

CAT-TALES

BY CHRIS DEE



BOOK 2

WHAT IF BATMAN WAS REAL? WHAT IF CATWOMAN WAS REAL?
WHAT IF EVERYTHING YOU KNEW ABOUT THEM WAS WRONG?

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A Cat-Tale and Twofaced Tale told in parallel. Two-Face chapters by Rob Pierce

SOMETHING OLD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Alfred, really, we agreed—"

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

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

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

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

"You wouldn't dare," he growled.

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

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

"How many rooms?"

"Sir?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"WHAT?"

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

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

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

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

Bruce eyed the three of them dangerously.

"I don't see anything funny here."

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

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

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

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

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

Barbara's engagement made welcome news on many grounds.

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

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

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

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

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

Diamond ring: 1

Gold Locket: 0

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Consequences for Batman: None. (grunt)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dick woke up.

::Twitterbringngng::

Tried to answer the lampshade.

::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

Then found the telephone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...:*Oh...*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bruce glared the answer.

“That sucks,” Dick noted.

“This is an ugly couch.”

“So who is this guy anyway?”

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

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

"Alfred talked to you?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know."

"You *DON'T KNOW?*"

Impossible. Bruce not know? Batman not know?

"They didn't mention it."

"Well you better find out!" Dick exclaimed.

"That's tacky," Bruce countered.

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

"This is a really ugly couch."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Um, well," Bruce stammered.

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

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

♪ *Because I could not stop for Death,*

♪ *He kindly stopped for me.*

♪ *The carriage held but just ourselves*

♪ *And Immor-TA-LI-TY!* ♪

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

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

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

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

"Selina's not here."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brucie growled silently, but Joker continued undeterred.

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

"Mm. Imagine that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That make sense to you?" Joker whispered.

Bruce was forced to admit, it didn't.

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

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

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

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

"Green hair?"

Another grudging nod.

"Kill people by the dozen."

"Yep."

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

"Yes."

Joker turned his head, seeming to process this information.

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

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

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

“Oui.”

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

“Oui.”

“And you hear she’s screwing around.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A dilemma,” thought Bruce.

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

“Dilemma solved—maybe,” thought Bruce.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He considered this.

"This is a FAIR price?"

She nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Although...

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

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

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

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

There was a long, long silence.

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

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

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

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

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

There was another long silence in the darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Just lights."

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

"NO."

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

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

She started to follow, then looked back.

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

"You fluster him. Leave it alone."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yeah, right.

Catwoman. Meow. Purr. Hiss.

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

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

Strange that.

"And—EUREKA!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Excuse me?"

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

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

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

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

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

"This is not an attractive side of you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

A heartbeat later the full implication hit her.

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

Bruce said nothing.

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

Bruce continued to say nothing.

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

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

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

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

"Oh no," came the prompt reply.

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

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

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

Bruce looked. She was doing exactly that.

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

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

Bruce looked at her penetratingly.

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

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

Her look said *There, close enough?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heeheeheeheeheehee-**HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA**!!!!!!

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

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

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

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

"HAHAHAHAHAHAAA! Hiya, Catty!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Oui.*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This one might be worth the battle.

“Now look, Joker—” Selina began.

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

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

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

“Don’t help me,” Selina told him.

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

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

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

“Wagner,” Selina admitted.

“Who?”

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

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

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

“It’s a long story,” Selina sighed.

Joker eyed the Frenchman unpleasantly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still. The family mattered.

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

Values. Standards. Character.

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

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

THAT is what his little girl was marrying into.

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

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

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

In fact, it was overdue.

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

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

The rest was the price you pay.

Well, that was that.

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

Although...

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

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

"You do that very well," Selina observed.

"Do what well, *Cherie?*"

"The Fop."

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

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

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

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

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

Selina couldn't help but smile at this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Selina did not smile this time.

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

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

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

François shrugged noncommittally.

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

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

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

François responded now, with some passion.

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

"There are worse fates."

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

There was a long pause, then Selina sighed.

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

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

"You would be the Comtesse de Poulignac now."

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

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

Selina laughed. There was something about Gotham.

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh dear," Alfred gasped softly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joker pulled the still coughing cameraman to his feet.

"Okay, let's try another one."

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

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

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

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

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

"You tell'em, Mistah J!"

"CUT! WHO SAID YOU COULD TALK?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"HAR-LEEEY, TAAAKE 4!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Kill Batman?" Harley repeated, awed.

"Kill Batman?" Gordon sputtered, confused.

"Kill Batman?" Alfred whispered, worried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harley squealed again.

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

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

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

When the lights came up...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After he left, Bruce turned to Selina.

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

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

"That's not the point."

"Usually something expensive."

"That's not what—"

"Usually something expensive of yours."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I was shopping with Barbara!"

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

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

"Petit chat."

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

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

"Don't help me," Selina interrupted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

SOMETHING NEW

I had the dream again.

The one where a totally pissed off Nightwing hunts me down and accuses me of ruining his life. Then he morphs into a ten-year-old version of Dick in Nightwing pajamas and asks why I stole his Barbie doll.

Don't really need Freud to work that one out, do I.

I got up, stumbled to the bathroom, and assured the face in the mirror that it was not my fault the wedding was called off. It's not. It absolutely is not. Gordon was in a state before I got there, anybody should be able to see that. A Joker attack—at Wayne Manor—Barbara could have been there. But for the grace of Mr. Jose at the House of Shri pretending there are 67 shades of white, Barbara *would* have been there. Christ, no wonder the poor man freaked a little. That compiled with whatever other qualms he had about Bruce - and opinion at the manor is split on just what those might be—and we get a fiery proclamation denying his consent.

The bitch in the mirror didn't seem to believe me, so I reiterated: not my fault.

I may have picked a bad time to sweep into the library, but it wasn't half as bad as Barbara's performance out in the foyer. She hadn't expected to see her father and was a little bubbly with enthusiasm about the fabrics. And, okay, she was a little bubbly from the bubbly at the House of Shri—again this is *not my fault*. We all have to get over this idea that whenever a bat-somebody exceeds their limit, it's somehow Kitty Cat's doing.

Anyway, Barbara was happy, she was excited, she's getting married and she had just picked a dress. Life was grand. She hadn't expected to see her father and when she did, she bubbled. She showed him some fabric swatches and babbled about the veil. He tried to bustle her out of there, may have mumbled something about the recent events, and if the reports are to be believed, she answered, "Joker caught, that's nice, now about this dress..." And that's apparently when Gordon blew. "No daughter of mine will marry into this loony bin where a Joker attack is just another Thursday afternoon!"

So you see, this really isn't my fault. You can knock off the dream, mirror-bitch, it is NOT MY FAULT!

That ended the conversation as far I was concerned, and I splashed some water on my face, brushed my teeth and then... then mirror-bitch took advantage of the silence to replay the last conversation we had about one of her little dream-plays:

"'The Relationship' is just a part of my public image..."

I stuck out my tongue at her.

"Batman & I are nothing more than adversaries who enjoy suggestive banter instead of spitting venom like other enemies do..."

I threw the luffa sponge at her. I *had* said that once upon a time, but that really wasn't the point.

"Men who dress up as bats and fight crime do not get cuddly with women who dress as cats and commit crimes," she reminded me.

I wasn't about to break a perfectly good mirror over this.

"Batman will never allow this to develop beyond meaningless flirtation...."

The phone rang, ending the debate before I had to admit the dreams were right that time and I was wrong—about *Batman*. That doesn't mean they're right now. The wedding debacle is *not my fault*. I glanced at the handset to see it was the Rogue's line.

"Good morning, Catwoman's House of Pain." I answered, because it's the little touches that mean so much to them.

...:Hey, Lina. Have you got a rhyming dictionary I could borrow??:..

"Eddie? Um, no. Not being a professional songwriter, I don't even own a rhyming dictionary."

...:Shit. Okay, thanks anyway...:

Well that was weird, I thought, but I didn't think too much of it until lunchtime, when he called back.

...:Do you have that funny e-mail I sent a couple months ago with the made-up words??:..

"Eddie, what's going on?"

...:Do you have it or not??:..

"I think I kept it. It was some of your best stuff."

...:Thank god, I'll be right over!?:..

I found the e-mail, printed it out and Eddie came over. That's when it got weird.

"Dope-ler effect," I read, "the tendency of stupid ideas to seem smarter when they come at you rapidly,"

"That's good," chuckled the author, "but I can't use it. Next."

"What is this about?"

"Next one, please."

"Huff," I grumbled, then read again from the printout. "Inocu-latte: To take coffee intravenously when you are running late."

"They don't have that much cash at Starbucks. Next."

"Reintarnation: Coming back to life as a hillbilly."

"Useless. Next."

"Eddie, what the hell is going on?"

"SELINA, JUST READ THE NEXT DAMN RIDDLE!"

"Giraffiti: Vandalism spray-painted very, very high."

He tore the e-mail from my hand and murmured: "Hipatitis: Terminal coolness ... Foreploy: Any misrepresentation about yourself for the purpose of getting laid....Oh, this is pointless!"

"I agree. What is it?"

He sighed, huffed, wadded the e-mail into a ball and threw it at Whiskers, then dropped back into the chair.

"I'm blocked. I can't write anything. Not a single clue. So I thought maybe if I found an old riddle or something I could retrofit it to a target."

"START with the clue? I don't think that's going to work too well, Eddie."

"I don't either, but I've got to try something. I can't write! I've got 76 Trombones stuck in my head."

"76 Trombones."

"Yeah, the song, from The Music Man... 🎵 *Seventy six trombones led the big parade... With a hundred and ten cornets close at hand* 🎵 It's stuck in my head, I keep singing it over and over."

"Well, I can see where that's kind of a problem unless you want to steal 110 cornets, but c'mon Eddie, everybody gets a tune stuck in their head now and then. It'll pass. Let me make a pot of tea, and we'll get caught up. I haven't seen you since the Christmas party."

In his years as Robin, Dick developed a profound loathing for strategic self-mutating defensive regimen 4—otherwise known as Big Bad ZOGGER. It was run twice a month, on the 1st and 15th—except when Bruce was worked up about something, and then it ran 4 hours a day every day until he got it out of his system. The "something" that brought these sessions on was almost always a run-in with Catwoman. Dick was too young then to see the connection between the voluptuous leather-clad thief and the need for intense physical exertion. But he understood now, and in his charged emotional state after Mount Gordon erupted and showered hot lava on the fragments of his engagement, he was finding settings on Zogger he never knew existed.

He stood now in the cave infirmary, smearing disinfectant on a puncture below his ribcage.

"What did you do?" Bruce asked with a disapproving scowl, having followed a trail of blood from the workout mats to the small heap of bloody gauze beside Dick.

Dick smiled for the first time since he'd moved back into the manor.

"I found the switch labeled 'François,'" he said. The scowl deepened slightly, and Dick's smile broadened. "She still does it to you. Somehow I find that very comforting."

"Fine. I'll just leave you to bleed," Bruce grumbled.

"It's like coming home."

Bruce had started to leave but he spun back now and said, "Hey, in all the uproar, I never got an explanation, okay. I'm not used to that. No François, no Pheromones, no nothing. So don't talk to me about—"

He stopped. Dick's lighthearted manner had suckered him in, and he momentarily forgot what 'all the uproar' referred to.

"Do me a favor, okay Bruce? Consider yourself cordially invited to shut up about this. She picked you, didn't she? You didn't get the François story or the Pheromones story, well boo-hoo. You got Selina! What the hell are you whining about? She chose you. It's more than Babs seems willing to do."

"Yeah, well, she might come around still," Bruce offered half-heartedly. He left in a semi-huff. If Dick didn't want his opinion, why did he come home at all....

His peripheral vision picked up Alfred entering the infirmary with a plate of chocolate-dipped double-chocolate chip cookies.

Oh.

When I returned from the kitchen with the tea, Eddie was humming then sang, “*They were followed by rows and rows of the finest virtuosos, the cream of ev’ry famous banDAMNIT! There it goes again!*”

I stifled a laugh.

“It’ll pass,” I told him. “Talk about something else. So, what’s the news?”

“You heard Joker got caught, right?”

“Out at Wayne Manor, of course I heard! I heard it first; I was on the clean-up crew. Jack’s quite a party animal, y’know.”

“Well anyway, I went to see him out at Arkham. Figured he’d be lonely. Harley’s disappeared right after the... well, I guess you heard that too. So I thought I’d cheer him up.”

“Oh Eddie, every time you try to be nice, it backfires. Haven’t you noticed that?”

“What, you think I’m cursed or something? That’s ridiculous. Okay then, so Joker asks me to bring these tapes from the Hacienda.”

“Whose Line is it Anyway?”

“Yeah. What does he see in those?”

“I don’t know. So then what happened?”

“Nothing. I brought him the tapes.”

“Eddie, that is the most pointless story I’ve ever heard.”

“I didn’t say there was a point to it. I’m just talking to keep the trombones out of my head.”

“Get out.”

“But I—”

“GET OUT!”

“Sigh. *♪-There were more than a thousand reeds springing up like weeds there were horns of ev’ry shape and kind -♪* Hey, wait a minute. A thousand reeds—A thousand! A thousand something, that could be lucrative... ‘A thousand rings springing up like springs’ - OH MY GOD, DID YOU HEAR THAT? ‘SPRINGING UP LIKE SPRINGS?!?!’ MY BRAIN, WHAT’S HAPPENED TO MY BRAIN?”

98...99...100... Dick somersaulted out of the iron cross, landing smartly before the plate of cookies.

“Master Dick, it isn’t my place to say, but I do think you’ll find talking to the young lady more productive than working out or comfort foods.”

Dick took the cookies with him into the main chamber of the cave, leaned his favorite chair backwards and flexed, executing his pet maneuver to get a beverage (in this case, milk) from the mini-fridge behind him.

“I have tried, Alfred. Barbara’s an adult. It’s not like she needs her father’s permission to get married. It’d be nice to have his blessing, but if he wants to be this way, if he absolutely insists on this Jazz Singer ‘tude, I say we let Bruce or Clark give her away and MOVE ON with the gameplan.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“Indeed,” Dick repeated, as though convincing himself. “Yes. Makes sense, right: She’s a grown woman, and this is her choice. But Miss Barbie says NOOO, she could

never do that to him. Stood by her when... well you know. Well we *all* 'stood by her,' didn't we?"

"Y-es, sir. Still, Mr. Gordon is her father."

"That is the crux of the problem. Barbara says it'd be like she was a rebellious teenager, stamping her foot: 'I'll marry Dick if I wanna and you can't stop me.'"

"I hardly think anybody would think..."

"Yeah, seems a pretty radical interpretation of the text, doesn't it."

"Indeed, sir."

"So as far as Barbara's concerned, Daddy has to be convinced or the wedding is off. Case closed."

"Most distressing, sir."

"It's almost like... oh never mind."

Dick bit into another cookie with an angry snap.

Bruce sat at his workstation in full Batman-mode. The current wave of Riddler crimes made no sense—even for Riddler. There were four clues, all left at a Kinko's on the corner of 76th and Pine. That must mean something. The targets: a box office at the concert hall, then a shop with antique music boxes -that one had to be a clue-crime and not a real crime, since they couldn't have had enough cash or valuables to pay off his thugs... ditto "Brassy Girl" Cosmetics. And then a return trip to the concert hall box office! That didn't make sense either, hitting the same place twice.

He had to be missing something. Maybe cleanse the palette, he thought. Think about something else for a bit and when he returned to this Riddler question, the answer would pop out at him.

He punched a series of keys, pulling up a list of themed criminals currently at large.

At Large:

Catwoman

Hugo Strange

Mad Hatter

Riddler

Catwoman? Was that still in there? Better take that out, Bruce thought wryly. Punching in another code which opened the criminal database connected to this list, he clicked on her name, the file opened—then a second window popped up on top of it:

::Took you long enough.::

He stifled a twitch-smile and closed the window. Another took its place.

:: I don't care what Dick says, you DO trust people. ::

The twitch tugged harder this time. The window closed, and Bruce went back to the Catwoman file and hit DELETE. This triggered another pop-up:

:: Well, as you've finally decided I'm not a threat to society, ::

:: come to my balcony tonight. Wear the blue. No Kevlar. ::

::I want something I can shred. ::

::Meow. ::

The visiting psychiatrist presented all the appropriate paperwork at the entry to Arkham's high-security wing. He signed the logbook and was escorted to the Joker's special cell. That was all the guard remembered or needed to remember. He returned to his station and fell into a deep, relaxing sleep from which he would awake in ten minutes feeling rested and refreshed...

"It's done," Hugo Strange reported to the Joker, "When do I get paid?"

"When I'm satisfied it was done right, you'll get what's coming to you."

On the whole, Joker avoided killing people he knew. On the whole, he wasn't done having fun with them. Murder was for the nameless extras. But if Hugo was going to insist on being paid, an exception might have to be made...

It all started with *Whose Line is it Anyway?*: Joker was bored in his lonely cell. Harley had disappeared during the attack at Wayne Manor, so he'd asked Riddler to bring his tapes from the Ha-Hacienda. Good ol' Riddler was such a pal; he'd brought them all.

When Joker saw that Harley had *taped over* *Whose Line is it Anyway!*—taped over the one where Colin Mochrie does the dinosaur walk! - he was ready to kill her.

But she wasn't there.

So he watched the tape instead.

She *was* there.

Giving a party.

The trollop.

But wait... Santa hat, it was the Christmas party. That was ok. Then he saw it...

"Oooh!" (RIDDLER PINCHED HER!)

"Oieee!" (HE DID IT AGAIN!)

...And she was giggling. She was playing up to him! The tramp!
"EEIKF!" HE DID IT AGAIN!

Oh, he would kill that funnyman now, oh yes he would.

Then came a deeper voice... "If this JokerCam setup is two-way, Riddler's a dead man."

Too right, you tell'em, Brucie!

"He's the only one who really understands me," Joker told the remote control.

Dr. Hugo Strange was forced to return to his improvised laboratory without being paid. The Joker. Who the hell did that ghoulish Pagliacci think he was—Batman's greatest foe, indeed! The man's only claim to great criminal enterprise was a shit-eating grin, an annoying laugh, and being utterly insane. What kind of nefarious arsenal was that?

While he, Hugo Strange, had achieved the ultimate criminal epiphany: he had deduced Batman's secret identity! And was this achievement recognized by his peers? It was not.

Just because he didn't have a wild outfit and a goofy moniker. Strange was an old and distinguished name.

Hugo blanched as the thought reminded him of his first meeting with his current victim:

"Eddie Nigma, get it. E. Nigma—clever that."

"Very droll."

"But I don't use it professionally, you understand. I still go by Riddler."

"Yes, I've heard that."

"So why stick with a loser handle like Hugo Strange. I mean, Hugo is okay in a dorky way, but STRANGE, c'mon."

"It's an old and distinguished family name, Mr. Nigma."

"Go on, old and distinguished, it means, what? 'That guy outside town who, when he walks past the farm, makes the pigs nervous.'"

That was the respect he received from his peers.

Like that Harlequin bitch excluding him from the Christmas party.

Hugo had been gratified when the great and mighty Joker came to him. A personal matter, the clown had said... Joker. An arrested adolescent that went from thinking "girls have cooties" to "riding a Harley." There was no justice in the world; there truly was not. But that was neither here nor there. The Joker had come to *him*, Dr. Hugo Strange, for help!

He only did so, it turned out, because Hugo was due to be released from Arkham, not because he appreciated the special talents only a criminal genius like he could bring to the task...

Still, the task Joker had in mind, driving Edward Nigma mad, would be a satisfying one. Revenge for that insulting remark about his name! And later: Revenge on Harley Quinn for blackballing him! For Hugo was sure she would be the Joker's next target.

Oracle sat at her console eyeing an unlabeled silver button from the corner of her eye. She slowly brought her hand up from under the desk, as though sneaking up on it, then depressed it quickly, held it for four seconds while holding a calm, attentive expression, then let it go with a flourish. The procedure disconnected the scans of her head movements and facial expression from the hologram displayed in the Watchtower conference room. Now the other members of the Public Relations Subcommittee would see only the calm, attentive expression. She could safely adjust the volume and tune out Diana's endless prattle about civilian opinion.

The talk with her father hadn't gone well. That was the only civilian's opinion she cared about.

"Barbara, that man's world isn't safe," he insisted. "You've had enough pain as it is without taking on more needlessly. This is nothing but hurt waiting to happen, it's suffering and risk and worry that can all be avoided by just turning your back on it. Shake the dust from your feet and don't look back."

"Daddy," she began softly, "I love him. Can't you understand that? I love Dick; I want to marry him. This is my decision. It's my life we're talking about."

"It's your life, so I'm supposed to stand by while you get yourself killed! It's your life, so I just ignore that you're deliberately putting yourself on a path where you'll encounter that madman again! No, Barbara, no! I said it then and I'll say again, it will be over my dead body that you marry into that, that, that *family*."

It stung. There was no denying it stung. But Barbara convinced herself she was calm enough to continue. And she began calmly enough...

"Dad, it's like you want to draw a line as to how much..." she searched for a word and, in her frustration, lost the advantage of remaining calm "...how much hurt or pain or...*shit*...your daughter will endure in her life, and if no one else will abide by this line, then fuck'em all to hell!"

"Barbara!"

"Oh, screw this!" She was near tears now she was so frustrated.

"Barbara Louise, stop this at once," Jim Gordon ordered. "I won't have you carrying on like this." He stroked her hair lightly, like she was a little girl. "Barbara, listen to me," he continued with a new intensity, "I will never go back to sitting at your bedside watching you almost die."

"ORACLE, what are your thoughts on this?" Diana was asking impatiently.

Barbara double-clicked the silver button, re-establishing the feed from the scanner above her face to the hologram generator.

"I... think... Diana makes an excellent point. One that needed to be discussed. Maybe she'll go into a little more detail for us," Barbara sputtered. She felt bad for the rest of the committee who were actually in the room and didn't have a mute button to hit, but that guilt was overshadowed by another when she regained her train of thought.

"Daddy. Daddy-Daddy-Daddy. You can't keep bad things from happening to people. You can try, you can rationalize, I guess, but they still do happen."

"Barbara, would you please stop talking to me like I'm an insurance salesman! I am, was, the commissioner of police. You think I don't know about the risk you take just living in this city?"

"Then what are you—"

"A policeman lives and breathes that risk. Any simple pullover, broken taillight, could be the end. 'Can I see your license and registration'-BANG! So there are procedures. You minimize the risk whenever you can. Before you move to the door, your partner stands there, at this angle, to observe the passenger seat. You do it that way because people who are more experienced tell you to. You do it because your superiors learned the hard way this is what's best."

"Daddy..." she broke off then tried slowly, "...I *know* all that. But this isn't pulling over a speeder, it's marrying Dick Grayson."

"I'm your father, Barbara Louise. You have to trust that I know what's best. I know what's safe. You want to throw out the rulebook and walk into this incredibly dangerous situation, and I'm saying no. Not while there is breath in my body to say 'No, no, no, no, NO.'"

Like many of the Gotham night people, Jervis Tetch (a.k.a. The Mad Hatter) slept through most of the day and arose around four or five in the afternoon to begin his day's work. So even though the frantic (but strangely rhythmic) knocking that woke him did so at 9 am, he still went to the door complaining about rude callers pestering him "in the middle of the night."

"You gotta help me Jervis—I have 76 Trombones stuck in my head. ...*Thundering, thundering louder than before...* You gotta get it out. I'll pay anything, just make me forget this damn song."

While Jervis tried to calculate how "I'll pay anything" might translate into a dollar figure, Nigma produced a slip of paper.

"Look what I just wrote—it was supposed to be a clue for the Crane Brokerage House!"

Jervis took the slip and read:

*76 black crows on the Great White Way
with 110 blown fuses on the sand*

He looked up quizzically. Edward Nigma nodded sadly, and Jervis realized he could name any price he wanted.

"Why do your cats hate me?" Bruce asked in a strange mixture of his natural speaking voice and Batman's deepest growl.

"Nutmeg doesn't hate you," Selina assured him, setting down a jug of orange juice and a plate of toast. He pointed.

Nutmeg had appropriated a strip of shredded fabric that had once been part of Batman's cape and was hurling it into the air as though to break its neck. Whiskers watched this performance and would snarl at the inert form with satisfaction when it landed.

"That's just play," Selina laughed, then took on a husky tone as she added, "I thought we settled that a long time ago."

Bruce smiled, blushed, then managed an embarrassed, "Somehow, it's not the same."

"It's after nine," Selina observed, changing the subject. "Do you have to call in or something?"

"No, Lucius is used to my coming in at odd hours, if at all. Still, it'd be nice if those clothes got here."

"I offered you an outfit to go home in."

"Look, my reputation can actually benefit from having Bergdorf's deliver a sweater and pants to Bruce Wayne at some woman's apartment because she destroyed what I was wearing last night. But it will not survive my going home in a Cat-Tales sweatshirt!"

Selina's shrug said "Whatever."

Nutmeg's crouch said "Soon I shall pounce on my unsuspecting prey."

Whisker's growl said "Die, wretched strip of blue, die!"

Bruce studied the scene carefully.

"No, that tone I recognize. That wasn't play; it was 'Die, Batman, Die.' The little gray one said it, just now."

"Well," Selina smiled, "It's possible. Truth be told, Whiskers does have a bit of grudge. But it's not personal. That's his balcony you're always landing on."

Bruce looked at Whiskers who looked right back. "Damn right, Buddy," was the unspoken message. Rather than submit to a staring contest with one of Catwoman's cats, Bruce turned and noticed scribbles in a familiar hand on the back of a magazine:

Clarinets of eve'ry size and trumpeters who'd improvise

a full octave higher than the score.

Then the words *Score, More, Bore, Core, Door, Floor*. This last was underlined. Then *"Higher than the door. Higher than the floor."*

"What the hell is this?" Bruce asked.

Selina glanced at it, then chuckled. "Oh. That's Eddie."

Bruce's eyes went square, focusing hard on the scribble. A break at last—a clue he wasn't supposed to have. His eyes snapped up and met Selina's, and he heard Batman asking "Do you know what this means?" before he even considered the ramifications. He had just asked her to help take down one of her "friends" among the rogues, a good friend, one she'd turned to when they had that fight during hell-month. That kind of request hadn't gone over well when the friend was Harvey in genuine agony... Except... so far from shutting down like last time, she gave a bright smile and answered immediately.

"Of course, it's 76 Trombones."

There was a stunned silence as he processed what just happened. She was helping him. No hassles. No accusations.

Except she mistook his surprise for confusion and started to explain.

"76 Trombones? You know... 🎷 *Seventy six trombones hit the counter point* 🎷 *while a hundred and ten cornets played the air.* 🎷 *Then I modestly took my place as the one and only bass,* 🎷 *and I oompahed up and down the square...* 🎷 Man, you gotta get out more."

♪ yadada-la-di-da yada-ditdit-da, yadada-la-di-da dit-dit-da ♪

That damn tune! It cycled over and over again.

Edward Nigma looked down at the paper before him:

♪ Elephants, Camels, Antelopes, -something-else- ♪

The something else, whatever came next, had to be three syllables.

He wadded up the paper in disgust and tossed it onto a pile of similar paper balls. He didn't want to hit the Safari Club anyway.

Back to basics...a bank. Good old-fashioned, "put the cash in the sack" kind of crime....

♪ Dollars-and-Cents, Safe De-po-sit Boxes, Boull-ion vaults ♪...

That had a nice ring to it, actually. Not much of a riddle, but the meter was right.

♪ Yadada-la-di-da yada-ditdit-da, yadada-la-di-da dit-dit-da ♪

Oh, damnit to hell. The clues were still echoing that tune. Why couldn't he get that tune out of his head? He wadded up the next sheet of paper even though he hadn't written anything on it.

Lots of valuable manuscripts at the Public Library's rare book room; that would be an interesting puzzle:

♪ Emily-Bron-tey! Flau-bert! Ste-phen King!

Pride and Prejudice, Tom Sawyer, First Editions too... ♪

ACK! It was that same blasted tune!

Enough of this. He would get away from it: get some air, get some lunch. Come back later with a clear head. He strolled to the farmer's market, absently singing:

♪ Mandarin-Orang-es, Ap-ri-cots, Straw-ber-ries

Avacados and Onions, Pineapples and more... ♪

Bruce wondered momentarily if, illogical though it seemed, this might be a Joker attack of some kind.

His initial relief that Selina was willing to help him was short-lived when it became clear she had no idea she was doing so: She hadn't heard anything about a Riddler crime wave. Eddie had paid her a visit about something else. As far as she knew, something totally unrelated.

When Bruce told her what was going on, the mystery of the Riddler's targets, the theme he couldn't figure out, she got a funny look on her face, produced an awkward snort, and then the laughter started. It built, sustained, built again, then finally she made a gasping effort to pull herself together. She held her stomach, took a deep breath, looked up at him—and it began again. After a minute of giggly twitching, she held up a hand, took another deep breath, and this time quite obviously avoided looking in his direction.

Glancing down at the bedsheet toga he still wore, he realized Joker was probably not responsible for that last spasm of her laughing fit. He'd clearly have to postpone any discussion of serious topics until the clothing was delivered.

With bat-like single-mindedness, Bruce resumed the conversation the moment the door closed behind the deliveryboy.

"Now about this crimewave."

"Not much of a crimewave," Selina answered, emptying the boxes onto the bed. "Antique music boxes and pink eyeshadow?"

"He hit the box office at the concert hall twice," Bruce pointed out.

"I'd guess so, it's the only thing he can come up with where there's any money. Ooh, that's a nice color."

"No, no, no, we're not starting that again. Crimewave—"

"Really," Selina stroked the sweater playfully, "it brings out your eyes."

"No."

"Ooh, and they sent a belt, nice leather that," She gave it a firm whiplike snap.

The phone rang.

"Thank god," Bruce whispered, collecting the belt and using the distraction of the phone call to dress quickly.

"Yes, Tim, he's here," Selina was saying, then mouthed, "It's Tim." That figured. He didn't have Bruce Wayne's cel phone, having come over as Batman. And Batman's radio, along with the rest of his utility belt, hadn't survived the 69-story fall from Selina's balcony to the pavement.

"He says don't worry about the Riddler thing," Selina went on relaying the phone message, then paused, listened some more and repeated, "He's back in Arkham." She paused again. "They found him-WHAT!?"

No crime wave meant Bruce was free to play, and he materialized behind Selina with trademark stealth, an arm snaked easily around her waist to stroke her stomach while he nuzzled the back of her neck, close enough to the earpiece to hear the phone squawk ::found him huddled in a fetal position under a stall at the farmer's market!::

Now it was Selina who was in no mood to play.

"What did you do to him?" she demanded of the telephone receiver.

::Heyheyhey,:: Tim objected, ::I didn't do squat. I found him rocking himself and humming::

"HUMMING?"

"You're right," Bruce observed, trying to divert her attention with the belt, "it is good leather."

"Tim, what was he humming?"

::I don't know! A song?!?::

"Was it 76 Trombones by some chance?"

There was a long silence on the phone, then a confused:

::I actually have no idea what that is::

"♪ Badadadada lada badada dada ♪" she sang.

::Selina, I don't know. I wasn't paying attention. He was humming, okay, that's all I know. Oh, and he said something about Mad Hatter::

"Mad Hatter? Jervis Hatter? Oh, this time that little troll is going to die," Selina declared ominously, then made a rapid movement to snatch Bruce's new belt from the air. He countered, grabbing her in one arm and the phone in the other.

"Tim? Bruce. Get to the troll, I mean Mad Hatter, and find out what he knows."

::Can I get Dick to go? Dick's just hanging around,:: Tim was saying while Selina squirmed free and opened her storage closet.

Bruce hung up and joined her as the closet deposited an avalanche of assorted junk onto her feet.

"HEEEY, you're not French!" he declared.

Batman left Joker's cell just as Catwoman was leaving Riddler's.

"Hatter didn't do it," they said in unison.

"Joker's definitely behind this," Batman announced, "It started when he saw that tape of the Christmas party, and Jervis Tetch was released before Joker was even incarcerated. There's no way they could be in communication."

"I know," Catwoman added. "Jervis tried to undo it. I think Riddler must have paid him to undo it because he says he wants a refund."

"A refund?" Batman exclaimed. He would never get used to these bizarre glimpses into the rogue subculture, the seamless blending of six different kinds of insanity and business-as-usual daily life.

"It was pitiful," she continued, "he kept repeating Hatter and refund and then he couldn't come up with a rhyme for refund. Treepond, Freeplums."

Batman shook his head. They were all insane. Each and every one of them needed a whole team of psychia... Psychiatrists... That was it!

Rather than ask if Catwoman didn't think this psychotic tango was weird even for Arkham inmates, Batman spun around and raced to the front desk where he'd checked in.

"Here, look. Yesterday's visitor list: Dr. Herbert Merkwürdig, that's German, for 'Strange.'"

Catwoman gave a half-smile of understanding.

"Hugo's broken out of his slump."

But Batman was already charging back down the hall, and entered Riddler's cell. He emerged five minutes later and spat, "C'mon, I'll explain in the car."

I admit it's an awful lot easier working with Batman than against him. I admit that. I would never have gone into Arkham by way of the front desk, so I would have never seen the visitor sign-in, or put together Dr. Herbert Merkwürdig = Dr. Hugo Strange.

Having worked out that it was Strange, I wouldn't have been able to ask Eddie exactly three questions and instantly determine that Hugo had injected had him with a viral microchip receiver, that the song was actually being broadcast into his brain, and that that was why he continued to hear the melody even after Mad Hatter removed his memory of the song and its lyrics.

Now, given that much information, I would have worked out that there must be a transmitter somewhere, but again I freely admit that I would not have been able to deduce its location as quickly as Batman did.

It was indeed easier working with a formidable mind like that rather than against it.

However, there is a price and just at the moment, balanced on a commercial satellite dish gutting the damn transmitter, I was wondering if the price was entirely worth it.

Because when I'm running my own show, and I work out that Hugo damn near drove my friend mad, I get to tear him open with my own claws and show him some of his vital organs.

This way, I got the “fun” of shutting down the transmitter, while Batman gets to shut down Hugo.

“Selina, be reasonable,” he had said, “it’s the transmitter that’s causing Riddler’s torment, and the sooner we get to it, the sooner it’s over for him.”

“I realize that,” I answered, trying to match the let’s-be-rational tone. “Two targets, and two of us. What I want to know is why I’m stuck with the one that won’t bleed.”

He muttered something I couldn’t quite catch about the reason being carved up and down his back and what I can do with those claws when I’m in a good mood.

I growled. “Well, the good mood is long gone, Lover. So the question is, if I’m in the mood to rip somebody’s throat out, do you really want to be picking a fight or do you want to point me towards Hugo.”

The car screeched to a halt, and I thought for a minute it was lecture time, but then I saw we were at the base of the satellite dish.

He glared, which is evidently his way of ending an argument with Robin or Nightwing. It’s hard to argue with a glare, but I learned a long time ago that a well-timed hiss makes an adequate counterpoint.

“Look,” he grumbled, clearly put out that he had to fall back to using words, “Hugo may or may not be expecting visitors. Walking into the bad guy’s booby-trapped lair is what I do. Dismantling the technical doohickey is what you do.”

The technical doohickey. Can you believe it? He thought that was disarming, as if he wasn’t the world’s greatest badass technophile.

He must’ve seen me soften, because he added, “You can always toss it 69 stories onto the pavement when you’re done with it,” and then sped away, convinced he had won.

What he didn’t realize was, the “technical doohickey” remark wasn’t what softened me. It reminded me of his rebooting the Batcave systems. He does it the hard way. I knew I could probably finish this off faster than he was thinking and still get to Hugo in time to draw a little blood.

“Okay, dear,” I whispered to the cloud of dust the Batmobile left in its wake. “You bash the bad guy. I’ll shut down the doohickey—and then shove it down his throat through his nostril.”

“I didn’t think that last bit was necessary,” Batman noted quietly as the Batmobile pulled into the cave.

“Which bit?” Catwoman asked innocently.

“With the whip round his...”

“Stopped him talking didn’t it.”

“Yes,” Batman admitted, and that was no small feat. Hugo Strange was not a formidable foe physically, but if there was a downside to the confrontations, it was that he tended to flaunt his knowledge of Batman’s identity. He was unable to do this once Catwoman arrived intent on shoving the transmitter up his left nostril.

She was quite extraordinary, Bruce observed, removing the cowl and opening the costume vault. She was leaning back against a tall stalagmite, stretching out her back and arms dramatically. He smiled as she flexed, pulling her weight onto the rock and balancing. When Dick was young he was forever climbing and cavorting on the

natural outcroppings around the cave, foregoing all the manmade routes and conveniences. Bruce would never forget the time soon after he'd learned the secret, the boy complained about an extended workout on the parallel bars while climbing that very stalagmite, intent on claiming it for Spain.

Bruce started at the memory of what happened next, when Dick overbalanced and fell, not onto the soft tumbling mats beneath the parallel bars, but onto the solid and rocky ground. Neither Alfred, who disinfected and bandaged the bloody knee, nor Dick, who was back on top of the stalagmite half a minute later, thought anything of it. But for Bruce, it was the most traumatic non-criminal moment he'd ever experienced.

"That's beautiful, Kitten," he murmured, joining her at the stalagmite, "but get changed quick if you want a ride back into town."

"You're going back in?" she asked.

"Yeah, I have a stop to make as Bruce Wayne. One I've put off too long."

Jim Gordon was relieved when his visitor declined the offered tea. He had offered it because it seemed something he ought to do. He wasn't a tea-drinker, but somehow it was the retirement drink. Entertaining your unexpected late-night guest, you sat them down in your garden and you offer them a cup of tea. But on reflection, he wasn't sure he had any teabags.

"You mind?" Gordon asked, gesturing with his pipe.

His guest shook his head politely and answered, "Of course not. Glad to see you using it."

Ah yes. His retirement gift. The "slick uptown pipe" was feeling a little better these days now that he'd gnawed the mouthpiece a little. In a few years it might break in okay.

"You're here about the ...pah... wedding, I take it?" Gordon growled.

"Yes," his visitor answered with a brevity and a seriousness uncharacteristic of the glib, airhead playboy.

"Where Barbara, Dick, and Barbara a second time failed, namely changing my mind about this foolhardy nonsense, you've come to turn me around and show me the error of my reasoning."

"Let's cut through the crap and get to the heart of this, shall we, Jim?" Bruce spoke again with uncharacteristic -but familiar- directness.

"Yes, let's." said Gordon, equally willing to be direct. "You're Batman."

"Yes. That's not the issue."

"Dick is Nightwing."

"Yes," Bruce repeated calmly. "Still not the issue."

"You all want my little girl to marry into a world where Joker, Two-Face, Killer Croc, anybody—Joker—might show up at any time and—"

"I thought you were going to say Barbara was Batgirl—which also isn't the issue, by the way."

"Barbara was...?"

"And is now Oracle. Is this really news to you, Jim?"

"I think you should leave now."

"I think you should admit none of this is remotely relevant. One of us is going to be disappointed."

"My little girl..."

"Your 'little girl' is a grown woman! She loves Dick. That's her choice. Maybe you should respect that."

"Not if her choice puts her in the path of that homicidal lunatic."

"Joker isn't the issue."

"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU TO SIT THERE AND TELL ME WHAT THE ISSUE IS?"

"I'm a father that's seen his child shot by the Joker when I was the one he was trying to hurt."

Gordon tried to speak but couldn't, and Bruce went on:

"I know guilt when I see it, Jim. You couldn't protect her. She was shot because of her connection to you. It wasn't Batman. It wasn't Batgirl. She was in your house. She answered your door. She's your daughter. Joker wanted to drive you mad. It happened to her because of you, and you can't ever look at her without feeling that pang that you couldn't protect her. I do understand, Jim. I understand better than Dick or Barbara ever will. This isn't about me, or Dick, or Joker. It's about your guilt."

"My friend, I..."

"What I'm trying to say is: Don't do it. After Dick was shot, I tried to control him. I channeled all the guilt into one thought: Never again. The madman will never touch my boy again. You know what happened then."

"Nightwing."

Bruce half-laughed, half-sighed. As if the name summed up the whole sordid story.

"He had to make his own decisions, live his own life. I wouldn't let him. It cost us a lot of years, a lot of bitter fights—for nothing. Because of my guilt. Don't do it."

~ ~ ~

Mr. Bruce Wayne

requests the pleasure of your company at the marriage of his son

Richard John Grayson

to

Barbara Louise Gordon

East Garden, Wayne Manor, Gotham

~ ~ ~

EPILOGUE

Of all the bizarre situations Selina Kyle found herself in since becoming Catwoman, this was easily in the top three—and might rise to number one before the day was finished.

She stood, half-naked, in the too-pink fitting salon at the House of Shri while Mr. Jose's assistant, Anslo, adjusted, readjusted, and pinned lengths of yellow fabric against her body. When he was happy with a particular effect, Anslo would call to Mr. Jose, performing a similar operation on Barbara a few feet away. Mr. Jose would look, then tell her to walk, turn, or bend. Mr. Jose would look some more, then grope her here and there, then command more walking and turning. Finally, he would nod his approval and Anslo would baste the addition into place.

"Explain to me again," Selina called to Barbara, "why it's me standing here and not Stephanie and Cassie."

"Dick has three attendants," Barbara answered as though humoring a child, "Tim, Wally, and his college roommate, Steve. Dinah's maid of honor—"

"Meaning two bridesmaids, Steph and Cassie. So why am I standing here?"

"Dick's Aunt Kate is kind of an obligation. And either one of Steph or Cassie without the other would seem odd."

"Barbara, putting it as delicately as possible in mixed company: Meow! You don't think THIS qualifies as odd."

The bride smirked. She wasn't about to admit to Selina that Cassie and Stephanie had each gotten wind of the yellow ruffles chosen for the bridesmaids' dresses and, as allies in the crimefighting sisterhood, delivered threats a former enemy like Selina could not dream of.

"Oh well," Selina sighed, then added casually, "I suppose Cassie would have killed Mr. Jose by now."

Mr. Jose discreetly removed his hand from Selina's hip.

"Anyway," Selina abruptly changed the subject, "what's Dickey got to say about the wedding being back on at the manor."

"Utterly paranoid," Barbara answered. "I told him, if this whole thing with my Dad says anything, it says there are no safe people or safe places and you gotta accept that and get on with life. You pays your money and takes your shot. So if the wedding's on, it's on at the manor. To have it anywhere else now because of this curse idea would validate everything my Dad was saying that we fought against."

While professional propriety demanded Mr. Jose pretend not to hear the ladies' conversation, he could not contain his admiration.

"You are very extraordinary lady," he said to Barbara, "Most brides, they are all superstition. Something old, something new, something borrowed... must sew bread crumbs or flax seeds, some talisman into the hem of the dress, the groom mustn't glimpse the dress or even the fabrics before wedding... but you are all calm and rational, very wise and special lady."

"Oh, but Dick mustn't see the dress," Barbara gasped.

Mr. Jose shrugged. The customer was always right. And brides were uniformly crazy.

“Well you’ve got old and new covered,” Selina remarked, eyeing the yellow ruffles with distaste. “The ring and the dress, right?”

“Good luck mojo,” Barbara sang out.

“That will make Dick happy. They’re so cute when they’re paranoid. Oh, heard the latest one? B has decided my cats are out to get him”

Barbara stifled a laugh, causing Mr. Jose to stab her with a pin.

“Your CATS?” she exclaimed.

“Yep, so what did he do last visit? Smears catnip—I am not making this up—smears catnip on his boots.”

A slight tremor shook Barbara as she again stifled a laugh.

“It’s not funny. He got my cats stoned.”

Barbara lost the fight to conceal her mirth as the explanation continued:

“It’s not funny, Barbara. Whiskers rolling on his back, pawing at the air. Nutmeg trying to climb the kitchen counter. It’s not funny. You people have a very sick sense of humor, you know that?”

SOMETHING BORROWED

With great stealth, the lithe, cat-shaped silhouette lowered itself from its position several feet above the target. She calculated the angle of descent that would enable her to snatch the coveted object and hit the ground at the optimal angle for a quick getaway. The figure leapt, seized her prey and ran, hearing as she went how the theft disturbed a dozen surrounding objects, noises that drew instant attention to her crime.

“NUTMEG!” Selina yelled, as the blur of fur sped between her legs and through the doorway to the bedroom. “She likes envelopes,” she explained in an embarrassed voice to some visiting twofoot.

“Success!” the smug feline announced, reaching her war room under the bed. She deposited her prize, an envelope of unusually thick paper with shiny foil lining, amidst other trophies that included a plastic milk ring, three paper balls, a pantyhose egg, a strip of blue fabric, and a cotton sock.

“Big deal,” her companion, Whiskers remarked, unimpressed.

“But it’s crinkly,” Nutmeg insisted, pawing the new acquisition to illustrate the point, “and shiny.”

“Woof,” answered Whiskers, in the ultimate expression of feline disdain.

“Fine. Be that way. More toys for me,” replied Nutmeg, not caring. “Why don’t you sit on your balcony and watch birds then?”

“Twofoot with boots,” Whiskers grumbled. “Bat-Bruce. Brushed the planter in front of my flowerpot, leaves aren’t right now.”

“What’s your thing with that planter?” Nutmeg asked.

Whiskers rubbed his head into the mass of buttersoft purple leather kept under the bed, scenting it, then answered, “When the leaves are just so, they hide me. I am the stalking jungle cat of death.”

“Woof,” Nutmeg answered. It was really the only thing to say.

Whiskers slunk out from the war room and saw the visiting twofoot sitting against the fat pillow, ruining the indentation it took days to create.

Whiskers walked up to the intruder and tried to explain as nicely as possible:

“This is my home. That is my chair. That is my pillow. I had it arranged the way I like it. Please put it back the way it was.”

“What’s your name, Little Guy?” Dick asked, interpreting the cat’s hostile stare as friendly curiosity.

“That’s Whiskers,” Selina explained.

“The Whiskers that has it in for Bruce?”

“Note to self: if you don’t want everybody to know something, don’t tell Barbara.”

“Eh, yes,” Dick affirmed with a smile, “Somebody should have warned you about that before now. Babs is sort of Radio Free Bat.” Then the smile vanished and,

covering an awkward silence, Dick took Whiskers onto his lap. The cat promptly wedged itself between Dick's thigh and the disputed pillow.

“HEY HEY HEY HEY HEY! New twofoot pillow-squasher, PUT ME DOWN! Just 'cause you have thumbs doesn't mean... Oh. Lap. That's okay then. I can get to my pillow now. Watch the ears though. You can stroke between the shoulder blades if you want. No, here. Put the hand *here*. Alright, you'll do.”⁹⁰

“He likes you,” Selina observed, “He doesn't usually take to new people.”

Dick said nothing so Selina continued, just to cover the silence.

“I have a theory that cats already know everyone they want to know.”

Again, Dick said nothing, but continued stroking the cat.

“Richard, not to be inhospitable, but you did come over to talk about something, right?”

Dick sighed.

“I mean, you didn't ask when I would be home alone—very pointedly stressing the *alone* part—just to come and meet Whiskers?”

“Yeah right, I need to ask something... delicate. I want to ask you—or Catwoman, rather—to do something for me. Something slightly... illegal.”

Twofoot Selina-Cat, she who wielded the power of the can opener, arched her eyebrows, which sometimes meant good things to come, open closets and excitement, and sometimes not.

The words were seldom of interest: “stealing” “don't say stealing, consider it borrowing, consider it your ‘Something Borrowed’ for the wedding” “borrowed you give back. we're not giving it back” “unilateral property transfer then” “it's still theft, it's breaking and entering, it's still illegal” “and you still want me to do it” “...Yeah...I do. I really, really do.”

The words were of no interest at all. The tone is what mattered. And the tone said this would be a time of open closets and excitements.

“Well, if that doesn't beat all,” Selina said, closing the door behind Dick then returning to the living room. “I know what you're thinking,” she said as Whiskers looked up from his place on the pillow, “Hypocrisy, thy name is crimefighter.”

Whiskers was, in fact, thinking about a trip to the end table to drink from the flower vase.

“But his heart is in the right place.” Selina went on, as Whiskers decided moving to the end table could mean losing the pillow again.

An hour later, the doorbell rang and Selina ushered a different visitor onto Whiskers's favorite chair.

“Calloo-Callay, I'm screwed I say.”

"Jervis, this will go a lot faster if you give it up and talk prose," Selina announced firmly.

She was prepared to let bygones be bygones. The hatting episode with Mad Hatter at the mythology museum was a good four months ago, and that was the usual statute of limitations for incidents with Hatter, Scarecrow, and Penguin-caliber rogues. But forgiving him was one thing, putting up with gobbledygook was another.

"C'mon, Jervis, plain and direct, what's the deal?"

"It doesn't matter," Jervis moped, "I'm in the soup. Aunt Maud's coming to town."

And this is the plain and direct version, Selina thought. Aloud, she said, "And 'Aunt Maud' would be your little codephrase for...?"

"For my Aunt Maud," Jervis answered testily. "She's coming to Gotham for, like, a month. She wants to stay with me. She thinks I'm an editor at Harpers and Row. Selina, what am I going to do?"

Whiskers looked out from under the settee and eyed the newcomer with distaste. This one didn't just rumple the cushions, he talked with his hands. Twofoots were so undignified.

^{oo}That's not the one from before,^{oo} Nutmeg remarked, joining Whiskers under the settee.

^{oo}No. That one smelled like damp, cavern, and cut grass. This one smells like porchscreen and cheap aftershave.^{oo}

^{oo}Excitable too. Moves around a lot.^{oo}

^{oo}Squeaky voice too.^{oo}

"I don't think I can help you, Jervis."

"Eddie thought you might cut me a break, since I was so nice and helped him out with the y'know ♪-yadada-da-dada yada ladada-♪"

"For money. You helped him for money, Jervis. And when it didn't work, you cut him loose to—"

"Hey, I did what he asked. It's not my fault it didn't work out."

"Okay, okay, look, it's not that I'm not *WILLING* to help you, I just don't see that there's anything I can do."

"You could let me live here," he blurted out.

"Ex-cuse me?"

"Let me live here. Let me borrow your flat and say it's mine. And my Aunt Maud can stay here too, and she'll think I live like a normal person. She can't see me at the hideout, I've got white rabbits and giant playing cards and queen of hearts and—"

"Jervis, this is really getting into 'more than kittycat need to know' territory, okay."

"Can't my aunt and I stay here for a month. Pleeese?"

"Jervis, I live here."

"But you've got Bruce Wayne in your pocket, right; he's got a big place."

"JERVIS!"

“Oh, we can’t mention him either? I know we can’t say Batman, but I figured Wayne was all ordinary so that’d be okay—HEY, Wayne is *ordinary*! You two could come over while my Auntie is here, let her see I have legitimate friends.”

“Jervis,” Selina sputtered, then took a deep breath, trying to achieve the kind of okay-dealing-with-crazies-now calm she’d seen Batman assume on these occasions. “Jervis, I am not going to lend you my apartment, nor will Bruce and I be visiting you socially while your Aunt Maud is here or pretending you are an editor at Harper and Row.”

∞∞She’s laying down the law now.∞∞

∞∞Looks like.∞∞

∞∞That’s the no-climbing-the-drapes tone.∞∞

∞∞I was thinking no-rubber-mice-in-the-bathtub.∞∞

“Alright,” Jervis sighed dejectedly, “If you won’t let me live here, and you won’t visit, then at least come to the Iceberg sometime. Penguin’s gonna let me act like I run the place.”

“Fiction editor by day, nightclub owner by night?”

“No, I’ll have left the editing job two years ago, and now I’m doing this.”

“Mm,” Selina nodded, playing along, “Better pay?”

“Downsized.”

“Ah.”

∞∞At last he’s gone.∞∞

∞∞Thank Bast.∞∞

∞∞I’ll be on my planter.∞∞

∞∞I’ll be playing with my envelope ball.∞∞

∞∞ANOTHER ONE?∞∞ Nutmeg glared at Selina in disgust. How many twofoots were going to be allowed to come trudging through their territory today?

This one might turn out okay, though...

Nutmeg moistened her nose as she detected, under a surface odor of pipe tobacco, an undeniable whiff of honey-garlic chicken. She hopped up to the end table next to the visitor and confirmed, YES, the new twofoot visitor was a slob! The heavenly aroma was coming from two distinct globs on his shirt. All hail twofoots that drip honey-garlic chicken on their clothing! Nutmeg nestled up to the newcomer and tentatively licked the stained fabric.

“Miss Kyle... eh, Selina,” Gordon began hesitantly after the social pleasantries subsided. “I know we’ve had our differences, but the thing is, the differences are why

I'm here. I – I mean, Catwoman – I need to hire Catwoman for something, and – I've never done anything like this before. How do I start?"

"Start what exactly?" Selina asked uncomfortably.

"I've never commissioned a criminal undertaking before. How do I begin it exactly?"

Selina sat back heavily in her chair.

"Is there a full moon or something, 'cause I'm getting the damnedest offers today. You want to pay me to commit a crime?"

"Yes."

"Well, Commissioner, I'm not in that business anymore, but if I was—"

"It's ex-commissioner, and that's really how this all comes about."

"...but *IF I WAS*, this would be what's called entrapment."

"Miss Kyle, Selina, please, I assure you this proposition is not a law enforcement exercise."

"What is it then?" Selina demanded impatiently.

"A wedding present."

She stared, stunned, and Gordon continued.

"I need you to acquire something for me, something I have no legal right to. And I want to acquire this thing, to get it away from the people who have it now, as a gesture and a security measure to protect Barbara."

"Go on," Selina encouraged softly, just a hint of her Catwoman voice creeping in.

"You know what happened to her, with the Joker, why she's in the wheelchair?"

"Of course."

"You know there were pictures."

"Yes."

"Not police photographs, sick ones, taken by that fiend. You know what they... show."

"Not the details, but I can imagine the general content, yes."

"Well, they were used at the trial, evidence. They're public record, technically. But, I was commissioner then. I had power, I had the ability to... I saw to it that the pictures *got lost*, misfiled actually. A couple digits transposed in the evidence locker. Mistake if anyone noticed. No one did. I did it to protect Barbara, you understand. I didn't want some newspaper or magazine to..."

"I understand, Jim. It's okay. I'm not a 'Rules girl.' "

Gordon half-laughed ironically, then went on.

"Damn near forgot who I was talking to. Okay, I bent the rules, and I hid the photos. I got away with it. No harm done. The case is closed, will never be appealed, and no one is the wiser, right?"

"Except?"

"Except what?" Gordon asked in alarm.

"If there wasn't an 'except' you wouldn't be here," Selina pointed out.

"Ah, I see. Okay then, yeah, *EXCEPT* now I'm retired. And it's all political. Anybody snoops, they can make a big thing out of it 'cause of my impropriety, former commissioner's abuse of power and all that rot—but it's not me that'll hurt for it. It'll be Barbara 'cause all the uproar will dwell more than a little on what it was I covered up."

"Yeah, I can see that. Sensational stuff. And of course with the wedding, Bruce Wayne's son, big news story, somebody might actually go looking."

"You think so?" Gordon stared in horror, as if this had never occurred to him.

Selina nodded. She didn't mention that Dick himself had brought up this gruesome possibility at their earlier meeting.

"Okay," Selina agreed, an air of dismissal in her tone. "I'll look into it."

"What'll it, I mean, the cost? In addition to my pension, I have an IRA and the house is paid off."

Selina waved him off, embarrassed for the first time in this extraordinary conversation.

"Forget it. On the house—if I decide to do it, which I was going to say I hadn't decided yet, but I just did."

Gordon blinked. Was that a yes?

Nutmeg entered the war room still savoring the lingering flavor of honey-garlic sauce. She batted a milk ring lazily, then settled against the folds of purple leather. She was just drifting off as the leatherbed was swept out from under her like a magic trick.

^{oo}REOWRL!^{oo} she objected.

The bedskirt rose and twofoot Selina-cat's face appeared.

"Don't you get clawmarks in this, I need to use it tonight."

^{oo}rowrl,^{oo} Nutmeg sulked.

"Don't push me. I'll vacuum under there if I have to."

It took fifteen minutes to get to my first stop, which, it turned out, was a few minutes less than it would take to get over the heady thrill of being in costume again, prowling for criminal purposes.

The panel before me was part of the PHOENIX 9000, one of the best, if not *the* best, security systems on the market. This panel took up to a 10-digit digital PIN that could take four hours to crack—and then only if you had the right equipment.

Fortunately, it wasn't going to take me anything like four hours, because I was damn sure I could guess the owner's PIN: 22222 222 22

There was a low hum and the indicator went from red to yellow to green. The system was deactivated.

I let myself in and, since Harvey wasn't around, I made myself at home: fixed a cup of tea and stretched out on his sofa with a box of Goldfish crackers.

For some reason, on getting home a half-hour later, Harvey acted like this was a big deal: What was I doing here, how did I get in, etc. etc.... I mean, really, you would have thought he was channeling Batman.

"Harvey for godssake, it's Gotham City, and you're in the murder and mayhem business. Even with a Phoenix 9000, you must've had people let themselves in before!" I insisted, a little put out that he was being such a prude.

He just looked at me, then said, "You know, Selina, exactly TWO other people have been able to 'let themselves in,' as you put it: Poison Ivy. And Batman. Neither one of them, we assure you, sat on the couch and ate Goldfish."

"What Batman did, I can guess," I said with a laugh. "But Ivy? I don't ever want to hear about that."

He smirked and that ended the preshow. I got down to business.

"I need a favor."

"A good favor or a bad favor?"

"Bad one."

Harvey raised an eyebrow, then the Two-Face voice cut in:

"This mean love's young dream with Bruce Wayne is over and done with?"

"No," I answered. I would have preferred to deal with Harvey alone, but there's nothing for it when Two-Face decides to get involved. You have to roll with it like it's perfectly natural. "This is by way of being a favor for a friend," I explained casually.

"A criminal favor," one of them observed.

"Yes. So will you help me or not?"

They flipped their coin, then appeared to have a disagreement whether the result meant yes or no. 'Favor for a friend' being construed as a good thing, 'criminal favor' being bad.

"Look boys, I hate to interrupt, but this sounds like a crock to me. Bottom line is: one of you wants to help me and the other doesn't. If you'll just tell me which of you it is that's being a fathead, maybe we can cut a deal."

It was Two-Face who spoke up: "You want to make deals, precious, you deal with us. If it was Pretty Boy Harv that needed convincing, you could just whip him into line with that braided leather sextoy you got hanging from your belt."

If this was the way it had to be, it's the way it had to be. I would have preferred to play nice, talk like civilized people - but some things you can't let pass. I uncoiled the 'sextoy' enticingly and purred.

"Now Two-Face, that's not how I hear it at all. Word has it, your bedgames with Ivy, you *like* it rough 'n' ready."

It was enough. Two-Face may consider himself the baddest thing on two legs, but a few non-ambiguous words from a comely lady in leather and he loses it. Well, maybe he didn't 'lose it' exactly, but he hesitated long enough for me to swing the whiphandle across his throat and plant a heel in his gut. I was sorry, pulling him by the hair, that Harvey had to pay for Two-Face's mouth. Not sorry enough to stop slamming his head into the kitchen table, but sorry enough to fix him an icepack when it was over.

"Sof fwat ifsit sfat you fwant?" Harvey managed from under the ice and swelling.

"What can you tell me about police evidence lockers?" I asked.

Harvey Dent staggered into the Iceberg Lounge looking like he'd been in a battle.

Sly, the only bartender who had stayed at the Iceberg for more than three weeks or three brawls, decided not to notice this until Mr. Dent gave some sign that he wished it to be noticed.

"Evening, Mr. Dent."

Two-Face growled, "Two double malts on the rocks. And make them doubles."

"Happy hour, Mr. Dent. If you order two, I serve you four. If you just want two, only order one," Sly advised, wisely.

"If you know what we want, Wise Ass, why don't you just serve us."

"Now, Mr. Dent, you know Mr. Cobblepot'd shoot me if I sold less than you ordered without sayso."

Two-Face sneered, but Harvey smiled: "Just 'one' then - Double shot of double malt, please."

Sly produced two drinks on cue.

"That's what the doctor ordered," Harvey held up the glass, touched a finger to the ice, then applied it to the inch of bruise on his forehead that extended to the unscarred side of his face.

Sly decided this was enough of a go ahead, so he spoke:

"You look like a man that broke one of the cat-lady's rules."

"Technically," Harvey said wearily. "But that's not why we require your services, oh barkeep extraordinaire."

"Why's that then, Mr. Dent?"

"Ask your new boss."

"New boss? - Oh, you mean Mr. Tetch. Yes, we've all been briefed about that. Pretend Mr. Tetch runs the place. A little unusual," Sly mused philosophically, "but not half as strange as some of the things I've seen in this club, Mr. Dent, nor you either, I expect. And it's exciting for someone like me to be a part of it for once."

Harvey liked Sly, his easy manner never put out by the most outrageous Rogue behavior. But there were times the guy was just too perky for Two-Face. The latter glowered. Sly met his gaze evenly, and Two-Face seemed to reconsider, like a charging dog that was challenged. In reward, Sly topped off his glass.

"So how does Mr. Tetch posing as manager of the Iceberg relate to—"

"You ever see *The Birdcage*," Harvey explained, "gay couple playing it straight for a conservative politician and his wife?"

"Robin Williams, Nathan Lane, Miramax 1996," Sly answered like he was reading a resume.

"Guess you know it. You know the part where all the campy drag queens from the nightclub are redoing the apartment?"

"Where they get a moosehead and a crucifix - Playboys in the bathroom - 'that's what they read.' I love that scene!" Sly enthused. "It's funny."

"We used to think so too." Harvey replied. "No more. We just lived it."

"Plants are chic," Poison Ivy insisted, "You can't have too many plants."

"You can if you want to look normal, Pammy! This is like Wild Kingdom," Harvey moaned.

If Jervis Tetch wanted to look normal, upstanding, and respectable for his aunt's visit, Harvey thought he was the obvious choice to advise him redecorating this flat. He had been a successful lawyer and politician, he knew how to play that game. What Pamela Isley and Roxy Rocket were doing here was beyond him.

"Maybe we did overdo the green," Jervis wondered, standing before two walls almost completely covered by potted trees, ivy-covered trellises, and hanging planters."

"It was Riddler that overdid the green," Roxy countered. "Without the plants those walls just look GREEN; this way it looks planned, like it's part of the decor."

"If the decor is Wild Kingdom, yes," Harvey repeated, and Ivy kicked him in the shin.

"Why Riddler's place anyway?" Roxy asked abruptly, "Why not either borrow someplace normal or redo your own hideout."

"This is a better location," Jervis ticked off his list of reasons, "It's near the club, it doesn't need nearly so much work as mine - just the green, the futon and the question marks really."

"Oh, save that one above the mantle," Roxy put in, "One big question mark in the room - it looks like art!"

Harvey, Ivy, and Jervis all stared.

"Or not," Roxy squeaked.

"Let's face it, the only hideout, lair, or apartment that wouldn't need any work at all is Selina's, and she wouldn't cooperate."

"You could have hatted her," Ivy observed coldly, "that'd bring her around."

Jervis winced and unconsciously moved his hand to his right side. The memory - and the scars - from the payback when he'd 'hatted' Catwoman were still far too vivid.

Harvey empathized and touched a finger to his own fresh cat scratches.

"The futon's got to go," Roxy declared, again changing the subject at an opportune moment.

"Throw some pillows on it," Jervis suggested.

Harvey realized what this scene reminded him of, and quoted *The Birdcage*: "Don't add, just subtract."

"What?"

"Don't bring in pillows, get rid of the futon."

"Then were'll we sit?" Jervis asked peevishly.

"Surprise!" Penguin called from the doorway, "I brought you a *-quack-* house cooling present."

He handed over a coffee table book: THE WONDER OF IGLOOS

Jervis looked at it, then up at Harvey who repeated, "Don't add. Just subtract."

"So, Mr. Tetch is not just pretending to run the club, he's pretending to live at Mr. Nigma's?" Sly asked in awe at the end of the story.

"That is the second tier of his deception, yes" Harvey answered, gesturing for his glass to be filled.

"What does Mr. Nigma say about this?"

"He's up the river, not saying anything at the moment," Two-Face answered, gesturing for the other glass to be filled.

"Only one to be complaining is Roxy," Harvey continued.

"Miss Rocket?" Sly's tone changed slightly. It wasn't the first time Harvey had noticed such a change. Roxy was the one rogue that caused Sly to lose his unflappable cool.

"She's posing as Jervis's girlfriend," Two-Face informed him maliciously.

You would think that someplace like the police evidence locker for all of metro-Gotham would be a fortress, wouldn't you? Turns out their "security" is set up by bureaucrats. It's all about paper, documenting the chains of who handled what: this officer turned in this item on this date, tagged to that incident report, that lawyer signed it out on that date. The priority is maintaining the legal integrity of the stuff, not the physical security. I mean, it's not totally unprotected, but compared to museums, galleries, jewelry stores, bank vaults, government installations - in short, the kinds of places *I* break into - this was a walk in the park.

In under an hour, I was inside and doped out the layout. There was a cage on each floor that led to the records for a block of precincts. The 29th, which is where Barbara's casefile would have been "misfiled" according to Gordon, was on the 3rd floor. There was one guard that patrolled the 1st through 10th floor stairwells and elevator—slowly. He was, to put it mildly, not difficult to avoid. There was one clerk in the cage. That took a moment's thought... Traditional gas pellets, while effective, would be remembered. When he woke up, he'd know he was gassed. A couple drops of chloral hydrate in his coffee would do the job too, but the hangover's a dead giveaway. So I opted instead for a 100mg dose of a common over-the-counter antihistamine. It was risky, as I couldn't be sure he was completely out. So instead of taking his keyring, I figured I'd just pick the locks beyond the cage.

Maud Wodehouse sat at the best table at the Iceberg Lounge, alternately singeing the rogues of Gotham with glares of haughty disapproval and crinkling her nose as if to avoid some unpleasant smell.

The rogues looked at Aunt Maud, then at each other. Formidable didn't begin to describe her; the woman was a cross between the Queen of Hearts and Batman. Hell, you'd think after growing up with a gorgon like that, Batman would be a breeze!

"JER-VIS," the Wagnerian voice intoned, "This novelty glass in which that slippery bartender poured my drink is an abomination. Please instruct him to serve me with ordinary glassware in future."

"Yes, Aunt Maud," Jervis groveled.

He was mortified letting the other rogues witness his humiliation, but there was always the chance one of them would snap and kill her.

"Very interesting," Hugo Strange observed from a corner table. "This is perhaps why Herr Tetch is so scared of The Batman - she reminds him of his childhood terror: Aunt Gladys."

"Aunt Maud," Scarecrow corrected.

"Aunt Gladys," Hugo repeated, lost in recollection of his own family burdens, "could make grown men to climb trees and pull them up after them."

"You guys are pansies," Poison Ivy observed. "A strong woman should be celebrated. It's nothing to be intimidated by."

"You go over there and say that," Scarecrow challenged her.

"No way."

"I can't think why Alice is so late," Jervis was saying with a twitchy expression. "She's usually so prompt."

"Alice?" Scarecrow asked, in a hushed whisper, "I thought Roxy was posing as the girlfriend."

"Fiancée," Ivy sneered in disgust, "it's more respectable."

"Fiancée then," Scarecrow countered. "I thought it was Roxy."

"It *IS* Roxy, you straw-brained nitwit! He's calling her Alice. Says Roxy's not a normal name."

"Oh, like *JERVIS* is?"

Minor setback.

All the locks behind the cage were Medico, and Medico locks...Well, let's just say they *can* be picked if you know what you're doing, but it takes a while. Easier by far to cut or blast through them, except this needed to be an invisible job. They weren't supposed to know anything had been tampered with. So I went back to the dozing clerk, held my breath, and eased the keys from his belt. He didn't stir—some guys just can't hold their NoSneeze Nighttime.

I made my way to the appropriate room, the right filing cabinet, and the right drawer. At last. Found the file... and it was sealed. Thank you, Commissioner SuperCop, for not giving me a hint about that little surprise. *Now* I had to somehow get the pictures out without breaking the seal!

More lost time.

“Explain to me again, Jervis, why so many of the patrons here dress in such an odd and conspicuous fashion.”

“It’s, ah, well, a kind of custom here. It’s called Viva la Difference night, the, ah, third Thursday of the month, all the regulars dress in wild outfits. The more respectable they are, the wilder the getup, you see.”

“How very peculiar.”

“It’s like Mardi Gras!”

Damn, I’m good.

Plain ordinary exact-o-knife dipped in liquid paper... slid ever so gently up the seam opposite the seal... so I could open the file without the seal ever being broken. Got the pics, and re-glued it with more liquid paper. Was it absolutely undetectable? No. But you’d have to be looking for something amiss. And it wasn’t like this case would ever be appealed or retried.

I opened the file and a thin plastic sheet, like a transparency for an overhead projector, except opaque and gray, fell to the floor. I picked it up and noticed a faint chemical smell.

I returned it to the file and paged through the police report. I could see why Dick and Gordon would go so far as to break the law, commissioning a crime, to get control of the pictures that accompanied this report, the words were graphic enough... Poor Barbara. She’d hate that I thought that, and I’ll never let her know if I can help it. Still. Poor Barbara. She opened the door, that’s all she did: Makes her dad cocoa, sets down the tray, doorbell, “It’ll be Colleen from across the street. Yoga class tonight” – and BANG! – psycho-clown out of a nightmare blows a hole in her spine.

Then he took off her clothes and took pictures—bleeding, naked—quite a variety of poses, judging by the testimony. He blew them up into slides and plastered a funhouse wall with them. He wanted to prove a point, he said, he wanted to drive Jim Gordon mad. Didn’t work. He considers it one of his failures.

Some failure. Barbara’s still paralyzed.

I was skimming. I didn’t want to be reading any of this. I just wanted to find the part where it said how many photos, slides, negatives, and whatever there were to track down.

I found the photos—they were blank, all the same solid gray as the plastic sheet. I looked for the negatives, and found they were in the same condition. The slides were in an envelope with another tiny strip of plastic. They too were solid, opaque gray.

I pasted the folder back together at the seam, returned it to the filing cabinet, relocked the cabinet, relocked the room, returned to the cage and replaced the clerk’s keys... all the while waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I was nervous. I don’t like surprises like that in a job, any job, but my first in months, I especially didn’t like it. In the heart of police territory, I especially didn’t like it.

I took an extra minute to evade Captain Efficiency patrolling the stairwell. I was being too cautious, which in itself was dangerous.

I made my way to the roof—and with the shock of the cold night air, the explanation hit me. It was so obvious and so right I almost laughed.

The chemical smell.

I should've thought of it before I wasted six hours on a fool's errand.

Well, if I wasted my time, it was worse for poor Harvey. Beat him to a paste for nothing.

I did laugh then.

I really should have expected it.

"JER-VIS!" Aunt Maud bellowed for the ninth time since arriving in the lounge.

"Is it my imagination, or does she hit the same notes as Joker calling for Harley?" Penguin asked, waddling up to the table from the direction of the imperious Maud. "She wants to meet you," he told Poison Ivy.

"Me? Why?"

"-quack-, 'Cause it's Viva la Difference Night," Penguin answered.

"Don't ask me why," Scarecrow offered a longer explanation, "but it seems in the World According to Jervis, the wilder the outfit you wear on Viva la Difference Night, the more respectable you are. She took one look at me and decided I was a corporate vice president, at least. Now she wants to meet you, because she decided you must be practically a duchess if you come here dressed like a whore."

"WHAT!" Poison Ivy screamed, while Scarecrow and Strange held her back.

"C'm off it, Pammy, it's not like the 'foliage' leaves a lot to the imagination," Harvey pointed out.

Ivy spun around and slapped him. He turned back from the slap with Two-Face's lecherous grin.

"Ooh, Baby," he growled, and slapped her back.

Jervis ran over in a panic.

"What are you doing! No slapping, no slapping!" He looked back at his aunt in alarm, "Thank god, she didn't see it. Oh, where is Roxy? This is not going well."

"Jervis, something I don't understand," Scarecrow began, "If your aunt's such a problem, why not just pop one of those mind control chips on her head and shut her off."

Jervis sighed.

"She is my mother's sister, Jonathan. Does a man 'hat' the mater's own sister? And if he does, what happens when she goes home without any memory of it, and my mother asks 'How was your trip and did Jervis take good care of you?'"

"Mammasboy," coughed Two-Face.

"JER-VIS!" Aunt Maud bellowed for the tenth time since arriving in the lounge.

I love the windows they put on those old mansion houses, I really do: foothold - foothold, and *a shelf* if you have some heavy safecracking gear you need to set down while you work on the alarm system. This particular system was the best commercially available before the little adjustments that make it all but impenetrable... but no system is foolproof, not even his. There was a flaw, a very tiny one. If you

weren't the world's very best thief with exhaustive knowledge of the technology AND had a set of razor-sharp catclaws, you could never, *never* get passed it.

I opened the window silently and entered. Padded quietly over to the bed and watched him sleep for a moment before lowering my head and meowing softly.

His eyes opened instantly, bright and clear and blue.

"Hey," he murmured softly, reaching to pull me to him, "There's a Catwoman in my bed. Y'know, I actually have a dream that starts just like this.."

I purred.

"Tell me."

He reached up around my waist -and then his hand went flat against my back and the other felt my arm. He sat up abruptly.

"Your costume's cold. How long have you been prowling tonight?"

In one move, I laughed, smiled and kissed him. Busted in under ten seconds! You gotta love him.

"You really are the best, you know that," I meowed, settling back on his bed, enjoying the situation tremendously.

"Selina, what have you done?"

"You tell me," I challenged him. *My Dark Knight Detective*, I thought, *You tell me. Let me watch your mind work.*

He looked into my eyes for a long moment. I used to wonder if he could read my mind when he did that.

"Police evidence locker. Barbara's file."

I guess he can.

"And all for nothing," I confirmed it, as if he needed me to. "You got there first."

"Well..." he looked embarrassed, "it's not like I removed anything."

You gotta love him.

No, he didn't steal the photos, he just added something that reacted chemically with the paper and negatives. I wanted to kiss him and tell him what a sweetie he is under all that avenging badass of Justice - but I just couldn't. Not when he was Bruce. When he was Batman in a righteous spate, yes, but not like this, all warm and blushy. I let him off the hook with a change of subject.

"Since you're awake, what would you say to a little excursion? There's quite a show on at the Iceberg tonight."

"Aunt Maud," Jervis intoned proudly, "This is my fiancée, Alice Rocket." And he pronounced it ro-KAY.

The older woman eyed Roxy as though through a monocle.

"Sit down with me, young woman," she commanded. Roxy did so. "And tell me about yourself. How old are you?"

"I'm not going to answer that," Roxy objected.

"Then how did you meet my nephew?"

"26," Roxy answered.

Aunt Maud glared.

Jervis stepped in. In his panic, he blurted the truth: "We met through work."

"You did not work at this club, surely?" Aunt Maud sniffed. "This is only a barely acceptable situation for a man," she paused to glare mercilessly at Jervis before continuing, "Let alone...."

"Oh no, my old job," Jervis adjusted the story, "We met at my old job, when I was an editor. Roxy is, ah, a librarian."

Roxy's eyes bulged slightly.

"Indeed," Aunt Maud nodded approvingly, "a most respectable profession. What it lacks in social cache, it makes up for in refinement. I like a well read girl. Tell me, Miss Roquet, which is your favorite Bronte sister?"

Roxy swallowed. Behind her, the Rogues within earshot began whispering: "Roxy hasn't read a book since high school," "She goes into Barnes and Noble for calendars and coffee," "\$50 she makes up a name," "\$100 she says 'the quiet one,'" "'with the bangs.'"

"What are those ill-bred people whispering about in that rude fashion?" Aunt Maud wondered audibly, and the most notorious representatives of the Gotham underworld hung their heads like truant schoolboys.

"Actually," Roxy tried to extricate herself from the most objectionable lie so far, "that was just when we met. I haven't worked in a library for years."

Now it was Jervis's turn to swallow...

"And what do you do now?" Maud was asking.

Why oh why did he get Roxy for this? He knew educated women. Harley Quinn was a psychiatrist (speaking of which, where was Harley these days?) Poison Ivy was a botanist. But Roxy, Roxy was a lovely girl and not stupid, but not book smart, not the kind you bring home to meet Mother. Before turning to crime she had been...

"...in the movies," Roxy was saying.

"Yes. She used to be a stunt woman," Jervis cut in, glaring at Roxy, "but that was just temporary."

"A TEMPORARY stunt job?" Roxy glared back.

"In a very important art film," Jervis went on, "...and actually now she's... she... she works at—"

At this moment Selina Kyle entered the dining room with Bruce—

"Wayne!—Wayne Foundation—She works at the Wayne Foundation!"

Dearest, Dearest Barbara,

I'm so very pleased to be able to offer this bracelet as your 'Something Borrowed.' It was my 'Something New' when Clark and I got married, a gift from Papa Kent. I would have brought it to the shower next week, except I'm not yet sure I'll be able to attend. A story developing in Pango Pango might keep me away. But you know I'll be there in spirit.

Lois

"It's beautiful," Dinah remarked, handing back the note and picking up the bracelet of tiny seed pearls.

"Yes," Barbara agreed, "I admired it at her wedding, and she remembered, isn't that sweet."

"Reporters," Dinah grumbled, "may log everything that's said to them, but that doesn't mean they're sweet, caring or in any way sensitive to their fellow human beings."

Barbara raised an eyebrow, and Dinah stood down.

"Okay, that was my thing."

"Still sore about the Ra's al Ghul stories?" Barbara guessed.

"One does not forget being labeled a living demon's love slave," Dinah declared adamantly.

"But that wasn't the Daily Planet's doing and it certainly wasn't Lois Lane's."

"No, but come on Barbara, what kind of friend is this: I'll be at your shower if I'm not busy breaking some story in Pango Pango?"

Barbara laughed.

"Dinah, don't be a featherhead. Pango Pango is Diana."

Dinah blinked, so Barbara explained.

"Lois's spies in the JLA have not yet told her if Diana is coming to the shower. If she is, big story in Pango Pango keeps Lois away. If she's not, 'oh look, I'm free after all.'"

"Are you telling me Lois and Diana avoid each other?"

Barbara nodded.

"One Superman-Wonder Woman rumor too many, in my opinion."

"But Lois can't think there's anything in that! I mean, Boyscout: Truth, Justice, and cheating on his wife? No way."

"Of course not. But look, Lois is in the rumor mill business. It's not like she can pretend she doesn't hear that nonsense, and she gets tired of it. Says Diana doesn't do anything to discourage it - *which is true enough.*"

"Staying 'above it all,'" Dinah hazarded.

"I suppose," Barbara answered. "Worked okay for you."

"What did? Head down and wait for it all to pass? Yeah, technically it's over, I guess. The papers went on to write about something else - but a lot of people still think that I was in love with that slimy, creepy, icky, evil..."

"Cadaver?" Barbara prompted.

"YES!" Dinah cheered, "*Cadaver*. Perfect term. Thank you."

"You'll have to thank Catwoman for that one. It's what the rogues call him."

"Catwoman," Dinah repeated. "Now *THAT* was a solution: Get yourself on stage, sell tickets, and tell it like it really is."

"Maybe a TV show," Barbara giggled, "It'd have to be cable-access, I guess, but it's not like there's any shortage of material. When they got done smearing Catwoman,

they did you and Ra's, then Joker was supposed to be dead. There's even a story now that Bruce Wayne is supposed to have killed somebody, there's no end to it."

Dinah beamed a smile of almost sexual excitement: "Let's do it, Barbara, you and me. You've got the equipment here to make up some holodeck character—"

"Holographic."

"Whatever, to appear as the host. Let's do it!"

"You can't be serious!"

"Why not? Barbara, why not? I'm so sick of this bullshit. And I'm sick of these mindless lemmings thinking whatever those scandal sheets tell them to... about all of us!"

Barbara just smiled, not unkindly. Then Dinah smiled too.

"Okay, was a silly idea. Done now."

"Good. So tell me who's coming to my shower."

One thing Selina Kyle knew, her friends and enemies would have to agree, was how to enter a room with distinction.

She did so now, surveying the table at which Jervis Tetch, Roxy Rocket and an unknown large woman sat...

"A foundation," the large woman cooed, "That is most respectable."

...the many clusters of Rogues watching the show...

"The nerve of the guy," Hugo Strange muttered, eyeing Bruce contemptuously.

"Oh give that a rest," Penguin retorted. "Look at her, my Roxy, pretending to be with Jervis Tetch."

"Your Roxy, oh please, she hasn't spoken to you since the Christmas party, has she?"

"Hasn't even looked at me," Penguin admitted.

...and Harvey Dent at the bar...

Normally either Harvey or Eddie would be her first stop in a room full of rogues. They were her preferred informants for whatever was going on beneath the surface... Except Eddie was still in Arkham. And Harvey was nursing his wounds after their last meeting.

She sighed, glanced at Bruce, and then, as if by mutual consent, they went up to greet Jervis and Roxy.

"You're not in costume!" were Jervis's first words, uttered far too loudly considering the whole club was straining to hear every syllable uttered at that table.

Selina didn't react at first, and Jervis, in a near panic at the waves of disapproval he felt coming from Aunt Maud, turned to her companion and said: "Or you either, Bruce!"

There was a gaffaw from Hugo Strange, but the room was otherwise silent.

"It's Viva la Difference Night, did you forget?" Jervis prompted.

"...Is... it... Viva la Difference Night already?" Selina managed slowly, "Where does the time go?"

Meanwhile, while everyone watched Selina, Bruce took a heavy plate from the table and tossed it like a Batarang into Hugo Strange's head.

"Aunt Maud, despite the nondescript clothing, I know you won't mind being introduced to Bruce Wayne, of the Wayne Foundation."

Bruce shook Maud's hand, but eyed Jervis warily. That was an unusual introduction.

"And this is Selina Kyle, she's in... acquisitions."

There was a gaffaw from Roxy this time, and Selina very sweetly batted her on the head with her tiny hardcase handbag.

"Hand slipped," Selina cooed sweetly, "Sorry, Roxy."

"Roxy?" Aunt Maud raised her eyebrow.

"Oh, that's a nickname she picked up... in college... rocks! Alice studied *geology* before she went into library science... so they called her Rock-sy and Selina still calls her that because... they were sorority sisters."

The rogue audience almost applauded this magnificent whopper, so impressed were they with the effort Jervis was putting into each syllable. As lies went, it was an impressive tour de force.

"See, the thing is," Dinah mugwumped, yet again, about a name Barbara suggested for the guest list, "I'm not sure I can contact all these people."

"C'mon, Dinah, we can use our imaginations here," Barbara urged, "JLA distribution channels."

"I can't actually get in there, Barbara."

Barbara stared in horror.

"Why?"

"Birds of Prey! Takes up *too much of my time* and now I'm *no longer a full-member* of the League, so according to Diana, Queen Bee of the Watchtower, my access has to be approved case-by-case now."

Barbara rolled her eyes.

Then a solution presented itself.

Oracle was, herself, a full member of the JLA, but it wouldn't do to use the database for her own bridal shower. But there was another member of the bridal party on the JLA membership rolls..."

"Selina can get the list," Barbara declared happily.

"CATWOMAN! Catwoman can use the JLA DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS and I HAVE TO GET APPROVAL CASE BY CASE!" Dinah fumed. "SHE HELPED OUT TWICE!"

"Yeah," Barbara hedged, "but...well, you know...Batman.... Nobody was sure what the situation was there and... I guess everybody figured they weren't going to be the one to take her name off the computer..."

"Wonderful."

"You know what I think," Barbara chirped, "I think you should co-host the shower with Selina. And once we have everybody together, we make a point of how nice it is to be able to get together like this, more socially, and we need to do it more often, so let's keep the rolls open for invitations. Have more events like this. Gosh, somebody shouldn't have to get married for us all to get together. From what Selina says, the rogues do it all the time. Wouldn't it be nice if we could do stuff like that..."

"WHORE???" Ivy bellowed.

"SORORITY SISTERS???" Selina yelled.

"LIBRARIAN???" Roxy screamed.

"Mamma's Boy," Two-Face taunted.

"Getting into a slap-fight in front of Auntie Maud," Jervis complained.

"Somebody threw a plate at my head," Hugo Strange slurred.

The moment Aunt Maud retired to the ladies room, pandemonium had broken out at the Iceberg Lounge as everybody jostled for airtime to voice their grievance before she returned.

Only Sly and Bruce Wayne remained totally calm.

"We don't actually hire stunt people at the Wayne Foundation," Bruce told the bartender, quietly.

"We don't actually have a Viva la Difference Night," Sly confided in the billionaire.

"JER-VIS!" Aunt Maud bellowed, officially ending Open Share Time by dragging Gina, the washroom attendant, into the dining room by the ear. "I have learned things," Maud announced, red with indignation, "I have learned *monstrous* things from this young woman about the goings on in this club and the kind of people these are with whom you surround yourself!"

Jervis Tetch gulped, looked around like a startled deer, and then stammered, "But Auntie, whatever do you mean?"

"Mammasboy," Two-Face coughed; "Excuse us," Harvey apologized.

"That man," Maud pointed accusingly at the Penguin, "has betrayed your trust. Not only does he claim to own this establishment—"

"OSWALD!" Jervis turned on the Penguin with a what-can-I-do shrug as he wailed, "AFTER ALL I'VE DONE FOR YOU!"

"-he has had an indiscreet liaison with your fiancée."

"YOU TROLLOP!" Jervis wheeled on Roxy.

"Yeah," Dinah agreed with Barbara. "It's a shame we don't all get together more."

"Nonono," Selina was saying, holding up a hand to silence the rogues gathered around the Iceberg bar, "I got in and out of a police evidence locker tonight, I can get through this without help from any of you."

She gestured to Sly, who filled the shot glass sitting before her.

"Jervis Tetch," she began, "who is not the Mad Hatter, used to be an editor at Harper and Row and now runs a nightclub called the Iceberg, which is not a criminal hangout. He's engaged to Roxy, who is called Alice, Rocket, pronounced Roquet, who is not a criminal, but used to be a librarian and now works at the Wayne Foundation, which is very respectable, even though Bruce isn't wearing a costume because he forgot it's Viva la Difference Night." She downed the shot, there was a collective cheer, and money changed hands.

"I don't get it," Killer Croc said. There was a collective groan and more money changed hands.

"Next," Selina called out, admitting defeat. And Scarecrow took her place trying to explain the tangle to Croc.

Meanwhile across the room, sweat poured from Jervis's brow as he spun story after story trying to explain the latest revelations to Aunt Maud. Finally he joined the rogues at the bar.

"Selina," he whimpered, "come to the flat for a bit with Wayne. This place is too dangerous, but if I have to take her home - the only thing she likes there is this painting of a question mark. She thinks it's art. I can't BS about art. Please help me!"

Selina looked at him coldly.

Jervis looked to Bruce, who didn't look any warmer.

"C'mon, guys, I just had to break up with Roxy and fire Oswald. I'm desperate. HELP ME!"

"C'mon, Selina," Harvey urged, "one good favor deserves another. Or rather, one bad favor deserves a good one."

Bruce raised a disapproving eyebrow. "I'll want to hear about that later," he signaled in their secret sign language.

"You're bluffing," Selina countered.

He had the same look he had watching Ra's Al Ghul on The View. He was having a ball but wouldn't admit it. Which meant (God help us miserable sinners, Selina thought) they were going to the flat.

"This would be... a... meditation on uncertainty, I would say. Taking a familiar, commonplace image like the question mark and forcing us to... grapple with the complex... philosophical... abstract... ideas it represents."

I took a deep breath. The evidence locker was nothing compared to this. Breaking into Fort Knox would be nothing compared to this. Explaining true modern art to non-art lovers who say "my three year old could do that" is no simple feat, but trying to pass off a piece of Riddler kitsch as fine art, that requires some heavyduty footwork.

Outthinking Batman was easy compared to this—Speaking of which, was I getting any help at all from Mr. Twitch-smile? No, I was not.

It was *RIDDLER'S HIDEOUT* they fixed up! Nobody at the 'berg had mentioned that! We walked in and there were two walls covered in plants, just barely obscuring the signature lime green wallpaper. A third wall was a bookcase full of Harvey Dent's old law books, and the fourth was covered in posters from Roxy's old movies. There was a book on igloos sitting on the coffee table and a giant oil painting of a question mark over the mantle. Tell me who wouldn't laugh at that?

But did the guy with a trophy room full of this shit so much as blink? No reaction whatsoever. Thanks, Dark Knight. I owe you one.

Two. I owe him *two*, because Jervis decided to play host, offering us drinks and coffee - when he didn't have the slightest idea where anything was kept. So Bruce offered to "help" him. Any excuse to go snooping around, opening all Eddie's drawers and cupboards, no doubt. Wonderful, Batman finally got his inside peek into a rogue's private life other than mine - except it left me alone with Aunt Maud and the punctuation still-life.

The two of them, Bruce and Jervis, somehow managed to make coffee and returned with a tray just as I was running out of unanswered questions the painting invited us to reflect upon. Like: What is the sound of one hand clapping? Why am I here? and What's taking so long with that damn coffee?

With the arrival of the coffee, I was officially out of material - and apparently, so was everybody else. We sipped in awkward silence just long enough that it was almost a relief when the doorbell rang.

Almost.

There was the awkward matter of who it could possibly be and what they could possibly want.

The question mark painting was looking a mite more profound than I thought, especially when Maud asked Jervis if he was going to answer the door or not.

He did, muttering an obscenity cut short by the sight of Harvey escorting a sobbing Roxy Rocket.

"Jervis, forgive me, forgive me!" she cried, throwing herself at his feet.

"Hugo Strange has an Aunt Gladys," Harvey explained quietly to me and Bruce, "He is very sympathetic to Jervis's situation. He went to work on Roxy right after you left. 'Sticking by our own in time of need' and all that rot."

"Jervis, forgive me, please. It will never happen again, I'll be good from now on," Roxy went on, sobbing.

"Isn't she taking this a little far," I asked, somewhat nauseated.

"She's on a mission," Harvey agreed, "Hugo pushed her buttons pretty good."

"Please Jervis, please..."

"You know Roxy has a bit of an inferiority complex," Harvey continued, "not been among us very long, and being able to help an old guard criminal like Mad Hatter, I think Hugo put it in terms of 'earning her wings,'" Harvey concluded. "-or earning her horns," Two-Face corrected.

Then disaster struck. There was a jiggling sound from the door, it opened, and Edward Nigma walked in. He looked around the room, and you could read the thoughts clearly on his face: *Selina. What are you doing here? And Jervis. Harvey. Bruce Wayne. Large woman -Who are you? ...and WHAT HAPPENED TO MY WALLS?*

It wasn't necessary to read that last part on his face, because he said it out loud.

And I have to hand it to Jervis, who I would have written off as a flyweight a few hours earlier, but now recognized as the most creative and courageous improvisational liar of my acquaintance.

"This is my decorator," he declared without a moment's hesitation, "Edward Nigma, he goes by Enigma."

Eddie just blinked.

"My stuff," he stammered.

"Mr. Nigma, this is my Aunt Maud."

"My stuff," Eddie repeated. "That wall - and that one - and that one."

"You know how temperamental they are when they've put so much of themselves into a design. Eddie, not all the stuff worked out, so I'm sure you can get a *FULL REFUND, OK?*"

Hearing the magic word "refund," Eddie nodded.

If Jervis is half this impressive in the field, without the added indignity of a bawling Roxy Rocket clinging to his pant leg, I have no idea how Batman can deal with him—

“Jervis, please forgive me,” the dialogue from below resumed.

And that’s when it got weird.

“Alice, do stop that,” Jervis muttered, “I forgive you, just go over there and be quiet.”

“Roxy, what are you doing here?” Eddie asked, looking down.

Roxy rose from her knees, an actress whose scene was completed, and - in an inspired touch - she gave Jervis a light kiss on the cheek.

Now Eddie, it should be remembered, is particularly sensitive about mind control issues right now. He saw Roxy: on her knees, answering to “Alice,” and being submissive to Jervis. He jumped to the not-*entirely*-fantastic conclusion that she’d been hatted. So far, so good.

He jumped to the conclusion that she’d been hatted for some romantic rather than criminal purpose. Well, considering: Hatter, Kiss, “Alice” ...Again, I say: So far, so good. Not completely through the looking glass, as logic jumps go.

But! Then Eddie wheeled on *me*!

“And you just stand here and look at this like it’s nothing?”

He turned to Bruce!

“I can’t believe you approve of this.”

Maud assumed he was talking about the desecration of his decorating scheme, and she agreed that the plants were way too much but at least they obscured that hideous wallpaper, and the only object of real beauty in the room was that painting of a question mark.

Eddie wavered for a second.

“That’s true,” he brightened, “so few people really appreciate the cache of an unanswered question.”

For a second, I thought that was the end of it. Eddie wandered into a corner, then turned back, bewildered.

“Where’s my futon?”

Roxy gestured for him to join her on a window seat and, before long, he was searching her helmet and goggles for the mind control chip he was certain was there. I know because I heard her whisper “Stop pulling my hair” and Eddie answered “It’s for your own good.”

“She’s letting the decorator take liberties now,” Maud observed.

And where was Bruce during all of this? Standing there. Like it was a video of Ra’s Al Ghul on national television covered in papier-mâché with a yapping dog on his lap...

The phone rang. Things had gone so far at that point we all just looked at each other, everyone too stunned, panicked or overwhelmed to move to answer it.

It rang again, again, then there was a click.

“Riddle me this,” Eddie’s disembodied voice intoned, “What do you get when you cross a hive-dwelling insect with a yellow marshmallow Easter treat: BEEP.”

Jervis looked around frantically, but couldn’t find the phone.

::Hiya Eddie,:: a second voice cut in, ::It’s your HA-HA-HAR-LEY! ::

Now Eddie too joined the wild search for the phone.

:: Didja get my postcard? Paris was so fun, but they talk funny and you can't understand a word they say! Anyway, I just wanted to say, I heard you had trouble with Puddin' over the video we made... ::

Jervis and Eddie collided with each other before a small cabinet. Bruce casually opened the cabinet, picked up the receiver and spoke in his foppiest drawl:

"Hello... Yes... Yes... France. Aha. Yes. Puddin. Mhm. Mhm... Okay, I'll tell them. Goodbye::

He hung up, looked at Eddie, at Jervis, and then at me. When he spoke, it was a magnificent deadpan.

"She went to Paris and the Riviera with a French count. She's back now. Don't tell Puddin."

EPILOGUE

“Yawn. What’s that noise?”

“Laughter. She’s home.”

“Finally. Alone? Or with Bat-Bruce?”

“No Bat-Bruce. Another one. Twofoot with two shoes.”

“They all have two shoes.”

“This one has two different shoes.”

“Oh, this I’ve got to see.”

“Oh god” Selina was laughing, “if I was still doing Cat-Tales, that would’ve been good for a third act.”

“You could never capture ‘Aunt Maud,’” Harvey countered, mimicking her in a nasal falsetto, “Eddie? Video? Ha- Ha- Harley?”

“And what did Eddie say? ‘You see, the beauty of the unanswered question, so few people truly appreciate it.’”

“Look at that: two different shoes, two different socks. This guy’s a calico.”

“Something’s awfully funny.”

Harvey wiped a tear from his eye.

“And what was that nonsense she spouted back! ‘A meditation on uncertainty, taking a familiar image like the question mark, forcing us to grapple with the abstract ideas it represents...’”

“That, she got from me, actually,” Selina giggled.

“You came up with that crock of shit!” Harvey was delighted, “Man, we would have loved to see that.”

“I’m just glad now that Eddie didn’t hear me say it, considering how he took it from Maud: ‘It takes an extraordinary woman to understand the full meaning of the question mark.’ Jesus!”

“Yeah, that was scary. He really teared up; I think he’s in love.”

“Poor Jervis,” Selina cackled, and Harvey nodded and echoed, “Poor Jervis.”

When the laughter subsided, there was a strained silence. Then Selina spoke.

“Anyway, thanks for the lift. Bruce remembered an...”

“...an early meeting, I remember those. C’mon, Lina, I’m not stupid. He’d just been thrown out of Ed Nigma’s hideout in the company of Catwoman, Two-Face, Mad Hatter and Roxy Rocket, leaving god knows what going on between Riddler and ‘Aunt Maud.’ If he wanted to go home after that, it’s not necessary to invent a morning meeting excuse.”

“It was still nice of you.”

Harvey said nothing and the strained silence returned. Selina spoke tentatively:

“You didn’t flip for it, I noticed.”

Harvey bristled, then admitted: "No. We figured... we owed you... after...."

She smiled gently.

"We're okay then?"

She was heartbroken when, instead of answering the question at once, the coin came out.

°°TOY! SHINY! GIMME!°°

"ARGH! What the Fa-HEY! DAMNIT! That cat took our coin! That cat's a thief!"

Selina cackled merrily on the sofa.

"Well, duh, what do you expect? Harvey, sit down. You're not going to catch her."

"SHE TOOK OUR COIN! THAT FUCKING FURBALL TOOK OUR COIN!"

"Sit down, I'll get it later. I know where she'll hide it. But first," Selina stood, "you've got to deal with *me*, without the coin. Harvey. Look at me. Are we okay?"

Harvey looked in the direction Nutmeg had disappeared to with his coin, then back at Selina. "I dunno," he mumbled, then weakly croaked "We guess?"

Selina sighed sadly. Not much of an answer, but it would have to do.

°°You still sulking?°°

°°She took the round shiny away.°°

°°Never mind. Twofoot-calico is gone, and look what I got. Nip-nip.°°

°°From Bat-Bruce?°°

°°Y-EP°°

°°In boots?°°

°°Yep.°°

°°And you're not whining about your terrace and your planter and your flower pot?°°

°°Nip-nip.°°

°°You are so easy.°°

"Viva la difference night," Batman remarked, entering from the terrace with a twitch-smile, and gesturing with his cape.

"Thought you were so clever, didn't you, 'helping' with the coffee like that," Selina answered with a real smile. This was their first chance to talk freely since before the Iceberg.

"I was sorry to miss your treatise on the question mark."

Selina sighed, she was laughed out from the reminiscence with Harvey.

"I thought Roxy's was the most nauseating performance," she said instead of making another joke. "One more 'forgive me please forgive me,' I thought she'd start singing a country western song."

"C'mon, Kitten, what was she supposed to say, that she was swept off her feet by Penguin's charms? Or maybe the truth: that she got drunk on jello shots?"

“My God, it *is* a country western song.”

He sat back on her sofa, as he used to when the relationship first started to change and he began stopping in after patrol. Then he removed his cowl, as he never would in those early days, and laid it on Whiskers’s pillow.

“I’m afraid there is no option that doesn’t lead back to: she has all the good judgment of a stuntwoman bimbo that turned to crime for cheap thrills.”

“A-hem,” Selina picked the cowl off the pillow and handed it back to him, “She was not the only one to get sloshed at that party.”

“Will you never stop bringing that up?” he asked, pulling her into his lap.

“Make me,” she purred her answer.

“Yawn. Are they still at it? I want to go to bed.”

“Nothing stopping you.”

“Look at that! Look what they’re doing! I’ll never get those indentations out of the pillow.”

SOMETHING BLUE

The website Tim Drake was reading was one of the stupidest exhibits of paranoia, conspiracy theories, and urban legends on, he was certain, the entire internet. But it had the best photo available of the patch of desert known as Glow Ground 51.

Beneath the image of ordinary-looking wasteland that took on a greenish tint after sundown, were two vitriolic essays arguing that the land was the crash-site of alien spacecraft hidden by the government at Area 51 or else an Indian burial ground desecrated by nuclear testing in the late '50s.

Tim stared at the photos. It was neither. It was Clark Kent's Bachelor Party.

Tim didn't know all the details. No one did, except those present, and (if they remembered) they weren't talking. But even in Young Justice one heard things: Hal Jordan was Green Lantern then ... Jagermeister ... a cocktail waitress called Lola ... the Golden Gate Bridge ... Oliver Queen... the Space Needle... Tequila... and prominent members of the Justice League told they were no longer welcome in three West Coast cities for anything less than a nine-alarm fire.

"The truth is out there!" the website proclaimed. Tim would dearly love to know what it was, now more than ever.

He was 17. He was a high school junior. What did he know about planning a bachelor party? Dick said it didn't matter. He didn't need a party; he didn't want a party. He just wanted Tim to be his best man. Fine. Good. Great.

Except it wasn't fine. First thing Wally asked was when the bachelor party would be. Eel O'Brien asked where. J'onn asked if it'd be costume or civvies. And Kyle asked if there'd be a stripper!

This was so unfair.

Black Canary perched on the South Tower of Gotham General Hospital. This was the spot Oracle recommended—and sure enough, it was ideally situated to observe the emergency ramp, the heliport and, most importantly, the walkway between the main entrance and the Kensington Street parking garage. However Poloff tried to leave, she would see him, and she would tail him.

The only snag was that he wouldn't be leaving until visiting hours ended, and that meant quite a wait. Sitting there. Nothing to do except... get it over with.

She opened her stakeout satchel. From the sleeve where she liked to keep a thermos of coffee, she took a rolled up copy of BRIDAL SHOWERS FOR DUMMIES.

This sucked.

So far, if asked to rank activities worse than a root canal, Tim would have to place planning a bachelor party right between the SATs and hiding in the dumpster outside Joker's HA-HAcienda while those mongrel hyenas snarled over his head.

Bruce said it was costumed personas with more powers than maturity that led to "the greening of Seattle," and it'd be a cold day in hell before he'd okay a party in his city for anything but civilian identities. That was the sort of thing Bruce often said about metas, but the vein on his neck didn't always throb when he said it.

Alfred said the manor was off-limits. The wedding ceremony was almost upon them and he was far too busy - besides the memory of "the Frenchman" was all too vivid. Whatever that meant.

Dick said: "No pressure, Bro. Nobody's expecting 'little Timmy' to match Clark's party, 'the bacchanalia by which all future debauches will be measured.'"

Wally said he could buy the liquor, as Tim was underage.

The third attendant, Steve, Dick's college roommate said: "I've only been to one other bachelor party. Was in Pittsburgh. We went to a comedy club. Had a pitcher. Jokes about airline food. And shopping malls. And Bette Middler."

Tim's father said Uncle Derek threw his bachelor party in New Orleans, in the French Quarter, during Mardi Gras.

Clark hung up on him.

Having followed Poloff from his brother's hospital room into a money-laundering front, Black Canary called in the relevant information to her contact in the FBI. It grated that she wasn't allowed to pump the weasel for information, or even let herself be seen. But it was important this next phase be left to an official agency. There'd be plenty of action, her contact assured her, once they followed the money.

On an impulse, Canary swung uptown and landed on Selina Kyle's terrace. At least, she hoped this was her terrace. Peeking in to the apartment, she didn't see any cat stuff. Although there was a cat (hostile looking little critter, too), that was hardly conclusive. Plenty of people had cats.

She wanted to call Oracle and confirm the address, but knew that would stir up a dozen questions about the reason for her visit.

The cold amber eyes assessing her from inside were joined by a second pair—a human pair—green, and not nearly as nasty looking. The woman opened the sliding terrace doors and ushered her in.

"Catwoman?" Canary asked.

"Selina," the woman laughed, "home and out of costume, it's Selina."

"You don't have a lot of cat stuff around the place, do you?" Canary observed.

"You'd be surprised how often I hear that," Selina replied. "This about the shower, I take it?"

"Yeah," Canary paused, then spoke awkwardly, "I figured, since we're hosting it together, we should at least meet, compare notes..."

"You don't have any ideas either?" Selina guessed.

"None," she admitted with a laugh. "I bought this book."

"I visited a website."

"I don't see 'scented candles' and 'bath soap' being a big hit as party favors, do you?"

"I don't see Barbara wearing a hat made from bows and wrapping paper either."

"This is going to be tricky."

"Meow."

"I'd just like to know how I'm supposed to avoid the mistakes of Clark's party if I can't find out what they were," Tim muttered, as ZOGGER dug a hook into his arm and flung him against the wall. *Ah, but that is logic*, came the counter thought, *and logic does not apply when that vein on Bruce's neck throbs.*

He'd made a stupid move:

"You said I should hone my detective skills by picking a mystery, investigating and solving it," he had told Bruce.

"I never said any such thing," his mentor answered before sentencing him to a lifetime of ZOGGER.

Clark's bachelor party was becoming an obsession, and Tim's theories about it were growing as ludicrous as those on the website where he'd seen "Glow Ground 51."

Wildcat threw him out just for asking about it.

And Clark hung up on him again.

"I keep bigger secrets than this!" Tim had insisted. "I even know where B keeps that kryptonite ring 'just in case.'"

...:What you don't know, kid:... the voice on the phone responded, ...:is what it's like to be married. When you know that, you'll understand why there's no power on earth, including that ring, that would impel me to tell you what happened -cough- that night...:

And that's when Smallville's noblest son, the man who defined 'superhero,' hung up on Tim for a second time.

"Okay, here's the deal," a gloved hand switched off Zogger while the gravely voice spoke, "You can use the penthouse at the Wayne Building. Civilian identities only. Eight to midnight. Fifteen guests max. Understood?"

Tim looked up and the gloved hand helped him to his feet. It was a miracle. Like a Christmas miracle—except for bachelor parties.

“ESOLC TNOD! ESOLC TNOD!” a frantic voice called, while a Disney Store shopping bag wedged itself between the closing elevator doors.

Lois Lane raised an eyebrow as the doors parted and a panting Zatanna stepped inside, smiled apologetically, then pressed the button for Barbara Gordon’s floor.

“Flight was late,” she explained, “Magic Convention in Vegas—forgot the shower—stopped to get this on the way in from the airport—Cabbie was a pig.” She sighed dramatically. “Hi, Lois. How you doin’?”

Lois just smiled, waiting for Zatanna to notice they were still looking into the lobby.

“I mean, I’m in showbiz, right, I don’t mind if a guy notices my legs, but to talk about them on his radio right in front of me—”

“Um, Zatanna,”

“—and, okay, it was nice of him to wait while I ran in and got this, but it’s Gotham. If he didn’t want to wait, I could’ve got another cab easy enough, right?”

“Zatanna, the doors.”

“Oh, don’t mind me. Just feeling bad I guess, ‘cause I forgot and had to get a gift at the last minute like this. Think she’ll be getting a lot of dishes ‘n stuff?”

“I doubt it. I got her lingerie. Zatanna, you froze the doors magically. You want to unfreeze ‘em, or should we take the stairs?”

“Oh, sorry,” she apologized. “WON ESOLC SROOD”

They were the last to arrive. Dinah took Lois’s elegantly wrapped giftbox and Zatanna’s Disney Store Bag to a side table while Selina offered “tea or champagne.”

“This is very nice,” Lois observed of the large sprays of flowers on each end of the gift table. Then she saw another floral display next to the tea—and another near the champagne, and still another by the food, “It’s all very, um, pink and white.”

Selina and Dinah exchanged a brief ‘you go’ exchange, then Barbara cut in.

“They each bought decorations,” she explained, while everybody who heard the story before perked up, waiting for their cue, “So did I,” Barbara continued, “And so did Alfred. And Dick sent flowers.”

“Awww,” came the collective gush.

“Finest tush in the super-community,” Dinah remarked to Zatanna.

“I heard that,” Barbara chimed, ushering the new arrivals into the center of the party while the hostesses retreated to a quiet corner to continue their conversation about a mutual acquaintance now known as “The Cadaver”...

It began when Barbara had parted yet another boxful of Victoria’s Secret tissue paper to find yet another item of intimate apparel—with the difference that, unlike the previous boxes of powder blue teddies, sapphire blue nightgowns, and midnight blue penoirs, this garment was an intense purple.

Everyone looked to Selina, who laughed and sputtered, “Not from me.” Then, as Cassie meekly admitted it was her gift, Selina whispered to Dinah, “Like I’d really want Dick thinking about me on the wedding night—sheesh, after all I did to squelch that Nightwing story last year.”

It was a joke—but it was enough to remind Dinah what she had in common with Selina.

“Those reporters at the Post should be buried to their necks at low tide,” she seethed.

Selina's instinct was to laugh again, but she saw Dinah was in no mood to laugh it off.

"Rotten break, about Ra's," she said sympathetically.

"Megalomaniacal slimebucket," Dinah pronounced.

"Hairdo," Selina offered.

"Sicko freak," Dinah added.

Selina looked around then whispered, "Flyweight"

Dinah giggled, then held her fingers together between them, about a half-inch apart.

"Small...feet," she confided.

Selina's eyes bulged. Her comment was an assessment of Ra's as a global threat—Dinah clearly had another yardstick in mind.

Wordlessly, Selina picked up a champagne bottle, and she and Dinah retreated to a corner with their glasses.

By the time Barbara was opening Zatanna's box of Disney Store glasses, Selina and Dinah were comparing notes:

"He claims to know all these famous dead people," Selina was saying, "Did you get that too?"

Dinah nodded.

"Are you kidding, he wanted to *impress* me. I heard'em all."

"He told me he knew Wagner."

Dinah nodded more vigorously, then broke into a fair impersonation of Ra's voice and manner: "We were sitting in a café and I said 'Richard, it won't do. You can't cover this material in a single opera, it must be longer. Three, no four full operas. Don't worry about the length, a few hours each. And the Valkyries need a theme song!'"

Selina laughed merrily so Dinah continued: "'What's that Fair One, not much of a music lover? Theatre then. Shaw, Wilde, I knew them all. Why it was I who told Christopher Marlowe that Helen was 'a face that launched a thousand ships.'"

"He knew Helen of Troy too," Selina gasped in pretend shock.

"All the great beauties," Dinah pishawed, still in character, "Helen, Cleopatra, it was I who told Shakespeare about Cleopatra—though she was a shrew. Taking over the world is man's work. But where was I, oh yes, the great beauties—Helen, Cleopatra, Catherine the Great, knew them all. All!" Then she resumed her own voice, "I surpassed them all of course."

"Of course," Selina toasted, and they clinked glasses. "You do that really well, by the way, I know people who would just die to see that impersonation." She sighed, "Too bad really."

Dinah sighed too, and they moved to rejoin the party as the doorbell rang.

The party froze with a collective "Who could that be—not another centerpiece?"

It was Barbara herself who finally answered the door.

"Diana! You made it after all. How... wonderful."

"No stripper?" Kyle Rayner looked incredulous. "Isn't that the whole point of getting together on a guy's last night of freedom? Look at one last pair-HEEY!"

This last was in response to a smack in the head delivered at subatomic speed.

"Last party," Wally West said levelly, "I missed the good stuff - stuck in the men's room of the Foggy Bottom Bar & Grille 'cause a wiseass Green Lantern moved the party—actually moved the *ENTIRE BAR* except for the men's room to another location. This will not occur again."

Oliver Queen walked over from the bar with a glass in one hand and a bottle in the other. "Good man, West, you remembered." And he gestured with the bottle. "A man's drink."

"Tequilla," Wally mouthed to Kyle, and Kyle slid his Zema behind a tablelamp.

There had been some debate whether Oliver should be invited, not because he was dead, body brought back from the underworld without a soul and possibly inhabited by an evil spirit, but because he was the chief agitator in the matter of Clark, the waitress Lola who learned he was the groom-to-be, and Hal the hotshot who objected to any man other than him getting special attention from the girl, especially milquetoast Kansas, even if she did have an "L" name.

"So this is Bruce Wayne's famous playboy pad," Kyle asked, leaving Ollie's vicinity for safer territory near Dick and Tim. "Does he have any of those cool gadgets, like in the movies," he asked flipping each light switch in turn, "with a mirror ball and funky lights and a bed that comes out of the wall."

"Ah, no," Dick answered, wondering—not for the first time—why Kyle seemed magnetically drawn to whatever idea would most likely result in Bruce killing him.

"Hold on to your roll bars, girls," Zatanna was whispering, "we're gonna do a little offroading, and I want a seat in the back, cause I'd hate to get hit by a flying reporter."

The colloquy in Barbara's kitchen had assembled the moment Diana stepped into the powder room to "freshen." She didn't have a hair out of place, Dinah was quick to observe, but when you arrive at a party you said you couldn't attend because of an uprising in Argentina, which is then resolved and you can come but you're 2 hours late because you came straight from the Pampas, you are expected to go to the powder room and freshen.

"Can somebody explain this?" Selina asked, "I didn't bring my decoder ring."

"They don't like each other much," Dinah explained, "and there's gonna be fireworks."

Selina raised an eyebrow. "Look, I'm just the outsider here, but you guys are all on the same side, right. If everybody's treating me okay, why would there be any friction with—"

Barbara understood how to explain it succinctly: "That's kind of like saying you and 'the demonspawn' are 'on the same side.'"

"Oh!" recognition dawned. "You don't mean Superman and—"

"Of course not," Dinah cut her off, "that's just talk. Gossip. But like we were saying before: the talk, when it hits the newspapers, can get pretty—"

"At least you two contradicted those stories," Zatanna put in, "the thing with Diana is she's never once so much as..."

"Get Diana drunk," Barbara suggested, grabbing Selina's sleeve.

“Barbara, contrary to popular opinion around here, I don’t actually have any special powers to get heroes drunk.”

“Ah, guys,” Stephanie interrupted from the doorway, “of the two women you’re discussing, one has super-hearing and the other is a professional snoop. And they’re both out here. Come and help!”

“What I want to know,” Eel O’Brien grumbled, “is how that uptight, tightass, master of gloom rates the hottest piece to ever pour herself into spandex.”

“Meow,” Oliver’s demon mouthed the word with quiet menace. In life, he’d always admired the Catwoman’s curves, it was logical to assume the other more red-blooded heroes did as well...

Wally looked towards Bruce then around the room, “Check it out: Penthouse—Picassos.”

“Nah, they had a thing before she knew he was rich, didn’t they?” Kyle whispered, completely missing the undercurrent of envy and malice Oliver was subtly exuding. This wasn’t because he was any purer than the others. It was habit: Batman intimidated him, and he always kept Bruce or Batman in his peripheral vision if they were in the same room. Only superficially participating in the conversation with Oliver had kept him immune from its darker subtext.

“...Hitman used to say he’d crawl fifty miles over broken Pepsi bottles just to clean her bathtub with his tongue...”

Kyle’s eyes grew wide. “He can hear you!” he whispered through clenched teeth.

“Balls.” Ollie dismissed the idea as ridiculous.

“He’s looking this way,” Kyle insisted, still not moving lips or teeth, “and he’s rubbing his knuckles.”

“He can read lips,” Wally said, holding a glass to his mouth.

“And he’s coming over,” Eel announced.

“Don’t be such a *pussy*,” Ollie said distinctly, glaring up at Bruce on the final word. “We’re not allowed to *TALK* now? Bad enough you can’t come into ‘his’ city without sayso.”

“You can come to Gotham, Ollie,” Bruce said amiably, “any time you like. But call first so I don’t mistake you for something—*evil*.” The last word only was spoken in Batman’s foreboding growl. Then he placed a hand on Kyle’s shoulder and resumed Bruce’s fop manner: “Kyle, you haven’t met Dick’s roommate from Hudson U...”

He led Kyle to a small group at the far side of the room, then whispered something to Tim who immediately looked towards Ollie, Wally and Eel. A few minutes later Tim whispered to Clark, then joined the trio and said: “Ah guys, deal is you knock off the Catwoman talk this second or you’re in orbit ‘til they’re back from the honeymoon. ‘Kay?” The threat was delivered in tones of such sparkling innocence, an eavesdropper would have assumed it was a joke... even if they knew Tim knew Superman... right up until they saw Clark pause in the middle of his conversation, turn towards the trio, and nod.

"This was a mistake," Dick hissed at Tim, "Ollie AND Eel AND Kyle AND Bruce— You don't put these guys together unless a malignant intelligence is hurling huge meteors at heavily populated cities—and even then you *THINK ABOUT IT FIRST!*"

"It's *his place*, Dick," Tim insisted, "I couldn't tell him not to come."

Dick sighed, "Yeah, I guess. But Eel makes him crazy!"

"Bro! If I nixed everybody Bruce doesn't get along with, it'd be you, me, and Alfred sitting here. Hey, can you see Alfred with some 'Bambi' on his lap, trying to look disapproving!"

It was an amusing enough image, but it introduced a less-than-amusing subject.

"I don't see *me* with any Bambi on my lap."

Tim looked dejected. But Steve, the roommate, the outsider in the group, saw him slump as he walked away. He crooked a finger at him and said: "Don't worry, kid. I got a plan." If Tim noticed a distant glaze in Steve's eye, he would have attributed it to meeting too many new people after too much scotch and soda.

"Is it my imagination," Selina whispered "or has Diana been toasting for like 10 minutes?"

"Sit down, dear," Dinah answered, "she's just warming up."

Barbara now wore the traditional bride-hat of bows from the giftwrap stuck on a paper plate. The theory was that Diana respected ritual and the closer they stuck to prescribed shower activities, no matter how clichéd or inane, the more comfortable everyone would be.

Everyone apart from Lois, that is, who chose this particular moment to tell Cassie, who hadn't asked but was sitting beside her, about her interview with Oprah Winfrey.

"She has all these 'experts' on her show, but winds up doing all the talking herself," Lois declared pointedly, "I mean think about it, what's the point of having other people around if it's just going to be talk talk talk about *you* and what *you've* done and your precious advice to all the little people..."

Cassie nodded, not out of any strong sense of agreement but simply because she preferred nods to speech. That was true under any circumstances, but especially in a case such as this when someone else had the floor.

"I like to think of myself as Every Woman..." Diana continued, ignoring Lois's asides.

"She doesn't," Lois objected, "she likes to think of herself as, literally, gods'—with a small 'g' - gift to mankind."

"Of course," Diana still appeared to be oblivious to Lois's comments, but her toast changed tone slightly, "however much we might champion the cause of women's strength and independence, it is so important that we actually live up to those ideals. For who can consider themselves truly independent if they're forever in need of rescuing by a more able partner?"

"The thing I find most interesting about Oprah," Lois continued, undeterred, adding "in a tiara" under her breath, "is the way she'll give policy on things she has absolutely no experience of. Why it'd be like some professional virgin presuming to give advice

on marriage... But anyway, I shouldn't be monopolizing your attention, should I, dear? We were listening to—oh look, the toasts are *still* going on."

"Hey Barbara," Selina whispered, thinking back to her own confrontation with the demonspawn, "just out of curiosity, how big is your shower?"

"What was the name of that drama major you dated sophomore year?" Steve was asking Dick, "Megan?"

"Molly," Dick said with a twinkle, "Molly was drama, Megan was business administration with a minor in anthropology."

"And Cheryl," Steve rounded out the list, "was the music major with the Kermit the Frog backpack and the cello case she always laid on my bed."

"That's right, I forgot that."

Tim listened in awe: "Drama, business, anthropology and music. So the common theme here is...?"

"Red hair," Steve pronounced, as though answering the riddle of the sphinx.

"Of course," Tim smiled at Dick.

"Of course," Wally echoed.

"Oh brother," Dick rolled his eyes.

"I couldn't help noticing," Steve went on, raising his voice a little so the others at the party could all hear, "the lack of any ...traditional Stag Night entertainment..."

Tim blushed, as there were guttural murmurs of agreement even from the partygoers who had souls.

"...and knowing our guest of honor's preference for a certain hair color..." Steve went on, signaling to Kyle, who stood nearest the door, "I figured: Do I give a silver-plated chafing dish like everybody else? Or get my ol'buddy something he'll really enjoy..." He waved to Kyle, who opened the door to see a stunning woman, long red tresses cascading down her shoulders to... oh my... Kyle swallowed... great knockers... he inhaled sharply... great everything... and all of it... draped... in green...."

"So I told Donald Trump," Lois was now discussing her recent interviews with Stephanie, in just as audible a voice as before, "for a sharp businessman, you're awfully gullible. Anything that round can't be real!"

"What about one of those games," Zatanna suggested, swallowing her champagne at a gulp.

Selina and Dinah just looked at her. They had skipped that section of the books entirely.

"I don't know any shower games," Dinah hedged. "We figured, they were icebreakers, and everybody here..." she noted Lois glaring at Diana and Diana glaring at Lois, "...already knows each other."

"I know a good one," Stephanie offered enthusiastically, "The Penny Game! We sit in a circle, and everybody names something they've never done, and if anyone else in the group has done it, they put in a penny..."

“Let’s begin by clarifying it’s *someTHING* you’ve never done,” Zatanna giggled, “and not *someONE*.”

“First,” Selina confided to Barbara, “this shower idea is more fun than I thought.”

“And second?” Barbara asked, staring at Zatanna, then Lois, then Diana in stunned horror.

“Second is: Magic Gal is cut-off on the bubbly.”

“I hear ya.”

“I always assumed Black Canary was the party girl in your circle.”

“Everyone does, poor thing.”

Eel took in the buxom dancer before him with a gaze of pure lust: “Oh sure, it’s all fun and games ‘til someone puts an eye out.”

She smiled knowingly and leaned over him. Her scent was intoxicating...Flowery and fruity...he inhaled deeply... but musky, too... thick, heavy... like the jungle... green.

“Mile-High Club!” Zatanna chirped, while Diana and Lois watched each others’ fingertips like gunfighters at the OK Corral...

Roy, Vic, and Gar had retreated from the rest of the party. Dick was more than preoccupied being Bruce Wayne’s son, the groom, and the guest of honor. They collected a bottle of whiskey, found a card table, and played blackjack while discussing, alternately: “Are they real,” what really happened at Clark’s party, what was so cool about BattleBots, who they’d like to see appear in a JLA-swimsuit calendar, who would win in a cage-match between Huntress and Power Girl, and finally that bullshit editorial that said a hero changing his name or costume was official notice to the world that they’d “jumped the shark.”

“Felicity?” Roy sputtered, “they said it’s like Felicity cutting her hair—what kind of thing is that to say? It’s a TV-show! It’s hell-ooo,” he noticed his audience was no longer looking at him but looking past him. Turning in their direction he saw... bewitching beauty... “Hello,” he continued, “and whose little girl are you?”

At the conclusion of the ‘Penny Game,’ the ‘Safety Pin Game,’ three bottles of champagne, and several hands of five-card stud, Diana was the universal winner, and Selina and Dinah scrambled to find the door prize for which she would exchange her pennies, safety pins and poker chips.

“What the hell is this?” the Amazon Princess exclaimed.

Stephanie focused hard on the object, then answered decisively: “It’s soap—shaped like a blue pigeon.”

“Why?” Diana asked. Steph shrugged and Diana left.

The remaining guests looked at Selina and Dinah.

"It was either that or aromatherapy candles," Selina explained defensively.

"Serenity, Memories..." Dinah added, specifying the varieties.

"Valium," Lois suggested a more suitable fragrance.

Zatanna had another idea and giggled: "Ya sure you don't want a humming toy instead of soap?"

Barbara looked at Selina. "No special powers to get heroes drunk, huh?" she whispered.

"Um, Z'anna, maybe you missed this part," Dinah chimed in. "We didn't plan on having games. We had no prizes. We ransacked Barb's stuff to get the soap."

Zatanna's brow furrowed, then she said, "Nothing that goes 'whirr' in your old Batgirl stuff?"

There was a long, long pause.

"Okay, new rule," it was Selina who finally spoke, "We don't even *joke* about sex toys with bat emblems on them, not even hypothetical ones, not while I'm in the room. Everybody got that?"

Clark's super-senses detected the scent long before the temptress got around to him. He sat enraptured, watching her with Wally, while Oliver grumbled that the Bat's stay-out-of-my-city rules were interfering with his attempts to get Black Canary back....

Oliver trailed off as the beauty finished with Wally and approached him and Clark.

"Gentlemen," she announced her arrival in low come-hither tones that made their insides vibrate, "It's most unsociable to stay over here talking together when there's a lady present to be... entertained."

Oliver blinked a few times, looking up at her, then sank back in his chair.

"Do join us," he murmured.

"But there's nowhere for me to sit," she answered.

Clark stood from his chair, but Oliver offered his lap.

"What I don't understand," Selina asked, watching Dinah and Barbara drain the glasses while they cleaned up, "is why you're all not dead by now. You guys can't keep secrets worth shit."

"-hic- That's not true," Dinah objected. "I didn't tell anybody 'bout Jason Blood and Shiva."

"Do you know," Selina ignored Dinah's outburst and spoke to Barbara, "how many versions of the Clark-Diana story I heard tonight? *Everybody* has one. Except for Lois of course, and *she* had to make sure I knew Zatanna only got your gift ten minutes before she got here. From the tourist Disney Store in Gotham Plaza, she specified, not the good one on Fifth Avenue."

"Lois is happiest when she's gathering and disseminating information," Barbara mused philosophically, "-hic- As am I. What do you think the guys are up to about now?"

"Red," Dick said with a pained longing as the sharp vision of Poison Ivy filled his mind. Red Hair—what was it about red hair?

Ivy's enticing but displeased features contorted as she spoke.

"None of you are rich?"

Bruce Wayne's son, shouldn't all his friends be loaded? This lot of mouth-breathers were... *ordinary!* A reporter, an artist, a cop, a high school kid, a salesman—at that point she stopped asking...

"I used to be rich," Ollie grumbled through the haze of pheromones, anxious to please this bewitching siren.

"Used to be?" she asked flatly.

"Gone now," he admitted.

"Dot-coms?" Steve asked.

"No."

"Pork futures?"

"I don't like to talk about it."

"Day-trading?"

Ollie took Ivy's atomizer from her belt and spritzed his inquisitor. Steve's eyes glazed and he sank bank into dreamy contemplation of the green.

"We should've gotten a stripper," Dinah declared, passing the Hagen Daaz carton to Barbara.

"I don't want some himbo dressed as Zorro groining around my apartment in speedos," Barbara objected, passing the cookie dough tube to Selina.

"You'd rather have Diana and Lois squaring off?" Selina asked, staring at the cookie dough much as Diana had scrutinized the bathsoap and passing it on to Stephanie.

"They brought presents," Barbara pointed out.

"You'd rather have a Body-by-Victoria camisole than *Zorro*? Babs, you turned a corner somewhere, dear. That ring is cutting off circulation to your brain."

Barbara huffed, looked at the heap of blue lingerie piled on her couch, and reconsidered.

"You guys wanna go out? There is a club down by Pier 17. They have male dancers."

Selina looked at her appraisingly. Barbara was full of surprises.

"How do you know this?"

"They have a wheelchair ramp, and a ten o'clock show," she added.

"Barbara, how do you know this?"

"How do you think? They have a website!"

Dick's breathing became quicker and harsher... God, how he desired this woman, she was so beautiful, she was everything he had ever wanted... and her scent, burning into his lungs, was overpowering... fruity but tart... citrus... like... lemons, but with something else... something chemical...

His eyes cleared a little as a thought came into focus ...not lemons—Lemon Pledge. Poison Ivy! ...red... so beautiful and exciting... not natural red, henna maybe, not real like Barbara... Ivy... Poison Ivy... This wasn't real... Lemon Pledge... This wasn't real, this was a drug. Ivy—Poison—He shook his head clear.

Poison Ivy was standing before Bruce, fingering his hair like a plaything. "Looks like you're the only one here worth enslaving," she sighed.

Oh shit! Bruce looked totally out of it. He could be faking, but it didn't look it. Eyes empty, head back, staring up at Ivy...

Summoning all his resolve, Dick stood.

"No, he's not, Red. I'm his heir. I'll get it all."

Conjuring visions of Rhett Butler, he strode up to Ivy, grabbed her forcefully at the hips, and turned her into his arms. Before she could gasp, he kissed her, raising a hand to her hair, then raising the other to her throat. He moaned into her mouth, turning her face ever so slightly to better reach him... laid a finger on the nerve he was searching for, and pinched. He felt her tense for a quarter-second, then go limp.

He lowered her gently to the floor, let out a long huff, and looked around the room of passive, enthralled heroes.

"Next time," came the thought, "elope."

===== HEROINE CHAT =====

FeistyFan: Now DeepDude, seriously, you're telling me
of all the women that run around in spandex
you'd want to spend the night with Amethyst?????

MarvMan: What are you, a perv! She looks like she's 12!!!

BabeMagnet: YEAH! Figure of a VENUS PENCIL, dude

=====

Selina, Dinah, Barbara, Cassie and Stephanie, who were logged into the chatroom as "Underwire," huddled around Oracle's oversized monitor, trembling with laughter.

=====

DeepDude: You guys are so shallow. Look at her, you can
see she's got so much more character than
someone like Black Canary or Catwoman

=====

The women burst into peals of laughter. Selina pushed her breasts into her chest and pondered: "Why yes, I feel more complex now."

Dinah mimicked her: "Me too. I've got a good three, four more inches of character this way."

Stephanie asked to take over the keyboard to see what more ludicrous postulates she could lure out of "DeepDude" through private whispers...

She didn't get to find out, because the OraCom alert closed the chat window and threw up a feed from the police band.

"Barbara," Selina complained, "you said you were turning that OFF for the party."

Barbara became all business, taking the keyboard back from Stephanie and centering her chair before the monitor.

"I did," she said puzzled, "At least, I turned all the filters up to screen out anything that wasn't practically in our back yard. This can't be. To be going off like this, it'd almost have to say—"

Barbara broke off and inhaled sharply. The others gathered around the scene and read the words that triggered the OraCom panel:

:: visiting Bludhaven Police Officer Richard Grayson... Wayne Building... ::

"Oh dear," Dinah murmured, amused, while Barbara and Selina alternately mouthed various words as they scrolled up the screen.

:: ...apprehended...Pamela Isley aka Poison Ivy... infiltrated a private party... as a stripper!... ::

Partners. Partners work together, understand each other, depend on one another. Bruce and Dick were not simply the groom and his father, they had been Batman and Robin! Bruce and Tim were still Batman and Robin. The men shared a bond borne of surviving unspeakable perils together, as a team.

The rehearsal dinner did not look like a deathtrap when they walked in. But then, neither had the abandoned warehouses, the clock towers, the greenhouses, the factories, or the comedy clubs.

The women were already waiting. They made smalltalk.

"How was the party?" Selina had asked casually. It didn't seem like a trap.

"Oh, it was fine," Bruce answered.

"Not too rowdy?" Barbara had asked.

"No, no," Dick answered.

"Strippers?" Stephanie had asked.

"Nothing like that, no," Tim insisted.

And then, just like the time they tripped the electric eye in Mr. Freeze's hideout, the room's temperature plummeted ninety degrees in four seconds.

"So Poison Ivy was caught at a *different* party?" Selina began.

"A different *bachelor* party," Barbara corrected.

"Right, a different bachelor party," Selina continued.

"In the Wayne Building," Stephanie added.

"Dressed as a stripper," Barbara finished.

The arrival of Steve and Aunt Kate stymied any more explicit conversation, and the group went in to dinner in the much the same spirit three lions, three Christians, and two indifferent spectators might have entered the Coliseum.

Unlike the Mad Hatter's Aunt Maud, Dick's Aunt Kate was an attractive, pleasant woman in her late 30s. Steve found her an attentive dinner companion, happy to hear his stories about being bewitched by one of the actual costumed rogues of Gotham City. So far from feeling a victim, Steve seemed to look on the episode as an adventure

and an exciting brush with fame. Besides which, his good friend Dick was the hero of the day! How cool was that? No Batman or Robin that foiled that crime, but Officer Dick Grayson...

"How exactly did that come to be, anyway," Barbara muttered through clenched teeth.

Dick's eyes flickered. He wasn't about to give details on how he'd actually subdued Poison Ivy, so, needing to give some answer, he explained briefly how he'd fought off her pheromones.

"And just how did you originally come to notice her pheromones smell like Lemon Pledge," Barbara asked testily.

"Or that she's not a natural redhead," Selina muttered disapprovingly under her breath. Only Bruce heard this and, for the first time, was grateful it wasn't he who first broke out of Ivy's spell. With the noble intention of watching his partner's back, Bruce leaned over to Selina and defended him:

"You remember adolescence," he whispered. "He was sixteen, he was a hormone machine, and he noticed *everything* about *all* of you."

It was, perhaps, not the wisest time to allude to Selina's Catwoman past, for lacking any claws, Selina stuck a fork in his thigh.

"Hey!" Bruce exclaimed.

"So Dick is observant," she whispered back, before falling back on their sign language: "You trained him to be, right? Then how'd she get to *you*?"

Bruce blinked. It was starting to sound like he was in as much trouble as Dick.

"What do you mean?" he signed.

Slowly, as one might speak to a moron, Selina spelled out her question: "How... did... Poison Ivy... who ...I do believe... you've seen before... a number of times... waltz into ...Wayne Penthouse... and get close enough... to spritz YOU... not Dick, not Tim, not Wally... YOU, Dark Knight bad ass crimefighter extraordinaire.... How did she ...get close enough... to ...spritz... YOU... ???... I'll tell you how ... 'cause you... were not looking... at... her... face!"

Yes. He was in as much trouble as Dick—if not more.

"You said there weren't going to be strippers," Stephanie looked daggers at Tim.

"I didn't get a stripper. I had a nice quiet evening planned, which it turned out was a mistake, cause everybody was bored stiff and mad at me 'til Ivy showed up and..."

"Tim."

Tim looked up—Bruce could deliver much deadlier looks than Steph.

"As best man, don't you have a toast to make?"

"Umm," Tim blanched.

DEARLY BELOVED

A pulsing orb of fire spun slowly in the nothingness of space. Over eons that are but minutes in the cosmic scheme of things (or maybe it's the other way around), Selina realized the ball of fire was her head. Awareness grew slowly. She became aware of absence... there were no city sounds outside the window... there was no warm mass of Whiskers and Nutmeg curled at her ankles... and the throbbing ball of pain was her head...this was not good...

The first system to "come online" was smell. She smelled coffee.

An eye cracked open and saw – BRIGHT – LIGHT - BAD - LIGHT - BAD – SILVER POT - LIGHT - BAD !

Logic circuits were not yet online to connect this bit of sensory data (silver pot) with the previous one (coffee smell) - nor with the next:

"Want some coffee?"

The words had no meaning, but at that primal core of her brain she did perceive that the sound was Batman's voice.

Throbbing head and Batman's voice. Oh, serious shit going on here.

She forced her eyes open again and saw a not-pointyBat-head silhouetted against the BAD BRIGHT LIGHT BAD still streaming through the window.

"Dead?" she asked.

"Tattinger '96," he answered.

"Feels like dead," she croaked.

"Well in that case, Kitten, you've got eight lives left," he chuckled. She opened her eyes to see Bruce smirking at some private joke. "Good morning... Mrs. Wayne."

THE DAY BEFORE...

6:04 a.m. Sunrise

The rays of warm sunlight that escaped through the slats of Venetian blind to fall on Dick Grayson's eyelids were not enough to wake him, only enough to dimly transport his subconscious to an earlier time. He was home. Wayne Manor was home now. He'd come to accept that the circus would never be home again. He'd even started accepting the idea that Bruce could be his father without treading on the memory of his real father. In a way, Bruce was his father in this new life, in this new identity: Robin. Batman and Robin. How cool was that! He was a superhero! He fought evil-doers! Well, he wasn't allowed to fight them yet, but that was coming. He had to train more first. And he wasn't allowed to train if he didn't get his grades up....school... Why does it have to be so early? It was never like this at the circus. The tutor was Gretchen, the lion tamer, and she was onstage 'til 10:30 like everybody else on show nights. Class started promptly at noon! Why did these city kids have to start so...

“Rrrly,” Dick drooled into his pillow. “Toorrly. Tellem uptll...patrlng...can’t schooo t’day.”

That’s when Alfred would say “Master Dick, you know the rules. If your nighttime activities interfere with a proper school schedule in any way, it is the nighttime activity which will be discontinued,” adding quietly when he thought Dick couldn’t hear “and a jolly fine thing that would be, too.”

When Alfred’s voice did not intercede as expected, Dick pulled himself awake... His old room. As he had every day since coming back to the manor, Dick took a deep breath as if expecting to smell bacon and coffee brewing. Smells from the kitchen would never reach to this part of the house, but for some reason, he still expected – **WEDDING!** Lord God, TODAY- WEDDING—WEDDING TODAY—WEDDING DAY—NOW—HERE—SHIT!

6:10 a.m.

If you’re a Gotham City ‘night person,’ it sometimes happens that you can wake up in a drugged fog and have to piece together just where you are and what’s going on. I woke up in just such a fog, minus the drugs. I wasn’t in the catsuit...

::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

Whiskers and Nutmeg were curled on my ankles—I was home.

::Twitterbringngng::

But something was definitely happening that I couldn’t quite work out.

::Twitterbringngng::

There was that noise.

::Twitterbringngng::

It was... my eyes focused on something next to the bed and, with Herculean effort, I grabbed onto an idea...

::Twitterbringngng::

It was *the PHONE*.

::Twitterbringngng::

How could this...who could this be?... who that I know would call at... I didn’t even know what that said on the clock...

::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

“Oh for god’s sake what do you want?”

Was this the rogue line? No. I rephrased:

“Who are you, and what do you want?”

...:*Selina! Panic attack. Help me, girl. Time for estrogen solidarity!...*

“Ummh...Wha?”

...:*You know that dream where you wake up and there’s a history test that you haven’t studied for and you’re totally unprepared and you’ve got to go take it right now?...*

“What? No. I don’t know that one ...I know the one where there’s this noise that won’t stop and it turns out to be the phone and...who is this again?”

...:*Selina, meow! Wake up! It’s Barbara!...*

I yawned, swallowed, breathed, and swatted Nutmeg off the phonocord. More awake now, so I managed a (comparatively) friendly: “I don’t know a Barbara. Call back in an hour, please.”

...:Ha. Ha. Listen, I've been thinking - They had the bachelor party at Bruce's penthouse and Poison Ivy showed up. You don't think there could be any truth in that curse, do you?::...

At this point, I woke up enough to realize what day it was—the Wedding Day—Barbara's special day. Mustn't call a girl a loopy, paranoid headcase on her special day.

"No," I said, "I don't think Ivy hit the party cause it was Bruce's penthouse, I think it was probably because she figured there'd be rich men to ensnare." Including Bruce, which, note to self, I will take up with her at a later date. For now, I swatted Whiskers off the belt of my bathrobe as Barbara went on ... something about rose petals...

I could focus on the clock now—it was six o'clock. Six o'clock in the morning—not a time of day we night people routinely deal with, and I'd have to say that, based on my experience with it so far, there's a very good reason for that.

I walked the phone towards the kitchen and stared at the coffee machine. It looked complicated - I didn't think that was going to be happening any time soon. I'd go down to Raoul's Cart in the park as soon as I was off the phone and dressed. *Off the phone*, the idea echoed. *Yeah, speaking of which...*

"Look, Barbara, under the circumstances, if it were me, I'd be looking forward to it! Scatter the rose petals and watch people squash'em flat. High spiked heels and all those flower guts oozing out. It should be very therapeutic.... No, I don't think it will remind anybody else about Ivy. Everybody will have other things on their mind like how beautiful you look..." -and, I thought, how big Catwoman's ass looks in those yellow ruffles.

6:20 a.m.

Bruce stood on the stairs of Wayne Manor, staring over the banister at a ringing telephone in the hall. He assaulted it with the same deathscowl he'd direct at gangbangers playing cop-killer rap. The deathscowl could make the lowliest scum look to the skies as though actually sensing the malevolent force of judgment about to descend on them. It could make pushers, mobsters and sociopaths cower in dread.

The telephone merely twittered in cheery defiance.

Bruce hopped over the banister, answering defiance with defiance. He had realized sooner than Dick or Selina what day it was, which made it obvious to the deductive mind why Alfred was not available to answer the phone. Still, he wasn't nearly as awake as his physical manner let on. On the rare occasions he was up at this disgusting time of day, it was for a Wayne Enterprises meeting, and who cared if he was alert for that.

He picked up the receiver.

"Wayne Manor, Bruce Wayne speaking."

...:Morning, Handsome,::... the warm voice caressed his ear and, for a split-second, his instinct said Catwoman instead of Selina. Catwoman taunting him back to life from some half-conscious haze. Straddling him on the ground of some alley or hideout, purring threats or hissing propositions into his ear, and playing with the edge of his mask as if, one of these days, she might actually—

...:Orders from General Barbara: If Dick slept there last night, he needs to be out of the house by nine o'clock sharp...:

Catwoman taunting him out of a half-conscious haze never said anything like that.

...:She has to come over to dress and supervise the setup, and they can't see each other today, it's a rule...:

On the cold, damp floor of a hideout, her warm body on top of him, he would always murmur something stupid. Old habits were hard to break:

"Huh? Wait. So why are you calling again?"

...: Use your head, would you! What if it was Barbara that called and Dick had answered the phone! ...:

Feline logic. There was no arguing with it. Whether the subject was culpability for releasing dangerous criminals as a diversion to pull off a theft or wedding day telephone etiquette, you couldn't win. A man simply could not win.

...: So you'll tell him? ...:

"What?"

...: You'll tell Dick to be out of the house by nine. ...:

And if God forbid the subject was whether it's possible for a man to be present in a room with a stripper—or a woman posing as a stripper—and not happen to notice that he knows her in another context, even if it's a context where the man is usually focused and observant, that does not necessarily mean it's because he wasn't looking at her face.

...: And that doesn't mean the cave, Barbara was very specific about this, it means out of the house, off the grounds, and completely out of the picture—we don't want any accidents. ...:

6:25 a.m.

Dick's Wedding Day realization produced only a few moments of panic, which a hot shower had cured.

He skipped down the stairs, down the hall past the little telephone table - "Morning Bruce" - and turned smartly into the kitchen—when his stomach lurched forward, up, down, then up again.

It was a sense memory - intense and strangely unsettling: Alfred had thoughtfully laid out, on the left of the counter, a pitcher of orange juice and two glasses... beside the juice a bowl of apples behind, a basket of muffins in front. Toast rack. Then a tray of bagels and croissants and a covered dish over a flame: scrambled eggs, bacon, kippers. The Gotham Times, The Daily Planet, two plates, napkins, and utensils. Serve yourself.

It was First Day of School breakfast.

Dick licked his lip absently—not in anticipation of the scrambled eggs, but in reflection. First day of school breakfast—also served the morning of his interview for a summer internship—also served the morning he left for Hudson U. This was Alfred's big day breakfast: Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life.

Oh man.

He was frozen in the doorway, so Bruce stepped around him, picked up a plate and took a muffin.

"That was Selina on the phone, you're to be out of the house by nine."

Dick's brow furrowed.

"Are we being evicted?"

7:00 a.m.

...: Did Dick send flowers? ...

"What?" Bruce had again answered the phone, and again couldn't help flashing to Batman for parallels. This time, it wasn't a Catwoman-specific memory so much as that sick feeling when he'd realize he'd just stepped into the same trap twice. Follow the riddle to the train station and ZAP an electric charge stuns him into unconsciousness. Follow the next riddle to the dump and ZAP... How many times was it going to take for him to learn? All he had to do was *stop answering this phone...*

...: Morning of the wedding, ... Selina was explaining patiently, ...: it's traditional for the groom to send flowers. Did he? ...

"I have no idea."

...: Look, I'm being nice, trying to keep the kid out of trouble. If you don't care enough to do the same — ...

They'd had this conversation before. Back then, she was "being nice" capturing Penguin and leaving him tied up under the Bat-Signal. And he was expected to show his appreciation by looking the other way while she plundered Tiffany's. What's he supposed to be doing this time?

"I will make sure Dick sends flowers," Bruce intoned wearily.

...: NO! Flowers mean Ivy. You gotta make sure he DIDN'T send flowers. CANCEL IT, if he sent flowers, he's got to cancel it! ...

"Yes, dear," Bruce said sarcastically, beginning to feel that, if he had to be whipped by this woman, the literal method might be preferable.

8:50 a.m.

Dick's Mazda pulled out of the front drive just as a small convoy of catering and florists' vans turned into the rear. These were followed by Mr. Jose's station wagon, Mr. Corry's sedan and, on foot, the French chef Anatole from next door. Anatole felt a special connection with this dear young couple, and no rivalry with Alfred, nor even his near-fatal experience here with that homicidal clown, would dissuade him from giving his services for that magnificent dainty: the wedding cake.

He had constructed pieces for a wondrous confection: a mosaic of cake more complex than the mosques of Istanbul, and at its center, a fountain of champagne.

They would have to be assembled, glued together with marzipan paste here on the site, and Anatole planned to guard his masterpiece in person.

No clumsy caterer would be allowed to upset or upstage this glorious creation. Of that, he would be certain.

9:05 a.m.

If I got caught, Barbara would kill me. But “if I get caught” isn’t something I traditionally worry about, and I wasn’t about to start now.

I made a call and explained the situation. He was reluctant, so I purred a little. Sometimes it works. I named a dollar figure and he agreed. Halleluiah.

9:10 a.m.

Bruce watched from his study while the parade of workmen marched cartons of alcohol into the Great Hall where the reception would be held. There was one fellow in particular, not doing the lifting but organizing bottles behind the 18th Century demi-mantel moved from the library to act as a bar... yes, a bar ... that was Sly, the bartender from the Iceberg Lounge! Sly who worked for the Penguin! What was he doing here? *My god*, Bruce thought, *the curse!* What if there really was a curse?

Bruce stepped forward, thinking to question Sly directly, then thought the better of it. This was not a criminal investigation and it wasn’t the Iceberg Lounge. If he took action and there was fallout, it wouldn’t be a case of “Batman triumphant: Banner day for Arkham admissions office.” It would be “The world today saw the rise of new arch-villain Alfred Pennyworth, who single-handedly drove the Caped Crusader out of Gotham City into a hermit’s cave in Guadeloupe.” For once, he’d have to be circumspect.

First stop was the kitchen, now converted to the war room of a vast military operation by the curious triumvirate of Mr. Corry, Anatole, and Constance Catering, each supervising their own teams of serfs in blue, white, and khaki polo shirts, respectively. Alfred, Bruce was told, had a more private headquarters set up in the butler’s pantry. Peeking in, Bruce had the impression of entering the tent of the ranking general.

“Alfred, could I have a minute?”

“Is it urgent, sir?” were the words, although the tone said: “only if you are gushing blood.”

“I suppose not.”

9:25 a.m.

I pulled into the drive. “The garment” sat on the seat beside me in its special couture bag. Just through the gate with the giant looming W, this little Napoleon of a parking attendant said it was too early; he wasn’t set up yet. Oh, but wait, was I the family?

I really had no answer for that, so I showed him the garment. Yellow ruffles. If I wasn’t something connected to this event, would I even consider draping myself in yellow ruffles?

He waved me through and I parked in the garage between the Daimler and the Porsche. I don’t usually do this. Usually I leave my car in the drive, but today, god knows, they needed the space in front. Still, it felt funny.

Was I “the family,” Napoleon had asked? What kind of question was that? How was I supposed to answer something like that: “Well, I’ve known them all a long time, but it wasn’t too friendly, unless you subscribe to the theory that all the fighting was

just sublimated sexual tension and we've really been stuck on each other since day one. And I did watch the kid grow up, although I never knew who he was 'til last year. Oh, and the bride and I once had to fight our way out of a training camp for a splinter group of Syrian terrorists and, even if you're technically on opposite sides, that creates quite a bond."

This was stupid.

Was this the kind of crap this day was going to rake up?

When Napoleon asks "Oh, but wait, are you in the family?" I should smile and say "Yes."

Right?

9:30 a.m.

Bruce returned to the Great Hall to learn what he could from Constance "of Constance Catering" as it said beneath her nametag and those of all the khaki-clad workers. She seemed as friendly as a woman can seem holding a clip board, a palm pilot, and a walkie-talkie, but she was clearly too efficient for the playboy approach.

"Morning, Mr. Wayne," called Sly.

"Oh, you're Bruce Wayne," Constance eyed him warily. She had been warned by every society hostess on the Upper East Side not to *ever* be alone with this man. She had been reassured by his butler that those stories were wildly exaggerated. *But*, Alfred had added, while Constance should not fear Mr. Wayne as a lothario, she should certainly not let him converse, distract, or interfere with the preparations in any way.

Batman's reading of body language saw her shut down to him. But in case he had missed it, another voice provided narration as Constance "of Constance Catering" walked away.

"Shot down, Hotstuff! Pink Team: 1, Fop: 0"

He turned. Naughty grin... Twitch-smile... And a perfunctory kiss hello. (Was it his imagination or was the kiss a little strained? She couldn't still be mad about Ivy?)

"Morning, Miss Kyle," called Sly.

But before this interruption could remind Bruce of his investigation, he caught a glimpse of color in the bag over Selina's arm.

9:35 a.m.

"Yellow?" he asked. And unless I'm very much mistaken, it was exactly the same voice: 80 percent disapproval/20 percent disbelief, that once asked about the Rothchild Rubies.

I wanted to remind him how fetching he looked wrapped in a bedsheet toga, which was at least in the privacy of my apartment while he waited for clothes to be delivered, not paraded in public before a garden full of strangers.

But before I could say anything, Mr. Corry appeared and insisted—and I mean *insisted*—that we come look at what was going on in the garden. Mad Hatter, complete with hypno-chip, would be easier to say no to.

"Look at this," Corry demanded, waving his arms like a South American dictator.

I looked. It was a sight that, frankly, invited one of those minimalist, dogmatic bat-declarations: "Going down" or "Don't try."

Unfortunately, Bruce didn't say a word, and Mr. Corry was looking at *me*. Why? 'cause I was the woman? I wasn't the bride here, it hadn't come to that. But *somebody* needed to say *something*. This couldn't be allowed to just *be there*, looking like that, and get away with it. It was time for justice. It was time for the truth to be spoken:

"It's the wedding from hell," I said flatly.

And it was. Six rows of little gilt chairs faced a clearing with a kind of non-descript altar, and arranged around that were fourteen candelabra of different heights. When they were lit, it would look like Dante's Inferno up there.

"That's what I say," Mr. Corry huffed. "The candles should be at the end of each row of chairs!"

"Okay," I answered.

Bruce's lip twitched.

"Then you can tape a little ribbon on each," Corry explained, pointing.

"Okay," I repeated.

Another twitch.

"Ribbon and perhaps a flower."

"Absolutely," I said.

And—wait for it—yep, there was the twitch.

Mr. Corry stormed off, ready to convey my opinion on the Dante Hellfire Altar to whoever it was that set it up this way. In my peripheral vision, I noted yet another lip-twitch.

"Can I help you?" I turned, fed-up with his smarmy condescending amusement.

"I was just thinking, that's all," Bruce said innocently.

"What?" I demanded.

"You. Just now: 'Okay, okay, absolutely'... That's just how you sound humoring Joker."

I stared. I didn't think that's what he was smirking at, but you can never be sure with him.

9:40 a.m.

"Are we sacrificing somebody?"

Dick emerged from the Garden Maze and eyed the altar with horror. Bruce and Selina turned and said in unison: "You're not supposed to be here."

Dick looked at them.

"You two are scary," he said, then turned back to the altar, "But not as scary as that... That looks like - You remember that voodoo guy? Cult in the sewers?"

Bruce (who, by his own admission, nobody ever called "Mr. Sensitivity") returned to the house, so Dick told Selina about it:

"There was this voodoo guy, staged these ritualistic human sacrifices—releasing the power of the ancient gods to possess the dead bodies or something—real black arts shit - this is what it looked like." He pointed to the altar.

Selina took pity on him, forcing her embarrassment with the wedding details into a corner.

"We'll change it," she promised cheerily. "The candelabra are supposed to go up the sides, at the end of the chairs."

Dick looked skeptical.

"Just two at the altar," she assured him.

He continued to look skeptical.

"With ribbons attached... and a flower... It'll be nice. I promise. I'll make sure they fix it... Dick, stop looking like that. I will *personally* make sure they fix it, okay? Now get out of here. Scary altar is nothing compared to the scary bad luck if you and Barbara see each other today."

10:00 a.m.

Still no Barbara. Which was odd. No sign of Mr. Corry either since he left to chew ass about the Fire Altar of the Damned. No sign of Bruce, which was just as well cause every time I thought of him—who remained stone-faced in Riddler's redecorated Hatter/Two-Face/Roxy/Ivy/Penguin lair but twitched at a little peek of yellow silk - I got an itch to claw something.

Speaking of which, Steve arrived. This was the winner who had brought Poison Ivy to the bachelor party, and only Aunt Kate believed his story that Ivy got to him as soon as his plane touched down in Gotham. I know what Pammy is capable of, and she's certainly capable of that as far as foresight and seduction. But if it were that simple, it would have been only the women's side of the bridal party that was pissed at him. But the guys were freezing him out too—and that meant they knew something. "If he was completely innocent from the start," Barbara declared, "they'd stick together. But they're not. They're mad at him for getting them in trouble. Q.E.D. he was in full control of himself when he decided to bring Dick a red-headed stripper."

Steve, I should mention, was already wearing his tuxedo. He was, I learned, afraid to change clothes with the other groomsmen—not because of their presumed hostility after the Poison Ivy Affair, but because of a grand tradition of pranks in his and Dick's college dorm. Pranks involving Bengay and jockey shorts.

That's Bengay! And jockey shorts!

When I think of the times Nightwing has put on that sanctimonious tsk-tsk act: harming your fellow man, having a little compassion for other human beings! Bengay in jockey shorts, Richard! Find me *ONE ROGUE* who has *EVER* come up with *ANYTHING* that perversely wicked!

Well, much as I would have loved to sit around and learn more guilty secrets from ol' Stevo, I had a guest to smuggle in.

On my way through the kitchen, the chef from next door with the funny name I can never remember (Anatole! that's it, Anatole) stopped me. He said Mr. Corry was busy with Mr. Jose (of the House of Shri—originator of the yellow ruffles—speaking of the itch to claw someone), and of course he couldn't ask Alfred for help (What the deal is with those two, I don't know - and as Harvey once said when the subject of Batman and Catwoman was raised: I don't need to know, I don't want to know).

So anyway, Anatole couldn't ask Alfred; so could I please show him where the dinner would be served because he needed to set up the cake? I took him to the Great Hall where they were just about done setting the tables. He had a high-pitched hissyfit about something so important that mere English was inadequate: the traffic patterns—guests wouldn't be able to see - waiters upsetting his great creation—and all in a rapid-fire patter that made you think THIS is what Gilbert and Sullivan would have sounded like if they wrote in French.

The sixth sense quivered, and I perceived a familiar, silent, unassailable (but benevolent) force of nature standing behind me, watching, waiting, listening - and poised to come to the rescue.

"If I may, Miss," Alfred intoned quietly, "A display of the gifts is set up in that alcove. If we place the cake on a table beside it, all the guests will surely be able to admire it on their way in and out of that room."

Salvation. I left Alfred and Anatole to work out the details (still no Barbara?) and returned to the kitchen...but there was *DICK*, letting in my special, secret guest.

"Mr. Kittlemeier! What are you doing here?" Dick asked, bewildered.

"Ze better queztion is vat are *you* doing here, Young Man. Eet iz very bad for groom to zee bride before vedding, everyone knows thiz."

"Everyone except Mr. The-manor-is-cursed-and-we're-all-doomed," I interjected. "Dick, what are you still doing here?"

Dick turned to me.

"It still looks likes the Well of Souls out there," he announced, pointing out the door towards the garden.

"And I said I will get it changed. DICK, WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING HERE?!?"

"I need my suit," he answered. "It's up in my room."

The kitchen door swung open and Bruce peeked in, telephone in hand.

"It's Reverend Geoff," he announced, "Did we reach a consensus on 'obey?'"

Now, you see, in the past week, as this "happy event" loomed closer and closer, it had swallowed up every spare minute of, shall we call it, "non-bat conversation" in, around, and below the Wayne household. I'd done my best to avoid these conversations—and that little trick was right up there with avoiding the heat sensors at the bullion depository—but I had at least managed to remove myself from anything that could be construed as a *decision* about the process of spiritually and contractually joining two previously free and independent souls into one binding unit 'til death do they part—and I had especially avoided this subject matter in Bruce's presence, let alone, god forbid, actually talking *TO* him—and if I didn't take a breath soon, I was going to pass out...

Breeaaaatthhheee.

I had, as I said, avoided this—particularly with Bruce. But some things you don't let pass. The man inside Batman and I were finally going to have a conversation about a wedding issue and that issue (what did I do to deserve this!) was the blessed vows!

I turned as coolly as possible and pronounced my view:

"I think we can omit that part. And hey, if that goes well, maybe one day women will be able to vote and own land."

10:30 a.m.

Tim tripped, spilling the change across the parking lot of the 7-Eleven. This was so embarrassing. In a tuxedo at ten in the morning, bent over picking up nickels and dimes.

Everybody told him his job as Best Man was to hold onto the ring and make sure Dick was wearing pants.

Nobody said (a) pick up the minister and (b) call to remind the bride's father to pick up (c) the dress otherwise somebody has to (c-1) drive back to the city. But (a-1) the minister had to run out and see a sick parishioner and (b-1) the door to the church office was locked, but (b-1.2) even Robin can pick a lock but then (b-2) the phones didn't have any power, and (b-3) he didn't bring his cel from home cause (unnumbered Tim-rant) where do you put a cel phone in a tux, but (b-4) there was a payphone down the street, but (b-4.1) no change, so (b-4.2) 7-Eleven to break a bill and (b-4.3) spilling the change all over the parking lot and god this was embarrassing...

10:45 a.m.

Dinah and Barbara arrived at the Wayne Manor drive at the same time as Tim with Reverend Geoff, and Maurice Wilson the photographer. The Napoleonic parking attendant assumed this was the first rush of guests and began waving them into the receiving area on the south lawn. Rather than just explain that she was the bride and driving straight up to the house, Barbara explained with some eloquence (and at some length) the difficulty of maneuvering a wheelchair over two acres of grass—hence the very concept of the handicapped parking space. By the time she had finished, Wally West and Lucius Fox joined the queue of cars behind them at the front gate.

The bride's arrival in the manor's main foyer created flurried ripples through the quiet efficiency of the final preparations. Alfred stood formally to welcome Ms. Gordon, Ms. Lance, Mrs. Fox, Mr. Drake, Mr. West, Reverend Geoff and Mr. Fox. He indicated the room in which the ladies would dress, the room where Mr. Drake could find Mr. Grayson, and that to which Mr. West should escort Reverend Geoff before seating Mr. & Mrs. Fox. If everyone had taken their cue from Alfred, things would have progressed smoothly.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Fox couldn't help but notice the beautiful shade of aqua peeking out from the couture bag on Dinah's arm. Mention of Dinah's dress led to talk of Barbara's.

"Where is it, dear?" Mrs. Fox queried.

"Oh it's not with me. Dad brought it," Barbara answered.

"He hasn't arrived yet, Miss," Alfred informed her.

"But Tim did call and remind him, didn't you Tim?"

"He never answered the phone; I figured he'd already left."

"Look if there's any delay, I'm only booked 'til 2."

This last was Maurice Wilson, the photographer. A fool.

Dinah, Wally, and Tim stepped back imperceptibly, clearing a path between Maurice and Barbara—or more precisely, Oracle. This was a personality to whom, when she

said “Do it now,” the most powerful beings on the planet said, “Yes Ma’am with a vengeance.”

10:55 a.m.

Bruce looked into the mirror and straightened his tie for the fourth time.

Dick... married. Little circus kid, lost, crying... so lost, and so angry, and so alone. And now he was grown up and getting married. To Barbara Gordon, that upstart little girl that put on a cape and cowl and took on the night. Tim was Robin now; Cassie was Batgirl. Little Dick and Little Barbara were grown up and getting married. They could have children? Would that be possible; Batman a grandfather?

Forcing the thought from his mind, Bruce straightened his tie for a fifth time and resolved to work out what Penguin’s bartender was doing here.

He crossed from his dressing room into the hall and did a doubletake as, for a half-second, he thought he saw Kittlemeier disappear into the far doorway.

Bruce shook his head in disbelief. His inner-critic spoke in Batman’s voice: *You’re using crime—thoughts of Sly & Kittlemeier—to detach from this. Today’s not my problem. It’s yours. Go deal.*

Downstairs. Find out what Sly is doing here, don’t you think?

I’m the detective here, and the simplest explanation is always the best. Gotham’s an expensive city. Lots of working people have two jobs. Rogues are lousy tippers. The man picks up extra bartending work with a caterer—and you’re only saying go downstairs because you don’t want to go in there and talk to Dick.

Bruce sighed his defeat, walked to Dick’s room, and then stopped, hand on the doorknob. The thought that stopped him was Batman’s “Today’s not my problem.” But what if...

I might know what to say to Dick if Dad was still around.

In his mind’s eye, Psychobat assaulted Bruce with the most petrifying deathscowl ever delivered:

You DARE? You dare use their memory to get me to do this for you?

Unworthy of you, Son... Psychobat morphed into the image of Thomas Wayne. You’re 35, Bruce, and if I was still around, we still wouldn’t have had the wedding day talk, now would we?

Dad! For godsake!

Okay, never mind. Just get in there and tell the boy you love him and you’re proud of him. Doesn’t take nearly as much courage as addressing the stockholders, let alone the other things you do with yourself.

But it does, Dad. For me, it’s a thousand times worse than facing an army of Jokers and Crocs and Ra’s al Ghuls. I don’t know why. Selina once said there’s a difference between the risk facing a hail of gunfire and risking getting your heart broken. I guess...

Bruce, you’ve lost a lot of the people you’ve loved. And I know that was painful. But you can’t never take that risk again. No risk, no return. If you don’t recall that one, I hate to think what’s become of the company under your stewardship.

Banner year, Dad, we just posted record earnings, okay?

It occurred to Bruce, that he sounded very much like Dick just then: "Lay off, I've got it under control. Just stuff your advice and let me do this my way."

You love him. Whether you want to take the risk or not, you love him. You may as well go tell him so.

At that moment the doorknob was yanked from Bruce's hand and Dick's face appeared before him, bleeding at the chin.

"Styptic," he croaked. "I forgot how to shave. I need a styptic pencil."

Tim called from inside the room, "Here, got one."

Dick turned back and closed the door in Bruce's face.

Bruce blinked for a minute, then opened the door undeterred.

"What time is it?" Dick asked.

"1 minute and 20 seconds since the last time you asked me," Tim answered.

"You have the ring?"

"I have the ring."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Dick, I'm sure."

Tim turned to Bruce and talked as though Dick was not present, "He's been like this since I got here. I don't know what to do, it's like Scarecrow gas except the focus keeps jumping around."

"Blood. Did I get blood on the collar?"

"It's fine, Bro."

"What time is it again?"

Bruce stepped in, thinking perhaps, for once, it was he and not Batman that was best-equipped to deal with the situation.

"Richard," he said, "Calm down. It's a ceremony, that's all. You love her, so you say so, out loud, in front of everybody. A ritual. It's not like swinging on a flyline forty stories above street level. The worst thing that can go wrong here is—"

"Is I forget my line!" Dick realized with horror, "or her name—what if I forget her name! Or lose the ring—Tim, do you have the ring—Hold on to that ring - It's an heirloom..."

Bruce left. He was sure now he could clap his son on the shoulder and tell him he loved him and was proud. But he may as well leave it until after the ceremony, when Dick might actually hear him.

Back in the hallway, Bruce heard a voice in one of the rooms:

"It was idiot who did dis. Dis ruffles is for stick woman. Your proportions very deeferent. Need smooth lines, show where you curve in and curve out, not poofy-flouncy like dis yellow."

Bruce opened the door without knocking -And yes, there was Kittlemeier, signature tape measure around his neck, kneeling before Selina, adjusting the ruffles.

"Dere," Kittlemeier pronounced with satisfaction, "Now when dis one falls..." he draped a particular ruffle, "it draws de eye to—yes, when you move, dat will flutter and bounce in very becoming manner. You try now, in front of mirror, you knock their eyes out now."

He knew it. Bruce always knew they plotted against him this way—Kittlemeier and Catwoman. It couldn't be an accident that she looked like that, the purple, and the

gloves and the boots as black as her hair, escaping out the cowl in little wisps and curls, and the line of that costume wrapping her curves in leather—they did it to him on purpose. Of course they did.

“Do you mind?” Dick’s Aunt Kate appeared and pushed him towards the door. “This is a ladies’ dressing room.”

But none of the ladies present were shy in front of Bruce, and Barbara in particular wheeled up to him—wearing little more than a slip and bustier, which made Aunt Kate gasp. Barbara slapped a bouquet of flowers into Bruce’s stomach and a roll of tape around his wrist.

“Go down,” she ordered, “and tape one of these to the end of each row of chairs, and one on each candelabra...”

Not wanting to tape flowers to anything, Bruce started to object: there was something he needed to keep an eye on, there was... this bartender from the Iceberg...

The no-nonsense OraCom voice that said “do it now and argue later” bored into his very spinal column with the words “*then hide the tape in this.*” And a roll of white ribbon joined the tape around Bruce’s wrist.

11:15 a.m.

Rosa began playing the specially selected walk-in music with the arrival of the first guests. But Mr. & Mrs. Fox had arrived so early, Rosa soon ran out of prepared material. Steve and Wally, stationed at the garden entrance to seat guests as they arrived, noted this.

“If I were her,” Steve said, “I’d grab a hymnal.”

At almost the same second, the synthesized chords of *A Mighty Fortress is our God* droned through the garden.

Wally looked at Steve. Steve looked at Wally. Both stifled a laugh.

Faith of Our Fathers was next... There was a pause, then... *On the River Jordan* and a longer pause.

“Can’t keep that up forever,” Steve observed.

“How many hymns are there?” Wally asked.

Then came the *Ave Maria* followed by the longest pause yet, and *We Gather Together*.

“Running out of hymns,” said Steve.

After the Thanksgiving song, the pause continued on... and on... and on...

“Now what?” asked Steve.

“Improv,” Wally answered.

On cue, Rosa began a jazz exploration of Greensleeves.

Steve and Wally looked at each other, eyes locked, then sprinted out the back of the garden, doubling over with laughter, only to run smack into-

“Bruce!” Wally sputtered, his whole face red with mirth suddenly paled to pink with embarrassment. Then Wally saw the tape, the ribbon, and the flowers Bruce carried, and mirth-red returned.

Bruce glowered the best glower he could manage without the cowl.

“I’m looking for one of the bartenders,” he growled. “You see him?”

11:30 a.m.

Okay. A lot has been written, concocted, and speculated about that day at the Watchtower. Here's what really happened:

There was a bad guy: Prometheus. He had a gadget. He took control of Steel's armor, reduced Martian Manhunter & Plastic Man to a state of spastic paralysis, hit Green Lantern with some neural chaff making it impossible for him to use the ring, set up motion detector explosives to keep Flash from moving above normal speed, hypnotized Huntress into immobility, and beat Batman within an inch of his life.

Well, what was I supposed to do? You can't just stand there and *WATCH* that kind of thing spinning further and further out of control.

So I abandoned the disguise I'd snuck in with and interceded. I drew focus with the whip just long enough that the heroes were able to get the upper hand.

My point is: there was Kittlemeier, agreeing to look at Dinah and Kate's dresses since he'd finished with mine, and Tim in some panic about losing the ring in the parking lot of the 7-Eleven and maybe he could ask Wally to zipzap over and look for it. Mr. Corry, Constance, *and* Anatole came up the stairs as a bickering set! Then Bruce came back with the tape and the flowers, asking if I knew how much Sly made at the Iceberg, while Barbara started chattering behind me that if he ran out of ribbon there was more on the gift table. I heard a door open down the hall and Dick's voice calling for Tim...

Well, what was I supposed to do?

"You," I said to Mr. Corry, "tape the flowers to the candelabra. You," I turned to Tim and continued round the circle, "find the ring. You, fix the ruffles. You, stop stalking the bartender. You, get back in the room before Dick sees you. You... I don't know what your thing is. And you, go guard your cake."

And they did it. Every one of them. Even Bruce!

I took a deep breath, clapped the imaginary pixie dust off my hands, then settled them on my hips—where Kittlemeier had indeed tamed the ruffles into submission. That was really much easier than I would have thought possible. Almost like the first time I went up against Batman—the giddy realization that *I can do this*. I can really do this!

11:45 a.m.

...:Detective, I wished to call and convey my respects to the young ones on this special day.....

Bruce was expecting this. There were only two villains with the crucial information to know Dick Grayson's wedding was an opportunity to strike at Batman. There was Hugo Strange, for whom such an event would hold little appeal. And even if it did, Hugo was too afraid of Catwoman at the moment, since her payback for Riddler threatened removal of some internal organs he'd rather not lose, through bodily openings not intended for ad hoc surgical procedures.

And there was Ra's al Ghul, who would not shrink from using the occasion for some nefarious purpose if he had cause, but was far more likely to pull a stunt like this: making a show of his ability to use the event and even bigger show of not doing so.

“Give it up, Ra’s,” Bruce growled into the receiver, “You want to play ‘Aren’t we Civilized,’ pull those six DEMON agents out of Chinatown. Their arrival didn’t go unnoticed.”

...:Detective, you wound me, truly. I called to wish your family joy, and you answer me with threats.....

“I haven’t threatened you yet, Ra’s, but I...”

...:Oh, for godssake, boys! ...

Bruce and Ra’s both stopped as Selina’s voice, a curious mix of silky, amused, and pissed off, broke in on the extension:

...:Just unzip, whip’em out, and let’s all get on with our goddamn lives!... -click-

12:00 noon

Martin Stanwick was, for all intents and purposes, the Batman of Gotham High Society. He had an almost frightening eye for detail, an equally formidable gift for deduction, and he even had a secret identity: he was Hermoine, the society & gossip columnist for the Gotham Times.

But Martin was known to the Gotham social scene as Marty Stanwick, a “novelist” in theory, but hostesses learned fast that inquiries about his literary output were never encouraged. One simply learned to not ask, to smile when he called himself a writer, and to generally humor the silly goose. He was always available to round out a dinner party, he was always charming and funny, and he never seemed to notice if he was a last minute replacement. Nor did he mind escorting deaf Grandma Wensis.

Martin / Hermoine sat in the East Garden of Wayne Manor, in the last seat of the back row, taking mental dictation:

The bride appeared in a full-length gown of imported peau de soie and alencon lace, fashioned with a portrait neckline, bracelet-length sleeves & fitted bodice with alencon lace appliqués re-embroidered with seed pearls... Who’s that coming in? Mr. and Mrs. Wigglesworth (back together?)... Being seated next to Mr. and Mrs. Fox... Interesting ...The full princess skirt and chapel-length train with which such a dress would have been originally designed, was modified, gathered into graceful twirls to accommodate the wheelchair... His editor would object to his mentioning this, but Martin would fight for it. It was a dignified solution to a reality of this bride’s circumstances, and it damn well should make it into print...

On the bride’s side... Good lord, what a mish-mash. That fat cop and the pretty Hispanic one that guarded the baubles at all the charity balls. Why couldn’t they dress them more uptown? The man was impossible but that woman could pass if someone put her in a decent frock and taught her how to carry herself—GOOD LORD, they were sitting next to the Father! They were guests! How frightful...

Her fingertip veil, Martin resumed his mental note-taking... cascaded from a mother of pearl tiara.

For Dick, the reality of the situation began receding the moment he turned to the back of the garden and saw Barbara at the top of the aisle.

He’d been standing at the altar, where Tim had led him like an invalid, standing him on his mark. The organ stopped, then played a note -that sounded like all the other

notes as far as Dick could tell- except it triggered a rustling noise behind him. Tim poked him, then he felt a nudge on his hip—ah, turn. We turn now...

His mind dimly registered 5'1" of yellow, topped by Aunt Kate's face. She walked up to him, smiled, then stepped to the side.

Selina did the same thing—except she winked.

Then Dinah—smile, no wink, and her dress was aqua.

And then... there she was. His Barbara. Reading from top to bottom—fiery red curls that used to peek out from below her cowl—fiery blue eyes that also peeked out from the cowl, always demanding to be taken seriously even though... progressing down farther...the way those apple lips pouted and the bat-emblem stretched across her costume did not inspire "serious" thoughts—at least not for him.

That's how he first saw her, and that's how a part of him would always think of her—bright yellow gloves that matched the emblem and the belt—but also gave her away. She put on a brave show, but she was new to being in costume. She wasn't comfortable and it showed. That first meeting, while they talked, she had no idea where to put her hands. Kept striking those little poses, then readjusting. Yellow here, yellow there. It was SO CUTE...

...gathered here in the sight of God and this gathering, to join together this man and this woman in holy wedlock, an honorable estate...

He was afraid she wanted to hone in on his position as Batman's sidekick—it sure looked that way from the outfit. But she didn't. And she was this incredible, irresistible mix of "better than me" and "clueless"...

...and not by any to be enterprised lightly or wantonly...

Then they found out Batgirl was Barbara Gordon. The commissioner's daughter – wasn't that something! It seemed to make it better and worse as far as Bruce was concerned. As Gordon's daughter she had a legitimate claim to the fight on crime; it wasn't a wound like Batman's or his own, not back then, but it was a tie to this shadow world. That was something.

But Batman was also worried that he could learn her secret at all. He thought it meant she had no idea how deadly this world could be. How could she know? How could any of them?

...but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly and in the fear of God, duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained...

How was it possible they were standing there now? Did he make this happen? The memory of that first sight of Batgirl, in a "superhero" stance on a rooftop while he pulled himself up on a Batrope, vanished like a reflection in still water hit by droplets of rain, each drop forming a new image:

Barbara in Oracle-mode at her keyboard, the image from her monitors flickering off her glasses, oblivious to his presence.

...for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other...

Giving her the locket... Getting the diamond for her ring...

... both in prosperity and in adversity...

...into which estate these persons present come now to be joined...

Barbara found it impossible to control the smile which was surely too wide and undignified for the occasion. Happy was good, but the bride should be serenely happy, not cat-that-ate-the-canary happy.

And now she owed herself twenty dollars. Because the moment she named Dinah and Selina among her attendants, she knew someone would have to use that expression sooner or later, and she figured it would be the original punster himself, Dick.

Look at him.

What happened to that infuriating little brat that couldn't leave a bad pun alone, who had to make it so clear he was Batman's second, trained by the master, handpicked—Look at him now.

Look at him looking... like she was the center of the universe.

What could he possibly see?

That couldn't be right, could it, being that focused on another person, even at a time like this? Didn't even look like he knew where he was...

"I do," Jim Gordon intoned. And the words snapped Barbara into her reality.

Her father said... then... that would have been in answer to "Who gives this woman?"

Oh my, Barbara thought, speaking of staring into his eyes like Svengali, not knowing where we are...

Do you, Barbara Louise, take this man, Richard John...

Yellow ruffles or not, I was awfully glad now that Barbara forced me to do this. Standing safely up there, turned a comfortable 60-degrees towards the happy couple, he couldn't see my face from Father of the Groom position.

Shouldn't be looking my way anyway, Bruce, I thought, should be looking at your son. Look at that smile—like he can barely hold in a laugh—isn't that priceless. He didn't get that from you, Stud. From day one, what the kid feels, you can see all over his face.

For better for worse, For richer for poorer, In sickness and in health...

Does she think I can't see that?

Selina, how long did I know you in that mask? A few inches of cheek and mouth to work out what the whole face was doing? Do you think I can't see you, Kitten? Smiling at my son and his girl.

With this ring...

The sixth sense never lies.

You're watching me, Dark Knight. I know it. What you can possibly see from there, I can't imagine. But I feel your eyes on me. Like the museum. Or a rooftop.

You know where they got that ring? Cartier's. Our first rooftop. First time it got interesting, anyway. First time you let me get so close. I found I could do more than just scratch you at that distance. I could kiss you. And you let me. You didn't seem that surprised, either, not even the first time. Is that why you let me get so close that night...

You may now kiss the bride...

...your arms slid up around my neck, like it was perfectly natural. I could never figure out how you did that. How you could be so casual about it? Like this was something that happened all the time between crimefighters and thieves. Your eyes were the most astonishing things I'd ever seen, and the taste of your lips... That does not happen every day.

You didn't blush that night, Catwoman. But your cheeks are coloring now.

Ladies and Gentlemen...

Look at me, Kitten...

I present for the first time...

Don't look, no, just for a split-second...

Mr. And Mrs. Richard Grayson

12:45 p.m.

"Hiya, Mr. Nigma," Sly greeted the man he recognized as the Riddler, Edward Nigma, despite his conservative suit and false mustache.

Nigma shushed the bartender, but took two glasses of champagne off the tray.

"Sly, you ever see a movie with Harrison Ford and Melanie Griffith crashing a wedding?"

"Working Girl, Romantic-Comedy, Mike Nichols, 1988."

"The part I'm thinking of," he said, with a glance at a blonde guest a few feet away who stood with her back to them, "Ford realizes the girl dragged him to this thing to meet some business hotshot, the bride's father, but they're not invited and says: 'You're like one of those psychotic cops that nobody wants to ride with cause all their partners wind up dead!'"

"Yeah, I remember that," Sly said with a laugh. "That was funny."

"I used to think so too," Nigma said, turning away from Sly and handing the second glass to the blonde.

"Tell me again, why we are risking this?" he asked, "This place is full of cops!"

"I told ya, Eddie, think of it as a puzzle."

"When is a puzzle not a puzzle, Harley? When it is a *SUICIDE MISSION*. This is like hitting a donut shop."

"Eddie, you don't have to stay. I thought it'd be less conspicuous coming in as a couple. I'm in now so if you want to go, *GO*."

Harley Quinn had finally achieved what the Joker's homicidal reputation, right cross, and the torture of 76 Trombones could not: scared Riddler off the idea of pursuing her romantically.

He made for the door. As he went, eyes on every policeman he recognized and not on where he was going, he collided with a table - and then with a very irate Frenchman.

"Watch where you are going, you silly man! Cake is for eating, not for wearing."

"Cake?" Nigma sputtered.

"But of course, this is the wedding cake that you nearly toppled into."

Nigma looked at the table he'd nearly bumped—it was a waterfall. The cake was a waterfall. He looked back at the Frenchman.

"The cake is a waterfall?"

"*Mais oui*."

Nigma smiled.

"That's very...enigmatic. I like you."

"*Tres bien*. But don't upset the cake-table, Sillyman."

Nigma tried again to leave, but having again not looked where he was going, he suffered another collision. This time it was a familiar voice that told him to "Vatch vere you are going - Meester Nigma? Dat is you under dat silly moustaches? Where you get that thing, Halloween shop? You come to me next time, I make you one that match your haircolor. Not look so silly as dis."

Nigma backed up from Mr. Kittlemeier directly into Jim Gordon, who excused himself looking past both men towards the table.

"Why is the cake a waterfall?" Gordon asked no one in particular.

Nigma bit his tongue as a dozen answers to the riddle suggested themselves.

12:50 p.m.

Harley Quinn detached herself from the party. She set her champagne glass on a tray and wandered out of the Great Hall, presumably—so it would look to anyone watching—in search of a powder room.

She passed the door to the powder room, however, continued past the next door, then the next, and finally opened the double doors to the library. She sighed. Right there was where her precious Puddin' kicked the cameraman in the nuts when they invaded that food festival.... And right over there was where he threw a pan of scalding oil at her.

And over there was the door to that little room where she hid when all hell broke loose. She opened the door to the little annex and began rummaging in the moss beneath a potted palm tree. She bent on all fours and looked under the booktable, then behind that little loveseat where - she stopped. Looking through the legs of the loveseat she saw silk shoes dyed a bright yellow to match - she looked up - ruffles.

"Hiya, Catty. Heh heh. Nice color on youch ouch ouch."

Selina grabbed hold of Harley's ear, and pulled her to a standing position.

"Explanation?" was all she said.

"I, ah, ah, lost something last time I was here."

Selina raised an eyebrow.

"I need it back," Harley added.

Selina said nothing.

"It's not like this place is open to the public every day, Catty, I need my bra-ack. I need to get *back* the *thing* that I lost."

Selina felt a tug on the corner of her lip. Rather than permit it to turn into a bat-twitch, she let it relax into a full, natural smile, then composed herself and became matter-of-fact.

"Harley. You were on the Riviera recently, correct?"

Harley nodded.

"With a French count."

"Mhum," Harley confirmed, chewing on her lip.

"François de Poulignac?"

Harley nodded again. Selina sighed, looked around the room with a knowing eye, then moved to a shelf that looked to be the right height. It displayed a variety of ancient artifacts. She picked up an Alexandrian oil lamp that seemed the right size, looked inside it, and extracted a ball of fabric. She handed it to Harley.

"Your bra. Now get out."

"Catty I..."

"I won't tell Joker. Just. Get. Out."

2:30 p.m.

The banquet was being cleared and strains of music called the guests into the large drawing room where a dance floor was laid. To the casual observer, Alfred's

appearance was as dignified and impassive as ever. But those who knew him well could see he relaxed considerably now that the meal was successfully completed.

Selina in particular, sensitive to barely perceptible changes of mood in stoic, inexpressive men, decided to acknowledge this as she would with any other stoic, inexpressive man: by playfully tweaking his nose.

"Alfred," she whispered, hanging back as the guests migrated out of the hall, "later we must talk about the clean-up after these big events. You won't believe what I found stashed in the oil lamp in the library..."

This was all Martin Stanwick overheard or needed to hear. He had already seen the cook, the caterer, and the wedding planner coming to her with questions. He'd seen her receive what looked very like a sarcastic "Yes, Dear" from Bruce. And now she was giving instructions to the butler.

She might be wearing a bridesmaid's dress, Martin thought, but his Hermoine-sensibility recognized the "mistress of the manor" when he saw her. She might not be Mrs. Wayne officially—but in this day and age those distinctions had little to do with legal names. She was the one to be courted if Hermoine was to be invited to all those Wayne galas in the future, and he would lose no time in doing so.

Unfortunately, this was easier said than done. As a member of the wedding party, Selina seemed occupied with duty dance after duty dance. And when free, she and Wayne gravitated towards each other in a way that obviously wouldn't welcome Martin's cutting in.

He danced instead with the Maid of Honor, a stunner, certainly. Beauty, Brains, and (Martin was certain) Breeding (although she denied any connection to the Lances of Newport or Palm Beach). At the conclusion of their dance, Martin asked to be introduced to... he looked around, but Selina didn't seem to be in the room. "Bother," Martin said aloud, "where did she go?"

"Who?" Dinah asked.

"Mrs. Wayne," he answered absently.

Dinah chuckled at this and politely told him she assumed he meant Miss Kyle. She pointed: "She's dancing with the groom."

2:40 p.m.

"You're in trouble, Richard, there's plotting in the air."

It was a mock-serious tone with which Selina spoke, and Dick played up to it with a deadpan.

"I'm shaking."

"I'm serious, I've been dancing with several of your old college buddies, and I must say, you have not guarded your secrets well."

Dick stalled their dance and looked at her, curious.

"Oh?"

Selina nodded grimly.

"Bengay. Jockey shorts. There's payback in the air, my friend. And they all seem to know you're in the bridal suite at the Carlyle tonight. If I were you, I'd sweep the room for microphones and strip search the guy who brings room service."

Dick laughed.

"You had me going for a second."

"Just consider this, so far you've already had Stevo bring Poison Ivy into your path *by accident*. Can you imagine what he might come up with *if he really tried?*"

"I'm done imagining. Selina—we did it! We beat the curse!"

Selina laughed and sighed.

"Cocky. I've always said that'll be your undoing one day."

2:47 p.m.

It began with Martin's distracted misstatement to Dinah:

"Mrs. Wayne" ...Overheard by Mrs. Wigglesworth, who then saw Dinah point to Selina...

"Dancing with the groom" ...Mrs. Wigglesworth told Mrs. Ashton-Larraby she'd already heard talk of who's next, mouthing the words "Mrs. Wayne" and pointing, as Dinah had, towards Selina.

Mrs. Ashton-Larraby said at last her lips were unsealed! She'd known for months, but didn't want to spread idle gossip. Mrs. Ashton-Larraby told Mrs. Helbrook, who told Mrs. Ford, overheard by Mr. Upton. Mr. Upton told Mr. Drake, who told his wife, who told Mrs. Fox...

By the time Selina returned to her seat, there were four separate accounts of the engagement being circulated. Hearing one of these, Aunt Kate sought out Selina to offer her congratulations.

2:48 p.m.

"Excuse me?"

I couldn't have heard that right.

"Congratulations! Oh right, that's the wrong way round. You only congratulate the man. I should congratulate Bruce, and I compliment you."

"Come again?"

"Selina! Don't be coy. I just heard you're engaged."

E-e-e-en-ggggg-aged???

"Engaged to do what, exactly?"

Anyone 'in the family' would know the tone. It said "as you have blood in your veins that you want to *keep* in your veins, think carefully before you speak next." But of course Kate wasn't in the family, neither family that knows Catwoman's voice or what it means. She went on as if the answer was obvious:

"To get married."

My next question, to intimidate her into backing off should have been "To whom?" But I couldn't say it. If I asked the question, she'd only *answer it*, and I didn't need to hear that.

Instead I opted for: "Engaged in what sense of the word?"

Kate smiled now, and she used the tone I use with the cats when it's time to get them in the carrier for the vet.

"There's only one sense, dear. Weren't you listening earlier: 'For better for worse, for richer for poorer.'"

I turned away. I didn't need to hear it again. I didn't need to snap at the silly woman. I did need to find out where she got this monstrous idea, but before I could calm down enough to know where to begin, Stephie bubbled up with a note from one of the catering staff "For Mrs. Wayne" she giggled, she guessed that meant me!

I don't happen to know ClueMaster, Stephanie's daddy. He's a 2nd class rogue, and we've never moved in the same circles. But I made a mental note that if I ever did meet him, I must mention that, in my opinion, this giggling little twit is not too old for a spanking.

I grabbed a bottle of champagne from the nearest cooler, and scanned the room: Barbara was busy, obviously. Dinah...Lois... Perfect. Who else? I spied a blonde head ducking behind a planter. Harley. Still lurking. Okay, fine. For this, she could stay.

2:49 p.m.

Clark Kent's super-hearing picked up the story in its earliest stages, and he shared it with his wife with some amusement.

Lois only smiled for a moment, then looked disapproving. She said it would be very awkward for both Selina & Bruce to be the subject of rumor and innuendo and if Clark had even an iota of sensitivity he might appreciate-

"Darling," Clark cut her off, more amused than ever, "neither of them are new to rumor and innuendo. Think about it for a minute."

Lois delivered one of those looks that say "Enjoy the pull-out sofa." If after the bachelor party, the Diana stories, and the whispers still going around about his own bachelor party, he couldn't understand how distasteful it was to have people talking about...

"C'mon," Selina passed the table with Dinah and another woman in tow, each holding a bottle of champagne. "We're getting drunk."

Lois grabbed a bottle from the table, shot a parting look at Clark, and stood to follow. Clark stared in disbelief.

"Catwoman, Black Canary, and I think that other one is Harley Quinn just invited me to get boozy with them. I might want to write a book one day."

4:15 p.m.

"Okay, here's what I want to know," Selina slurred. "'Til death do us part'—Could we possibly come up with a more terrifying concept? We'd have to make up new words to top that one."

"I think," Dinah mused, "it was the same guy who came up with 'if I should die before I wake.'"

"I think it's nice," Harley said, shaking the last drops from her bottle into the glass.

"You would," Selina accused, passing Harley her own bottle, "with Puddin' around, you're always close to the escape hatch."

Lois took Selina's bottle from Harley and filled her own glass.

"It's not so bad," she declared, as the only qualified spokesman for the married state, "unless you've got the alsoran waiting in the wings, waiting for you to kick. She is, you know, just biding her time. Thinks I'm too dumb to know it. Smallville's too simple to get it, but I know. *-hic-*"

"Lois, it's just talk," Dinah whined. "There's nothing in it. Move on."

Selina squinted at Dinah critically. "That's not what you said when the talk was 'bout you." She looked at Harley. It was unfortunate they couldn't speak plainly. If Harley could know Dinah was Black Canary she would understand. The Gotham Post's ridiculous stories about Canary loving Ra's Al Ghul... and Harley would love Dinah's impersonation of Ra's. Well, Selina could speak plainly about one topic, the Post had written other lies:

"And it's not what *I* said when the talk was about *me* either. Arrested, brainwashed, streetwalker, *flat-chested.*" From her tone, it was clear she felt this last slander the most. Then she pointed at Harley... "An' can y'see me letting this tasseled twit make me her bitch?"

Harley did a spittake.

"Catty, honest, I never even dreamed of—"

"Oh, stand down, ya silly twit, I know you had nothing to do with that ridiculous story. You couldn't even keep track of your underwear with Count François."

Harley giggled, Lois and Dinah stared, and Selina concluded, "I don't see you as a mastermind."

9:00 p.m.

Once the happy couple left and guests began making their exits, Clark identified the room where he'd earlier heard the women's giggles, whispers, and heartbeats. He collected a barely-conscious Lois and agreed to drop an equally inebriated Dinah on their way out of town.

Harley Quinn was entrusted to Sly. She was still wanted for the last attack on the manor, but Bruce thought it would be impolitic for him to openly hand her over to the police. So Sly was instructed to drop her at the Hacienda and an anonymous tip would take care of the rest.

That left Selina.

As he watched her stretched on the sofa, eyes closed, lips parted, chest rising and falling as she breathed, a wicked glint came into Bruce's eye. It was the memory of her with which he'd started this day, taunting him back to consciousness in some alley. He leaned over her sleeping form and fingered her hair gently, where the mask would be, but wasn't.

"Catwoman." His voice was soft and seductive, but still Batman. "Catwoman, wake up."

Her eyes opened dreamily, then focused, boring into his—and the vaguely formed idea of payback fell to pieces as she began babbling woozily:

"You were no help... Can't just stand by and watch that kind of thing Napoleon in the parking lot and ruffles in the family ... and the altar with Dante's Inferno...and Tim!...ring at the 7-Eleven...Why'd he want t'send Flash to 7-Eleven to get a ring

anyway?... and somebody had to take French Gilbert and Sullivan to the dining room cause he won't talk to Alfred after something happened at Christmas..."

"Yes, Dear."

"Stop saying that," she muttered, as he steered her up the stairs. "You. You did this to me. I liked my life. Finally had it down to where it worked. I had a good little thing going, 'til that Carlton bitch at the Gotham Post says I'm in jail, flat-chested Jane Doe brainwashed by Harley Quinn! But I would've let it go. I let it go when that Miller asshole said I was a whore, what do I care? Let it go when they said Watchtower was a threeway with you and Black Canary..." She stopped leaning against the wall and pointed unsteadily. "...but you smiled. You did that fucking twitch smile. And that's how it all started."

"Yes, Dear."

Selina looked up at the ceiling, then around.

"Who keeps saying that?"

Bruce steered her into the bedroom, removed her dress, folded it neatly, and placed it in a drawer.

"Then came the museum, 'this isn't a crime it's a date' and the vault, and the demonspawn ... none of this was s'posed to happen? And, lil game with Catwoman breaks into the manor, fine, no harm in that, then the Cadaver's in love with Canary, ...and R-Word... and Pheromones..."

She wound down, and Bruce smiled.

"Don't stop now."

She removed the dress from the drawer.

"This is how it starts," she said, looking for a chair to toss the dress onto, "Kitten this, Kitten that, and before you know it your bra is stuffed in an Alexandrian oil lamp." There was a moment's silence, then she yelled, "THAT'S IT! THAT'S THE TWITCH. STOP DOING THAT."

Bruce laughed.

"I like you when you're drunk. You're cute."

"This is your fault! *THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT.*"

"Selina."

"WHAT???"

"Shut up for a second."

He wrapped his arms round her, then said gently, "Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible a concept, is it?"

I felt naked—not because most of my clothes were in the drawer, draped over the chair, or on the floor—but because... this... person... Bruce, Batman, the guy inside Batman... was looking straight into my soul. It, ah, sobered me up in under a second.

I felt my arms lifting, settling easily around his neck, felt my head tilt back and my eyes close as I leaned in to kiss him... then I felt a jolt—He had my wrists in one hand and my chin in the other.

"Won't work this time, Kitten. You can't escape that way anymore. Answer me. Mrs. Wayne isn't that awful, is it?"

I didn't trust my voice, so I shook my head a little. He released my chin, then my wrists, and then he was holding me again.

"Good, I just thought we should settle that before we went any further."

KNIGHTLIFE

Batman stood on the roof of Wayne Enterprises, just...standing. He hadn't fired the grappling hook, and he wasn't even seeing the magnificent cityscape before him. He was off his game tonight. And it was dangerous to proceed until he could nail down the reason.

"Off his game..." It's the kind of thing she would say. There was a time he would've been the first to object, "This isn't a game."

"It's a figure of speech, Stud," she answered in his mind's ear.

He tuned her out. Didn't need that voice in his head right now, not tonight when everything felt so strange.

It had been like this all night.

He'd gotten up at four, having decided last night this wasn't a day he would be making an appearance at Wayne Enterprises. Even if there was no Batman in the picture, he doubted he would return to WE this week for any reason. Not after that finance meeting. Talk about torture: six hours on arbitrage opportunities in the new millennium. He'd rather do six hours in that Hugo Strange contraption with the electrodes than ever see another arbitrager.

To keep up appearances, however, Bruce had rigged his laptop to send two e-mails, one at 10:30 and another at 2:15, to give the illusion that he was awake and active, somewhere, on company business. He checked to see that the e-mails went off as planned, then went down to the cave.

"Good afternoon, sir."

It would appear to anyone that Alfred just happened to be in the cave, having just finished cleaning... But Bruce knew his butler long ago devised a routine that placed him wherever he needed to be. There were no coincidences. In this case, Alfred had expected Bruce to be awake and coming into the cave about now, and so presented himself for this casual, "accidental" meeting. *Now, Bruce wondered, is this for my convenience or his? Is he here in case I need to ask him something, or does he have an agenda of his own?*

"Afternoon, Alfred. Any news?"

"Mrs. Ashton-Larraby called, sir. She hoped you would reconsider making an appearance at her benefit."

"No way. I sent a check."

"And she thanked you very much, sir, for your generosity. But she did mention that, while your monetary contributions are always welcome, your actual *presence* at these affairs can contribute a great deal more by attracting other donors not inclined to be so generous."

"Alfred, I can't stand that woman. I sent a big enough check so I don't have to go in person."

"As you say, sir. Would you care for a sandwich before you depart?"

"No."

Alfred knew perfectly well, Bruce reflected, jumping to the parallel bars, that he did not eat before a workout.

Alfred had also, Bruce surmised, done a bit of tactful paraphrasing of Mrs. Ashton-Larraby's invitation. "Attracting other donors not inclined to be so generous..." Yeah, right. It would have been more like "Can't you get him to come, Pennyworth, use your influence - and get him to bring *that Darling Selina*. They're such an adorable couple, we were *all* saying so at the wedding..."

Bruce could read people, and he knew since the wedding that his role in Gotham Society had been recast. To hostesses like Mrs. Ashton-Larraby he was no longer bait for the social climbers. He was to be entertainment, grist for the rumor mill.

Well—he dismounted the parallel bars in an effortless flip in which he grabbed a jumprope hanging loose from a suspension hook. He jumped rope rigorously until his heartrate doubled, then began a complex pattern of twists and spins—it wasn't as though there was anything new in Bruce Wayne being gossiped about. But talk about him now meant talk about her as well, and Selina's reaction to being talked about could be... extreme. And unpredictable. No one who saw Cat-Tales (least of all Bruce) could deny it, Selina Kyle's reaction to being gossiped about, pigeon-holed, slandered, or labeled was bound to be an event.

He threw the jumprope back onto its hook and began an adapted Tai Chi form, an exercise that encompassed meditation and mental discipline as much as physical precision and martial art... Cat-Tales, what an idea. What a woman. A newspaper prints some lies about her so she goes onstage and says *Look, I'm not in jail, I wear purple, and I'm a 38-D*. Unbelievable. The chuckle disrupted the slow extended exhale and Bruce had to start again.

The newspaper said she'd shot Gordon—so she made famous an obscure quote of Lex Luthor's calling him the most inept peace officer in the Western Hemisphere. "*I'm smart enough to come up with more creative and less lethal ways to strike at an enemy than shooting them.*" ...*Ain't that the truth. I could've told them that*, Bruce thought, reflexively shifting his weight as he would to defend against her favorite attack, again interrupting the Tai Chi cycle and again having to start over.

Of course she'd said other things on that stage, things she didn't have to, that invited as much gossip as the rest of her act dismissed—"*If I came up to you and said Hey, wild night of passion, no names and no strings, and I'll even bring the whip if you want—you'd say, what?*"

"Dear Penthouse" Bruce murmured the punchline aloud - instead of inhaling in a slow steady five count while he extended his left arm...

This was ridiculous. She'd done it again!

Another workout shot to hell. Thanks, Kitten, Bruce thought, not even bothering to start on the weights.

He decided to forego his ritual post-workout meditation at the stalactite and went instead to his workstation - to find the sandwich he'd refused, but that Alfred brought anyway. He pulled the status reports from the Batcomputer. At large: Crane, Dent, Nigma, Tetch

Scarecrow, Bruce thought, Possible, he's been quiet. Harvey... Doubt it. Something else on his mind lately. Eddie? Yeah, right. If he's got the energy after 'Aunt Maud.' Mad Hatter... Ditto.

Bruce punched up a new screen, events that were potential targets. Mrs. Ashton-Larraby's benefit was not listed. She'd be crushed. But it really wasn't much of a target. Maybe in Selina's day, for the diamonds some of those bluehairs might get out of the vault, but other than that... Selina. Yeah. Well anyway, better get out there...

He suited up, checked and double-checked his gear. This was the first time he experienced the strangely "off" feeling that had haunted him all night.

On the rooftop, thinking back, Batman realized it was a kind of déjà vu that had struck him in the costume vault—he was doublechecking the gear. It was the one thing he didn't have to teach Dick. Circus performers, he'd learned that night Dick first prepared to join him in the field as Robin, always, *always*, ALWAYS check their gear themselves. And Dick, Bruce knew, always checked a second and then a third time when he thought Batman wasn't looking. Always. And Bruce wouldn't have been much of a detective if he couldn't deduce what the boy thought each time: that last night with his parents - checking the gear - and not seeing it.

Dick! Of course, that was it! Batman couldn't pinpoint it before, but now he could see clearly: Dick and Barbara's wedding! Dick and Barbara's honeymoon! The OraCom was silent tonight for the first time in... god, how long? No open channel with an instant connection to Nightwing, Robin, and Batgirl. It felt like it used to be, Batman alone in the night. Alone with his mission,... and alone with his thoughts. No wonder he was thinking about her. She was the only one around in those days.

"Oh, is that it?" he imagined the amused purr, velvety like her skin, soft and round like the rest of her. Whether it was sinful promises if only he'd let her leave with that diamond, or "Morning, handsome, cream and sugar?" her voice still affected him like she'd "accidentally" pressed against him after a warm shower, wanting him to rub lotion on the places she couldn't reach—with that damned sly smile that said "Fine, cuff me, if it makes you feel like a man; is that a Stein lock? Gee, that'll take a whole forty seconds to pick. Forty seconds I'll never get back, what a triumph for crimefighting."

He sighed.

It was just Oracle being away.

That's what was behind this.

He fired the grappling line and traveled east towards the diamond district. He stopped for a mugger one side street off of Gotham Plaza. Gotham Plaza that was "now safe for tourists to walk through even after 10PM." The Mayor's much ballyhooed partnership with key family-friendly corporations that were pouring a bundle into renewing the city's theatre district. 99-percent of Gotham was exactly as it had always been, but there were these strange pockets of sanitized unreality, like an alternate universe. Gotham Plaza was one such pocket. Once overrun with porn theatres and street hustlers, it was now an open-air mall. Middle of the night and there were eleven year olds running around that weren't hookers.

This wasn't a *bad* thing, obviously, no one could say it wasn't an improvement, least of all Batman. But for any native Gothamite it was... peculiar.

It would have felt good to punch something, but the mugger, who'd found his victim a mere half-block from the plaza, was no hardened criminal. He was a disgusting weak-willed non-entity of a first-timer who was so petrified at having encountered Batman in his first attempt at a crime, that he swooned, pissed himself, cried, and then ran into the plaza and smack into Officer Ralph—whose nametag read: "Hi, My name is Officer Ralph, Welcome to Gotham City."

Batman just blinked, looking into the plaza, to see Officer Ralph arrest the mugger to the positive delight of onlookers, all elated to have seen an actual street crime in their visit to the big city.

"Are you hurt?" Batman asked the victim, perfunctorily, without turning to look at her.

"No," came the answer, and that would have ended the encounter, except the reply was interesting enough to warrant a look. It was so brief and to the point. Not tearful, not shaken, not rambling. Just "No."

Batman turned to look. It was a girl in perhaps her mid-twenties, nice-looking in an obvious, cocktail-waitress sort of way. She wore a tight T-shirt: Kit-Kats. It was a chain of perfectly ordinary restaurants that featured buxom waitresses in these tight shirts. There was one in Gotham Plaza. This girl was obviously the late shift, walking home after closing.

"Wouldn't you know it, I've worked there for years," she remarked. "Always walk home through the Plaza. It's supposed to be so scary, and I never once had a problem. The one night I take a side street, I get mugged."

Batman never indulged in crisis counseling. His mission was to bring justice to the scum that thought they could get away with it. But, just this once, something about the girl's self-deprecating humor - he offered to get her an escort home if she wished. She made a sound, expelling air through the side of her mouth, that apparently meant she didn't think that was necessary.

These guys were hopeless. The diamond district had always been a part of his regular patrol: it contained a large concentration of valuable jewels in a few short blocks. But other than the times Catwoman took an interest in some particular gem, this area was a chore. The criminals - well, just look at this lot, fussing with that alarm panel for half an hour! Selina would have been inside twenty minutes ago.

Not that he was proud of her criminal abilities or anything. It was just that: it's a short night and a big city—his time was valuable. It would be nice if these morons finished their breaking and entering so we could proceed from trespass with intent to felony burglary.

Ten minutes later—still with no end in sight—Batman ran out of patience. He placed a homing device in their van and another actually on their "lookout," and then moved on to another location, only a few blocks away, that warranted a check-in since he was in the neighborhood.

Poison Ivy's Greenhouse—Should have been empty since she was in Arkham, but there was a light on inside. Observing as best he could through the skylight, Batman

deduced it was a sunlamp of some kind, probably on a timer, something for the plants. False alarm, the place was deserted.

He continued south, into Chinatown. Those DEMON agents had set up a front in a curio shop: soapstone, cloisonné, erotic netsuke. As a cover operation, this place wouldn't fool a child. It obviously wasn't the kind of place that would be open at this time of night, and it obviously wasn't the kind of place that needed six employees. But there were always six. There was a new one tonight, and the short one that smoked was gone. This was the second change in personnel since Batman discovered this cell, but always, there were six.

Well, it might mean nothing. Even Ra's al Ghul had turnover. There was that messenger earlier this year... Omar. That was a thought. Omar now worked for the Daily Planet, but his girlfriend, Moira, was an employee of Wayne Enterprises Metropolis office. If Bruce Wayne had Moira transferred to Gotham City, Omar would surely follow. That could stir the waters. Would this group make contact with Omar? Would...

This was disgusting. How could he even think—it was the sort of thing Ra's might do—playing with people's lives. Batman did not use such methods. What was he thinking?

He decided to simply keep an eye on this operation and watch for future developments. It was possible they were simply to be Ra's Al Ghul's eyes and ears in Gotham. Batman moved on.

He was on his way to the Park—muggers within and flanked by museum row and scores of luxury condos on each side - when he saw the Redbird below. Robin and Spoiler. Batman had not realized the extent to which “Robin's” patrol had become “Robin and Spoiler's” patrol. They were together all the time now, by the look of things.... Not that there was anything wrong with that, Batman thought, it's simply not how he himself would ever choose to proceed.

“No,” Selina's voice stirred again in his imagination, “you'd prefer to go it alone, night after night, year after year, caught up in your obsessive-compulsive funk of justice and gloom.”

She lived on the park.

It was a little early to drop in, but, it was a quiet night.

If he told her he was thinking of old times, she would oblige readily enough. He could imagine the way the tips of her lips would tickle his ear, sending that familiar electric zing that felt like nervousness, excitement and needful all at once. It made his jaw automatically clamp shut...

No, damnit. He was not going to cut a patrol short for her. It hadn't come to that.

What was really eating him? Was it “Mrs. Wayne?”

There was a type of man, insecure and petty, that might have been offended. But Bruce was not insecure. He had been truly charmed by her meltdown at the sequence of events at the wedding that led to her being addressed as Mrs. Wayne. He'd seen her go off the deep end before, god knew, with far more provocation and to far deadlier effect. He hadn't been the least offended or insulted; he thought she was adorable. He

reined her in as gently and lovingly as he could: "Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible a concept, is it?" It took a little handling, but he finally got an admission that it was not. Well and good.

But now... Now...

It was not unlike the time he'd said "Let's accept our relationship for what it is." He'd said it and he'd meant it. It was only the next day he realized the words could well be taken to mean it was okay for her to be a criminal—and that was certainly not what he'd intended.

"Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible a concept, is it?" He said it, and he meant it. He wanted her to acknowledge that being his wife was hardly a fate worse than death and that her kneejerk panic attack—while adorable, and entertaining as hell - was perhaps out of place when it was, in fact, something they were moving towards... or had been moving towards... or might possibly be moving towards... that is why people date. And when it goes on as long this certainly had and starts developing into something deeper and warmer than...

He stopped and thought back, trying to replay his thoughts...

... and she was certainly becoming part of the family and... and...
... "his wife" ...it was when he thought to himself that he "wanted her to acknowledge that being *his wife*..."

This... might... be... what Selina had experienced at the words "Mrs. Wayne"...

"His wife."

Was he engaged?

Could she have taken that to mean...

"Let's accept our relationship for what it is." It didn't mean go right ahead and ransack Tiffany's. "Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible..." Could she have possibly thought? - No, of course not. She was drunk. She was a cute drunk too.

"Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible a concept, is it?"

She couldn't have possibly thought that meant "Let's set the date." Could she?

He fired a line and descended near the Redbird.

"Robin, Spoiler, There are a trio of pathetic burglars in the diamond district. This is the frequency of the homing beacon. Pick them up if and when they ever finish the job."

The Selina-avoidance that plagued him all night led Batman to forego Museum Row and the condos and check, instead, on this warehouse. It wasn't a regular part of his patrol, but he liked to look in on it every few months. He always thought it would be a perfect rogue hideout, but it never once occurred to any of them.

This warehouse was not "abandoned" but the goods stored there were used only one day a year, so activity was minimal. And any number of rogues would find something of interest for their themed décor. This warehouse was where the balloons were stored for the Thanksgiving Day parade.

A quick run-through confirmed that the building was, as always, unoccupied. No imagination at all. You'd think-

Batman's musings were cut short by the appearance of the Bat-Signal cutting through the night sky.

In the fifteen minutes it took to reach police headquarters, Batman reflected that he was going to meet the fourth new commissioner since Jim Gordon's retirement.

He hadn't understood the reference when Selina referred to "Murphy Brown's Secretary" and Tim had to explain—he was doing it again. *Kitten, get out of my head*, he ordered. *I'm trying to work.*

"I'm not stopping you, Babe," she said in his mind. "Go meet Commissioner Flavor of the Month. You know I'll still be here when you're done."

He remembered telling her about the appearance of the first new commissioner when he'd started dropping by her apartment after patrol. She'd rubbed his neck that night. It felt wonderful. And he found himself relaxing, telling her about his day:

"Answered the signal, and there's a new one."

"A new signal?"

"A new commissioner."

"Not Gordon's replacement."

"Replacing Gordon's replacement. Oh... Ooohh, that feels good."

"I'll bet. You're tense."

"This new one: He was wearing a nametag, can you believe it. It's like he knows he won't be around long enough for anyone to bother learning his name."

Landing on the roof, Batman returned himself to the present. Commissioner #4—Muskelli—might have some staying power. No nametag. And he had something to prove. Giacomo Muskelli had run the docks in the late 20s and built the smalltime operations into a formidable crime syndicate. It was not the largest operation of its kind, but it was the bloodiest. His great grand-nephew, Lawrence Muskelli, who now switched off the Bat-Signal, wanted to erase that blot on the family name. He was determined that the Muskelli name would again be famous in Gotham, for service and civic contribution.

The news he had for Batman tonight, however, was not likely to achieve that noble goal. There was a "suspicious occurrence" (an unusual expression, Batman thought) at a cheap motel by the expressway, something that would embarrass an important city councilman. They wanted him to look into it, intervene if necessary, but quietly—

Batman noted the pronoun: *They*. Whatever this was, it wasn't Muskelli's idea to call in Batman. He was embarrassed to be doing so.

Then Batman realized why as Muskelli explained further: If they sent in regular cops, then whatever it was (and it seemed like it was blackmail), those cops would learn about it and be in a position to... Plus, of course, there was the paper trail of their reports...

Batman squelched his impulse to smash the signal and curtly tell this political toady masquerading as a policeman not to fix it until he'd learned how to use it.

But he didn't. This was a first offense. Muskelli was new. It wasn't his fault he was the fourth commissioner Batman had had to break in.

"We don't do 'I was only following orders' here, Commissioner," Batman said tersely. "Not in my city, not on this roof. We don't do 'they' and 'following orders' and we don't do politics. This is politics."

Before Muskelli could respond, there was only empty night to respond to.

Batman had no intention of officially looking into this unsavory business, nor intervening at the behest of politicians. But he did intend to find out what was going on. Batman needed to know things. It was an integral part of his mission. And if what he found out was that a blackmailer was conducting his unspeakable business in Batman's city, there would be Justice. Not a political cover-up. Justice. There would be consequences and retribution for any doing wrong, and it would be delivered impartially regardless of any wrongdoer's seat of power. That's why Justice was always shown blindfolded.

The internal monologue stopped cold when Batman arrived at the LazySue Motel and saw Slam Bradley hiding out (if you could call that hiding)... in the stairwell, with a camera. Slam Bradley! That meant this was not "blackmail," this was, at worst, nothing more criminal than a philandering husband. For pity's sake, Muskelli wanted to send him after a bottomfeeder like Slam Bradley? Nobody Batman knew would associate with the likes of Slam Bradley! Nobody Batman *beat up* would associate with the likes of Slam Bradley! Matches Malone wouldn't bother giving his guy the finger on the expressway! This was beyond pathetic. Batman had a good mind to go back to the rooftop and smash that signal after all.

There was a night, Batman remembered, shortly after Bruce and Selina starting "slumming" at the Iceberg Lounge, when Bradley's name came up. Scarecrow—who seemed to have a deathwish where Selina was concerned—made some silly joke implying she was friendly with this guy, and she'd answered:

"Let's revisit the hierarchy of Gotham After Dark, shall we?"

Then she'd signed to him ~Batman—Top, Sidekicks and Junior Bats along with...~

Then she resumed aloud, "Senior rogues: Joker, Riddler, Two-Face, *Moi* and so on. Secondary Rogues: Roxy, Catman, along with senior sidekicks like Harley Quinn and... and Harley Quinn! Third rate rogues: ClueMaster, Mime, etc. Henchmen, Scum, Iceberg Lounge washroom attendant, the guy who runs into the 7-Eleven to buy Hugo Strange cigarettes, Slam Bradley."

Nothing ever rattled her. Make a joke, or claw its throat out. Or occasionally both.

By the time Batman returned to the city-proper, it was after 4:30 and the streets were deserted. There would be no more scum on which to take out his frustrations.... It hadn't been a satisfying night. A sympathetic ear and a good massage would have been welcome but, maybe it was the nostalgia, he bypassed Selina's terrace and returned home. Alone. As he would in the old days. Alone to his empty cave and the empty house above.

It wasn't late enough to go to bed. He needed to decompress, he told himself, after patrol. The truth was, he'd been thinking too much about it *-her-* it all night long, and if he wasn't utterly exhausted before trying to sleep, if there were any synapses still firing by the time his head hit that pillow, it wouldn't end.

He made the log entry for the night's patrol, read over the previous week's entries... He failed to note when he typed *sleep* instead of *steep*. He did notice when he typed "the waarehouse was closed closed."

He saved the file but didn't shut down. He skimmed the 1 a.m. auto-downloads. When the text started to swim, he increased the font size. When the monitor actually blurred, he knew he was finally ready.

He dragged himself to his bedroom and tossed his shirt onto a chair. He was so consumed with sleep, he didn't see that it landed on a mass of purple leather—a color and texture he was particularly alert to most of the time, even (especially) in a darkened room.

He pulled back the coverlet, sunk into the soft sheets, and adjusted his pillow. There was a soft, sleepy “Heeey” and the pillow was pulled from under him.

“Selina?”

“Mmm ...'bouttime... late tonight...got tired waiting... 'nd'ts cold...”

She pulled his arm around her like a blanket. Bruce hesitated a half-beat before letting his arm go limp around her, pressing his nose into the back of her neck - thereby reclaiming a third of the disputed pillow.

“G'night, kitten,” he murmured before drifting off.

“Night, knight,” she answered.

Bruce awoke to three very specific sounds:

– a distant shower,

– a female voice (morning, kitten), distant, muffled by both glass and wood (that would be behind the bathroom door, behind the shower door, talking to herself—strange girl),

– a cell phone ringing, the special ring he had tagged to Lucius Fox.

Knowing it must be important if Lucius would be calling him on cel, Bruce answered the beeping box without realizing...

“Morning, Lucius”

::Morning what? Lushy? Who is this?::

...this wasn't his phone.

“Bruce Wayne. Who is this?”

::Bruce? It's Harvey Dent::

A half-beat of alarm that Harvey was using Lucius's phone dissolved the moment Bruce looked at the small silver box in his hand. It was he who was using Selina's phone. She must have the same ring for Harvey that he used for Lucius.

::Um, Bruce, why are you answering Selina's phone?::

“She's in the shower,” Bruce answered without thinking.

There was a moment's silence on the other end of the line.

::Oh:: Another pause, then... ::well:: and another pause. And finally... ::Wait, maybe this is better. Could you come see us this afternoon? We need some expert advice about something::

Burning with curiosity as to what topic Harvey could possibly want 'expert advice' for *from Bruce Wayne*, Bruce agreed to the appointment. This agreement immediately scored a bonus for Batman: the location of Harvey Dent's new hideout in the old Flick Theatre.

He went to the cave to log this while Selina was still in the shower. Not that he was avoiding her or anything. He simply wanted to research this building and pull the original blueprints, just in case, as he would before entering any known rogue hideout if he had the luxury of time.

Logging in to the system, Bruce was immediately met by an alert. The analysis of last night's autodooldowns detected a pattern that, cross-referenced with the Rogues At Large list, generated a flag:

Three days before, Harold Morton, of the Morton Trust, cancelled all his appointments. He returned to work the next day. Yesterday, Charles Fitzwallace, of Fitzwallace Tech, cancelled his appearance at a panel discussion on emerging technologies. He and his wife were also a no-show at Mrs Ashton-Larraby's benefit, where Fitzwallace Tech had bought two tables. There was both a Morton Building and a Fitzwallace Lab at Hudson University, a favorite target of the Scarecrow.

It wasn't much, it wasn't anything yet, it was merely something to keep an eye on.

Bruce made a mental note of this information and went on to research the Flick Theatre...

Two hours later, standing in the lobby of the empty and derelict theatre, Bruce Wayne felt a fool. Harvey Dent himself was giving him a history of the edifice far more detailed than the public records had provided. Harvey told, with pride of ownership, how this building was once The Cathom, a vaudeville house, run by one Roddy McMurphy - who refused to sell out when the great impresarios began organizing theatres into touring circuits, who refused to acknowledge vaudeville was dying, and who refused to kowtow to the mob bosses then becoming a force in Gotham City. It was this last that proved to be the fatal mistake, and McMurphy was killed, accidentally or not, in the gang wars of 1935. His theatre fell into disuse, but was eventually purchased and converted into a lush movie house by Santo Valenz. Valenz passed the theatre on to his son and his wife, who made a decent living with it - but in the age of multiplexes and DVDs, the era of great movie palaces was over. Rather than borrow to convert the theatre to something more competitive, the Valenzes continued as an art house until their recent retirement to Florida. The move was financed, it now turned out, by the sale of the theatre to a mysterious holding company. The Valenzes assumed the company was fronting for a family-friendly SuperCorp that was known to be buying up strategic patches of Gotham real estate. This despite the fact, Harvey observed caustically, that the downtown location was anything but strategic. No, the mysterious holding company was a front for none other than "us," Harvey Dent and Two-Face.

Bruce started at the way Harvey so easily referred to Two-Face as a separate entity, as if they were business partners. There was a disquieting similarity to his own habit of referring to Bruce Wayne and Batman in the third person to people who knew they were one and the same.

The reason for Two-Face and Harvey's interest in the building, while not evident from the paperwork, was clear enough now that Bruce had seen the edifice. Giant concrete Comedy-Tragedy masks decorated the façade like gargoyles, and here in the lobby, the floor beneath the grand staircase was picked out with an elaborate mosaic of the same image: two masks, one laughing and one weeping.

As Selina would say: Poor Harvey.

When the pleasantries of viewing the new building were over, Harvey proceeded to the business of the visit with the directness of a lawyer with an agenda.

"Y'know, Bruce, the thing with you and Selina, we can't quite figure it out."

Join the club, was the thought concealed behind the business exec's poker face.

"I mean, we love the girl, we really do, but we do believe you're the first man ever whose face wasn't a scratching post within the first month of knowing her."

The neck muscles that supported Bruce's poker face tensed in a way Harvey did not notice, but Dick or Tim would have. He *had* been a scratching post on that first meeting. Harvey had no way of knowing it was as Batman and occurred years before was generally known, but still... he had been a scratching post within a month, indeed within an hour, of knowing her. Harvey went on with his musings.

"That's why when you picked up this morning and said 'in the shower' (heh, heh), we thought 'Hey, anybody who can go the distance with Hurricane Selina, might just have a plan.'"

"A plan?" Bruce asked meekly.

"We've gotten ourselves into an awkward situation with Pammy, er, Pamela. Isley. I mean, that's Poison Ivy. We, er, know each other slightly. Well, actually, we know each other quite well... in fact, uh, intimately, you might even say. And ah, well to be honest, um, it seems... *she* seems to have decided—and I don't know how this could have happened frankly—but she seems to have decided that we're a couple. Now, I have never thought of that woman as what you might call 'girlfriend material,' and god knows I never asked her on a date or anything. The only time I gave her anything but the back of my hand, it was a corsage at Christmas (and boy was that a bad idea). So I don't know how it is I now find myself on the hook to take care of her plants while she's up the river, but the point is, I AM. On the hook. I don't know how it happened, but here I am: the boyfriend, taking care of the plants. And the thing of it is, I seem to have accidentally, uh, killed her pet flytrap."

Each *er*, *ah*, *um* and *well* was in response to a stare Harvey had interpreted as civilian Bruce Wayne, ordinary guy and his old friend, shocked and horrified at the revelation that Harvey was intimately involved with a woman who had once seduced him for the purpose of killing him. Bruce's expression was indeed shocked horror, but not at the news that Two-Face and Ivy were lovers (*they deserve each other*, was Batman's response), but at that curious bit about "I don't know how this could have happened... I never asked her... I don't know how it is I now find myself on the hook... but here I am."

And before Bruce could begin to process his reaction to these utterly random phrases in Harvey's rant, they were pushed from his head by the glorious revelation that that flytrap was dead!

He hated that flytrap. As much as he hated anything in this world, he hated that damn oversized weed with its steel grip, its vine-like tentacles, and that nauseatingly sweet odor it put out when it had something struggling in those tentacles that it thought would be its next meal.

The flytrap was dead! Batman's disciplined reflexes held the poker face, barely. And Harvey went on to explain his predicament—as if explanations were necessary. He'd killed one of Ivy's plants, her babies, possibly her favorite. Bruce didn't know what he could say. Even Batman didn't even know what to say. He was looking at a dead man, that's really all there was to it.

"Maybe if I got her another one, replace it before she gets back."

"No," Bruce answered too quickly, then made up a reason, "She'd probably know the difference, and then on top of killing it, you tried to fool her." *Plus*, he thought, *give us some time to enjoy the new flytrap-free Gotham.*

"So, what do I do?" Harvey asked pitifully.

The phrase "move to Metropolis" hovered on Bruce's lips, but he knew he couldn't actually say that.

Batman smashed his utility belt onto its shelf in the costume vault with a force far from prudent for an object that contained explosives, gas pellets and capsules of unstable chemicals.

The first time Harvey contacted Bruce Wayne for a tête-à-tête about his seeing Selina, it had set off a Psychobat episode the likes of which were seldom seen outside of Hell Month. Today, contacted as some kind of expert in the romantic handling of the women of the rogues gallery, Bruce heard his voice dispensing advice he would be loathe to follow himself: "Talk to her, Harvey," he had said, "Tell her the truth." It was the Batman part of his psyche, the strategic thinker, who added "And do it now, while she's safely in Arkham and can be medicated if necessary."

Harvey's reaction had not been pleased.

"In Arkham. Yeah. Well. Harley Quinn was just sent up, you know. You know what happens when those two get together, it's bad for the men. They work each other up."

Bruce thought back to the foursome at the wedding: Selina, Harley, Lois and Dinah, and shuddered. The drinking buddies. Who knew what all was said? Well, Clark knew more than he was saying, but you couldn't make the Boy Scout talk.

They work each other up.

The words had hung in the air as once, on that earlier visit, *you're part of the family now* had hung in the air. The effect was similar: Psychobat.

Bruce was the ultimate embodiment of the principle: we teach best what we most need to learn. So far from taking his own advice and talking with Selina, calmly, rationally, and above all truthfully, he dealt with his uncertainties about her as he always had: by denying anything at all was going on and pouring himself into the Batman mindset with every fiber of his being.

And the first thing the Batman mindset had to offer in re the day's events was that Scarecrow was active. And there was a *Wayne building* at Hudson University, let's not forget that... The last thing he needed right now was to be blindsided by some lurking, unspoken fear. It was time to be proactive, a preemptory strike; get Scarecrow and her fear toxins off the table...

That led to tonight's campaign to locate and apprehend (read: beat the snot out of) one Jonathan Crane a.k.a. Scarecrow. *That* led to a series of none-too-satisfying interrogations of petrified snitches. And *THAT* led to a second-floor apartment above a pharmacy where he'd discovered... no Scarecrow. But he did set off that booby-trap like a rank amateur. Knowing a trap was likely, Batman had taken the precaution of wearing a gas mask... he hadn't figured on the blowdart. He felt the blow on his neck, like a wasp-sting, and knowing he had only seconds before his judgment and perceptions were worthless, he fumbled in his belt for the antidote. He popped it to his mouth, only to find his mouth still covered by the gas mask. The gunman stood before him and he stumbled back into the alley, tripping over their bodies, he fell backwards.

"Hey, careful there, Stud."

Catwoman's arm, strong and firm, materialized behind him, supporting him at the waist, keeping him from falling. The alley was gone, he was still in the apartment. No gunman, no nothing. Except her.

"What happened?" he asked, confused, drawn into those extraordinary pools of green. She drew a single claw down his cheek, following the seam where the mask met

is face, then continued down, slicing the mask at his throat. She continued to claw down his chest, the armor was no protection, then plunged its needlelike tip into his flesh without a word. He didn't react, didn't fight, didn't move. Blood was gushing from his face, from his throat, from his chest, and he stood there staring into her eyes.

"I'm mad at you," she said simply, licking the blood from her claw. "You didn't come to bed last night. I was bored."

"I'm sorry," he answered numbly.

Then she reached inside the now gaping hole in his chest, like a safe, and pulled out a string of pearls. She turned, lifting them to her throat.

"Help me with this clasp."

"Yes, Dear."

She walked away, out the door, without a word. He followed her onto the street—it was different somehow. Cleaner. Brighter. Safer. It was the middle of the night, but the gleaming streetlights lit it up like day. There were kids on rollerblades and bicycles, boy scouts helping seniors across the street, it was... *wrong*. It was all wrong.

"See, baby, Gotham doesn't need you anymore."

Catwoman standing behind him again, except when he turned, she wasn't in costume, and neither was he.

"I guess it never did," she said.

"What happened?" he asked again.

"That corporation bought up the whole thing. The whole city is theirs now, so it's all like Gotham Plaza: clean, efficient, sanitized for your protection. A postcard of a Gotham City that never was and always will be. Ironic, isn't it, all it took was corporate money. You had that. You had the solution all along. Like the Wizard of Oz. You just didn't think to use it. You'd rather dress up like a flying rat and beat people up. That's why Jason's dead; that's why a lot of people are dead. That's why Barbara was shot. Because you never thought to do this."

"No, no this isn't real. This is Disney World, this is Stepford. A couple blocks, sure, but the whole city like this? It isn't possible."

Selina laughed, mockingly, and turned into an alley that immediately went black as pitch, swallowing her up. He heard two gunshots in the nothingness, then nothing at all.

He awoke on the floor of that apartment, pulled the useless gas mask off his face and the blowdart from his neck. He stood on shaky legs and summoned the car.

This wasn't the first time a miscalculation with the Scarecrow led to one of those nightmare visions. It wasn't the first time an indulgence in being Psychobat led to a miscalculation.

But it was the last time Psychobat was going to appear because of the Selina situation, that much he vowed.

And Bruce Wayne should hit the showers as well, he wasn't doing so hot lately. No, it was time this matter was dealt with once and for all, and Batman was the man to do it.

It wasn't my fault. Everyone says I blame myself when there's no cause to. Well, let's lay that theory to rest once and for all. This was not my fault, and I am saying so, out loud, in language so clear and plain it cannot be misunderstood: this was *NOT BATMAN'S FAULT*.

The fact is, between d'Annunzio's and society gossips and rogue gossips and the wedding, everybody—including Bruce and Selina—*everybody* lost sight of the fact that Selina Kyle did not hook up with *Bruce Wayne*. She fell for *Batman*. And it was high time he, I, started acting like it and took control of the situation.

That's not a judgment about the Bruce-method; it's just the way it is. Bruce Wayne was out of his league. Selina wasn't some bimbo; she was Catwoman. It takes Batman to handle her. We wanted—Christ, I sound like Two-Face—I wanted to find out just where this relationship was headed. Where did she think we were, and where did she think we were going. The situation required subtlety, ruthlessness, focus, discipline, and expertise in the art of interrogation, not to mention a knack for cat-handling.

The first objective was to tire her out. I decided a morning of shopping, a light lunch somewhere it was a chore—like Lalique's, and an afternoon at the museum should do the trick. The last part, I knew, would be tricky. Actually *taking Selina to a museum*, particularly *THAT* museum, there was no denying it was going to be tricky. But Batman has never been afraid of a challenge. The objective was tired feet, and sources were unanimous that the Gotham Metropolitan was absolutely guaranteed to produce tired feet.

The night before, I cut patrol short and kept her up late. It was hardly an unpleasant task. I knew I needed to get her up early the next morning without it seeming planned. I set the alarm on my phone, set the ringer to vibrate and hid it in the bed. When it went off, I thrashed around like I was having a nightmare and swung an arm onto her side of the bed—I hit cold sheet. My eyes popped open and I sat up.

"You're up early," she purred. God, that voice, no wonder Bruce was floundering. He never stood a chance.

She was already dressed, pulling boots over riding pants, a look that suggested her Catwoman costume ever so subtly (Bruce never stood a chance, I could see that now. I should have stepped in sooner.) The addition of a flannel shirt—my flannel shirt—while not remotely evocative of Catwoman, was still unspeakably sexy.

"*This is going to be harder than I thought,*" is what flashed through my head a split-second before remembering not to ever, ever use that word with her. The Catwoman in my mind didn't miss a beat: "*And how hard did you have in mind, Dark Knight.*"

I realized then that I was out of practice. I'd forgotten what it's like trying to deal with her while still ignoring her, ignoring what she does to me—and oh god, then she bent over to pick her costume off the floor. What a body. All I could think was "*Kitten, that was uncalled for.*"

I slapped the thought away. Calling her Kitten, even thinking of her as Kitten, was not the way to go about this. I needed to be as I used to be: lock it all out of my mind and do what needed to be done.

"I thought maybe go into the city today," I said casually, "shopping or something."

"Can't. I'm going for a drive. Upstate."

A snag. Already there was a snag. But upstate rang a bell. "Upstate" and her rustic outfit, I hazarded a guess: "That preserve, the... what's it called?"

"The Catitat."

"Right, you were going to show me that sometime."

I learned this from Glori Smyth. (I don't remember all the bimbos names, but Glori with an "i" Smyth with a "y," who could forget? The things I do for Gotham.) Where most girls subtly hint for an invitation, Glori went right past that and simply reminded you it had already been extended, whether it had or not. Selina had never actually said she'd show me her preserve, nor even told me its name. But she shrugged now, mission accomplished.

As I dressed, it occurred to me this was far better than my original plan. Spending the day together away from crowds and public places was a definite advantage, the preserve was sure to be physically taxing and, best of all, she's never more at ease than when she's with her cats. It was perfect. A day with them, a day with me, and then... it was perfect.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy the preserve. I'm not a great nature-lover as a rule (let us pause in remembrance of the lately-departed flytrap and cheer at the miserable weed's passing). But a day out of the city was pleasant enough.

There was a Siberian tiger, called Shimbala, that was—even for Siberian tigers—huge. I was glad I never had to deal with him as Batman. I said as much. And Selina stared at me like I'd said it in German.

"This animal has a three-acre wooded pen with a marsh and a spring-fed lake. You figure it's gonna drive into the city and rob a bank or something?"

It sounded silly when she said it like that, so I explained—and I realize now that was a mistake—I explained my reasoning: this was *her* tiger and perhaps *she* might have used it as a weapon against me. I still don't understand what was so objectionable about that statement. But I'm a little piqued that the core of the objection was entirely about the *TIGER*. It had nothing to do with not wanting to see *my* flesh torn to ribbons by nine hundred pounds of nature's most efficient killing machine. It was all about: wild cats aren't attack dogs, they hunt for food, they don't kill for a biscuit, and why would anyone bring one into a city anyway where there's no space for it to run, besides which these were pets and not weapons...

I held my tongue about Ivy's flytrap and Joker's hyenas. This wasn't about winning an argument; this was about setting a tone. Today, I needed to blur the line between Bruce and Batman. Too much talk of the rogues would be counter-productive.

There were four lions, two African and two Barbary, and six leopards, all but invisible in their various corners of the preserve, but we focused binoculars on them all the same. There wasn't much to see. Nocturnal animals sleep during the day. That's

what they were doing. It was like a stakeout, without the possibility of anything interesting happening.

Then came the “small wildcats.” There were several lynx, which acted almost like dogs the way they jumped up on us, pranced, played, and generally reveled in the attention they were receiving. (That observation, I need hardly add, was almost as unpopular as the one about the tiger.)

There was a pair of servals that wanted nothing to do with us. Then there was a family of caracals that possibly wanted to make up for the servals and restore our faith in feline hospitality. It had been a warm day. There was a kind of bench from a fallen tree. We sat. The largest caracal hopped up next to me and began licking the sweat from my hair. Selina was charmed by this: it’s grooming, it’s what he would do for another cat. (And I thought the *museum* would be weird!)

Then came the real object of the visit: the ocelot. Its name was Nirvana, and the way I was introduced, I got the idea that I was expected to make a good impression—or else. I’ve never been in the position of having to meet “the family.” It just never came up. With debutantes, I already knew their families and they knew me. With bimbos, I never let it go on long enough. And as for Talia...

But I suspect what I experienced being “presented” to Nirvana is what it feels like to meet the future in-laws. There’s this sense of “this is the one I’ve told you about” hanging over your head like a neon sign.

And the cat didn’t seem to like me. It growled.

“Put your hand out,” Selina said, “so she can sniff you.”

And I did it. I felt like an idiot, but I let the growling ocelot sniff my hand.

I could have offered to drive back to the city, but didn’t—better to make her keep those boots on a little longer. When we reached her apartment, I expected her to kick them off first thing. When she didn’t immediately, I improvised, removing my own shoes and rubbing my ankles as though they ached. The suggestion was enough; she decided to “get comfortable.” She returned a few minutes later in a cool looking cotton dress, short, no stockings and no shoes. Purrfect. She curled next to me on the sofa, and I continued rubbing my leg.

“That terrain up there takes a toll on the ankles,” she remarked sympathetically. (*Gotcha!*)

“Aw,” I said, pretending to think she meant her own feet hurt, “Poor kitten,” and drew her leg into my lap. After rubbing for just a moment, I said “Wait, better idea. Hold that thought,” and disappeared into her bedroom. When I returned, I popped a soothing CD into her machine, and lit some candles. “Get comfortable,” I said, dimming the lights and returning to her room. I found what I was looking for... scented, too... lavender.

“Close your eyes,” I said.

“Why?” she asked, smiling.

“Just close your eyes. It’s a surprise. No peeking.”

I rubbed a little of the lavender-scented massage oil into my fingertips and started behind her left knee. She cooed. Down the thighs then, kneading them, in long strokes, in line parallel to the muscles.

"That feels wonderful," she said.

"Don't talk."

I went behind the other knee, making small, brisk circles... Then the thighs again in those long firm strokes... I felt the tension start to ease out of the leg muscles.

"You've got great hands."

"Shh. No talking."

I moved up her sides, working very, very slowly. By the time I reached her shoulders, I was stroking in time to her breathing. By the time I finished on her neck, she'd adapted her breathing to match me.

"I learned this in a temple..." I mentioned casually, stroking up her jawline. "...in the East..." at her temples now, little circles, "...done correctly, it clears the mind..." little circles, little circles, "...eases tension..."

"...ts very r'laxing" she murmured. I could tell from her voice that we were almost there. I did her neck again, then return to the temples. Little circles, little circles.

"Selina?"

"mm?"

"I want to ask you something."

She sighed.

The moment was here. I opened my mouth and... realized I had absolutely no idea what to say. What exactly was it I wanted to know?

Where do you see us going?

I knew that. Her answer would be: I don't know. She doesn't like thinking about these things any more than I do.

It was too general. Something more specific...

The night of the wedding, what happened, what do you think happened? Mrs. Wayne... not so terrible... what do you think was said there? What WAS said?

There were a thousand questions tied up in there, and at the same time, there wasn't even one.

What exactly was it I wanted to know?

I was mad at Bruce more than anything. I had done my part: here we were. The moment had arrived. Was it too much to have the question ready? Was it too much to have this thought through?

The Bruce part of me (and if I don't want to sound like Two-Face, I must finally admit it isn't "Bruce Wayne" but "the Bruce part of me") pointed out that Batman took over, sending everyone else to the showers, so if the finger of blame was going to be pointed...

But it wasn't my fault.

I bent and kissed her neck. She sighed again, and those gorgeous eyes fluttered open.

"You give a great massage," she said, smiling up at me.

"You deserve it," I told her, feeling like a heel. "It was very nice of you to show me the preserve."

If she knew what I'd done, or thought about doing, she'd kill me. Hack me into bite size pieces and feed me to Shimbala. I'd deserve it too. I know what her cats mean to her. That preserve, it's her special place, and I used it against her.

The Catwoman in my head was strangely silent. I would have preferred accusations. Frankly, I would have preferred claws.

"Of course you would," the imaginary Selina noted. "You're great as an enemy. It's only as a friend, an ally, or a lover that you suck."

"Now that's not fair."

"You want the *whole list* of friends you've screwed over in ways that you'd never dream of attacking Joker or Two-Face? Or will just the *top 10* suffice?"

"I'm not having this conversation."

"Course not. That's why you're trying to make this *all about me*."

"I just want to know what you're thinking."

"THEN ASK ME, YOU STUPID SCHMUCK!"

Ask me, you stupid schmuck. That's what the Selina in my head was saying while the real one was in my arms, kissing me. Her soft, strong hands caressed my back, pulling me in closer, and I was hearing *Ask me, you stupid schmuck*.

It's just possible Joker is right. It's just possible I'm crazier than any of them.

AAAAAARRRRRGH.

I've woken to a kick in the stomach before. Every time it happens, you swear this time is the worst ever, but of course the reality is "this time" is always worse because it's happening *now*... Nevertheless, this time was definitely the worst.

"GET OUT!"

It took me a moment to get my bearings... I was in Selina's room.

"NOW, GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE NOW!"

In Selina's bed.

"GET OUT!"

And she was... quite extraordinarily pissed.

"What happened?" I asked, then the still aching stomach seemed to lurch and I realized what it must have been: I talked in my sleep. I must have said something about—oh god. She'd turned away from me, but I could tell that she was crying—oh god, oh god. I tried to get out of the bed, my leg tangled in the damn sheet and my foot hit the floor with some force. There was a sickly sounding yeowlp and I prayed that lump under my foot was a furry slipper and not a dead cat.

As I ran to Selina, I caught just a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. It was split down the center. Like Two-Face. I'd killed her cat. Oh god.

She was still turned away from me. I put my hand on her shoulders... "Don't touch me," she sobbed. I turned her towards me only to find myself looking at Scarecrow's triumphant grin...

AAAAAARRRRRGH!

I sat up in the bed... Selina next to me... She gave the disgusted glare of someone who'd been woken at 3 a.m. by your screaming.

"Nightmare," I said sheepishly.

She nodded.

"5:00 already?" she asked sleepily, and rolled over.

"No," I answered, "this was a different one."

"Sir."

(The disapproval Alfred can pack into a single syllable is frightening, truly frightening.)

"I came across these objects while cleaning the master bath."

He deposited three small, metallic pellets onto the desk. Each was embossed with a bat silhouette inside a small oval. I made no comment.

"They appear to be yours, sir."

"Yes, Alfred."

What did he expect, an explanation?

"They appear to be recording devices, sir."

"Yes, Alfred."

I wasn't explaining. I didn't have to explain, and I was not going to.

"Might I ask, sir, why you are endeavoring to bug your own bathroom?"

"No, Alfred, you may not."

"I see, sir. Then I must regretfully give my notice."

"WHAT?"

"My notice, sir. I am resigning my position in your employ."

"Alfred, this is insane. You can't leave."

"Sir, I have endeavored to overlook the emergence of various garments and behaviors above stairs that would, prior to Ms. Kyle's arrival, most certainly have been confined to below stairs. I have done this, sir, because, in my profession, what occurs within the confines of a gentleman's bedroom is guarded with as much confidentiality as what occurs, in this household, *-cough-* below stairs. Do you take my meaning, sir?"

"Alfred, really."

"I shall take that as a 'yes,' sir, and continue. While there has never before been cause for discretion about that aspect of your private life, sir, I have, I believe, demonstrated a discretion about other matters far beyond that which ordinary servants are ever called upon to exhibit."

"Alfred, you know you're part of the family, please don't keep calling yourself a servant that wa—"

"As I was saying, sir, I should have thought I had exhibited a discretion at least equal to that of ordinary servants who are trusted to maintain the secrets of their employers' bedrooms. In short, I thought I had proven myself loyal and trustworthy. But as you evidently feel that whatever it is you and Ms. Kyle do with these bat-shaped objects must be hidden from my eyes—"

"OH, FOR GOD'S SAKE, ALFRED, STOP IT. My God, what are you thinking? Look, she talks to herself in the mirror, okay? And in the shower. And I thought if I could listen in, maybe I could find out what the hell is going on in her head."

"I see, sir."

"You understand? It's not—God, I can't believe I have to say this—they're not props for some weird... whatever it was you were implying before."

"I understand, sir."

"So you see, it wasn't that I didn't trust you and was hiding those things behind the mirror and in the shower. They were simply... placed there."

"I understand, sir."

"Thank God. So you're not leaving."

"No, sir."

"Good."

"I would venture to point out, sir..."

Here it comes.

"... that this episode would have been far less painful for you, sir, if you had simply told me what was going on at once."

"Yes, Alfred, I see that now."

"Do you, sir?"

Shit.

"Yes, Alfred, I get the message. And if I'd just go to Selina and ask her directly, that would be a lot less painful as well."

"What a profoundly insightful observation, sir."

When Selina shared her bizarre philosophy with respect to the Rogues: that there was a statute of limitations on a particular level of offence, after which she forgave such misdemeanors as Mad Hatter using her as a pawn in a robbery or Hugo Strange trying to drive Edward Nigma mad by implanting 76 *Trombones* into his head, Bruce thought this philosophy was, at the very least, odd.

But he was forced to reconsider this view, strolling into his office in the Wayne Tower a mere five days after the arbitrage meeting. They had gone on for six hours about arbitrage opportunities in the new millennium. It was ridiculously optimistic to come back so soon. And yet, here he was, prepared to forgive and forget. One couldn't hold a grudge about that kind of thing forever, or the economy would shut down.

There was a new girl outside Lucius's office. Discreet inquiries revealed that her name was Bonnie and she was a temp helping Lucius's senior assistant, Gale.

Bruce docked his laptop into the network and downloaded his schedule. He recalled that there was an unexplained pattern of events involving donors to Hudson University, a favorite Scarecrow target, that he himself was such a donor, and that any deviation from business as usual was suspect... He reminded himself that paranoia about the business of daily living was a far more dangerous habit than any artificial fear the Scarecrow could chemically trigger.

He reminded himself that healthy skepticism was not the same thing as paranoia. He reminded himself that, given his station in life and the nature of his nighttime activities, 99 percent of the time, his paranoia was well justified. He reminded himself of the 'fridge magnet: Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

An hour later, Bonnie entered his office with a floppy disk from Mr. Fox: the second quarter projections, she said. Bruce appeared flustered, juggling his laptop, day runner, and a file folder, so he held the latter open for her to place the disk inside it. Then he hurried out the door, making an offhand comment about being late for an early lunch that would run long.

An hour after that, he was in the Batcave, dismantling the disk with gloved hands. He found the drug in a coating that would cause it to be absorbed directly into the skin. It wasn't the standard fear toxin but one meant to trigger a specific phobia. He couldn't be certain which particular fear it was to produce, but agoraphobia was a reasonable guess. The previous victims had all cancelled their appointments and refused to leave their homes.

That would be his assumption when Scarecrow made contact for the shakedown. If he was wrong, he'd bluff. Biochemistry wasn't an exact science, after all, and the human mind was a highly individual thing. There was no telling for certain how any given individual might react to a given stimulus...

At that moment, the Batcomputer's monitoring system pinged an alert, and Batman was forced to reconsider that hypothesis.

Harvey Dent, a.k.a. Two-Face, was on route from the limited infirmary facilities at Arkham Asylum to the Gotham General Emergency Room.

“My God, she killed him,” was Batman’s thought as he skimmed the information he already knew: Dent was not currently incarcerated at Arkham but was apparently there as a visitor... Batman’s eye raced down the page to the advisory to the receiving ER: Would require a complete transfusion ... stabilize before surgery (surgery!)... removal of... fragments... baked clay... like a flower pot... from his ... Ouch.

Bruce knew if he was to successfully bait the Scarecrow into showing his hand, he had to appear terrified of the world. It would not do to be seen in public. But he was not willing to postpone this talk with Selina. So he called and asked her to come to the house. He asked her to bring sesame noodles from Little Saigon. It was code for staying in to talk, and he knew she knew that—but he rather hoped she would take it literally and bring the noodles. Alfred had not brought him lunch, had not made the usual offer of a sandwich before his workout, and even after Bruce announced he was in for the night, i.e. would not be patrolling as Batman (always music to Alfred’s ears), there were no discernable signs that a dinner of any kind was being prepared.

Bruce knew whatever passive-aggressive statement the butler was making, he would still bring anything Bruce specifically asked for. But asking would be admitting defeat, and that was not something Bruce was prepared to do. Not tonight. Not on both fronts at once.

She looked beautiful as she entered the study. It was a new dress. She didn’t think he noticed things like that, and it amused him to let her think that. She thought being a detective meant observing one kind of detail specifically, “useful” details about footprints and cigarette ash. It didn’t. It meant noticing everything, and drawing what conclusions you could. In this case: it was the third new outfit in six weeks, each had a short skirt. She had finally noticed, he liked legs.

But he wouldn’t compliment the dress, wouldn’t smile, not even a twitch. Instead he spoke of his second observation.

“No noodles?”

“I did bring noodles,” Selina answered, confused, “Alfred took them when he let me in.”

“Hell,” Bruce grumbled.

Selina smiled like she didn’t get the joke but around here that was nothing new. Bruce decided to forego explanations and go straight to the heart of the matter:

“Selina, I asked you over tonight because I want to say something and then ask something. And it’s going to come out confused, because I haven’t thought this through. It seems like when I plan ahead—protocols, etc.—it’s not working out so well, and when I’ve just blurted it out without meaning to is when I get it right. So, do you mind if I just talk and it maybe doesn’t make a lot of sense?”

“Okay, if only for the novelty. Go ahead.”

“It seems like every time we move forward, it’s because of me. I know that’s not fair; as soon as I heard the words come out of my mouth just now, I knew it wasn’t fair. You’ve changed your whole life for me and put up with weddings and 67 shades of white and Hell Month and... me.”

"Well, I love you, so that counterbalances a lot."

He looked at her, stunned. She'd said it so casually - and so frankly - it was... unexpected.

"I know," she went on, realizing what had caused his silence. "You said it first. I'm not good at that part. I'm learning, but I'm just not."

"It's nice, actually," Bruce mentioned, "I like that. It *means* something when you say it, it's not like..." he trailed off before finishing, but she knew what he meant: not like "Beloved."

"You're on a roll, don't spoil it by making that comparison, okay."

"Okay," he said, but the 'roll' was broken and he had no idea how to continue. Fortunately she was ready to start talking now.

"The thing is, I'm not completely comfortable with you these days," she was saying.

"Because of 'Mrs. Wayne?'"

"No, it's not that. It's... How long were we at it, before?"

"Eight years, four months, nine days," Bruce said instantly.

She stared.

"That's scary."

"I made the numbers up."

"No, you didn't."

"No, I didn't," he admitted.

She bit her lip; this next part would be tricky...

"I came on to you—a lot."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Don't help me."

"Yes, dear."

She glared, then continued.

"The thing is, it got a little routine, didn't it? I'd make an offer, you'd say no. And after enough repetitions of that, it sort of became an open invitation. I mean, over time, the offers became *broader*... And then all of a sudden, everything's changed. Sometimes I just feel like there's this huge backlog of 'come hithers' and I feel like: 'You know, I said that, and I meant it, but I never really meant it to imply all these other things that might be seen to go with it and—'"

"You can stop right there," Bruce cut in, "I understand. *Believe me*, I understand." This was going so much better than he could have hoped, he risked one of the prepared questions: "Selina, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Where do you see us going?"

"I don't know. I don't like thinking about those things."

"God, I love you," he laughed, "I knew, I absolutely *knew* that's what you were going to say. I didn't trust it though. I didn't trust what I knew, and I should have. I know you so well. Sometimes it's like you're a part of me, it's—"

"STOP. Okay, who are you and what did you do with Bruce?"

He stared, not understanding.

"Way too many words," she explained.

"Ah. Well, I guess... this has been building up for a while."

"Since the wedding?"

"How'd you know?"

"Just a hunch."

He pulled his hands through his hair.

"It's like: Okay there was a wedding. 'And now for my next trick...' Like there's this expectation in the air, everybody thinks the next logical step is—"

"Wasn't it you who told me they/normal people will never understand us and we can never make sense of it using their standards?"

"That wasn't me; it was Batman."

"You really need to embrace the concept of first-person singular. You know that, right?"

"I'm trying, I'm not good at it."

"Besides, if you want to split those hairs, it wasn't Batman, it was you. You hadn't been Batman with me for some time before that night." He was staring again, not understanding, so again she explained, "You stopped being Batman with me long before you took the mask off. You did know that, didn't you?"

"I didn't. I never thought about it. I've actually been thinking, well, how you didn't start dating Bruce Wayne. You got involved with Batman and I've been riding on his coattails..."

It was her turn to stare.

"You're got it worse than Harvey," she noted.

"That realization has also been on my mind lately, and it's not a comforting thought."

"Harvey has a problem. He needs a 12-step program or something to separate him from his coin. That or Nutmeg. But you're not like that, baby; you're just you. You really should unclench a little and just *BE YOU*."

"I tried that. Didn't turn out so good. Now Alfred's mad at me."

"Alfred will forgive you. He loves you." She paused and let the full meaning sink in before going on, "And you haven't been doing *that* badly; you made a hit with Nirvana."

"She growled at me."

"She growls at everybody. She has no purr, so she growls. Jeez, I would have thought if there was anybody I wouldn't have to explain *that* to..."

"She growls instead of purring," Bruce smiled.

"Yes."

"That's a strange little creature."

"Certainly judged by the standards of *normal* people with their *normal* little purring pussycats, it would never make sense."

"They'll never understand?"

"They'll never understand."

"But she liked me?"

"She liked you."

"Uh, how can you tell?"

"I know her very well," Selina pronounced significantly, "We go back a long way. We understand each other."

Another man may not have followed, but Bruce understood subtext.

"Ah," he nodded. "My mind wasn't where it should have been when we were up there, but she seemed like a very special cat. I feel fortunate to have gotten to know her."

In the distance, the phone rang. Sensing they were about to be interrupted, Bruce changed the subject.

"Oh, news. Harvey killed Ivy's flytrap."

"Sweet Bast, she'll kill him!" Selina sputtered.

"She tried, actually."

"Already? But she's still in Arkham. How did she find out? How did she get to him?"

"I think he went up there and told her."

"In person? Where'd he get a boneheaded idea like that?"

"Err—"

"Excuse me, sir," Alfred interrupted, "the call you were expecting, the caller stressed that no matter how reluctant you were to come to the phone, I should urge you to take the call."

"Thank you, Alfred. Now go back and tell them I'm too terrified to come to the phone, and he'll insist you bring the phone to me."

"Indeed, sir."

Alfred left.

"Scarecrow," Bruce explained.

"That would have been my guess," Selina answered with a smile.

"Want to come along?"

She considered a minute, then nodded.

"Okay. I still owe him one for the Slam Bradley crack."

Catwoman and Batman were hidden at the rendezvous point two hours before Scarecrow had instructed Bruce Wayne to arrive. He said this was to avoid suspicion, but Catwoman didn't see the logic:

"It's still Batman showing up at a rendezvous only Bruce Wayne knew about. I don't get it. How is that not suspicious?"

Batman chafed at this. No one questioned his methods. It was not suspicious because he said so. He knew how to do this without being second-guessed by women in leather.

"Just explain how you're supposed to have found out about this?" she was asking.

"I'm Batman," he answered. The declaration would have silenced Nightwing, Robin, Canary—any of them. Catwoman, on the other hand, was, predictably, unimpressed. He reluctantly offered a rationale: "You could have told me."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You were actually *there in the room* when the call came," he reminded her.

"Okay," she said (in her humoring-the-Joker voice, which he did not appreciate). "That's how I know. Why would I tell *you*?"

He crossed his arms in the "I'm Batman" pose.

She wondered how he managed to cram all that ego into that tiny cowl night after night.

"Look," she said firmly, "if Scarecrow messes with my boyfriend, I'm going to introduce him to the five-finger threshing machine, not farm it out to dial-a-bat."

"You'd come out here by yourself."

"Hell, yes!"

"This is how you go about things: flighty, impulsive, no plan, just take matters into your own hands and not give it a moment's thought."

"This isn't a bullion vault, it's Crane! How much of a plan do I need: Insert claw and pull!"

"Scarecrow is *DANGEROUS*, Selina!"

"Crossing 59th Street at rush hour is dangerous, Handsome; Scarecrow is a 98-pound weakling covered in *straw*!"

"Go home. Now. I can't have this. You're impossible. You're a loose cannon. And you're going to get yourself killed."

"If I go home, Stud, I will call Scarecrow and *tell him* he's walking into a trap!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Like hell I wouldn't. And then he'll invite himself over to thank me in person—and I'll let him! You know why? Because *I'm* the one that should have first crack at kicking his ass anyway! It's *my boyfriend* he's fucking with!"

Batman's lip twitched uncontrollably.

"And I'm the one who's worse than Harvey, huh?" She fought the smile for about ten seconds before it won. Then Batman spoke again: "You should embrace the concept of second-person singular."

"Shut up."

"I hear there's a 12-step program."

"Shut. Up."

"Yes, Dear."

The next day Bruce was already awake when Alfred brought in the breakfast tray.

"Morning, Alfred," he said, unfolding the neatly pressed Gotham Times. The headline offered few details about the Scarecrow's capture—which was understandable. It wasn't much of a story: drugging and extorting money from three businessmen was obviously not the ultimate goal. It was working capital. All those chemicals were expensive. Whatever Scarecrow's final scheme was would never be known—until he tried again. It never ended. Night after night and things never got any better.

"Cream, no sugar, Miss?" Alfred asked.

"Thanks, Alfred," a silky voice purred.

Well, maybe a few things got better—occasionally.

The paper made no mention of the cat-scratches. But Bruce knew it would raise eyebrows at Arkham. The prisoner was delivered in Bat-cuffs with numerous whip lacerations and claw marks. They wouldn't have seen anything like it since Hugo Strange—revenge for Eddie. *76 Trombones*.

It's one of the rules. Never mention that book. No pussy jokes. And don't mess with Selina Kyle's friends.

A telephone rang. Instinctively, Bruce answered it:

"Morning, Lucius"

::-click-::

Five minutes later, it happened again. This time, Selina reached across him and took her phone from the bedside table.

"Hey, Harvey," she chirped into the phone, "Hm?... No, we use the same ring... Yeah, I heard. Gotham General? Room 203... Well, you can't have everything."

Bruce listened, fascinated, as Selina covered the receiver and whispered "*Doesn't like his room number.*"

"Mhm. Mhm. Lifetime. Well, that would suck."

She covered the receiver again, this time to spare him the giggle. "*Candy strippers hear him talking to himself and won't come into his room. TV is stuck on the Lifetime Channel. Eddie refuses to stop by the hideout and bring him anything. Once burned...*" "No, I'm listening. I am. Mhm. Mhm. Yes, he's here—Hello? Hello? Harvey?"

A few minutes, later the phone rang yet again. After answering, Selina listened for a moment, gave Bruce a parting glance and left the room. He heard a few indistinct murmurs then "HE WHAT?"

Bruce knew what that was about even before Selina stormed back into the bedroom.

"You are a sick and twisted excuse for a human being, you know that? YOU SENT HIM FLOWERS!"

"A get-well bouquet. I thought it was cute."

The postcard depicted a bronze statue of Michael, the avenging angel. His sword raised insuring protection of a quaint village in the Italian countryside. The flipside read: *Hey Tim, look what I'm NOT sending Bruce. Italy's fantastic. Barbara's fantastic. Life is fantastic. Get married, Bro. It's the only life.* –Dick

The postcard depicted a deceptively modern-looking skyline, until one saw the towers of San Gimignano were 13th Century stone structures. The flipside read: *Buon giorno, Selina, look what I'm NOT sending Bruce. The Gotham of Tuscany. You know what the view is from the top of that tall one: olive trees!* –Dick

The postcard depicted a haughty fashion model wearing a minidress of lime green and purple vinyl and four-inch platforms, licking an Italian ice balanced on her own shoulder in the middle of a busy intersection in downtown Milan. The flipside read: *Ciao Papa Gordon, look what I'm NOT sending Bruce. Imagine being a playboy in a city where nobody finds this shocking.* –Dick

The postcard depicted a magnificent table set with prosciutto and melon, risotto, thick loaves of Italian bread dusted with flour, and a towering tiramisu. The flipside read: *Hey, Alfred, look what I'm NOT sending Bruce. Would I do that to your kitchen? Just think of the havoc he'd wreak cutting the melons.* –Dick

The postcard depicted a gondola-view of St. Marks Square. Beneath the caption reading: Grand Canal, Venice were the words: *Bruce, Having wonderful time. Glad you're not here. :)* –Dick

Tim closed his laptop without sending the e-mail he'd written. He was a little rattled, it was true. But this was not an emergency or anything like it; it was just a scare—a silly, stupid, nothing scare. And that did not justify interrupting Dick and Barbara on their honeymoon.

He thought about telling Bruce. But Bruce would never understand. At best, he'd think Tim was asking advice, like this was a problem he couldn't handle. And it wasn't. It was just the stupid kind of thing that happens sometimes, and it rattled him, and he would like to purge it by telling someone who would understand and laugh. Bruce would not laugh. Anything to do with secret identities, Bruce would not find funny. Worst case scenario: Bruce would think Tim coming to him was a shot, a passive-aggressive shot, from when Batman told Spoiler about Robin.

Tim headed for the cave, figuring this was the time to try the solution to pent-up emotion advocated by everyone else in the bat-family: a good, exhaustive workout. Selina was already in the gym when he arrived, balanced against a stalagmite, engaging in some kind of stretching exercise that was -for a red-blooded teenager - spectacular to watch. He cleared his throat before he got into ten kinds of trouble.

"Hey, there," she said, sitting up but continuing to stretch this way and that.

"Hey. Thought I'd work out some," Tim explained. "I thought Bruce said you never use the equipment down here."

"I don't. He's offered it a few times. It's not me. Too weird."

"But, eh..."

"It's too hot to workout at my place. 96-degrees today. Nice thing about down here. constant temperature."

"Ah." It occurred to Tim that Selina had both a secret identity and a sense of humor. He took a chance. "Can I talk to you about something?" he asked.

She nodded, and while Selina continued to stretch Tim told his story.

The young scholars at Brentwood Academy were expected to spend the summer before their senior year engaged in some activity to beef up their college applications the following term. An internship was customary, an internship at a certain level and inside a certain type of company, an internship that spoke of connections students from an institution like Brentwood were expected to have. His friend and classmate, Randy-quad—and here he had to stop and explain Randy-quad was Randolph Larraby IV, son of Randolph Larraby III (obviously) and Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. Selina looked at him blankly, and again Tim had to explain: the woman from the wedding trying to pass off citrine earrings as canary diamonds... Selina nodded. Tim nodded. That was Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. She was an Ashton. Newport Ashtons, crashing snobs, but no money left. Married to Randolph Larraby of Larraby Chemicals. Again, Selina nodded; she did know them. She had heard the story during the endless round of Christmas parties, mercifully punctuated with silent editorial comments from Bruce in their secret sign language:

The biggest fight the Ashton-Larrabys ever had, it was known throughout Gotham High Society, was at the birth of the boy Tim now referred to as Randy-quad. *~And when they say 'fight,'~* Bruce editorialized, *~they mean A FIGHT. Don't think a polite little rooftop tussle, think the social register equivalent of gas grenades, missile launchers, and scrambling F-16s off the USS Saratoga.~*

The former Miss Gladys Ashton, of the Newport Ashtons, was not willing to give up so illustrious a name, so she hyphenated. Her son too, she felt, should hyphenate. He was half an Ashton, after all. He should be Randolph Ashton-Larraby. *~Getting the theme,~* Bruce put in, *~Ashton. It's the logo. Like question marks or umbrellas, gotta feature it prominently at each and every appearance lest, God forbid, some smalltime Flash villain gets the credit.~*

Randolph-cubed didn't agree. If their son hyphenated, he would not be Randolph IV. What was the point of having offspring if you couldn't number them like movie sequels. *Bruce had made no editorial comment there. What more was there to say?*

Obviously, Randolph-cubed had won, for his son was Randy-quad. It was to be his only win in twenty-odd years of marriage. *~She planned it that way, tosses it up to him every time they disagree. Like Clock King's vendetta with the Mayor. She just will not let it go.~*

All this was backstory. Randolph Larraby IV or Randy-quad was a classmate of Tim's, and "sentenced" (as Tim put it) to intern at Larraby Chemicals over the summer. Working at the old man's company—Hell. On. Earth. Tim was facing the same situation, as his father seemed to automatically assume Tim would intern at Drake Industries. Tim didn't like the idea. "The Boss's son," who needed that? His name was literally on the letterhead. His name was literally on the building! It'd be

like going to work each day with a sign hanging round his neck saying "Make way for The Boss's Son."

Selina laughed.

"So what does Bruce say?"

Tim's brow furrowed.

"I haven't told him about it. This has nothing to do with the Robin part of my life. This is life-life. Bruce doesn't care about that."

"He might surprise you, Tim. He does at least know what it is to have your name on the building."

Tim shook his head, "I appreciate you're trying to help, Selina, but that's not what I need right now. My stepmom wanted to help, and she totally creeped me out. You know what she said? She said if that's how I felt, meaning being Tim Drake at Drake Industries, that I should use an assumed name: get myself a secret identity!"

Selina laughed again and Tim realized that's exactly what he wanted. Somebody, anybody, to grin and reassure him that his instinct to laugh it off was okay.

"Thanks, Selina. Hey, do me a favor, don't tell Bruce about this ok?"

"Okay," Selina lied.

That night at dinner, Selina took her first tentative steps into territory where she was surprisingly inexperienced for a woman her age: exercising her influence with "the boyfriend." As Catwoman, it's fair to say her effect on Batman had been considerable, if difficult to define: she tempted him, she dared him, she infuriated him, she intrigued him, she tormented him, and she excited him. Since the 'whatever it was' with Batman developed into a romance with Bruce, they'd experimented and sometimes played with the roles of a more traditional couple. But she'd never seriously attempted anything like this.

"I want to ask you something. And your kneejerk is going to be no. But I want you to hold off on that and ask yourself why, because there is really no good reason not to say yes."

The look was one she recognized. It was, most definitely, Batman: *I know this is a trap, let's see what you're up to.*

She took a deep breath and dove in. As she would with Batman, she'd begin by throwing him off balance. Give him something 180-degrees off what he was expecting:

"Do you have any idea how much you all take Tim for granted? He is the nicest and most well-adjusted of the whole crazy bunch of you—except for Alfred," she added hastily. Then she saw it was unnecessary. Alfred had vanished from the dining room exactly as silently as Batman dematerialized from rooftops. Selina continued.

"When has he ever said no, hm? Somebody needs to pick up the minister? Ask Tim. Somebody stakeout the Falconi warehouse? Send Robin. It's the inevitable fate of the nice guy: the overflowing inbox. But does he ever complain? And don't say Spoiler; that was an extreme case. And on top of all that, he's doing the adolescence thing, which is no easy ride. You should have seen him this afternoon trying not to look at my tits."

Bruce stared, openmouthed. This was *NOT* what he was expecting. Selina took advantage of the stunned silence and went on:

"He needs something from you right now, and he's so used to being the footnote around here that it doesn't even occur to him to ask for it."

"What?" In one syllable, it was difficult to tell if it was Bruce or Batman that cut in.

"He needs a summer internship away from his father's company, and I want you to give him one at Wayne Enterprises."

"WHAT? NO!"

"What did I just say about that kneejerk no?"

Bruce stopped. It *was* his instinct to say no to anything he didn't initiate and work out the reason after. There was a reason, of course there was... There must be a reason... Well, Batman and Robin... It made a link with Bruce and Tim that could be connected to Batman and Robin.

As if she could read his thought, Selina said, "Tim is the son of a major industrialist, and he *does* know Bruce Wayne, CEO of Wayne Enterprises. Were it not for Batman and Robin, either Tim or Jack Drake could be asking this. Were it not for Batman and Robin, would there be *any reason* to say no?"

There should be, and Bruce was sure it would come to him...

When it hadn't by the end of early patrol, he radioed the Redbird: "Wayne Tower. Meet me in ten minutes." He hadn't thought to specify *alone* and was relieved when Spoiler didn't tag along.

"Good night?" he asked by way of a greeting.

"Not bad. A dealer. Couple toughs in the park. Nothing special."

"Good."

There was a pause. Then Batman spoke again, gruffer than usual.

"School night. Should you still be out?"

"I've got it under control." Robin was confused, he couldn't tell where this was leading, but it was starting to feel like being called to the principal's office.

"You're able to balance a full day's school work and a full night of..." he gestured towards the city below.

"I've got it under control, Batman."

"Good. You can take a week off after your final exams, then you report to Lucius. 9 am sharp."

Robin's mouth dropped open, just as Tim's once had when Bruce made scrambled eggs.

"You'll spend two weeks in each division, low level clerical stuff. Keep your eyes open and stay out of the way. One day a week, you'll shadow me or Lucius, or else sit in on the executive training pool. Clear?" When the boy gave no answer, he added a no-nonsense, "Unless that's a problem."

The tone shocked Robin out of his trance and he stammered. "Yes. NO! I mean: yes, it's clear, and no, not a problem."

"Good."

He turned, drawing the grappling gun from his belt, clearly preparing to leave.

"Um, Batman?"

He turned back.

"Thanks."

There might have been a grunt lost in the firing of the grappling hook and the *swolsh* of cape in the high winds.

Dr. Leland Bartholomew, Senior Case Psychiatrist at Arkham, couldn't believe how a day that started out so well could so rapidly become a living hell. He had never credited the Joker's delusional rationalizations that he and other stylized personalities of Gotham "had a bad day once." It was the kind of self-justifying rationales sociopathic psychotics like Joker were apt to create, but it held no merit. Or so Dr. Bartholomew thought until today.

He'd been offered a full-professorship at Hudson University: tenure-track, speaking engagements, access to funding, and plenty of time to work on his book. He wasn't seriously considering it; he was a healer, not an academic. But he'd allowed word to reach the Arkham administrators, and was rewarded with a most gratifying expression of their desire to keep him: 30-percent raise in salary, a new title, and a corner office. Today was his very first in this new office. He'd spent his first session sneaking peeks out the window, enjoying the new view of the courtyard and garden.

It had started out to be such a good day.

Then Pamela Isley's session began. Bartholomew would have thought the woman who called herself Poison Ivy, and whose core psychosis focused on plants, would appreciate the gardenview. But all she would do was rant and rave about the transfer. After her attack on Harvey Dent, Isley had been transferred from her regular cell into the high security wing, limiting her contact with her best friend among her fellow inmates, Harley Quinn, and forcing her to interact with the only other occupant of the high security wing, the Joker. Isley evidently did not get along with Joker, nor he with her, for according to the morning rants, Joker was amusing himself with his imitation of her dying flytrap "crying out as its poor little plant insides fried in the heat of that sunlamp."

Lunch with the Executive Director in his private dining room would have been a treat, signifying as it did, the special value the administration placed on Bartholomew's services and their appreciation at his decision to stay. Except the Director served a Chef's Salad and, as he munched, Bartholomew kept hearing Pamela Isley's imitation of Joker's imitation of her dying plant.

After lunch, any residual pleasure was ruined as his digestion was subjected to Harley Quinn in his next appointment. Separated from "her goodest buddy Red" (a.k.a. Poison Ivy, a.k.a. Pamela Isley), she wallowed in vocal self pity for most of the session, alternating from tears to tantrums with bewildering speed.

The mix-up (*if that's what it was*) after Quinn's appointment was inexcusable, and Bartholomew promised himself that there would be a full investigation. If it turned out the orderly had deliberately brought Joker for his session early so he could run into Harley in the outer office, Bartholomew would see to it that people were fired!

The whole staff seemed to buy into Joker and Harley's assertions that this destructive sado-polar co-obsessive liaison was a romance!

Bartholomew had just made the note: “her goodest buddy’—hard to believe Harleen Quinzel has a PhD” and was about to underline the word “tantrums” and add “hard to believe she’s 28,” when the patient’s voice rang out in his outer office:

“PUDDIN!”

There was a crash.

Bartholomew opened his door, expecting to see the madman had put Harley’s head through a wall. Instead, he saw a very different picture: Harley had hopped up and fastened herself onto the Joker, her legs straddling him at the hips, arms around his head with an ear in each hand, holding his face in place for what Bartholomew believed the young people call “a liplock.” The crash was apparently caused by the force of her lunge knocking Joker against the wall.

Bartholomew stared. The Joker was, hands down, the most disturbed and disturbing patient in Arkham—but the sight of the homicidal maniac pinned against a wall by an amorous blonde!

“Ha...Ha...Harl...” Joker managed between breaths, “Not in front of the medical staff.”

“But, Puddin,” she insisted, “I *MIIIIISSSED* you so!” then made a sound like “moi-moi-moi” and planted stage kisses all over his face.

That tenure at Hudson University was looking better all the time.

Joker turned to the orderly, looking embarrassed: “She gets excited.” Then he turned to Bartholomew, looking menacing: “What’re you looking at?”

The orderly pried Harley off Joker, and he took advantage of his newfound ability to use his arms, no longer pinned to the wall, to swat at her head.

“That’s for getting caught. If you had taken care of Ivy’s plants, she wouldn’t have made Harvey do it and wouldn’t be moved into MY WING...” He got no further before the orderly pulled Harley out the door, bawling, and Bartholomew ushered Joker into his office. Joker transitioned seamlessly from yelling at Harley to complaining to Bartholomew. “Can’t you do something about this, Old Sport? There are ferns growing in all the windows now. She’s not supposed to have plants, but they grow up right into the windows. Hey, if a flytrap screams in the greenhouse and nobody hears it, does it make a sound?”

Nethal entered the United States like most DEMON agents: as cargo. The crate provided for him to hide himself was not sent to a bonded warehouse to await customs inspection like the other crates, for the label it bore, marked "TOMIC: May not be opened outside the presence of ARGUL-licensed technician" was discolored and emitted a faint odor. Whatever was in there causing that smell and discoloring that label, the dockworkers were not going to touch it.

At nightfall, Nethal emerged from the crate. He remembered to take the aerosol can labeled "new car smell" with him but to leave the rest of the crate's contents untouched.

He made his way to the Chinatown address on foot and steeled himself for the presentation to his new master, Ulstarn. It was common knowledge among the followers of Ra's Al Ghul that a posting to Gotham City was a punishment, and Ulstarn was the reason. They said he ate his mother. They said he would have his father burned at the stake if the mighty one, Ra's Al Ghul, wished a blaze to light his cigarette. They said he was bitten by a snake once—and it died. Such stories could not be true, Nethal assured himself. But the telling of them said much about the kind of man Ra's Al Ghul would entrust with his operations in the heart of his enemy's city.

It was known that a posting to Gotham City was a punishment. And Nethal was, indeed, being punished. He had given a hungry man food against his master's interests. It was right that he should suffer. Omal was one of The Mighty One's food tasters. It was decreed that no food pass his lips outside what he ate from the master's table. For it was important that any poison be absorbed quickly into his system and dispatch him in time for the master to save himself.

The food taster, Omal, smoked cigarettes—which was permitted. He decided to quit—which was also permitted. Such was the munificent freedom Ra's Al Ghul granted to his loyal servants. In quitting smoking, Omal became struck with strange appetites he described as 'the munchies' and begged Nethal to share his bowl of fried noodles. Nethal did so. He was reported, and was now sentenced to six months' penance in Gotham City.

Joker paced his cell like a tiger at feeding time.

Dr. Bartholomew's investigation had him pissed. Investigation! Who did he think he was, the scum-lapping headshrinker. Joker was King Madman at Arkham and everyone was supposed to know that. If he chose to have his staff bring him to session early in order to score a few minutes alone with Harley, that was surely no one's business but his own—and surely not of interest to the hired help.

But more troubling than the investigation itself was the information it brought to Joker's attention. For as Bartholomew questioned staff and inmates alike, news that hadn't made it to the high security wing was now reaching Joker's ears:

Bruce Wayne sent a get well bouquet to Two-Face while he was laid up with Poison Ivy damage! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! It was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. God how he loved that man! What a sense of humor!

Scarecrow had got his ass kicked for attacking Wayne. Well and good. The nerve. Attacking poor Brucie with fear toxins. What an idea! Attacking that wonderful man who took Catty away from Bats!

And then the blow had fallen: Scarecrow was brought in *with cat scratches—and in Bat cuffs*. She went back to the Bat! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO. It couldn't be. It mustn't be. She and Brucie must have had a quarrel or something and the sniveling fatman moved in. The bastard. The lowlife bastard. The rabid lowlife winged rat!

This was Joker's opinion, and he didn't shirk from saying so. For that, Harley threw Koolaid in his face! Harley said she was sick of hearing his ranting about Selina leaving Bruce Wayne. Why Joker didn't care that much if *she* came or went. Well of course he doesn't, she should know that by now!

And Bartholomew was no help. Joker had tried to explain in this morning's session: This was a crisis! He wasn't being selfish, he was thinking, as any king should, about his people. What about the other rogues? They were all so fond of Brucie! Now they would all have to choose sides. It was so unfair. A Broken Home! Who will get the children!

This must not be. He simply could not stand by and watch Brucie, that wonderful man, lose Catty to Batman. He would put on his thinking cap and find a way to get them back together. He had to think of some way to make Brucie more appealing. The guy had so little going for him. Not much of a smile... Joker briefly considered a how a little SmileX gas could improve that. But alas, Catty simply did not appreciate the manly charisma of a JokerGrin. He'd tried, pre-Harley. Nothing. If she didn't go for the original on Joker's own delectable puss, what chance did a stiff like Brucie have with a chemically induced knock-off.

Not that Brucie was the problem here. Catty was. Just look at what she goes for—tall, dark and dour. She goes for Batsy, for pity's sake! How do you reason with a woman like that?

Hey, that was an idea - get her to think Bruce Wayne is Batman!

heh?

Heh heh.

HAHAHA.

HAHAHAHHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAA!

HAHAHAHHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaa...No.

Ridiculous.

He was starting to sound like Hugo Strange.

He'd been in Arkham too long.

Time to leave.

Two hours later, Joker sat in a Starbucks near the HA-HAcienda East, cuffs stained with blood and cappuccino.

"Now, where was I?" he asked the twitching body of the night clerk. "Oh yes, Hugo Strange, that's right. At one time, Strange actually thought Brucie was Batman. Maybe Selina could be convinced of it too—women aren't very bright, after all."

Nethal had presented himself at the White Tiger curio shop in Chinatown. He met his companions in service in this dreaded city and found them surprisingly tolerant of the sin which led to his posting here. Ulstarn had required a blood oath of unquestioning loyalty to himself no less than as would be yielded to the Demon's Head himself. He cut deep, as was proper, high on the forearm, and Nethal found the wound difficult to bandage himself. His new companions assisted him, then took him "out drinking." They told him the tales of their own transgressions, similar to his own: serious but not so serious as to warrant death.

They told him there were those in this city who believed fantastic propaganda about The Demon's Head. They thought raising one's eyes to the Great One would elicit a death sentence, that to speak out of turn meant one would be ordered to slit one's throat with one's own blade. They told him a man could live well, among such people, if one let these impressions remain.

"This is not sound," Nethal objected, "to kill one's followers for no cause, the master is not so foolish. We are not worthy to live if we displease, it is true, but we pledge our lives, we are trained, we serve. To exterminate us for no reason..."

"You don't have to recite that 'not worthy' stuff here, Nethal, not unless The Ulcer is listening."

"The Ulcer?"

"Ulstarn. If he's not around you can talk like a man. Of course old man Ra's isn't going to off you for looking at him funny. It'd take twenty years to breed a replacement and then he'd have to train him—that's another five years. The old man's not stupid."

"The old man?"

"Ra's. Don't worry about it, you'll catch on. Here's all you got to know: We got a good thing here. Just keep your head down, do your work, and steer clear of the Bat."

"The Bat... not," Nethal lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper, "He Whose Name Must Not Be Spoken."

"Batman!" his companions chanted in a loud voice, raising their mugs.

"You're not in the compound now, you're in Gotham City. It's okay to say it here."

"But the master..."

"Look. We all know we're supposedly here because this city is the center of western commerce, headquarters to a hundred corporations, and 'The Detective's' presence has no effect whatsoever on our operations, no special measures are taken, yadda yadda yadda. But c'mon, you think he'd send a walking hemorrhoid like Ulstarn here for any possible reason except..."

"But, but, Master Ulstarn is The Mighty One's most trusted lieutenant, entrusted to run his affairs in the heart of the enemy's own—"

"No. Look kid, to hear Ulcer tell it, he's a trusted lieutenant, 'more highly esteemed even than the late bodyguard Ubu, for while Ubu protected the master's person, Ulstarn runs operations in the enemy's stronghold,' etc. etc. The truth is, 'Master Ulstarn' is a toxic personality and Old Man Ra's doesn't *want* him waiting outside the shower to hand him a towel. He wants him half a world away making Batman's life a living hell. Except Batman's not around, so he makes *our* lives hell. Get it?"

"I don't understand."

"You will. And you're buying the next round."

Dick tipped the cabbie an extra fifty, ostensibly for carrying the luggage up to the apartment, but in reality because he sensed the strained silence from the airport was more uncomfortable for the stranger than it was for him and Barbara.

The quarrel began during the First Class pre-flight beverage service, and continued for nine hours and however many thousand miles. When they couldn't speak frankly, they typed on her laptop and slid it back and forth.

Nine hours and however many thousand miles later, he still couldn't believe it. How could she just assume—without so much as a word's discussion—that he would leave Bludhaven! How could she just assume he'd leave his job, his cover job *and* his real job, his apartment, and his city and relocate to Gotham. She told him about her *RASPBERRIES OR STRAWBERRIES* quandary for the *FRUIT CUPS* at the reception! (Didn't care about his input, mind you, but she at least told him the plan) But *WHERE THEY WERE GOING TO LIVE*, THAT was supposed to be so universally understood she didn't think to mention it!

"Your apartment," she told him, "is not wheelchair friendly." "Nor," she typed on the laptop, "is it equipped to house several million dollars worth of computer hardware with trace-proof shielding."

"But it's my city," he insisted.

Then she got nasty. Nightwing was not as big a deal as Oracle. JLA and her Birds of Prey operation outranked the Titans. Gotham outranked Bludhaven. Plus, her Daddy was the old commissioner, so if he wanted to augment the real work (the *real* work!) with being a street cop...

She was worse than Bruce! She was, this was... unreal!

Dick threw the last bag onto the sofa. It was a softside duffel and it hit a plump overstuffed cushion, but it was still enough noise to warrant a look from Barbara.

"I'm going for a walk," he said simply.

Okay, yes, one of them did have to relocate. And there were several valid points in favor of it not being Barbara and not being Oracle. But to just assume, without bothering to discuss it!

If he went along with this—and by the time the elevator reached street level he realized he would be going along with it—there would be conditions:

1. He would not abandon Bludhaven. He could reverse the "Family Dinner" plan: one night in Bludhaven, the rest of the time in Gotham. No arguments, no guilt, no talk of divided loyalties. It would be thus, and anyone who didn't like it could talk to the batarang.

2. He would not become a cop in Gotham. 2a) His father-in-law was the former police commissioner, that was unacceptable. 2b) Batman would consider Officer Grayson his own private mole. 2c) Joining the force was necessary in Bludhaven because of the nature of the city's corruption. Gotham was a different proposition. It was a corporate center, an arts capital, a publishing center, a fashion mecca, home to a dozen embassies. It was the hub of a hundred subcultures and self-contained microcosms... It would take more than a beat cop's connections to get inside it.

3. He would not become an Agent of the Bat. Gotham was all those things he'd said, and one thing more: it was Batman's city. When he left, it was because he needed to break away, to be his own man. If he came back, Bruce (and especially Batman) needed to accept that he was his own man.

Yeah, right. What were the chances of pulling that one off?

But what was the alternative?

Dick blinked. Lost in thought, he'd been wandering the streets aimlessly, or so he thought. But looking at a bench in a parklet-courtyard across the way... *THAT WAS TIM!* Dick's "aimless" wandering had taken him straight to the courtyard outside the Wayne Building. Was that a sign or something? The old subconscious trying to tell him something? Gotham was all those things he'd said "and one thing more," yes, all true. But it was still *one thing more* after that: it was home. Gotham City was still home.

Filing that sticky thought away for later, Dick walked up to the oblivious Tim and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Buon giorno, Signore Tim! Come stai?"

"BRO!" Tim jumped up and hugged him. "You're back! I forgot you were home today. But what're you doing here? Shouldn't you be jet lagged or something?"

"Probably," Dick answered, "With the hours we keep, what's the difference."

"Yeah, I guess," Tim laughed. "So, you're back."

Dick smiled but didn't say anything. Tim pressed on.

"Was there... Selina said at the wedding your old college buds were planning something. So, was there a prank?"

Dick laughed. "God, I forgot what the rumor mill was like in this town. YES. Stevo found out we spent the wedding night at the bridal suite in the Carlyle..."

"And?" Tim prompted.

"Sleigh bells in the box spring."

Tim cackled.

"Yes, HA HA HA like laughing boy says. Now that you've got a scoop before all the other old hens, you gotta give back. What have I missed?"

"Nothing that entertaining. There's Bruce & Selina's latest spat: seems she referred to the shrimp arrabbiata at d'Annunzio's as 'better than sex' and he decided to take it personally."

"He tends to take metaphors literally."

"Dick, c'mon, you tell me. You were there when they used to be, well y'know, like they used to be. Batman and Catwoman. Surely worse things were said than that."

"No comment."

"Oh, C'MON!"

"Tim, I can't. I'm sworn to secrecy."

"BRO, you can't hold out here, Robin to Robin, what went down?"

"Bruce said sooner or later you would ask about this, and if I said anything but 'no comment,' there would be retribution."

"He's bluffing."

"We were in the trophy room when he said it. He was holding Selina's first cat-o-nine tails and my old Robin shorts. I'm not taking the chance."

"If you don't tell me, I won't give you the 411 on what happened with Poison Ivy and Two-Face."

"Flytrap e morte. Already heard."

"Nuts."

"I am married to Oracle, buddy."

"Unbelievable."

"Dinah emailed her."

Tim looked thoughtful. "Yeah... What you said before about the rumor mill, can I bounce something off you? I don't know if I'm imagining things, and I don't want to take it to Bruce if it's something dumb."

Dick nodded, becoming serious, and Tim continued.

"Well, a bunch of us from Brentwood are starting internships, and the guys from my study group decided to get together like it was any other school project, compare notes 'n stuff."

Dick chuckled, and Tim became defensive.

"Okay, mostly we just eat pizza and shoot the breeze, but we do talk about the work a little, and I just... I started to notice... and I don't even know what I'm talking about, but it seems like... patterns. Information is circulating somehow, little items showing up in weird places, echoes and variations on things that shouldn't be where they are... it seem wrong somehow. Does that make sense?"

"I'm not sure. I never did the big business thing."

"Don't think business, think real work, instinct. Like before you enter a crook's hideout, if it feels wrong, you want to work out why before you step through the door and trip something."

"Can you give me an example?" Dick asked.

"You know we had a Scarecrow episode a couple weeks back, right? Three CEOs were struck with fear toxin. They cancelled their appointments for a day or two and then, having paid off Crane for an antidote, they all went back to business as usual. As far as the Scarecrow end of it goes, it looked like straight extortion: hit the rich man and make him pay up to get his life back. But totally independent of the Scarecrow angle, when these guys went missing, their businesses each took a hit in the market: Chief Executive disappeared, nobody knew what was up, investors don't like uncertainty, they sold off stock, prices dropped. That wasn't something the Scarecrow did, it was a natural domino effect. When the CEOs showed up for work next day, their stock came back to where it was before. With me so far?"

Dick nodded.

"Ok," Tim went on "Now here's the thing: some of the guys my friends have been working for, they made money on those stock drops. They 'sold short,' that's when you basically borrow shares you don't own and sell them at today's prices. You have to buy tomorrow to repay whoever you borrowed from. If the price goes up between today and tomorrow, you lose out. You might have to buy at \$27 an item you sold for \$22. But if the price goes down, you make out."

"You buy back at \$22 an item you sold for \$27," Dick said, showing he understood.

"Right. And in this case, it's almost like they knew in advance these guys would go missing and their stock would fall."

"That's insider trading, isn't it?"

"Yeah, to say the least. It's insider trading if you use publicly traded stock to profit from private information not available to the full market. But Dick, we're not talking about the settlement of some lawsuit or somebody getting a government contract as the private information. We're talking about advance knowledge of Scarecrow targets. And the really creepy thing is that these guys went short when the target was Harold Morton of the Morton Trust and when it was Charles Fitzwallace at Fitzwallace Tech, but NOT when it was Bruce Wayne and Wayne Enterprises."

Dick shook his head, not quite following. "Look Tim, I'm a cop and I'm not quite keeping up with the high finance end of this, but it sounds like you're saying somebody got wind of what the Scarecrow was up to and SOLD information that these

“Ra’s al Ghul,” Harley said, dipping her McNugget in Diet Pepsi.

“That’s it. He thinks he’s Batsy’s greatest foe, after all (the nerve). Now, if he were to ever seriously threaten Batman, I would have to step in, killing Batman clearly being my prerogative as Batman’s Big Baddy, right? So if the presumptuous hairdo wants to think he’s the big bad in Batdom, then he would have to come through and make this rescue of poor Brucie.”

“I’m confused,” Harley wailed. But Joker ignored her.

“Daddy has a plan,” he announced, “deathtrap for Brucie at the Ace Chemical Plant and have Rabid Ra’s set up to rescue him.”

“But Puddin, how will this convince Catty that Bruce Wayne is Batman?”

“WERE YOU NOT LISTENING?!” Joker roared, smashing a plastic tray over her head. “BATMAN is to blame for my distinctive pallor. My avenging myself by offing Brucie at the Ace Plant in the very vat where Bats made me go kerplop-gurgle-gurgle means Brucie is Batman!”

If her head wasn’t throbbing from being walloped with a plastic tray, Harley would have known better than to point out that she wasn’t listening because she wasn’t there when he explained it the first time. As it was, the throbbing in her head was soon forgotten due to a harder tray-thwap on her bottom.

If Ra’s al Ghul had a sense of humor, he would have laughed.

If he had an iota of empathy for his fellow beings, he might have felt pity.

As it was, as there was no advantage in either laughing at the Joker or pitying him, the Demon’s Head was merely surprised. Surprise was still quite an achievement; you had to give the insane clown credit for that much. After a few centuries, Ra’s thought himself jaded. He believed he’d seen it all. That this 21st Century psychotic could come up with something so insanely twisted as to cause surprise was an achievement.

He wanted ... this pitiful non-entity of a chemically-mutated psychopath wanted the great Ra’s al Ghul to dispatch a rescue party to Gotham City to save the Detective—no to save Bruce Wayne—from a death trap in order to convince a woman that Wayne was Batman? It was monstrous. That this demented individual was allowed to live was a sad testament to the failings of Western government, of the Detective’s methods, and of the need for global order that DEMON rule would bring.

The Joker was a sad, sad case indeed.

But the information he so artlessly dropped in the Demon’s lap might prove useful. Information was the currency of power. Money was inconsequential, Americans never understood that. These tiny men, these so-called leaders of the corporate world, did not begin to understand: It was all about power, not money; it was not necessary to own if one controlled those who did.

With his new network brokering information in Gotham City, Ra’s was securing control over anyone and anything with power. Those he tipped on the stock fluctuations of Morton Trust and Fitzwallace Tech paid well for the information, and they assumed that was his motive in selling it. Money. The fools. What need had Ra’s al Ghul of their meaningless totems of wealth? The buyers of his information were now indebted to him. They had engaged in insider trading. He knew. They were now

in his power. Their corporations and all they owned were his to control if and how he wished. It was a start.

He had been concentrating on corporations thus far, as the paltry information they considered valuable was so easy to obtain. He had not thought to traffic in information of a criminal nature, apart from that one Scarecrow episode, and that was only because the targets were CEOs. But this information falling into his lap, without his lifting a finger... He would be foolish indeed if he did not ponder the possibilities...

If the potential buyer were anyone other than the Detective, he would proceed without question: Look at this valuable stream of information I can open up for you if only you serve me.

That approach would not, obviously, work with the Detective, not put in those terms. But what if... what if the information came anonymously, from "a friend." Perhaps another type of Oracle emerging, no hint of reciprocal favors owed, not at this time... Ra's al Ghul's skin warmed and his breathing quickened as he thought through the next logical step in the sequence: If the "friend" later got into trouble, the heroes he helped would rally to defend him. It could be managed. The Detective's own circle could be controlled this way. He would finally be able to call the Detective into his service whenever he wished!

"NalFoy!" Ra's called to his new lieutenant, "open a channel to Gotham City. Tell Ulstarn to establish the new man, Nethal, in separate quarters at once. He must not be seen to have any connection to the Chinatown operations. He will take orders from me and no other. He will receive these orders directly from my lips."

Whiskers eyed Dick Grayson with all the malice of a cat whose favorite cushion is being bent out of shape by an inconsiderate two-foot. This particular two-foot had done it before, squashed the favorite cushion, but at least then he did so smelling of cavern and cut grass. Now he smelled like wet paint and plaster. Whiskers delicate nose twitched at the grim realization that by the time two-foot pillow-squasher left, the favorite cushion too would smell like wet paint.

And did two-foot Selina-cat do anything to discourage this? No, she'd lifted Whiskers into her lap where he could get a good look at the desecration, she stroked his fur consolingly, but she did not stop it. Indeed, she seemed to be thinking. There was a very particular kind of thinking whenever she picked him up and stroked his fur this way. It usually meant the purple leather would be removed from under the bed for a time.

Nutmeg would be upset about that. But Whiskers didn't care so much. Under the bed was Nutmeg's war room. Whiskers's domain was the terrace, the planter Bat-Bruce disturbed when he was two-foot in boots, *and that cushion*.

"I can't pay you anything approaching what Bruce did for the Wayne Enterprises job," Dick said. "In fact, with all the start-up costs, Selina, I don't know if I can pay you anything at all, for a while at least."

"That's okay, Dick," she answered, "your credit's good. You're starting up a new business, high ticket private investigation and security; that's hardware, contacts, office space. You think I don't appreciate what you must be shelling out to get this off the ground in a city like Gotham? And I know you won't take money from Bruce, so you must be doing it on loans. I completely understand what you must be going through. What I don't understand is why you want me?"

"You're the best."

"Where exactly did you guys get the idea that I respond to flattery, tell me that? No, never mind, tell me this instead: why don't you ask *your wife*? I mean, Richard, if it was security for a physical plant as well as the computer system, you'd be right. I am the best. But just the computers, Dick, you're *married* to the best. You've got Oracle waking up next to you every morning. You don't think she can't find the holes in your system better than Catwoman?"

"You cracked Bruce's system. Barbara never did that."

"I doubt she's tried. Look, I'm not complaining that you can't pay me up front because money is tight. I am simply asking: if money *is* so tight, why don't you use the better no-cost solution right at your fingertips?"

Dick sighed. This wasn't the first time he'd tried to maneuver Selina around a conversation and failed. One last-ditch attempt to change the subject:

"What if, instead of owing you a fee, I made you a partner. How would that be?"

“Reowrl,” Whiskers spat aggressively as Selina—or rather, as Catwoman—tugged the fur at the back of his neck. It was so clearly a response to Dick’s statement, it was almost as if Catwoman herself had reowled, challenging him. In an instant, her whole manner was different: firm, focused, and no-nonsense.

“Richard, I don’t work for people who try and jerk me making the offer,” the voice took him right back to that rooftop when he was ten years old. This wasn’t Bruce’s girlfriend Selina anymore; this was Catwoman, and she was losing patience. “Why—won’t—you—ask—Barbara?”

“For the same reason I won’t take money from Bruce,” Dick answered honestly, “I don’t want to be indebted—to either of them—not on this. If it was a partnership, her and me against the world, I would. But Selina, this is her town almost as much as Bruce’s. And I want to establish my own presence here without a handout from either of them. Okay?”

She eyed him, appraisingly.

“There’s more you’re not telling me,” she said finally, “Don’t bother denying it, Richard, I can see there is. And if it was just the two of us, Dick and Selina, talking, I’d say I won’t ask because it’s none of my business. But it’s not just the two of us. You are hiring Catwoman. In fact, you offered a partnership—and that means it *is* my business, whatever you’re not saying. If it involves Batman, if it involves Oracle, if it involves Nightwing even. So ‘fess up, kiddo. What’s the rest of the story?”

Dick looked up at her, looked down at the cat, down at his own lap, then back up at her. It wasn’t exactly like Barbara or Bruce: *Tell me because I say so*. Selina did at least give a better reason than ‘because I say so.’ With her, it was a legitimate proposition, quid pro quo: If you want Catwoman’s help, there will have to be full disclosure. He made himself comfortable in the chair—destroying Whiskers’s hopes that the cushion would ever recover—and began a more detailed explanation...

He’d lucked out in virtually his first week back in Gotham, when a small committee from Barbara’s condo association called to welcome him to the building. One of them, Brian Everwood, was a city councilman. He stayed after the others had left. Everwood was well-informed about Bludhaven, its civic issues, its law enforcement woes, and he even referenced details of Dick’s own achievements on the Bludhaven Force that could only be the result of genuine interest - or research. After more than an hour of fascinating conversation, Everwood asked, point blank, if Dick would be joining the Gotham Police Force. On learning he wouldn’t (“too much baggage, Barbara’s father being the ex-commissioner and all”) Everwood had smiled, handed Dick his card, and invited him to lunch at the Barrister’s Club. As Bruce Wayne’s son, Dick was no stranger to the corridors of power. The private clubs & the executive suites did not dazzle him as they might an ordinary street cop looking for a new line of work. But Dick was not insensible to the fact that Everwood was trying to impress him, and that attention was both unexpected and gratifying.

“Of course, Gotham City,” Everwood (please, call me Brian!) enthused, “is a very different proposition than a metrop like Bludhaven. The corporate presence here, the wealth it represents, it’s staggering. Look at WishStar. Why, they’ve accomplished more in a year, restoring buildings and cleaning up Gotham Plaza, than City Hall could in a decade. And as for Batman—”

"It's just cosmetic, Brian," Dick felt compelled to point out, "Gotham Plaza, all the crime is still there, and all the sleaze. It's just moved a few blocks to the left."

"I know that Dick, may I call you Dick? I'm not naïve, Dick. But the patches of a clean Gotham that have been created are good for the city. Tourists feel safe—in fact, tourists are safe. Don't you realize what that means? Why, the boon that creates, not just in the dollars they bring in but the boost for the city's image! They go home and tell people it's a good place. You can't put a price tag on that, on what WishStar has given us."

Selina looked curiously at Dick, who paused in his story.

"Could we possibly fast forward past the paid advertisement for WishStar, 'a family-friendly SuperCorp with a heart as big as their bank account,' and get on with your new line of work?"

Dick looked embarrassed and summarized the rest of the lunch: Councilman Everwood suggested the need for savvy, informed, well-connected security and investigation services to serve the growing corporate presence in Gotham. Consultants like Foster & Forsythe had their niche, and so did low-level investigators like Slam Bradley...

Dick paused to enjoy Selina's reaction. He'd dropped that name specifically, knowing her distaste for that particular PI, who she described (rightly enough) as a bottomfeeder. But the fact was, Everwood too had used Bradley as an example of the kind of investigator whose outdated methods and underclass trappings did not fit the needs of the new Gotham and her emerging corporate clients.

It seemed the perfect answer to a question Dick had only started to ask himself: his place, his day-job, and Nightwing's inside track in Gotham City.

The very next night, Nightwing had found Nathan. Nathan was a snitch, but not an ordinary snitch. A good snitch. A very good snitch. He knew the penny ante stuff they all did, the mob and the street gangs, but he knew uptown too: not just that some museum exhibit might make an interesting target for this criminal or that one, but what corporate sponsors were underwriting the exhibit, who carried the insurance, and so on. He even had Iceberg gossip: Sly finally got his dream date with Roxy Rocket; the disillusionment was swift and painful...

"You're kidding!" Selina interrupted, Catwoman's down-to-business mask dissolving in an instant into the reveling-in-gossip face. "I hadn't heard a word about that."

Dick failed to supply more details, but smiled, as if dangling bait. "Then I guess my informant's as good as I think he is," he grinned.

"He have any more to offer besides gossip of either the Iceberg or Wall Street Journal variety?" Selina asked, the business face returning.

"History," Dick said. "Did you know Larraby Chemicals main factory was the old Ace Chemical Plant where Joker had his... accident?"

Selina shook her head. "It was a long time ago," she said.

"Yeah. It's way before my time. But I remember asking Bruce about it once. We were on a case, and I thought it'd be a likely Joker target."

Selina waved him off. "I do know this one, from the clown's own mouth," she sighed. "Joker doesn't blame the physical plant. He blames Batman. He blames his

astrologer—dead now, by the way. And also he blames Mr. Whipple.” Dick looked blank, so Selina explained, “from the Charmin ads.”

Dick rolled his eyes. Then finished his story.

“So anyway, I was in this quandary about what to do with myself being back in Gotham, and within two days, all the pieces fell into place: Brian Everwood, Nathan, Grayson Associates. Actually, my first thought was Grayson & Grayson, but Barbara’s been so difficult about anything work related. I finally worked it out, I think: See, with the Titans, I led *a team*. And before that, I was Bruce’s *partner*. For all his dictatorial personality, Batman is part of a team: in the JLA, and he led the Outsiders, and he leads ‘Team Bat’ for lack of a better word.

Barbara’s never done that. She’s more of a dispatcher. She’s traffic control: go here now. And she’s triage: This is the priority, take care of this one, then that one, then that. She doesn’t know what it is to lead; she directs. And it seems like, since we’ve been back, whenever our personal relationship bled onto Oracle turf, that aspect of her character emerged. Well Selina, I can deal with that in the field. As Nightwing, it’s a total asset to me. But if Grayson Associates is going to be *my* business and part of *Nightwing’s* operations here, then I’m going to be calling the shots. I’m not going to have ‘the wife’ ordering me around like the hired help.... So now you know. That’s why I came to you. That’s why I want you handling this—for money or a share of the operation—and not her.”

“Okay,” Selina agreed. “I don’t believe I’m doing this, but I’ll just get rusty if I don’t keep my hand in, I guess. When do I start?”

“As soon as you want,” Dick said, handing her a business card, which Whiskers promptly snatched from his hand. “I settled into the office at that address yesterday,” Dick said, watching Whiskers chew his business card into a small, wet wad, “paint’ll be dry tomorrow. Meantime, you can log in from here with...the access codes I had written on the back of that card—does that cat not like me or something?”

“I swear,” Selina laughed, retrieving the card and trying to see if the ink on the back was still legible, “you’re worse than Bruce.”

“I swear,” Selina sighed quietly, twiddling her fork in her salad, “You’re worse than Dick.”

It had been going on for four courses. There had been six DEMON agents at some curio shop in Chinatown; now there were five.

Through the soup: were six, now five. Why?

“He killed one,” Selina guessed. “Now about this new job I’ve been offered...” “In the past,” Bruce bulldozed over her, ruining her plan to tease him with her news, “if he killed one, a new one came in and replaced him. So why not this time?”

And through the fish: men are cycled in and out, but there are always six. What happened to the last one that he wasn’t replaced?

“Weren’t you going to tell me about the meeting with Tim?” Selina asked, trying to change the subject. “He was onto something about Scarecrow—those CEOs?” “It doesn’t make sense. Even Ra’s al Ghul has turnover, but in the past, when he’s lost

a man, he's always replaced him. They came and went, the faces changed, the short one left, the goatee came in - but there were *always six*."

With the roast: "Look, I know you didn't have henchman, but imagine you did. If you always had six, why suddenly change to five?" She started to speak but he cut her off: "And it can't be to cut costs; funds are never an issue with Ra's." "Because I used to be psychotically obsessive, but now I got therapy," she answered tensely. "I don't know."

"Neither do I," Bruce growled, "That's what bothers me."

And now with the salad: Bruce took six grapes from the centerpiece, arranged them in a row above his plate, took one away, and stared at the empty space. *And this*, Selina couldn't help but reflect, *is the crimefighting genius that kept me from the VanDeegan Emeralds?*

"Couldn't Ra's just change his mind?" she speculated.

"To my knowledge, he's never changed his mind in 1200 years. Why start now?"

Dessert would have been more of the same if Dick hadn't arrived, eager for Grayson Associates to make its first intelligence contribution to the crime-fighting crusade in Gotham.

"A lead already?" Bruce and Selina asked in unison.

Dick did a doubletake.

"It is so creepy when you guys do that," he said.

"Must be an emergency if it couldn't wait for patrol," Bruce said, checking his watch. They'd be in the city in costume within the hour. If it couldn't wait that long, he wondered why Dick did didn't simply telephone.

"Not an emergency, exactly," Dick said, unable to hide his intense excitement, "I didn't bring it to Batman or to the cave, because this lead concerns Bruce Wayne." Finally! Finally, Dick's hour had come. He was finally measuring up to, and possibly even surpassing, Bruce. "Seems the Joker wants to kill you. At the old Ace factory."

"WHAT?" Selina reacted first, and louder, "WHY?"

"Never ask 'why' with Joker," Bruce said calmly.

"But Jack adores you," she objected, "which is a big, creepy *WHY* all by itself, by the way. Now, all of a sudden he wants you dead, and no *WHY*? Six grapes down to five, and we were obsessing on why through four courses."

Dick looked back and forth like it was a tennis match.

"Ra's is predictable," Bruce explained carefully, "Joker is insane. You can't predict what he'll do or why."

"It looks like Dick can," Selina observed. Dick beamed as she turned to him and asked, "Where'd you say this is going down?"

"The old Ace plant. Now Larraby Chemicals," Dick answered proudly. "My contact supplied blueprints."

"Already got 'em," Bruce said dismissively.

"Old plans," Dick shot back, producing a long documents tube, "not since the renovations when Larraby took over."

Bruce growled.

Batman stood on the roof of the former Ace Chemical Plant, watching the paddy wagon taking Harley Quinn back to Arkham disappear into the stream of traffic. The ambulance was still being loaded. There was the stretcher carrying Joker...cuffs stained with blood and Green Dye #4.

The OraCom buzzed in his earpiece under the cowl, and he heard Oracle's patient, but insistent, request for confirmation of the police chatter she was picking up: Joker and Harley apprehended. No civilian casualties. Minimal property damage, but fire trucks dispatched to sign off before the plant could reopen. All those chemicals—it could have been serious.

Batman didn't respond.

Yes, it could have been serious. Joker wanting to kill Bruce Wayne at the Ace Factory? Insane. Insanity was a given with the Joker, but still. In the privacy of his own mind he voiced the "Why" he would not with Dick and Selina. Then he reprimanded himself just as he had them. There was no "Why" with Joker. In a week, the madman wouldn't know himself.

::BOSS! REPORT IN, WOULD YOU?:: Oracle's answer-me-now tone. It was one sound, Clark once confided, that made the Man-of-Steel jolt.

...: Here, Oracle. Report confirmed. Joker's in custody. Quinn's in custody. Situation contained. No casualties:..

::Mind telling me why you didn't answer the first two times I asked then?:: The relief in her anger was palpable. Of course, Batman kicked himself, "no civilian casualties" could have meant anything. With Joker, she would naturally assume the worst.

...:Preoccupied:... he answered, in the terse I'm-Batman/Don't-Question tone that silenced everyone but Selina.

Then he thought the better of it. Barbara was pissed because he'd scared her.

...:I was preoccupied,... he explained, ...:going over the battle, Oracle, I didn't hear you. It was almost too easy. The heads-up from Dick, the blueprints, they hadn't had time to set the Bruce Wayne trap, let alone prepare for unexpected company from Batman:..

:: Well, good deal. Calling it a night, then? :: Oracle answered simply.

Some things she still viewed with Batgirl simplicity. Battle lost or battle won. It was too early to "call it a night."

Besides, Batman couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something. A link in a chain that wasn't a chain. Or a piece that didn't fit the puzzle because the puzzle, not the piece, was wrong... Disgusted at the thought he sounded like Riddler, Batman slapped the OraCom control.

:: Yeah, boss? ::

Maybe what he needed, Batman decided, was to get back to basics. An old-fashioned scrap and scratch might be just the thing. Clear his mind, and let him think this through.

...: Is Selina on the channel ? ... he asked abruptly.

:: Not tonight. She's doing a job for Dick. ::

...: You mean, for Nightwing?...

:: I mean what I said. You wouldn't hear of her coming along to the chemical plant, so Dick has her casing this big corporate complex. Revamping their security and Grayson Associates is putting in a bid:..

...:She's not on the channel when I need her because she's DOING A JOB FOR DICK!:..

:: Hey, Bossman, stand down. Change the tone and maybe I won't tell her you had a hissy that she wasn't at your beck 'n call after you left her out on the Joker bust. ::

This was outrageous. What had gotten into the girl? "Change the tone and maybe I won't tell her you had a hissy?" That was a very different thing from getting a little testy because he'd missed a check-in.

...:What complex is she casing?:... Batman asked through clenched teeth.

::I'm not at liberty to say,:: came the unbelievable reply ::Guess you'll have to use those detective skills we've heard so much of. Oracle out.::

Batman stared at the OraCom control in disbelief. But the mystery of Oracle's mood swings would have to wait. To pursue it now would be to let her distract him from finding Selina—and on the off chance that that's exactly what it was supposed to do - "estrogen solidarity" and all that - he wasn't going to let them get away with it.

The initial attempt to break into Grayson Associates' computer system met with a brazenly personal message:

You CAN'T be serious. We haven't been online for 48 hours and you're already scratching at the backdoor? If you ask Dick nicely, he might just tell you what you want to know. Or you could ask me. You could try to kiss it out of me like you used to, or maybe...

He didn't read further. He realized what she'd done. The relay from the Batcomputer to the Batmobile used a unique data pulse that prevented anyone from tracing the signal in either direction. She was using that pulse as an identifying signature to block login and send back this saucy little taunt. That meant however he was going to break into this network—and he *would* break into this network—it couldn't be from a Batcave workstation or the Batmobile field unit. Damn her.

Well, he thought, *Come at it from the other side then*: If Catwoman was approaching this like any other job, she'd investigate before going to the site in costume. He let himself into her apartment and examined her personal computer. As he skimmed the day's browser history, he felt Whiskers sniffing his boots expectantly.

"Sorry, fella," he offered, patting the cat's head although his eyes never left the computer screen, "unexpected visit tonight. I'll bring you some next time."

There it was—in the history. In the last two days, Selina had visited the websites of WishStar, Chantal Klee and KeeNeCo. The latter two were, respectively, the architect and contractor that renovated WishStar's midtown complex, taken over from a failing publishing empire.

Batman lifted the cat onto the desk and chucked his chin. "Don't tell her how I found out," he instructed, "testosterone solidarity."

There she was.

Catwoman was perched on the observation deck of the Sony Building, facing the WishStar complex. When he found her, she was on the Drake Building next door. He'd watched, mesmerized, as she'd circled WishStar from each adjacent rooftop, first taking pictures with a digital camera, then measurements of some other kind with a gadget he didn't recognize, and then—the best part—she'd lie on her stomach and make notes on a palm pilot.

The rational part of Batman's mind knew it was a different world from the last time he'd seen her like this: Catwoman, on a rooftop, coolly assessing a target. The rational part of his mind knew more than a year had passed. His rational mind knew she was no longer a criminal; she was his lover. The lips that chewed the end of the palm stylus were the very lips that had pronounced d'Annunzio's shrimp *arrabbiata* "better than sex." The hair that blew so wildly in the high wind so far above the city would smell of a tea rose shampoo that sat on a little shelf in his own shower. His rational mind knew that the wisp of dark purple only barely visible in the moonlight was the very arm that would yank the pillow from under his head if he got to bed too late.

His rational mind, however, had no say when the rest of him was watching Catwoman.

The rest of him was in a time warp: Catwoman. His enemy. So beautiful. So dangerous. So forbidden... He made a mental note to check the security cameras for each one of these buildings before he left. This was valuable footage. Look at her—casing a target—he could study her studying it from a dozen angles. Watching her work, watching her plan...

Point of Order, the rational mind intervened.

Just look at her move. Just look at her not move...

A-hem, the rational mind tried again. *She's no longer a criminal. And if I want to know what it is she's doing over there, I don't need to study tapes, I can just ask her.*

...those legs, that ass...

I get to pinch it anytime I want. It's Selina. And this is not a productive use of my time.

...this one is catvid-perfect...

Before the rational mind could make a rebuttal, he saw the lithe purple form stretch, stand, then move in his direction. How perfect was this, she'd seen enough and was finally ready to take on the target itself: the WishStar roof, where he happened to be standing.

Batman merged deeper into the shadows, pulling his cape taut so its movement couldn't give him away. He held his breath as she went to work on a firehose feederduct not three feet away.

"Nice night for a stroll," he grveled, thinking to continue 'most people do it at streetlevel' but was unable to because of the scream. Her shocked jump-scream-spin set off instinct and muscle memory so that - before he could even think - he had her wrists

in one hand, the other clamped over her mouth and his body was pushing into hers, trapping it against the coil of firehoses.

They stayed that way for a long moment, lost in the past.

His rational mind realized this was a moment to make up for a dozen wrong calls, a hundred missed opportunities. The hand on her mouth he should move behind her neck, pull her face into his and crush that delicious mouth with his own.

But his rational mind still had no say where Catwoman was involved, and the rest of him—still caught in the time warp - waited wordlessly while her look of wide-eyed shock softened into amused recognition. Then he released her mouth for the inevitable proposition...

"I can't play tonight; I'm working."

The time warp shattered. Did she say...? This was insane. Even for her, even for them, this was insane! She was *WORKING*?!? He's Batman! And she couldn't/wouldn't/refused to, er, play because she was *WORKING* trying to break into... Even for her that was simply fucked in the head: when Batman interrupts you in the middle of a break in, you don't get to shoo him away because it's not a good time!

He held on to the wrists a little tighter. She hated that, when he took her wrists. It was the ultimate expression of his chief advantage, his size and his strength compared to hers. It always brought about some expression of her advantage, it always brought about the come-ons. He held one wrist in each hand now, and pushed in closer pressing her against the coils with his body.

"You're working?" he rasped in a hoarse voice that would have been dangerous with anyone else, but with her, like this, had other connotations.

Her lips parted, the tongue flicking moist and soft against the teeth as she began to speak. And the words that came were right out of the time-warp... "I don't have time for your games right now, this is serious." ... except, that wasn't her line, it was his.

Granted, she said it better. Crisp and light and apologetic. Not ponderous and self-important, not heavy with unspoken and unspeakable desire and regret. Simple, casual, sophisticated: *No time now, Dear; run along and bother other criminals*. It was so totally unexpected, it had virtually the same effect as that first rooftop kiss, stunning him into such a state of awed confusion while she wriggled out from under him and disappeared into the night.

...

She had already made it into the CEO's private office when he caught up with her. Safe open, she had removed a stack of floppy disks and was sifting through them on the desktop.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he exclaimed—in marked contrast to the more traditional, Batmanesque opening on the roof.

She didn't answer. Eyes glued to the monitor, she waved him over with a finger.

A gloved hand blocked the monitor as she was trying to read.

"You can't do this..." he began, then stopped when he saw that she seemed to be staring straight through his hand. He looked down, following her gaze. Then moved slowly behind her chair and started reading over her shoulder.

"How did you find this," he murmured, barely audible.

"Dick's idea. He figured the *coup de grace* on the proposal to revamp their security was to mention how many other bids they'd received and from whom."

But the document she was reading: "Security Bids—Eyes Only," was not a listing of the bidders. It was an internal memo. It said the CH contact BE... ("That's City Hall contact Brian Everwood," Selina whispered) ...specifically instructed WishStar to award Grayson Associates the contract, regardless of who put in the lowest bid. In return, it gave a timeline in which BE would have a particular block rezoned, enabling WishStar to have specific properties classified abandoned and take them over for revitalization while the current owner would be unable to respond.

"You recognize the address?" Batman asked.

She shook her head.

"Flick Theatre," he said tersely, "Two-Face's new hideout. How does some guy at City Hall even know Harvey Dent bought that place, let alone that he would be unable to block this rezoning because..."

"...Because he's flat on his back in the hospital with Ivy injuries," Catwoman completed the thought. "And why is this guy so keen to help Dick?"

"And why are there five agents in Chinatown when there were always six before?"

"OH. COME. ON!" Catwoman sat back in the chair, arms folded in disbelief.

Batman shook his head.

"This isn't the first mix of big business and rogue business that's come up lately, is it: First the Scarecrow and those CEOs, then Dick's informant just happening to supply the blueprints from Larraby Chemicals to foil the Joker's plan, and now this. Remember Tim's theory that whoever knew the Scarecrow targets knew he'd fail against Bruce Wayne. Why? Maybe because..." he stopped, then signaled in their secret sign language: "Let's get out of here."

"This room isn't bugged," Catwoman said out loud. "That's one of the first things I checked."

"I want to be sure. I'm going to double-check the security closet in this building. You get the tapes for the surrounding ones."

She stared.

"The rooftop cameras," he clarified. "That was quite a show you put on."

She stared again.

"Zero residual presence. C'mon, snap to." And with that he slapped her upper thigh. "Meet me on top of the Wayne Building in an hour."

An hour later, Batman picked up almost exactly where he'd left off.

"Tim was right. There is an underground information network, consolidating control of Gotham piece by piece. Whoever knew the Scarecrow targets knew he'd fail against Bruce Wayne. Why? Because he knows Bruce Wayne is Batman."

"That does narrow the field," Catwoman conceded.

"It's not Hugo Strange. It's not YOU. That only leaves..."

"The Cadaver."

Batman permitted himself a lip-twitch and nodded.

"So...what happens next?" she asked.

"Now that we know?" he answered, "We set a trap of our own."

"I just know I'm going to hate where this is going."

The lip-twitch tugged a little harder on each word that followed, ending in a genuine smile.

“A woman. In Metropolis. Not who you think... Her name is Moira.”

In his years of service as a humble messenger to the Demon's Head, Omar had had occasion to enter Ra's Al Ghul's palatial compound in Nepal four times. He'd entered the castle in Moldova once and the castle in Shanghai once. On those occasions, he'd kept his eyes lowered on his own feet as he came and went from The Presence, for it was not his place to notice the possessions of his betters. As Omar delivered his message, he would and stare directly in front of him, facing respectfully in the direction of his master without presuming to look at the Great One's most illustrious features. Once, in doing so, he chanced to glance at the Great One's table, for Ra's Al Ghul was seated for a meal when Omar was obliged to bring him the news: the original Batman had returned to Gotham City and retaken his mantle from the pretender dubbed AzBat. No one knew if this announcement would please or not, and Omar had knelt should the Mighty One wish to cut his throat for bringing unwelcome news. Kneeling before the seated Ra's Al Ghul, Omar could not help but notice the plates of food sitting mere inches from of his face, and even on that extraordinary occasion he had not seen—on the very table of Ra's Al Ghul—delicacies such as were placed before him now.

"Specialite della casa," Giovanni d'Annunzio purred, *"Gamberoni - Gulf Shrimp—very large, sautéed in extra virgin olive oil and herbs de provence, with a spicy arrabbiata sauce, served on a bed of lemon pepper angelhair pasta..."*

"Here it comes," Bruce Wayne said quietly to Omar, counting down with his fingers: 3..2..1..

"It's better than sex," Selina confided to Moira with a wink.

"Darling," Bruce said theatrically, once the orders were taken and Giovanni was done sucking up, "I did ask you here tonight so Moira, the Wayne Enterprises employee from Metropolis who I so desperately want to transfer to the headquarters here in Gotham, could see that I have a nice, normal girlfriend. So she and her boyfriend Omar can see that those rumors about me being the Don Juan of the Western World aren't true."

"What's your point, Dear?" Selina asked with equal theatricality.

"Only that perhaps allusions to your unusual relationship with the shrimp arrabbiata isn't going to allay her fears about what she's getting into in moving to Gotham City."

Everyone laughed at this. Selina crunched the end of the bread stick and changed the subject:

"So, Moira, is it true you used to work for the demonspawn? I mean, er, Talia al Ghul or whatever she's calling herself these days."

"Head," Omar said flatly, "Talia Head."

Everyone except Moira chewed, as though they had thought of something to say but decided against it.

"Yes," Moira answered finally, "it was as Miss Head's secretary at LexCorp that I developed the 'working for difficult people' philosophy that Mr. Wayne hired me to

bring to W. E. - not that the management at Wayne Enterprises is especially difficult to work for," she corrected quickly, for she didn't wish to give offense. "I certainly couldn't imagine any of the Wayne Enterprises suits throwing a coffee pot into a Dell 9000 just because of some items in the newspaper."

Selina's eyes locked with Bruce's, glowing with amusement, as she asked, "Really?"

"If after what you've seen today, you'd like to meet with an apartment broker," Bruce began, hoping against hope to derail the train of Selina's inquiries. But he was outmaneuvered. Selina stood, saying something about the powder room; Moira stood. *Estrogen solidarity*, Bruce thought bitterly as the two of them disappeared down a damask wallpapered hallway.

Bruce allowed the executive façade to give way to the Fop façade as he turned to Omar with a world-weary smile.

"By the time they get back, whatever Moira knows about Talia, Selina will know about Talia."

"She doesn't know so much as she thinks," Omar said, surprising Bruce with an equally worldly voice. "Throwing the pots of coffee into the calculating machine, it is nothing. At the compound, in my old life, there was warning: if you are alone with the Great One's daughter and she starts to, how you say in English, 'froth'—run! It is only way. Do not wait to be dismissed - just run! One time, she send entire squad into Hong Kong, suicide mission because of..." Omar lowered his voice dramatically "'he whose name must not be spoken' did not come with other Justice League heroes to assault on compound."

Bruce was almost too stunned to realize this was the perfect introduction of the subject he'd wondered how to broach. Omar continued:

"And this 'sexual harassment' of which Miss Moira and the other Secret-Aries speak, this fear of chasing around the water cooler, it is nothing. In compound, if you were, how you say, 'not too bad to look at,' and 'he whose name must not be spoken' turned down the Great One's daughter..." Omar made a shuddering gesture.

A lifetime spent honing the acting skills necessary to maintain a dual identity enabled Batman to hear these astounding revelations of life inside the DEMON Camp while maintaining Bruce's most guilelessly foppish exterior.

"Oh, that reminds me," he blithered like a well-meaning dimwit, "he who's name... I mean, er, Batman sent you a note."

He fished the sealed envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Omar just as the women returned and the shrimp arrived.

There had been some debate as to whether Bruce or Selina should deliver the note. It was true Omar already knew of her connection to Batman from when he'd rescued her from Ra's clutches, and in so doing helped Omar defect. But it was also true that Omar knew Bruce Wayne had arranged the job with the Daily Planet that Batman had promised. One connection was as good as another.

The delivery of the note should have been the last order of business for Batman that evening, and he tried to slip back into Bruce mode for the remainder of the dinner. Bruce mode was so much better for dealing with Giovanni d'Annunzio. Tonight's stunt from Gotham's premier snob was a new dessert. He was waiting, Giovanni had said, for Bruce and Selina's return to introduce the new confection. He wanted to name it after her.

Bruce identified Giovanni's strategy just as Batman would Ra's Al Ghul's: he was hoping for another magnificently colorful description of the dessert from Selina, *a la* "better than sex." Not the sort of thing you could put on a menu, but the sort of thing Giovanni would delight in passing on to other patrons, an amusing little aside, delivered with that delightful continental *savoir faire*.

Back in Selina's apartment, Bruce spoke with the same air of exasperated disapproval once reserved for the vault at Sotheby's. "I can't believe you actually did it. I don't know why I should be surprised, it's not like it's out of character or anything. In fact, it's so totally, typically, the kind of thing you would do..."

"I don't believe we are going to have this conversation again. What goes on in your head: I've said this forty-six times and got no response, but hey, let's go for lucky forty-seven!"

And then, just like the vault at Sotheby's, she short-circuited his ability to argue, pressing against him, whispering sinful pleasures: "It was a peach, stuffed with amaretto cream, served on a pomegranate reduction drizzled in Belgian chocolate... It's a perfectly good word, it's a perfectly good metaphor, and it was a perfectly *orgasmic* dessert."

Unlike the vault, Bruce was not rendered mute and immobile by her performance. He ran his fingers through her dark hair, cocking her head back. Her lips parted with a soft gasp, and he bent over them, declaring in Batman's firmest gravel: "Those breathy little pants are mine. Remember that..." His free hand moved playfully up the front of her body, coming to rest on her collarbone. "...the next time you want to give some pastry chef credit for..."

That was as far as he got, for Selina wasn't rendered immobile either.

When conversation resumed about twenty minutes later, Selina brought up a subject that had been puzzling her since he first mentioned Omar and Moira.

"I could have sworn you said you weren't going to bring Moira to Gotham on Wayne Enterprises business just to get Omar here, that you'd considered the idea and rejected it, that it was a cheap manipulative stunt playing with people's lives that way, the sort of thing Ra's might do, but totally beneath you."

Bruce blinked.

"One," he said crisply, "That was before. Then it was five agents instead of six in Chinatown. Now he's messing with Dick. I'm not about to let him get away with that. Two: it's not playing with their lives if I really do want Moira's program coming out of the Gotham headquarters and not the Metropolis office. I would've brought her here at the beginning if she'd let me, but it took some time to convince her the job was legit. Three—"

"How many parts are there?"

"Four. Part Three: I'm not forcing Omar to go under cover or anything, I just want to pick his brain a little. That's why I asked him to meet Batman tomorrow while you and Moira looked at apartments. I'm just *asking* for *help*. Exactly what you, Dick, Alfred, Clark, and everybody else are always on me to do."

"Me? How did I get on that list?"

"Four—"

"Have you always been this anal-retentive?"

"Four—"

"You'd think I would've noticed before now."

"Four: with Ra's, it's always a game of chess. Omar is the one piece I have that Ra's doesn't even know is on the board."

"I mean, to layout your argument with a table of contents and footnotes..."

"In other words, I've made my point and, rather than admit you've lost a round, you want to change the subject."

"Growl."

"Well, it won't work, Kitten. Unless you admit I'm right, I won't tell you what Omar said while you and Moira were powdering."

"I can't believe I missed anything good. According to Moira, Omar is pretty naïve about some things."

"According to Omar, Moira is pretty naïve..."

Their eyes met.

"Interesting paradox there."

"I'll say."

"Strange couple."

"Very."

For a man like Ra's Al Ghul, *too much loyalty* or *excessive devotion* should have been impossible concepts. But his Gotham lieutenant, Ulstarn, was beginning to push the envelope.

It wasn't that things were going poorly in Gotham City. On the contrary, The Upstart, that son of performing gypsies who the detective would make his heir instead of breeding with his own beloved Talia, was responding exactly as expected. Nightwing, it was known, had a history of trying to prove himself, to prove himself to the Detective and to prove himself as good as the Detective. He had never run an operation of his own in Gotham City. The situation Ra's had placed before him, through his agents Brian Everwood and Nethal, was a scratch precisely where the boy itched. It had just the right mixture of appeals to his vanity and his insecurity. Everwood planted the suggestion to start this *-snort-* security agency and, at virtually the same moment, Nethal established himself as an invaluable source of information. Blinded by the chance of erecting his own banner in his mentor's city, of being connected to the corridors of power and to sources of information about the Gotham Underworld even the Detective and that annoying Oracle could not match, the headstrong fool never dreamt that DEMON was the source of the information he was passing on to the Detective. Or that, now that the information pipeline was established, Ra's could feed the Detective any information he wished, maneuvering him and his minions to do whatever he pleased.

This pleasant thought was interrupted by the chiming of the clock. It had just turned eight o'clock in Gotham. That meant within seconds the door would open and...

“My Master, the unworthy agent in Gotham begs to make his report via the satellite hookup.”

Ra’s Al Ghul winced. Ulstarn ran a tight ship; that was why he was sent to run the Gotham City operation in the first place. Ra’s had seldom encountered a man of such potential: fiercely loyal, disciplined to the point of mania, and so rabidly unpleasant to be around that the very possibility of working under him was universally understood to be a punishment. Genghis Khan, Hannibal, that Colonel in Napoleon’s army, and Ulstarn, Ra’s filed them together in his mind.

Ulstarn’s intense need to prove his loyalty had, up until now, been manageable—especially since Ra’s had the brainstorm of stationing him on the far side of the world in the Detective’s City. He reported in regularly, sent some tribute or other with every full moon, and that was that. Granted, the so-called delicacies from America were seldom to The Demon Head’s taste, but such was the price of being Ra’s Al Ghul. The tribute of underlings was not to be discouraged simply because it was revolting.

Yes, Ulstarn’s posting to Gotham was an ideal arrangement, until recently. But since Nethal was transferred out of the Chinatown base and established in a private residence, operating as an independent agent in Gotham City, Ulstarn’s mania had gone into hyperdrive. He was reporting in every few hours, always wishing to speak to the Demon’s Head himself no matter how inconsequential his report, always begging to sign off with the loyalty oath—in the long form.

It was a tantrum, that’s what it was, and Ra’s Al Ghul was not going to rescind an order or reconsider a strategic decision to accommodate the fragile ego of a lieutenant, no matter how rabidly loyal.

Resignedly, Ra’s al Ghul tapped a button, opening the channel to Gotham.

:: Great One, your lowliest and most humble servant begs to report: situation unchanged.::

Like that was news, Ra’s thought. It had only been three hours since his last report.

“Very good, Ulstarn,” Ra’s sighed.

:: My Master honors my most unworthy report with his attention, Sire. Your servant begs to be allowed to sign off with the oath of loyalty....::

“Very well,” Ra’s sighed again.

And it began, the long form. As Ulstarn’s voice droned, Ra’s face assumed a mask of patronizing attention, while thoughts returned to his private contemplation... Where was he? Ah yes, success in Gotham! The headstrong fools! They who’ve not lived but a single lifetime - Child’s play to anticipate their every thought and move...

Batman clung to the shadows in the little alley behind a novelty store in a rundown neighborhood near Chinatown. Omar entered the alley at the precise hour requested in the note, punctual to the minute, nearly to the second—not surprising in a former DEMON agent, Batman supposed.

Stepping silently from the concealing darkness, Batman was disappointed to see Omar start for only a split second before recognizing him and then breaking into a bright smile. This was Omar’s only failing as far as the Dark Knight was concerned:

he simply didn't catch on that Batman was to be feared. That's what criminals did. Or if they were too far gone to fear him, like Ra's or Joker, they at least hated him.

But to Omar, Batman was not the avenging arm of Justice, nor even Ra's al Ghul's great enemy. To Omar, Batman was The American, his ticket back to basketball, movies, and a girl called Moira.

"Come with me," Batman grveled in a voice meant to unnerve. Omar followed, unperturbed and wholly accommodating. A short while later, he looked through the nightscope Batman handed him.

"Those are agents of Ra's Al Ghul," Batman said flatly.

"Yes," Omar confirmed. "The one near the window is Ishmael, the one who sits in the back is Ulstarn. I don't know the others."

Omar handed the scope back, and Batman eyed him appraisingly. Omar responded to the silence as expected, he filled it.

"Ulstarn is legend among the followers of the Demon. He who is entrusted to run the master's affairs in the Detec- in Gotham City. It is very great honor. He is very great man. Everybody says."

Batman applied a little more silence, but this time it had no effect. Sometimes a direct question was called for: "So Gotham is a plum assignment? These men are Ra's best?"

"No," Omar answered hesitantly, "For Ulstarn, Gotham City is 'plum,' is great honor. But for others, posting here is not being sent to Gotham City; it is being sent to work for Ulstarn. They are being punished."

Batman considered this useful insight: Ulstarn was "great man...everybody says" but they didn't want to work for him. Hmm.

As Omar continued to speak, Batman was able to form a clear picture of the man: If even half of what Omar said was true, Ra's had made the biggest blunder in their long war. In sending this total shit of a human being to run his Gotham operation, Ra's had exposed his jugular. Someone that unpleasant was so because they were afraid. Afraid and paranoid! And fear was a weakness that could be exploited.

There were six agents, now there are five; if it bothered Batman, it must be *KILLING* Ulstarn.

"There were originally six agents here," Batman said to Omar, "Now there's only five. Why might that be?"

"If there were six, there still are six," Omar said simply.

"No," Batman insisted, thinking perhaps there was a language problem, "Count them, 1-2-3-4-5. There are only five men down there."

Omar shook his head. "If the Great One decide Gotham City is six-man job, there are six men here, not five and not seven. Maybe you don't see him. He is still there."

Batman stood, stretching his legs from the uncomfortable rooftop-surveillance squat.

"If there were six, there still are six," he repeated, thinking out loud. "But one has been moved elsewhere, away from the intensely insecure Ulstarn. If I'm a raving paranoid, don't I assume its about me- don't I think everything anybody does is about me?"

Omar blinked. The conversational English learned at DEMON was sufficient for a messenger, obtaining accommodations and transportation in Metropolis. Since meeting Moira he'd added to his vocabulary with respect to food, basketball, movies,

and portions of the female anatomy. But “intensely insecure...raving paranoid” was beyond him.

“In tents of the insect cures?” he asked.

Batman’s lip twitched slightly at his mistake, then said: “You’re moving to Gotham City?”

Omar nodded.

“I can have someone arrange a job for you here just as I did in Metropolis. There’s only one thing I’ll ask in return—this is something even simpler than last time.”

Omar said goodnight to Batman, walked out into the street, past the curio shop, slowed just a halfstep as he saw Ishmael through the window, and waved. Then he went back to the motel.

He could not know, though Batman would have predicted, that this simple action led Ulstarn to question Ishmael no fewer than four times: twice before the 5 a.m. report to Ra’s, once before the 8 a.m., and once again after.

“My Lord,” Ishmael repeated each time Ulstarn asked, “I only know the man slightly, to say hello if we pass in the hallway. He is a courier.”

After another four assurances that the courier, Omar, was neither a close friend of Ishmael’s, nor had they ever worked together on a mission nor shared quarters nor any other link Ulstarn could think to specifically ask about, the unlucky Ishmael was sent off to find the man anyway for a “casual, accidental meeting.”

Ishmael was far less convincing than Omar had been in appearing surprised at the *purely coincidental meeting*, but Omar let this pass. He reacted exactly as Batman had instructed—by answering or not any inquiry he wished with the guileless and unvarnished truth.

“He is in Gotham with his girlfriend Moira, who is moving here from Metropolis for her job? And this story checks out?” Ulstarn asked for the ninth time since hearing Ishmael’s report.

“Yes, My Lord.”

“And he said nothing else?”

“You ordered it to be a friendly conversation only, My Lord; he said nothing else of consequence. And I could hardly ask for more and maintain a tone appropriate to—”

“What do you mean, ‘nothing else of consequence?’ What else *did* he say?”

“He recommended I go see Star Wars Episode 2, My Lord.”

“What?”

“In my evening off, he suggested I see a cinematic entertainment: Star Wars, Episode 2, Attack of the Clones. He said it was most diverting.”

“YOU DON’T HAVE AN EVENING OFF!” Ulstarn bellowed, and Ishmael lowered his head until his chin touched his chest.

“I did not think it appropriate to reveal that, My Lord.”

Ulstarn was worried. He had viewed Episode 2: Attack of the Clones fourteen times and could not detect any hidden message this Omar might be trying to pass to his men.

He now began to worry the movie itself was the trap. It didn't contain a message—it was a way to get him out of the curio shop. To go see it, he had to leave the men alone. That was almost as bad as letting them leave the shop. How he hated not knowing where they were. He should have put a stop to that 'night off' business long before Nethal's transfer. Why it was madness, letting them go anywhere. They could be doing anything; they could be talking to anyone. At least now their free hours were spent in his presence. They could still talk to each other if they wished, for he was no tyrant. But it was better still if they spent their free time listening to him. Yes, far better that he be able to fill their ears and their minds with stories of glorious battles past, shouting down any thought but their loyalty to DEMON and the Demon Head's appointed lieutenants. And now he'd left them alone - again.

He called each man into his private quarters and questioned them about what they had done in his absence. He was not pleased with their answers, as none used the exact phrasing he wished to hear.

He began questioning again, but only got through the second man when he gave up. This was not satisfying. They were not spontaneously saying what he wanted them to say.

He thought about some sort of team-building activity: Get them all tattooed, or perhaps branded.

Enraged, Ulstarn assigned each man fourteen hours of busywork to occupy his time while he went out. Then Ulstarn stalked out of the shop again. He was going to confront the architect of his downfall, that miserable Nethal! Who was that miserable non-entity who no sooner took the loyalty oath pledging himself to Ulstarn before getting transferred to be his own one-man operation! Who was this vermin that the Master would give him orders directly! Ra's al Ghul's decisions could not be questioned, but this worthless cockroach certainly could.

He was going to confront Nethal, and this monstrous plot against his sovereignty in Gotham would be exposed—Nethal's downfall would be an example to the next ten generations of DEMON underlings to know their place and serve the lieutenants as they would Ra's al Ghul himself!

So fully did this pleasing thought fill Ulstarn's imagination, he failed to take the most elementary precautions for a DEMON agent operating in Gotham. Not that it would have made any difference. The caped figure following on the rooftops was silent, invisible, and undetectable whether his quarry was paying attention or not.

Batman stood on the roof of Wayne Enterprises. He hadn't fired the grappling hook. He wasn't even seeing the magnificent cityscape before him. He simply stood. And he stared. And he tried to work out how he had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

He had won. It was that simple. The information network was shut down. The mole was discovered. A host of corrupt politicians and executives were forced to resign. Checkmate, Ra's. It was over and Batman had won.

So why did victory taste like ashes?

From Ra's al Ghul's point of view the Endgame would have played out like this: Ulstarn failed to report in... Hmm. Nethal failed to report in... Oh-Oh. He'd initiate contact with Gotham then. The Chinatown base failed to respond... He'd call his puppets at City Hall, at WishStar, at Larraby Chemicals. No one would take his call. Then they'd hear the first news releases: Resignations. Everwood. Johanson. Brownley. Wickershaw. Feldman. One by one, all his puppets. And finally... Selina's touch... the crate. Nethal shipped back to his masters in the same container that smuggled him in.

He had won. Batman had won.... So why did it taste like ashes?

Once they'd learned about the webcam, it was easy. Once they learned the underground network distributed their information through a website, it all became so easy.

It was an ingenious plan, typical of Ra's: A website for a seemingly innocent neighborhood association... Gotham's Chinatown, how picturesque... with a webcam trained on a random storefront, the curio shop... The arrangement of the merchandise in the window was a code. Subscribers to Ra's service were told how to decipher it: Display of a certain Noh mask meant the Gotham Stock Exchange, another was Who's Who, another the front page of the Gotham Times.... Next to the masks, the number of figurines directed the viewer to a specific page, name, or column... Prices, sale signs, everything displayed in the window had a meaning. It was brilliant. And it could be accessed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, from anywhere. It was *BRILLIANT*... as long as no one knew what it was.

Once they'd learned it was a website, it all became simple. Oracle hacked their server and implanted a virus that sent her the IP of any computer visiting three times in one week. It was thought this was necessary to avoid tagging casual visitors—as it happened, there were no casual visitors to this site.

Within a week they had a complete list of Ra's buyers. Bruce Wayne spent a day making sure the SuperCorps could survive the resignations before Batman spent the night delivering his ultimatum. By the time the D.A. opened the bulging envelope with a blazing bat insignia, she had fourteen voicemails from people listed inside it—all begging to cut a deal.

It was a victory. It was a total victory. So why did it taste like ashes?

The first thought was to go through Jack Drake. Drake Industries was almost as big as Wayne Enterprises, and its founder was perfectly credible as a potential buyer of Ra's information. Except since Ra's knew Bruce Wayne's secret, there was a better than even chance he knew Tim's. So Jack Drake was tainted. But the discussion brought Tim into the loop, and Tim had the solution. It was he, after all, who first identified the underground network. And he did it when the people some of his friends interned for had information they shouldn't logically have. One of those friends was Randy-Quad, working for his father...

"Randolph Larraby III, or as he likes to be thought of around the office, God Almighty," Tim quipped.

Bruce could've kicked himself - the plans from Larraby Chemicals! It was under his nose almost from the beginning. Dick's "contact," Nathan, supplied blueprints of the old Ace plant from Larraby Chemicals.

And Bruce just happened to have an invitation to another of Mrs. Ashton-Larraby's benefits sitting on his desk.

"What! Were all the good diseases taken?" Selina muttered when told they had to go to a fundraiser for Periodontal and Craniofacial Research.

"I will admit it's not one of the most pressing problems in the world," Bruce hedged.

"It's gum disease," she interrupted.

"Pretend she's a rogue who's M.O. is stupid parties and humor her, okay?"

"I will humor split personalities with a fate complex, photosynthetically-crazed ex-botanists, and even a masochist-enabler in tassels taking time out from her obsession with Psycho Clown to run off to Paris with my old boyfriend! But I will not humor that social climbing blue-hair trying to pass off citrines as canary diamonds at a benefit for gum disease!"

She relented of course. When Bruce's powers of persuasion were exhausted, Batman took over—and Batman, Selina would be the first to admit, didn't fight fair.

"I don't know how I let you talk me into this," she muttered as they entered the stuffy ballroom.

"Yes, you do," Bruce insisted through a frozen receiving-line smile, making his point with a playful, well-placed, pinch that make her squeak as she reached her hostess's hand.

"HEEY-lllo, Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. Hello. So good to see you again."

Bruce then greeted Mrs. Ashton-Larraby and the two began chatting like the two biggest airheads on the social register, while Selina moved on to Mr. Larraby - Randolph Larraby III, who, like every other time she'd met him, seemed wholly incapable of making eye contact. He would greet her, chat about the weather, the theatre, the stock market, the traffic problems created by the new Gotham Plaza, Bruce's new plane, a line of software Wayne Enterprises was launching, and his own upcoming cruise to Alaska...all without once raising his eyes above her cleavage.

"You're gonna pay for that one, Lover," Selina assured Bruce at the first opportunity, referring to the pinch.

"Take your best shot, Kitten," he answered, "then *I'll take mine*. Meantime, let's do what we came for."

A short while later, Selina separated herself from the party and wandered onto the terrace. She appeared to contemplate the cityscape until—predictably—Randolph Larraby trotted out to follow her.

“I’ll bet Bruce doesn’t have a view like that,” he began, “Wayne Manor is, what, all the way out in Bristol.”

Having pointed across the river towards Bristol, Larraby’s hand should have returned to its side, but it came to rest instead on Selina’s shoulder.

“You know what else Bruce doesn’t have?” Selina said sweetly. “A wife.”

She slipped away, leaving Larraby alone on the terrace—or so he thought. But as he turned to rejoin the party, he found his way blocked by a huge mass of black.

“You’re buying dirty information,” Batman growled. “You’ll tell me. You’ll tell me everything you know about this network. Or there’ll be consequences... for you, for your business, your personal fortune, your position in society - not to mention your health.”

Larraby spilled. The whole thing: about the Chinatown shop, the webcam, how the information was distributed.

A total victory.

So why did it feel so much like defeat?

Ulstarn, Ra’s al Ghul’s neurotic mess of a lieutenant. He’d reacted exactly as Batman expected. Already paranoid about the sixth man removed from his charge, he’d imagined his rival’s scheming in the most trivial occurrences. It took only the lightest touch to set him off. When his obsessive fears boiled over, Ulstarn went to confront his antagonist. Batman followed him straight to Nethal... the missing sixth man was located at last.

Batman had feared he might have to step in if he was to benefit from the discovery: he didn’t want Ulstarn killing this guy. Fortunately, like most paranoids, Ulstarn was cowardly and passive-aggressive. He didn’t have the gumption to strike at his rival in any meaningful way. He only played games with the lights, killing the power, and broke a window, probably by tossing a rock with some poorly worded threats.

It ended. Ulstarn left. And Batman was free to follow Nethal.

And follow he did. Followed him straight to Nightwing. Batman’s heart broke as he lurked over a dark alley and listened. Nethal was Nathan, Dick’s wonderful new source. Grayson Associates’s ace in the hole was an agent of Ra’s al Ghul.

The next day when Bruce told him, Dick’s reaction was just as predictable as Ulstarn’s:

“I don’t believe you’re doing this! Christ, Bruce, this is so *TYPICAL* of you! You never give me any credit! I’m doing well, I’m making a name for myself in your precious city, so it just has to be a setup, is that it? From Ra’s al Ghul, no less!”

“Ra’s is very subtle, Dick; he’s a master manipulator. I’m not surprised you didn’t see what was happening.”

“Oh, please. Not only is it a foregone conclusion that any success I have must be a sham, *you’re not surprised!* Dick is a mark, but that’s to be expected, is that it?”

Bruce was losing patience. Other than actually using the phrase “let me be my own man,” Dick was completely reverting to behaviors that...

“Why can’t you accept that I’m my own man now? WHY?”

“Dick! Enough.” This was the breaking point. It was time for economy of language. *Make him* understand. “This is a setback. You’re disappointed. Lashing out at me won’t change the facts: You’re being used, Richard. You’re being used, and you won’t see it.”

It hurt. Like all the bat-family, Dick responded to hurt in one way: he quickly fashioned the deadliest weapon he could from whatever was handy and hurled it with brutal efficiency to cause maximum damage.

“You’re being used and you won’t see it,” he mused, “Gee, Bruce, where have we heard *THIS* tune before in relation to the DEMON crowd?”

Batman’s fiercest stare was the only answer.

“You can leave now,” Dick said in tones that left no doubt how little he cared about Batman’s ocular modes of expression.

“There is a line even you shouldn’t cross,” Batman’s voice graveled.

“You crossed a line when you walked in here, Bruce. It’s six feet behind you. You can cross it again on your way out.”

Batman stood on the roof of Wayne Enterprises... He hadn’t fired the grappling hook... He wasn’t even seeing the cityscape before him. It had played out perfectly. Ulstarn led to Nethal, Nethal to Larraby, Larraby gave them the webcam, the webcam gave them the client list, the network was shut down, corrupt execs removed, and Ra’s even had his nose tweaked in the inauspicious return of Nethal. A total victory. But it tasted like defeat.

WHAT'S NEW PUSSYCAT

Bruce Wayne entered the Iceberg Lounge with a far less certain gait than usual. It was only three in the afternoon, but the fact that the notorious underworld watering hole was empty did nothing to make the experience of going there, out of costume but not with Selina, any less bizarre.

He couldn't have said with certainty why he had gone. When Sly, the only bartender Penguin managed to keep longer than three weeks or three brawls, had called asking him to drop in if he had a free half-hour, Bruce only said he'd try in order to be polite. He had no conscious intention of doing so. And yet he scheduled that lunch with Rodgers and Gonzales at a downtown restaurant that was quite nearby. While he didn't rush the meeting, neither had he lingered over coffee or hurried back to the office afterwards. Now he was there, sitting at the bar while Sly stacked glasses and explained his problem... Maybe that was it. Sly had a problem and, unlike another young man who shall remain nameless, Sly actually *wanted* Bruce's advice. That was worth rushing a meeting for, wasn't it?

Both Bruce Wayne and Batman knew the nature of Sly's problem already, for the Gotham rumor mill was a force unto itself. But Bruce let the boy tell it anyway: After a year of waiting, watching, and wanting, Sly had finally psyched himself up and asked Roxy Rocket for a date. He was thinking dinner and a movie, but her tastes ran more towards daredevil sex - on her rocket - balanced precariously on the summit of the Amusement Mile rollercoaster—trying to shake it into an uncontrolled fall.

Sly related this in spurts, for as he spoke, Oswald Cobblepot kept passing by, eyeing both men with disapproval. Oswald was not only Penguin, the owner of the Iceberg and therefore Sly's boss, but he was rumored to have had a one night stand with Roxy that she wished to forget and he didn't.

"I wouldn't put too much stock in anything *he* has to say," Oswald called over bitterly, "not after what he did to Harvey."

"You see how it is, Mr. Wayne," Sly whispered apologetically, "there's nobody else I can talk to about this. I'm just an ordinary guy that happened to fall for one of these luscious honeys. Supposed to be 'a dream come true,' right? So the rest of these guys, they're not exactly sympathetic. I hear them snickering 'We should all have such problems.' I know your advice to Mr. Dent was a disaster and all, but at least, going out with Miss Catwoman, you won't roll your eyes at my saying I have a real problem here. Mr. Wayne, she wants to go out again! What am I going to do? She still thinks my objection was 'not on a first date.' I couldn't make her understand I meant 'not on the railroad tracks!'"

Bruce was at a loss and said nothing, but a comment *was* made: Not by Oswald who had disappeared into his office. Not by Sly, now preparing a pitcher of bloody mary mix. But from a dark corner booth.

"HIC-eugh. I would like another Jacaniels, tenbarter. I mean, ohmystomach. I would like another Jabberwocktail, bartender....Nooo. JabberJack. Jack! I would like another Jack Daniels, please, bartender. HICmyhead!"

Bruce and Sly turned together to see Jervis Tetch rise unsteadily from the floor beneath the booth, focus on a patch of air between them, then walk towards it. As he got closer, he looked from one to the other, his confusion and the thumping in his head intensifying with each turn of the head. Then he said, "There are two of you. Thought I was seeing double."

Then he turned to Sly and repeated, "A Jack Daniels, if you please, said the Jabberwock to the guy behind the bar that pours the drinks."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tetch," Sly apologized in that politely inflexible tone they all knew meant no deal if you begged, bellowed or pulled a M-16. "We're not open for another hour. And you exhausted your credit last night."

"Can you blame me?" Jervis wailed, looking from Sly to Bruce then back to Sly. "After what happened to me? After what I was subjected to! Was just having a nice little talk was all."

"What did happen, Mr. Tetch?" Sly asked, pouring the hungover Hatter a cup of coffee. "I never did work it out."

Jervis Tetch ignored the question, sipped the coffee, then appeared to have a better thought. He rummaged in his jacket for a small electronic wedge and eased it between his hat and his temple. Then he took out a small device like a pocket calculator, hit a few buttons, and sighed.

"Best hangover remedy in existence. Now, Sly, if you would, take this revolting concoction away and bring me another Jack Daniels."

Sly looked about to protest, when Penguin called over, "Pour him the drink. As long as he tells what happened."

"Well," a now lucid Jervis fell easily into the role of gossip, "We were simply sitting around discussing what might become of Poison Ivy now that Two-Face is out of the picture. Nigma pointed out that she seems to be working her way through the alphabet: Harley, Harvey, so next in rotation should be..."

"Hugo Strange," Penguin put in, too quickly, as if he'd perhaps thought this through already.

"Quite. Now you all know how Hugo perks up at the mention of his name," Jervis continued, "so no sooner does he overhear 'Hugo Strange is next,' and he comes up to the table, strutting. 'Next for what? Next to bring Gotham to its knees? Next to unseat Joker as Batman's greatest foe?' No, he finds out, next to plant petunias in Ivy's garden!"

Jervis paused, like an experienced gossipmonger, for everyone to get their snickers out of the way before he continued.

"So now Hugo's pissy. Victor Frieze speculated that, with all those internal poisons, when she got to Joker, she might give him a rash or turn his hair back to its original color. But then Hugo piped up, real sarcastic, 'Of course, according to your puerile little theories, Jonathan Crane would be next after that. Whatever will he do, I wonder, when his number is called,' snicker snicker."

"What did he mean by that?" Sly asked—which was lucky because Oswald and Bruce both wanted to know as well.

"You know Hugo," Jervis said, "when he gets his nose out of joint, he analyzes: Nobody's ever seen Crane with a girl, why no henchwench? 'Scarecrow doesn't lend itself to it,' Jonathan said. 'What about *The Wizard of Oz*,' Hugo asks, and he's on a roll now: Scarecrow could have a Dorothy. Hey yeah, and who played Dorothy—Judy Garland! Snicker-snicker. Jonathan had enough at this point and he said something—he said something I'd rather not repeat, cause this is a visual that sticks with you for a while, and I'm drinking to try and blot out. Okay?"

Bruce was pretty sure he knew what that visual was. Hugo Strange might have deduced that Bruce Wayne was Batman, but Batman knew something far more disturbing about Hugo: Hugo Strange had a mannequin fetish. Never 'til his dying day, Bruce reflected, would he forget bursting into Hugo's lair and finding him, dressed in a Halloween-store knockoff of his own Batman costume minus the cowl, with the cowl resting on an otherwise naked plastic woman. So, Bruce deduced, somehow or other Jonathan Crane had seen what Batman saw. And last night, while the banter was flying, innuendo about Scarecrow and Judy Garland begat innuendo about Hugo Strange and the display window at Bloomingdale's. Hatter overheard and...

In a rare moment of empathy, Bruce slid \$20 to Sly with a nod. Sly understood this to mean it was to reduce Jervis's tab. The visual did indeed stick with you for a while... Jack Daniels wasn't going to do it.

"Alfred, you wouldn't have believed it." Bruce was in the kitchen, feverishly rearranging lunchmeat, bread, cutting board, mustard and other sandwich-making necessities. "This is the most wanted list—dangerous, deadly criminals - and they're sitting around gossiping like old ladies, drinking like it's keg night at Sigma Alpha Phi, and hitting on women like... like it's keg night at Sigma Alpha Phi!"

"I'm not certain I understand, si—Would you possibly like me to prepare that sandwich *for you*, sir?"

In answer, Bruce merely slammed the breadknife against the cutting board, and Alfred winced for his kitchen.

"And the worst of it is, Batman still has to fight these guys. One of these days, I'm going to be in some alley, staring down Scarecrow, and I'm going to flash on him speculating if Poison Ivy and Ventriloquist get together, what will they do with the Scarface dummy!"

Alfred made no comment, but deftly removed the cutting board and handed Bruce two slices of bread. Then he offered a parallel.

"It occurs to me, sir, that the challenge Batman might face in that instance is not unlike that in my profession, when one is obliged to see one's employer in any number of... *informal* circumstances... and yet one is still obliged, when waiting on them later at table, to maintain a dignity in keeping with one's position."

Bruce rolled his eyes. This was hardly the response he wanted.

"Selina, this really isn't the response I was hoping for," Bruce complained.

Selina put her hand to her side, then her chest, then her mouth. With effort, she managed to contain her laughter.

"Scarface sitting on the bedpost, making color commentary, while Ventriloquist and Ivy get it on 'cause she's working her way through the alphabet'... Baby, what kind of response *were* you expecting?"

"I don't need to be hearing this kind of thing."

Selina shrugged, amused.

"So don't listen. Why'd you go to the Iceberg in the middle of the day anyway?"

"Sly asked me. The thing with Roxy that Black Canary mentioned."

"You mean that I told you. Unless there's something new; is there something new?" Selina asked eagerly.

"Oh, that's right. See, Nathan told Nightwing, Dick told you and he *also* told Barbara. Barbara told Dinah, you told me-Bruce, Dinah told me-Batman."

"And the *ROGUES* are such gossips, you say?"

Bruce rolled his eyes. This just wasn't the response he wanted.

"Batman, I'm telling you like I heard it," Robin managed through a mouth full of pizza.

Batman glowered when his sidekick arrived at the rooftop check in munching a cheese slice from Gino's, but he couldn't afford to do more. Tim's cooperation was too important right now, the only lifeline he had to Dick.

"I didn't hear anything about a date, I didn't hear anything about Sly," Robin was saying. "I don't even know who Sly is. I heard Roxy was making a play for Joker 'cause of how he slaps Harley around. Being Joker's girlfriend is a dangerous gig, and, you know, she likes the thrill of almost-dying."

"Then you heard wrong," Batman cut him off just as he would any other faulty report where he had superior information. "Roxy has not made a play for the Joker. But she might if she realized the danger factor, so do not repeat that story."

"Fine. Whatever. Who would I tell anyway? Steph's away for the summer."

"You talk to Dick," Batman noted quietly.

Robin sighed.

"Yeah, I do," he admitted, "but he won't go on talking to me if he thinks I'll turn around and tell you what's said. So don't ask me."

"Bro, I didn't tell him *ANYTHING*, I swear," Tim insisted, "But I couldn't very well stop him from talking, could I? Besides, what he had to say was—well, for Bruce, it was damn near an apology!"

"That he wasn't prepared to admit his behavior in the past was that of a dictatorial control freak. That *I* saw it that way, and someone who felt that earlier behavior was inappropriate and unsupportive should be able to see how *this* episode was completely different. How do you figure that is 'damn near an apology?'"

"For Bruce!"

"Bullshit 'for Bruce!' Words mean the same thing coming from Bruce Wayne as they do from everybody else. If you mean 'I'm sorry the way I acted all those years ago

makes this thing you're going through now more difficult,' then *you say that*. And if you say 'I'm not prepared to give an inch on anything I've ever said or done, but *your* perceptions are at fault here and *you* best adjust them,' then THAT'S what you're held accountable for saying."

"Now I'm sorry I told you," Tim moped.

"So why did you tell him?" Selina asked.

Tim held his hands to his forehead as he wailed, "I don't know! Because... Because I'm stuck in the middle of the Batman-Nightwing rematch and the paranoia is contagious! I had a short conversation with Bruce, I was juggling a pizza slice and a grappling hook, and afterwards... well, I wasn't completely sure I had muted the OraCom. So on the off chance that Barbara might have overheard..."

"You covered your tail," Selina nodded appreciatively. "You went to Dick and said 'in the interests of full-disclosure,' I had this talk with B... A preemptive strike, nice move, Short Stuff."

"Well, it backfired! All it did was bring out Dick's inner Bruce: 'I'm not the one being unreasonable, *he's* being a stubborn fathead.' Selina, they're driving me nuts! Last night, I needed to hit something so bad, I followed Riddler for six hours. But he wouldn't do anything criminal! You know where he went?"

"All night coffee shop at a Barnes & Noble in Chelsea."

Tim's mouth dropped open.

"It's a long story," Selina laughed.

"As long as it's a long story in which no one, at any point, will utter the phrase 'my city' or 'be my own man,' I got time!"

Laughing harder, Selina gave a summary report:

"Eddie has a new girl. She works at the Barnes & Noble in Chelsea."

"She works? Y' mean, like a job?"

Selina nodded, sadly.

"I know; it will never work. 'People like us' and 'normals.' But you can't tell Eddie that. Certainly *I* can't tell him that while I'm seeing Bruce Wayne, now can I? Besides, as far as Eddie's concerned, she's no ordinary girl. She does the Times crossword in ink."

Tim leaned forward to hear more, his Dick-Bruce frustrations forgotten.

"So that's how they met," Robin now repeated the story Tim heard earlier, "She's behind the counter, doing this crossword, in ink—he does them upside down, by the way."

"UPSIDE DOWN!" Black Canary exclaimed, "What kind of freak of nature, oh never mind!"

"Anyway, so she's stuck," Robin continued without a pause. "Six-letter word for preserved arachnid. Riddler looks down and says 'scarab.' Strike up the violins."

Black Canary laughed merrily.

...: Dinah, that's too funny, ... Barbara laughed into the OraCom.

::Oh, but wait, there's more. Seems the lady has no interest in being a Query or an Echo or whatever else he calls 'em::

...: E-gad, she won't wear a question mark? She won't be a henchwench!::...

::Can you believe it! And it's killing him because he's so impressive in the field::

...: He is????? ...

::Work with me, Barb,:: Dinah said testily, :: I'm just telling it how Tim says Selina told it.

::
...: So Puzzleboy thinks he's impressive in the field and he's whining cause the new girl won't see him there?::...

::You got it::

...: That's too weird::...

::Not to change the subject, but how's Dick doing? Tim said he was awfully...::

“...narrow-minded, inflexible and obsessively stubborn.”

Selina and Jim Gordon stared in awed fascination as Bruce went on, oblivious to the irony.

“And moody. He's gotten so moody.”

Selina rose and excused herself from the table. In the hallway, she ran into Alfred.

“Moody! He says *DICK* is narrow-minded, inflexible, obsessively stubborn and moody! I need a drink; I need it now.”

“Master Bruce is most acutely disappointed, Miss,” Alfred demurred. “He had hoped inviting the former commissioner to ‘family dinner’ might persuade Master Dick and his wife to attend.”

“Believe me, Alfred, I know. I know he's going through stuff, and that is the only reason I am standing out here right now instead of in there, reprising the act-one monologue from Cat-Tales.”

Meanwhile in the dining room, a trapped Jim Gordon was wracking his brain for a new topic of conversation.

“Renee Montoya was approached to run for that open spot on the City Council,” he managed finally.

He meant well. He really did. It was a change of subject, a little gossip. Renee Montoya. How could he know the spot on the council was only vacated because Brian Everwood was a puppet of Ra's Al Ghul, forced to resign when Batman brought down the operation that caused this rift with Dick in the first place.

Bruce's growling dropped an octave, which Jim had never seen happen outside the cowl. It was interesting—but not conducive to the digestion. When Selina returned to the dining room, she found Bruce alone.

“Gordon left?” she asked.

“Some excuse about getting up early to clean out his basement. Your fault, Kitten. You made him uncomfortable.”

“What with my being so obsessively moody?”

“And she scores!” Dick cheered. “Two points, Selina!”

Selina gave an 'oh please' scowl.

"Then, let me guess," Dick went on, "You said 'with my being so obsessively moody' and he took the hit exactly like he always does: hostile stare, growl, harrumph, and goes on patrol."

"He is what he is, Dick; you can't take it to heart so much. He wants to be disapproving and judgmental for a while. It's just one of those things. You gotta let it roll off your back."

Dick gave a hostile stare, growled, harrumphed.

"You know what his latest beef with me is?" Selina continued. "He made a log entry last week: 'Currently at large: Ivy, Scarecrow, Hatter, *Harvey and Eddie*.' He writes Harvey instead of Two-Face, and Eddie instead of Riddler, and this is *my* fault cause they're my 'pets' among the rogues."

"See, that's what I mean, that's just SO TYPICAL! What he does is your fault. Somebody else is always to blame, somebody else is always the problem."

"C'mon, Kiddo, one of you has to be the bigger man here, and history tells us it's not going to be him."

Dick growled again, harrumphed again, and left the room. Selina turned to Barbara, who was at her workstation, too immersed in the flickering monitors to listen to the conversation. Selina finished her tea in a swallow and gathered her things to leave when, after a moment, Nightwing emerged from the bedroom and headed for the window. "Going out" was his only comment.

Almost as soon as he'd left, there was a static buzz from the desktop speaker and Batman's voice rang out clearly:

::Odd that the OraCom is functioning, since Oracle herself has obviously been kidnapped::

Selina shook her head sadly while she watched Barbara reposition her headset mic.

"Come again, Boss?" she said calmly.

::Oracle?: the deep voice dripped with uncharacteristic sarcasm ::Impossible. When Barbara and Dick failed to show up for family dinner, I naturally assumed there was some sort of dire emergency keeping you away::

"Oh, for pity sake," Selina muttered to no one in particular.

There was a long silence, then Barbara said, "There's some static on the channel, Boss. I didn't quite get that."

"No, no, no," Selina erupted, "Don't let him off the hook like that. This is fucking ridiculous. He's out there watching, he waited for 'Wing to leave, and now he pulls this shit. Barbara, I mean it, don't let him get away with that."

Barbara stared at Selina like she was speaking in Swedish.

"Boss, there's a 9-14 on 12th street. This early in the night it's probably a false alarm, but it is electronics store and since Mad Hatter is at large..."

::Check. Batman out::

"Damnit, Barbara, what did I just say!" Selina demanded.

"Selina, what do you expect me to do? It's between the two of them."

"Is this what everybody did last time? Just stand by and watch while the pair of them self-destruct?"

"Selina, why is this bothering you so much? I mean, I'm not exactly happy about it. I love 'em both and they're hurting. But, look, it has happened before. This is actually the *norm* for those two. The couple months of peace we've had was the anomaly."

"I can't accept that."

"I can see that. What I'm saying is: Why not?"

Selina thought about that for a long moment, then she rummaged in her handbag and scribbled on a notepad.

"Give me half an hour," she said, "then tell 'Wing to investigate a break-in at this address."

Nightwing approached the South Mall expecting to find the supposed break-in was either rats in the outdated alarm system, or the work of the stupidest smalltimer to ever force a deadbolt with a credit card.

From the day it was built, the South Mall was a white elephant. In a city like Gotham, the idea of clustering chain stores under one roof was ludicrous. Adding a food court, an arcade, and a multiplex didn't help in a city where food and amusements are everywhere.

Still, Dick did recall fondly one particular night when the mall was new. An alarm had sounded, like now. Batman and Robin responded. And they encountered Catwoman.

He didn't understand then why the confrontation seemed different from those with other criminals. Batman always challenged the perps, and they always denied doing anything criminal. But Catwoman—Catwoman was insulted! The sort of merchandise in a shopping mall, a SHOPPING MALL! It was beneath her! Oh, she didn't deny being a thief. But she was a world class thief, and this was a measly shopping mall!

"Then what are you doing here," Batman had grveled.

"Maybe I followed you," she purred.

And then Batman sent him to "find some evidence."

Yeah, in an empty parking lot at three in the morning, Robin set out to "find some evidence."

Instead, he found Batgirl. Robin and Batgirl had such an adventure that night. By dawn, they had apprehended the real burglars and commemorated the event with a silly reel of photos from one of those booths. More importantly, they laid the foundations for a partnership and a friendship that... that lasted through... everything. All the turmoil of growing up. Revealing identities. Falling in love. Even getting married. Dick couldn't help but realize as his thoughts returned to the present: the partnership forged that night turned out to be more resilient than the one between Batman and Robin.

The revelation would have hurt had its impact not been undercut by blind shock. For as Nightwing reached the roof, he was met with the sight of Catwoman, stretched out, legs crossed, one knee bobbing playfully over the other. On the bouncing leg, just at the ankle, hung a diamond necklace, wrapped twice and fastened, like an anklet.

"C'mon, Selina, what gives?" Nightwing blurted, not realizing until he heard himself how young he sounded.

She said nothing. Just raised an eyebrow, and bounced the foot at him.

"This place was beneath you years ago when it was new," he complained.

"True," she conceded. "And thank you for noticing. That little observation eluded *him*, as I recall."

"Yes. It did."

"See, there are one or two areas where you're just naturally better than him, without even trying," she purred. "But don't tell him I said so." Then she winked. "For example, you don't piss me off 1/10th as much as he does."

"Is that why we're here," Nightwing asked. Then he knelt, grabbing hold of the bouncing leg and undoing the clasp on the necklace. "So you can massage my poor shattered ego? Selina, I get that at home! Barbara's being so sweet and supportive it's killing me! If she'd at least tease me, it might not feel like—like I FUCKED UP so bad. Dinah baked me brownies; did you hear about that? And now I get a pep talk from Catwoman!"

He started playing with the necklace as he continued. "Instead of being so nice, why don't you come out and say it: Richard, you were played like a fiddle by Ra's al Ghul. I cannot believe you were so stupid as to be made a fool of by the flyweight hairdo."

"Oh shit," Catwoman said softly, "'Wing, you can't possibly think that's how I look at this, can you?"

"I don't know why not. That's how I see it. Selina, I—I've said it myself a hundred times: what kind of self-deluded imbecile do you have to be to let that demon crowd string you along? Now it turns out, I'm a bigger fool than Bruce ever was and I—"

"Okay, remember when I said you don't piss me off 1/10th as much as he does? I take it back."

Her comment was playful, but Nightwing looked at her seriously.

"You ain't heard nothing yet. Look, Selina, I don't know how much you heard about what was said that day, when Bruce told me about Nathan and Brian Everwood. One minute, I'm sitting there the master of my own fate, having built something that's going to be important in the fight for Gotham. And the next, Bruce waltzes in and says Grayson Associates is just a tool Ra's al Ghul manipulated me into creating for his own purposes."

"And you were—understandably—very upset."

"Yes. Yes, I was 'upset.' Especially with it coming from Bruce that way. And I said... Selina, I something awful. I took a cheap shot. I said, 'being played for a fool by the demon crowd and not knowing it. Gee, where have we heard that before?'"

"Alright. Now I definitely take it back that you don't piss me off as much as he does. But Richard, so what? You piss me off, you think I'm going to spend the next ten years nursing a grudge over it?"

"No."

"Seems like you're more than a little mad at yourself too. Are YOU going to spend the next ten years feeding this into some massive inferiority complex, or are you going to cut yourself a break and move on?"

"Well," he stopped and laughed, "when you put it that way, no. I'll move on. Eventually."

"Okay, then. I'm going to forgive you. You're going to forgive you. What do you think the chances are that Bruce can manage the same thing. I mean, he does have that annoying tendency to be better at just about everything."

"You gonna put this thing back or am I?" Nightwing asked flatly, holding the necklace.

"Wing!"

"Selina, just leave it be okay? Me and Bruce. It is what it is. We've all behaved ridiculously, and I've had enough of it. I'm moving on."

It was with a marked feeling of *déjà vu* that Batman landed on the roof of the Sterling National Bank. There was a time this roof was a regular base, for it afforded the best view of Cartier's roof, next door and three floors down, and Cartier's was Selina's favorite.

Batman quickly surveyed Cartier's roof now and the alley behind, as he always would before responding to an alarm. Something wasn't right. It wasn't the *déjà vu*. Something was simply not right.

"Oracle. What time did the alarm sound?" he asked into the cowl mic.

There was no answer, but a bit of static on the line sounded like a whispered *::shit::*.

"Oracle. Come in," he repeated. "I'm at the observation point now. There's no alarm, silent or otherwise. There's no activity from site security. No police. And the response time in this neighborhood is under two minutes. Can you confirm the alarm or... *Oracle, respond*. What's going on?"

"I'd say you've got a burglar that knows how to get in and out without setting off the old Phoenix 8000."

The voice was hypnotically soft, faintly amused, deliciously seductive, and oh, so familiar.

Batman turned towards it, and the scientist in him kicked in with cool detachment. Learned responses: the physical body reacting to a sensory stimulus as it always had. It made no difference if his mind knew things had changed. It made no difference that she hadn't taken anything, that they weren't going to fight. His body knew this roof, knew that voice, and it reacted as it always had and always would: he was aroused yet on edge. Muscles quivered, tensing as they anticipated an embrace at the same time they tried to relax to absorb an attack.

"Catwoman, what are you doing here?" Batman heard himself ask, as surprised by the form of address as the question itself. It would've made more sense to ask why Oracle reported an alarm if Selina had circumvented the system.

"You wanted me that night," she said simply, "and every night afterwards. You knew it. I knew it. Everybody knew."

Now, as then, he said nothing.

"We wasted a lot of years."

He said nothing.

"You love him like a son. He loves you like a father. You were partners forever. Just how much time are you both going to waste on this?"

Selina Kyle's other alter ego, known only to her and most often referred to by the colorful moniker MirrorBitch, regarded her other self with a look of truly bat-like disapproval.

"Don't you give me that shit," Selina told her reflection, "I tried to warn them. I'm not my brother's keeper, and I'm certainly not my old boyfriend's drama queen sister and her bipolar husband's keeper. I tried to warn the rogues, I tried to warn the bats, I told them all what would happen. They. Didn't. Listen."

"You're not listening."

"I am listening, Eddie," Selina replied, repeating his complaint thus far as if she was a secretary taking dictation. "Everybody got entirely the wrong idea about you and Aunt Maud. You admired her for her many fine qualities, not the least of which was her superlative grasp of the question mark. It was a purely intellectual and yet mutually-rewarding relationship and they all turned it into something sordid."

"Yes, they did. Even Batman took a shot about it. Batman, can you believe it? A cheap shot!"

Selina was bursting to know what the cheap shot might have been, but she didn't trust her voice to ask. That was probably just as well, for any comment would have only prevented Edward Nigma from going on to the real subject of his visit.

"I just want to have a night out with Doris, and she won't come to the Iceberg unless—"

"Doris is crossword girl?"

"Doris is the lovely young lady I met while she was doing a crossword puzzle, yes. Do we have to come up with cutesy handles for everybody?"

"Eddie, turn around and look at yourself in that mirror, particularly the sixteen yellow question marks *on your tie*, and four dozen others on your jacket, then ask yourself just how stupid you must've sounded asking that question."

He sighed.

"Look at me. I am Riddler, I am E. Nigma, I am the Prince of Puzzlers. I query, therefore I am! Selina, why won't she see me in action? Why won't she be my sidekick?"

"Not everybody's cut out for spandex, Eddie."

"Doris is. Selina, you should see. She's 5'5" and a size 2. She'd be such a luscious Query or Echo."

"Attractive as I'm sure she would look in a leotard, I meant that not everybody is cut out for the Gotham nightlife."

"But *I AM*, Selina, I am! I *thrive* in it. And she won't see me there. She won't even come to the Iceberg to see me in my element. So I thought, maybe ... well... you could get Bruce Wayne to talk her into it?"

Selina's face froze, but Nigma didn't seem to notice. He just went on:

"He's fit in so well. It's really your relationship with him that's encouraged me to hope things will work out with Doris."

"Um... ah... er..."

She was saved by the telephone.

"Hello.... François! *Bon jour... Oui... Oui, je me rappelle les*, I remember them.... Uh-f course. Of course. Yes, I'll be delighted. Sure, I'll tell him. Sure, I'll tell her too. Okay. *Au revoir*. -click- *MERDE*."

"That didn't sound good," Eddie observed.

"François de Poulignac," Selina said despairingly.

"The French count that Harley ran off with?"

"Do we have to come up with cutesy handles for everybody?" Selina quoted.

"I never got to meet him, but the dish was prime! He's coming back?"

"No. No, much worse. His sister Natasha is coming—with her husband. Oh god, we're all doomed."

"Why, is this an Aunt Maud situation? They won't be able to handle the Gotham thing?"

"N-no," Selina explained haltingly, "It's not that exactly. It's more like—"

"Will Gotham be able to handle them? What does that mean?" Bruce asked testily, "Have you been hanging out with Riddler?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. That's not the point. He didn't get it any more than you do."

"Selina, I am approximately five hundred times smarter than Nigma or anybody else you know. When I 'don't get it,' it's because there's nothing to get."

"Oh yeah? They're not even *here* yet and it's starting already."

"WHAT is starting already?"

"Look, Natasha is a perfectly lovely woman, except she is slightly more melodramatic than Maria Callas having a diva fit... think Poison Ivy on Prozac! And Anton, he's wonderful, except when he gets excited about something, he makes Ra's al Ghul sound like Hemmingway. And even that would be fine except for one thing: they married *each other*. And they're coming here! Mark my words, sooner or later they're going to have a spat. And when that happens, within six hours, everybody around here is going to know about it. And within an hour of that, everybody will have an opinion, and within ten minutes of that, everybody will have taken sides..."

"Is it my imagination, darling," Anton deNuit asked his wife as they walked to the baggage claim, "or does it seem like everyone on the plane was bad tempered by the end of the flight?"

"Certainly everyone in First Class seems to be squabbling," Natasha answered.

"It was that movie, showing a chick-flick in a closed cabin where a man can't get away." Anton muttered.

"It was a very touching story, rich in romance, which you might appreciate if you were openminded enough to give it a try."

"WHAT IS THAT DOING HERE?" Anton demanded, pointing at the baggage carousel as if he were the hero in a silent movie indicating the coffin of the Vampire King.

"I wanted to bring the costumes," Natasha answered evenly, picking up a small, green valise, "so I did. It doesn't mean we have to use them. But at least this way, we have the option."

"The option of putting on absurd outfits to commit 'theme crimes?'"

"The option of 'when in Rome,' having a little fun like the natives do."

"Instead of the perfectly dignified and lucrative practice of grifting jet-setters in our own element."

"Perfectly dignified, perfectly lucrative, and perfectly dull. That harlequin woman made it sound like such fun... Where was the place she told us all the colorful ones gather, The Icy Lounge?"

"That harlequin woman was insane."

"Icecube, maybe? Or Icicle?"

"As is this Nocturna-Thief of the Night business. And what's more—"

"Maybe it was Icing, does that sound right? The Icing Lounge?"

Anton sighed heavily and picked up the last two bags.

"Or was it the Isaac Lounge?" Natasha guessed getting into the taxi. Anton sighed yet again.

"Eisenberg's?" she said, as they checked in at the hotel. Anton huffed.

"Eyes Only," Natasha pronounced as the bellboy brought the luggage to the room.

"No, it's the Isis Lounge," she decided, tipping the bellboy with no actual cash but a warm smile that made his knees weak.

"ICEBERG!!!" Anton screamed once they were alone. "IT'S CALLED THE ICEBERG! NOW THAT YOU KNOW, WILL YOU PLEASE, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, WOMAN, DROP IT ALREADY! IT'S CALLED THE ICEBERG. LIKE WHAT SUNK THE TITANIC. NO LIFEBOATS AND 1500 PEOPLE DROWNED. THE ICE-BERG LOUNGE!"

"Of course, the Iceberg," Natasha repeated, pleased to have the name finally, and completely unmoved by the volume at which it was shouted.

Anton huffed again, defeated. His wife said if he coming down with a cold, she'd packed the nasal inhaler.

OraCom: Channel 00

"One second, Robin," Barbara whispered, her fingers performing a rapid sweep over the controls.

...encrypt... ..all other links locked out...

"OK, Tim, it's totally clear," she announced. "None of them can access this channel."

::None of who? Barbara, we're the only ones left. It's like a haunted house movie! One by one, everybody's disappeared.::

"I know," she sighed into her mic. "Black Canary said that counterfeiting case led to Montreal and she didn't know how long she'd be away. Cassie wanted to try one of those camps to learn a foreign language by immersion, but she was scared, so Stephanie went with her."

::That's a crock and you know it! It's not a 'foreign' language, it's ENGLISH. She's got immersion in English every day. She's learning as fast as she's going to. They just don't want to be here stuck in the middle of the Batman-Nightwing mess.::

"YA THINK!" Barbara exclaimed. "Tim, I've got the most respected figures in the JLA MAKING UP reasons to avoid Gotham City! You know where they allegedly are right now? The Gamma Quadrant. You know why? Asterisk-8 is collapsing commercial wormholes to blockade Alpha Centauri."

::Gee, that does sound serious.::

"ASTERISK-8? That's Clark! That's Clark Kent lying—badly! He's looking at a keyboard while he makes up an excuse. Asterisk-8, that'd be, what, the son of Ampersand-7 and OpenParenthesis-9? AND HE'S TRYING TO PULL THIS SHIT ON ORACLE!"

::Um, Barbara, I'm wearing an earpiece. I know you're pissed, but could you please not shout?::

"I'm sorry, kid. Azrael is the only one who's man enough to admit he's avoiding us. Of course, in his case, it's not Batman & Nightwing so much as Catwoman working for Grayson Associates."

:: Oh? ::

"Yeah, you hadn't put this together? Dick's the only one, in JP's opinion, that won't forgive and forget the AzBat era. Dick hired Selina, the one person whose mere presence causes him to make a total ass of himself. Those two went into business together, Az found stuff to do out of town."

:: So it's just you and me. They've all abandoned us. What happened to not leaving a man behind enemy lines?::

"Now, Tim, it's not as bad as all that."

::It's not? These aren't battle conditions? Dick and Bruce are both mad at you for sending them individually to meet Catwoman and then each other. Selina's mad at them for 'being fatheads' and not working it out. And then there's this whole other round of Riddler - Doris - Iceberg - Fop - Alfred that everyone's pissed about, and I don't even know what that IS!!! ::

"One second."

...OraCom: Channel 00... re-encrypt... ...all other links locked out... ...rephrase every 30 seconds...

"Okay, I wanted to make doubly sure the line was secured. Robin, this can go NO FURTHER EVER, do you understand? If one word of what I'm about to tell you leaks out, I will..."

The threat was punctuated by the high-frequency squeal of an old-fashioned radio receiver.

:: Ergle-gulp. I understand. Won't tell a soul. I swear Barbara. I'll never tell a soul.::

"Okay then. The rogues have an instant messaging system. Selina's on it. Bruce knows. Neither of them know that I know. Last Thursday night, I hacked it. Between that, Dick, and Selina I got the whole story. And Tim, you won't believe this..."

Robin's eyes glazed slightly as the excited chirping in his earpiece explained that Edward Nigma a.k.a. Riddler finally brought his non-spandex-wearing girl Doris to the Iceberg under the impression that Bruce Wayne would be there with Selina. He wanted the girl to experience a certain normal factor on her first visit, and indeed see a happy and well-adjusted Costume/Normal couple. Bruce and Selina didn't show, and

Doris latched on to the only other "normal" in the place, the bartender Sly. She listened with sympathy to his tale of a horrific date with Roxy Rocket that confirmed her worst fears. Eddie was less than pleased with Bruce and Selina, but just as pissed at Sly. Threats were made, which honked off Oswald because, before Sly, Iceberg bartenders only lasted a night or two, and if Oswald could put up with Sly stealing "his precious Roxy" out from under him, Eddie should certainly be able to deal with this minor setback with a girl he hadn't even gotten to second base with (although how Oswald knew that, Oracle couldn't say). Then there was something about Scarecrow playing "on the pink team" and Hugo Strange playing with Barbie dolls that didn't quite make sense to her either...

::O...kay,:: Robin said cautiously as the excited narrative concluded. ::I guess that's Riddler, Doris, and the Iceberg explained. But what about—::

"Fop?" Barbara cut in, "I'm getting there. Selina was here the other day talking to Dick, and the two of them didn't know I could hear. She said Bruce caught himself calling Two-Face and Riddler 'Harvey and Eddie.' And there might have been something else about Ivy and Ventriloquist, I'm not sure about that. But the upshot is he's decided the whole Iceberg slumming thing had gone too far, and if he loses his reputation as a ne'er-do-well and a rake, so be it."

::Wow::

"I know. Quite a change. But it's not exactly out of the blue. I mean, Dick says from the minute he told Selina the truth and dropped the bimbos, it's been a matter of time before he gave up the Fop act."

::I guess::

"But the surprising thing is Alfred. Alfred is totally pissed."

::What? But Alfred hated the Fop::

"I know, but he hated it because he hated Bruce being thought of that way. He's mad because Bruce will give it up for a 'Batman reason,' i.e. not thinking of rogues as people, but that Bruce's own dignity wasn't a good enough reason to end it."

::Ouch::

"Can we please for the love of God get out of this room?" Anton bellowed while Natasha again changed her earrings.

"There," she cooed, "I like these better. They match the star on my handbag."

"Fine, whatever, let's just GO!"

"Anton, this is to be my debut as Nocturna. The look I assume tonight will be the image associated with that name for all time."

"It's not 'for all time,' it's for the week and a half until we go home. I can live with that, let's just GO ALREADY! The invitation is for 8:30. We have no idea how long it takes to get to this Wayne Manor."

"So we're a little late, so what? Everyone is late for those things."

"We're the guests of honor. Despite the fact that your brother probably chased Selina the entire time he was here, this Bruce Wayne is throwing a party to introduce us to Gotham Society. We are not only using this event to launch our criminal careers

as Nocturna and Thief of the Night, but you're going to make us *late* as well? Doesn't that strike you as just a trifle rude?"

"The guests of honor are late? I do call that *de classe*," Mrs. Ashton-Larraby sniffed disapprovingly as she and her son came through the receiving line.

"Mother, please, don't start," Randy-quad pleaded. "I only said I'd be your escort tonight instead of Dad because you promised it wouldn't be one of these stuffy deals where everybody stands around judging each other."

"Randolph, there are times we all must do what we do not wish to do for the sake of keeping up appearances. You know your father simply could not bring himself to face Bruce Wayne after that unpleasantness with the foreigner."

"I know that Mr. Wayne made a special point of inviting you both as a friendly gesture that there were no hard feelings after the 'unpleasantness.' And I also know that I was assured by both you and Dad that I would not be the only person in this room under ninety."

"Randolph, really, you're not even the only person under thirty-five."

"Same thing."

"That Drake boy is over by the punchbowl."

"TIM! Thank God."

"*Nouveau riche*," Mrs. Ashton-Larraby sniffed as Randy-quad waved to his friend.

Tim was quick to introduce the woman he was talking with: Renee Montoya, candidate for City Council. And Montoya was quick to see a potential contributor in Mrs. Ashton-Larraby and a campaign volunteer in Randy-quad. She set to work on recruiting them immediately. By the time she had finished explaining her platform, the guests of honor, Anton and Natasha deNuit, had arrived.

Tim explained that these were old friends of Selina Kyle's. He did not add, of course, that Bruce was making such an effort to get to know them and make them welcome in Gotham because he'd resolved to cut off contact with Selina's other friends and acquaintances at the Iceberg.

Given only this much information, Mrs. Ashton-Larraby was predisposed to approve of the deNuits, for she took a proprietary interest in Bruce and Selina's relationship since she had announced their engagement to the social world. She was not remotely deterred by the fact that the couple did not yet admit they were engaged.

"If the two of them want to go on denying what anybody at all can see just by looking at them together, that's nothing to me," she pronounced definitively.

Tim's eyes bulged in disbelief. As an excuse to leave, if only for a moment, he offered to bring Mrs. Ashton-Larraby a drink or canapé. By the time he returned, her opinion on the guests of honor had shifted.

Anton deNuit had asked Selina for a tour of the manor, while Natasha latched on to Bruce in a fashion Mrs. Ashton-Larraby found distasteful.

"That woman," she said of the newcomer, "has a terribly unhealthy pallor."

"She is a bit pale," Renee Montoya agreed in suitably non-committal terms for a politician.

"Pale. She's got, like, no blood pressure at all," Randy-quad added more definitively.

Within mere minutes of her introduction to the guest of honor, Mrs. Ashton-Larraby attached herself to Bruce and Natasha, quite determined that if this presumptuous EuroTrash was going to monopolize Bruce, she not be left to do so alone. And since she could not be in two-places at once, the formidable Mrs. Ashton-Larraby sent her son to inflict himself similarly on Selina and Anton.

His father would have leapt at the chance to spend time with Selina, but Randy wasn't as adept socially, so he ran to Tim for moral support. The two of them disappeared in search of Selina and Anton while Mrs. Ashton-Larraby dug in at Natasha's side and made relentless small talk.

"Your name is deNuit? That's French for night, isn't it?"

As meaningless small talk goes, this strategy was a mistake. For Natasha prattled something about night being the cloak that adorns mystery with its elegance, starlight in the ebon vault of the sky, and similar drivel. It taxed Mrs. Ashton-Larraby's ability to smile impassively. By the time Natasha and Bruce began discussing sleeping during the day and thereby "dwelling in darkness around the clock," Mrs. Ashton-Larraby considered that she should have assigned the boys to this pair and gone instead to keep Selina and Anton apart. No sooner did she have this thought, however, than the boys appeared: Randy was chatting with Selina, but Anton was nowhere to be seen.

She motioned to her son and suggested he try the terrace. Husbands who wander off at parties, she informed him, are invariably found on the terrace.

But before Randy could do so, the glass doors to the terrace were shattered by... well... the doors were shattered.

The... *figure* that did the shattering was... somewhat nondescript. It was man-sized, man-shaped, and gray. From head to toe, it was dark gray.

Having ripped a curtain from the wall during his entrance, the intruder spread the fabric out on the floor and demanded, at gunpoint, the guests place everything of value onto it.

The guests, jaded Gothamites all, did so with an aura of condescension. Most were already considering how they would tell this story the next day. This person was obviously here for criminal purposes, for he waved a gun and took their valuables. Plus, whatever else that outfit might be, it surely was not a Ralph Lauren tuxedo. The question was: what WAS it? Much as one liked to think they were above such things, a Gothamite did get to know the various costumed characters. "We were robbed by Penguin" was easy. "The Joker, Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy attacked the party," that everyone understood. But this character? How were they to describe it: "We were robbed by a man-sized glob of gray that looked rather like a potato?"

In a bizarre and puzzling finish, the PotatoMan allowed Bruce Wayne, Selina Kyle, and Natasha deNuit to keep their valuables. Then he fled.

After the nondescript criminal's departure, the upper echelons of Gotham society waited for the police with all the urbane sophistication of party-goers who still have an open bar, a full buffet, an orchestra, and a mansion full of amusements to while away the time until they gave their statements.

In this atmosphere, Natasha deNuit managed to slip away.

Bruce was trapped as host. But he sent Tim. Soon the police band would pick up the story. Then Oracle would know. Nightwing and Robin could take it from there.

Azrael, the artificial personality created by the Order of St. Dumas in the mind and body of Jean Paul Valley, did not approve of the latter's departure from Gotham City. An Azrael did not seek approval. An Azrael did not acknowledge past mistakes, let alone feel the need to make amends for them. And an Azrael certainly felt no embarrassment in the presence of the rightful heir to a mantle he had usurped and disgraced. If Jean Paul, the mortal man born into this body he inhabited, felt such weakness, then Azrael could be tolerant up to a point. He was prepared to tolerate Jean Paul's need to prove himself to Batman, his desire to make amends for AzBat, and even his awkward avoidance of Dick Grayson and Nightwing.

But if Grayson, the aforementioned heir to the mantle, chose to go into business with a woman who, admittedly, had been present on occasions when the aforementioned Azrael's performance was less-than-stellar... so what? Women were irrelevant. The Dumasian programming taught that they are inferior and beneath notice. If this particular woman's presence seemed to bring about episodes of less-than-impressive bungling...

And this is where the programming that was the Azrael personality hit a snag. For the chaste crusaders of the Order of St. Dumas had never thought to incorporate into the hypnotic programming of their perfect assassin any protocol for dealing with Catwoman. It simply never occurred to them to create a mindset from whence their assassin could respond to a seductive woman telling him to his (helmeted) face that he lacked pheromones. And yet, on that first meeting, this is exactly what occurred. The absence of any Azrael programming on the matter left Jean Paul at the helm, and women were not an area where Jean Paul excelled. Simply put: he choked. The added pressure of being "Batman" had already begun affecting his equilibrium, the power of the mantle was going to his head—and suddenly hearing that he wasn't desirable... the shock damn near caused him to shift control back to Azrael, resulting in one sorry, confused fiasco of an encounter.

Since then, things hadn't gotten any better.

If the Knightly Order of Dumas didn't think to program for Catwoman, they certainly hadn't prepared the Azrael psyche for dealing with failure. He had no means to process having made a fool of himself—and so it was that every time he met her again, his responses froze up. Always anticipating more stimuli to which he would be unable to respond, Azrael tried to throw control to Jean Paul, who didn't want it. The result, invariably, was another blunder that the feline fatale would add to her repertoire of "Ways you're not half the man Bruce is and never will be, you presumptuous imposter."

Bruce Wayne dating Selina Kyle *and* Grayson hiring Catwoman, it was all too much and Jean Paul had left Gotham.

But it smacked of cowardice, and Azrael couldn't stomach cowardice. So he returned.

He returned just in time to see a suspicious pair heading towards the Iceberg Lounge...

"Anton," the first said audibly, "We said it would be *gauche* to rob Bruce Wayne since he was our host. I don't know why you thought it necessary to single Selina out as well. I rather liked those diamond cats she was wearing."

“Tasha,” her companion replied, “the invitation came from her, don’t you realize that? Wayne only asked us to please her. Good god, if she’s not actually living there, the butler sure treated her like she was the hostess. I chose to err on the side of delicacy and decorum.”

It sounded like the pair had robbed Wayne Manor, a development that excited both Azrael and Jean Paul’s interest. Azrael saw a worthy foe to battle, and Jean Paul a way to prove himself to Batman. He followed them as closely as he dared, until they actually entered the nightclub.

In one respect, the Iceberg Lounge was no different from other urban nightspots: there was a core of regulars, consisting of costumed and non-monikered criminals, and there were the new people. New faces drifted in - henchmen, fences, bookmakers, working girls, assorted riffraff - they stayed a while, mixed with the regulars for a few weeks, then, as often as not, they drifted away again.

Oswald Cobblepot had become a bit of a snob about “the New People.” In one sense, this fresh meat was an important factor in the running of his business—both the legitimate business of the club, and the illegitimate fencing and racketeering operations for which the club fronted. But Cobblepot wasn’t some nameless crime boss, he was the Penguin, one of Gotham’s oldest and most established rogues. He didn’t care to learn the names and gimmicks of all these flash-in-the-pan newbies. Hence, when the new couple entered, he barely registered them beyond “Goth woman and her companion who is too tall.” That is...until...

He was showing them to a table in the main dining room when they dropped the names of two valued customers:

“You said you would *isolate* and *distract* Bruce Wayne, not *flirt* with him! Not make him listen to the ‘starlight in the ebon vault’ bit (on a full stomach no less, poor man). Not *drape* yourself on him like a Greek toga!”

“You didn’t want to rob the host; he had to be gotten out of the way somehow.”

“So did Selina. But you didn’t see me *pawing* at her that way!”

This statement, uttered as they passed Joker and Harley’s table, brought an immediate response.

“Who’s been pawing Selina?” Joker demanded loudly, for he considered himself King of the Gotham Rogues Gallery. He addressed the Iceberg dining room generally as his court, and anyone in it as his subjects.

“NOT AGAIN!” Harley wailed, throwing down her napkin. “I am sick of you caring more about Bruce Wayne’s love life than your own.” She stood to leave in a huff, then stopped as she realized the newcomers were staring at her. They looked... familiar.

“Why look, Natasha, it is the delightful Harlequin who told you of this place!”

The Thief of the Night, forgetting he wore a leotard that make him look like a potato, reverted to his natural manner of Anton, the jet-setting charmer.

“*Enchanté pour vous revoir, Mademoiselle,*” he murmured taking her hand, “Enchanted to see you again. I am Anton duNuit, from the Chateau, you remember, you were with my brother-in-law François.”

“Heh, heh, it couldn’t have been me,” Harley squeaked meekly. “I, uh...”

“You figure it was a different Harlequin?” Joker growled dangerously.

"My husband is confused," Natasha put in, "He forgets himself and forgets that the cold names and faces of the day give way to dark and delirious facades in the alluring shadows of night."

"Huh?" Joker said.

"The *Thief of the Night* failed to introduce himself properly," Nocturna went on, deftly removing Harley's hand from her husband's. "He is the Thief of the Night and I am Nocturna."

Joker eyed her suspiciously.

"Lady, you should get some sun. Some of us can pull off that look, but you look like Death on a Triscuit."

"That better not be who I think it is," Nightwing grumbled, looking at a shape several rooftops away.

Robin looked through the binoculars and confirmed, "It's Azrael."

"Well that's *JUST WHAT WE NEED*, isn't it. Captain Lugnut staking out the Iceberg while we're supposed to be tracking—what's that description—'Morticia Adams and a walking spud.'"

"I looked fine in my tuxedo," Anton muttered into his glass.

Fed-up with developments in the dining room, he'd sought a cognac and a sympathetic ear at the bar.

"A tuxedo," he explained to the pretty, normal-looking woman chatting with the bartender, "is a classic style of dress for a reason. It endures because it makes a man look sophisticated, dapper and manly."

Oswald Cobblepot walked by just then, and Nocturna cleared her throat meaningfully.

"Well, most men," she put in.

"That is a rude woman," Oswald grumbled, returning to the dining room, "with a skin condition," he added bitterly.

This, unfortunately, was overheard by Poison Ivy, who was offended, and by Two-Face, who was delighted Ivy now had someone else to be mad at.

Meanwhile, the pretty normal-looking woman was working up her courage to meet the newcomer at the bar. "Hi," she began boldly, offering her hand, "I'm Doris. And you're the first one I've seen here that talks sense. Can I ask you—those outfits—the tights—do they chafe?"

OraCom Channel 2:

...:Nightwing, I don't know what Azrael is doing there. I thought he'd left town. He's not on the channel. If you want to know why he's there, go and ask him. Maybe he's seen them!:...:

:: Oracle, give me a break. You want me to swing over there, tap him on the shoulder, and ask Azrael, the vigilante clotheshorse, if he's seen Mr. Spud? ::

Roxy Rocket stormed out of the dining room and into the bar, forgetting that Sly would be there. That was awkward, but for now, she didn't care. She ordered a long island iced tea and began to rant:

"The new woman, Elvira—"

"Nocturna," Anton corrected.

"-is impossible," Roxy continued, undeterred. "She's not here half an hour and the men in there are hanging on her every word, staring into her eyes like she was the Dragon Lady. 'The sunless hours are serene and magical,' she says. 'The songs of the nightbirds are sweeter.' What the holy hell is that supposed to mean? -hic—"

"It means that Nocturna has finished her fifth champagne cocktail and is persuading that strawman to buy her a sixth," Anton explained bitterly.

"Scarecrow," Oswald scoffed, "if he'd been half as discriminating about his victims as you were and not gone attacking Bruce Wayne, he'd have more blood in his veins now."

Roxy looked daggers at this other newcomer at the bar—another newbie who somehow managed to leapfrog over her. She was only too aware that she wasn't an old-school villain like Joker, Riddler, Penguin or Catwoman; but she'd worked hard to overcome that and fit in among the established rogues. How these new people managed to waltz in and carve out a niche for themselves in one evening, getting attention from all the biggest names...

"And who the hell is Nocturna," she asked bitterly.

"Nocturna is my wife," Anton answered politely, "And I am the Thief of the Night, *enchanté*." He punctuated this last with a courtly bow over Roxy's hand in which his lips gently touched her glove. This brought more daggers from both Oswald and Sly.

"Whew," Eddie entered from the dining room with a fascinated glow. "Damn but that woman can work a metaphor. I've never seen anything like it. Hugo said something about her being pale—and that led to pale moonlight reflected on the water or something and she took off. It's been like twenty minutes on the moon and the stars and the twilight..."

Anton sighed.

"Another drink please, I'll be here a while."

"SAY," Eddie looked Anton up and down with new awareness, "You're the guy in gray who told Doris that costumes chafe."

"OH, REALLY," Roxy chimed in, but with an emphasis that meant she was speaking for another's benefit rather than Anton's. "So you're another one of these anti-costumed criminal bigots, are you? What's the matter, a shapely woman in tights too much for you to handle, you gutless wonder? You gotta have everything dowdy and gray in order to feel safe? Is your lousy manhood threatened by a real woman that isn't afraid to act like it?"

"Roxy, for pity sake," exclaimed a new voice—and both the bar and the dining room were stunned into silence at the unprecedented sound of the unflappable Sly flipping out. "How many ways do I have to say it? Roxy! I don't care if you're a bad girl! I don't care about the outfits! I just *DIDN'T want to DIE* in some freakish sexual daredevil incident that will become 'a cautionary tale' circulated on e-mail forwards for the next six hundred years!"

There was a long, long silence.

Finally, it was Two-Face who broke the silence.

"We'd like to hear more about that, Roxy."

OraCom Channel 3:

...: Robin, O. This is a 30-second advance warning, I'm about to tell Nightwing that Batman has extricated himself from the situation at homebase and is now proceeding into Gotham. ...

:: ... ::

...: Robin, acknowledge. ...

:: ... ::

...: Clear your throat, cough, do something, kid. ...

:: ... ::

...: Robin, acknowledge the message. ...

...: NOW! ...

...: Robin, say something, you're scaring me. ...

...: ROBIN!!! ...

:: -cough-can't talk now. ::

...: WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING OUT THERE? ...

:: -cough-later. ::

OraCom Channel 2:

...: Nightwing, Batman proceeding into Gotham. ETA at your location in ten minutes. ...

:: Not now, Babs. ::

...: Soon as I open the channel, he'll expect a report on the perps you and Robin are tracking and-excuse me? Did you say?...

:: Not now~~~qqo!~~~::

...: What's that noise in the back? NIGHTWING! ...

OraCom Channel 1:

...: Batman, proceed to location now transmitting to your GPS. 'Wing and Robin are there but- ...

:: They're not responding. ::

...: They're responding, but they're not saying anything ...

OraCom Channel 3:

...: Robin, come in. What is that noise I hear on the back of Nightwing's signal? ...

:: Hold on.::

...: *ROBIN!* ...

The blip that represented Robin's transponder hopped a small distance from Nightwing's, indicating a move to another rooftop...

:: Jesus, Barbara, it's an earpiece, remember? Do you have to *SCREAM INTO IT* every time you get *EXCITED*? The background noise was Azrael.::

...: *Oh, shit.* ...

:: 'Wing asked about this pair we're tracking, Az saw them go into the Iceberg, 'Wing asked why Az didn't follow them in, Az asked what 'Wing is doing back in 'his city.' Zany hijinx ensued.::

Anton had had enough. His wife's costume was a Vera Wang. His was a leotard and speedos. She was flirting her way through the entire male population of the Gotham Underworld. He was stuck at the bar with a salesgirl, a stuntwoman, and three men who took turned hostile if he so much as smiled at either woman.

Enough was enough. He tossed Sly a bauble from the robbery as payment, broke a bottle on the edge of the bar, and stormed into the dining room.

Nocturna was prattling to Hugo Strange about "the true lure of darkness and the mysterious truths hidden in the folds of its languorously pulsing heart..."

"YOU WANTON HARLOT," Anton bellowed, "IF YOU HAVE FINISHED YOUR INDULGENT WALLOWING IN THE ATTENTIONS OF OTHER MEN AND THE SOUND OF YOUR OWN VOICE, CAN WE PLEASE, FOR THE LOVE OF THOSE BEDAMNED STARS YOU ENDLESSLY INVOKE, GET OUT OF THIS PLACE AND GO HOME BEFORE SUNRISE!!!"

The Iceberg was accustomed to violent outbursts. This explosion, while more eloquent than most, did little to distract Joker and Harley from the argument they'd been having since she got fed up with his Bruce Wayne fixation, and he learned of her dalliance in a Frenchman's chateau. It did little to distract Poison Ivy and Two-Face from their quarrel, which began with his ill-concealed interest in Roxy Rocket's thrill fetish, and escalated when a skirmish between Hugo Strange and Scarecrow led to some flying dishware—which Oswald assured them they'd pay for—reminding Harvey of the injuries he'd suffered at Ivy's hands from the airbourn planter of the late flytrap Ivan.

In the bar, Roxy and Sly were out-shouting Eddie and Doris, and in the dining room, another airborne platter hit Hugo Strange in the head. Again, Oswald assured the perpetrator she would pay for damages—in this case, the platter had been thrown by Nocturna, who repeated her earlier remark about Penguin's lack of sartorial elegance. She suggested a day at Barney's might improve his fashion sense.

"A 42 stout, I would think. There's a mannequin your size in Window 4," she sneered coldly.

Jonathan Crane was quick to snicker, then pounce.

"A mannequin, eh," then he winced theatrically. "Ooh, sorry, Hugo."

"So you see," Selina told MirrorBitch again as she stepped out of the shower, "this is really not my fault."

"I warned them," she reiterated as she toweled off, "they didn't listen."

She poured coffee, sighed at the blinking light by her phone, and pushed the button beneath it.

::You have _16_ new messages. ::

-beep- Kitten, it's me. You won't believe what went down last night. I can't handle d'Annunzio's this afternoon. Come to the house so we can talk privately.

-beep- Selina? Harvey. She's still punishing me for that damn flytrap, can you believe it! Free for lunch? Come up the hideout and talk.

-beep- Catty, Pam. The men are all shits. We're having a girls' night out. You, me, Harley and Roxy. Call me.

-beep- Hi, Selina, it's Tim. Look, I don't know what you heard about last night, but now even Barbara's mad at me. Look, I stuck it out between Bruce and Dick, but Dick and JP on top of that was too much. She wants to make that into 'abandoning my post,' I can't help that, can I? Enough is enough. Can I come over and talk?

-beep- 'Lina, Eddie. You won't believe this. These two Gothic drama queens show up at the Iceberg last night. This guy who's way too pudgy to be wearing tights in the first place turns Doris off on the whole thing.

-beep- Catty, say it isn't so. If that anemic tramp came between you and Brucie, I'll splatter her brains into...PUDDIN! PUT DOWN THAT PHONE! NOW! I SAID, NOW...

-beep- Sorry 'bout that, Catty. Girls' night Thursday. See ya then!

-beep- Selina, it's Dick. Stop by the office today. Had a run in with 'Pheromones' last night you won't believe.

-beep- Selina, this is Oswald. A curious couple presented themselves at the Iceberg last night, using your name as well as that of Ms. Quinn. They caused rather a lot of damage, and I found the woman quite rude. Would you know where I can get in touch?

-beep- Selina, Jervis. WHAT HAPPENED? I miss one night at the Iceberg and I'm behind on all the gossip. Call me! I can't stand being out of the loop!

It was nearly dawn. The Gotham subways ran all night, so Azrael was confident he could get to any point in the city as he had done when he acted as Batman. By attaching himself to the rear exterior of the trains, he could reach any destination in the city with the speed of the Batmobile—but in a manner far more incomprehensible, and therefore more terrifying, to his criminal prey.

That was the theory, anyway.

The difficulty was: he had nowhere to go.

His regular bases in Gotham were Oracle's—now off-limits as there was a better than even chance Grayson/Nightwing would be there. And the Batcave—now off-limits as there was a good possibility Selina/Catwoman would be there.

And yet, after this night of hell, he needed to retreat to a safehouse and regroup.

The thought struck him then: *THE* Batcave, the one under Wayne Manor, was impossible. But there was another. A satellite cave, little used, beneath the Wayne Tower in the heart of Gotham City. A Sanctuary. Praise be.

As he neared the entrance, Azrael reassured himself: Bruce Wayne's Batman seldom used this subterranean base. So it was unlikely he would have reset the security failsafes since Jean Paul's stint as AzBat. And if he had, Jean Paul was a computer whiz, there would be little difficulty obtaining access.

Jean Paul wasn't so sure. Having the utmost respect for Bruce, he doubted he could circumvent any system the other had set up.

Azrael was about to berate him for being a sniveling coward, when he was distracted by a smell and a sound. Not only was he able to access the secondary cave with the old codes, the cave appeared ready to welcome him home... The smell, as he approached, became more distinct: it was hot coffee. And the noise: was television...pouring forth from the giant projection screen that served as this cave's sole monitor.

Next to the coffee was a message board, tacked with notes:

Who's turn to bring food? -BC

I did last night. It's BG's turn, but she doesn't know what kind of stuff to get. She cleans up every night tho, so why don't you and I agree to take care of the food between us, switch off every other night. -S

Sound's like Robin's had enough. Should we bring him into the circle?

NO! Telling him is as good as telling NW.

Jean Paul puzzled over these mysterious conversations, until a voice explained:

"That's Spoiler asking to tell Robin about this place, and Black Canary saying no."

Azrael spun, flaming sword drawn to fight the unknown threat, when he saw: Azrael, flaming sword drawn to fight the unknown threat.

"Do put that down," said his mirror image before it morphed into an imposing green figure that still brandished the sword of an Azrael.

"What manner of Azrael are you?" the original asked warily, leaning in and scrutinizing the tip of the stranger's sword, which produced an odd, green flame that emitted no heat.

"He's a Martian," said a third man, who aimed a fire extinguisher arrow at the tip of Azrael's sword. "And he told you to put that down."

Azrael was conditioned to respond aggressively to any challenge, but fortunately the Jean Paul part of his mind screamed that these were heroes, Batman's allies in the Justice League, and not to be trifled with.

While Azrael ached for combat with such worthy foes, he accepted that these were allies and therefore not to be barbecued. He retreated into the back of Jean Paul's mind and sulked while the other sat with Green Arrow and Martian Manhunter and learned the strange history of this cave.

"The girls" (meaning Spoiler, Black Canary and Batgirl) were in hiding here, pretending to have left town and so avoid getting pulled into the Batman-Nightwing mess. They were using this cave as a clubhouse, and invited such members of the JLA that had to come into Gotham to do likewise. Tonight's special guests were Green Arrow and Martian Manhunter. "Ollie" was officially here to interrogate a suspect as a favor to Kyle, who was reluctant to come into Gotham even when times were good. Unofficially, of course, he was here because Dinah was...

Jean Paul blinked. His hosts, "Ollie and J'onn," shared these snippets as if he would know what it all meant. Dinah was Black Canary, he knew that much. But why should it be a foregone conclusion that this Ollie/Green Arrow would show up wherever she was? Jean Paul didn't understand.

"J'onn, on the other hand," Ollie resumed the narrative as Spoiler and Batgirl arrived with a small bag of groceries, "is officially on a fact-finding mission. Batty has been 'testier than usual'... Was that the phrase?"

He looked to J'onn, but his companion was busy searching the bag Spoiler had brought. Ollie could guess the reason: Oreos.

"Right, then. Bats is 'testier than usual' at the JLA meetings, and they sent J'onn to 'find out why.'"

"I already knew," J'onn admitted, examining a package like a connoisseur approaching a new vintage, "I knew why all along, it's the fight with Nightwing. But it's an excuse to get out of the Watchtower for a while.... These Oreos are one of the new fillings?"

"Fudge mint," Stephanie informed him.

"Of course, without J'onn's help, I never would have been able to rig this baby up," Ollie concluded, pointing to the projection screen with pride. "One hundred and thirty cable channels, including HBO. Mustn't miss *Sex and the City*."

Jean Paul blinked again: "Sex and the City?"

"Season five premiere tonight," Ollie answered as if knowledge of this series was as universal as the history between him and Black Canary.

The nightmare in which Nightwing's ankles became entangled in quick-drying goo and his surroundings faded like a hologram to reveal some villain's deathtrap was one he'd had since childhood. The deathtraps changed over the years; the villains changed over the years. But this was the first time he'd ever experienced a mis-match: for the trap was certainly Iyvesque: vinelike tendrils seeping up through the goo to wind round his limbs and tear him to pieces. But the villain was Joker - or at least Joker's laughter, echoing, echoing as the vines coiled around his legs... Laughing... Laughing....

Dick awoke. The “vines” around his legs were the bedsheets. And there *was* laughter, strident energetic laughter. He got out of bed and traced the excited gasps of mirth to the living room, to Barbara’s workstation.

“Morning, Sweetie,” his wife chirped before slapping the desk with another merry snort.

Nightwing had had a rough night, and Dick was not pleased to see it wasn’t yet nine o’clock. He’d had only a few hours sleep before being wakened by this...

“Ohmygod, ohgod, ohgod” Barbara exclaimed, punctuating each outburst with more gleeful desk-slapping.

With the unfathomable deadpan of a vigilante low on sleep, Dick remarked that only he, as her lawfully wedded husband, was allowed to make her make those sounds.

“Don’t be a poop,” was Barbara’s response. “Coffee’s made. Bring me some when you get yours and I’ll tell you what you missed.”

A half cup of Columbian blend later, Dick judged that he was coherent enough to be told.

“OK, tell me what I missed. What could I have missed? It’s barely light out.”

“Not today. Last night. When you were out flinging testosterone—”

“*Flinging testosterone?* That’s it. You are officially cut off from talking to Selina.”

“...while you were flinging testosterone around with Az and Bats, YOU MISSED IT ALL.”

“Missed what?”

“The scene at the Iceberg. It was going on right under your noses.”

Dick looked down at his coffee mug. In the manner of a medieval knight anointing himself with protective charms before going into battle, he took a determined sip. Took another. Then another. Then he looked back at his wife.

“The scene at the Iceberg?” he asked.

“They’re all talking about it!”

“They are?”

“The rogues! I hacked their IMs. They’ve been gassing about it for hours.”

Dick finished his coffee in a swallow.

“You *HACKED* their IMs?”

“Their instant messaging network, yes, and it’s been quite a ride. I’ve got sixty pages of material here. It’s unbelievable. Your suspects, by the way, are called Nocturna and Thief of the Night.” She pronounced this last triumphantly, for it had taken her half an hour to work out who “ToN” was.

Dick gaped. But it did make sense that the rogues would know who these newcomers were—and possibly more.

“They have any allies?” he asked with the serious, single-minded focus of a crimefighter with a job to do. He didn’t understand why Barbara looked at him with such pity. But it was a look he’d seen Selina give Bruce.

“Uh, no dear,” she answered, and that too had the ring of Catwoman explaining something obvious to a thickheaded bat. “I think it’s safe to say that Nocturna and ToN have *NO* allies in the Gotham underworld.” Then she began cackling again as she added: “But Riddler thinks they could ‘make big twubble for moose and squirrel.’”

In the Wayne Manor kitchen, Alfred set a plate on the counter in front of Selina. She looked at the plate heaped with sinful looking cookies, then up at him.

"These are the famous 'double chocolate dipped double chocolate chip'... Oh, I think I gained a pound just saying that," she moaned.

"The young gentlemen tell me they have given uniform satisfaction, Miss."

Selina sighed, picked up a cookie, and nibbled it.

"That might just be the best cookie I've ever tasted in my life," she admitted, "but Alfred... what am I going to do?" She took another bite. "I'm getting it from both sides. There were sixteen voicemails on my phone this morning. By the time I listened to them all, another three came in. Barbara wants to know what 'the boys' aren't telling her about the rooftop. Jervis wants to know what nobody's telling him about the Iceberg. The Iceberg crowd wants to know what went on at the party where Nocturna debuted. Bruce wants to know the Natasha-Anton history. Renee Montoya's political opponent wants to know if she endangered the party guests by trying to apprehend the armed robber. Kittlemeier wants *EVERYBODY* to know these new people are not his customers and he has nothing to do with those costumes."

She stopped only long enough to take a sip of tea, then popped the rest of the cookie into her mouth. "If I have to listen to one more go-round from any of them, I'm going to, to, *hack up a furball*."

Alfred exhibited the model for the disapproving bat-glare.

"Miss Selina," the butler began firmly, "I have observed that when persons in this household come into this kitchen, eat these cookies, and resort to the particular expressions of their nighttime selves, what is really troubling them is rarely what they state it to be."

Selina made no comment but examined her fingernails, so Alfred made up a smaller plate of cookies and handed them to her.

"I believe Master Bruce is downstairs, Miss; he is very fond of these."

J'onn's passion for Oreos was well-known throughout the hero community, but the effect they had on him was less widely-known. Hence, when Spoiler learned Martian Manhunter was to be among the guests in the clubhouse cave, she made the very hospitable gesture of picking up several packages of his favorite food. She couldn't know that Oreos—to use Ollie's words—made the Martian "go bonkers." And even Ollie couldn't know—nor, for that matter, could J'onn himself - what effect the new varieties with flavored centers might produce.

The fudge mint brought about a mellow high, during which Ollie unpacked the DVDs of the first three seasons of *Sex and the City* as a pre-show treat. His less-cultured brethren, namely J'onn and Jean Paul, that didn't follow the acclaimed HBO series, might thereby get caught up on the erotic misadventures of Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha. In a philosophical mood, J'onn speculated that the real reason human men watched these shows was the same reason they read *Cosmo*: to learn how the females of the species think, and in so doing, learn how to score. This piqued Jean Paul's attention, as did Ollie's impassioned rebuttal. He watched the show because it was sexy, smart, funny, and of course, for the T & A. He *DID NOT* need lessons in

woman-wooing. Indeed, he was an accomplished “horndog” and could teach the show a thing or two.

By the end of season two and Carrie’s tumultuous breakup from Mr. Big, Jean Paul was calling Ollie “Sensei” and Ollie was calling Jean Paul “Grasshopper” - and J’onn moved on to a new package of Oreos. Divided centers. Half chocolate cream, half peanut-butter... A new mood descended on the party.

By the time Black Canary learned there were JLA guests in the cave, the buzzed shape-shifter, over-stimulated by peanut butter Oreos and marathon exposure to the sexual exploits of Carrie Bradshaw, was—for Ollie’s amusement and Jean Paul’s edification - juxtaposing the costumes and bodies of the various heroines and supervillainesses.

Canary arrived just in time to see Diana in Azrael’s armor.

Ollie insisted it was a strategic exercise. They were conditioning the Azrael personality to move beyond his Dumasian programming and look on women as warriors equal to himself.

It was a ludicrous story. Exactly the sort of thing, Dinah knew, that Oliver would pull out of his ass to explain away... the kind of thing that was happening right now! Diana/Azrael morphing into Zatanna/Superman. Oh, PLEASE!

But Azrael was nodding confirmation.

Dinah sighed. He *was* a mess with women. She’d seen it firsthand. Not much more capable with her or Huntress than he was with Catwoman.

“Okay, then,” Dinah relented, “benefit of the doubt - *THIS TIME*. But only on the condition your *pupil* tells what went on on that rooftop with Robin, Nightwing, and Batman.”

Bruce was engaged in his post-workout meditation at the stalactite. He pretended not to hear the click of Selina’s heels as she approached, nor the clink of a glass plate set delicately on the outcropping behind him. But he couldn’t ignore the smell: Alfred’s double chocolate dipped double chocolate chip cookies, fresh from the oven. He might be Batman, but even Batman was human. He took a cookie.

“I want to make up,” Selina said without preamble.

“Were we fighting?” Bruce asked.

“Technically no, but I’m mad at you and Dick for being such fatheads, and now I want to make up.”

“O-kay,” Bruce hazarded, feeling rather like he was entering a hideout that was bound to be booby trapped. “Have a cookie.”

“I had one. Enjoy.”

“*ONE*? Selina, if Alfred’s boast is to be believed, this recipe is 170 years old, and no one has ever had just one.”

“Too rich. I put on five pounds when Alfred went on that baking spree when he broke up with the director from the playhouse.”

Bruce chuckled and reached out for her, “If you’re counting calories in Alfred’s cookies, things can’t be that bad.”

"But they are," Selina answered, letting him pull her gently into his arms, "I'm feeling shitty a dozen different ways lately."

"I've noticed," he answered, then when she looked surprised, he explained, "It shows. Selina, the problems with Dick, they have nothing to do with you, nothing to do with us."

"It feels like they do," she whispered. "I didn't know why until something Barbara said the other night. She said the infighting was the norm for you and Dick and that the few months of getting along was the anomaly, a fluke, exception to the rule."

"Ah," Bruce nodded, "I see. So now you're thinking we might, what, fall apart the same way? That things will suddenly 'go back to normal' the way they were before?"

"We were fighting a long time; we've only been together for—"

"We loved each other a long time too," he interrupted. "It's not like this came out of nowhere."

"No."

"Selina... Kitten... I'm not saying it'll always be easy, but no matter what happens, we're different people now. We could never go back to that, even if we wanted to. Whatever happens, we'll have to work through it as we are now, who we are now, and... oh my god." Bruce stopped, an expression of shocked horror frozen on his features.

"What?"

He took a deep breath, the full implication of his last words pressing inside him with an almost physical force.

"Maybe it *ISN'T* that different with Dick."

The elevator on the 21st floor of the Pigot building sounded a musical ping before the doors opened. A shapely woman stepped out with a wiggle that left the remaining occupant feeling he'd made the right decision riding six floors past his stop.

Pamela Isley consulted a scrap of paper once, then double-checked the sign on the door which read "For Rent. GRAYSON ASSOCIATES now on 8th Floor."

She returned to the elevators, pushed the down button, and waited. The same car she had ridden up in soon returned, with the same sole occupant now riding down. He looked elated.

The occupants of the clubhouse Batcave made a curious tableau as Jean Paul Valley attempted, for the third time, to tell what had happened on that fateful rooftop the night before. He stood in the center of the group, before two seated figures: Black Canary and Spoiler. Behind Canary stood Green Arrow, his hand placed loosely over her mouth should she attempt to interrupt yet again. Batgirl took a similar position behind Spoiler.

"Let him get through it at least once," J'onnn pleaded, for each previous attempt had been interrupted either by Canary, fully-briefed on Nightwing's version through Oracle, or by Spoiler, armed with Robin's version of events.

"I saw two suspicious characters in the vicinity of the Iceberg Lounge," Azrael began the tale yet again. "They were strangely dressed. They were heading for a known-

criminal hangout. They were having a clearly audible conversation about, I assumed, a crime they had committed at Wayne Manor. I followed them. They went into the club. I took a position from which I would be sure to observe their departure. God's gift to vigilante justice approached me..."

Here Black Canary tried to speak and Green Arrow clamped down his hand.

"Work with me, Grasshopper, if you mean Nightwing, just say Nightwing," he urged.

"Nightwing and Robin came barging up to me, in blatant disregard for the fact that stakeouts require stealth... Certainly that is what Batman taught *ME*. Nightwing made an insulting slur on the ways of St. Dumas, implying that he didn't know I was on a stakeout but figured I was having 'a rooftop chat' with one of my 'apparitions.'"

Here Spoiler snorted. Batgirl decided this was not an intentional interruption and so let it pass.

"The upstart... er, Nightwing then demanded a status report as if the mighty Azrael is some field agent. But Azrael was polite enough to tell them about the two suspects, and Nightwing criticized him."

This time, it was J'onn that interrupted.

"Do you have to refer to yourself in the third person that way? Batman does it. It's irksome."

Jean Paul winced. It was difficult for him to think of Azrael as "I," but he had enough hostile listeners already. He couldn't afford to antagonize another.

"I was polite enough to tell about the suspects," he resumed, "and Nightwing demanded to know why I hadn't gone in to apprehend them—into a den of an unknown number of criminals alone, without backup, without anyone else even knowing I was there. Now an Azrael is not accustomed to having his methods challenged - and for that matter, he, er, I thought Nightwing's fief was Bludhaven. It is supposed to be Batman partnered with Robin in Gotham City, is it not? So rather than giving an account of why I did this instead of that with regards to the suspects, I asked—"

Black Canary bit Green Arrow's hand and took over the narrative.

"You asked what 'Wing was doing in *YOUR CITY!* Selina is right, you don't have the brains god gave lettuce, do you?"

This was it, the acid test. Confronted with a woman criticizing him to his face, Azrael left his mortal half on his own. But this time, Jean Paul Valley, computer geek, was a recent graduate of the Oliver Queen School of Handling the Fair Sex. He looked Dinah in the eye and held his ground.

"I did not say 'my city'; I said 'this city.' A car backfired just then, I suppose the hothead misheard me. I said 'this city.' What followed could best be described as violent jazz. I heard 'unstable' and 'fascist' and the rest was a kind of freeform stream of pummeling and obscenities."

"You said 'this city?'" Dinah repeated skeptically.

"Yes. A movie let out on the corner, there were people laughing and talking in the street, there was a car backfiring and a distant siren. They misheard. I said 'this city.'" He looked at Oliver, assumed a look of self-deprecating charm, and added, "That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

J'onn smirked, and Dinah spun on Oliver.

"You taught him that, you son of a bitch."

Feeling a euphoria he'd not experienced since completing the final trials in the Temple of St. Dumas, Jean Paul sunk gratefully into the nearest chair... a chair which, unfortunately, was the largest, centered in front of the main monitor. It was, clearly, Batman's chair.

An awkward silence fell over the cave, eventually broken—not by speech—but by Batgirl's sign-language. Spoiler translated:

"She wants to know if, in all the brouhaha, did anybody bother to apprehend the suspects."

The euphoric feeling evaporated and Jean Paul hung his head, sinking a little further into the chair.

"That was the first thing Batman asked when he arrived. And of course, we hadn't. 'Bickering like children,' he said, and of course, he was right. But that set Nightwing off again, and that is when Robin left."

"Which Oracle's totally pissed about, by the way," Canary told Spoiler.

"So, doesn't anybody know what happened to the two criminals who started this mess?"

Anton and Natasha deNuit sat in Rumplemeyer's, wondering why all the waiters in the famous tearoom seemed to be so bad-tempered.

"Something more thematic next time, my love," Natasha cooed, biting into a buttered scone. "That's why the great Batman did not come forth to challenge us. Your crime was too generic."

Anton glowered but said nothing.

"No matter. We have time for one more crime wave before we depart, and this one will be rich in symbolism and pageantry. A veritable siren song for any creature of the night to rise up and meet us in single combat."

Anton threw his napkin on the table.

"My precious one," he began, "We have but a few days left here, and I intend to spend them as a visitor to Gotham should. I am going to the observation deck over Gotham Plaza, place a dime into the telescopic viewer, and behold the panorama of a great cityscape. I am going to walk in that magnificent park, rent a model boat, and sail it round and round for my own amusement. I am going to see the Grand Central Train Station, the public library, and the Radio City Music Hall. I shall buy a pretzel with mustard and eat it on the sidewalk. I will shop for luxuries on Fifth Avenue and eclectic chic in TriBeCa. I am going to dine at the Oak Room, see a Broadway show, then find a jazz club. I shall take the tour at NBC, go to a museum, buy an 'I heart Gotham City' T-shirt and send your brother a postcard. Then, I shall return to my room and complain *that my feet hurt*. You, my beloved Natasha, may do whatever you please, dressed as whatever you please, but rest assured, my Queen of the Night, you will do it *ALONE*. The Thief of the Night has left the building!"

Selina entered the new Grayson Associates office and set a plate of Alfred's double chocolate dipped double chocolate chip cookies next to Dick without a word. His reaction was identical to Bruce's, almost to the second in the time it took to feign indifference to the arrival of the cookies, sniff, sniff again, think about it, then reach for the largest cookie without appearing to look at the plate.

They were an adorable pair, Selina thought, and it was a pity they'd both growl if told how similar they really were.

"New office is nice," Selina offered, by way of breaking the ice.

"It's smaller and it's cheaper than the one on the 21st Floor. I have to cut corners, now that we're not going to see any fat corporate contracts any time soon."

"The agency is still a good idea, Dick; you'll make a go of it. Besides, just because Everwood isn't going to pull strings for you, it doesn't mean you won't get corporate accounts. Now, enough shop talk. On to the dirt. What happened with Pheromones?"

Dick munched another cookie and started telling the story, when the door opened and Poison Ivy entered without ceremony.

"This'd make a great hideout. It's real hard to find. Catty, you know all the listings for this place have you on the 21st Floor?"

Dick groaned.

"Anyway," Ivy continued, sitting herself down and continuing to address Selina as if they were the sole occupants of the room, "you're never on the IM anymore, and not answering your phone, and I wanted to nail down the plans for Girls' Night, and then I remembered you were doing some B&E for this place and - Ooh, cookies!"

While the intruder helped herself to his cookies, Dick sat stunned for a moment. She seemed totally oblivious to the intrinsic awkwardness of the situation: the last time he'd seen her was when she invaded his bachelor party. He'd overpowered and arrested her—not as Nightwing—as himself, Officer Grayson, the guy sitting here. Sitting RIGHT HERE in front of her. What was wrong with the silly woman? Did she not realize whose cookies she was eating?

Maybe Bruce had a taste for these Twilight Zone scenes with the Rogues Gallery, but he didn't. Besides, plans for "Girls' Night" did not sound like a conversation anybody with a Y-chromosome should be a party to.

"Ah, Selina, I'll be in my private office. Take your time with your, er, friend," he managed, disappearing into the "inner office," otherwise known as the supply closet.

And there he stayed until the patronizing, feline voice that used to taunt him as Boy Wonder assured him that it was safe to come out.

He opened the door. His eyes flickered, confirming the coast was indeed clear. He saw an empty chair, an empty plate previously heaped with Alfred's delectable cookies—and Selina. Her expression was most eloquent. It said: *that was one of the most magnificent demonstrations of cowardice ever seen without the assistance of Scarecrow's fear toxin.*

"Give me a break, will ya," Dick whined, sounding young even to his own ears. "Everybody always has to analyze every little thing I do around her. 'Red hair—Lemon Pledge—ha, ha!' Look, okay, when I was younger, I had a little thing for her. Sue me. I was seventeen. She's a knockout. Even before you add in the pheromones and the bad girl thing, *that is a hot woman!* I noticed! So sue me! But you know, Selina, that was

then. I'm not that guy anymore. So can we please put that past baggage aside and move on? Do we have to take everything I say and do and run it through the filter of what happened when I was Robin all those years ago... oh god."

Dick stopped exactly as Bruce had done, mid-sentence, clearly gripped by the same sudden awareness that his words meant more in relation to his fight with his father.

He ran everything Bruce said through that filter. Every utterance of Bruce or Batman's was weighed, syllable-by-syllable. Analyzed and reanalyzed. Examined for some sign Dick was still viewed as the teen sidekick.

It wasn't fair to Bruce, to Batman, and it was certainly no fun for Dick himself. But if they were ever to move past it, they'd need a new baseline. When they had been partners, Dick *was* the junior sidekick. They needed to work as partners again, if only for a short while, but this time as true equals.

Dick didn't have a Nightwing voice, per se, but his manner changed. His tone deepened and a markedly non-batlike smile overtook his features as he said, "Selina, tell me about 'Girls' Night Out.'"

"Um, Batman?"

"Yes, 'Wing?"

"Is it me or is this a lot more... bizarre... than anything we used to encounter in the old days?"

"Mad Hatter's tea party was pretty odd."

Nightwing shook his head. "Not like this."

It was four hours into the new partnership. Nightwing had arrived with the proposal just as Batman was suiting up to go out and find him. A new baseline, 'Wing said, one case as real partners—equal partners. He agreed not to weigh every word Batman uttered for some sign he was being dismissed as a junior, rookie, or sidekick. For his part, Batman allowed that he would deal with Wing as the man he was now not the person he was before, and he hoped his son would do likewise. Batman offered his hand...

Having proposed the partnership in the first place, Nightwing realized it would be grossly offensive to refuse to shake hands and instead search his new partner for signs of mind-control or drugs. Instead, he chalked up the impossibly reasonable Batman before him to yet another miracle from the same source as the smile and Bruce's newfound ability to make scrambled eggs... Still, it was odd.

It was odd, but not half as odd as the scene looked on four hours later, perched on a rooftop, a thin surveillance receiver aimed at their quarry so they could hear as well as watch the proceedings...

"There was the time Mad Hatter took over Tweedledum and Tweedledee," Batman suggested as an example of something they'd encountered that was certainly as strange as the scene before them now.

"Not even close."

"Veronica Vreeland dressed as Two-Face at the Drake Halloween party."

"I missed that one."

"JokerFish."

"Batman, we're looking down on Catwoman, Poison Ivy, Roxy Rocket, Harley Quinn, and Nocturna starting 'Girls' Night Out' at a *lesbian pottery shop*. When I say 'this is bizarre,' you gotta give me something better than a smiling trout."

Batman's mouth twitched.

The "New Partnership" was an experiment, and one on which a lot was riding. Batman and Nightwing chose the case they would work on with great care. They decided on Nocturna and Thief of the Night. There were several sound reasons:

1. They were new. Bruce and Dick had never faced them as Batman and Robin, so there could be no baggage on that score.

2. They were operating in Gotham City (Batman's turf), but it was Nightwing (through Oracle) who learned their identities and set up this surveillance.

3. Selina knew them. She was certainly well-acquainted enough to invite Nocturna along for the proposed Girls' Night Out. Batman and Nightwing could watch, wait, listen, and when the time was right, spring the trap.

"How'd you get her to go along with this?" Batman asked with disbelief.

"It took some doing," Nightwing hedged.

It had. It was dumb luck that Dick learned about Ivy's Girls' Night plans only hours after Barbara told him about Nocturna. Selina wasn't gung-ho about the excursion, let alone bringing a guest, let alone bringing Natasha. Yes, she admitted, she knew 'Tasha from the old days with François, but they weren't great friends or anything. And besides, after that night at the Iceberg, it was doubtful whether Pam, Roxy or Harley would even speak to Nocturna.

"Selina, please," Dick had pleaded, "I need this. I need to be able to bring Batman a case we can work on as partners."

"You don't fight fair," she replied.

Dick smirked. "Gee, where d'ya think I could've picked that up?"

"growl."

"You'll do it then?"

"snarl."

"That's a yes?"

"hiss."

"Good kitty."

"Okay," she relented, "I'll do it... For a price."

Yes, Nightwing reflected, there would be a price. But for now, here they were...

Fifteen stories below, Pamela Isley was showing her companions around her favorite store: Aurora's Pots.

"You pick a blank over there, paint it however you want, and they fire it. While you wait, or while you paint, it's a place to hang out, have some herbal tea, Thursdays they have poetry readings..."

"It's a lesbian pottery shop," Roxy interrupted with typical directness.

"Tuesday is open mic night..." Pam went on.

"Say, these'd make nice feedbowls for Damien and Slobberpuss," Harley said, picking up a large round bowl.

"Her hyenas," Selina explained to Natasha.

"I thought the hyenas were Bud and Lou," Roxy put in.

"Joker calls them that," Selina corrected. "But Harley feeds them, so they answer to her. And to Harley they're... what was it?"

"Slob-ber-puss," Harley said, painting the word in bright red across the center of the bowl.

"I come here and make a special pot for each of my plants," Pam went on.

"Heya Catty, you could do that for your cats too," Harley enthused.

"I figured we'd go to a bar," Roxy complained.

"And I," Nocturna pronounced grandly, "thought we might embark on a worthier enterprise. Know that I fully intend to confront and enslave the great Batman before leaving this city."

"What is it with you," Nightwing asked, turning to Batman.

"You should talk," was the deadpan reply.

"They're at table three," Batman insisted, pointing the microphone through the skylight of a dance club called STUDS.

"They're at table five," Nightwing countered, adjusting it.

"Table three ordered a martini, a cosmopolitan, a Long Island iced tea, a champagne cocktail, and a Diet Sprite. That's Selina—Ivy—Roxy—Nocturna—and Harley."

"Table five is discussing *my ass - literally*. Don't tell me a bachelorette party from Westchester is going to be talking about 'that Nightwing's darling tush.'"

"Wing, I hate to be the one to break the news, but there are entire websites devoted to the subject."

"Of my tush?"

"Selina says there used to be a wall in the women's washroom at the Iceberg. When Oswald had it whitewashed and coated with a graffiti-proof polymer, it went online. www-dot-HotWing-dot-com."

Nightwing blanched.

"Tell me Barbara doesn't know this. Lie to me if necessary."

"Dick, what do you think they mean when they say 'estrogen solidarity?'"

"Fight crime, you told me. Justice, you said. Battle evil-doers. You didn't mention this part."

"Must be quite a cross to bear."

"Just don't tell Barbara I know."

"Testosterone solidarity... It's them; it's definitely them at table three. Ivy is complaining that after all the Haagen Daaz..."

"...and cookie dough I choked down whenever you and 'Puddin' fight, and you can't free up a single evening when that brute Two-Face went and *murdered Ioan!*"

"Pammy," Roxy cut in, "If you've really decided you and Two-Fer are though, would you mind if I had a go? I always thought the way you slapped each other around looked like a rush, and that was just in public. I mean, if in private, there's even more going on *-hic-*"

"Roxy, how many of those have you had?" Selina asked, pointing to the Long Island iced tea.

"Three. I needed change. I need small bills for Zorro."

Batman and Nightwing looked at each other in stunned horror.

"Did they say Zorro?"

"It's not like a change machine," Roxy continued, "You can't just pop a twenty in his pants then take back change."

"Why would I want to 'pop' money of any denomination into a man's trousers?" Ivy asked testily, "A leaf of poison oak maybe, but not a twenty."

"Pammy, you've simply *GOT* to get into the spirit of the thing *-hic-*," Roxy insisted. "If you don't tip them, they don't grind."

"I did not need to hear that," Nightwing remarked.

"Think of it like conditioning," Roxy concluded, gesturing with a bill folded neatly between her fingers, "Here, Zorro. Here, boy. Do your trick. Gooooood booooooy."

For a moment, Nightwing stared through the skylight, speechless.

"Who knew Roxy had so much going on? She always seemed like such a flake."

"She doesn't *seem* like a flake; she *IS* a flake," Batman countered.

"I don't know, sounds like she really knows how to communicate with Poison Ivy. Seems on the ball..."

"At Christmas, she got drunk on Jello and slept with Penguin."

"Point taken."

Nightwing thought for a second. It was true. Batman really *did* know everything. He spoke this thought aloud, and saw Batman's chest swell with pride.

Not that this information was the result of great detective work, Nightwing quickly added.

Batman grunted.

"Not that that's why you're dating Selina, of course," 'Wing mentioned.

"Of course not. A happy byproduct."

"If you want to stay in the gossip loop, you might have to rethink the whole 'no more Iceberg' rule, though."

"If the alternative is going to be her spending her nights like this, yes. What's that they're saying under the static: 'Work it Zorro?'"

"I have a question," Nocturna, who had been quiet, finally spoke up. "Do performers of this sort ever don the apparel of the true denizens of Gotham Night?"

"She means," Selina translated for the waiter, "are there dancers that dress like Batman and Robin, or Joker, or Two-Face?"

"There used to be a club like that in the Village," their waiter answered. "It kept getting blown up."

Nightwing looked at Batman.

Batman looked at Nightwing.

Crickets chirped.

Ten minutes later, Pam went to the powder room with Roxy: "If I have to listen to one more round from Elvira Mistress of the Dark about how she's going to enslave Batman, I'm gonna hurl. Does she think this never occurred to any of *us*, or that we're not up to the job?"

"I know," Roxy whispered, scandalized, "I didn't want to say anything until Catty did, she sort of has first refusal where the Bat is concerned."

"I'll talk to her first thing," Ivy fumed.

"I think that gown's a knock-off," Roxy speculated, fixing her lipstick.

"Definitely."

Five minutes later, Harley went to the powder room with Selina: "ONLY a sidekick! Roxy said I shouldn't be here tonight cause I'm only a sidekick!"

"Don't be so sensitive, Harl. She's having a mood is all. She's not crazy about Natasha being here. A newbie, and she's already in the inner circle..."

"Natasha. You mean Nocturna. I thought we said no costumes, too conspicuous."

Selina sighed.

"We did. I guess she figured her 'costume' is non-themed enough to sneak through."

"That's not a real Vera Wang is it?" Harley asked, fixing her lipstick.

"Hardly."

Fifteen minutes later, Roxy powdered her nose while Nocturna chattered: "This Ivan that Pamela's other lover Harvey killed for her sake, I do not understand why she is so bitter."

Roxy rolled her eyes and explained that Ivan was not Poison Ivy's lover, but her pet flytrap.

"He's a sprout."

"This Harvey was so overcome with jealous rage, he denied her affections to be shared even with plantlife?"

"No, look, it wasn't premeditated. He screwed up the sunlamp."

"Not a crime of passion then?"

"Only if you count what Pam did afterwards with Ivan's pot."

"I see."

"Say, is that a real Vera Wang?"

"Of course."

After STUDS, Max's 49th Street Station was the next logical stop. It had a video rental next to a liquor store, and only three blocks from the HA-Hacienda West.

As they walked, the girls debated what films to rent. Ivy wanted Thelma and Louise. Harley said anything with either Steve Martin or Colin Furth. Roxy was not enthusiastic about renting movies of any sort.

"I just don't see the point of *watching* things blow up on a screen. It isn't the same as feeling the waves of heat racing up your back and flames licking at your heels."

"When Selina and I used to have girls' nights back in the day," Nocturna mused, "We always watched old movies: Casablanca, Jezebel, great romances all. And of course, we discussed the men: Anton, François and... what was that boy Anna ran with?"

"That's François as in Zogger-François?" Nightwing asked with a smirk.

"Shhh, I want to hear this," Batman hissed.

::It was Bobby,:: Selina's answer could be heard over the microphone before she added, ::Ladies, don't look now, but we're being followed.::

Batman brooded.

"It's good to be home," Nightwing smiled.

"She did that on purpose. She made that up to deliberately change the subject..."

"No, she didn't. Look down there."

At street level, a familiar figure could be seen closing in on the party.

"It's Pheromones," Selina whispered.

"Barney Fife," Roxy repeated.

"Azrael," Harley provided the vigilante's real name for Nocturna's benefit.

"Who is this Azrael?" Nocturna asked.

Ivy and Selina's eyes locked, and they instantly and silently agreed on a strategy.

"He's the catch of the county," Selina began.

"Absolutely," Ivy enthused, "The catch of Gotham City. The catch of the Eastern seaboard. You want to seduce a hero worth seducing, that's your man."

Nightwing looked at Batman.

Batman looked at Nightwing.

Crickets chirped.

Roxy caught on next: "Why yes, Azrael actually took over the mantle for a while. But it diminished him. His own persona is so much more dashing and charismatic."

Harley began to voice her confusion, and Selina clamped a hand over her mouth. "We'll wait in here," she confided, dragging Harley into the video store.

A moment later, there was a mad cackle from inside the store.

"Obviously Quinn approves of the plan, now that it's been explained to her," Batman remarked.

"I wish someone would explain it to me," Nightwing answered.

"What was that?" Nocturna asked, looking towards the video store.

"Oh, nothing," Pam soothed. "The mad laughter, that's her trademark."

"You are sure this Aztec..."

"Azrael," Roxy corrected.

"...Azrael is the hero to ensnare?"

"He is *THE* man of Gotham City," both women assured her.

"Many have tried," Roxy added. "The great and wonderful Azrael, we all quiver at his might."

"Damn, that's cold," Nightwing winced, "those women are evil."

"You're just getting that now?" Batman queried.

"And what exactly is your plan of attack," Pamela asked with matter-of-fact professionalism.

"I shall expose him to the bewitching wonder that is me," Nocturna answered, burying her total infatuation with herself in a naïve innocence that was rather pleasing.

"Go get him, Tiger," was Roxy's final word of encouragement before joining the others inside the video store. While Nocturna hid herself in the ebon folds of the night beneath midnight's dark canopy—otherwise known as that dark patch under the burned out streetlight—her companions inside the store made a startling discovery:

"Oh, my god," Roxy gasped, holding up a video jacket from the adult section, "Look at these titles: *Goddess of Mystery and Passion*, *Darkness's Dewey Tears*. This is the stuff she's been spouting all night, it's off these movie jackets! Listen: Tess Tits in *Beautiful but Ever Dangerous*, Lolita Lippstick as 'the Mistress of Darkness... offering her pale flesh to the caress of night's dark breath.'"

Meanwhile, Azrael walked into the street to see where all his quarry had disappeared to...

"We going to do anything?" Nightwing asked, knowing the answer already.

"Let it play out," Batman answered. "Let the targets eliminate each other, fewer to collect once it's over."

It was a lie. Batman wanted to see what would happen, just as Nightwing did.

The nice thing about partners was: neither had to say it out loud.

She emerged from the blackness looking like, depending on your point of view, a vision of dark allurements in a shadowy mist of her own seductive aura, or a Goth chick in a Vera Wang knockoff that looks a little like that dame from *Rocky & Bullwinkle*.

Azrael was of the former view and ran behind Jean Paul's mortal psyche like a cartoon rabbit diving into its hole.

Jean Paul, on the other hand, was a recent graduate of the Oliver Queen School of Woman-Handling. Under Queen's tutelage, he'd watched thirty hours of *Sex and the City*, and media images always made a deep impression on him. He recognized Nocturna immediately as an attractive woman attempting to seduce him, and he took refuge in the example of Carrie Bradshaw's paramour, Mr. Big: *Do not respond to the attractive woman by panting, drooling, or tripping over your tongue. Instead be - what was it Carrie always said? - 'emotionally withholding.' Yes, that was it!*

Jean Paul not only grabbed the helm with confidence, he whirled on his own alter ego with equal confidence: *So what if she's lumpier than other criminals! Arrest her anyway, or I will.*

"Holy shit," Nightwing exclaimed on the rooftop.

"Holy shit," Ivy remarked in the store window.

"Well, that was unexpected," Roxy added.

"Holy shit," Nightwing repeated.

"I'll say," Selina agreed with Roxy.

"Barney Fife did it," Harley noted.

"Captain Lugnug did it," Nightwing murmured.

"Well, now what?" Ivy asked.

"We go home," Selina answered. "After that, Steve Martin would be a letdown."

"Well, now what?" Nightwing asked.

"Grab the Night Thief at his hotel, then go home," Batman answered.

The bats were used to the roar of a turbo engine echoing off cavern walls at odd hours of the night. They were not used to the rumbling blasts being followed by melodic humming. Yet tonight, the dark man who emerged from the armored car tripped through the cave with a spring in his step and a song on his lips.

The New Partnership was a success. It wasn't a record-setting evening: hours of fruitless surveillance followed by the apprehension of a single costumed felon and a pair of muggers. But they had worked together, Batman and Nightwing, Bruce and Dick. They worked together as partners, they brought down the bad guy, and they did it while maintaining a tone so amicable 'Wing had signed off with a lighthearted jibe.

It *was* a lighthearted jibe, after all. It was a joke. Dick was like that. As soon as he was old enough to understand about Catwoman, he had to make his little jokes.

Things were different now. Dick knew that. Bruce Wayne was sleeping with Selina Kyle. It was silly to think Batman still had the same obsessive attraction to Catwoman, and if he did, he certainly wouldn't have to deny it like he used to.

It didn't stir him particularly, seeing her with them, plotting with Ivy, setting up Azrael. His bad girl.

It didn't excite him, and if it did, he would certainly admit it.

Dick just wanted to rib him like he used... to...

The thought hung in the air as Batman stood in the costume vault, eyes riveted on a small, hand-written note:

Don't get changed yet.

Might want to investigate that prowler outside your window.

Meow

"Meow," Batman mouthed softly, then turned.

The other half of Nightwing's parting taunt: Catwoman. Dick was certain she would be wild at the thought of Batman watching her all night. She wouldn't let on, Dick had speculated, but at the first opportunity, she'd be all over him.

Batman moved quickly but didn't race - out of the costume vault, out of the cave, to the grounds outside the house - an electric tension building at what Zen masters call the one point - a tension at once nervous, excited and needful - building - until - *ZING!* - Purple - the excitement ripped outward from the one point through every muscle in his body.

In four seconds, he had her pinned—albeit not a pin recognized by any martial art—her arms held fast behind her back, fingers intertwined in his, ass perched precariously on a thin railing outside the east balcony.

“Bad Kitty,” was all he said.

The emotional pull towards her had never felt this way before. Perhaps because he had the cowl on. He was still Batman. They were both in costume, the same costumes they met in and teased each other in for years... as their mouths met and locked, Batman felt his fingers release hers. His hands moved with a will of their own, reaching to cup the round softness beneath her hips. He picked her up without breaking the kiss. Her legs encircled him and they moved indoors...

Like any well-trained butler-valet, Alfred collected the items he found in a trail leading to his employer's bedroom and discreetly put them away in an appropriate location. It made no difference to him that the trail consisted a cape, a clawed glove, a utility belt, a whip, a cowl, and high-heeled thigh boots. He returned the items to the vault, added a second cup to the breakfast tray, and ran a hot iron over the newspaper.

A half-hour later, a purring Selina Kyle lay on her stomach on Bruce's bed, the newspaper spread out before her while Bruce stroked the back of her thigh and sipped his coffee.

Abruptly, the purring stopped.

Gotham Times, August 23rd

LIFESTYLES

Hermoine's Society Chit-Chat

There goes the neighborhood. Bunny Wigglesworth's drawing room used to be a glittering salon where socialites met cognoscenti. But last night's little gathering was quite the hodgepodge. On this end of the spectrum, the crème de la crème, the British Ambassador and his new wife Lady Newbury. And on that end... The Trashography Trio: F. Miller, M. Newell & D. Cooke...

PUSSYWHIPPED

I was having a good day, that's the thing.

Since Bruce, there are more of those than there used to be, but a good day is still not something to take for granted. And this was a good day.

The Girls' Night Out was more fun than I expected, and the epilogue - MeowPurr - that went way beyond fun.

Next morning, I drove up to the Catitat. There was still a lot of squabbling going on in Gotham, fallout from Nocturna & Anton, and I wanted to slip away for a bit.

Nirvana had a cub with her. You can't *NOT* have a good day meeting a little handful of baby ocelot no bigger than Whiskers and Nutmeg.

When I got back, I had two new messages: Bunny Wigglesworth wanted my opinion on a painting she was buying. And Dick. Grayson Associates got a contract...

::-beep- Glory Hallelujah, Selina, I got a job! Goldberg and Sons. Not exactly Wall Street, not yet anyway. But a solid third generation business. In the diamond district. I'll have a site study for you. ::

Isn't that too cute for words? A site study. That's the bat-influence. He doesn't like phrases like *casing the target* or *breaking and entering*. They're paying him to fix up their security, and he's paying me to work out how it needs fixing. He wants me to case their operation, break in, and crack their safe. A "site study." You gotta love him.

I had a fitting at Kittlemeier's. He was a shameless flirt, as usual. And a stickler for his rules, as usual. Bruce had wanted me to pick up his order for him.

"You want fries with that?"

"Selina, he's not an idiot. He's repairing a utility belt with a catclaw jammed into the winch. He knows we're together."

"He's still not going to go for it. Hell, I don't think he lets Harley and Joker pick up each other's stuff."

"It can't hurt to ask, can it? Smile pretty. Meow."

Can you believe it? "Smile pretty and meow, Kitten; it can't hurt to ask." Shall we revisit just how successful smile-pretty-and-ask has worked in the past: "Put the diamond back... pretty or not, it's not yours... put it back and maybe you won't spend the rest of the night in a cell."

And yet, there he was, my Dark Knight, telling me to bat my eyes at Kittlemeier and ask to bend the rules.

It went like you'd expect. People who think Batman is a black-and-white proposition have never dealt with Mr. Kittlemeier, that's for damn sure.

"Ze rulez is ze rulez, Zelina, you know diz. I make exzeption for you, next time he zend Nightwing. Pretty zoon, Mizz Quinn and Mizz Query want to come zhopping together, what do I zay? Now I got zilly girls giggling in my fitting roomz. No, no, no. No exzeptions, and I gonna charge you both extra for asking."

“Okay, okay, okay. Mr. Kittlemeier, I apologize. I really do. And I have never apologized, all right? I won’t ever bring it up again. You can tack on whatever surcharge you like onto my account, I’ll pay it gladly. Just one thing: You *MUST* let me tell him he’s paying extra because he tried to break the rules. *PLEASE, LET ME TELL HIM... Meow?*”

He smiled. See, when it’s *my* idea Meow/Ask Nice does occasionally work.

I got dressed to meet Bruce at d’Annunzio’s. A new dress—with a short skirt—which I knew he’d enjoy almost as much as pretending not to notice that it was a new dress with a short skirt.

And yes, new ivory pumps. I still don’t get the whole shoe-shopping thing. But I had to make an effort with Doris, for Eddie’s sake. And she is a civilian. It’s what they do, right? Normal women that don’t wear spandex and prowl rooftops, normal women that work at Barnes & Noble, they go shoe shopping. Besides, these pumps are the perfect color.

I got to the restaurant only a little behind schedule, and Giovanni d’Annunzio was deliciously understanding.

“*Cara gatta,*” he assured me, “For a beautiful woman, there is no ‘late.’ She is always on her own time, *perfetto!* If the man he must wait—all the better to appreciate her when she appears. And you are not so cruel as you might have been. Signore Wayne, he is only waiting a few *minuti.*”

Just as Gotham City is Batman’s turf where he metes out his own brand of justice, just as Kittlemeier’s shop is his domain where he enforces his rules as he sees fit, so too is Giovanni the master of his realm. He has his own system of rewards and punishments. If you’ve displeased him, you’ll wind up waiting for a cramped table in the bar. If he’s happy with you, he may invite you to proceed unescorted to meet your party in the great dining room.

“You make an entrance, Selina! Go right ahead. By yourself. Just for wearing that dress. *Bellissima.* Not many women know how to enter a room with class.”

I paused in the archway for just a second, taking in the room, pretending to look for Bruce’s table. This was unnecessary; Bruce is always seated at the best table. But the pause gave him time to see me. The eyes flickered over me, top to bottom before he met my eye. I smiled a greeting, and walked to his table... not too slow, not too fast... 2/3 a Bryn Mawr walk, 1/3 cat.

Bruce was appreciative, I could tell. Like me, he felt the room watching. For their benefit more than his, I kissed his cheek as he stood to greet me:

“Good evening, Darling. Sorry I’m late.”

“You look... fabulous,” he murmured.

“*And good evening to the fop.*” I signed, secretly.

“*Not the fop talking,*” he answered. “*You’re stunning.*”

So you see, it had turned out to be an extraordinarily good day, and I was planning to stretch that into an extraordinarily good night. Then it happened. Giovanni brought my regular cocktail, and as I turned to thank him...

“*Grazie, Giovanni, troppo pronto, da vero-*”

...I saw them. F. Miller, author of *Catwoman: an Unauthorized Biography*, seated with the three stooges of Catwoman exposes, the Miller-wannabes: M. Newell, E. Brubaker & D. Cooke!

Bruce turned, curiously, to see what I was staring at, then looked back to me.

"Darling, we can leave. I can take you anywhere you wish. Anywhere. Not another restaurant. Paris. Rome. Let's just go and..." he trailed off. Then Batman's voice picked up..."Selina, you're not thinking of doing anything *rash*, are you?"

Giovanni was the only one who said anything worth acknowledging, so it was him I answered:

"Who is at that table that offends you, *Cara gatta*?"

"Several years ago, Giovanni, that man, in the center, with the unfortunate mop of hair, wrote a book saying I was common, uneducated, a victim, and a whore."

I had to stop for Giovanni to express his outrage. He had no idea, he said, or he would never have admitted such riffraff into his establishment. Why if *anyone* was common...

He offered, with the Italian machismo of a man half his age, to throw Miller and his party into the street.

"Giovanni, please, no. That would hardly be productive. You know what they say: *Mantenga vicini i vostri amici, ma più vicini i vostri nemici. Sì?* Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer."

Bruce brooded. I went on with the history...

"In any case, he wrote this book. It sold. I wasn't crazy about it, but I figured it would blow over. It's the price you pay, being a public figure. Also, I didn't have the Cat-Tales idea back then. But anyway, the thing is, it hasn't blown over. And every parasite that fancies himself a new Dickens, Raymond Chandler or Judith Kranz goes back to this sorry orphan-streetwalker-headcase he invented..."

"Selina, when you said 'keep your friends close but your enemies closer'..." Bruce put in.

"Not now, dear. Where was I? Oh, yes - headcase he invented, which we all know is not me. Hello? Art expert? Graduated *summa cum laude* from the Sorbonne, thank you very much..."

"Selina."

"Bruce, please, I'm talking to Giovanni. Do you have a pen, by the way? Anyway, I speak three languages. I dated French aristocrats, not mob enforcers. And as for Slam Bradley, oh please! But nobody would buy the asinine adventures of their badly dressed streetchick if they didn't call her Catwoman, now would they?"

"Selina, I do have a pen. If you want it, TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE PLANNING TO DO."

I snatched the pen, and began to write.

"I'm making a list."

Dick Grayson had never been to d'Annunzio's, and he did what all first-timers do. He stood in the great atrium entrance and tried not to gape while waiting to be noticed by the attendant. His eyes fell where they were expected to, on the plaque that read...

"d'Annunzio's is the quintessential Gotham dining experience in a setting of opulent elegance, offering patrons an award-winning wine list, unparalleled service, and an electric fusion of classic Italian cuisine with modern innovation and flair..."

If you were standing there long enough to read further, you might as well leave, for the haughty proprietor would not be acknowledging your existence. Fortunately, it was at this point Giovanni noticed Dick.

"And how may I help you." He made it seem like an answer, not a question.

"Reservation for Wayne, for two, for lunch?" In reply, Dick's answer sounded like a question. But the Wayne name, as it did so many places in Gotham, worked its magic. Giovanni's features transformed entirely.

"Ah yes! You are Mr. Wayne's guest. He is already seated. Follow me please, Signore."

Dick was surprised, moments after their greeting, to realize he was dealing with neither Bat Bruce, at home Bruce, nor Fop Bruce. Instead, this was executive Bruce. It was the persona Dick had the least experience with but, like all the others, it got straight down to business.

"After the last time we spoke at your office, I thought it best to have this meeting elsewhere," Bruce said crisply. "I want to hire you."

Dick gaped.

"You want to hire me?"

"Yes, for a job. That is the purpose of opening an agency, isn't it?"

"Bruce, if this is a joke, I don't think it's funny."

"It's no joke. I have something that needs looking into that Dick Grayson can accomplish that better than *anyone else*." Dick understood the emphasis on the final words meant 'better than Batman or Nightwing.'

"Selina sat in this room last night, in that very chair, making a list I shudder to even describe. Your name is on it. So is Barbara's. So is Two-Face, Riddler, Joker and Scarecrow. It is a scary list. One line reads 'Wonder Woman OR Ra's al Ghul.' That comes underneath 'Oswald-dash-dollar signs,' and before 'P.Ivy-smelly plants.' I'm sure Diana and probably even Ra's would want to know what's going on there."

Dick chuckled.

"So that's the assignment? Find out what the list is?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you ask her?"

Bruce glared.

"I did. Seven times."

"Ah. Did, uh, Batman ask her?"

"I don't especially want to remind her of Batman at the moment."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Mantenga vicini i vostri amici, ma più vicini i vostri nemici."

"Huh? And what does that mean?"

"It means I'm very glad Batman never touched the particular nerve that set off the making of this list."

"Bruce," Dick began, then stopped. He saw an expression on his mentor's face he'd first seen as Robin. It was the "No Trespassing" sign. He'd first seen it the night they didn't chase Catwoman once she ran from the museum. "But she's getting away!" Robin had wailed. He continued complaining throughout the patrol and half the way home. Batman never responded, and eventually Robin noticed that he wasn't getting

an answer. He looked over—and that was what he saw. Jaw set, eyes square. Private Property. Keep Out. Trespassers will be frozen out.

“Ok,” Dick sighed. “I’ll look into it.”

The P.I. of bathetic fiction would have begun his investigation like so: *Go to a seedy bar. Drink self into a stupor accompanied by theme music of a soprano sax passing a kidney stone. Stagger into parking lot and fall victim to menacing thugs in bad suits with warning to “drop da case or else, Mack, oooupph.”*

Dick Grayson, not being a geriatric bachelor with a drinking problem, left the luncheon at d’Annunzio’s around 3:30, checked his office voicemail via cell phone, and headed home to his loving wife—who, he discovered, was having the object of his investigation to tea.

“Hey, Selina,” the Private Dick began.

“Hey, Richard,” the femme fatale answered.

“You weirded out Bruce big time with that list last night. What was that about?”

“It’s a little thing I like to call ‘People who Owe Me a Favor,’” Selina answered.

And there ended *The Case of the Loathed List*.

“So am I on your list?” Dick asked, already knowing the answer but reasoning this was as good an icebreaker as any.

“You are. Did I not go along with your Girls’ Night Out setup?”

“And you had such a miserable time doing it,” Dick joked sarcastically. “Really, Selina, it was the least you could do, I’d say—after Ivy went and ate my cookies.”

“Excuse me,” Barbara interjected.

“Um, nothing, Honey. Okay, Selina, you’re right; I do owe you one. So what do I have to do?”

“Simply remind your wife that I wore yellow ruffles for her.”

“I know, I know,” Barbara wailed. “Okay, Oracle is in.”

::Bruce, it’s Dick. Secure the line.::

-snirk-

“Check,” Bruce grunted as soon as they heard the click of the OraCom encryption engaging the landline. “Yes, Dick. What’d you learn?”

:: The list is mostly people who owe her. She’s calling in favors. And having heard why, Bruce, I gotta say, I’m totally on her side. ::

“Dick, there’s a conference call going on right now. She’s on a speaker-phone with Joker, Two-Face, and Scarecrow. They’re ‘brainstorming’—their word, not mine. You should hear this. If you heard, you wouldn’t be on board, believe me.”

:: Hey, whatever they’re coming up with, better it’s directed at Miller than at us, right? ::

“Bruce, sweetie,” Selina called from the other room, “There’s a carnivorous plant that gives off an odor; it smells like rotting meat. Do you know what it’s called?”

Bruce shook his head sadly.

“Never mind,” Selina called again, “Harvey’s got Pam on the other line.”

Bruce turned back to the phone.

"They're now discussing a plant, the Malaysian Devil's Tongue. If, in the next year, Nightwing finds himself confronted with a giant carnivorous blossom with a foul, carrion-like stench, think back to this moment and remember this brainstorming you dismissed so airily."

:: Bruce, it's not like she's the only one Miller libeled, you know. He's got Batman using a gun and killing people.::

There was quacking Bruce recognized as Barbara talking in the background.

::Besides, Babs thinks after all the fights last month, this could be a very constructive exercise. Sure, we quarrel among ourselves, but we can still all come together and make this guy eat his spleen... ::

More quacking before Dick added:

::...with a spork. ::

"Well, that was entertaining," Selina purred, catching up with Bruce in the cave gymnasium, "but not especially productive. They mean well, poor dears. But smelly plants and fear toxins, well, it's not exactly the right tone."

Bruce continued his workout. There was no sign that she was being listened to—except for a single grunt that had more to do with the parallel bars than anything she was saying. Upstairs, Selina had been preoccupied with the conference call. She hadn't noticed the "brooding bat" quality of Bruce's vanish from the study. But she was now beginning to detect the unmistakable aura of Bat-disapproval.

There was only one way to deal with Bat-disapproval, she'd discovered long ago. You had to feed it until it popped.

"I mean, really," she cooed, "this thing needs to be fought on a certain level, and I don't see that Jervis & Jonathan debating whether to make him afraid French fries or pens..."

Another grunt. Good. He was getting angry.

"Although I must admit, Harley's little brainstorm of making him deathly afraid of toilets, that's got some style."

Bruce leapt off the bars, grabbing a suspended jump rope on his way to the mat.

Selina appeared to ignore this and chattered on...

"By the way, Jack is on some kind of kick with fondue forks, you might want to be aware. Nobody knows what set it off, and obviously no one wants to ask."

Bruce slammed his jump rope into the mat.

"You're going about this all wrong, you do realize that, don't you?" he blurted angrily.

Catwoman's iciest stare was his answer.

"What would you have me do," she countered. "Turn the other cheek? I did that. If I'd dealt with him as he should have been dealt with all those years ago with that first smarmy book, then Carlton, Brubaker, and the rest of it never would have happened. I gave them an inch, look what happened. It ends now."

"Selina, do you want to cause him pain? Or do you want to win? Because if it's the latter, Joker and Scarecrow don't have the answer."

"So what do you suggest? Write a terse little letter to his editor, the same editor that's greenlighted all this shit?"

"Are you asking for my help now? Because, if you remember back that far, I *was* at the restaurant. I would have helped then if you'd asked for more than a pen. I'm not crazy about you looking right past me while writing down Dick, Barbara and Ra's Al Ghul."

"Ra's has a grudge against the American press, *and* he says he knew Cleopatra. That reminds me, did Wonder Woman? She's borderline immortal, right? If she did, that'd be better. It would be much better coming from a woman."

"I...don't know. I think Vandal Savage mentioned her once."

"No good. If Diana can't help, I'll go with Ra's."

"Don't do that. You've totally changed the subject. I hate that. Could we please stick to the point?"

"Cleopatra *IS* the point."

"The point, Selina, is are you going to let me help you? Or not?"

"The point, Selina, is are you going to let me help you? Or not?"

I hadn't felt like this since he hit me with "a crimefighter loving a thief." It came out of nowhere. He wanted to help. I had thought, I don't know why, I just *assumed* he'd go all judgmental-jackass about this. But that wasn't it. It wasn't disapproval. He was upset that I didn't go to him first.

"Well?" he asked.

Just like he used to be, all hard and moody and monosyllabic. I could never resist him like that. I got close and fingered his shirt collar as I might the bat insignia.

"And if I say 'Help me, please,'" I purred, "what have you got to offer?"

His breathing was ragged. I was getting to him.

"Martin Stanwick," he rasped, and I tried to concentrate, but I must admit, that voice doesn't make it easy. "From the wedding. He might be useful to you. He's really 'Hermoine,' the society columnist."

Meow.

Martin Stanwick was in Hermoine Heaven. As the secret identity of Gotham's most illustrious society columnist, Martin was experienced in angling for invitations. If there was a party, a race, an opening, or a gala that was *the* place to be, he made it his business to be there. But it was rare for a hostess to call out of the blue and ask him to lunch. A last minute fill-in for a dinner party, yes. But a luncheon *intime* to meet the Princess of Themyscira! That was unprecedented.

Martin had presented himself at d'Annunzio's promptly at one o'clock and was surprised to learn the royal reception wasn't hidden away in a private room. He was told "the ladies are already seated" and followed Giovanni into the main dining room. He gasped on seeing just how intimate the luncheon *intime* really was: Four ladies and an empty chair for him. Hermoine Heaven.

The one in the tiara was certainly the Princess. Next to her, Martin's internal dictation began...

...Bunny Wigglesworth, keeping better company than at that horribilino party last week...

...Selina Kyle, who had invited him. How long are she and Wayne going to go on pretending anyway...

...and, speaking of pretending, in the fourth seat was that divine woman from the Grayson wedding, who wouldn't admit her connection to the Lances of Newport.

Having shown Martin to the table, Giovanni gave an odd sniff before returning to his station.

"He's not convinced Diana is really a princess," Dinah Lance confided. "We've been laughing about it. Seems royalty doesn't dress that way back home."

"This is Amazonian ceremonial garb," Diana insisted.

"He's miffed because he got suckered," Selina explained. "Giovanni is Italian and he's breathing. You walked in dressed like that - he ogled. Then he found out who you were. He's embarrassed, so he takes a position: royalty and cleavage, it isn't right."

"I think it's lovely," Bunny Wigglesworth said, feeling that good manners meant making the guest feel comfortable. She defended Diana's outfit, "And as for what royalty does or doesn't wear, I'm buying this painting - Selina can tell you, she's advising me - it's of Cleopatra and, my dears, her dress, if you can call it that, is positively *shocking*."

"I'm advising you, all right," Selina answered, "I'm advising you not to buy it unless they admit it's Victorian, not 17th century, and then cut the price accordingly."

"You're sure?" Bunny asked.

"I'm positive. Look, Cleopatra lived two thousand years ago. What we know about her, it hasn't changed. There are two sources: Plutarch, who gave us the Roman view..."

"The Roman view," Diana interrupted, "was Augustus Caesar's propaganda machine, the party line of her enemies after they'd won."

"Yes, okay, that's quite true," Selina broke in quickly. She'd heard from both Bruce and Barbara how Diana would take over the conversation if given the opening. The Amazon Princess did have a role to play in this particular conversation, but she had to be led to the right spot. "The other source," Selina continued, "is Flavius Josephus. He

was closer to the action in Egypt. He tells more about her actual rule in between the affairs with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony that everyone else focuses on."

Selina paused and saw Diana smile approvingly, then she went on.

"Now, whatever you think of the bias on either side, those two works are *all there is to go on*. Every century goes to that same fixed pool of information, zeroes in on some aspects, ignores others altogether, and comes up with a *completely different Cleopatra*. To the 17th century, she was a romantic heroine dying for love. Your painting, Bunny, is 'the Nile slut,' a man-eater that seduces an innocent young pageboy each night, and then has him killed in the morning just to be evil."

"That's preposterous," Diana interrupted, "I knew Cleopatra; she wasn't promiscuous. On the contrary, all the Ptolemys were so obsessed with their Greek lineage, they wouldn't dilute their blood with that of the Egyptians they ruled. They married brothers and sisters to avoid doing so. The idea that Cleopatra would sleep around goes against everything that made her Cleopatra!"

"Purrrfect" was Selina's thought. Diana couldn't have chosen her words better if she'd been given a script.

"None of these versions tell you about the real Cleopatra," Selina brought the point home with a cat-like smile as Giovanni showed an expected 1:30 reservation to their table. "Not one of them. They just reveal the people telling - or making up - the story. Bunny's painting, the man-eater? That's painted by a Victorian. The artist has a screaming fear of female sexuality, so he needs to demonize it."

Selina paused, wondering if this was enough. She decided to continue, not because she feared Martin wasn't getting the point, but because Dinah hadn't had a chance to contribute yet. Selina had invited Dinah as a backup if Diana didn't come through - for Ra's al Ghul had also known Cleopatra and boasted about it to Black Canary. If Diana refused to provide the relevant information, Dinah could easily pick up the slack. Diana had come through, so it was a moot point. But Selina could see that Martin was quite taken with Dinah. It would be a shame not to let her shine. For in Selina's experience, men of substance *enjoyed* having the women they admire demonstrate their smarts and understanding. It was only the inadequate ones, the Millers, the Cookes, and the Brubakers, that needed to think such women were foolish, stupid, or confused.

"I remember hearing something similar," Dinah picked up the Cleopatra theme exactly where Selina had left off, and Martin leaned in to take in every word. "After the, what was it you said, the 'man-eater' era, the next group, also unable to cope with her sexuality, made her childlike: naïve, a pawn, manipulated by political forces she didn't understand."

"Vivian Leigh played that version," Martin cut in, anxious to support Dinah's position. "You're right, I never thought of that. They had to remove her sexuality altogether. How sad, when it was such a vital part of her story."

Selina could have kissed him.

"Well, don't feel too bad. She got it back. But not until the mid 20th century, the Elizabeth Taylor movie. By then, they could handle the notion that she was a politician herself, and a mother, and an intellectual."

"Yes, indeed. That library at Alexandria was her baby," Diana put in, feeling that far too much time had passed since she had been listened to. "And an aristocrat,

descended from a 300 year old dynasty. Frankly, she looked down her nose at those upstart Roman generals whose fathers were, what, farmers?"

"So, in each Cleopatra," Selina timed the closing just as her prey noticed Bunny Wigglesworth and was readying to step into the trap, "you're not seeing Cleopatra. You're seeing a commentary on the person that choose to show her this way. And what kind of a sorry excuse for a man needs her to be... Oh, good lord, is that F. Miller sitting over there? Bunny, I know he was at your party, and I'm sure he'll want to say hello. Frankly, I'd rather not meet him. Excuse me, dears, I'll just go powder my nose."

The man who was so ill-bred as to wear red Chuck Taylor tennis shoes at d'Annunzios never recognized the elegant brunette in the Ferregamo pumps that cut him so coldly as she passed. No matter, Martin thought, Miller would learn her identity soon enough. From Hermoine's column.

Bruce Wayne sat at his Batcave workstation, trying for Batman-mode and failing. He stared at the monitor displaying costumed criminals at large, as if willing it to do something:

At Large:

Harley Quinn
Joker
Mad Hatter
Hugo Strange
Poison Ivy
Riddler
Roxy Rocket
Scarecrow
Two-Face

Not a short list. Yet none of them were *doing* anything. Batman did not *WISH* for crime to occur. It was just that, for each and every one of them, it was only a matter of time until they *would* do something. So why not get one out of the way now?

Joker, he thought, fondue forks? Losing your edge, Clown. Let's have it out, once and for all, while you're fixating on melted cheese instead of mass murder.

Scarecrow, that was an emasculating scene at the Iceberg with Hugo; no urge to take it out on the bullies?

Ivy, the new flytrap has to be trained sometime, doesn't it?

Two-Face, be a pal. You know what she's like. Do something. Get me out of this cave. She's driving me crazy.

The object of his torment came up behind him and nuzzled his neck.

"I'm worked up," said the hot breath tickling his ear. "Come and play."

He sighed.

"I really should study this. Almost everyone's free right now."

"No one is in the city, it's too hot. It's quiet. Come and play."

"Selina, please."

"I'm restless. Work out with me."

"We've tried that; it doesn't work. Sparring turns into petting which turns into..."

"I'll wear the old suit you like, with the skirt, slit up to--"

"Kitten, you're killing me."

"I can't help it," Selina moaned, exasperated. "I've got all this pent up energy. I'm not like Oracle; I hate sitting tight away from the action, just waiting to hear the reports."

"I appreciate that, my love. I'm the same way. But in this case, you're going to have to wait until--"

"Sir, miss," Alfred announced from the landing, "Ms. Lance has arrived upstairs."

"Thank you," Bruce answered with ill-concealed relief, "Alfred, we'll be right up."

Alfred left Bruce, Selina, and Dinah in the east drawing room. He expected that, by the time he returned with the tea tray, Ms. Lance would be well into her report. He was sorry he would have to miss so much of the story. Only Dinah could tell what happened at the restaurant when Selina left the table, and what Martin Stanwick might have said when he walked Dinah home. This was not idle curiosity, Alfred assured himself. He had contributed more than a little to Selina's overall strategy. Batman and Catwoman were brilliant tacticians in virtually every arena of combat. Yet for the kind of subtle, social warfare that is waged in places like d'Annunzio's, they thought to consult a greater expert: Alfred Pennyworth. It was he who worked out the timing for each development to have the desired effect, and he would be disappointed not to hear firsthand how it had all played out.

Alfred was therefore surprised to find the trio waiting in the most respectful silence when he returned with the tea. It seemed they had waited for him after all.

Bruce nodded as the butler began laying out the tea things, and finally Dinah spoke.

"It was wonderful. Miller no sooner said 'Hi,' and the other one came in. Cooke, I think. He was late for the reservation. Giovanni was furious. Ah, but he had *such a good excuse*. It seems his book signing went to hell!"

Selina's head tilted back as she emitted a low rippling purr.

"I love it when you do that," Bruce murmured.

"You had your chance before," Selina replied. "Go on, Dinah, please."

"Well, you know this winner has a new trash wallow out, cut from the same cloth as Miller, so he's on the book-signing trail. Today, he was at a Barnes and Noble in Chelsea and—tsk tsk—this awful woman brought him coffee and spilled it, piping hot coffee, all over the front of his trousers."

"Go, Doris!" Selina cheered.

Bruce's mouth twitched.

Alfred brewed tea.

"Cooke cursed a blue streak," Dinah resumed. "Even though this woman kept apologizing and trying to make it right."

"Read: rubbing it in, giving the scalding coffee maximum time to burn and stain," Selina guessed.

"Exactly," Dinah confirmed, "and, unfortunately, they just happened to have seated him right next to the children's section. Many irate moms complained: 'That horrible

man. Such language. Our children should not get their ideas of how to behave from people like that.”

“Meow,” Selina observed.

“That was about it until Martin escorted me home,” Dinah went on.

“Wait a minute,” Bruce interrupted again. “What was Diana’s take on Miller?”

“She said he’s a perfect example of why the Amazons left Man’s World and founded Themyscira in the first place. Anyway, Martin took me home. We walked through Gotham Plaza, as planned. And there it was! Barbara’s timing was impeccable. She’d dug up the worst reviews on all of them, also their high school yearbook photos, and had them plastered on the JumboTron. There it was, in colored lights, four stories high:

‘To say Brubaker is a bad writer is to insult hacks, incompetents, and poseurs around the world.’

‘Written in a bland, moronic style reminiscent of *Look and Learn*.’

‘A lack of imagination surpassed only by smallness of mind and banality of thought.’

‘Amidst all the dross there is the occasional outburst of really dangerous lunacy.’

‘Amidst all the dross there is the occasional outburst of really spectacular ignorance.’

‘Amidst all the dross there is the occasional outburst of really spectacular incompetence.’

‘The greatest villain in this man’s world is the high school guidance counselor who did not urge him to forget writing, an activity for which he clearly has no skill, and pursue a career instead in the growing field of VCR repair.’

“And my personal favorite:

‘There are too many pages between the covers of his books. Paper that could have been used to wrap fish, print jury summons, or on which Marietta Klenofsky might have Xeroxed her lovely derriere at the next office party. Better still, this paper might have been used by Marietta’s son Jonathan. Jonathan is in the 6th grade. He could have used some of the pages squandered on the printing of Brubaker’s latest effort, to write a paper on the most fundamental principles of storytelling, which would demonstrate that a bright 12-year-old has a better grasp of those principles than does Mr. Brubaker.’”

“Holy hell,” remarked Selina, “and I thought *I* didn’t like him.”

“From what I saw, *plenty* of people dislike all four of these losers,” Dinah replied, “but the droogies always shouted them down, so they stopped speaking up. Now you never hear from them unless you go looking. Barbara went looking.”

But something was bothering Bruce.

“The JumboTron is big, but not that big. How did Oracle ever make it display those long reviews?”

“One sentence at a time,” Dinah laughed, “Martin was fascinated, being a writer himself. He made us stay and read the whole thing.”

“In the middle of Gotham Plaza? In traffic?”

“We waited in line at the TKTS both. By the time it was over, we had tickets for STOMP. Which reminds me, I’ve gotta get back. Meeting Marty for drinks before the

show. Selina, I was wondering if I could borrow that pretty green dress? With the low back?"

City folks who find themselves in the country are always startled by how dark the night really is. In a city, one never realizes how much glare the cars, the streetlights, the advertisements and the rest of it really do create. Not until they leave the city, look up, and see a sky so black it seems to have mass and texture, a blackness too thick to be the vacuum of space, a black that must be velvet, or liquid, or pudding. And spattered in that bowl of impossible black are more stars than can possibly exist.

Thus it could not be said that the condition through which F. Miller walked home was at all the "dark and stormy night" of fictional cliché. It was through midtown Gotham he walked, and Gotham City—despite the insistence of cliché-bound fiction writers—is never that dark.

But stormy it most definitely was. The rain began at four o'clock, coating the streets with a greasy slick that extended rush hour until seven, when the tourist traffic, the theatre traffic, and the nightclub traffic took its place. By nine o'clock, the air was thick with car exhaust and bad temper. The rain let up, but the winds promised it would return harder and wetter than before.

It was a miserable night. And Miller, like any sane human being, was in no hurry to walk into it. He lingered at Kane's Bar & Grille, not especially caring that some Cal Tech pranksters hacked the JumboTron, reminding ten million Gothamites of the review calling his sequel "a slap-dash fever dream only written because he drunk up the proceeds of his earlier efforts." It wasn't true. And he wasn't going to let such charges force him from the dry shelter of Kane's into that hell of a storm on a night when there was no chance of getting a cab.

That was his thought from midnight until last call. Then the reality had to be faced. He'd hidden in Kane's as long as he could. It was time to face the storm. He headed downtown through the wind tunnel that was South Sprang Blvd, too intent on the rumblings of nearing thunder to notice that he was being followed.

The first crack of lightning erupted when he was still six blocks from home; the downpour began two blocks later. He reached his door, wet and agitated. He dripped into his entranceway, dripped on his evening edition of the Gotham Post, dripped onto his unopened mail... and dripped onto the ominous shadow growing from the floor beneath his window.

"F. Miller," Batman growled, emerging from the darkness, "We need to talk. We need to talk about why you tear down heroes. We need to talk about what a normal human being can achieve with drive and determination. We need to talk about bravery, intelligence, and strength both physical and of character. We're going to get to the bottom of why you tell people heroes don't exist.

"There are individuals out there with initiative, ability and vision, who develop their gifts for the sake of being the best people they can be. There are people who give of themselves, who risk their lives and their happiness, to make the world better. You tell people that's a lie. You tell them an ignorant whore is more realistic than a bright, witty, sexy, and cultured woman. You tell them an obsessed emotional cripple is more realistic than nobility of mind and spirit, and a life marked by action and purpose.

“Does that make it easier to live with being a petty, selfish parasite?”

“So what if you’ve never done anything worthwhile with your setbacks: it’s okay, it’s just that you’re not so damaged and stunted as some. You’d have to be real messed up to care so much. You’d have to be one pathetic and limited individual to step up to the line and give of yourself to make the world better.

“I see what you are, Miller, you and those who emulate you, and those who insist your sick vision is the way things are. It’s sick, and it’s sad. But if it stopped there, it would be no concern of mine.

“But when innocents start believing your twisted version of things, when they think *THAT* is realistic, when they think the notion that men and women can achieve great things is a childish fairytale... then it is very much my concern. Because there *are* heroes in this world. One person *can* stand up and make a difference. And if one person stops believing that because of what you’ve written, I will rededicate the rest of my life to destroying the rest of yours.

“Be out of my city by sundown tomorrow.”

to: L.Lane@dailyplanet.com

fr: selina_kyle@oraclesecure.gothamcity.us

Dear Lois,

A little bird tells me one F. Miller has decided to leave Gotham on short notice and is setting up shop in Metropolis. If there’s one person who detests this man more than I do, I’m sure it’s you.

Attached is a list of ideas the think tank came up with that I did not have a chance to act on. I thought you might find it, shall we say, inspirational.

Meow,

Selina

to: selina_kyle@gothamcity.us [oraclesecure.intercept.decrypt]

fr: l.lane@dailyplanet.com

Selina, this is certainly inspirational. :) On the fear issue, pens and toilets are very amusing, I’m sure. But, as a writer myself, I believe I have a better notion than any that occurred to your ‘think tank.’ Please ask if it would be possible to instill a debilitating fear of the letter “M.”

Lois

Author’s Note: Two words: Flight 93.

Heroes are real. Miller is wrong. Dark Knight Returns, Year One and all the rest is wrong. Anybody that tells you otherwise is trying to pull you, me, and our heroes down to their level. Don’t let them.

LOOSE ENDS

I'm not an unreasonable man.

If there's something I'm not understanding, explain it to me.

When I didn't know about escapes, I learned.

When I didn't know about climbing, I learned.

So if there's a reason the catsuit can't be hung on the hook built for that very purpose in the costume vault, why not just explain it to me instead of consistently leaving it on the bedroom chair, on the tallboy, or under the bed.

She says she's fastidious. She says it's a cat quality.

So explain that closet.

The hell-mouth.

She once lost a cat inside it.

I offered to help her get it organized. What did she say: "Why bother?"

Why bother. Kitten, you can't find anything in it. What's the point in keeping stuff if you can't lay your hands on it without rummaging for half an hour and losing a cat in all the clutter?

And then... I saw it coming... head tilt... eyebrow up... "Pffffffffft." Same way she'd answer "Crime doesn't pay." Infuriating woman.

"It's not a trophy room," she says, "it's a storage closet."

"And what's *THAT* supposed to mean?"

"Never mind."

"Selina, I'm not an unreasonable man..."

"Pffffffffft."

"...if there's something I'm not understanding, explain it to me."

"I just don't feel the need to have my old junk filed clockwise around the room in chronological order."

::brrzzzz:: The intercom interrupted.

"Yes, Alfred?"

::Sir, Ms. Barbara is on the line. I fear she sounds somewhat agitated.::

Dick's face was bruised, swollen, and blood seeped through the bandages that ran from his cheek down to his collarbone.

"That's a cut?" Selina was aghast, "Richard, this is serious; that could've opened your carotid artery."

"I don't need to be grandma'd right now. Okay, Selina?"

"*GRANDMA'D!*" she exclaimed before Bruce pulled her away from the bed.

Dick looked grateful.

Talking was painful, but what he had to say to Bruce and Selina—and to his wife—couldn't wait. When he spoke, he addressed the room generally, but seemed to be speaking more to Bruce.

"The one-night-a-week plan isn't working. Before the wedding, Nightwing spending one night in Gotham and the rest of the time in Bludhaven made sense. Gotham has a fulltime protector. But trying to work it the other way: living in Gotham, checking in at 'Haven once a week, it's not enough. Every time I go back, it's six days worse. Blockbuster chose Bludhaven to be the seat of his criminal empire because it didn't have a hero. I worked too long and too hard to stop him, to clean up the corruption there; I can't turn my back on it now."

"Dick," Barbara pleaded, "I can't leave Gotham. You can't ask me to do that."

"Then I won't," her husband replied simply, "but I won't leave 'Haven the way it is, either, under Blockbuster's thumb. We've got to end him."

The only response was from Bruce; Dick understood the grunt to be approval.

"I couldn't stop him before, not alone," Dick said in reply, still addressing Bruce more than the others. "But I have three advantages now he knows nothing of: Oracle, Batman, and Catwoman."

"Okay, now I'm feeling insulted," Robin complained. "I'm not invited to participate in the Battle of Bludhaven. Fine. I accept that. I'll stay in Gotham and mind the store while you're all away. No worries. No egos here like on some teams. I accept my assignment. But you've got to rub it in by having me *run the projector for your briefing!*"

"Robin, Tim, Bro!" Nightwing pleaded, "I need this. This is Blockbuster. This is the big one. If it were a briefing at Titans Tower, I'd be golden. But it's not. It's in the cave. It's in *his* cave, and he's made a hundred little tweaks to the system since my day. If I go in there without you, I'm going to hook up my laptop to the big screen, I'll launch my slideshow, and it will crash the system. And there goes my credibility right there. Goodbye forever to my chance of running this thing."

"Alright," Robin sighed, knowing he was beaten. "I guess I can be there for half an hour and click a mouse for you."

The next day, Tim Drake drove out to Wayne Manor after school. Instead of going straight to the cave, he walked the long way around the house, to the kitchen door. He knocked and entered.

"Hey, Alf," he called as he went through to the elevator entrance in the butler's pantry, "Going downstairs."

Alfred Pennyworth knew his duty. Tim was the only Robin that didn't live at Wayne Manor in his civilian identity, but Bruce still wanted him to treat the house as his home. And Tim had always done so. He didn't need to check in the way he had just done. The only reason for Tim not to let himself in the front door and go straight through the grandfather clock passage to the cave was to pass by Alfred and make his presence known. And the only reason to do that, Alfred knew, was to get fed. Mrs. Drake was on another health food kick.

Alfred prepared a plate of sandwiches and brought them to the cave in time to see Tim, already changed into Robin, helping Nightwing move a long conference table into the main chamber.

"There," Nightwing declared with a satisfied grin, "now everybody will have a clear view of the overheads. Robin, you can sit there and run the slides off the laptop. Now where are those binders?"

Catwoman took her seat in the Batcave. She took one look at the glossy black binder before her - with a Nightwing emblem emblazoned on the cover - and drove a claw into her palm to fight back the smile.

Without turning her head, she stole a glance at Batman, staring down at an identical binder placed in front of his chair.

"Don't say it," he signed. "Just don't say it."

"Chip off the old block," she signed back.

"Stop it."

"It's cute."

"I mean it. Stop."

"Shall we start then," 'Wing began, and the projection screen lowered silently down. A Nightwing symbol appeared on the giant monitor that loomed over the cave.

Barbara, on the other side of Batman's chair, sitting before a third black binder, voiced the comment Catwoman would not.

"Nice logo, Sweetums."

'Wing glowered at her.

"Shall we start?" he repeated.

"*Un film di* Nightwing," his wife sang out.

"Says the gal who normally comes to meetings dressed as a hologram," 'Wing shot back in Dick's voice.

"And this is the crack team that kept me from the Katz Collection," Catwoman muttered.

"That, and a henchman who couldn't keep his mouth shut after a couple boilermakers," Batman noted under his breath.

"Leon was a fence, not a henchman," she corrected.

"I'll say, glass jaw."

"Alfred," Robin hit the intercom, "are there any chicken strips left? It looks like I'll be here for a while."

After the snack arrived, Dick removed his mask and rubbed his eyelids.

"Bludhaven briefing, take two," he said.

"A lot of alliteration from nervous Nightwing," Barbara chided.

"Here we go again," Robin mumbled.

Batman cleared his throat, "Can we get started here?"

Just like Batman did, Nightwing cleared his throat before speaking, "Uh, yes. Yes, I think we're all set now. You ready, Robin?"

"Sure thing, Bro," answered a too-cheery voice.

"Blockbuster is Roland Desmond," 'Wing began. He nodded to Tim, who clicked the mouse as instructed. A surveillance photo flickered simultaneously on the laptop and the huge projection screen. It showed a well-dressed but unremarkable man entering a car. Then the same man's mugshot appeared on the screen. "He is the numero uno criminal in Bludhaven."

Nightwing paused, looking at the others in the room, trying to judge their level of interest. Batman already seemed bored.

A third slide came up, showing the same man's face on the body of a behemoth. It had a huge balding head, but long grayish-blond hair flowed from the back, down past the shoulders.

"WHOA," Tim exclaimed. "What happened?"

"Experimental steroids. In prison. Roland is now 8 feet tall, weighs 825 pounds, and fights like something out of *Lord of the Rings*."

"That's not even human," Tim winced.

"Bullseye," Barbara said, "Ten points to the Boy Wonder."

"The human heart Roland was born with couldn't accommodate his new body. Somehow, he got himself a transplant... from Gorilla City. Physically, it's his only weakness that I know of."

Batman stifled a yawn.

"Ok, we get the picture," Selina put in. "He's a velociraptor in a good suit. What else has he got going for him?"

"Smarts," 'Wing answered. "The first Blockbuster, his brother, was a muscle-bound ox. Not Roland. Roland is a genius. In addition to his sheer physical bulk, we've got to contend with, in my opinion, an unmatched criminal intellect."

Batman spoke up, "Yes, yes, he ousted Bludhaven crime boss, Angel Marin, and was able to fend off Black Mask's minions to keep a stranglehold on Bludhaven. Right, Wing?"

A clearly flustered Nightwing looked down and shuffled his notes.

"Uh... uh... yes, of course, that's right."

Batman spun his hand around a few times as an indication to speed up the briefing.

"Uh, Blockbuster operates a highly sophisticated criminal enterprise in Bludhaven. The largest of its kind, in fact," Wing said as if he were reading from a script.

"Old news," a bored voice rang out.

"Hey! Who the hell is running this briefing anyway?" Dick shouted.

"Apparently, you are," Batman replied. "So tell me something I don't know."

Shuffling his notes again, Wing said, "Okay, okay, I will." He looked up to Robin to change to the next slide. "The chief source of Blockbuster's cash is a gang, the oldest and largest in Bludhaven. About fifteen years ago, this gang was started by Angel Marin. It originated in Bludhaven's fourth police precinct on the South Side, and later spread its tentacles into almost every community in the city."

Nightwing looked up and saw everyone in the room was staring at him. He continued.

"Originally, this gang developed as a traditional street gang. Their main desire was to protect their neighborhoods or turfs. Occasionally, they would do battle with rival

gangs from other neighborhoods. During these battles, they developed a reputation for violence and brutality. That reputation is still with them today.”

Feeling more confident, Nightwing said, “Their criminal activity entails...”

“Narcotics,” Batman cut in, “drive-by shootings, intimidation, graffiti, burglaries and related thefts.”

Flustered once more, Wing could only say, “Uh, uh... that’s correct.”

“Of course it’s correct. I’m Batman.”

The room erupted into laughter. The only one that wasn’t laughing, other than Batman of course, was Nightwing.

Trying to regain control of his briefing, Nightwing ignored the laughter and continued.

“And he’s got the cops in his pocket. From Police Chief Francis Alexander Redhorn—slide—on down.”

Robin sobered quickly and clicked for the next slide. A publicity shot came up that was obviously from a City press kit: a middle-aged man in uniform, brown hair, built like a football player, a cigar clenched in one hand as he stood behind his desk, leaning over a tidy stack of papers and files.

“And this photo is trying to make him look good,” Nightwing remarked sourly. “Just about all the scum in ‘Haven work for Blockbuster too. He gets fifty cents of every dirty dollar.”

“That’s good to know,” Catwoman noted. “He’s greedy. If he’s taking fifty percent, he’s not that smart. That’s your weakness number two right there.”

Nightwing met her eye. “We’ll talk later,” he said with a smile.

Batman grunted.

Catwoman gave a pleased purr. “Don’t be territorial, Dark Knight; it’s unattractive.”

“Actually,” Wing said with a strange twinkle, “a little marking of territory is going to be crucial to making this work. Robin, next slide.”

The next image that came up looked altered.

“That is Dudley Soames. Used to be called Deadly Soames before he upgraded to the more colorful handle: Torque.”

“It looks like his head is on backwards,” Robin observed.

“It is. Soames was the dirtiest cop around, and also one of Blockbuster’s lieutenants. Played all sides against the middle. Even gave me info on Blockbuster’s operations for a while. Roland found out, twisted his head 180-degrees. Soames blames me as much as Blockbuster. Wants revenge on both of us. That’s the key to him. Weakness number three.”

Batman grunted again. “Summing up any time soon?”

“To end Blockbuster, we’re looking at a three-tiered operation: One: find him. Two: physically taking him down. And three: neutralizing the corruption in the force. Otherwise, he’s free as soon as we take him in.”

Batman removed his cowl and gauntlets, changing them for the protective gloves and goggles needed to fuel the Batwing.

That was why he didn't have a conference table in the Batcave in the first place. It was a simple equation: Conference table = Meetings = Waste of his time. Like the Watchtower: *Team this, team that, we're a unit, we need one another.* One of these days Diana would insist they all join hands and sing Kumbaya.

As a corporate executive, Bruce Wayne was more than familiar with what Nightwing was now experiencing, the dread horror of "the meeting after the meeting." Bruce could have warned him. But, of course, Dick didn't want to be warned. He cared nothing for the experience Bruce brought to the table, he'd made that more than clear.

Dick loaded the luggage into Barbara's wheelchair van and huffed. It had begun immediately after the briefing concluded.

Barbara was coming. She said she only needed ten minutes to pack.

"Oh but," Nightwing had sputtered before he even realized he was speaking, "I hadn't realized you'd want to come. Oracle can operate from anywhere, after all. When you helped in the past, it was always from your base at the apartment."

And BANG, it was just like after the honeymoon, she'd laid down the law: Of course she was coming. He'd be gone for a week minimum on this. She wasn't going to be left behind all alone. Of course she was coming. *OF COURSE* she was coming. She'd operate off her laptop from his safehouse or the hanger where he stored his car and plane. Of course she was coming. The Oracle had spoken - It would be so.

Well, he had figured she'd stay in Gotham but... "Okay, honey, if you feel that strongly, I guess we'll take your van then." He'd turned to Batman and Catwoman, who had each removed their masks but were still in costume, paging through the binders. "Bruce, Selina, leaving in an hour okay? Civvies. We'll take Barbara's van."

That's when the second hammer fell:

"Hell no, we're taking the Batwing," Bruce spat instantly.

Dick couldn't believe it. The Batwing? It'd be like taking a Lear Jet to the 7-11 to buy milk.

"The Batwing!" he exclaimed, "'Haven is thirty minutes across the river! We load up the van, we'll be there by dinnertime!"

"Batman's arrival in Bludhaven should be conspicuous for your plan to work. We're taking the Batwing. Catwoman will ride with me. If you and Barbara want the van, we'll rendezvous at the hanger *when you get there.*"

Yeah, Bruce, Dick thought acidly, when we get there the whole twenty minutes later. Make it sound like a week and a half.

And before anybody could question just how "conspicuous" Batman's arrival would be in a freakin' stealth plane, he was off to its hanger, leaving Nightwing alone with Catwoman.

There was a long silence.

"When we get to Bludhaven," Dick said finally, "I thought I'd take you all to dinner at this little place I know. Mario's. Great steaks. Selina, this is where you should stamp your foot and say 'No, we're eating Chinese and that's final.'"

He made a joke. That's his way. Bruce broods. Or turns into Psychobat. Or else, today's special blend: he launches into the control freak. But Dick jokes.

I left him there. There was really nothing to say as we stood there staring at each other after Bruce's departure. It was a quintessential Bat-moment.

I know from experience what all that bluster means: "You're a thief." Hard and cold and controlling. "We can never be because you're a thief." The battier he gets, the more is going on that isn't Bat at all. "Hell no, we're taking the Batwing." That's Bruce. That's Bruce hurting. Bruce having a spasm. Any emotion gets twisted into the usual one and dealt with the usual way: Batman. They say if your only tool is a hammer, you view every problem as a nail. Batman may not be Bruce's only tool. But it's his favorite. By a mile.

I followed Batman into the hanger. He was fighting with the fuel hose like a stubborn snake.

"The Batwing will have us there in minutes," he said, by way of acknowledging my presence without looking at me.

"Barbara and I were talking," I fibbed. "We think Nightwing may have missed one of the challenges of this mission."

"Just one?" he muttered.

Bat-prick. Same attitude he had at the briefing. I ignored it.

"Yes, three challenges," I said. "He listed one: finding Blockbuster, two: physically apprehending him, and three: neutralizing the corruption. He missed four: without letting the testosterone levels reach toxic proportions."

The glare was one I hadn't seen aimed at me in a very long time. It gave me a chill. But it also gave me direction. That look frightens everyone off. No one ever stands up to it. Nobody except me...

"I thought you and Dick were okay," I said softly. "You were over it; you worked together that night. New baseline. New partnership."

"Tell me something," he blurted, fiercely agitated. "I'm supposed to be the 'World's Greatest Detective,' right? Explain to me what was up with that table?"

"The table?" I sputtered, "I think they brought it in from the lab."

But he wasn't listening; he talked right over me...

"Why did he go about doing it this way? And those binders? Why does he hate me?"

"Hate you? Bruce, he worships the water you walk on."

"So why didn't he ask *me* to brief and conduct the meeting, hmm? I'm the senior crimefighter, I have the experience, I have all the data on Desmond. I thought he'd value that."

A year ago, I brushed off JLAers that warned me Batman was a high-handed, domineering autocratic control freak. They were smarting from the protocols, I told myself. I knew him better than anybody. I knew him at his worst and his worst wasn't that bad. His worst *wasn't* this bad. Something was happening to him. *Bruce, what's going on in there?* The question kept echoing in my head.

"Blockbuster is Nightwing's enemy," I stated the obvious as matter-of-factly as I could. "Bludhaven is *his* city. Of course he'd brief, of course he's heading the team--"

"He's heading the team," Bruce interrupted me. He looked stunned. Like this was just dawning on him. I didn't know if I should speak or leave it be. If this was reason dawning at last, then it was a fragile, delicate thing. A breath could collapse it.

"If it was Gotham," I said finally, "If it was Joker, would ANYBODY but you be in charge?"

He looked at me like the answer was obvious, which, of course, it was.

"Would you not run the entire JLA out of town on a rail if Krypton so much as suggested a mission here you didn't lead?"

"Drop it, Selina. I'm running a pre-flight check. We'll be ready to go in ten minutes."

"Four bags, four of us, a laptop and a wheelchair. It's twenty minutes across the river. Are you honestly telling me there's any reason to take this thing other than it's going by air when Dick said ground, going in costume when Dick said civilian clothes, and taking your vehicle instead of his?"

There was a long, long pause.

"Fine," he spat, "You want to go too. Go. Leave. Take the van. Just go. Just go and leave."

Ah. I might not be the world's greatest detective, but I didn't need to be to put that together.

"Like he did?"

"Enough. Selina, that is *enough*."

The soft hiss of a pressurized air gauge was magnified as it echoed off the walls of the cavern. Finally, Batman spoke:

"You're saying, since it's Bludhaven and Blockbuster, I should let another yard or so out on the leash?"

"I'm saying that he hasn't been on the other end of that leash for a long time. Not since he was Robin."

That brought on another look I haven't seen in a while. The look that says ABSOLUTELY UNACCEPTABLE information coming in. Penthouse, 3 AM, emeralds. My little joke "I don't look on it as stealing; I look on it as practical socialism." Then comes *that look*. I decided a different approach was necessary.

"Did you know Dick and Barbara had a big fight after their honeymoon?" I asked.

"A fight?" the compulsive fixer replied, "Should I have a talk with them?"

I ignored this and continued.

"It was because Barbara said they'd be living in Gotham. She didn't ask, she told him. Assumed it was understood from the getgo." I paused, hoping he'd make the jump on his own. He didn't. "He left her too, you see. When you clipped his wings as Robin, to continue being *what he needed to be*, he became Nightwing. And he went to Bludhaven. And she felt abandoned."

"I know Dick loves her very much," he said after a pause.

"Yes. But he still left. And that hurt her. So now she's laying down the law, taking control of the situation, so he can't do it again."

There was the slightest hint of a mouth-twitch as he said, "She lays down the law?"

"Dick is wondering why I seem to be the only one willing to take his lead on this. I can't help wondering the same thing. I can't help wondering if it isn't because..."

C'mon, Bruce, I mentally cheered him on, last chance. FINISH THE THOUGHT. You see it there, I know you do. Greatest detective, my ass. SAY IT.

“Because you’re the only one he didn’t walk out on,” he growled, choking the life out of the gas hose. “Because you’re the only one he didn’t abandon for that stinking cesspool of crime marinating in guns, drugs and graft!”

It was at this point the gas hose he was strangling began to choke and gurgle. The tank was full. He disengaged it from the Batwing, replaced it in its harness, removed his gloves and goggles, and then took a deep breath.

“Who would drive the van?” he asked abruptly.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

“I do love you,” I told him. “You need therapy. But I love you.”

The road sign read: **Bludhaven 20 miles**

Without taking his eyes off the road, Dick glanced at Barbara. She was pulling traffic reports on a PDA. In the backseat, Bruce and Selina were becoming more engrossed in their argument and less aware that they had an audience.

“I’m saying that I would never put my costume in the same suitcase with Bruce Wayne’s clothes. It would be like keeping Batarangs in a briefcase; anyone could stumble over them.”

Dick downshifted and changed lanes. He couldn’t figure out what Bruce was getting at. He was happy enough when Bruce and Selina showed up, bags in hand, having decided the van *was* the better alternative after all.

And Bruce was making an effort, Dick couldn’t help but notice: He hadn’t claimed the driver’s seat, dictated the route, or even grumbled when Dick gassed up with 87 octane instead of 92. In Bruce’s case, Dick noted, “making an effort” manifested itself in things *not* said.

Junction: US-61 8 mi

“Kitten, I’m only saying that these men are dangerous criminals, so it would be a good idea to get their attention at the beginning by making it clear you’re there to bring an offer that’s profitable for them.”

The puzzle was, as much as Bruce was improved with Dick, he’d been laying into Selina since they had pulled out of the parking garage: He was surprised she could pack so quickly considering the state of her closet. He questioned keeping the catsuit with her other clothes. He was giving notes on her part in the Bludhaven operation. That would be: talking to crooks. And he was giving her notes!

Bruce, I don’t think she needs a flowchart, Dick thought silently, flicking his turn signal, I really don’t.

“Sweetie,” Barbara interrupted, “This time of day, traffic is pretty heavy in downtown ‘Haven. Better to take the bypass, even though it means overshooting your exit. It’ll be faster to minimize the drive through town.”

“Babs, I have driven this route a few times before, y’know,” Dick objected.

“Not at this time of day, Dearest,” was the all-seeing Oracle’s reply.

Dick flicked off the turn signal. He knew when to drop it—which was more than he could say of Bruce.

“Were you not listening back there? Blockbuster is over eight hundred pounds. If you should find yourself in a situation, you need protection. A nine hundred pound bodyguard with sharp teeth is not an unreasonable precaution.”

Dick could only surmise that Selina was holding her tongue as long as she had because they were in a closed car with two other people. There was a limit, however, to how long Selina's politeness would contain Catwoman's temper—and that limit was reached, Dick sensed, at the suggestion she bring her pet tiger, Shimbala, down from its preserve for use as a bodyguard.

"First," she began in a voice that became more feline with each sentence, "I packed in under five minutes, so obviously the state of my closet was not an impediment, Mr. It's Results That Matter. Second, I've been carrying the catsuit around with me for quite some time without any hints from Gentleman's Quarterly, so how Batman does or does not choose to carry his costume around is of absolutely no interest to me. And P.S., if we were to make a list of all the things you would 'never do' that I would, we will not only bypass Bludhaven, we'll be a hundred miles across the Canadian border before we even get into Spandex. Third, the day I need tips, hints, notes, or direction of any kind on how to get a man's attention, criminal or otherwise..."

She sputtered, clearly unable to come up with a sufficiently ludicrous scenario. Dick offered, "They'll be pork in the treetops!"

In the rearview mirror, he saw Bruce and Selina staring.

"You know, like 'when pigs fly,'" he explained sheepishly.

"Don't help me," Selina snapped. "And if, by some fantastic stretch of the imagination, I actually thought I *needed* advice on how to talk to or handle men, you, my precious, would be the *ABSOLUTE LAST* living person I would be talking to. In fact, 'living' is irrelevant. I'd get a ouija board first and ask the dead."

Dick eyed the roadsigns:

US-61

Bludhaven Next 4 Exits

Bypass 261 – 1 miles.

"Fourth," Catwoman concluded her rant, "A tiger is a living thing. It is not a weapon. It is not a bodyguard. A tiger is a force of nature, and those that try to tame forces of nature invariably find themselves at the bottom of the ocean with an iceberg up their ass."

That's when the checkbook came out. In disbelief, Dick heard Bruce's voice saying something about the Catitit being a nice enough preserve as it was, but it could always be larger.

"Barbara," Selina cooed, "what would it do to the resale value of your van if I got bloodstains on the upholstery?"

"HEY," Dick improvised, "Here's our exit."

Barbara started to correct him. She had said to take the bypass and circumvent the midtown traffic, but Dick shushed her with the husband-eye. They needed a diversion and they needed it now, not 4 exits from now.

In the rearview mirror, Dick saw Bruce watching. Barbara snapped off the PDA and changed the subject. Dinner at Mario's.

Bruce looked envious.

"Another night," Dick said, pulling the van into the turnaround behind Rabe Memorial Hospital, "Expect the unexpected."

His peripheral vision caught the twitch before Bruce answered: "Always."

Another night. Always expect the unexpected. It was the formula of words Batman repeated every night, once they were suited up and seated in the Batmobile, right before they pulled out of the cave as Batman and Robin.

The foursome had dropped off their bags at Nightwing's safe house near Rabe Memorial, then headed to Mario's, his favorite restaurant near his old apartment on Parkthorne Avenue. He missed the old place, Number 1013, Apartment 3A. But it would have been foolish to keep up the lease once Dick Grayson was known to have gotten married and moved back to Gotham.

The safe house was better. Anonymous. Nondescript. Like the Caernaervon Garage they were headed for now.

After dinner, Barbara was so anxious to set up her laptop system and get to work, the men dropped her and Selina back at the safe house. Now they were on their own, and Dick knew the corner of Bludhaven he most wanted Bruce to see.

Speeding under the Woolridge Overpass into the Caernaervon Section of industrial parks by the waterfront, Dick finally came to a dark carport, parked the van, and nodded for Bruce to follow on foot. He punched a code into a security panel beneath a sign reading: Caernaervon Garage, Storage by Week/Month/Year.

"A rental place," Bruce said flatly as they entered.

"You taught me better than that," Dick said, "I own the building - through a dummy corporation. On the books, there are nineteen tenants. All deceased, mostly BPD Police Officers killed in the line."

"Nice touch," Bruce murmured. "So this is where you store all your gear too big to be carried with the costume?"

Dick beamed. It was approval. It was pride and approval. Bruce expressed it the only way he could, letting an appreciative eye linger over the surveillance equipment, weights, exercise mats, scuba gear, metal detectors, and assorted weaponry.

And of course... the car: The Nightbird.

"Aluminum alloy McLaren engine - modified, 6,064 cc, 672 horsepower at 7,400 RPM, 0 to 60 in 5 seconds; 0 to 100 in 9."

"Nice," Bruce conceded, caressing the front bumper, "This is an old Camaro body?"

"It's a shell. I have four interchangeable bodies: muscle car, taxi, police cruiser, and a truck cab. Sort of urban camouflage."

"Bulletproof?"

"Of course. Oblique glass. Onboard CPU. Video, sat, and com links. OraCom, of course. Perimeter defenses."

"You ever consider a theme chassis just for you—no camouflage, black, insignia on the grille, headlights and hubcaps tinted to match?"

"The Tim Allen caveman grunt, ooh-wooh-wooh, that's what they're doing right now, Selina, I'll bet my life on it." Selina laughed. But Barbara insisted: "Really! I will bet you anything; what do you want to bet? They're circling the car, making happy man-grunts."

"Bruce?"

"Hell yeah. Around hot cars, it's what guys do."

"I can't picture it. It's too normal."

Barbara smirked. "Aren't you the one who wrote the book on 'underneath the mask and the bat-bluster, he's a man like any other man.'"

"Guilty," Selina admitted.

"And the best part is, if you ask, they'll say it's for us: 'Chicks love the car.' But c'mon, who cares? It's a *car*. Four wheels, takes you from A to B. Big whoop. They want to think we love the cars, because that gives them a grown up reason for having the silly things, instead of admitting they're nothing but toys for big boys."

"Nah. Nope, now you're stretching. It's shoe shopping. It's the flipside of shoe shopping."

"What's wrong with shoe shopping?" Barbara asked with arched brows.

Selina rolled her eyes.

"Okay, your laptop is hooked up to the portable generator," she said. "I still don't understand why you needed this thing."

"Oracle is accustomed to a certain degree of untraceable anonymity."

"So is Catwoman. Which is why I wore a mask when I removed this from the hospital's storage closet. Nevertheless, when the boys get back and see this thing, they're going to have a pretty good idea who brought it here. And when they ask why, I'd like to have a better answer than 'Oracle is accustomed to anonymity.'"

"You do get worked into a lather, don't you? Dinah never wants to hear this stuff. All right, I'll explain, but you don't get to roll your eyes and say 'technobabble.' To keep my logins anonymous, I go through several satellites, most of which are operated by government agencies that don't like hackers hitchhiking on their datastreams. So every now and then, they'll send a pulse that will cause connected computers to draw more power. It would drain my laptop battery in minutes."

Selina's eyes glazed slightly.

"Did we just slip into a Tom Clancy novel," she asked.

"Remember," Barbara retorted, "You may not say 'technobabble.' So, to stay online, I need current. But if I just plug into the outlets, I'll draw more power in the precise pattern of the satellite pulse. It's like a signature, and they could trace it."

Selina held up a weary hand. "Tell you what, when Bruce and Dick get back and they ask what the generator is doing here, you take it from there."

"Deal. As long as you make the tea."

"Tea?"

"When I work as Oracle," Barbara said, happily completing her untraceable login, "I always drink tea."

"When I work as Catwoman," Selina called from the kitchen, "I always get paid, but you don't hear me complaining."

"You could have taken Bruce's check," Barbara joked, "To - what was it? - enlarge your preserve? What was that about anyway?"

"The return of the control freak," Selina hissed. "I'm not sure what's behind it. But if he doesn't lay off about my tiger..."

"I know. That tiger-as-bodyguard was too much. I mean, look, you're not going to be running into Blockbuster face to face, but if you did, Roland considers himself a ladies' man."

"You *can't* be serious."

"He flirted with Black Canary."

"You *cannot* be serious! He looks like Ra's."

"He's a sharp dresser, Selina."

"He looks like Ra's al Ghul crossed with a mutant Viking."

"No desire at all to be on the receiving end of the ol' Blockbuster charm?"

"He looks like Ra's al Ghul... crossed with a mutant Viking... sucking on a lemon."

"So any interaction would definitely have to be kept at the 'wanting each other dead' level."

"Absolutely. I have standards."

"Besides," a deep-throated growl sounded behind her, "you're taken."

As always, Selina and Barbara gave no indication that the trademark Bat-appearance from the silent shadows was in any way remarkable.

"Why is there a stolen generator in my living room?" Dick asked.

"A little more care with our adjectives," Barbara chided. "It's not stolen; it's been re-localized."

"Retroactively displaced," Selina corrected.

"Ah, okay, what's the bullshit euphemism for a stolen generator doing in my living room?" Dick repeated.

"Enabling Oracle to complete Phase One—Finding Blockbuster faster than any of you thought possible," Barbara smirked.

"You... Finding Block... You *FOUND HIM?*" Dick stammered, "Already?"

"Selina, I think I'd like another cup of tea," Barbara remarked with exaggerated casualness. "Would you be a dear and heat up the water?"

"*Already?*" Dick repeated.

Bruce stood back and watched. This was one of those occasions where the older, more experienced crimefighter would have liked to warn his partner. Bruce had made this very same mistake once. He'd chanted his incredulous request for confirmation five times on learning that Selina Kyle could cook.

"You found him already?" Dick repeated, "I mean - already?"

"Richard," Selina cut in, "your expression of wondering awe is noted. But if you don't stop repeating 'already,' we'll never get to the 'how.'"

Bruce thought it sounded like a cue. They were to ask how Barbara had done it. Clearly they were expected to ask. *Dick, it's your cue*, Bruce thought. Bruce was still on his best behavior, making an effort to respect Nightwing's position as head of the team... And it was clearly the *team leader's* prerogative to ask for the report... But if Dick didn't get it together and ask the question soon, there was a limit to how long Bruce could restrain himself...

Selina could feel it building. In her mind's eye she drew on the mask—she could see it. He was ready to blow. It was quite sexy.

At the last second, Dick cleared his throat, Bat-style, and spoke.

"Um, okay then. Yes. How did you locate him so quickly?"

“Operation Walgreens,” Barbara announced happily.

The men looked at each other.

Barbara waited a full minute for some expression of *something*, then when nobody said a word, she went on to explain...

“Blockbuster has a gorilla heart. He had an organ from another species transplanted into his body. Bodies can reject organ transplants. And to minimize the risk of that, they give you anti-rejection drugs.”

“For a few weeks after the operation,” Bruce interrupted.

“Normally, yes, a patient only takes those drugs for a few weeks. But, at the risk of repeating myself, this is a freakin’ gorilla heart. And he weights 825 pounds. So I hacked into the local pharmacies and found-”

“Prescriptions for a hippopotamus dose of anti-rejection drugs,” Dick completed her sentence and her thought.

Barbara nodded.

“He’s still on Cyclosporin and Tacrolimus. He’s due for a refill in ten days, the Stark Avenue Pharmacy. Plant a homing device in the bottle or follow whoever picks it up, and there’s your man.”

“That is so F-ing slick,” Dick whispered in awe.

Barbara smiled.

“Which gives the three of you exactly ten days to lay the groundwork for Phase Two.”

Mick, Joey Bluehat, and Switch waited nervously for their audience with Blockbuster. They had successfully hijacked a truck. They thought it contained microwave ovens. Instead, it contained DVD players. That meant more money. Lots more money. It wasn't likely word would be on the street yet, but they weren't taking chances. Blockbuster would have his cut before he even heard about their score.

Better safe than sorry.

Remember Deadly Soames? Remember Little Eddie? Remember Blade Walski? And Nickie the skunk. Bad things happened to guys who crossed Blockbuster. "He didn't rewind" was the way they spoke of it on the street.

Inside the de facto throne room built in a gutted strip club, Blockbuster readjusted himself on his specially made, titanium-reinforced chair. The difficulty was not in finding a material that would hold his enormous bulk, but in making it comfortable. The chair frame was hard as a rock. Placing mere cushions under his ass did nothing but press the padding flat within seconds.

He had finally found the solution, bladders of industrial polymer inflated with pressurized air. But he was still working on the right psi.

Blockbuster was pleased at the tribute Mick, Joey Bluehat, and Switch had rendered. More than pleased. But the news they delivered with it was troubling. No, not troubling. Troubling implied fear, and Blockbuster feared no challenges to his criminal empire. But it was... perplexing.

The Bat was in Bludhaven. On what business, no one knew. There were reports of confrontations between Batman and Nightwing. Indeed, "arguments" would not be too strong a term for the scenes his informants had witnessed. If the scouts were not exaggerating, it would be fair to say a *fight* was what occurred between the two vigilantes.

The development would require some thought. And Blockbuster resolved to apply the 45 minutes prior to his dinner to a strategic analysis of Batman's appearance in Bludhaven.

Every day at 7:15 precisely, Blockbuster's cook, Akira Gomasuri, hired from a Japanese Sumo stable, would enter and bow greeting to *Desmond-san*. Blockbuster would nod and dispatch his man, Riley, to help the cook carry the four bags of groceries Akira brought with him. Riley would stay with the cook and observe the preparation of his master's meal.

At 8:00 Akira would enter again, bow, and present a great pot of *Chanko-nabe*, a hearty stew of vegetables, meats, seafood and tofu made to feed entire teams of Sumo Wrestlers. Riley would eat a portion of the dish in Blockbuster's presence, and then the criminal kingpin would commence to eat.

Whenever Blockbuster had a problem of some importance, he devoted that time between Akira's first bow and his second to the full study of it. Blockbuster knew he was the greatest criminal mind of his generation. Any problem he gave his full attention in this manner would be quickly disposed of.

This night, as Blockbuster ate his *Chanko-nabe*, he was confident. He had thought through every possibility and permutation of the Batman problem. He could find no

special opportunities in the Bat's arrival, but neither could he see any particular danger, either to himself or his operations. Whatever Batman's business was in Bludhaven, it originated in Gotham City. It was not one of Blockbuster's minions, then, that Batman was chasing. If whoever or whatever it was succeeded in evading the Bat, they were here now and would have to pay tribute like anyone else. If they didn't, they would learn. He would make an example of them: like Soames.

The anatomical anomaly that was once Dudley Soames took his usual route to BLUE, a third rate watering hole with a first rate crap game. He took his usual route because it was dark, unpopulated, and he wasn't likely to be seen. Soames could navigate well enough, thanks to the special glasses that let him see "behind" him, i.e. in the direction his feet were walking. But being able to walk from point to point, aim, and fire a weapon were not the real challenges of his life. The challenges were getting through day-to-day tasks like walking to his hangout without the stinking mass of mouth-breathing morons pointing at the freak "walking backwards." Then he'd have to stop and teach them some manners, and there goes another evening of craps. So it really was best to stick to the back streets where he wouldn't be noticed.

BLUE was named for the Blue Line, under whose tracks the seedy establishment was located. And if the beer was swill and the whiskey was watered, it was at least the kind of place they knew not to give a man shit just because his head was on backwards. At BLUE, the regulars all knew (and the newbies would be told soon enough) that the guy in the neck brace has the barstool by the wall. He comes in and sits, twists around, and he bends his elbows backwards to drink. "Dunno how, don't ask. Maybe he's double jointed. Point is, don't stare. Guys get ventilated who stare." The same held true in the men's room. Whatever he was doing, Soames's head faced behind him. You got a problem with that, take your leak in the alley.

The crap game was slow getting underway tonight. The guys were excited about the fresh meat. Soames could see why. She was hot. Not seven-come-eleven hot. Hardbody-wrapped-in-leather hot.

"You're on the wrong side of the river, Pussycat," Soames sneered, by way of introducing himself. He didn't turn from his beer and he spoke loudly, as if addressing the room at large. He saw the feline rise and walk to meet him with a viciously round sway of her hips. Something cold and sharp bit into the divot under his chin and pulled him by it, causing the barstool to swivel until he faced two eyes of piercing green ice.

"Whatever side of the river I am on," the vixen purred, "is the right side... Mr. Torque."

He swiveled the stool back around to face the bar and pointed an invitation to the seat next to him. The feline sat, and Lou - who never waited on customers himself - sat an icy martini before her in seconds.

"*Pint a' catnip*," Soames quipped in one of his trademark palindromes. "The name's Dudley. So, what do you want, Alleycat?"

"From you? Nothing," Catwoman replied dryly. "I do have a message to interest several in this dreary little 'burb. You're not one of them."

"Tell me anyway," Soames pressed, his soft tone meant to seem both menacing and seductive. "Villain to villain, tell me. Let me decide what interests me."

"A party in Gotham wants it known that Oswald Cobblepot only takes a thirty percent piece of the action. Blockbuster, I understand, takes fifty."

"A 'party in Gotham' wants that known here, eh," Soames chuckled. "Cobblepot wants to muscle in? Change protectors, keep an extra twenty cents on the dollar?"

"I didn't say that," Catwoman purred. "But you see now why this matter doesn't concern you. You're no longer on Roland's payroll, now are you?"

"I want him dead, that's not a secret. And I want it to hurt." From his flowing overcoat Soames produced a vintage weapon, caressed its barrel lovingly as he held it out for Catwoman to see. "That's a vintage Thompson .45 caliber machine gun, commonly called a Tommy Gun. Made by Colt. 100 Rounds. That's what Al Capone used to kill Frankie Yale. First time a machine gun was used to commit a homicide in the city."

Selina fought down her nausea and answered with the cool detachment of a business woman: "Vengeance is fine, Studley, if that's what gets your juices flowing. But there isn't any money in it. You and your vendetta are of no interest to my associates."

"What about the Bat," Soames hissed. "He's 'of interest,' isn't he? Word is, he's in 'Haven. Even bet he's here for you."

Catwoman tossed her head.

"Batman is not a concern. Haven't you heard? He's far too busy squaring off with Nightwing to bother about little ol' me. Take a tip, Studley, villain to villain. Bats and Nightwing are fire and gasoline. Something bad went down there. Lot of bad blood. If they're going at it, you can consider the coast clear for...whatever."

"My only 'whatever,'" Soames said, throwing a bill onto the bar, "is seeing Nightwing suffer as much as Blockbuster."

He slipped on his glasses and left the bar. He was bitter at the feline's cool dismissal of the mission of his life. But not so bitter that he was unaware of his surroundings as he walked home. He knew he was being followed. His route home was darker than his route to BLUE, and from the black beyond the dim streetlight, the shadow of a vigilante fell over his features. A shadow with pointed ears and more cape than is seen in Bludhaven alleys.

Bruce couldn't sleep.

He lay with Selina tucked under his arm on the pullout sofa in Dick's safe house. Dick and Barbara had the bedroom, but from the sounds seeping through the wall, they weren't sleeping either. It took him twenty minutes to work out what was going on—TV was on, CNN, then Letterman, then CNN, then TVLand. Remote war in progress. The remote, so deduced the World's Greatest Control Freak-Detective, was kept on the nightstand on Barbara's side of the bed. It was she watching CNN and Dick changing to lighter fare.

Bruce thought about warm milk. He was reasonably sure he could heat milk without difficulty. But that would wake Selina. He looked down at her. Catlike, she could sleep anywhere.

The reason for his wakefulness was certainly not the Bludhaven operation. The plan was going well. The staged confrontations with Nightwing had been cathartic. And Catwoman played her part beautifully. After she'd laid the groundwork, Batman had no trouble manipulating Torque. He made the villain think it was his own idea: If it was *Batman* who took down Blockbuster, it would destroy Blockbuster, but it would also deal a crushing blow to *Nightwing*. The ultimate insult: this rival he despised from Gotham comes into *his* city and takes down his *great foe*.

Torque cared nothing for justice. But playing both sides against each other was always appealing. In the interest of injuring both his enemies, at little risk to himself, using this preposterous caped vigilante as his tool, he agreed to help Batman take down Blockbuster.

The plan was fine. It was working.

So why couldn't he sleep?

Well... it could be the hour. In Gotham, he would just be starting the late patrol. And there were the city sounds. Despite being the quintessential Gothamite, Bruce was used to the quiet of Wayne Manor. Besides, Bludhaven sounded different. There were fewer skyscrapers, the roads were a little wider, water traffic was everywhere. It sounded different—that was it. That would keep any Gothamite awake, surely.

Well.... He glanced at Selina again and stroked her hair absently with his free hand... any Gothamite but one.

Why wouldn't she go along with the tiger-bodyguard? He only wanted to keep her safe, couldn't she see that? It was the same reason he planted the tiny bat-shaped homing device in her costume—which Dick saw, and made him remove.

"You have no grasp of boundaries at all, do you?" Dick had said—a line taken from one of their phony rooftop fights staged for Bludhaven informants—delivered with real affection here in the safe house, instead of the venomous spite of the rooftop.

Through the wall, the hum of the television switched back to CNN. It was a comforting sound, it sounded like monitor duty at the Watchtower, a bore. Bruce closed his eyes, willing the sense-memory of boredom to lull him to sleep.

Then his eyes opened and he looked at the ceiling.

This was Selina's doing. No. Not quite. It was Catwoman's. The night's activities had stirred up old feelings. Trailing her—not Selina on some Girls' Night Out, but *Catwoman*: claws, whip and attitude—to underworld dens, consorting with a villain like Torque. No wonder he felt...

How did he feel?

Back when they were... as they used to be, adversaries... he wouldn't have just trailed her to Torque, there would have been an encounter. Then he would have gone home to his lonely bed and looked up at the ceiling, not this ceiling, but one looks much like any other... and he would replay it over and over, lingering on the more personal aspects that always worked their way in, no matter how much he vowed that this time it would be strictly business... He'd blot out the sting of fresh scratches and wonder what if... what would it be like *if*... to hold her, to spend a night with no Gotham to patrol and no crime between them, only the warmth and softness of her in his arms...

And now she was here. The warmth he had imagined. The details that go with reality he never envisioned... the weight of her head cutting circulation in his arm, the

way she managed to take half his pillow no matter how many others were on the bed... this was no fantasy Catwoman. It was real. In his dreams, he never figured on... loving her... on losing her.

Bruce thought back to the hangar:

"You want to go too. Go. Leave," he had said, "Just go and leave."

"Like he did?" she had asked.

Like they all do. His parents. Jason.

What was so silly about a tiger-bodyguard, after all? If you have a nine-hundred pound carnivorous pet, why not leverage it for a little peace of mind? If your lover is the most dangerous man alive, Kitten, why not let him protect you?

Through the wall, the dull hum of CNN gave way to the carefree whistle of the Andy Griffith Show. Bruce sighed, and the sleeping cat in his arms murmured "judgmental jackass." His mouth twitched. If that didn't justify waking her to get up for some warm milk...

Batman and Nightwing trailed Blockbuster's man Riley from the Stark Avenue Pharmacy to a boarded up strip club in "The Spine." Batman brought this information to Dudley "Torque" Soames. Soames remembered Blockbuster's routine and timed his arrival just after Akira Gomasuri's first bow. Riley would be off supervising the preparation of Blockbuster's dinner. It was the only opportunity for an unannounced audience...

Blockbuster was suspicious, just as Torque knew he would be. When the former lieutenant you maimed for betraying you, who vowed vengeance on nine separate occasions, shows up on your door at dinnertime with information, *SUSPICION* is to be expected.

But Blockbuster knew Soames's track record. He'd sell anybody to anybody, everybody to everybody else. And what he had to gain in this case, Blockbuster could see, might be just enough to overlook the past vendetta—at least for now.

"Mutiny," Soames said, "Cobblepot, from Gotham, is offering 30 percent. Half the operators in 'Haven, from pimps to dealers to the guy running the three-card-monte by the stadium, are all ready to defect. You don't act now? By morning, you won't have anything left."

"Why tell me," Blockbuster asked with soft-spoken menace.

"*Doom an evil deed, liven a mood,*" Soames said reflectively, trying out one of his signature palindromes. "I like the thought of you owing me. B'sides, Roland, to keep what's yours, you gotta bust some heads. Anybody that don't live through the night, I take over their operations. And I'll pay you forty percent."

"I get fifty, Soames, and you know it."

"You won't get anything without me," Soames oozed. "*Egad, a base life defiles a bad age....* You don't change protectors like changing credit cards, Roland. All your scum-lapping minions know that. To go over to Cobblepot's camp, they'll have to remove you. They're having a war council—the men, the money, and the guns, all in one place - tonight. You want to stop this, there is one way only: You say 'Help me, Dudley, my

friend and partner. Help me in my hour of need. Tell me where they're meeting, and I'll meet your price."

Blockbuster was suspicious, but he had no choice. Soames had made his ultimatum, and having made it, he would only answer "*No, it is opposition*" to all further queries. "*No, it is opposition,*" a curious phrase, a palindrome, spelled the same way backwards and forwards, one of Soames's obsessions since Blockbuster had twisted his neck into Torque.

"Alright, it's a deal," Blockbuster agreed, "where's the meeting?"

If this was a setup, he was more than able to handle whatever waited from him at....

"The St. Eustace Mission."

And if it was not a trap, there would be plenty of time to eliminate Soames afterwards, once Blockbuster's empire was again secure.

Suspicion was lost in raw rage when Blockbuster reached the mission and found EXACTLY what Soames said he would find—three hundred of his operatives and their flunkies, gathering for war.

He had no time for subtle strategy and none was needed. This was a challenge to the dominance of the alpha-male and he met it as such: with a primal yelp and beatings of his chest. The five boldest of the challengers moved in on him and were quickly dispatched. Five more came and fell likewise. Then five more... Shampoo, rinse and repeat.

After the 20th group was thrashed, Blockbuster felt sure the others would submit. But the rest were sure he would tire soon. When the unconscious form of the 182nd man was thrown into 183, 184, and 185, those that remained fled.

Blockbuster had won. But he was tired. The physical fight was necessary—no guns—he had to *beat* them into submission. It was to prove a point, like when he twisted Soames's head around. Soames who, curiously, had told him the truth about this meeting.

Well, it was enough for tonight. He was tired. The matter of what to do about Soames could wait until morning. All Roland Desmond wanted now was home and bed.

Except... here was Soames again... Shit.

"That was very impressive, Roland," Torque twinkled with a strangely psychotic glint in his eye. "*Won Now*, you could say."

Palindromes. Freakin' palindromes from the freakin' freak. He'd just fought 180 strong men, did he have to suffer this now?

"Doesn't look like you killed any, though," Torque observed, glancing at the moaning thugs scattered around the mission, "That was petty. Don't want to pay my fee? Well, fuck you, Roland! I knew you'd try and stiff me, that's why I held back the real prize."

He took a clawed purple glove from his pocket and twirled it. "*Was it a cat I saw?*"

Blockbuster took the glove and examined it, then looked to Soames.

"I have her. Catwoman. She's been working the town for Cobblepot, his mouthpiece, organizing this thing. So before you go home to whatever retention pond a thing like you uses for a hot bath, I'd say you have one more stop to make."

“Give her to me, Soames,” Blockbuster said dangerously, “Give her to me, and I’ll send her back to Gotham in pieces. I’ll send Cobblepot and everyone else a message about fucking with my operations. Give her to me, Soames, or it’s you I’ll be ripping apart. Piece... by piece... by piece.”

The barrel of a vintage Thompson .45 caliber machine gun pressed into Blockbuster’s throat.

“War, sir, is raw. You know my price, Roland. I take over the operations of everybody lying on this floor, and I pay you 40 percent.”

“Fine,” Blockbuster said, wanting only to kill the Cat, go home, and REST. “Where is she?”

“Basement of the Devin Building, in Melville. Take her under the cloverleaf before she wakes up,” Soames suggested, taking back the glove, “and the noise from the Little Narrows Bridge will drown out the screaming.”

Roland Desmond roared off with blood in his eyes, and Soames smiled as he toyed with the purple glove, his ‘souvenir’ of this episode. Blockbuster was depleted from his marathon battle, but had strength left, certainly, to kill one defenseless woman. Except, he wasn’t going to find a defenseless woman. There was no captive Catwoman at the Devin Building. He was going to find Batman... waiting.

“You’re a fool, Roland,” Soames told the night sky as he left the mission and started for home. “The basement of the Devin Building! And what’s on the top floor, hm? An elegant restaurant overlooking Melville Park—best view in the city, they say—and what’s it called: *Top Spot*. A palindrome.”

When he sent Roland Desmond to the Devin Building, Torque thought Blockbuster would encounter Batman there. That, he had been led to believe, was the trap.

Blockbuster entered the Devin Building expecting to find a captive Catwoman. Instead, he faced—not cat, not bat, but instead... Nightwing—a riled Nightwing that was ready for him.

The vigilante stood alone, at the center of the room, lifting a pair of escrima sticks with gentle fingers, like a conductor raises his baton before a concert.

“You’re having a bit of a day, aren’t you, Roland.”

Across from the Devin Building, on the rooftop of the Melville Arms, Batman paced back and forth like the tiger, Shimbala, which Selina had refused to bring along as a bodyguard.

“Now I’m supposed to stand here, just stand here, while my boy takes on that monstrosity by himself?”

“You don’t have to stand,” Catwoman soothed while she inspected a ventilation duct with professional interest, “You can sit. You can pace. You can—”

“Damnit, woman, this plan isn’t sound.”

“You can pace, you can swear and, if you want, you can even complain about the arrogant crimefighter than runs this town insisting everybody play it his way. But the one thing you will not do is go inside that building.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

“That’s why I’m here. My job is to make sure you don’t make a move from this roof—You don’t make *a move* against Blockbuster unless he walks out of that building on his own power.”

“Selina,” Batman said softly, “if Blockbuster walks out of there on his own, it means that Dick is dead.”

Blockbuster had incredible power. The menace had slain and broken hundreds of men. He was a huge brute that could do as much damage with a casual swat as with a deliberate bear hug.

The goliath lumbered forward.

Nightwing started to move as well, springing and pivoting around the giant, using the escrima sticks to drive quick shots to the rear of Blockbuster’s knees. The rods struck flesh in a rhythm of sickly wet squelches, but Blockbuster kept coming.

Nightwing stopped short and Blockbuster lunged. Nightwing dodged and Blockbuster clutched. Nightwing wheeled out of the way and Blockbuster increased his forward momentum.

Nightwing whipped around and swung the sticks hard into the small of Blockbuster’s back—his opponent arched back with a roar—that had hurt. But the arch countered the momentum Nightwing had hoped would carry the brute into the wall.

Both men kept moving. The terrible, massive arms kept clutching, crablike, for his much smaller foe.

"This is torture..."

"You're all torturing me, you know that..."

"You're killing me... You and Dick..."

"Don't you even care?..."

"Won't you at least answer me?"

He moved with the speed of a much smaller man. Every time Nightwing whirled to escape Blockbuster's clutch, the giant reacted faster than expected. Quick, weaving spurts on Nightwing's part brought him loss, not gain.

Nightwing was whirling to get behind the villain - taking another swipe at his legs with each turn. If he could get Blockbuster's hulking mass down on the ground, much of his advantage would be negated.

Against a wall, Nightwing stood a scant yard from the sweeping arms. Diving to the side, he barely missed a bear hug.

A massive hand caught his shoulder, and 'Wing felt as though his arm might be ripped from its socket.

Spinning as he reached the wall at the right, Wing found himself facing a human grizzly pounding forward for the kill. Nightwing sped along the wall, then made for the open center of the room.

"Won't you at least answer me?" Batman grabbed Catwoman by the shoulders. As she looked up at him with moist eyes, he realized why she was silent. It wasn't the silence of indifference or anger, but of choking back tears.

"Of course I care," she said finally. "Do you think I enjoy seeing you like this? I know where the control freak comes from, Bruce. It's helplessness. It comes from a little boy who was afraid and alone and made it so that would never happen again. Am I right?"

He looked at her for a long moment, heart pounding.

"It did happen again. It does happen. Dick was shot, I said 'No more,' he wouldn't listen. He came here, I couldn't stop it."

"I know you want to control things."

"I couldn't stop him. Jason got careless, I said 'Stop,' he wouldn't listen. He ran away, he got killed. I couldn't..."

"I understand that. You couldn't stop it. You felt helpless."

Batman turned and looked out over the city. The wrong city. He walked to another ledge of the building and looked towards Gotham.

"It would have killed you to bring the tiger?"

Once again, Nightwing was able to flatten the Escrima sticks into the rear joints of his opponent. The chase continued. 'Wing could see that Blockbuster was tiring. Nightwing - backing, springing, whirling - was engaged in trapped flight from a foe that now seemed, at last, to be tiring.

A ham-sized fist shot straight toward Nightwing's face. He blocked instinctively, swinging with his left hand. Only once his forearm hit Blockbuster's did he realize the mistake—he couldn't pit his strength against this monstrosity's right cross... except... at

that moment... the impossible happened... the arm opposing his wavered. Blockbuster was weakening.

Nightwing kicked himself free. Then, with all his might, Nightwing delivered a terrific blow to the rear of his opponent's knees.

This time, Blockbuster went down like a felled tree. 'Wing delivered another smashing blow, this time into the back of the giant's neck. The stroke stunned Blockbuster for an instant, then he was down. If only Nightwing could keep him on the ground...

"Hey," Selina's voice was very soft, as was the ungloved finger that touched his lip, then his chin. "I'm not a Robin. I'm not a sidekick. I'm not going to grow up and leave you or go off on some adolescent rampage."

"There are still risks," he whispered.

"Of course. Those go with The Life. For you, too. I mean, let's face it, I'm hands down the only woman you've dated who wouldn't have a problem with how you spend your nights."

He answered with a half-twitch. "That's true."

"So we're okay?"

"Almost. We'll be fine... as soon as Dick comes out of there in one piece."

Nightwing delivered two quick, powerful punches into the villain's arms, blows meant to stun the upper portion of the body. The lower arms, however, shot out to clutch their prey. Another smash, with all of Nightwing's fury... Blockbuster turned slightly from the blow and 'Wing, diving sidewise, managed to elude another clutch of gigantic hands.

With one mighty heave, Blockbuster got back on his feet. But he looked unsteady. Another punch from Nightwing turned the giant toward him. The murderous opponent lunged, gaining momentum, and Nightwing leapt back to the center of the room.

An obviously tired Blockbuster started towards him. He was sweating profusely and his face was a deep shade of red. His breath came in gasps. Nightwing leaped and delivered a stunning dropkick to the face.

Whirling on his landing, Nightwing saw the final fall.

Blockbuster staggered... eyes wide... staggered... then the top-heavy body skidded to the floor.

The fight between Nightwing and Blockbuster had lasted six minutes. The fight between Detective Porpora and Chief Redhorn lasted forty.

Porpora, representing The Multi-Jurisdictional Task Force against Organized Crime, was to lead the press conference at Bludhaven City Hall announcing Roland Desmond's capture and the extraordinary catalog of charges for which he was being arraigned.

Porpora's aim was to place the Task Force seal over that of the Bludhaven Police Department on the podium. Redhorn was insulted. What did this say about the BPD?

Porpora's response was brutally frank: it said they were dirty. It said the Task Force was involved because it was the only way Desmond would see the inside of a courtroom. It said this is why we have federal racketeering laws in the first place, so corrupt locals couldn't shield a thug like Blockbuster, no matter how many he'd paid off.

The threats with which Chief Redhorn answered these charges were vivid and imaginative—both against Porpora and whoever was behind this slur on his department, and he would find out who it was, make no mistake.

But the only follow-through would be when four of Redhorn's dirtiest cops decided it might have been Grayson, and formed a posse to go into Gotham and teach the snitch a lesson. They would get as far as Englehart Square - when they got mugged.

Selina took her phone call out on the terrace, then returned to the dining room. Dick and Barbara had agreed to stay the night at the manor. After such a successful mission, a celebratory dinner seemed in order.

"Any news?" Barbara asked brightly when Selina returned, sparing Dick and Bruce the indignity of showing interest in rogue gossip.

"It's official," Selina announced. "Ivy has a new flytrap. She was at the pottery place last night painting the pot for Ivan-II..."

Bruce and Dick groaned, and Barbara chortled.

"...Doris got a tingle sabotaging the book signing. Keeps asking Eddie if it's always this much fun to be bad."

"Oh. My. God." Dick gasped, joining Barbara in discreet chuckling.

Even Bruce gave a mild twitch when he pondered, "Whatever did 'Eddie' say to that?"

"Jervis has hatted himself a White Rabbit - the whole Iceberg is talking about it," Selina went on.

"You mean an Alice," Bruce corrected.

"I mean a White Rabbit. She's too tall to be an Alice. 5'11" in her stocking feet."

"WHOA," Dick exclaimed.

"He measured her?" Barbara asked.

"It's good to be home," Bruce said with a contented sigh.

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. Fingered 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."

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 Ipress 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."

"Bruce, 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 bustled 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."

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.

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?

Impossible 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.

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.”

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 spritz 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.

BLONDE JOKES

“Selina... Kitten... I’m not saying it’ll always be easy, but, no matter what happens, we’re different people now. We could never go back to that, even if we wanted to. Whatever happens, we’ll have to work through it as we are now, who we are now...”

That’s what I said. She was upset about the fight with Dick. Barbara told her it was a return to the norm. Fighting was the norm for us ever since he’d become Nightwing and the few months of getting along was an aberration. Selina was afraid that might mean the same thing for Batman and Catwoman. So I reassured her.

We’re different people now. Whatever happens, we’ll work through it as we are now.

We are different people. Since the fight about Two-Face and the protocols, we’ve come through Christmas, Hell Month, the wedding, Bludhaven. We’ve grown closer than either of us would have thought possible when it started. If it happened today, she would know. She would know I wasn’t trying to use her; it was just business.

Besides, Joker isn’t her friend. She said so the night I discovered the Rogues’ IM network. I said I hated that she was friends with those people, and she answered “The Joker is not my friend. He’s a homicidal maniac.”

Eddie, yes. And Harvey. But not Joker. “Joker is not my friend.” That’s what she said.

So she really should have no objection. A few innocent questions is all I’m asking.

I looked back at the monitor. A map of Gotham with red circles denoting the Joker sightings of the past week. No comedy clubs. No clown tie-ins. No laughter, smiles, grins, teeth, or lips. No wordplay on Ha-Ha. No discernable pattern whatsoever. There had to be a logic to it, just had to be. It would be insane logic, like making a fish that smiles, and therefore look like him, so he should be allowed to copyright it and collect a royalty... Insane logic, but still logic.

One crime spree, if you connected the dots—literally, on a map, drew a line connecting the locations where he used SmileX—it made a grin over the lower half of city. The sites where he used regular, non-lethal laughing gas were the eyes, and the intersection where he attacked a homeless man with a crowbar was the nose. A smiley face. Sick bastard. But still it was a pattern—an insane, twisted pattern, but a pattern.

No deaths yet.

And no Harley.

Active for a week and not one fatality, and not once was he accompanied by Harley Quinn.

It had to mean something.

It had to mean something, and I had to figure out what before the killing started. She’d understand that.

Or maybe she wouldn't have to if Barbara came through. I touched a button on the console, and a new window opened with the videofeed:

"Oracle, any leads?"

...:Sorry, Boss. I've interfaced with every database I can think of going back to 1990. There is no common thread. These places have no connection that I can find...:

"Batman out."

So that was that.

Joker walked casually into a midtown Sharper Image, stationed a henchman at the door with a machine gun, and nonchalantly connected a canister of laughing gas to the Ionic Breeze air purifier. He then marched to the Mr. Karaoke display and started playing Surrey with the Fringe on Top.

"Your attention, please!" he announced through the microphone, "Here's a funny story. A guy goes to the grocery store to buy some Spam. He sees a blonde in a car parked next to him. Her eyes are closed, and her hand is behind her head. It looks like she's sleeping. He shrugs and goes into the store to buy his Spam. When he comes back, she's still there. Hand is still behind her head, but now her eyes are open. She looks very strange, so the guy taps the window and asks 'Are you okay?'

"The woman says 'I've been shot in the head, and I am holding my brains in.'

"The guy calls 911, and when the paramedics arrive, they have to break into the car because the door is locked. When they get in, they find that the woman has bread dough on the back of her head and all over her hand.

"A Pillsbury biscuit canister had exploded from the heat in the car, making a loud explosion like a gunshot, and hit her in the head. When she reached back to find what it was, she felt the dough and thought it was her brains. She passed out from fright at first, then when she woke up, she tried to hold her brains in."

Joker turned back to the machine, switched off the music, and left the store.

Tim was aware that the dangerous life of a crimefighter could make you paranoid. Batman said paranoia was useful, almost a prerequisite for the life they'd chosen. And Nightwing offered the less-than-comforting truism: "Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get you."

But if crimefighting made you paranoid, it also honed your awareness. And Tim's awareness was setting off alarms lately. It might be paranoia, but he didn't think so. He was feeling... hunted.

If he went to the library, Linda McVitty just happened to be there.

If he went to the arcade, it was Amanda Gardiner, "Wow, Tim, what a surprise.

Haven't seen you for a while."

If he went to the mall, Nicole Renssalaer, "Early Christmas shopping!"

If he stopped at the 7-Eleven, Cathy Lawrence, "What a coincidence!"

It was not a coincidence. He was not paranoid. He was being hunted.

Joker and his henchman worked their way through the tables at the posh restaurant, Lutece, distributing small slips of paper to each man seated with a fair-haired woman.

“Q: Why did the blonde scale the chain-link fence?” one read,

“A: To see what was on the other side.”

Poison Ivy returned to the greenhouse she’d neglected since establishing a new lair in Riverside Park. Much as she loved the open air of the park, the controlled climate of the greenhouse could support many more species. Exotic specimens like these blood orchids that could never survive the intemperate Gotham winter.

She sighed—providing a rich stream of carbon dioxide for the orchids—while she mixed a pitcher of their special plantfood.

The dalliance with Edward Nigma was a mistake. It was that simple.

Perhaps she was lonely. Not that it’s possible to be lonely in a glade full of clematis and trumpet vine.

Still, however it happened, it had happened. A moment of weakness, and she, as queen of her particular realm, chose a consort for the night. That was her prerogative.

So it was not a mistake; it was simply the whim of a moment. Edward would have to accept that—once his head was clear.

“There’s just one snag,” she told a tiny flytrap as she held out a bit of hamburger on a silver babyspoon. “These Rogue men aren’t that bright, particularly when it comes to the concept of the one night stand, the meaningless tryst, ‘just sex.’”

The flytrap closed over the hamburger, but otherwise gave no response.

“Just look at Penguin,” she went on. Rogue men might not understand, but the flytrap was a plant, and surely any plant should be smart enough to grasp it. “Just look at Penguin still mooning after Roxy after that one ludicrous fling at Christmas... Roxy Rocket.” Her tone turned dark on the name. “Now that I think of it, this is all Oswald’s fault. If he’d been man enough to keep the little tramp satisfied, Harvey never would have strayed.”

The announcer at the Meadowlands Sports Complex cleared his throat into the microphone before making the requested announcement at gunpoint:

...:Ladies and Gentlemen, your attention please,;:... he began, looking to the psychotic clown for approval.

...:The management has been asked to read the following announcement: What’s the blonde’s cheer? “I’m blonde, I’m blonde, I’m B-L-O-N... ah, oh well... I’m blonde, I’m blonde, yea, yea, yea!”:...:

“You didn’t sell it,” Joker said, disappointed. “Try again.” He handed the terrified announcer another slip. “And this time make me believe it.”

There was a curious mix of onlookers outside the Iceberg Lounge—or rather, outside the two story husk of vegetable matter and vines that had sprung up around the Iceberg in a matter of minutes. A-list rogues like Mad Hatter stood alongside Zodiac

Master and King Snake, nameless henchmen, a camera crew from WCBX, a crossing guard, the people waiting for the Lexington Avenue bus, and, eventually, Robin the boy wonder. They all stared at the hardshell green mass of vegetation that completely enveloped the bar. Finally, it was Robin who found his tongue:

“What the hell?”

It was, in Jervis Tetch’s opinion, the least stupid question any vigilante had ever uttered. So he answered it.

“‘It seems very pretty,’ said Alice through the looking glass, ‘but it’s rather hard to understand.’”

“Word,” Robin answered by way of agreement.

“Somebody honked off Red bigtime,” Harley Quinn chirped.

“Ya think?” King Snake snarled.

“Croc think so.”

These words were uttered by Killer Croc himself, hanging upside down, ankles ensnared by a particularly vicious tendril when he tried to punch through the husk.

From inside the Iceberg, there was a sudden hum, and abruptly the vines stiffened. The hum shifted up an octave and the husk turned from a healthy green to a pale yellow. Then a pounding began. It grew louder, until bits of the husk began to crumble, finally revealing a hole through which figures began to emerge...

Oswald Cobblepot, poking an opening through the now-brittle husk with an umbrella...

“This way, lads, to the egress.”

...Ventriloquist...

“My w-w-word, that f-f-freeze ray c-certainly is effective.”

...Scarface...

“Wait’ll I get my hands on gat gitch!”

...and Victor Frieze.

“See how the icy hand of liquid nitrogen cools the hot rage of a broken heart.”

Hugo Strange said nothing, but he did help Magpie step over the chipped-away bits of plant carcass.

“Oracle, you’re not going to believe this,” Robin called in the incident. “The call at the Iceberg, I don’t know what all should be dispatched to the scene.”

“Someone cut Croc down,” Croc asked politely.

“But a firetruck and a tree surgeon would be helpful.”

Joker looked up happily at the nine foot banner draped over the Washington Square Arch:

“Q: Did you hear about the blonde coyote?” it said on the north face, while the banner on the south face read:

“A: Got stuck in a trap, chewed off three legs and was still stuck.”

So I had to talk to her.

Step one in devising a successful strategy is to marshal the known facts. I was going into a situation very similar to one I’d experienced before, one that went badly. So consult the log, analyze what went wrong before, make a plan to avoid those pitfalls this time.

Unfortunately, I stopped logging encounters with Catwoman long before the protocols fight.

I accessed the last entries I had for her. All were from the week after she closed Cat-Tales:

CW – Art Museum, Egyptian Wing – as expected. Cat’s back in business.

Entry through climate control system, 12 minutes. Targeting jeweled statuettes. Fled with one. Recovered statuette with batarang to wrist during chase. Statuette suffered minor chip.

Foundation \$ to cover repair.

C Escaped.

Banter.

I winced. Banter? Was that any way to describe what happened that night? The night I smiled at her... the night everything became possible... Banter?

I scanned ahead to the next entry.

CW – Cartier’s. Emeralds.

CW – Penthouse. Surprised her.

CW – Playful tonight.

CW –

I sat there for an hour, remembering. I sat there looking at four log entries consisting of seven words. Eventually realized I’d completely lost sight of the objective.

I had to talk to her.

In celebration of the de-husking of the Iceberg, Oswald Cobblepot declared an open bar. He’d only done this once before, when Two-Face claimed to have finally and forever offed Batman. Such claims were not uncommon at the Iceberg and Oswald had been justly skeptical. But then a day passed. Then 30 hours, then 36, and there were no bat-sightings whatsoever. So he’d relented... Only to wake the next morning to headlines of the JLA quashing an uprising in Kurdistan. Batman was there. Batman was alive. Batman was alive in Kurdistan, and Oswald’s inventories were depleted by two hundred cases of premium spirits.

But that was last time. This time, there was just cause to celebrate. No false alarm: They had all seen Poison Ivy apprehended after her hysterical descent from the rooftops on witnessing the “murder” of “her baby,” the husk. The deranged harpy

erected a vegetable husk around his bar, trapping a dozen of her fellow rogues inside, and then had a screaming fit because they had the wherewithal to cut themselves out!

And what a screaming fit. Such sounds had not been heard since the famous Clayface-Secret Santa-potpourri incident of '99.

"I almost feel sorry for the lad," Frieze had said, as they all watched the Redbird drive off. "It is a long drive out to Arkham with a hysterical Pammy screaming obscenities." They'd all been thinking it, but no one else said anything. Now Victor Frieze reintroduced the subject.

"To Robin," he toasted. And Oswald bristled.

"Beware the Jubjub bird, Victor," Jervis cautioned. "Toasting a vigilante in the Iceberg is... well, it's a topsy turvy world! But to do so with liquor Oswald himself is paying for! O frabjous day; It's rude, I say."

Victor considered the rebuke, then said, "No. I will pay for the drink. I still say 'To Robin.' Deathtraps are one thing, but having to drive any distance with Pamela like that, that is simply... *cold*."

Everyone remembered that Victor was the designated driver the night of the Christmas party and had to take Poison Ivy home after Clayface gave her potpourri, so they sipped their drinks and said nothing.

There was a click from the jukebox and a moment of tense silence... then a collective sigh of relief as a hard rock beat began pounding and Bryan Adams told of a *One Night Love Affair*. Edward Nigma ambled to the bar, ordered a Glenundrom, and pulled a leaf from his costume.

Sly served the drink with his usual air of genial unflappability.

"Why do you have dandelion in your waistband, Mr. Nigma?" he asked with a friendly air.

"Don't I wish I had an answer to that one," Eddie grumbled, downing the shot.

"You'll be happy to know that Lady Weed was just taken up the river," Hugo informed him, "so we should be all be pheromone-free for a while."

For the first time since his breakup with Doris, Edward Nigma indulged in the kind of free, rocking laughter you'd expect from the Riddler.

"She's gone to Arkham!" he cackled, "Well set me up with another, Sly, my good man! And riddle me this, my fellow Rogues: Who else was just captured, only last night? Two-Face! And Roxy too! All three together at Arkham. Now that should be some quality dinner theatre!"

"So the blonde calls to her husband that the tiger jigsaw puzzle is really hard, and the husband says 'Honey, put the Frosted Flakes back in the box.' HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAaaaaaa. Don't you get it? PUT THE FROSTED FLAKES BACK IN THE BOX!!! What's the matter with you people??? It was Tony the Tiger!!! HahahAHAHAHAHAAAAAAA!"

"So you bagged Poison Ivy," Dick asked with a note of envy.

"Wasn't much of a challenge," Tim answered, "She sort of went to pieces after this thing she was doing at the Iceberg went bad."

Dick shrugged, spinning himself off the vaulting horse to land smartly before the cooler. He chugged a chilled bottle of water, then tossed another - unopened - over his shoulder, where Tim caught it neatly.

"Actually, the tussle with Poison Ivy is the least menaced I've felt all week," Tim admitted. "It's the girls from around school that are starting to creep me out."

"Oh my god, Bro, your senior year. And holidays are coming up. Deb season. Ha! Hadn't realized your number was up already." Dick chuckled like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

"Deb season?"

"Yeah, debutante balls. All the related parties. You know how it is, they need escorts."

"I don't think that's it," Tim insisted. "This is the feeling like closing in on a villain's hideout: You know it might be a trap, there might be cameras, you get that feeling you're being watched, any second the floor could drop out beneath you."

"Yep. Deb season."

"No."

"You're a nice looking boy, Timothy."

"Stop that."

"I'll bet you look smashing in a tux."

"Not funny, Dick."

"You're a marked man, Tim. You can fight this, or you can just accept the inevitable."

"That's the kind of thing Ra's al Ghul says."

"Heh, heh, the Demon's Head should be half so determined as a debutante hunting for an escort."

"Okay, now I'm scared."

"Bruce and I both went through it. You'll live."

"That's what you said about Zogger."

"Heh, heh, heh."

3:53

Leland Bartholomew watched the minute hand flick upwards, another tick closer to four o'clock. How he was dreading four o'clock. Dreading it with a dread bordering on absolute detestation...

"Miss Vicens?" he said into the intercom, "Please schedule me for a routine blood test at day's end."

"Are you alright, Doctor?" his assistant asked, concerned.

"Perfectly sound, Miss Vicens. There is a remote possibility of exposure to fear-gas, and I wish to run a tox-screen before anything develops."

It would do no harm. It was standard operating procedure at Arkham if even the mildest symptoms manifested themselves. But Bartholomew knew his dread of the coming hour had a natural, non-chemical explanation. And Jonathan Crane's remark was not planting a suggestion; it was a simple observation: Bartholomew had looked at the clock fourteen times during Jonathan Crane's session. In 50 minutes, between

3:00 & 3:50, he'd looked at the clock fourteen times, and his patient had noticed. He did it with a look of distaste, Crane had said, as if something was to occur at four o'clock that Dr. Bartholomew was not looking forward to.

It was: Harvey Dent's session.

He'd had Pamela Isley at one o'clock, Roxy Rocket at two. It was a lot to take.

At four o'clock, Bartholomew swallowed two Advil with a swig of Maalox and opened his door. Dent went through his usual rigmarole, flipping his coin to determine if he would speak in today's session or sit in silence. Feeling a traitor to his Hippocratic oath, Bartholomew prayed it would come up scarred, indicating silence.

"A lot of estrogen in the rec room today," Harvey began, and Bartholomew slumped in his chair. "Since last night's arrival of, you know, the Queen of Green. Miss I-am-nature-incarnate-and-all-must-worship-my-leafy-beauty."

"She's just going by Pam now," Bartholomew said dryly—and then stared in horror at his unprofessional remark.

Harvey Dent stared as well. Then, after a beat, he roared with laughter.

"You're okay, Bart! We like you!"

It was a thoroughly inappropriate outburst, completely unprofessional, but it opened up Harvey Dent as nothing ever had. For the next half hour, Harvey (and Two-Face) told, at length, the convoluted but fascinating tale of his, or "their," cough, love life.

"Of course, we're glad we are with Roxy now. We're quite over Ivy. Of course we are. We can't help yearning for her now and again—despite the bad times (of which there were many) outnumbering the good times... Well, like the old nursery rhyme says, when the good times were good, they were very, very good."

Harvey rose from his chair and Bartholomew scrutinized the move. Such a gesture could be threatening, or it could mean the patient had decided to terminate the session early and leave. This appeared to be neither. It almost seemed that Dent was... oh dear... it seemed he stood in order to adjust himself. Bartholomew looked to his notepad, then thought the better of it. He wouldn't want Dent to think he was making a note of the action. But Harvey merely paced as he resumed talking, and didn't look at Bartholomew at all.

"Do you know why we are here now, Doc? Roxy pulled the alarm at the Second National Bank. Two perfectly satisfying jobs went off smooth as you please, and that was *boring*. So she pulled the alarm. Women! Then, while she was all wired from the chase, she decided to buzz the Iceberg. Thrills are one thing. We don't say we didn't enjoy certain aspects of that ride on the rocket, but to buzz the Iceberg! And then when it came to a confrontation with Batgirl, she baited the little beast. That Batgirl is ninety-eight pounds of hurricane, and Roxy flat out baited her. That's why we're banged up from here to here, Doc! It's Two-Face, mind you, Two-FACE. The acid only scarred those parts our suit didn't cover—and *WE'D RATHER KEEP IT THAT WAY!*"

At the batting cages in Gotham Central Park, Joker stood in one cage and his henchman in the one beside it.

"What does a blonde owl say?" the henchman asked, swinging at a fastball.

"What, what." Joker answered. "Why did the blonde have tire tread marks on her back?"

“From crawling across the street when the sign said DON’T WALK,” answered the henchman. “Why did the blonde tip-toe past the medicine cabinet?”

“So she wouldn’t wake up the sleeping pills.”

The Sensei said effort was a trap.

I'd anticipate an attack, compensate accordingly, wind up overcompensating, and find myself slammed into the mat, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling. Then the Sensei's face would come into view. "Effort is a trap, *Wayne-san*. Do not anticipate. Be. Then whatever comes, react like the water, fluid, of the moment."

I wasn't going to repeat the mistakes of the Protocols fight—the Two-Face fight. When Selina and I became close, I asked if Catwoman had inside information to take down the rogues, "protocols" like I made up for the JLA, just in case. Then, when she was still smarting from that, I asked her to help me against Two-Face. It was the worst fight we ever had, and it nearly split us for good. I wasn't going to repeat those mistakes. That night, I went to her as Batman. So tonight, I went as Bruce. That night, I showed up unannounced. Tonight, I called ahead.

It was too much. It was overcompensating. And I wound up slammed into the mat, staring at the ceiling.

"Aren't we a little past having to call before you drop in?" That was how she opened the door. Suspicious, right off the mark. She knows me too well.

I fibbed, said I was making up for trying to cancel on her last night.

The Two-Face fight began with my asking about protocols. That whole mess began when I came over for a date, as Bruce Wayne, as I was now. I had said I wanted to stay in and talk instead of going out. So this time, I did the opposite.

"Let's not order in, let's go out."

And, I figured, instead of introducing the subject over dinner, we would talk in the morning.

"I don't feel like getting dressed up tonight. Why don't we stay in?" This while she practically crawled into my lap, playing with my tie like the insignia. Stay in... she asked it with a purr... like it was some vault and she really, *really* wanted to keep that diamond.

...whatever comes, react like the water, fluid, of the moment...

"Okay, Kitten," I kissed her cheek, "whatever you want. We can stay in."

After all, it's not like it was a stolen diamond in the vault. She just wanted to stay in. Maybe she was tired or, more likely, playful. We could still talk in the morning, I told myself.

...Effort is a trap, Wayne-san. Do not anticipate...

That's when it happened. That's when it all went to hell. A simple phonecall and I wound up slammed onto the mat, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling.

There was "a situation" in Atlantis. Not a *crisis*, Arthur stressed, a *situation*. Political. It would be 'imprudent' for him to leave. He went into more detail than he needed to: A scandal involving one of his ministers. If he left, the viceroy who would act in his absence was the minister's brother... Arthur didn't need to tell me all this. It was guilt that made him do so. He couldn't take his shift at the Watchtower, would I please fill in?

Arthur never misses Monitor Duty. Never. He is 100 percent dedicated; excuses are for those who don't make Duty a priority. That's why he was asking me to fill in for him. He didn't say so; he didn't have to. I knew the reason. There were many in the league with whom he's on friendlier terms, but he wasn't asking them. He didn't want

them to see him slip—King Orin had a conflict of priorities. If they knew, he wouldn't be able to grumble about their constant shift swapping. He knew I didn't play those games. He knew I wouldn't hang it over him. So I agreed; what else could I do?

I turned back to Selina, knowing she'd heard my half of the conversation. Monitor Duty. The night the Protocols fight started, I had Monitor Duty. To change the subject, I asked her to come along. I was standing right here on this spot. This was a very bad omen.

"Want some company?" she asked.

I couldn't have heard it right. She was offering to come?

"Monitor Duty, right? You said it gets pretty boring if it's a slow night."

Almost the exact words I used that night. Hell. Could there be a worse omen?

"Sure," I said, "it will be nice to have the company."

What else could I say?

...slammed into the mat, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling...

Jason liked working at the Shakespeare and Company Bookstore between acting jobs. They understood his need for flexible hours, and manning the help desk gave him a chance to meet a cross-section of Gothamites and tourists. Many had interesting accents, and when he heard a new one he would practice it for the rest of the day—a useful skill in getting acting work.

Jason just left the help desk for a moment to get a skim-latte from the coffee bar. When he returned, he could see a customer was waiting. A customer that looked familiar—more than familiar - Famous. Jason had seen famous customers in Shakespeare and Company before. He wrote up the encounters and sent them in to David Letterman in hopes of getting invited for a "Brush with Greatness" segment. This customer he could not write up as a "brush with greatness"... assuming he even lived.

"HAHAHA-Hallo," Joker said with a terrifying grin, "Personal Growth, please?"

Jason stared.

"The personal growth section, would be where?" the killer clown repeated.

Jason found he could not speak. He stared in horror, then, finally, he pointed.

"Thank you!" Joker said, and disappeared in the direction indicated. A moment later, he returned.

"Say, do you know why was the blonde upset when she got her driver's license? Because she got an F in sex! HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Last time Catwoman accompanied me to the Watchtower, we were relieving Plastic Man. Tonight, with fate conspiring to remind her of that incident any way possible, Eel was, of course, in the Monitor Womb when we got there. Not his regular shift. He must have swapped with J'onn.

Last time was right after the protocols. He hated me. All that was behind us now. We're teammates again. With the unfortunate byproduct that he'd resumed his usual infantile banter around me.

"I taut I taw a puddy-tat," he announced, turning himself into a yellow bulbous creature. Then he switched back to his regular form and added, "Hiya, Miss Kitty."

Rather than rolling her eyes or staring him down, Catwoman smiled warmly. She could never resist the chance to reduce a hero to his basest instincts. Even Plastic Man, who I would have thought was too easy to bother with.

She smiled at him, called him 'Stretchy' and blew a kiss. His reaction took a second to process... it was as if the kiss actually took a moment to travel across the room... and his expression, when it hit, looked like the time Prometheus reduced him to a state of spastic paralysis.

I asked Selina to get us some coffee. The moment her back was turned, Eel "blushed" his whole body to the color of her costume. I gave him the death scowl, although it never has much effect.

"Careful," I cautioned.

He just looked at me. For once, no wiseass backtalk.

"I figured you were using her," he said finally. And it was Eel O'Brien talking. Plastic Man doesn't have a special voice but his manner is distinctive. This wasn't it. But it wasn't the Eel I know either; but then, I suppose I don't really know Eel. "When you brought her up last time, I figured you were just stringing her along, had some case you wanted her help with, taking advantage... *Taking*, like you do."

I didn't even process the insult. I was too shocked. Even O'Brien was talking about that night. Were we all going to have to rehash every word and nuance of that night? Word by word, bit by bit, until it all exploded into another knockdown-dragout-we're kidding ourselves-it's over?

"I hope you know how lucky you are."

I didn't answer him. By the time I realized he'd actually spoken, that the words I thought I heard weren't a chimera from inside my own head, Selina was back. Eel had resumed his regular color scheme and, instead of leaving, sat himself on the arm of her chair, like he was planning to stay a while.

"I was just telling Batman how the last time you were here, it caused quite an uproar. None of us realized, of course..."

He was still talking about that night. And he was drinking my coffee.

"...until those news stories started about Selina Kyle dating--"

"I certainly hope you people know better than to believe everything you read," she interrupted—predictably—the calumnies of newspaper gossip is one of her favorite topics. "If you don't, well, let's just say you're in for quite a shock when you go home to Graceland and see what's happened to the place."

O'Brien laughed, morphed into an Elvis impersonator and sang a few bars of *Hound Dog*, complete with pelvis-grinding choreography. I never saw the tabloid piece alleging that Plastic Man was Elvis Presley, but it's one of Selina's favorite examples to slap down gossip-mongers.

I ignored the pair of them. They both react to the death scowl like it's encouragement, and I obviously didn't want to feed this nonsense. Instead, I busied myself with the newsfeeds. Two channels needed adjusting, which is typical when relieving O'Brien. I tuned one to pick up the AP feed out of Gotham, and that's when I

saw... Six more Joker sightings. I held my breath as I skimmed the report... still no fatalities... I breathed... but a new development...

::American Airlines Passenger Harris to the white courtesy phone... The yellow zone is for loading and unloading only... Excuse me, sir, you can't come in here... that microphone is for official airline announcements—ugh.... **Attention K-Mart shoppers, Joker here! Know how you confuse a blonde? Ask her to alphabetize a bag of M&Ms! Know why it works?::**

The announcement continued in a sickly falsetto:

::“Does 3 come before E, or does it go between M and W?” ::

then concluded in Joker's normal voice: ::**HAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!**

Thank you for flying Air Joker! ::

“O'Brien, get out. We need to work.” I turned to Selina, “Six new sightings, all today. He's telling blonde jokes now.”

“Blonde jokes? Hey, did'ya hear the one about the blonde skydiver?”

“O'Brien, I said GET OUT.”

“She missed the Earth!”

“NOW.”

I was prepared to physically stuff him into the transporter tube. Selina had a better way. She stopped paying attention to him. He left.

“Blonde jokes?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I swiveled my chair around to face her, then turned hers to face me. “Look, I had wanted to ask before, but I didn't know how to bring it up. I really don't want you flying off the handle like last time.”

“Flying off the handle?” she interrupted.

Don't turn into Batman, I told myself, not like last time. You're just a guy whose girl is giving him a bad time. Just a guy. Don't go Bat. Don't go Bat. Don't go Bat.

“Look,” I swallowed, “It's Joker. Could we stay focused on that, please.”

“Flying off the handle—like last time?”

Don't go Bat. Don't go Bat. Don't go Bat.

“Selina, please. I'm asking for help. You want to just listen and maybe give me shit some other time.”

I heard my breathing, I heard my heart beat, I heard the hum of the uplink matrix running raw data through a multilevel contextual filter sorting the information by location, category and urgency indices. But I didn't hear any interruption from the chair opposite me.

I took a deep breath, and resumed.

“I can't work out what he's doing. I've been trying to get inside his head for days, which is not a pleasant exercise and I don't recommend it. He keeps showing up at these locations, occasionally he commits a crime, usually he just acts out in some way and leaves. So far, no killing, and no Harley. She hasn't been seen with him once. That's why I thought, maybe... maybe you could ask around. The rumor mill. Jervis. Ivy. I don't know who she'd confide in.”

"Confide in about what?"

"If they had a fight. Broke up."

"You think..."

"It was just a possibility before, now I'm sure Harley is the core of this. He's telling blonde jokes. 'Why did God create blondes? Because sheep can't bring beer from the fridge.' That seems pretty hostile."

"Compared to when he plopped her off the Hudson Bridge, shoved her out of a blimp, flung hot oil at her, slammed her head against a vending machine, or dropped her into a shark tank?"

"He was in a good mood when he did those things, now he's pissed."

"Ok, I'll help you. 'Cause that was just scary."

"Huh? What?"

"I said I'd help. But you are to spend no more time 'trying to get inside Joker's head,' cause 'He was in a good mood then, but now he's pissed,' that is just SCARY. Don't do that again."

And she left. Just like that.

You see, a little advanced planning, a little intelligent strategy, and any situation can be finessed.

Dr. Leland Bartholomew made his apologies to the occupants of the Arkham Visitors' Lounge. They were short staffed today, and Miss Isley had quite a number of visitors. He was sorry they had to wait. There were a number of magazines and a television to keep them entertained while they waited.

"Short staffed," Jervis turned to Edward Nigma and Selina. "You know what that means?"

"Green Flu," Eddie answered knowingly.

Jervis nodded, but Selina, who had never been caught, let alone incarcerated at Arkham, looked confused.

"When Ivy is being particularly temperamental," Jervis started to explain.

"Or just 'mental,'" Eddie added bitterly.

"They have a lot of call ins," Jervis concluded.

"Better to call in sick, than to really be sick," Eddie completed the thought.

"We may therefore conclude," Jervis said happily, "there have been developments since the terrible trio were all sent here."

Selina continued to look confused, so Jervis filled her in on what was known of the Harvey/Roxy/Ivy triangle. By the time he was finished, Dr. Bartholomew returned and said he could go and see Miss Isley now. When the door closed, Eddie looked at it for a long time, then turned to Selina slowly.

"Mad Hatter, heh, he should go by Gossip Gertie if you ask me. That's why he's here, making the rounds. He's going to see the three of them, get the dirt, and go trotting back to the Iceberg with 'reputable sources'... 'straight from the flytrap's mouth.'"

Selina smiled. "Okay, that's why he's here. Now why are you?"

"Went to see Harvey first," he explained, "I had an, er, encounter, with Ivy. And after that Joker business earlier this year with..." he hummed a few bars of 76 *Trombones* and gestured with his hand as if playing the instrument, "...I wasn't going to take any chances. So I told Harvey everything. The bloom is off the rose, so to speak. She's not my type. Contrary to popular—and Pamela's—opinion: sans pheromones, she is not every man's type."

"Noted." Selina checked her watch.

"And Harvey said to tell her," Eddie went on conversationally, forgetting that it was Jervis who was the incurable gossip. "Clean break. Said it was your boy Bruce's advice. Tell her the truth. And do it now when she's in Arkham and can be medicated if necessary."

"Eddie, that advice got Harvey hospitalized for four weeks." Which, Selina made a mental note, may have been Bruce's intention the entire time. She'd never decided for sure.

The door opened again, and Dr. Bartholomew said Miss Isley was ready for another visitor. Nigma looked at Selina thoughtfully, then told her to take his place in the queue.

Joker and his henchman returned to Gotham Central Park, this time to the ice rink, and gleefully told the clerk at the skate rental the connection between a blonde and a halogen headlamp is that both get screwed on the front of a Ford Escort.

They then made the rounds of all the skaters, took aside each man accompanied by a fair-haired woman, and told him a blonde tried to steal a police car because she saw 911 on the side and thought it was a Porsche.

"This is the first I've heard of a break-up," Pamela Isley declared when Selina asked about Harley and Joker, "but it's about time she dumped that... that... that...MAN. And such a man, really, of all the losers that crawl around this city after dark, could she possibly have done worse?! but, look who I'm talking to."

Selina's eyes burned at this blatant flouting of the cardinal rule: Thou Shalt Not Insinuate about Batman and Catwoman. But she said nothing, not wanting to interrupt the diatribe and possibly miss something valuable.

"But at least you came to your senses, Catty, not that Wayne's much of an improvement. Rich and all, but dumb as a post from what I hear...."

Selina let this pass as well, knowing that the real seed of Ivy's dislike lay in Bruce The Fop leering at every woman except her when they began the slumming ruse at the Iceberg.

"...And besides, Joker likes him. There has to be something seriously wrong with the guy if Jack likes him, you mark my words..."

Selina forgot her annoyance. This was an angle that hadn't occurred to any of them. Good old Pammy! If other inquiries proved fruitless, Joker would surely confide in his good buddy "Brucie." A slow feline smile crossed Selina's face as the thought of suggesting it to him—he'd probably burst a blood vessel.

"Although, now that I think of it," Ivy's tone changed once she'd vented sufficiently, "When Harley came to see me, she *did* complain that she and Joker were having trouble hooking up. Whatever Hacienda she was at, he wasn't."

"Avoiding me! My Puddin' is avoiding me," Harley wailed. "Oh Catty, it's awful, the man I love has gone missin', and the hyenas need walked, and I'm outta cortisone cream, and those videos need returned."

Selina gave an uncomfortable cough. This would not be easy to say.

"Well, I ran into Jervis at Arkham, and he did explain about the Poison Oak. So, um, well... Harley, this does not mean we're friends and it certainly doesn't mean I'm going to walk those hyenas. But if you're really in a bind, I'll run to the 7-Eleven and get you some cortisone."

"Oh Catty, you're the best," Harley whimpered. "Could ya drop the videos too? *When Harry Met Sally* is overdue, and Puddin' hates paying late fees, so now he'll have to kill the clerk."

"Harley, I am not returning *When Harry Met Sally* for you."

Harley sobbed.

"That was the last movie Puddin' and I watched together before he disappeared."

Selina looked thoughtfully at the videobox, then picked it up slowly.

"Really. Well, okay, just this once. As a special favor."

"1989, can you believe it?" Barbara exclaimed, sipping her tea. "*When Harry Met Sally* came out in 1989. If I'd gone back one more year, I'd have found it. All the Joker incidents have been at sites where *When Harry Met Sally* filmed on location here in Gotham. All I had to do was run a reverse-compare against the city permits database..."

"Or watch the movie," Dick suggested.

Selina looked from Barbara—who practically dove into her computer, typing like something not quite human, on hearing the new information—to Dick, who took the videocassette from her, popped it into the VCR, and fast-forwarded through the airport scene, the stadium, the batting cage, the restaurant, Sharper Image, the Shakespeare and Company bookstore...

"Thanks for bringing this to me before Bruce," Barbara said absently. "Gives me a chance to redeem myself."

"You haven't told him yet?" Dick asked.

"I called him on cell," Selina answered, "He was at Wayne Enterprises, couldn't talk. Said he'll come by as soon as he can."

"Cool," Dick grinned, "That won't be 'til 5. We can have this cracked by the time he gets here. So... *When Harry Met Sally*... avoiding Harley... blonde jokes... very hostile toward Harley... Oh my god."

"YES?"

"It's only the most famous scene in movie history," Dick smirked.

"Now you're abusing hyperbole," Barbara corrected.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! YES! YES!!!" Dick chanted, slapping the arm of the sofa.

"I'll have what she's having," Barbara quoted.

"Should I leave you two alone?" Selina asked.

Dick just smiled. Barbara smiled. Finally, after one of those you-go looks, Dick spoke.

"Selina, I don't think any of us have told you how happy we all are to have you in our little circle. Because, with something like this, well... Bruce has his accomplishments, we all know. But he isn't exactly in the mainstream. Pop culture, not his thing. And back in the day, it would be one of us that had to explain this to him. But now, hey, we have you!"

"Faking it?" Bruce looked incredulous.

"That's the theory," Selina confirmed.

"Your theory is that Joker is pissed because he saw a movie in which Meg Ryan fakes an orgasm in a diner, and now he thinks Harley Quinn has been *faking*, and that's why he's running around town telling blonde jokes instead of killing people?"

"I know it sounds insane."

"Not really. Not for Joker. If anything, it's a little too pat for the guy who couldn't kill people on his anniversary because he hadn't recited Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Ulysses* before he left the house." Bruce's eye flickered towards the kitchen door where Dick and Barbara had disappeared. Then he spoke louder, "It's not a bad theory. It doesn't explain why he isn't killing, but it's a start."

Dick and Barbara, knowing they were being addressed, peeked back into the room.

Bruce continued, "It's probably enough. Joker will want this kept quiet. We got him to check himself into Arkham once before. Batman will talk to him tonight."

After Bruce left, Barbara turned to Dick and asked, "Just confirming, 'Batman will talk to him' translates as..."

"Blackmail him."

"That's what I thought."

"Dr. Bart! Long time no laugh, HAHAHAAAA! Did you hear about the blonde who shot an arrow into the air? She missed! HAHAHAAAAAaaaa but seriously, Doc, I do have an embarrassing little issue I'd like to talk about today. I seem to be having trouble killing people."

Dr. Bartholomew took a handful of Advil with a swig of Maalox.

"And it's all Harley's fault, the demon blonde. Here all this time I thought she was faking like a good girlfriend should, and it turns out, she's really having that much fun! What's up with that? Is that any way to make a man feel like a man—like he's actually giving her pleasure? Yuck! I gag every time I think of it. Thrown my whole system out of whack. No confidence!"

I felt strong, knowing fingers kneading the muscles at the base of my neck.

This is why I used to tell myself there could never be a woman in Batman's life. At night... after patrol... waiting while I made log entries... impatient... entitled even.

I never figured on a woman like Selina, whose fingers rubbed little circles against my hairline. She knew exactly how long to wait. Somehow she knew when I was done with the vital work, and then...

"Watch you don't pull your shoulder, Stud, reaching to pat yourself on the back."

This taunting whisper breathed hot and moist into my ear... When I got back to the cave, I used to leave the cowl on while making log entries. I don't know why. Some idea of "thinking as Batman" maybe. No more. Soft fingers massaging my neck, hot whispers. Batman was quick to realize the cowl got in the way.

"What makes you think I'm patting myself on the back, Kitten?" I asked, letting those magical fingers relax me.

"You had this pleased little smile while you typed."

I told her the truth: "That wasn't for me; it was for you. Your part in this was huge."

She purred.

"Selina, I'm serious," I told her. "You've helped before, but not like this."

She just purred. She didn't understand. She had leveraged Catwoman's status among the rogues for information to help Batman. And she had no idea how significant that was. She's still a puzzle to me.

"Oh. Sorry, guys," an uncertain voice murmured, "I didn't think anybody'd be down here."

"Hi, Tim! Good to see ya," Selina called, in a voice that made it clear he was an unwelcome interruption. I gave her thigh a light smack.

He didn't seem to notice anyway. He'd removed his mask and was now stripping off the gloves, looking exasperated.

"Girls are confusing," he said finally.

I'd been waiting for this. Deb season. He'd already talked to Dick. Of course. Girl issues, he goes to Dick. Don't ask Bruce, Bruce is clueless. Bruce only dated the most glamorous *debutantes* and *supermodels* before settling down with *Catwoman*, what could he possibly tell you about women?

"Deb season?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Yeah. The stalking has begun."

"The only defense is to have already committed to escort someone," I told him. "The Von Schlonicker girls are a good choice because the family travels. You'll have to attend the ball, but then they'll be off to Europe. No other parties."

Tim looked suitably impressed. Selina looked piqued.

"So in Bruce-world, the idea is to see as little of the girl as possible? This is your idea of advice?" She turned away from me and asked, "Timothy, why exactly do you not want to go out with these girls?"

He seemed stuck for an answer. I started to speak...

"Don't help him," Selina snapped.

"I didn't say a word." (And I hadn't.)

"You were about to." (Impossible woman.)

"I... I... they look like they fell out of a J Crew catalog," was what Tim came up with on his own.

"You don't want to go out with them for the sole reason that they want you to," she observed markedly, "Where could you *EVER* have picked up such an idiotic attitude."

Impossible woman.

"Listen. Tim. You're looking at roughly a four week period in which you can enjoy the best food, dancing, champagne, and elaborate entertainments this city has to offer, all at no cost to you, in the company of a lovely girl your age who's on cloud nine just being invited to the party - and all you have to do is show up, be male and wear a tux. Through what bizarre bat-lens do you look at that and see it as a bad deal? You two are crazy."

She went up to bed, and Tim looked at me like I'd let him down.

This wasn't the first time she'd sliced me up in front of a Robin and left me standing like that. It was the first time I found myself blaming the Robin. But for this interruption, I would have been upstairs with Selina by now, "thanking" her for her help, and instead I was still in the cave, pronounced idiotic, bizarre, and crazy, while she went up to bed alone. And Tim was looking like *I'd* let *HIM* down.

"Callooh! Callay! Jack Daniels, I say!" Jervis Tetch ordered happily. "This round is on, what was your name, my friend? Never matter, doesn't mind. Sly, another drink for me to be paid for by this fellow here, wearing the funny hat!"

It was the ninth round Jervis Tetch, aka The Mad Hatter, aka Gossip Gertie had enjoyed in payment for telling all the latest from "The Triangle at Arkham," as Harvey, Roxy and Ivy were now universally known.

"Anyone who hasn't heard it yet, gather round! Gather round! 'The time has come,' the Walrus said, 'To talk of many things: of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings—'"

"Well Selina, thanks to you, I'm effectively without a Robin until Christmas. Tim's decided to escort Cecily Grenville, and if she's anything like her sisters, that will be every party, afterparty, and after-afterparty, every night, 'til the end of the season."

She looked pleased with herself.

For a second, I wondered if, in her mind, robbing me of a Robin balanced her helping me against Joker. I was about to say so in payback for "Through what bizarre bat-lens... idiotic, bizarre and crazy" when, inexplicably, I thought of O'Brien. "I hope you know how lucky you are."

I rolled over and turned off the light.

"Kitten?"

"Hm?"

"You really came through today. It's not that I don't appreciate it. It's just that, well, Barbara and Dick, JLA, Titans, Young Justice, they have many long-standing wagers on this sort of thing, and I've already made Dick enough money this year. There's you, cooking, the bachelor party, Bludhaven, asking for help. If, on top of that, I say 'thank you,' I might as well buy Dick a Porsche, give him all my credit cards, and sign over the house."

"You're welcome."

SECRETS

Giovanni d'Annunzio looked down at his reservation chart, then up at the couple before him. The leggy brunette said she was lunching with Bruce Wayne. The wiry man with thinning hair and a question mark tie clip said he was meeting Selina Kyle. Giovanni looked back at his seating chart: There was only one table. Wayne's man Pennyworth made the reservation for one o'clock, a party of two. Selina called a few minutes later: one o'clock, a party of two. He just assumed they were together. He promised them both his best table.

The only free space for emergencies such as this was cramped and noisy, near the kitchen. He could not risk insulting Bruce Wayne, accustomed to the best d'Annunzio's had to offer. Nor would he want to offend Selina, who brought royalty to his establishment in the person of that oddly dressed Princess of Themyscira... Selina who had been so gracious when he'd seated that awful Miller character... Selina who, on seeing the vilifying writers in her territory, had spoken about vendetta (in flawless, patrician Italian) in terms that made it clear, Catwoman or no, this was not a woman to cross.

He decided the only solution was to compound his mistake. He had assumed the two different reservations were the same. What if, instead, he had assumed the two parties would be dining together? Still an innocent misunderstanding on his part, but this way, no one should be offended by being seated at a cramped table by the kitchen.

He picked up two menus and beckoned Bruce and Selina's guests to follow him.

Zatanna sat across from her unexpected lunch companion, concealing her suspicions in the easy manner of a show-biz personality on a talk show. That Bruce was late was not, in itself, cause for alarm. He was a busy man with a company to run, a charitable foundation gearing up for the holidays, and a secret identity. So he was late for a lunch date. Big deal. What was suspicious was that a criminal sat in his place. The man with the question mark tie clip was not unknown to Zatanna. As an auxiliary member of the JLA, she would have recognized The Riddler even if he hadn't introduced himself, bold as brass, as Edward Nigma.

"So tell me," the insidious puzzle master queried, "What brings the famous prestidigitatress to Gotham City?"

It took Zatanna a half-minute to realize this was meant as polite smalltalk, not a master criminal issuing a riddling challenge, and she found herself answering reflexively as she would on a talk show: "I'm playing at the Civic Center on the 8th and 9th, and then I have a special appearance at the Wayne Foundation Gala to benefit the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic. It's always such a pleasure coming into Gotham for

any reason, but I'm especially excited to be a part of this event. There's to be a silent auction, and one of the items being sold is an artifact of Harry Houdini's. The To—"

"The Tome of Secrets," Nigma cut her off. And only then did Zatanna remember she was not speaking to a talk show host, but a member of Batman's Rogues Gallery, a theme criminal, and she had just drawn his attention to a most tempting prize. Bruce arrived then, followed by Selina, both complaining about the same traffic snarl in Gotham Plaza. By the time they sorted out the introductions and lunch orders, Zatanna had tried twice to signal Bruce about her faux pas. It now became clear that no such covert signals were necessary, for Nigma introduced the subject openly.

"Before you two arrived, Miss Zatanna had just mentioned an item I'm very interested in, Harry Houdini's Tome of Secrets. It's said to contain every secret he knew, his own illusions and escapes, those of other magicians, the fake mystics he debunked, everything."

Zatanna began envisioning the bat-sowl and lengthy explanations as to how and why she'd told a master criminal about such a coveted prize. But as Nigma went on, it became clear he already knew about the Tome long before their conversation:

"When he died, Houdini told his brother Theo to burn the thing. But he wouldn't. Instead, Theo used the Tome's secrets to further his own act—and therein, so the legend says, began the curse."

"The curse?" Bruce and Selina asked in unison, causing Zatanna to look back and forth across the table like she was watching a tennis match.

"The curse," Nigma repeated. "If any but the rightful owner of the Tome turns its pages," he lowered his voice dramatically as if telling children on a camping trip about the escaped maniac with a hook for a hand, "it is his or her own secret that will be revealed to the world."

"Let me get this straight," Bruce asked, walking Zatanna out of the restaurant, "You're doing two shows at the Civic Center for extra money to buy this magic book..."

"The Houdini Tome," Zatanna corrected, waving her arm for a cab.

"...but if you get outbid, you won't let me buy it for you and you won't let me lend you money?"

"Curses are not to be trifled with, Bruce. Riddleman had it right. If any but the rightful owner touches the thing, their secrets will be outed. I don't know exactly how the powers that be might interpret 'the rightful owner'..."

"...and I'm not any taking chances," Eddie told Selina, "I can't steal it. I have to buy the Tome legitimately."

Selina sipped her coffee while Eddie finished his dessert.

"Good thing you asked me to lunch today, because I found out who my competition is. Zatanna is in town for the book, she said so! That woman is a professional magician, there's no telling what tricks she might stoop to in order to get it. I'm going to have to play hardball; I can see that. Something to deplete her cash reserves and boost my own."

"Eddie, you're unbelievable. You chance into having lunch with a beautiful, unattached woman, and in the ten minutes you were alone together, you make her into a rival. You had stuff in common!"

"You saying this was a fix up?"

"It was not a fix up, Eddie. It was just an oops at the reservation desk, I swear. But look, I was at a bridal shower with Zatanna. In a room full of bitchy, tightass, pretentious crosscurrents, she was the let-your-hair-down, live-and-let-live, top-up-the-champagne-glasses and joke-about-toys-that-go-whirr girl. You hear what I'm saying? You found out you had stuff in common, right? She's a magician, she knows about Houdini."

"Lina, look, I do hear you. But no. I'm done with it; I'm off women for a while. No offense. Between Harley and Doris and Clurissa and Ivy, *it's been a bad year*. Enough already. I'm going back to focusing on the work—and getting that book. By any means necessary."

"IXAT POTS," Zatanna called out in desperation, causing a passing cab to screech to a halt, stopping within inches of her outstretched leg. "Works every time," she winked while Bruce held the door.

As the taxi disappeared into traffic, Bruce returned to the restaurant with a scowl.

He waited for Nigma to depart and offered Selina a ride home.

"They're both awfully intense about Houdini," he muttered, while they waited for the valet to bring the Jag.

"-cough-SherlockHolmes-cough-" she answered, with a graceful dip into the passenger seat.

Bruce couldn't help but smile at the valet's double take. He was grateful in ways he couldn't even articulate that it was Selina, that it was Catwoman, who was the woman in his life. He didn't have to be polite on the ride home. He didn't need to be politically correct or even tactful. He could vent.

Zatanna was a nice girl and a heroine, but in some ways, she epitomized everything he distrusted about metas and superpowers. Using magic to hail a cab. Irresponsible. Flamboyant. Heedless. Careless.

The best of them relied on their powers too much and never developed other basic skills as they should. "Powers are not a crutch," Wonder Woman had insisted on the one time he broached the subject, "They're a part of us, a part of what makes us all that we are. Why, it's like saying you're too dependent on your eyesight because you never learned to read Braille."

"I can read Braille," Batman had said flatly. "It comes in handy."

Diana had stormed off in search of a listener that wouldn't contradict her proclamations. By contrast, Selina was nodding at the story as he told it, smiling like it never occurred to her for a moment that Batman would not read Braille.

Zatanna, he resumed, was the perfect illustration of what he was saying. She was the weak link of any team she was on, when one would think her magic would make her the strongest.

“Proving yet again,” Selina purred, shifting her legs subtly in the seat, “it’s not powers or the lack, it’s what you do with them.”

A twitch-smile signaled that Bruce was done venting and, noting the seductive shift of her legs, he proposed bypassing her apartment and heading out to the manor. She shook her head.

“No point, we’ll just get settled in and you’ll wind up coming straight back into town.”

“Oh?” Bruce’s eyes flickered off the road to regard her. With Silver or a bimbo that statement would be a complaint, because he was always running off from their dates. Coming from Selina, it was a tease. She knew something. She knew Batman would be called into the city tonight—and she’d just spoken with Nigma.

“No need to come back just for that,” Bruce began, dipping his voice slightly into Batman’s gravel to show he was ahead of her. “Since I already know the answer to the riddle is Houdini.”

She said nothing, but his peripheral detected a sad shake of the head.

“Oh right, the rightful owner bit. Damn.”

His eyes shifted stealing a peek. There was still no reaction from Selina.

“Well, if Nigma is planning to buy it outright and he just found out he’s got competition, he’ll be going for large amounts of cash. Like box office receipts. And if he hit Zatanna’s shows, that could tie her up in paperwork, delay her payment, reducing her ability to bid against him.”

He twitched. Selina said nothing. This triumph of deduction was as much a foregone conclusion as Batman knowing how to read Braille...

“Damn, you’re a hard woman to impress.”

She laughed.

“I like watching you show off.”

“I wasn’t showing off,” Bruce lied, “just thinking out loud.”

Gotham Times, December 8

LIFESTYLES

Hermoine's Society Chit-Chat

Only one party into the season, it's far too early to declare a Deb of the Year. Nevertheless, Miss Cecily Grenville certainly distinguished herself last night, exhibiting poise under pressure that is the hallmark of true character. The Snowflake Ball was the scene of an attack by Mr. Freeze [see Local News, p.2]. When costumed vigilantes arrived on the scene, Miss Grenville was taken hostage, and although the dastardly villain was apprehended, Miss Grenville was left with her foot frozen in a block of ice. Rather than leave in hysterics, Miss Grenville comported herself as a true lady, remaining at her table with her foot soaking in a tub of defrost solution, chatting with her escort, Mr. Timothy Drake...

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Hello? Yes, Dick, I saw the bit in the paper. You're the fourth person to call and ask... No, I'm not in deep shit with Steph. We're not exclusive. We never said we were exclusive... She patrols with Robin, that's all. That's as far as it goes... What do you mean 'I'll Learn.' Bro, I'm telling you, it's not a big deal..."

Gotham Times, December 8

CLASSIFIEDS

Lost: At or in the vicinity of Beaton's Tearoom, a shopping bag containing four small gift-wrapped parcels and a bound manuscript. Owner does not care about parcels. Reward for return of manuscript.

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Wayne Manor... Yes, Madame, the manuscript is a work of fiction... That is most reassuring. Thank you very much. For confirmation purposes, could you read me the title page, please?... Yes, indeed, that's it... Yes, a-hem, it is a play... Yes, indeed, I am the playwright... I am most flattered, Madame, but there are no plans for production in the foreseeable future. I only wish the manuscript returned... Yes, please address it to Pennyworth, P-E-N-N-Y..."

Gotham Times, December 8

LOCAL NEWS

The show at the Gotham Civic Center, *Zatanna: Mistress of Magic*, was interrupted last night when the performer vanished from the stage. According to eyewitnesses, Zatanna became distracted by a disruption in the rear of the auditorium. She muttered something the witnesses could not understand, then disappeared "in the blink of an eye." In what appeared to be a variation of Houdini's Metamorphosis, a figure draped in black cloth materialized at the same instant on the spot where she had vanished. The cloth fell, revealing the costumed criminal known as The Riddler bound in handcuffs.

The audience, assuming this was part of the show, applauded and cheered as the felon ran offstage and escaped via the stagedoor. Minutes later, the plucky Zatanna returned to the stage from the back of the auditorium and finished the performance. Audience members say they only realized what had occurred when they left the theatre to discover police tape and flashing lights in the parking lot.

Authorities will not confirm that The Batman foiled a robbery of the Civic Center Box Office during the show.

::Twitterbringgggg::

“Hey Selina, it’s Eddie. Thought you’d want to know, Bats has come up with a new kind of Batcuff, damn thing took me twenty minutes to get out of last night. Good thing I got away and had plenty of time to work on it. I figured since you always worked out how to quick-pick all the previous versions, you’ll want to take this new one apart. You’ve got to see this thing, it’s really hard to open!... Anyway, you’re now officially the only woman left I will keep in touch with - and that’s only because you’re dating Wayne and can’t get any ideas. Would you believe HARLEY called me after that bit in the paper? Said she was real concerned about ‘this thing’ with me and Zatanna, that I was on the rebound from Ivy and shouldn’t do anything rash! Can you believe that!!! ME on the REBOUND from IVY??? I dumped her! If you can call it dumping when it was just a one-night stand and a green one at that... and what ‘thing with me and Zatanna,’ huh? It was a robbery, not a thing. A robbery is not a thing! Do we all have to pair up like animals in the ark now? Can’t anybody just put on a mask and commit a freaking crime anymore?... This is all your fault, Selina, you and you-know-who, because people in this town used to be able to tell the difference between a crime and... Hello? Selina? Aw shit.”

::Twitterbringgggg::

“Allo. Diz is Kittlemeier.... Yez, Mr. B. I been expecting your calls. A new zet of ze batcuffz, yez, I zee dat in ze papers... A replazement cape too? Oh my, izzat ze black cloth dat wind up on ze ztage? ... Oh my. Ok. Zo batcuffz, and cape. You pay when you pick up, usual time...”

::Twitterbringgggg::

“Don’t hang up! Okay, I broke a rule. I take it back. ‘There is not now nor has there ever been anything between Catwoman and Batman, and anybody who says otherwise in the feline presence will be like unto the ball of yarn.’ OK? I’ve done penance. Give me a break, Selina, it was a helluva night. And the very thought of Miss Top Hat and Fishnets as a prospective romance... Do you know what she did to me? ‘Tca eht ni thguac,’ how do you like that! I make up anagrams in my sleep, Selina, you think I didn’t recognize that as ‘caught in the act?’ And then I’m up on the stage—which, okay, it worked out for me, ‘cause I had a little oops with Batman in the box office, and winding up on stage made for an easy getaway, but c’mon, CAUGHT IN THE ACT! It’s a freakin’ pun! What are we back to Robin I, Punning Punster of Gotham?”

Gotham Times, December 8

PERSONALS

Successful Gotham entrepreneur with thriving nightclub seeks vivacious female companion. Birdwatching a plus.

Gotham Times, December 8

ABOUT TOWN

Tis the season for every charity in creation to hold a fundraiser, and everyone's calendar is overcrowded. But the upcoming gala to benefit the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic is worth making time for. Entertainment includes the Hudson University Choral Singers under the direction of Lori Elton, and *Zatanna: Mistress of Magic*. Silent Auction includes many rare and valuable antiques including a Fabergé egg, a collection of vintage Punch and Judy puppets, a pair of cufflinks that once belonged to Rudolph Valentino, an exquisite etching by the Master of Cologne, and an extraordinary artifact of Harry Houdini's known as the Tome of Secrets.

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Morning, Lucius. It's Bruce. I'm juggling the seating at the benefit, need to free up a chair at my table... A friend of Selina's. He's very interested in the Houdini Tome, so I thought it would be only polite to, you know, keep a close eye on him—I mean, seat him where he can have a good look at it. Is it okay if I move Leslie Thompkins to your table?... Good then. Thanks, Lucius."

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Hello, Edward. This is Bruce Wayne. I thought I remembered you saying something about that Houdily Book you were interested in... That's what I said, isn't it? Houdily... Oh, right, *Houdini*, yes, of course. Anyway, this Houdini doohickey. It turns out it's actually a Wayne Foundation event that's holding this sale... Hm? Oh, I can never keep track of that. I have someone who manages the schedule. Anyway, the Foundation has three tables, so I made sure you'll be seated with me and Selina... Good, good. Well then, see you there."

::Twitterbringgggg::

"It's me, Kitten. Secure the line... Are we still on for dinner?... Yes, I am in a better mood; I wasn't in a bad mood before... I was not chewing nails... I was not.... Now that's an exaggeration... I am going to take him down hard, fast, and painful, but to say I'm 'royally pissed' is overstating it... I did not bite Alfred's head off... I did not call Whiskers a demonic little furball... I told Alfred, in a calm and rational tone, not to reposition anything in the costume vault because I'd have the cape replaced by Tuesday, and I made passing reference to the fate of the last cape... Yes, the last cape, the destruction of which your demonic little furball reveled in with wanton glee... I am not... So dinner's off?... Oh, heh. Well that's a thought... Okay, roof of the Moxton Building, midnight... Yeah. Meow."

Gotham Times, December 8

VICTORIA'S SECRET CIRCULAR

Ho Ho Ho

Make his Ho-Ho-Holidays Merry with our stunning collection of intimate apparel in reds as red as holly, and blacks as black as coal left in bad little girl's stockings.

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Ha-Ha-Hiya, I mean, eh, hello. This is Dr. Harleen Quinzel, I would like to speak to one of your patients, a Ms. Pamela Isley... Ha-Ha-Hiya, Red! I was just thinkin', since you're up at Arkham and Puddin' is up at Arkham, could you maybe talk to him and see what he might like for Christmas?... But Red!... Red, I don't know what to get him!... Well there's this ad in the paper, but I don't think he'd like prancing around in red silk lingerie... Red? You still there? There was hacking sound... Well, if you won't help me, I'll have ta fall back on a theme gift, there are these Punch 'n' Judy puppets... Red? Red? What's so funny?"

The bats always grew still when the roar of the great engine echoed through the cave. Then the dark man emerged from the black car. He emitted an intensity some of the bats could sense and others could not. Those that did became agitated; it felt like a storm brewing.

It had not felt like this for some time.

The dark man was still for a long time, seated amidst the flashing boxes and lights.

Then he rose and moved into the room with the towering perches...

Batman moved like a ghost among the trophies in his trophy room, his cape brushing the bases supporting the largest objects: the dinosaur from Dinosaur Island and the giant penny of Joseph Coyne, the Penny Plunderer. Batman's mouth twitched as he regarded an oversized playing card. Joker assumed his was the largest of Batman's trophies. One day he would have to tell the psychotic clown his contribution fell short by a full four meters.

Batman spent more time studying the smaller items in glass cases: a freeze ray, an exploding question mark, several hats tricked out with microelectronics, a handle of braided leather...

"Meow," he whispered, running a gloved finger over the case. He would miss her. But it was for the best...

He moved beyond these cases to the newest acquisition, propped on a small Lucite stand, Houdini's Tome of Secrets.

"Just you and me, Harry," he remarked, picking up the book and bringing it with him to the costume vault. While he changed into Bruce Wayne's street clothes, he laid the book on the little shelf meant for Catwoman's costume. Hanging it on the peg, she complained, would pull the leather out of shape.

Now the shelf was bare.

He would miss her, certainly. But this was for the best. Hell Month nearly finished them last time.

A few minutes later, he ascended to the manor, Houdini Tome in hand. Alfred greeted him cautiously. It was starting already. January 5th, and already everyone on eggshells, like he was a monster.

"Did Wayne-One call?" Bruce asked curtly.

"Yes, sir, about thirty minutes ago. Your private plane landed in Paris at seven a.m. local time. It will refuel and be back at Gotham Executive Airport by three p.m. tomorrow. The pilot reported that Ms. Kyle had a most comfortable flight and, by way of thanks, sent a message which he was reluctant to relay. When I assured him the lady often indulged in a kind of *banter* which expressed affection no matter how insulting it might appear, he relayed it to me to pass on to you."

"Well?" Bruce asked, annoyed. Hell Month or not, this beating around the bush was trying his patience.

"Are you quite sure it was wise to send Miss Selina to Paris for Hell Mon- for these three weeks, sir? It isn't my place to say, of course, but it seems you would both be happier if..."

"It *isn't* your place, Alfred. The message?"

"You are a rigid, humorless, paranoid, obsessive, smug, melodramatic, and pompous jackass, sir."

Bruce glared, then to show he understood this to be the message rather than an egregious impertinence on Alfred's part, he noted:

"Cat Tales, Act I. I'll be in my room, reading."

He gestured with the book and turned to go.

Last night, he'd tried reading in the cave. He preferred the cave this time of year, preferred staying in costume. But there are physical laws that refuse to accommodate the Batman's mood: the book was old and irreplaceable, the cave was damp. So he retired to his bedroom, set a match to the fire laid in the outer room, and opened a small leather box on the sidetable. He selected a CD and heard the opening strains of Schubert's Impromptu #90. He sat and read the notes of the great escape artist, and thought back over how this object came into his possession.

The Robinson Plaza Hotel, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Robinson Park, always went the extra mile for a Wayne Foundation event. Their Grand Ballroom was not the largest in Gotham, but it was the most sought after in the busy holiday season. When it opened in 1907, the rich entertained in their homes. With the building of the Plaza, they began giving up their city mansions in favor of suites of rooms. The Plaza was built to offer "all the pomp, glory, and opulence of a French chateau," and this it did. The largest single order in history for gold-encrusted china was placed with L. Straus & Sons, and no less than 1,650 crystal chandeliers were purchased. In giving up their townhouses, however, the great hostesses had also given up their ballrooms, and the Plaza became the first establishment to offer, for a price, such facilities that had previously been a function of private entertaining.

With such a history, it was not surprising that everyone with an event in December wanted to book the Plaza's ballroom. That the Wayne Foundation could always secure it for whatever night it pleased was a function not only of Bruce Wayne's standing, but of Alfred's expert management of any event Mr. Wayne booked.

The official reason for Alfred's involvement was snobbery: the waitstaff of a commercial hotel were respectful, if not actually intimidated by, their counterparts in private service. And Alfred Pennyworth was everyone's idea of a British butler: authoritative, witty, snobbish, discreet and intelligent, both respected and feared for his masterful knowledge of etiquette, food, drink, sterling silver and glassware.

The unofficial reason for Alfred's presence was insurance, in case Bruce needed to make a Bat-exit. One couldn't always rely on Lucius, after all. In fact, Bruce reflected sourly that night at the gala, one *usually* couldn't rely on Lucius.

Another burst of merry laughter from Table 2 punctuated the thought. Lucius's table was having a wonderful time. His own gathering at Table 1 was far from cheery.

Selina, sitting next to him, was becoming far too interested in the Riddler-Zatanna duel for the Tome. Yes, Eddie was her friend. But it seemed, somehow, Eddie had also become her horse, and Zatanna his, in one of her twisted games with Batman, and just what the rules of this particular game were he was at a loss to say. He wanted Eddie taken down for the attempted robbery at the Civic Center, but beyond that he had no

interest in who wound up buying a book that was, at best, a curious artifact of interest to a few dozen people worldwide.

Next to Selina was Edward Nigma, alternately eying the book and Zatanna seated seven places away. Bruce's own fault: He'd taken pains to put Nigma at his table so he could keep an eye on him, forgetting that, since Zatanna would be performing, she too would be at the head table.

For her part, Zatanna was ignoring Nigma's existence. When she first sat down, she had made a few remarks about all the plainclothes police on hand to protect the auction treasures. If this was meant to rattle Nigma, Bruce could have told her she was wasting her time. Riddler was one of his smartest foes. He wasn't at the gala to commit a crime but to bid legitimately on an item for sale. And he knew he was in no danger after the incident at the Civic Center. It wasn't common knowledge that Edward Nigma was the Riddler, but even among those who knew, the fact that a person wearing a leotard with a question mark was seen near an *alleged* robbery attempt was not conclusive proof that this man sitting at Table 1 had done anything for which he could be arrested.

Next to Nigma sat Barbara and Dick. Barbara looking none too pleased to be seated next to Riddler; Dick looking none too pleased to see Lori Elton three chairs away. Bruce remembered that Dick and Lori had been a couple for a time in college, but as far as he knew, it was an amicable parting. Why there should be any tension he couldn't imagine.

Between Dick and Lori sat Dinah Lance and Martin Stanwick. Martin was the only one to respond to Zatanna about the security. He said he didn't know why the police even bothered with plainclothes officers. They were so painfully obvious. When Barbara bristled at this, Martin proceeded to point out each and every one of the undercover officers. "Cheap shoes," he pronounced, "off the rack tuxes, and polyblend evening frocks. NOKD GCPD."

Finally, between Lori Elton and Zatanna, sat Dr. Leland Bartholomew. Bartholomew seemed more put out than any at this none-too-cheery gathering. At first, Bruce thought it might be Nigma's presence. Bartholomew was, after all, a doctor at Arkham and had the unfortunate duty of treating the incarcerated rogues as patients. But if Nigma was too anxious about the Tome to care about Bartholomew, Bartholomew too seemed preoccupied, too preoccupied with... something?... to worry about Nigma. After a few minutes observing, Bruce deduced the something: Leslie Thompkins. Bartholomew kept glancing to Leslie at Table 2, then to Zatanna sitting next to him.

Leslie was head of the Thomas Wayne Clinic, the institution this event was to benefit. She would, logically, be at the head table. Bruce had only moved her to Table 2 to make room for Eddie. He made a mental note to confirm later with Lucius, but he was certain what he would find: Dr. Bartholomew had made a large donation to the Foundation and pulled strings to secure a place at this table, assuming he'd be seated with Leslie Thompkins.

Well, well. Bruce determined to make amends.

"Dr. Bartholomew," he began with only a touch of the Fop in his voice, "after dinner, you simply *must* let me introduce you to your colleague, Dr. Thompkins, who runs the clinic."

If there was any doubt of Bartholomew's infatuation with Leslie, his reaction to these words dispelled it. He beamed as he informed Bruce that, while he would be *delighted* to talk with Dr. Thompkins again, no introductions were necessary for, indeed, they had been at med school together. He then proceeded to list every class they'd had in common, from gross anatomy to abnormal psychology.

"Oh dear," Lori Elton laughed sweetly, "Abnormal psychology, that's rather a delicate subject with someone at this table, isn't it Grayson."

It seemed like polite smalltalk, just something to keep the conversation going. But Dick's eyes bulged slightly and he bit his lip.

"Tell, tell," Barbara asked eagerly, a fact-finder hot on the scent.

"When we were in college," Lori answered readily, "I remember Dick was flunking abnormal psych—"

"He what?" Bruce interjected, transformed in an instant from fop to father.

"—ology," Lori continued.

"Ix-nay, ix-nay," Dick pleaded too late.

"Failing abnormal psychology?" Bruce asked flatly.

"I can explain," Dick insisted, no longer a grown man but a college freshman with some explaining to do to the man paying his tuition.

"And it was the biggest secret because there were some classes - I remember chemistry was another one - he was simply *NOT ALLOWED* to not ace."

Bruce stood up. As head of the Wayne Foundation, he had a few remarks to formally open the event. As he passed behind Dick's chair on his way to the podium he graveled "We'll talk later," and Dick seemed to slump slightly in his chair.

Eddie turned to Dick with concern, "A big secret, eh. Hey Grayson, you didn't touch that Houdini book up for sale in the auction, did you?"

Dick said nothing. He certainly didn't mind Selina, nor the changes in Bruce since she'd come into his life, but the increased social contact with other rogues that she brought in her wake, that he could most definitely do without.

Meanwhile, Eddie took the brooding silence for confirmation: Grayson had touched the book and Grayson's secret was exposed. Hmm. The curse was very real and it had a pretty strict interpretation of its mandate. That is, an item up for sale at an auction, potential buyers might want to examine it. A broadminded curse would make allowances, a grace period. So Grayson touched it. It could wait a few hours and see if perhaps he wound up buying it, thereby becoming the rightful owner. But no, it acted at once. This was a rigid and brutal curse, the Batman of curses. He would have to be careful.

Up on the podium, Bruce was welcoming everyone, thanking them for showing up to support the Thomas Wayne Clinic, yadda yadda yadda, and finally explaining the rules of the silent auction: The items for sale were situated around the room. Before each item was a clipboard. Anyone wanting to make a bid should sign their name, their table number, and specify the amount of their bid. One could bid on as many items as they wished as often as they wished. At midnight, the auction was closed and the high bidders would all receive their items.

Bruce then went on to name some of the items of particular interest included in the sale: *Houdini's Tome of Secrets...*

Riddler became nervous. The Batman of curses was on his tail, anything could happen.

...a pair of cufflinks that once belonged to Rudolph Valentino...

Cufflinks come in pairs, Eddie thought. Two-Face. What if Two-Face showed up to steal the cufflinks, disrupting the sale and upsetting the curse. The rightful owner, who knew how the Batman of curses would interpret "the rightful owner" of the book if some costumed psycho interrupted the sale!

Eddie shared his concern with Selina.

"Edward," she chided, "Didn't we decide you should stop taking those herbs."

...an Easter egg made for the Grand Duchess Olga by the legendary Carl Fabergé, opened to reveal a miniature sculpture of a carriage in 14-karat gold...

Eddie furrowed his brow. An egg. Penguin loved anything with a bird tie-in. Of course, Oswald claims to be retired from field work, but that egg would be just the kind of thing to draw him back.

Again, he shared his thought with Selina.

"Eddie, you're paranoid."

"Especially with that thing in the center, it looks like an umbrella!"

"It's a carriage."

"It looks like an umbrella if you squint. Turn your head a little, see it now?"

"Eddie, I really don't think you want to be having this conversation within earshot of your psychiatrist."

...and an exquisite etching by the Master of Cologne entitled 'Dreams of Darkness' after his own oil painting by the same name...

"Look at that thing!" Eddie exclaimed, "It's got bats and cats in it!"

Selina ignored the implication and answered with an art expert's pedantry, "It's an allegory. The sleeping figure is having a nightmare in which evil is represented by night creatures: bats, owls, an armadillo, a raccoon, and yes, a cat."

"Screwed," Eddie grimaced, "so screwed."

From his position along the back wall, Alfred gave a signal and teams of waiters entered with great covered platters. As they began serving, Bruce returned to the table. He was pleased to see Edward Nigma looking dejected.

"What'd I miss?" asked the Fop.

"Doomed. We're all doomed," Nigma answered.

"Ah," Bruce looked a question at Selina, then at Barbara, then Dick, then Zatanna. Getting no answers, he decided a little more probing was in order. "Well if we're doomed, we may as well go down happy. More champagne all around, my good man."

"Kroc duol," Zatanna coughed into her napkin, and an exploding POP shot from the waiter uncorking a bottle directly behind Nigma, making him jump.

"Doomed," Eddie began generating anagrams while the waiter poured the bubbly, "Ed Doom... DoDo Me... Odd Moe."

"Why are we doomed anyway?" Bruce asked with far more Fop in his manner than he would normally allow himself at a Foundation event. "Whatever it is, we should drink a toast to it."

Zatanna was pleased to catalog Nigma's fears with a saccharine smile.

"The concern seems to be that every item in the sale *except* the Tome of Secrets will attract the attention of *some costumed criminal*."

Bruce smiled at Dick.

"Sounds like someone's been sharing his theory about a curse."

"Curse, what?" Nigma sputtered. "Hell no, no curses here. Just because you got cufflinks for Two-Face and eggs for Penguin and Catwoman won't be able to keep her claws off that etching."

"Eddie, I'm sitting right here," Selina hissed.

Before he could answer, there was an earsplitting squeal from the sound system and everybody looked to the podium to see Harley Quinn staring into the microphone like a telescope.

"Is this thing on?" she squeaked. And Nigma pounded his head rhythmically into the table.

"Good evening, ladies and germs," Harley continued, "to avoid inadvertently causing one of my colleagues with the gas canisters letting rip with a cloud of SmileX that will lead to a gruesome and horrible death for all concerned, please remain seated and keep your arms and legs inside the ride vehicle at all times. Very good. Now, if the tall gentleman that looks like Gandalf," she pointed to Alfred, "Yes, you, since you're already standing, if you would just pick up the Punch and Judy puppets and hand them over to Ha-Ha-Harry, then we can all be on our way."

Eddie continued smacking his head into the table, now muttering "Punch and Judy, Punch and Judy."

"Eddie, stop that, you're embarrassing me," Selina whispered.

Harley Quinn stood on the stage in the Great Ballroom of the Robinson Plaza Hotel, twirling a microphone by the cord, singing *Love for Sale*. After a few bars, she pulled Randolph Larraby from his place at Table 5 and urged him, at gunpoint, to sing along.

At Table 1, Dr. Bartholomew observed the performance with concern. Harley was his patient whenever she was incarcerated at Arkham. This stunt was likely to get her sent back to the asylum, back to his couch, and that meant he would probably hear this ditty reprised twice a week for the next six months.

♪-Like the poet's type of love in their childish way-♪

♪I- know every kind of love better far than they-♪

♪-If you want the thrill of love-♪

♪-I've been through the mill of love-♪

And all the while, his other patient, Edward Nigma, sat across from him, pounding his head into the table.

Meanwhile, "the guy who looks like Gandalf," Alfred Pennyworth, was doing as instructed, removing the antique Punch and Judy puppets from their place in the display of auction items and preparing to hand them over to Quinn's henchman, Ha-Ha-Harry.

Randolph Larraby pleaded that he didn't know the words to *Love for Sale*, so Harley urged him to at least join in on the refrain.

Zatanna murmured something barely audible and Nigma's head shot up and looked at her: "You cheating wench," he accused. Then all the auction items, including the puppets and the Tome, floated into the air. Ha-Ha-Harry was alarmed and began fidgeting with his gas mask. Fearing he was preparing to unleash the SmileX, Alfred grabbed the nearest object, Houdini's Tome of Secrets hovering a foot overhead, and smashed it into the henchman's skull. The Plaza waiters who had been taking orders from Alfred all evening looked at each other with concern.

On the stage, Harley Quinn continued to coach Larraby on the harmony chorus of *Love for Sale*, but pandemonium erupted throughout the rest of the ballroom.

♪ Love for sale ♪

Zatanna called to Alfred to toss her the book for safekeeping. Bruce slipped silently towards the exit, neatly tripping up a second henchman as he went.

♪ Advertising crazy love for sale ♪

Alfred tossed Zatanna the Tome, and an outraged Edward Nigma tackled her at the waist crying "Loose Book!"

♪ Love that's fresh and still unspoiled ♪

♪ Love that's only slightly soiled ♪

♪ Love for sale ♪

The Tome flew from Zatanna's fingers to land at Dinah's feet. In a hurry to get away from the crowd and change to Black Canary, she picked it up and passed it to Dr. Bartholomew, who set it on the table.

♪ Who would buy? ♪

♪ Who would like to sample my surprise? ♪

♪ LOVE for SAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—

Harley's last note turned into a wail when Batman swung in, kicking the last henchman in the kidney, picking up Quinn and hurling her off the stage into Table 1 with a resounding crash.

"That hurt," she whimpered. Then, as one of the plainclothes policemen in cheap shoes handcuffed her wrist, she added, "My head hit something hard."

"That would have been the table," Barbara observed with wicked sweetness.

"No," Harley argued, "It had a corner. Oh, it must've been this book?"

Edward Nigma did a double take and backed towards the door. He was four paces from the exit when he backed into something large.

"What'd I miss?" asked the Fop.

"BRUCIE!" Harley Quinn squealed, dragging the policeman to whom she was handcuffed with her to speak to Bruce. "Mistah J says you're the only one who really understands him. Oh, hiya Eddie; nice tux. Anyway, Brucie, I'm kinda stuck for ideas for a Christmas present for my Puddin'. This Punch and Judy idea doesn't seem to have worked out too well, heh, heh." She gestured with the handcuffs.

"Harley, my dear," Eddie cut in, putting an arm around her shoulder, "You touched the Tome of Secrets. You're screwed. Your deepest and darkest secret is about to be revealed to the world. I wouldn't sweat the Christmas thing if I were you."

"I don't have any secrets," Harley insisted, "except that I don't think Mistah J's octopus joke is funny. Oops." She brought her hand to her mouth, dragging the policeman's wrist with it and hitting herself in the nose with the cuffs.

"And so it begins," Eddie said stoically.

Bruce started to excuse himself, then called Harley back before the police took her away:

"Um, Miss Quinn," he drawled in his best Fop, "since you don't find this joke funny, and I presume you laugh at it anyway whenever your, what do you call him, Pudding, tells it, then in a sense, you've been 'faking it.' I think you should tell him that just as soon as you see him up at Arkham. It will make his day."

"Do ya really think so?"

"Absolutely," Bruce said in earnest.

Harley skipped off to the paddy wagon, telling the policeman she was reevaluating dear Brucie. Time was she was dead set against him, what with the fuss her Puddin' always made about him, but he really did come through this time. Puddin' was right, nobody understood so well...

Bruce turned with a satisfied smirk into the judgmental stares of Selina, Dick and Barbara. After a beat, it was Dick who spoke.

"So another rogue is about to be hospitalized by the romantic advice of Bruce Wayne, Crimefighter Yenta."

"Let's all just sit down, finish dinner, and let things get back to normal," Bruce suggested.

The trio laughed. "We're all that remains of the table, Darlin'," Selina informed him. "Eddie's left spouting conspiracy theories more deranged than an Oliver Stone pitch meeting."

"Dr. Bartholomew," Barbara added, "also left, having spilt a little secret of his own."

"That he's in love with Leslie Thompkins," Bruce declared in his firmest I-Know-I'm-Batman tones.

"No," Barbara volleyed with a distinct You're-Batman-and-you're-wrong twinkle. "He's in *hate* with *Batman*. Batman keeps sending those nutjobs back to Arkham. Bartholomew left muttering about back to back sessions with Harley and Joker, guzzling Maalox straight from the bottle, double dosing Advils, and hoping you would die."

"Lori's backstage," Dick took up the recitation, "getting the Hudson U choir ready to perform."

"With Zatanna, Dinah and Martin, that still leaves seven. We'll make the best of it," Bruce pronounced, ushering them back to the table. "Let's set an example, before too many people leave."

The waitstaff had just finished righting and resetting the table, under Alfred's direction. As the party seated themselves, a woman seated directly behind turned and complimented him.

"You've done a remarkable job," she said appreciatively, "and that was very brave before, the way you stood up to that lunatic."

"Hey, that's right," Dick elbowed Barbara as realization hit, "Alfred pummeled that henchman with the Tome. He touched the book, and nothing bad happened to him."

"What is your name, my good man?" asked the woman.

"Pennyworth, Madame," Alfred answered. To his surprise, her face lit up with recognition.

"Oh good heavens, Pennyworth—and Wayne Foundation—why Pennyworth and Wayne, Pennyworth at Wayne manor! *You're the man who wrote that play!* Jodie, come here, this is the owner of that manuscript I found. You must meet him. Oh, Mr. Pennyworth, you simply must reconsider getting that play produced. It's so funny."

Alfred could feel the eyes of Table 1 upon his back as the woman continued to gush:

"I simply couldn't resist reading a few pages, and it is so wonderfully funny. Mr. Pennyworth, you must reconsider! That ridiculous playboy having his Man Friday making up all those lies to juggle all his women, the man keeping all the excuses organized, what excuse went with which bimbo, in a palm pilot, then quitting to take a better job in Tierra del Fuego!"

"Okay, now I'm scared," Dick said.

"You?" Dinah cut him off, "I actually touched the thing."

"Zatanna!" the gushing woman interrupted her outing of Alfred Pennyworth—Playwright, when she recognized an old friend, "Zatanna, my dear, it's been ages. We never see you at the Sisters of Sappho luncheons anymore."

Dick and Dinah turned to each other and mouthed in unison: "Sisters of Sappho?"

Then Dick turned to Barbara, "Honey, I'm scared, I want to go home." While Dinah turned to Martin, "We're leaving, go get the car."

Another charlatan exposed, another con man prevented from taking money from grieving mothers and widows. And yet, for every false medium I put out of business, another comes forth to take their place. It's this dreadful war. So many good people have lost someone on the battlefields at Gallipoli, or in Belgium or France. So many will grasp at any hope.

With each new case, I become convinced the charlatan's greatest tool is not any knowledge of the conjurer's art, but the client's own desire to be deceived.

Never underestimate the power of self-fulfilling prophecy, or of self-delusion.

Bruce reread the last sentence as the Schubert Impromptu on the CD transitioned into the second movement.

Self-fulfilling prophecy.

He thought back to the night of the Gala... Had Nigma's obsession with the curse foiled his plans for the Tome exactly the way he feared? Riddler didn't have anything to do with Harley's appearance, that much was certain. But the Harley incident was a minor one compared to most criminal interruptions at Wayne Foundation events: it ended before the salads were served, there were no casualties, no paramedics, and only one table overturned. After Quinn was removed, the evening could have continued if Nigma hadn't planted all those suggestions:

He told Harley her secret would be exposed, and within seconds she opened her mouth and blurted it. Bartholomew too had heard Eddie talking about the curse at dinner. Of course, Alfred and Zatanna had no hand in their secrets being revealed, but so what? If it hadn't been for all of Nigma's curse talk, Dick and Dinah never would have interpreted the revelations the way they did.

Within fifteen minutes of Nigma's departure, so many people were leaving the ballroom, the party broke up. By midnight, when the sale would have formally concluded, only Bruce and Selina were left in the ballroom.

Never underestimate the power of self-fulfilling prophecy...

Indeed. Look at Dinah's behavior, so rattled after the party, she thought the valet who brought Martin's car looked like Oliver Queen. Then they passed a delivery van for *Green's Dry Cleaners*, saw a taxi advertising *Quiver Printing*, and Dinah made Martin turn the car around and take her back to the Plaza. She found Bruce in the empty ballroom and insisted if a secret of hers was to be revealed, she would decide which one and to whom.

"Can I borrow him, Selina?" Dinah had asked, "I'll bring him right back, I promise."

Selina gave an amused shrug and Dinah led Bruce away.

"It's the cave," she whispered when they were alone, "the secondary cave, under the Wayne Building. We've—we, the girls and I, - I mean, Batgirl, Spoiler and I have been using it as a clubhouse since July."

Bruce gave the most piercing Bat-stare he could manage without the cowl. As expected, it brought about a more detailed confession:

"It started when you and Dick were having the big quarrel, and we all sort of wanted a flee square... then after a few weeks... I guess we sort of... got comfortable."

The stare continued, but no new details were forthcoming. Bat-stare gave way to Bruce-smile.

"I know," he said with a surprising lack of 'I'm-Batman' arrogance. "There was a certain amount of cheese doodle residue."

Dinah sighed with relief.

"Thank goodness. Because Ollie and J'onn said if you found out, JLA meetings might become the OK Corral again and—"

“WHAT!?!” Bruce exploded, a much angrier Bat-scowl replacing the smile. “Oliver and J’onn, do you mean there’ve been JLAers involved in this? That there’s been... they’ve been in town, *my town*, using *my cave* as a, a... *clubhouse!*”

“Oops,” Dinah deflated, “didn’t know that part, huh. Well, um, Martin’s waiting in the car, I really have to go. Tell Alfred how much we enjoyed... oh never mind.”

She slunk away defeated, muttering how you can’t outsmart a curse.

I have mastered the arts of escape and deception in order to entertain. But since the death of my beloved mother, I feel I am called to use this secret knowledge for a higher purpose. I will put a stop to these fraudulent spirituals profiteering on the grief of others.

Bruce had returned to this page for the fourth time. At first, he never intended to read the section on mysticism at all. It didn’t interest him. He was curious about the chapters on escape, for obvious reasons. Houdini was the greatest escape artist of his day, and Bruce had made the pilgrimage in his years of travel to Appleton, Wisconsin, to a museum that housed the thousands of locks, shackles and contraptions the famous illusionist defeated. Some were rigged stage effects, but most were genuine. The notes the museum had preserved revealed a little of Houdini’s methods, to those who knew enough to understand, but were not nearly as complete as the Tome.

The notes were circumspect, careful. It was expected they would eventually fall into lay hands, and Houdini was most careful his words would not reveal the secrets of his trade to those not already in the know. In the Tome, he was writing for himself, and he let himself go. The pages revealed not just techniques, but the mind of the man who wrote them. Bruce found that mind intriguing, and interested in knowing it further, he delved into those other chapters he originally thought were irrelevant.

He discovered a man driven by the death of a parent to a mission to stop those preying on innocents.

On the CD, the third movement of the Schubert began...

“Merry Christmas,” Selina had purred with that naughty grin that still stirred him, even as it signaled something he would undoubtedly object to.

“Three days yet,” he frowned.

“And you know what a stickler I am for rules like that.”

He took the gift from her hand, kissed her cheek, and pulled on the ribbon. As the paper fell away, he stared at the object it concealed:

“The Tome? But this is...”

He looked up at a raised eyebrow framing Catwoman’s delighted, taunting gaze daring him to finish the sentence.

“...stolen.”

“Technically,” she chirped, intolerably pleased with herself.

“You stole the... from a Wayne event... you stole the Tome with the... the cursed Tome... with the curse on it... rightful owner... and you... *took it...*” he sputtered on incredulously, voice pingponging between Bruce and Batman, while she laughed.

"Well first," she began, in that tone that always made his neck muscles tense, the voice that said *Buckle up, feline logic ahead*. "It was the Wayne Foundation selling the thing to raise money for the Wayne Clinic, so if you want to be completely anal about this, write yourself a check."

He grunted out of habit. It was the only response he'd ever devised to "feline logic" that didn't lead to claws and blood loss.

"And second?" he asked, bracing for even more felinity.

"And second," to his surprise, it was Selina's voice that answered, gentle, tender, without a trace of Catwoman's amusement, "I don't think 'rightful owner' has anything to do with who paid for the thing."

"An opinion you've made abundantly clear over the years."

"Houdini wanted the thing destroyed," she insisted, "Do you really think he'd care if Eddie or Zatanna or Randolph Larraby pays you \$5000 for the privilege of taking it home? No, if Harry's avenging spirit is watching over that book, he'd want it in the hands of his true heir. And who is the greatest escape artist since Houdini?"

Bruce grunted, and looked down at the book.

"You're welcome," Selina concluded.

The third movement of Schubert's Impromptu #90. This is what he was listening to the night Catwoman broke into the manor... a distant click, a meow, and he found her opening his safe, inviting him to act out his fantasy.

It was dawn. Calculating that was nearly noon in Paris, Bruce picked up the phone and dialed the Paris Ritz. He confirmed that certain arrangements were in place, and then...

::Hello?:: a sleepy voice murmured.

"Good morning, Kitten. Slept off the jet lag?"

::Well I hadn't,:: as she spoke, the voice deepened from sleepy to sultry, ::but the café au lait that just arrived should help. This is your doing, I take it::

"Read the card."

::What card?::

"Between the chocolate croissant and the rose, there's a card."

There was a tap as she sat down the phone, then after a pause:

::Meow::

"I'll let you go now, you're going to view the collection at Dior at two. I just wanted to call and tell you, I stayed up reading last night. I'm enjoying my Christmas present."

::That's nice. Mine sucks::

"Yeah, being flown to Paris, put up at the Ritz and expected to go shopping on a billionaire's tab, that really bites."

::It's the thought that counts, Bruce. And the thought behind this sucks::

"Selina... you know what I'm like this time of year."

::Yes, I do. And I know why. And that's why I should be there. Not sent half a world away::

There was a long pause.

“Dior at two, then Balmain at four, and Chanel tomorrow morning. They’ll keep you busy with fittings after that, and in between, there are the perfumeries and museums.”

::I know where the art is in Paris, Bruce::

“I got you a ticket to the opera for Saturday night.”

::Bruce, this is ridiculous::

“And go to Cartier. Buy yourself something nice, something extravagant. Money’s no object.”

::And now we’ve reached the guilt portion of our phonecall?::

“Anything but pearls.”

There was another long silence, then an audible sigh.

::...You win. I’ll see you in three weeks::

AWKWARD PAUSES

A bright full moon illuminated the rooftops of the L & L Lofts in the heart of the once seedy, now ultra-fashionable Meatpacking District. Batman retrieved his grappling hook and reloaded the ascender, then he removed his gloves and massaged the knuckles.

It wasn't the three hours of Zogger, he told himself, it was the JLA meeting. Sitting there for an hour and a half of interminable nonsense, he'd expressed his disgust the only way possible, by clenching and unclenching his fist.

A burst of hoarse laughter came from below. Batman turned to see a trio of drag queens leaving a nightclub, one pointing in his direction. The moon, he was perfectly silhouetted by the full moon. He muttered an obscenity, firing a line to a more discreet location and swinging out of the moonlight.

The Meatpacking District. In the 60s, it was SoHo; in the 80s, TriBeCa. Struggling artists find a rundown area where rents are cheap. They improvise studios and performances spaces however they can from old warehouses, factories or, in this case, meat lockers. Then someone becomes a success, and the beautiful people find them. Pretty soon, restaurants, boutiques, galleries and super hot nightspots are popping up in the rawest of raw industrial spaces. The Meatpacking District was still in the early stages of transition, but before long, it would be saturated in chic, the remaining spaces would be converted to apartments, the rents would skyrocket, and the artists who started it all would move on.

Batman scowled. It wasn't like him to look on any corner of his city with contempt. Hell Month. It was just Hell Month.

A tone sounded in his utility belt. It was the alarm he'd been waiting for. Six hours ahead in Paris. She'd just be waking up. He muted the OraCom and took out Bruce Wayne's cel phone.

"Good morning, Kitten," he began, with a cheer he didn't feel, "how was the opera?"

::Morning, Handsome. Little known fact: today, it's mostly ballet that's performed at the Paris Opera House.::

"Just a minute."

::Just a minute,:: the deep voice graveled. Then there was a clunk, a swilsh, and silence. In her lush suite at the Ritz, Selina sipped her café. After a few minutes, the voice returned.

::Still there?:: he asked.

"Mugger, dealer, or pimp?"

::Excuse me?::

"You put down the phone, swoosh, and you come back out of breath. You just pummeled somebody." There was a pause, and she bit into her croissant. "Pummel opportunities are few and far between this time of year, *n'est pas?*"

::Pummel opportunities are few and far between this time of year, *n'est pas?*::

Batman's lip twitched. Nobody teased him during Hell Month. Never. Not even Dick the wiseass. Not even Plastic Man. Nobody. Only the Cat would dare.

"If you want to play detective, I do have a puzzle I wanted to ask you about."

::Oh?::

"A package arrived at the manor. Gift basket. Box of cigars, lime scented candles, bodywash and shampoo, big natural sponge, and a card with a cat on one side and a riddle on the back."

He heard a happy laugh on the other end of the receiver. He growled. It was encouragement to continue, but merriment annoyed him during Hell Month. A lighthearted outlook on crime always irked him, but during Hell Month... He glared at the cityscape before him, then sighed, looked back at the phone and read the riddle:

"My first is half that to which a baker adds one,

"My second sounds the fate of a broken down car,

"My third is inspiration to you, dear friend,

"And my whole lived with poets and pirates on an island by the sea.

"I return on the 17th."

::Well?:: Selina prompted.

Batman liked that. She knew he had the answer. She was giving him the opening to show off.

"A baker's dozen is thirteen, or twelve plus one. Half twelve is six. The first syllable is six. A broken down car is towed; the sound alike is -toed. Six-toed something. Third syllable is inspiration to you, his dear friend. Six-toed cats, or polydactyl cats are indigenous to Key West, an island off the coast of Florida where Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and many other writers lived, and was historically a base for numerous pirates and wrecking crews."

::Meow:: was all she said, but he could hear the smile in her voice. He felt a pang. Sending her away seemed the best course at the time—it was for the best—he wasn't about to second-guess his decisions. He did miss her though. He expressed this with an angry snort.

"Meow, nothing," he spat, "it's not an answer. It answers the riddle but not the puzzle of the card and the clues: cigars, candles, soap, sponge - And what's this 'I return on the 17th' bullshit?"

The laughter that had been merry now became downright delighted.

::You're too adorable,:: she gasped at last, ::They're not clues, you obsessed jackass. They're souvenirs. Eddie's gone to Key West, he's coming back on the 17th::

Batman stared into the phone... It was all too familiar. That voice, mocking him. Meow. So light, so carefree, so sexy. Meow. He wanted her back home, wanted her to cut the trip short and come home and be with him, wanted that voice as hot breath in his ear, "Meow," not the cold treble of a telephone. He wanted... just like he used to,

he wanted and he couldn't admit it. She knew too, like she'd always known, and she wouldn't help him. Vicious cat.

Like now. Laughing. He was trying to think over these clues and this riddle in light of new information and all she could do was laugh at him.

::Eddie is always like that,:: she was saying.

"Fine," he snorted, "but if I find out he's been up to something all this time—"

::Yeah, yeah, yeah, you'll take it out of my tail. Whatever. Oh wait, you can't, can you, 'cause you sent my tail 3,000 miles across the Atlantic.::

Turning the screw. Vicious cat. He did it for both their sakes, why couldn't she see that?

"So..." was all he could manage, then after a pause, "...How's Paris?"

::Great....::

It matched his "So..."

Maybe she felt the same way—

::Not at all crowded this time of year.::

"So it's mostly ballet at the Opera House now?" he heard himself ask, while fingering a Batarang absently. Psychobat was starting to stir. *What the hell was he doing talking about the ballet...*

::Yes. Giselle. Quite a production.::

There were crimes being committed *in his city*.

"Sounds wonderful," he grunted.

Why was he standing here talking about the ballet at the Paris Opera House...

"The weather ok?"

The weather! Ultimate sign of a doomed conversation.

::Well, it is winter. And the House of Chanel has never embraced central heating, so the fittings have been an arctic experience. Rather like Kittlemeier's backroom.::

Kittlemeier's. It brought his thoughts back to Gotham. To Selina being back in Gotham. To Selina, scantily clad, in that cold little room... The grumbling that followed concealed a knowing chuckle.

"Yes, it's quite cold here as well..."

What the hell am I talking about?!

::I'm sure it is, being January and all. How many flights up right now?::

"Fifteen."

Odd question.

::Wind is pretty harsh up there.::

"Not too bad. It's when I'm mid-swing that I feel it the most..."
and in bed... It's been so cold without you.

Reflexively, Psychobat clenched, unclenched, and re-clenched his fist. *It was time to check the docks. Then last call at the Iceberg, see who's closing the place and who heads out where. Then a quick pass through the diamond district. Then museum row and the park front condos.*

On the phone, the silence had become conspicuous.

::Well, button up then,:: she said finally.

He nearly remarked that there were no buttons on the Batsuit, but that would only rile the cat. Instead he grunted "I will."

There was another painful pause while Psychobat railed in his brain: *This was all wrong, the conversation was wrong, the words were wrong. Why was he thinking like this? Why was he TALKING like this? He had WORK to do.*

"I should go, I'm on patrol," he said finally, just as she said, ::I should let you go then. You're mid-patrol.::

" ... "

:: ... ::

" ... "

:: ... Well, good night then. ::

"G'night... .. I—"

You what? Psychobat interrupted, You love her? You miss her? You want her here with you?!? We've got to get to work!

"—I'll talk to you tomorrow."

::Yeah... Tomorrow... *Bonsoir*::

There was a click. Batman stared into the phone, the instinctive *What the hell was that?* response cut off by a commotion below. At last, Psychobat had the action he craved, but the wind cut a little colder than it had before.

Selina sat on the roof of 13 Rue de la Paix, otherwise known as Cartier Paris. She'd forgotten what it was like, the awkwardness, the unspoken questions, the unspeakable wanting, and then, the curt slap of the bat-rejection.

Was this all it took to set them back? A few days apart and they were back to square one. Worse. Worse than square one.

"Button up," she had said. Catwoman, mistress of innuendo. *Button up now, sweetie, it's cold out there. Drink plenty of liquids, have some chicken soup...*

"...Well, good night then." How suburban. Mary Lou Lipschitz leaning in after the movie. *Well g'night, Bobby, I had a wonderful time...*

::I'll talk to you tomorrow,:: he had said. That's the one that hurt. Why? Why did it feel so much like—like the Watchtower. She'd saved them, the whole goddamn JLA was taken out by that blowhard Prometheus with his gadget and his tinpot Renfaire-reject armor. Superman thanked her. Steel thanked her. Flash said "not a moment too soon." Green Lantern, in no shape to talk, nodded. Huntress admired her whip. Aquaman held her chair. And Batman? Batman said "Put the storm opals from Rann back on your way out."

::I'll talk to you tomorrow::

100 journalists were at the Watchtower that day. It was how Selina had snuck onboard, disguised as one of them. When the crisis was passed, they all had to be shuttled home. No one thought Catwoman, Catwoman who had saved their sorry hero asses, should have to suffer a ride back with Katie Couric, Mary Hart, Matt Lauer and Barbara Walters. So she waited in their conference room. And waited. And waited. Plastic Man brought her coffee, and then she waited some more. Finally Martian Manhunter came in; the coast was clear. She came out to find only a few heroes remained. Batman was one of them. Batman who was, presumably, going back to Gotham just as she was.

Thanks again, from Flash. A smile from Green Lantern who still hadn't entirely recovered from the neural chaff and gunshot wound. ...PAUSE... .. And finally... a grunt. Then Martian Manhunter looked at Batman, Batman looked at Manhunter, more pausing... She could just tell they were talking mentally to one another, having an argument from the looks of it. And then Batman walked off without a word. "Well," Martian Manhunter said with an air of covering for a missed cue, "I guess I'll shuttle you back."

::I'll talk to you tomorrow::

Jackass.

Bruce knelt beneath the stalactite where he always meditated after a workout. He sat up straight, but found it difficult to relax his shoulders for the breathing exercises. They were stiff. They ached. He inhaled through his nose, slowly, steadily, feeling the air fill his lungs, taking care not to lean forward, expanding his stomach area as he inhaled...

What did he expect? No sleep, so his shoulders ached.

He felt the air moving into the top of his lungs—maximum capacity. He held the breath for a second, then exhaled slowly through his mouth.

The tension twisted down his back.

::Yeah... Tomorrow... *Bonsoir*::

She sounded so—off.

Four regular breaths, then inhale again.

What the hell did she want from him? He was on patrol. What did she expect, a sonnet?

Inhale—deep—don't lean—DAMNIT! WHAT THE FUCK DID SHE WANT FROM HIM??? He sent her to Paris! Wouldn't any woman—wouldn't Catwoman especially—He FLEW HER to PARIS in his PRIVATE PLANE—he said GO TO CARTIER, BUY YOURSELF SOMETHING NICE! Wouldn't any woman flip? Wouldn't Catwoman of all women wrap her arms around him and kiss him? What the hell did she expect, he was on patrol!

::Yeah... Tomorrow... *Bonsoir*::

There were criminals loose in his city. Dick once said a crime was committed every eighteen minutes in Gotham. He was wrong. It's every sixteen minutes. What the hell did she... -the aching shoulders crumpled- ...want?

He wanted her home. If she was here, she would have soothed him and he would have slept. She would have massaged his aching muscles. She would have noticed him clenching his fist and taken his hand, opened the fingers, kissed the tender flesh inside the palm...

Zogger. He'd been meaning to make some modifications, version five was past due. He could insert heat coils into the steel arm to prevent the user from grabbing onto it, that would also open up the possibility of steam. Intense shots of heat, highly pressurized...

Heat. Pressure. Intense. Who the hell was he kidding...

“Selina?”

:: Yes? ::

“I know it’s late there—”

:: S’okay, I wasn’t sleeping. ::

“ ... ”

:: ... ::

“ ... ”

:: ... ::

“So, I’ll send the plane to pick you up in the morning?”

:: No, I’ll get the concierge to get me on the next Concorde out. Be home by lunchtime. ::

Oswald Cobblepot reread the offending document in disbelief. He flipped it over and checked the postmark: Key West, Florida. With a hostile agility not seen he’d retired from fieldwork, he grabbed the nearest umbrella, charged from his office, and angrily rang the brass bell over the bar.

“Your attention please, Iceberg patrons!” he began with an icy hauteur, “Be it known that from this day forth, the person of Edward Nigma is *persona non grata* in this establishment. The Riddler is BANNED from the Iceberg Lounge!”

Tim Drake and Cecily Grenville sat in Gino's Pizzeria, across the table from Cassie and Randy-quad, all discussing the second installment of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Tim made an effort, but the truth was, he hadn't enjoyed the movie at all. Not having read the book, he didn't know there would be treeherds avenging the destruction of an ancient forest. The sight of giant, sentient trees running around wreaking havoc, so thrilling to the rest of the audience, left Tim wrestling with unwelcome memories of Poison Ivy and her warrior plantlife.

"And when that one big treeguy caught fire and ran to the burst dam to douse the flames!" Randy enthused.

Cassie smiled.

Cecily laughed.

"...Yeah," Tim said finally. "That was... funny." Though in his heart, he had been disappointed not to see the psychotree burn.

The petite, dark-haired hostess called Raven ushered the ninth job applicant through the Iceberg's main dining room. She gave him a judgmental look up and down, then pointed to the office door.

"Mr. Cobblepot will see you now," she pronounced, her dour monotone reminiscent of the sinister housekeeper in a Gothic novel. The applicants were not to blame, but she blamed them anyway. She was a hostess, not a secretary. When Mr. Cobblepot asked her to come in to work in the middle of the day, that was one thing. The club was closed and no patrons meant no tips. But a job was a job and he was the boss. So she came in, as requested. Still, if the slimy birdman made one false move, said one word that could be construed as a proposition, she was ready with the pepper spray.

Turned out she didn't need it. He wasn't hitting on her; he had scheduled interviews all afternoon and wanted her ushering the losers back to his office like he was some kind of big shot.

Nurse Chin waited until her colleagues left for lunch, then let Pamela Isley into the infirmary. It was strictly against policy to let one Arkham inmate visit another this way, but poor Harley Quinn was having such a rough time of it. Why it took them twenty minutes arranging her pillows in the morning, getting her into a position where she could lie comfortably. All those bruises. Dear girl. If a visit from her friend would cheer her up, Chin could see no reason to deny them.

And besides, an underpaid junior staffer at Arkham Asylum never knew when she might overhear something... profitable.

"Harley, my dear, this time you've really gone and done it," Pam chided, "Giving Joker Punch and Judy dolls, it was bound to give him ideas. What were you thinking?"

"Wasn't that, Red," Harley moped, "my Puddin' is excitable, that's all."

Pam swore under her breath, then changed the subject. She was here to cheer Harley up, not chew her out. There would be plenty of time to make her see reason about Joker—later. For now...

"Here, I thought you'd find these amusing. Clippings from that website, hotwing.com."

Harley clapped her hands, anticipating a treat. When Oswald, the party poop, whitewashed the women's washroom at the Iceberg, the graffiti went online. The best of it, dedicated to the oh-so-delectable Nightwing, was housed at hotwing.com—and it only got better over time. Pam had spent the morning surfing, and began reading the most entertaining clippings:

"Sculpted. The man is positively sculpted. Buns of steel, arms like those thick braided loaves of bread, thighs of a Clydesdale..."

Nurse Chin, hearing this, raised an eyebrow, but kept her eyes on the file she was pretending to read. Pamela continued to read, unaware of her audience:

"...just the right amount of chest hair..."

Poison Ivy speaking that way about Nightwing? Nurse Chin smiled. Her generosity in letting Isley visit her friend had been well rewarded. Indeed, one never knew an underpaid Arkham staffer might hear something profitable. She closed the file on her desk and consulted a small card in her wallet: **Gotham Tattler** 212-555-6719 ext. 12.

"Mr. Fox?" Moira knocked timidly on the Chief Operating Officer's door.

Lucius gestured for her to come in as he made a final note and hung up the phone.

"I'm not sure if you're aware," Moira informed him as she sat, "that Mr. Wayne was in the office this morning."

Lucius nodded. He was aware; he simply avoided Bruce as much as possible in the month of January.

"He dictated a letter and a memo. As you requested, I'm showing it to you before sending the letter out."

Lucius removed his glasses and massaged his eyes. Every year it happened: Bruce in January. On one of his temperamental rampages, no doubt. At least this year, Lucius had the foresight to pull Moira from her regular duties and have her act as his secretary. She was certainly qualified, having served the LexCorp CEO before Wayne Enterprises stole her away, but what made her particularly well-suited to Bruce in January was not her stint at LexCorp, but her pilot program training assistants to deal with difficult people.

In the past year, Bruce was doing better, all things considered: more focused, less of a flake. And the support staff at the upper echelons of Wayne Enterprises had responded favorably. They had a far better caliber of employees assisting them at this level than ever before. And all it would take was one of Bruce's typical January episodes and it would all be shot to hell. That was *not* going to happen again.

Lucius replaced the glasses on the bridge of his nose and read:

F.B. Publicists, Suite C, Robinson Building

Dear Sirs:

In reference to your letter of January 3rd regarding alleged misspelling of Zatanna's name in promotional material for the Wayne Foundation Gala, December last. We beg to inform you that no literate person regards the use or not of capital letters throughout a word as misspelling. Furthermore, if your goal is to see your client's name in print more often rather

than less, you would do well not to antagonize her presenters in this fashion, to say nothing of the press, by insisting on these ludicrous marketing gimmicks.

If, on the other hand, your goal is to gain attention by being as obnoxious as possible, and assuming you don't feel it's pretentious enough that Zatanna has no surname, why not try changing her handle to some unpronounceable glyph.

Yours truly,

Lucius winced. Typical Bruce.

"And the memo?" Lucius asked wearily. Moira handed it over.

To: Lucius Fox

From: Bruce Wayne

RE: Moira Selmon

Lucius,

Moira is an exceptional employee in every respect, and I certainly must admire her poise in this absurd position she's been placed in. She is, as you know, fully occupied with her duties implementing the assistants' training program and DDP (Dealing with Difficult People) Seminars. A program for which she has particular insight because of her stint assisting Talia twitterHead at LexCorp.

"Talia twitterHead?" Lucius looked up.

Moira said nothing. After a pause, she nodded. After four drafts, that was the politest term Mr. Wayne had come up with. Lucius continued to read.

... assisting Talia twitterHead at LexCorp.

Anyway Lucius, it seems some damn fool has taken her off this worthy assignment, the job for which I hired her in the first place, and has her assisting me. Of course I have no complaint with her, but this is an egregious waste of her many rare talents.

Do see that she is reassigned A.S.A.P.

Picking up Selina at the airport this afternoon, so I shan't see you until tomorrow. Let's schedule a LONG lunch and you can bring me up to date on things.

Lucius looked up again. Moira had stood and was smiling down on him.

"As my final act as Bruce's secretary, he had me put that lunch on his schedule for tomorrow and make sure Gale did the same for yours. D'Annunzio's. Try the shrimp, it's to die for."

"..." was all Lucius could reply.

"I like your friend," Randy confided when Cecily and Cassie went to the powder room. "She listens. Not like those debs."

Tim said nothing. He could tell Randy was quite taken with Cassie, but Tim had more experience with Cassie and her silences. He could tell she was not having a good time. Though she talked more than she used to, each day acquiring more of a vocabulary and a sense for how and when to use it, she still expressed more in her looks and shrugs than in words. And her manner suggested to Tim that she was bored to tears, both with Randy-quad and the dating experience.

Assuming she even realized she was on a date. When she'd shown up for this, her first date as far anyone knew, in jeans and a Buffy the Vampire Slayer t-shirt, Tim realized his oversight. He had invited her casually, "Come to the movies with me and

Cecily and a friend from school." Any girl their age would have known what it meant. Any girl not saddled with a David Cain upbringing. But Cassie, who knew what she understood? Nuance, particularly social nuance, was still beyond her.

"So," Randy asked hopefully, "think she likes me?"

"...Eh..." Tim sputtered between pauses, "Shh, later, they're coming back."

"Your name?" Oswald asked the latest applicant, without looking up from his desk.

"Giggles, sir," the young man replied.

Oswald looked up.

"Surely not."

"Excuse me, for the last year, sir, it's just been Giggles."

"Ah, you're the chap that's been working for Joker then. I told you on the phone I don't need a henchman, I need a bartender."

"Begging your pardon, sir, you need me. Anyone can pull a tap or pour from a bottle. Not everyone can handle your clientele, Mr. Cobblepot. I can. Mr. Joker's henchman for a year, and here I stand, breathing, sane, and only smile on my face is what God put there."

Oswald's eyes narrowed. He said nothing for a long moment. Then put the pen into his mouth like a cigarette holder. "Giggles" took this as encouragement and continued.

"Well, maybe not God," he said with a between-men smirk. "Truth is, was that little Raven that showed me in here. She's a cute little bird."

Oswald's mouth dropped open and the pen fell to his lap.

"Particularly when walking away," Giggles concluded.

"If you made such observations about Ms. Quinn when working for Joker you would not be standing here now," Oswald observed coldly.

"Actually, Mr. Joker specifically instructed me to learn as many blonde jokes as I could find and accompany him—"

"Oh, kwak-kwak, that was you, eh? Well that's a little different. Giggles, hm. What was it before?"

"Sir?"

"Your name, my good man. You weren't born 'Giggles,' were you?"

"..."

"Come, come, out with it. What's your name, Boy?"

"I will be happy to accept any designation you wish, Mr. Cobblepot."

"Your NAME? Kwak-kwak."

"Brady, sir. Greg Brady."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"That sounds familiar," Penguin said finally.

"I've heard all the jokes, sir."

"Yes, I'd imagine so."

Nightwing crept into the dark, still bedroom with as much stealth and caution as he would entering a criminal lair. The fact that it was his own bedroom—and the room's

sole occupant his own wife—made no difference. It was Barbara's attention he so desperately wanted to avoid attracting just now.

He couldn't hope for much of a reprieve. Barbara was Oracle; Oracle found out everything. She probably knew already.

But at least if he didn't wake her, the fireworks could wait 'til morning.

He tiptoed into the closet, stowed away his costume behind the false door, returned to the bedroom, and slipped silently between the sheets. He stared at the ceiling. Maybe he was overreacting. It wasn't a story any woman would be *happy* hearing about her husband, but Barbara wasn't stupid. She'd know to take that kind of thing with a grain of salt.

The rumor mill was what it was. Every few weeks, it linked some male and female—the more improbable the better—just to see what would stick: Hawkwoman and Mad Hatter, Lady Vic and Catman, Batman and Wonder Woman. It was only the galactically clueless, the emotional twelve-year-olds, or the clinically insane that latched on to any of that nonsense. It took a special kind of stupid to believe such garbage. Barbara was none of those things. She wasn't insane, depraved or emotionally stunted, and she certainly wasn't clueless. She would laugh at it. Any sane woman would laugh at it. What was he worried about? So the tabloids picked up some story about Nightwing and Poison Ivy. That didn't mean he was neck deep in fertilizer. Dick smiled at the ceiling, gathered the blanket to his throat, and turned over. Then the light clicked on.

"Dicky, my sweet," his wife addressed him, "it's one thing to be the subject of idle gossip, happens to the best of us, and with a luscious bod like yours, speculation is inevitable. But you really don't help the situation skipping your shower after patrol, sneaking into bed this way, and laying there brooding for half an hour."

"..."

Oswald sipped the concoction Greg "Giggles" Brady set before him.

"An adequate igloo," he proclaimed, setting down the signature drink and regarding the prospective bartender shrewdly. He was, at least, one of them. A patron could sit and tell his troubles to a former Joker henchman as he could not to Joey, the applicant from the Waldorf, or Susannah from TGI Friday's.

"It was Nigma who brought on this crisis," Oswald said, cupping his drink and sitting at the bar like a customer. "Edward Nigma, the riddling excrescence. It's not like he's the first criminal to take a vacation in January, mind you, it's always a bad month for business. Bats goes batty and everyone lies low. Nigma, being a genial sort, sends a gift basket: oranges, marmalade, some key lime wine that was quite palatable. It was good of him. We received no such gesture from Ms. Quinn when she went to France last year."

"She's cheap," Raven pronounced from the doorway, "just like Joker."

"Now, now, my dear," Oswald waved her in, "Don't be bitter just because they tip you in monopoly money. Come meet our new bartender, Greg Brady."

"Groovy," was Raven's only response.

"Anyway, to resume the narrative," Oswald continued, feeling his new bartender was indeed very easy to talk to, "the trouble with Nigma is that he thinks he's so terribly clever. And he always has to be proving it. So with the basket of this and that—that key lime wine was surprisingly good—there was a letter. A long, detailed letter which I suppose he intended to be entertaining, effervescing about the many pleasures of this lush tropical paradise: Sunset Celebration in Mallory Square, colorful characters, live and let live attitude, taverns everywhere, a party town, warm tropic climate, and so on."

Oswald paused, reflecting that perhaps he shouldn't go into such detail with the new bartender. Seeing where this was going, Greg covered the awkward hiatus by refilling Oswald's glass.

"Yes, that very excellent key lime wine, I must remember that," he said quietly.

Finally Raven continued the story, picking up where Oswald had left off.

"Whenever someone that knew Eddie came into the bar, the letter was read again. And I guess after the sixth or seventh repetition..."

"Sly quit," Oswald said flatly.

"At first, we thought something happened to him," Raven moaned, "he just didn't show up for work one night."

"Like when Kittlemeier disappeared," Oswald said confidentially, remembering Greg was a Joker henchman and would know about Kittlemeier and the mugging incident. "Then the letter arrived. His resignation. Postmarked Key West. He's opened his own bar."

Not knowing what consolation to offer in the face of such dire news, Greg Brady remained silent.

At four o'clock in the morning, an awkward "... " was the best comeback Dick could devise for his wife's comments. At nine o'clock, having made the pilgrimage to that fountain of inspiration, the Mr. Coffee, he felt he could do better.

As expected, Barbara did not rant like a jealous harpy because of the deluded fantasies of *The Gotham Tattler*. These things happened, she said. Her objection was that he'd tried to hide from it, which he certainly wouldn't have done unless the story struck a nerve. Last night, he didn't have an answer. Now, revived by Mr. Coffee's elixir of reason for beleaguered husbands—with milk and two sugars—he knew what to say:

"Babs, I didn't want to get into it in the middle of the night, that's all. I'm cool with it; I really am. It's no different than that ludicrous Nightwing-Catwoman story a few years ago."

"Except you laughed that off," Barbara objected, sipping her own elixir, splash of milk, no sugar, "Cucucachoo, Mrs. Robinson, and all that. Whereas with this, you brooded like a bat."

"It's easier to laugh when you've got Selina standing on a stage, mocking the idea in front of a cheering audience," Dick insisted. "Somehow, I don't think Ivy is so accommodating. If she has a sense of humor at all, I don't know anybody who's seen any indication of it."

"Fair enough," Barbara conceded. She'd reached the same conclusion in the time she'd spent eavesdropping on the rogue's IM network.

"I swear, I don't know where they get these stories," Dick sighed, relieved that the storm had passed.

Barbara laughed.

"You DON'T? You obviously haven't seen the cover of the Gotham Post this week, have you?"

Dick stared, not understanding.

"They've got their highest circulation in *YEARS*, my dear," Barbara crowed. "This bit about you and Ivy in The Tattler is obviously a ploy by their chief competitor to get a piece of the action."

"I don't get it, what kind of picture could the Post be running that could possibly lead to a Nightwing and Ivy pairing—"

Barbara pointed to her monitor where she had pulled up the picture from the Gotham Post website.

"...Oh... ..my..." Dick gulped after a strained pause.

"*Bonjour, mon plus cher chevalier noir,*" Selina gushed stepping past the customs gate and throwing her arms around Bruce, "*Je t'ai tellement désiré, tu n'as aucune idée.*"

"Watch your language," Bruce chided lightly. He meant her addressing him in public as *chevalier noir*, 'Dark Knight,' and realized too late, only when she laughed musically, that his words seemed like a joke about her speaking French.

"I missed you too," he whispered, kissing her cheek, "I missed your laugh."

In the time it took to walk past the Duty Free, the ATMs, the tourist information booth and the food court, they caught up on those aspects of their lives it was safe to discuss in public. They turned the corner, heading for the elevators to the parking garage. Bruce explained that he didn't have Alfred or the limo with him.

"I came straight from the office. I just hope there's room for your bags in the Jag, otherwise we'll have to get a taxi to follow—"

He stopped speaking and turned slowly to the left. From long habit, Bruce constantly scanned his surroundings, unconsciously processing whatever his peripheral vision detected. In this case, it was a newsstand, a common enough sight in a busy airport, but something...

Gotham Times. Herald Tribune. Daily Planet. London Observer and then... There they were... in living color on the front page of the Gotham Post... Batman and Catwoman... in one of the most spectacularly passionate clinches ever portrayed on newsprint... Her arm wrapped around his neck, she was pressed tight against his body from chest to knee... his left hand cupping the back of her head, while the right grasped her waist... the cape whipping around their legs... a glorious full moon above, golden cityscape behind... It was... *Wow*.

He felt warm breath on the back of his neck and turned to see Selina behind him, looking where he had looked.

"...Well..." she said finally after a lengthy pause, "There's something you don't see everyday."

"Two sevens! Go fish!" Joker said, cackling inanely.

"Jack, we're playing poker," we said, through gritted teeth.

"Oh," he said, his grin fading slightly. "Sorry, Tutu!" he said brightly, an innocent smile on his features. Eddie smacked our hand away as we reached over to strangle the clown. Since Oswald was busy interviewing for a new bartender, Eddie was feeling daring enough to return to the Iceberg, despite Oswald barring him a mere day before.

"Question. Should we put up a sign or something advertising our little sojourn or did you already have a small group in mind?"

We regarded Eddie evenly, pondering his question before answering. We had always liked Sly. He was a well-needed breath of normality in an otherwise completely abnormal bar. His departure had hurt us, and we were not going to let him swan off to the Florida Keys without a fight. We had resolved to go to the Keys ASAP and 'bring our boy home.'

Our resolve had been strengthened by the stand-in bartender: Hugo Strange. Admittedly, he would only be bartender until Oswald appointed a replacement, but we had already run through mental scenarios where he became permanent. The thought was too horrible to entertain. We needed Sly.

We answered Eddie's question after some thought.

"We think it's probably for the best if we limit it to as few as possible. We're less likely to get into trouble that way." Despite trouble being inevitable, we thought ruefully.

"Well, that's settled then," piped up Jack with a characteristic grin. "Harv, you're Murdock. Eddie, you're Hannibal. I'm Mr. T, cos I'm a bad Mammajamma..."

"Shut up, Jack," we spat irritably. "As we've already discussed, Eddie's going because he knows the Keys. We're going because, other than Selina, we probably have the best chance of successfully persuading Sly to come home—" Joker motioned to say something. "—Without resorting to bloodshed," we said firmly. Joker sat back down. "And you're going for two reasons. One: when the chips are down, we're going to need someone to punch to relieve our frustration. And Two: well, frankly, we can't figure out how to get rid of you," we said, grinning wickedly.

Jack swallowed hard, laughing nervously. Suddenly, his grin broadened. He was looking over our shoulder.

"I think we may have ourselves a new candidate for punch bag of the trip," he said, giggling slightly. "And so I said 'you *must* get out of that wet magic cloak and into a dry martini!' HAHHAHAHAHA! Oh sorry, Catman, old chum, didn't see you there..."

We turned, a sinking feeling in the pit of our stomach. Sure enough, Tom Blake was swaggering towards us. We groaned. This wouldn't end well.

He and we haven't seen eye to eye since that incident that resulted in him being blackballed from rogue socials. We regarded each other with barely disguised contempt.

"Mister Blake," we managed to snarl, with a conciliatory nod.

"Messrs. Dent," he said, with a nod. We snarled in anger. He ignored us and bowed low.

"Gentlemen. One could not help but overhear your animated conversation."

"And we're sure you tried so hard not to," we snarled, bitterly. He continued, ignoring us.

"I understand you good fellows are on something of a hunt. Well, what better man for the task than I? In words men of your obvious intellect might understand, I wish to join you in your attempt to return Sly to the bar he managed so magnificently. What say you?"

"I dunno, Tommy. The Keys are a pretty wild place. You don't wanna risk spilling anything on that magic cape of yours. It must cost a fortune to dry clean, what with trying to not wash off all the magic and all..."

A collective snigger. Eddie and we exchanged a quick high five. We should explain: Tom Blake is what the ladies, in their gentile manner, call a 'witless dickhead.' Our favorite example of this involves his Catman costume. It is made, so he claims, from some mystic fabric taken from a hidden temple in the jungles of wherever he used to shoot things. He says it gives its wearer the nine lives of a cat. We say it makes its wearer look like a witless dickhead. Jack is particularly spirited on the subject, and we shall never forget the time he introduced Blake to Harley. Predictably, he told her the old nine-lives bit within the first minute (witless dickhead that he is), and Joker, who'd been waiting for it, hopped onto a table and sang *Coat of Many Colors* from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

Blake regarded Joker coldly, fiddling with his handlebar moustache irritably.

"Joker, you, sir, are lucky that the incident of which you speak ended as it did. If the salsa dip you attempted to ply my cape with had indeed made contact, it could have had grievous consequences for the world as we know it. Such is the mystery of the magic of the ancients. Power that should not be mocked by the likes of you."

We stifled a guffaw. He fixed us with a glare. We batted our eye-lid at him. He shrank backwards in distaste.

"There's only one way to settle this," Eddie said, diplomatic to the end. "I propose a vote. If you think Catman should accompany us on our quest, then raise your hand now."

Catman raised a hand. Eddie looked around, deliberately ignoring him.

"No-one? No takers?"

Catman jumped up and down on the spot, arm waving.

"Damn you, Edward, you damnable deuce! Catman wishes to accompany you!"

"Catman do, huh?" we said, thoughtfully.

"Isn't that a dance of some kind?" Joker asked, looking up from attempting to tie Eddie's shoelaces together.

"It's actually a place in Nepal," Eddie said, kicking him away.

We laughed. Suddenly, however, the laughter died on our lips as we spied Hugo Strange behind the bar, attempting to pour a Guinness.

Hugo was not concentrating on his task. Magpie was sitting at her customary stool, studying with intent the jeweler catalogue that lay open in front of her on the bar. Always in search of a new look, and most often turning to MTV to find it, she had recently hit upon Britney Spears as the style that would boost her to notoriety. Sadly, she had chosen to wear a particularly low cut top, one that revealed just about all there was to reveal to the bartender as she leant forward. Hugo, for his part, was staring

intently at her cleavage, a line of spittle snaking downwards from the corner of his mouth, through the filthy jungle of beard, culminating in one growing blob near the bottom of his chin.

We watched, the whole group mesmerized, feeling time slowing to a crawl, watching the fetid lump of phlegm dangle agonizingly from the dirty beard that may once have been white, but was now a particularly revolting shade of grey. Not yet willing to relinquish its grasp on the matted hair, the saliva hung desperately to one strand.

All eyes were on that one strand, hoping against hope that it would assist its load in defying gravity just long enough. Hugo reached with a grubby hand for the glass, ready to slide it down the bar to KGBeast. We gasped.

The phlegm had begun its fall. The hand inched closer to the glass. The spittle seemed to be gaining in velocity, speeding towards KGBeast's Guinness with unerring accuracy, the inevitability of it all making our heart ache.

At the same second as Hugo's fingers gripped the glass, his spittle dropped. It landed with a delicate splash in the frothy head of the pint. We looked from it to KGBeast in perfect horror. The poor sap was pounding away in frustration at a Gotham-themed slot machine. Hugo slid the drink down the polished bar surface with a practiced wrist action. Looking for some kind of liquid consolation for his woes, KGBeast grabbed the pint glass in one huge hand and took a long swig.

We looked away, unable to bear it.

He turned to look at our small group, feeling our incredulous collective gaze, a look of puzzlement on his face. Even Jack had been stunned into silence. We looked from KGBeast's confused eyes to his drink and back again. His brow furrowed further.

Jack, ever the diplomat, wandered over to him, looking for all the world like a condemned man might on his way to the gallows. He motioned for the beast to come closer. KGBeast lowered his massive head. Conspiratorially, Jack whispered into his ear. KGBeast's jaw dropped. To conclude, Jack patted him sympathetically on the shoulder. KGBeast didn't appear to notice. He had not moved since his jaw fell, a look of pure horror on his face.

Jack moved away, not wanting to face the inevitable painful wrath. But it never came.

The same expression of horror on his face, KGBeast walked over to us. The sweat was pouring from our brow. KGBeast's temper was infamous in these parts.

He clapped a monstrous hand on either of our shoulders. It is for just this situation that we always carry our will on our person. If you are reading this, and we have expired—hopefully heroically—then check our breast pocket.

He looked at us with eyes that spoke of untold sadness, and said in a shaking voice, "Find Sly. Quickly. Death imminent."

There was an awkward pause. Unsure of whether he meant his death, Hugo's or ours (and not willing to find out), we nodded and shoed our motley crew (Tom Blake included) out of the door.

Key West, here we come.

The Batmobile was the most advanced driving instrument ever conceived: a 1200 hp jet turbine engine with a carbon-fiber body that took aerodynamics to the molecular level, it delivered a maximum speed of 265 mph without strain, 0 to 60 in 3.1 seconds. It was, in every sense, *THE BATMAN'S CAR*. Hydraulic steering, titanium-reinforced grapnel launchers for cornering, speed and external radar-control sensors. *HIS!* Afterburner, drag chutes for emergency stopping, ceramic fractal armor panels over the whole thing. It was, quite simply, the ultimate driving machine. And controlling such an awesome vehicle was no small feat. It took concentration, split-second reflexes... Compared to the Batmobile, the exquisite Jaguar Bruce drove now was child's play.

And yet, he was having difficulty. There was... a distraction.

"It's purple, look at that. Their knockoff Catwoman, she's in purple. Not *MY* purple, but there's a tint."

Selina had, understandably, latched onto the Gotham Post cover with a ferocity that was positively feline. It was still a tabloid, she maintained, and they were still lying bastards. But this was the first story to spotlight Catwoman since her one-woman show denounced their degrading slander campaign for what it was. She scoured the picture and accompanying article for any hints that her public image was on the mend.

"I mean, there's still no tits to speak of, and I still don't know what the deal is with those goggles, but this looks better than that Jane Doe disaster, don't you think?"

Bruce said nothing, but allowed his eyes to glance at the image again before changing lanes. To his mind, the most startling aspect of the picture had nothing to do with Catwoman's appearance but the fact that she was wrapped around Batman, and he around her, locked in a passionate embrace. He nearly said as much, but waited. When they stopped at a red light, Bruce looked at the picture more carefully.

"Looks better," Batman's voice graveled finally.

She purred. And for a while they drove in silence.

He knows what that voice does to me. Deep, intense, just a touch of danger. Meow.

He had a point; the purple was secondary to... *Meow...* The Bat and Cat, in the dark, making sparks. Still. I miss my hair. In the picture, I mean, on the copycat. It's not something a guy in a cubicle at the Post would think of while he sat there playing with Photoshop, but when Bruce and I finally started—for real—getting past the teasing, it turns out he really likes my hair. In costume and out, he'll run his fingers through it, or pull it to draw my head back, stretching the neck under his mouth...

"You're purring louder than the car," Bruce observed dryly.

I said nothing for a while. Finally, to fill the pause, I mentioned the purple tint again. It's a victory, and I relished it.

"That's a reflection," he said, "Trick of the moonlight." It was exactly the same killjoy tone he'd use in a museum, like he has to ruin my fun. Jackass.

"It's *PHOTOSHOP*," I rebutted. "There is no moon; there is no reflection. If it's purple, that's 'cause *somebody made it purple*."

He said nothing, but there was a low satisfied grunt before he admitted, "Maybe... a hint... lavender... very pale."

From her position in the ventilation duct of the Grenlore Suites, Batgirl was certain her surveillance target couldn't see her. But she couldn't keep the target in her line of sight either.

Despite being inexperienced with many aspects of daily life, Cassie Cain was far from naïve. What she didn't know, what David Cain neglected to teach her, was omitted in order to intensify her focus on what mattered. And what mattered to David Cain was the kind of knowledge that would make her the perfect assassin.

And so it was that, although she didn't know what kind of ice cream she liked, she knew this was the set of a pornographic movie, rife with cocaine, ecstasy and methamphetamine. And she knew the meth source Black Canary was tracking from raves clubs could be traced through one of the film crew below: the porn star called NeferTitties. NeferTitties not only kept this set and others supplied with illicit substances, she made the round of the underground raves clubs. Her outrageous costume, a Bat cowl and cape over Wonder Woman's bustier and shorts, was meant to be noticed and remembered. For "Batwonderlove" was known on the rave scene as THE source for pot, speed, K, E, GHB, poppers, coke, 2C-B, even magic mushrooms and whippets of nitrous oxide. If it shut down brain cells, you could get it from Batwonderlove.

Batgirl silently opened the vent grate. This crew, she realized, were filming after hours because they had no legitimate access to the building. They were keeping a low profile and had far less lighting than she'd seen legitimate movie companies use when filming on Gotham streets. With the low lighting, Batgirl knew she could risk leaving the vent for the dark shadows of the catwalk. From there, she could keep her target in a direct line of sight.

She preferred to think of the woman she watched merely as "the target." Of all the things David Cain taught her, most Batman had shown her to be false, but that one mental discipline she did retain as useful. It was best to think of the target as precisely that. To spend a night or more trailing this individual and have to think of her as "NeferTitties" or "Batwonderlove" would be a needless penance.

Batgirl knew the target would need to visit her supplier soon. Drug trafficking, like all criminal activity, dropped off during Hell Month. Her stocks would be low, and with the colleges back in session after winter break, the raves would be in full force again...

The target had to meet her connection soon. It was just a matter of waiting and watching.

Greg "Giggles" Brady was finding the transition from henchman to bartender less onerous than the adjustment from Joker's underling to Penguin's. Penguin wasn't nearly as volatile, but he was terribly anxious about his cash register, quacking in the background whenever it was opened, just to make sure you knew he was watching. And he was curiously obsessive about the amount of liquor poured into well drinks during happy hour. But the greatest adjustment of all was the Penguin's policy about 'breakages.' Breakages were never an issue at the HA-HAcienda. With Joker and Harley, the more breakages, the better.

Still, Greg would have to admit as he stepped outside for a smoke, he liked his chances of survival much better at the Iceberg. And if Cobblepot was a strange little fussybudget, that was still better than... uh oh.

“Who th’fu’re you, Dirtwad?”

Blades got his nickname from an unpleasant hobby involving razors and rats. He himself spread the story: sixty kilos of C, Angel Marin was buying, to test the sample Blades offered his razor. Marin took it, cut a line, then looked oddly at the blade—it was sticky and a rodent hair clung to the tip. That’s when Angel Marin puked all over a kilo of premium Columbian cocaine.

Blades was meeting the porn twat, NeferTitties. A stupid bitch, but she made up for it being the best meth dealer south of Chinatown. The money and small plastic bags were just changing hands when he heard a loud squeak down the alley. Kitchen door of the nightclub. A man walked out, lit a cig, looked their way—SHIT, money and the bags in plain sight. And Blades had never seen the man before. He reached for his namesake:

“Who th’fu’re you, Dirtwad?”

To answer such a question “Greg Brady” seemed foolhardy. To answer “Giggles” was worse. So Greg answered the menacing punk as he was taught to approach Batman when henching for Joker:

Smile. Politely. Then...

Smile. Like you know something about his sister.

Flex up.

Telegraph a right hook

and then

Jab- jab- jab with the left.

Batgirl was about to intervene before the new target, the supplier, sliced up a witness in the alley. But in the time it took to fire a line from the fire escape, the witness took control of the situation. Batgirl watched, fascinated. She saw impressive technique! Imaginative use of a car antenna as an improvised weapon! Not to mention—Ouch—the dumpster lid. That knee wouldn’t support weight for a month. It was a pleasure to watch. Nice final kick when the scum was down, just to make sure he stayed down. What a guy.

The witness left the target heaving in a fetal ball of pain and walked nonchalantly back... into the Iceberg Lounge?

The telephone rang the minute Bruce left my apartment. It was Barbara. Drop everything, she said, and get over there ASAP. I looked out the window and saw...

“ ...”

::What gives,:: squawked the phone, ::Selina, cat got your tongue?::

It was one of those moments of clarity. One of the moments where you realize that, however much you love Bruce, you've let things snowball out of control, and unless you want to wind up with that insignia and the word BATFAMILY tattooed on your butt, steps will have to be taken.

"Barbara, Black Canary was just on the rooftop across from my apartment. Why is that?"

I knew the answer. But I wanted to hear her say it.

::Had to wait for Bruce to leave before I called you, of course. Now seriously, get over here. Don't unpack. Don't do shit. Just get over here right now!::

Forget the fact that I'd just stepped off a plane. Forget that I was still on Paris time and thinking in French. Toss all that aside and you're STILL left with this:

"Cats do not come when called."

::Yeah, yeah, tell it to the belfry. Look, Selina, this is Hell Month and this is an—::

"Hey, none of you even bothered to clue me in on Hell Month last year, so don't think just because—"

::Hang on::

Through the receiver, I heard typing and the distant sound of the 'Oracle voice,' crisp and efficient. When she returned, she sounded pleased with herself.

::There, that's done. 'Wing'll be busy for the next three hours. Selina, I know what you're going to say, but hear me out: It's Hell Month. Then that Post story comes out. (Nice picture by the way. Is that a purple tint?) And then the Tattler tries to top it with Poison Ivy and Nightwing. Zatanna's publicists changed her name to a glyph, so now I gotta draw the symbol for Boron with an umlaut over it just to type up the JLA meeting minutes! —and now *Batgirl is in love with a criminal!* Something's gotta give. It's estrogen solidarity time, so get your furry tail over here! ::

" ... "

What else could I say?

"Okay," I began in my calmest humoring-Joker voice, "let me get this straight. Cassie was helping Dinah track a drug dealer to her supplier. She calls in that she found the guy, he's unconscious behind the Iceberg."

"Right," Dinah said absently, leafing through Barbara's copy of the Gotham Post. "He goes by Blades. Real serious scumbag."

"So far, so good. You compliment her on a job well done and..."

"And she says no, not her collar. She's really anxious to give credit where credit is due. It was this other guy. He was *wonderful*. Powerful, fierce, vicious. Like a panther."

I raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything.

"Nobody's ever heard her go on like that," Dinah explained.

"Nobody's ever heard her use that many words together," Barbara added. "And look at this!" She turned one of her monitors so we could all see. It was a mugshot of a twentyish young man, not bad looking in the decorative henchman sense. "This is the feed from the satellite cave. This picture's been up for an hour, she's reading his file."

"And this is a crisis because...?" I asked. They both stared like it was obvious. "Oh, like I'm really going to object to the idea of a bat-hero stepping out with a villain?"

"Hey, nice picture, by the way," Dinah commented, pointing to the Post. "I see you're still very 'complex,' though."

This was her little joke since the night of Barbara's bridal shower. We logged into a chatroom where some of those faux-sensitive schmucks thought they'd actually score points with women—get this—by pretending they don't like breasts. Flatchested equals "More Complex" was their theory (I am not making this up), that's what was supposed to make them look deep when other guys were superficial: cupsize is inversely proportional to character. And when they pointed to Black Canary and Catwoman as examples of heroines that were simply too busty to have any depth, Dinah and I popped a fresh bottle of bubbly and settled in to have some fun.

I winked at her.

"We should do that again sometime," she suggested, obviously thinking back to the same chatroom. "A girl's night in!"

"Could we stay focused on the issue, please," Barbara interrupted, sounding like a schoolmarm. "It's Hell Month, and Cassie is mooning over a Joker operative, handle of 'Giggles.' Bruce is going to go thermal."

"So don't tell him," I suggested. It seemed an obvious solution. It still DOES seem the obvious solution.

"He'll know," Barbara objected.

"He's Batman," Dinah tacked on.

It's a cult. What can you do with people like that. It's a cult.

"You only encourage him when you say things like that," I told them. "You two do realize that, don't you?"

They stared. More silence.

"Okay look," I said finally, "Hell Month is pretty far along. It's what, A-minus-four already, say he takes another three days to simmer down..."

"Best to allow a full week," Barbara interrupted.

"Fine, a week then. Cassie is a seventeen year old girl. She's gone and done what teenage girls do, found someone who will be a guaranteed headache for all the adults concerned. If she's *THAT* normal, then she can do what all those other teenage girls do, which is keep this thing quiet and nailed down—for a week to ten days anyway. That's really not too much to ask. And in the meantime, I'll ... make some calls, check around the Iceberg, see what I can find out about this guy from the other side. I'm sure I can come up with more info than 'Giggles.'"

Bruce parked the Jag in the garage and entered the manor through the back door. He cut through the kitchen heading straight for the elevator in the butler's pantry.

"I'll be downstairs," he growled when he saw Alfred was there and had to be acknowledged.

"Certainly, sir, I trust Ms. Kyle's flight was pleasant and..." he stopped when the elevator door shut in his face. He sighed. Hell Month. A-minus-4.

♪ Four thousand six hundred and twenty seven bats chained to a wall, four thousand six hundred and twenty seven BATS!!! Bite off the head, pull out the wings, four thousand six hundred and twenty six bats chained to the wall!! ♪

And so it went.

On and on. Mile after mile. Bat after bat chained to the wall.

♪ Bite off the head, pull out the wings, four thousand six hundred and twenty five bats chained to the wall!! ♪

We tried to ignore it as the stolen BMW sped down US Highway-1. We were at the wheel again. We, Eddie, and Blake had agreed to take the long haul driving in turns. The idea of Jack driving was too horrible to contemplate.

We tried to concentrate on the gray road. We tried to block out his singing. We really did.

That same, irritating ditty, over and over and over again until our head pounded with... unholy vehemence and our teeth were clenched tighter than the purse clasp of... Gah! we can't remember the name now. A Dickens grotesque is characterized in that way. Just thinking of that stupid tune has completely ruined our power over adjectives. You can only imagine the effect it had at the time.

It is a Dickens character. Her purse clasp snaps shut like a bear trap. We think it was Estella from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Two-Face insists it was Maxi Amberville in *I'll Take Gotham City* by Judith Krantz. But we digress...

We like to think of ourselves as a tolerant man. But we dare you to listen to that same tune, spoken in a deliberately infuriatingly sing song way by a man who is suicide-inducing at the best of times, and see how much you like it.

Got the picture in your head? Now imagine that said annoyance—let's, for arguments sake, call him Joker—has been singing for the past **two hundred miles**...

Catman was the first one to crack. With a cry of "Out, vile spot!" (he has a penchant for misquoting Shakespeare - also for using words like 'penchant'), Blake fell upon Joker and began strangling the sadistic clown with his seat belt. Eddie started a rousing round of applause.

"Tommy... I never knew you cared... Erk!" Joker managed to squeal. With a howl of frustration—the kind that usually means yet another crime of his has been attributed to Selina, Blake tightened his hold on Jack's neck.

We sighed, massaging the bridge of our nose with our fingers. We have never been one for bad puns, so we'll refrain from describing the headache as splitting. But it was a rough one, and it was getting worse. Joker seems to have that effect on us. We honestly couldn't tell you why.

We actually sympathized with Catman, as surprised as we were to realize it. In truth, when Blake cracked, we had been very close to it ourselves, grinding our teeth down to the gum in a desperate attempt to block out Joker's fevered chanting. A glance at Eddie using our rear view mirror confirmed that he was going through the same torment.

He looked drawn and pale and, since the trip had begun, he appeared to have aged a good fifteen years. It was these factors coupled with the fact that he had now joined Blake in strangling Jack—inventively using the shelf behind the passenger seat at the

rear of the car for leverage—that led us to the almost Sherlockian feat of deduction that Jack was annoying all of us equally.

We sighed, regretting what we were about to say before the words had left what was left of our lips.

“OK guys, get off him!” we ordered. “He’s going the same color as his suit. And besides, Blake, imagine what the blood of such a creature could do to your precious cloak.”

Blake squirmed away from the now gasping clown, a look of horror on his face.

“Egads, Dent! For once you are correct! The consequences of the potent magic imbibed in my cloak being mixed with the blood of this charlatan could indeed have grievous repercussions...”

Eddie gave him an incredulous stare.

“Don’t look at me like that, Nigma. What would a man of your pitiful intellect know of magicks such as this?”

Eddie’s mouth had suddenly become a very thin line. You don’t cast aspersions on the Riddler’s brainpower, you just don’t. There was going to be trouble. We growled menacingly.

“Oh for the love of...” Words failed us, so we banged our head on the steering wheel, “Can’t we at least pretend to get along?”

“Great idea, Harv,” piped up Joker. His voice was croaky, and yet unnervingly perky. “Now, who’s for a quick game of Eye Spy?”

Almost instinctively, we found ourselves swerving the car hard right into the solid shoulder and bringing it to a juddering halt.

“That TEARS IT!” we hissed. Out of the corner of our eye, we saw Eddie and Catman squirm backward in their seats. We whipped around and fixed all three of them with an angry glare. “Listen you three. We have tried to be patient. We have tried to be understanding. But we have just about reached the end of our tether. Correction. We **have** reached the end of just about every tether! Jack—you will sit in the front seat next to us. You will sit perfectly still and say nothing. And if we hear anything—and we mean anything—from any of you, then there will be HELL to pay.”

“Will it be expensive?” Joker said, “because I’ve only got a couple of bucks on me.”

We fixed him with a glare that could melt ice. Without a word, he came and sat in the seat next to us.

“Right then,” we said, sighing heavily. We kicked the car back into gear.

“Sorry, Mom,” came a murmur from the back. Our head snapped round again, eyeing Blake and Eddie, daring them, willing them even to attempt to mess with us. They said nothing and did their best to look innocent.

Making a mental note to stop Eddie’s allowance when we got home, we resumed driving.

We had stopped at the last service station for a quick bite to eat. Joker had also picked up some reading material—that is to say, all the most recent gossip rags.

We had calmed down since the little outburst about two hundred miles back and were actually enjoying the ride now. There’s something about the freedom of the open

road that we enjoy. The same thing that had inspired so many singers, writers and poets to write about it, we supposed.

Suddenly, in the seat next to us, Joker began whistling innocently. Our heart began to sink. That kind of whistle could only mean one thing. Trouble.

We tried to ignore him, but we couldn't. We simply had to know what he was up to, if only out of very morbid curiosity. Resignation in our heart, we looked over to him.

He was clutching one of his gossip magazines. This one, judging from the bawdy graphics that adorned the front cover, was called 'The Gotham Tattler.' We knew of it, actually. The Tattler is a particularly trashy tabloid that looks into the meaningless lives of meaningless celebrities in Gotham City. Being as Gotham is one of America's most infamous towns, the magazine (using the word loosely) is available nationwide.

We were about to regale Jack with a five-minute speech on the pointlessness of such publications when something caught the corner of our eye.

Ivy was on the front cover. Our ex girlfriend, Ivy. A shudder passed through us at the memories, experiences shared and wounds not totally healed. But what was she doing on the front cover...?

And then it struck us. Next to her was a picture of Nightwing. A lump of seething fetid bile was forming in our throat. We read the glossy caption.

"Nightwing and Ivy! Together at last!" screamed the headline. We turned to the road, our jaw clenched. Our hands gripped the steering wheel. Hard.

"Sordid meetings in the Brazilian rainforest," Joker read out. "Baby oil and plant pots... and—Eeeeew! Oh ,that one's too sick to read out! HAHAHAHA! Ivy and Nightwing, eh? Who knew, huh, Harv? Hardly surprising, though. Harl was just telling me the other day how he's got the cutest ass in Gotham. Naturally, I was disgusted and mildly offended, but it seemed like an appropriate fact to throw in nowish. HAHAHAHA!" He said this, lightly punching us in the shoulder. We said nothing, eyes staring forward, hands gripping the wheel even tighter.

Eddie sighed sympathetically.

"Sorry, Harv. Better luck next time, eh?" He paused, looking past us and out of the windshield. "Uh, Harv..." he said, uncertainly. "Far be it from me to criticize, but don't you think that electricity pylon is getting a little close? Harv? Harv?"

Fortunately, injuries from the crash were relatively light. No one was seriously hurt, with the worst injury being sustained by Jack. In a freak accident, after the crash our fist seemed to somehow connect with his eye, leaving him with some nasty bruising.

We waited around for about half an hour for a tow truck to arrive and pick up the BMW now shaped like a fortune cookie. When it arrived, we pulled the driver from the cab, leapt in and drove off. Catman insisted on driving this time, so in the interests of peace and to avoid further argument, we left him fuming at the side of the road.

Surely you didn't expect anything less?

We hate Nightwing.

"I'll bet you never knew, Harv, that the Florida Keys cover an area of 1024 square miles and have a population of 81,000 people."

We looked out of the window of the tow truck impassively as Eddie read aloud from his guidebook. We were driving across the long, flat "7-mile bridge" that links the islands and the mainland together.

We hate Nightwing. What the Hell does she see in him?

"The word 'key' actually comes from the Spanish word cayo, meaning 'little island.'"

Jumped up little brat with his cocky ass attitude and stupid ponytail. Does he still have a ponytail? What does it matter?! He's all 'look at me, I'm Batman's understudy' and we're like 'yeah, like we give a shit' and he's all like 'yeah, but I got a black and blue suit that looks really cool and showcases my cute ass, the one I pulled your ex with' and we're like... 'Knives. Something involving knives...'

"The Keys have an annual rainfall of just 40-45 inches."

Maybe spoons would be better? Rusty ones preferably.

"You haven't been listening to a word I've said, have you, Harv?"

We turned to Eddie, and grinned apologetically.

"What? Oh yeah, right. Yeah, don't dye it bright red, it won't do anything for your complexion."

Eddie sighed in a long-suffering manner. He patted us on one shoulder, and continued reading.

"It says in here..."

We stopped listening again.

Whether the bat-brat and Petal were together or not, we were here to bring Sly home.

That was our mission objective. We were a single-minded calculating machine. We were like Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan*. We had to bring someone home, and we were going to do anything in our power to do so.

That was the reason we were going to The Keys this January. No really. It was.

OK. We're not convincing ourselves, let alone you. It's time for the truth.

We rogues have a theory. January is what we call 'Hell Month.'

The reason we call it that? Because it's what the beatings dished out during this time hurt like. Don't get us wrong—Batman is a skilled fighter and all his beatings hurt. But in January, things are different. He's more savage, angry—violent, even by Gotham standards. Essentially, if you're a criminal, and you're planning to remain in Gotham City in January, you'd better have exceptional medical insurance, or at the very least, an ample supply of morphine. At first, we assumed our Hell Month theory was paranoia, but when you're lying in a hospital wing (handcuffed to the bed, of course) and you find yourself surrounded by virtually every crook and lowlife in the city, their leg casts and traction cuffs similarly chained to hospital beds, you do start to see a pattern.

We shuddered violently thinking of Hell Month back in Gotham. Naturally, we snapped up the chance to avoid it. Who wouldn't? We had even hypothesized it might be a scheme of Sly's to get some of his more favored clients out of Gotham for a while. Who knows? All that mattered was that we were in picturesque Florida on what was essentially a holiday, and we would be keeping our teeth where they belonged for the first January in years.

We smiled at the sign on the bridge that welcomed us into the beautiful “Conch Republic” of the Florida Keys. The smile held for a second, then faded as another thought crossed our mind.

We really hate Nightwing.

I'm the first to admit, I've had some odd visits to the Iceberg Lounge. There was the New Year's Eve that Harley Quinn lost a bet with Catman, drugged my champagne, and delivered me to his table trussed up in wrapping paper with a bow on my ear. There was the famous Grand Reopening after an especially festive brawl took out the icicle chandelier. There was Joker and Harley's anniversary... the first slumming visit with Bruce... and who could ever forget Jervis's Aunt Maud. But even by Iceberg standards, this was a very peculiar episode.

First, it was raining; I got caught in the rain. And Oswald, the umbrella king, is always just a little snooty if he catches you running in out of the rain holding a newspaper over your head. It's like you've let him down.

Not to mention, the place was a ghost town. No Eddie, no Harvey—my preferred informants, being as close to sane as you can find in an establishment run by Oswald Cobblepot. It was still early, so I sat at my usual table in the big dining room and waited. Finally, an alternate news source arrived. No one will ever call The Mad Hatter sane (if they did, I suppose Jervis would have to find himself a new handle), but mad as he may be, he is an eerily reliable fount of information on just about everybody.

"Evening, Jervis. Buy a lady a drink?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly; you make one quite giddy!"

This is the usual shtick when Jervis sees me, Alice to the Cheshire Cat. Then I always smile, he sits and spouts a little more nonsense about seeing a cat without a grin or a grin without a cat, and we can get down to business.

"The place seems pretty empty tonight," I remarked.

"Leaving ever so much tea and crumpets for the rest of us," he twittered, tucking a napkin into his collar.

"Absolutely," I answered, because with Jervis, as with Joker, you have to pick your battles.

"And where has the Cheshire Cat been these many a day?" he asked pointedly. And I could just tell he was making the transition from Mad Hatter to Gossip Gertie. "Out of town for Hell Month?"

"Yes," I answered, truthfully enough.

After a long pause—once he figured out I wasn't going to offer details no matter how long he sat there waiting—he moved on to a more promising subject.

"Heard about Sly?"

I hadn't. While Jervis told the whole sordid story, I twisted to see into the bar. And sure enough, there was the man I'd come to snoop about: Giggles.

"So Two-Face has gone off with Joker, Riddler and Catman to bring our boy home—by any means necessary. And the worst of it is, he's missed that delicious bit about Ivy and Nightwing in the Tattler. So now we are all deprived of seeing his reaction firsthand. We shall be dependent on his traveling companions for a report."

"By any means necessary" sounded ominous, particularly from that foursome.

"Jervis, just out of curiosity, if it's that important to get Sly back, why didn't you go?" He knew what I was getting at. His mind-control chips are a hell of a lot more persuasive than an ex-prosecutor with a duality complex, a killer clown, an anagram freak, and Mr. Magic Cape.

"One cannot train a 'hatted' individual to mix a proper martini," Jervis stated, "I've tried."

He looked at the empty novelty glass in front of him, and I could just tell he was about to go off on one of his mad tea party episodes...

"I should like a fresh drink," he said, "your glass is full. Let's change seats."

The thing about Jervis is: as mad as he gets, the opportunity to spread some gossip will usually bring him around.

"*Twinkle, twinkle, little bat. How I wonder where you're at...*" he recited.

"So Jervis, what do we know about the new guy?"

"...*Up above the world you fly, like a teatray in the sky...*Hm? Oh Giggles? He's a most interesting dormouse. Joker's henchman he was, a go-getter, a fine Knave of Hearts. Always first into the fray. No mousy lookout duty for him. Always volunteered for the muscle work. A bruiser."

I looked back into the bar. The chap being described as the Joe Louis of the Gotham underworld was polishing a hurricane glass. I decided to have a closer look.

"Why don't I get us some fresh drinks," I said with a twinkle.

Cassie put the finishing touches on her disguise and regarded herself in the mirror. She had forsaken the advice Barbara and the others thrust upon her when she asked about a new look to attract Azrael. She learned much from that. Their advice was useless. She was seventeen, after all. She needed to be her own woman. She needed her own look, one to reflect today, not the outdated modes of the first Batgirl, Black Canary, and Catwoman.

Of course, Spoiler was nearer her age and likely to understand. Under normal circumstances, Cassie would have turned to her. But lately, all Stephanie wanted to do was whine about Tim seeing Cecily. Cassie avoided her.

It didn't matter anyway. She didn't need advice. She could manage well enough on her own. Batgirl had seen enough of the Goths and groupies that hung out at the Iceberg to realize an extreme look patterned after some themed criminal was the perfect in. She could infiltrate the club and be accepted as one of the transient groupies that hung around hoping to be picked up as a henchwench. Then she could be near him, her adored one, *Gregory Brady*.

"Greg Brady?" I sputtered, nearly choking on my martini. "Your name is really Greg Brady?"

There was an awkward pause in which the bartender said nothing, just looked out with a hangdog expression. I realized he must get that all the time.

"No wonder you turned to crime," I smiled, sipping my drink.

"Also why I got out," he said casually. "Mr. Joker said he was going to start grooming me, said I should set off on my own one of these days as THE BRADY, said he'd have a big 70s theme crime spree to launch me."

I confess the statement caused me to down that martini just a bit faster than was wise. I couldn't help it. The mental image of Joker in bell-bottoms and platform shoes,

of Harley Quinn spouting phrases like 'Foxy,' 'Dyn-o-mite' and '10-4 good buddy.' I chugged my martini, okay? I couldn't take it, and I chugged my martini.

Bruce strode from the stalactite to the costume vault and flung the cowl into the wall. The exertion did nothing to lessen his frustration so he punched the shelf meant for Selina's Catwoman costume. It splintered into bits, embedding slivers of wood in his unprotected hand, but again, did nothing to alleviate his frustration.

He couldn't meditate. Three days to the anniversary, and the ritual cycle had begun: when he was not out as Batman, he was in the cave: working out, meditating, reading the logs that recorded each night's progress of his mission since it began, more working out, more meditation. He would take only water and vitamin tablets in this time. The monks taught that three days was a suitable period for a fast in the cause of purification. He would not sleep, for natural sleep would only interfere with the directed focus of his meditations, the meditations that would intensify his focus on the mission until he became one with it: his parents, the murders, the mission, Justice. The concentration must be absolute, to become an avatar of the mission, to become Justice incarnate... except... his fist clenched, forcing drops of blood through the creases where the splinters pierced his skin... except he couldn't do it.

He couldn't meditate. He'd focused on the one-point, the chakra, his center of gravity. He focused on his breathing. He focused on the stalactite, the nothingness of pure air between his eye and the stalactite, the sound of condensed moisture dripping off the stalactite to land with a damp squelch against the stone floor. Nothing. He couldn't clear his mind.

So he'd gone to the costume vault and took down the cowl, placed it before him, and used it as a focus. The face of Batman. The mission incarnate.

And still... Nothing... He couldn't still his thoughts.

Not since the Harley-Catman incident have I come out of the Iceberg with such a beastly hangover. After that first martini gulped in reaction to the Joker-70s horror, I stayed at the bar, nursing another. I didn't especially want another drink, but it let me chat a while longer with Giggles and I learned a surprising amount.

He was far from the bloodthirsty zealot Jervis had described: He did volunteer for muscle work, but not for love of ramming his fist into Batman's face. It was survival strategy. Giggles had noticed that most henchmen prefer lookout duty: find a nice quiet spot, keep an eye out for Bats, and let the other guy get his ass kicked. What they didn't realize is it's always the lookout that gets stuck bringing Joker the bad news: The Batmobile is out front. Ergo, Batman is coming. Ergo, Batman escaped the deathtrap. Then SPLAT, flat lookout. Or BANG, lookout's chest gushes blood. Or Pfffffft and HA-HaHa-HAHAHAHAHA! Lookout gasps, spasms and stiffens into one of those hideous deathsmiles. So Greg "Giggles" Brady decided he was a muscleman, not a lookout.

"I heard you're always first into the fray," I mentioned.

That too, he said, was strategy. Joker might blame the last guy to go down, the one who actually lets the Bat get past him to wring Joker's own neck. And the last man left standing can sometimes get used as a human shield. No, it was better to lead the charge. First in, first out.

It made sense. The only problem was that Oswald overheard my question and thought Catwoman was poaching. Was I trying to steal away his new help?

Now I never went in much for henchmen, and Oswald knows that as well as anybody. Now and then, if I was setting up a new lair or stealing something heavy like a big stone antiquity, then maybe I'd pick up a few guys to do the lifting. But to employ men for the purpose of fighting with Batman? No. That is, to put it mildly, not my style. Catwoman has always known how to handle the Bat and Greg Brady doesn't enter into it. Not in any way.

But Oswald is a little paranoid these days, and one has to make allowances.

By way of assuring him, Giggles demonstrated how I was just teaching him to make my special martini: Drink #3.

With the third drink, I did get to hear why he was such a terror with the hyenas. The file Barbara showed me did mention that Joker's snarling pets would often attack alongside this particular henchman. Why? The Batfile theorized it was his fierceness. Nope. Giggles survived by flying under the radar. He kept quiet, watched and listened. When he saw Joker becoming pensive, he didn't stick around to see if it was one of those "it's Thursday, let's kill all the henchmen" moods. He made himself scarce. He took the hyenas out for a run! They liked him, so when he charged into battle, they ran alongside him.

It was really quite funny. I would have thought so even without that third martini.

Cassie turned off the television in horror. She hadn't understood what was so funny about the name Greg Brady, but some of the comments in his police file made her curious. She never watched television, except for Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The show was silly for most of the hour, but at least once in every episode, there would be an exciting display of imaginative fighting techniques.

It took her a while to find TVLand, but once she did, she understood. Greg Brady... "Groovy"... what a terrible handicap for a great warrior.

So I had the information I came for. It cost me three martinis on top of jetlag to get it, but I had the 411: Cassie's new amour a.k.a. Joker's former henchman Giggles was Greg Brady, strategic hyena-walker and avoider of lookout duty. Groovy. Now I *JUST* wanted to go home, have a hot bath, and climb into bed.

But no. There was still an obstacle between me and the exit sign, and that obstacle was leafy, lonely, and fresh out of Arkham.

"Come sit with me, Catty."

You had to know Pam to recognize who was talking. To the outside observer, it would have looked like the wall of ivy and clematis around the booth was speaking. The outside observer might wonder about this, because foliage isn't supposed to talk.

But then it's not supposed to move either. Yet here it was, parting like a theatre curtain and holding out a chair for me. In other words: Drink #4.

There really is no other way to deal with Poison Ivy, you have to humor her. I honestly don't know why she bothers with the pheromones and mind control. She can mostly get her way just being a royal pain in the ass if she doesn't. Like the plant from which she takes her name, she is exactly as persistent as a deep-rooted sub dermal itch. You can try to ignore it, but you're kidding yourself. Sooner or later you've got to scratch, so you may as well do it now and get it over with.

So I sat down for Drink #4 - Humoring Pamela: Her skin is alabaster, not green. She is a natural redhead. Paper is murder. Harvey Dent is a loathsome two-timing skunk.

And that brought us to Drink #5: The stories in Gotham Post and the Tattler.

"Where do they get this stuff, huh? Tell me that, Catty. You've had 'sperience with these papers b'fore. So tell me, where would they get an idea like that? NIGHTWING, he's so... tall."

Not a characteristic I personally find displeasing in a man, but if you think I would say that, you're not grasping The Humoring Pam Principle.

"And blue," she went on, making a face, "his costume, it's so BLUE."

Again, I'm not entirely clear on what's objectionable about blue, but again I let this pass.

"And those pictures—I have leaf hair! Leaves are for adornment, not coiffeur. The leaves of the living vine make becoming gilding for the body, and on mine they—like everything - are irresistible, but in the hair!"

"Pam, you look fine," I reassured her, "at least they didn't take you down three cupsizes."

"FREDERICKS OF HOLLYWOOD! WILL YOU TWO GIVE IT A REST!"

Pam and I looked at each other and the vine curtains parted to reveal—a thoroughly pissed Roxy Rocket.

"Ivy, you looked hot in those pictures. I would give everything I have if my worst problem was that the COVER STORY on me in a national paper didn't have me looking hot *in the way I prefer to look hot*. And Catty, take a reality pill. Everybody who's actually *had sex* can see what they're doing. The affected virgin lemmings carp that breasts are sexist. Fine, so they reshape the T&A to downplay the T and punch up the A. The undersexed pundits *don't have a clue* what's happening, and right under their noses all the normal, healthy red-blooded guys get an even better show. Meanwhile, while you two sit here whining about your coverage, SLY IS GONE! The only bit of identity I ever had around here was 'cause he noticed me and now HE'S GONE!"

"..."

I looked at Pam.

"..."

Pam looked at me.

I threw a twenty on the table and stood to leave. Pam did the same. Once you've been publicly spanked by Roxy Rocket, there's nothing more to say. It's time to go home.

Nothing turns a bunch of hardened criminals into drama queens like the subject of Hell Month. “The savage brutality of Genghis Kahn, the cunning cruelty of Torquemada, the sadistic torments of the Marquis de Sade, the terrible wrath of Attila the Hun, the searing pain of—” I dunno, Amazon menstrual cramps.

Hard to believe, isn’t it. I mean, they’re talking about *Bruce*! Contrary to what some people say, I do have a healthy respect for the Bat’s dark side. But he is not mentioned in the Book of Revelations. He’s a crimefighter and a damn good one, but even at his worst, he is not a horseman of the apocalypse.

If you want to talk sadistic wrath of vengeful torment, consider the hangover. Try pouring five martinis on top of jetlag, then sharing a cab uptown with Pamela Isley. Okay, first: her skin is *green*; not alabaster, and a henna rinse does *not* make you a natural redhead. And when you share a cab, it is customary to drop the person who lives closest *FIRST*, let them pay their share and go on their way. Particularly when they’re nursing a hangover and want nothing more than to go home, swallow five or ten aspirin, and die in their own bed. But no, Queen Chlorophyll has had some kind of falling out with the oak trees in Riverside Park, so she has to go back to her old digs in Robinson Park. And Robinson Park has been re-landscaped, so it might take a few tries to find the right path. And she can’t leave the cab waiting if she’s all alone. Don’t ask me why. I’m still working on ‘tall’ and ‘blue’ as her chief objections to Nightwing’s romantic appeal.

I finally did get rid of her, got home, and got some shuteye. Next day, the headache was less pronounced, but still present. I had an invitation to Wayne Manor. Leg of Lamb *a la Pennyworth* was promised, a welcome home dinner. In my hungover condition, I wasn’t in the mood for a big meal, but clearly Alfred had gone to a lot of trouble. Of all the laws, natural and manmade, that govern the universe, there are one or two even Catwoman holds sacred. Of those, “Don’t Cross Alfred Pennyworth” ranks very close to the top of the list.

So I downed a few more aspirin and trudged out to the manor. Imagine my surprise when I learned that Alfred didn’t just leave the message on my machine, it was he who extended the invitation. Bruce didn’t know anything about it. Bruce was holed up in the cave. He’d been down there for a day and a half and wasn’t expected to surface for dinner or anything else for another thirty-six hours at least. Alfred took down a tray, he said, at hour four, then returned at hour six to find the soup and sandwich untouched. He replaced the tray with a fresh one and repeated this procedure at two-hour intervals, except for the period when Batman was on patrol.

“Alfred,” I said cautiously, mindful of the universal law against crossing Batman’s butler, “this might be my hangover talking, but in my opinion, the behavior you’re describing is simply fucked in the head.”

Batman has a subtle way of smiling; it’s best described as a quick, slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. You have to know what to see. Alfred is much the same but more so. Between English, a servant, and the product of an older generation, there’s a reserved dignity that goes beyond mere ‘battitude.’ A twitch would be far too demonstrative. Instead, there’s this odd glint in the eyes, just a flicker of recognition. I understood what it meant: “‘Fucked in the head,’ Miss? Right ho!”

I took the grandfather clock passage down to the cave. The stairs weren't ideal, but the thought of Alfred's elevator with my head still throbbing was—ulgh.

The text swam. Bruce sat at his Workstation, eyes fixed on the Log Entries for April 1997: Matches Malone infiltrating Penguin's gang, planting the seeds that would unravel his alliance with Mr. Freeze. He was beyond the point of reading; he just stared at the words... the shape of the letters... *Cobblepot... suspicion... distrust...*

How many hours now... and he still couldn't meditate... The Logs were part of the Ritual, as a record of all Batman had accomplished and all there still was to do...but now they were more than that, they were his only hope of focusing on The Mission... *Penguin... criminal ... apprehend...* focusing to the point of exhaustion... *Freeze... distrust... avenge...* becoming one with it... *avenge... criminal... apprehend...*

"Why?" Until he heard the word, he didn't realize he was speaking. "Why isn't it working? Why can't I focus?"

Suddenly, the sound of his voice was joined by a new noise—Clip. ClipClip.... Clip... echoed... ClipClip... Clip... High heels on rock... Selina... Less clippy than usual.

"Something wrong?" he asked quietly, eyes never leaving the monitor.

"Oh... don't shout. Hangover. Iceberg. Don't ask."

"I won't," he grumbled softly.

Technically, he'd acknowledged my existence. But just barely. I knew better than to treat this antisocial behavior as if it was anything out of the ordinary, so I peered past the back of his head to the file he was reading, some ancient history with Oswald and Freeze. Yawn. Then I saw the Batcuffs. I picked them up, made myself comfy and started to fiddle.

These were the new modified cuffs Eddie had mentioned. New locks, hard to quick pick. I told Eddie I'd take a look when the opportunity presented itself, since I was the one who figured out how to pick the old cuffs. What Eddie didn't know, of course, was that I had suggested the modification: a little flap in front of the Grazour mechanism blocked a standard retractable pick. But Bruce had added something else, something of his own, and I had been meaning to figure out what.

"Don't break those," he snapped.

Don't break those. Unbelievable. The very suggestion of my 'breaking' handcuffs set up, I was sure, a dozen wonderful zingers. But damnit, my head hurt and I couldn't quite work out a punch line. So I had to settle for:

"If I can break them, Stud, then they're not up to the job, now are they."

I decided if my head wasn't up to *talking* about the Batcuffs, it certainly wasn't up to *picking* the Batcuffs. So I set them down and noticed the infamous lunch tray.

"Are you going to eat that sandwich?"

Bruce glowered. Impossible woman. Everyone else got it. Everyone else knew— Even Dick in his most ornery teen years knew: It's all about The Mission. If you can't be focused on that, get the hell out.

The Mission.

Even he couldn't focus on The Mission.

Why?

And why did she have to sit there demonstrating her maddening criminal expertise picking his Batcuffs? It was like she was flaunting her illegal activities right in front of him—in defiance—in The Cave, no less. Inserting herself into his life—again.

"No," he said, ignoring the cuffs and returning to the sandwich question, "I'm not hungry." Hungry. It was a broad word. What did it mean? More than wanting food. Wanting. Will. Will to do things. Will to participate, to partake of the world, taking part in the life experience... No. It meant food. In this case, ham and turkey with mayo and a cup of lobster bisque.

"I'll assume that's why you didn't invite me to dinner," Selina was saying, "Alfred did, by the way. We're having his famous Leg of Lamb Pennyworth. Sure I can't tempt you?"

Amoral Bitch.

She was behind this.

"*Sure I can't tempt you?*" This was why he couldn't focus. The Mission. The Mission was all. "*Sure I can't tempt you?*" To become one with The Mission meant blotting out everything else. Bruce Wayne was a Mask. A Tool. Another Weapon used to advance The Mission. He existed to serve the Bat. "*Sure I can't tempt you?*" Bruce Wayne carving out a bit of life for himself was never part of The Plan. Thus far, it had not interfered with The Mission, so Psychobat let it be. But now he couldn't meditate. He could not shut out the man Bruce Wayne had become. The man beyond the Bat was refusing to be silent... "*Sure I can't tempt you?*" It was all her fault.

"No," he pronounced finally. He meant it to sound firm, but even to his own ears it sounded stubborn instead. He tried to soften it. "No thank you." Silence. "I'm not hungry," he added, not realizing he'd said this before.

"Suit yourself." She shrugged as if it was of no importance, picked up her bag and headed towards the Costume Vault.

Putting away the catsuit.

He swiveled his chair back, meaning to return his attention to the computer, but instead a thought struck him and continued his momentum all the way around until he faced the Vault again.

Putting away the catsuit, *Catwoman's catsuit!* Defiling his Vault with a criminal's costume!

"I can handle putting a costume away," he called, stalling for time chasing after her. He caught up with her at the door. She looked amused—like she always looked before a Vault.

"So can I," she answered lightly.

Typical. Defiant—like she always was before a vault. Impossible woman.

Bruce turned back towards his Workstation, took a single step, then paused with a slight stumble when, as before, a thought hit him: *If she goes in the Costume Vault she'll see...*

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU Doooooh damnit, mustn't shout."

...she'll see that her shelf was smashed to bits.

In a heartbeat, she stood before him in the Vault doorway, holding two splintered pieces of wood the size of popsicle sticks.

She repeated her query silently, with only a questioning raise of an eyebrow.

"Oh, that," he said gruffly, "I needed some space."

"Needed space for what?" she asked finally.

"There's still a hanging peg in there for you."

"The peg pulls the leather. Needed the space for what?"

"What does it matter, I needed the space. I'll get you a hanger for the suit."

"Don't bother, I never asked for the shelf. I can go back to keeping it under the bed.

Needed the space for what?"

He snorted contemptuously. "Under *MY* bed, you mean."

"Bruce," she looked him in the eye, refusing to be baited, "Needed the space for what?"

"..."

"You needed the space for your fist, didn't you?"

The look was a new one. Not a deathscowl, to be sure. Not a glare, nor a glower. Whatever it was, it was followed by a soft grunt. To the untrained ear, a grunt like any other. But to Selina, well versed in the nuances of BatSpeak, it was an answer, as much of an answer as she was going to get.

A look and a grunt. He didn't want to open this up for discussion, but it was hard to turn his back on genuine concern. Particularly when he knew if he did turn away, the concern would follow him, stubborn, defiant and ferociously feline.

"It's not a big deal," he said finally, "I was having trouble meditating. Got frustrated."

"Ah," she said. It wasn't disapproving, nor was it sympathetic. Just "Ah."

Bruce's blood began to boil, and he heard the explanation tumbling from his lips—in Batman's voice—with a hateful bitterness he'd directed at many criminals over the years but never at Selina: This was *HER FAULT*, he couldn't *FOCUS ON THE MISSION. THE MISSION WAS ALL THAT MATTERED* and he *COULDN'T SHUT HER OUT!* Damn her to hell! She and all she brought with her! Damn the joy she found in living. Damn her loving him for who he was. Damn her for opening his mind and his heart to things in this world besides hate, anger and rage. How in the *HELL* was he supposed to turn all that off!

When he finished, he was breathing hard.

Selina said nothing. She was silent for a long, long minute.

I almost turned away and left. Not for good, just to give him some time until he was rational. Obviously he wasn't right now. When someone lays into you for making them happy, that's going straight through irrational into the land beyond, where Jack

kills his henchmen because it's Thursday and Ivy is a natural redhead because henna is a plant.

I stayed—not because of anything he said, but the way he said it. The pain in his voice was palpable. I took me right back to the beginning—to Xanadu—it reminded me why I'm here.

"When I was ten my parents were shot to death in a smalltime mugging. Happened right in front of me."

What he needs from me, what he somehow sensed Catwoman would give him that no one else did or could: I'll never make light of his tragedy, but I will not be another acolyte at his Temple of Loss. Leaving him alone until he's rational, that's what they all do. And that's exactly why I stayed.

He'd gone back to his workstation. I followed and read over his shoulder. Ignoring the more personal aspects of his rant against me, I went straight to his favorite topic: The Mission.

"So... April 1997. Quite the pressing emergency you've got there."

"Is there a point to this?" he spat. And I could hear it in his voice: "You still here? Impossible woman. I thought you were smarter than that—can't you take a hint?" The message was clear enough. He just pronounced it: *"Is there a point to this?"*

"You tell me. What is the point of this? Tell me how justice is served by you being hungry, tired and alone."

He got up in a huff—again—and poured himself some water from a pitcher on the tray. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

"Justice is served when I have all of the tools and information necessary to complete my task."

"Nice try, but not even close," I pointed to his monitor of 1997 crime fighting issues, *"Tiffany's is building a replica of the 240 carat blue diamond from Titanic for Celine Dion to wear at the Oscars, think Catwoman will make a play for it before it's sent to Hollywood? I'm guessing not, 'cause I was in Martha's Vineyard at the time. So let's try again. You, hungry tired and alone: what's the payoff?"*

"I'm eating and sleeping all that I need to. I can handle the physical pressure—HEY, WHATTHE—BITCH!"

That last outburst because I swept his leg and he landed ducking into a backward roll, hit the railing and wound up in an undignified sprawl. Nothing more needed to be said. On his worst day, he should have seen a move like that coming. He was not handling the physical strain. Justice was not served by his being depleted. There was something else going on here with this "ritual," something that had nothing to do with the Mission. Sequestering himself in his cave, starving himself, exhausting himself. It wouldn't protect his city, save innocents or frighten criminals. What was it supposed to do?

"Is there a reason you're punishing yourself?" I asked, sitting on the floor next to him and leaning back against the railing. He stood and began to walk off towards the workout mats.

"No pain, no gain." Then an exasperated grunt. I knew why: if that was the best answer he could think of.

"That's exercise," I insisted, "This is not productive pain. This is not a burn that makes muscles stronger; this is taking a kitchen knife and carving up your arm for no reason. This accomplishes nothing for Batman. So, *Bruce*, I'm asking again, why are you doing this to yourself?"

Silence. Then...

"I'm going to meditate. Somehow now, I think I'll be able to block out you and everything you stand for."

It was meant to hurt, meant to drive me away—like everybody else during Hell Month. Which is why I didn't let it. Besides, I finally realized what had been bothering me:

"Bruce?" I had followed him to a dark area beyond the mats, his special place to reflect.

"Selina, it's easier to block out the thought of you if you're not actually here."

"The way I was taught to meditate, you don't block out extraneous thoughts, you let them have their moment, run their course, then you can move on. You must know that."

"..."

"So why?"

"..."

"Bruce? *Why?*"

"..."

He stood and looked down at me, stirring a powerful surge of *déjà vu*: We'd done this before, and so many times. All those galleries, all those rooftops, all those vaults. We both knew what we felt back then; it was palpable. But he wouldn't say it aloud. If he said it, he'd have to face it. Then, as now, he resented me for pushing the issue. Well... fine then... let him.

"So," I said frankly, "we're back to pink elephants?"

"What?" he looked incredulous, sounded incredulous — like the first time he saw I'd changed to purple. It was an improvement over sulky-hostile at least.

"Don't think about pink elephants.' It's worked so well up to now."

"..."

Déjà vu all over again. If he didn't speak back then, he was also stubborn, tenacious even, when *he* was the one who wanted an answer to something. I'd learned to be the same.

"The question, in case you forgot, is *WHY?*"

"You know why," he growled, irritated that the question wasn't going away. "To instill fear. They *DO* fear me. It will never happen again—not in my City, not in Crime Alley, not while I draw breath."

"This isn't about what you do out there. You want to turn up the heat every January, give them Hell, nobody is questioning that. This is about what you're doing in here, these last few days: not eating, not sleeping, burying yourself in a hole in the ground..."

"THE GRAVE IS NOT A HOLE IN THE GROUND!"

The shout echoed through the cavern. It was only after the last reverberation had stopped that he looked at me. I said nothing. No need. He'd heard it. Slip of the tongue. Paging Dr. Freud.

“The Cave is not a hole in the ground,” he said softly, correcting the slip. Then he said nothing, just looked up at a stalactite for a moment, then back at me. His eyes were searching, naked, pained, like that night in the vault a lifetime ago when he kissed me. “I let them die,” he whispered. “I let them die. I couldn’t save them. I wasn’t strong enough, or fast enough or... good enough to save them. I couldn’t save them that night, so why should I get to enjoy a normal life now? I... I don’t deserve a life.”

There it was: The Why. He was punishing himself because he lived and they died. He was starving himself, exhausting himself, refusing to dwell even momentarily on any part of his life that made him happy, because his guilt said he deserved to suffer.

Fortunately, Bruce is not a stupid man. He could deceive himself for so long by dressing this ritual up in a Batsuit, convincing himself it was part of the Mission. But now that his true motive was spoken, I had an ally, an unexpected ally, in Batman. The most rigid, domineering, autocratic, ruthless aspects of Batman, the Psychobat that’s been my adversary from the beginning, was suddenly my ace in the hole.

Batman was about intellect and discipline. He overruled his feelings, Bruce’s feelings, often enough when they conflicted with the almighty Mission. Now his intellect was confronted with an undeniable fallacy in those feelings:

“Of course you couldn’t save them, you were a child.”

And not just a fallacy, a fallacy that caused an injustice, the worst kind of injustice—a fallacy *that harmed an innocent*:

“You were ten years old, Bruce, there was nothing you could have done. You’re punishing yourself for something that isn’t your fault.”

The searching, vulnerable look was gone. Batman was in charge. He wasn’t going to stand by and see an innocent blamed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But for all the determined gleam in his eyes, he still didn’t speak. He wanted to right the wrong, that was his function, but he seemed at a loss on how to proceed.

“Come upstairs,” I offered, “it’s where the food is, and the sunshine, and the people who care about you.”

“All but one,” he said, slipping an arm around my waist. I felt a hand stroke my hair, and his lips grazed my forehead, just at the hairline. We went up to the manor. I was still hung over and he was exhausted, so Alfred took pity on us, served the dinner on a tray in front of the fireplace. We curled up on the big sofa and crashed for the night.

I know what you’re thinking: Batman taking a night off during Hell Month? Blasphemy! He said he wasn’t up to it, that his depleted physical condition made patrolling an unjustified risk. Personally, I think the Bat felt he owed the Man. This wasn’t over, far from it. But it was a beginning.

We really couldn't believe our luck.

Here we were, sitting on a beach—in Florida, no less—and (this was the clincher) it was Hell Month, and we were miles from Gotham.

For the first time in living memory, the big old coin in the sky had landed in our favor. We sighed happily, lying back, basking in the sunshine. Apparently, this was quite cold for The Keys. It was heavenly for us.

You might think it odd that a wanted criminal with characteristics such as ours could lie on a crowded beach in the sun without fear of arrest or deportation. It is easily explained, however.

Key West is an island. It is a small island. As one local put it: "Honey, (she called us Honey), there ain't nowhere to go to get away from folks, so you better learn to live with them." We believe this whole Live and Let Live attitude results from a great mixing of cultures. Spanish, Cubans, pirates, all living in close proximity with no choice but to tolerate the other guy's food, music, attire, or propensity to wreck ships, claim their cargo as salvage, and auction the booty in the local square. A similar attitude pervades the dank old corridors of Arkham, but it was nice to find it somewhere other than an asylum for the criminally insane.

That history of piracy and wrecking may also explain a certain rebel spirit that looks askance at authority and views what some call criminals with a more liberal eye. Indeed, Eddie claims that, on his first visit, the landlady at his bed and breakfast knew her guest was the notorious Riddler, but didn't care. His worst characteristic, in her view, was that he was "a Yankee," and that regrettable character flaw can be overlooked so long as you hand over your Gold Card at regular intervals.

Naturally, however, as we lay on the beach, none of that mattered. As ashamed as we are to admit it, Sly had been temporarily forgotten. We felt our limbs, aching from hours in the stolen BMW, begin to warm and loosen. We sighed again, listening as the waves softly crashed into the shore.

Our happiness was broken by snickering. In fact, no, this was less of a snicker and more of an outright giggle. Instinctively, and without opening our eyes, we reached to our left and punched Jack hard in the side.

"What wazzat for?" he whined. "Has Eddie discovered I switched his suntan lotion for cooking oil or something?"

We opened our eyes, ready to give Jack yet another lecture. In front of us stood two impossibly muscular blonde haired lifeguards, each trying to stifle a laugh behind well-toned hands.

There was an awkward pause as we tried to ignore this blatant rudeness. The men continued staring at the three of us.

"Can we help you gentlemen?" we asked, becoming increasingly exasperated.

"*L'Anglais en vacances,*" said muscle-bound moron number one to muscle-bound moron number two. Two, for his part, gave up any attempt at stifling his chuckling, throwing back his head and laughing. He was joined shortly by his friend. We were outraged.

"Gentlemen! We're not English!" we said, hoping that the tiny amount of French we knew hadn't failed us. The two laughed even more as they walked away.

We looked over ourselves, Jack, and Eddie. We were wearing swimming shorts. One half was white, made of figure hugging spandex. The other half was black, made of coarse feeling nylon and was much baggier. Eddie wore a body length green swimming costume dotted with little black question marks. He still wore his eye mask. It wasn't actually a swimming costume—he had simply managed to shrink his regular costume in the wash whilst on Iceberg hiatus. Joker wore outlandishly large goggles with a snorkel attached to the side, flippers, armbands and extremely small purple speedos with a tiny yellow smiley face on. His skin, white as marble, looked satirically out of place in the surroundings.

We had absolutely no idea what the David Hasselhoff fan club had meant.

We resolved to not let it trouble us, reasoning that we were on holiday and should enjoy that fact.

"OK. I'm gonna go swim with the fishies. Just like so many of my victims before me. Heh. Tanning ain't really my thing," Joker said, waddling theatrically toward the sea in his black flippers with a slapping sound as the plastic met the sand beneath. We couldn't help but think of Oswald. "Don't you boys do anything I wouldn't whilst I'm gone. So, that means writing 'ass' in sun tan lotion on some sleeping loser's back and pissing in the shallow end are most definitely good to go! HAHAAHA!"

Eddie growled as he watched him go.

"I always did wonder who did that to me at Penguin's last pool party. Hugo told me it was Ubu, but I was far too keen on my life to ask."

We laughed.

"Never mind, Eddie. People forgot about it. Eventually."

Eddie shuddered despite the heat from the sun. Apparently, for the Keys, this is quite cold. We believe that's something people from Florida say to make us mainlanders feel better about our subarctic climate.

"Anyway, Harv. That's not important. Have you given our little quest any thought?"

What with the Nightwing problem, we realized, we had actually given Sly surprisingly little thought.

"Yeah, loads," we answered.

"Let's hear it then."

"Hear what?"

"Your plan!"

"Oh! Uh... well, we're... gonna need four ski masks, a really large cotton sack, some kind of baton..."

Eddie laughed.

"Proving once and for all that the old adage 'Two heads are better than one' is not applicable to those with two faces."

We decided not to tell him that Jack had switched his lotion. He continued: "Question: Why not just go and talk to him? You're probably the best person—should that be people?—for the job."

We had visions of Joker threatening to kill all of Sly's new clientele with Smilex-laced custard pies unless he came home. It was our turn to shudder.

"We don't know, Eddie. What if Sly doesn't want to speak to us? Maybe he finally had his fill of sweeping up shattered glass from the skylight and cleaning blood from

tables? Maybe he just wants a normal life—and who are we to try and take that from him?” Despite our best efforts, we couldn’t keep a bitter tang from our words.

Eddie glanced over at us knowingly.

“That’s a lot of questions, Harv. And speaking as someone who is very well-versed in that particular art, I’ll say this: A question needs an answer. If only for piece of mind. If you don’t go and speak to Sly, you will never know what might have happened. You will always curse yourself for not having at least tried. What have you got to lose? Answer—nothing. But you’ve also got everything to gain.”

We sighed. We hated it when Eddie went through this Mahatma Gandhi routine. He had a point, though. And his plan wasn’t too bad, we supposed. We and Sly had always got on well. In many respects, we had been each other’s bastion of sanity in The Arkham Asylum Bar and Grille, otherwise known as The Iceberg Lounge.

Our musings were broken by a commotion coming from the water. We sat up.

Joker, armbands and all, was floundering pitifully in the water.

“Uh, guys... I’ve just remembered—I can’t swim—Heh, heh, heh gurgle splutter.” He broke off as he began sinking underneath the salty foam and his mouth began to fill with water.

We shrugged, and laid back down. Sighing heavily, Eddie dragged us up by the arm until we were both standing.

“What?!” Two-Face asked him incredulously, more than happy to let the little shit drown. He gave us a glare. We looked over at the sinking clown. His hand was the only thing visible now. His fingers were counting down from five as they do in cartoons to signify how much air he had left. We sighed, Harv winning this particular moral battle. “OK. OK.”

With that, we both ran to the water. After a few minutes struggling, we emerged carrying the deranged, and no longer breathing, clown on our shoulders. We threw him down on the sand.

Eddie crouched at his side, pressing an ear to Jack’s chest.

“He’s not breathing!” he pronounced. Eddie’s crowning moment was when he appeared as an extra in E.R.

Within seconds, one of the Hasselhoff brothers had appeared. Attached to his ankle was one of those stupid little red life buoys that all lifeguards seem to carry. Pointless in this case, as Jack was on dry land, but we were not able to point that out as the buoy had skipped on the sand and smacked us in the face.

We cursed.

Ignoring us, the lifeguard dropped to the floor. Taking a moment to do a couple of press-ups (much to the glee of some of the female observers), he looked up at me and Eddie.

“Do any of you know the kiss of life?”

“Hell no!” we said, stepping backward. We do actually know it (when you play games like we and Ivy used to, you need to), but definitely not in this case.

“In that case, I’m going in,” said the lifeguard. We turned away, wincing.

"We never—and The Joker means NEVER—speak of that incident again," Joker said, sitting on the corner of his hotel bed, a serious expression on his normally cheery features.

We and Eddie nodded. That was more than fine by us. Joker's shrieking upon waking could easily have been mistaken for whales mating and may have short-circuited the Gulf ecosystem for at least a month.

"I would rather have died than endured that," Joker continued to rant. "He should have known that. Hence, a suitable revenge has been arranged. Don't think that you will escape punishment just because I enjoy tormenting you both. If you mention it, ever, to anyone, I'll carve a smiley face onto your foreheads with a shovel. And that's just for starters. Suffice it to say that Smilex **will** be involved in some shape or form."

We nodded meekly. We are glad that Eddie did not point out at this point that, ever since the 1960's, Key West has been famous for its free and welcoming attitude towards homosexuals. Indeed, the brochure Eddie had read claimed that the area was 'a closet with no doors.' We doubted Jack would have seen the funny side of it. For once.

Suddenly, the door of the room burst open, almost flying off its hinges.

Framed in the doorway was Tom Blake. Catman.

He looked for all the world like a feline version of Norman Bates. His clothes were unkempt, his hair also. His eyes glittered dangerously at us, the psychotic gleam more prevalent than usual. His face was framed in a scowl The Bat would have been proud of. Atop his lip, which had disappeared into a menacing little line, sat his handlebar moustache, curling upward at the edges. This had the most disconcerting effect of reminding us of the horns atop Satan's enormous forehead, but we quickly dismissed the comparison. Blake was turning far redder than the Dread Lord could probably manage anyway.

He pointed one shaky gloved finger at us. We actually felt a twitch of fear tugging at our chest. We had never seen the little furball this angry, and he was surprisingly intimidating.

"You..." he managed to rasp huskily, still pointing at us, "You accursed deuce... you left us at the side of the road... with a man who goes by the undoubtedly stolen name of 'Billy Bob Jonah Jim'... For my money, that defies all normal confines of Western society in that he has two first names too many and one last name too few... Anyway—it turns out that not only is Mr. BBJJ an unwitting follower of Fascism and the Neo Nazi movement, he is also..."

Catman shuddered here as if the recollection was painful for him—he continued, swallowing hard as he did so.

"A dog lover. As if that situation were not despicable enough by its own merit, he then proceeded to tell me that whenever the chance came by, he would run over cats in his truck. And seeing as how my friends had taken his truck—how I quarreled at the use of the word 'friends' as illustrated by the same brazen act of treachery he took issue with—he would be forced to take out this particular cat with his bare hands. Naturally, I paraphrase and censor the more obscene sentences."

Catman took another step into the room, still pointing at us accusingly.

"I attempted flight. But for a man of such dubious moral character, he was surprisingly swift. I attempted to blend into a nearby hedge, hoping the potent incantations in my cloak would create a chameleonlike effect. Unfortunately, however,

BBJJ appears to be immune to my magic,” said Catman, gesturing to a previously unseen nasty looking bruise above his left eye. “After a long and exhausting run, I realized I had managed to lose him. It was no surprise, of course. I once tracked a lioness for three days as I felt I needed a new rug. This was nothing but a stroll along the asphalt for an athlete such as I. From there, it was only a matter of time before I managed to commandeer the use of a car from a local job. You were easy enough to track down, of course. Most of the locals were only too happy to tell me where I could find a man with two faces, a man adorned in question marks, and a man dressed like a clown.”

“I knew we should have bought those fake moustaches when we had the chance!” said Jack, slapping his forehead in disgust.

We turned from him to Blake, swallowing nervously. Joker’s gag had only infuriated the mercurial toff more.

“Tom—we’re sorry—it was the coin—we flipped it—you know how things go...” We didn’t get a chance to finish our half-hearted (literally—Two-Face was proud of his part in proceedings) apology as Blake sprang at us with a roar.

We began rolling around on the floor of our hotel room, leveling punches on each other with neither combatant gaining the upper hand. Then Eddie and Jack joined in. It wasn’t clear who they were supporting, but the vase, ornately carved antique wooden chair, and complimentary shampoo bottle they threw into the swirling melee didn’t really help either man.

Moments later, the shotgun-wielding hotel proprietor politely asked us to leave. We did.

This was actually the second hotel we had been asked to leave. The first was La Concha Hotel in the downtown area. You may have heard of it—it was made famous by Tennessee Williams, as it was here that he rewrote ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ into the famous play that we all know and love today. A plaque on the wall in the lobby also claimed that this hotel had seen such famous residents as Ernest Hemingway and Truman Capote. It seems to us that everywhere in The Keys has a Hemingway story attached to it.

Still, there is no doubt that a musty yet delicious air of history hung over that hotel. Understandably, they didn’t take too well to Jack turning his bed into a trampoline and we were asked to leave.

Consequently, we found ourselves out on our ear for a second time. We and Catman had declared our contest a draw; it was the only conclusion that would not result in more fighting and Blake stubbornly refused to flip for it.

We reached the third hotel, stepped into the lobby, and announced to the assembled rogues that it would really not be suitable. Out of principle, you understand.

We eventually settled for the fourth hotel we came across. It was a little shabbier than the other three, but by this time, we were all so tired that we just didn’t care so long as we could get some shuteye.

We can confirm a rumor: Joker *does* tell jokes in his sleep. And if you thought the jokes he tells while he is awake are bad, then you haven’t heard anything yet.

Let’s put it like this. Of his dormant repertoire, that one about the octopus and the barman was by far the best one of the evening. We shudder at the thought.

Our merry band walked through the crowded town square enjoying the sights, sounds, and smells that lent this beautiful place its character. It was getting late, having spent the day on the beach again, fortunately this time a lot more uneventfully. For city slickers like us, we cannot begin to explain just how wonderful lounging on a beach is. There is simply nothing like the warm grains between the toes to put us in a good mood.

Being able to wander around or merely hang around in broad daylight was also wonderful. Not having to look over your shoulder every five minutes, not listening intently for the sound of a batarang flying through the air or a siren.

We're not going to claim we don't deserve retribution for many of our actions. Half of the time, when I let things slip, we are a ruthless cold-hearted murderer. That's a terrible burden to live with, but it's one I face up to on a regular basis. It was nice to take a holiday from that too, I suppose. A break from the violence, hatred and anger was just what I needed.

You're probably wondering where Darth Duplicity was during this. We had managed to pacify Two-Face with promises of bikinis and tan lines, and he was far from disappointed. We insisted on buying a pair of sunglasses, however, reasoning that if he was going to leer, we didn't want people to see it and think we were one and the same. It is an easy mistake to make for the uninitiated.

The evening soon dawned. A red sun sank into a dark sea, the night sky orange and immeasurably beautiful. The nightlife in Key West really has to be seen to be believed—we can't accurately do it justice, so we'll leave it to your imagination. Suffice it to say: wild is an understatement.

We had reasoned that we would go off and find Sly whilst the rest of the gang would go and entertain themselves elsewhere. Maybe we weren't thinking straight when we came up with that plan, too busy concentrating on being persuasive to realize the obvious problem with it.

Joker, Riddler and Catman... In a new city? With no-one (i.e. us) to keep them in check? As we would realize later on that evening, the plan had not been one of our better ones.

At that moment, though, we were far too buoyant to be worried. It was a beautiful evening, Batman and his temper tantrums were nowhere in sight, and we would soon be reunited with an old friend.

We asked a local woman for directions. After the initial and expected shock of our appearance, she was most helpful and courteous in explaining to us just where Sly's bar was. She even offered to draw me a little map. We politely declined, thanked her with a warm smile and a peck on the cheek, and wandered off.

As we walked down the cobbled streets, we marveled at the encounter. We are pleased to report it is typical. Everyone around here is so incredibly *nice*! We can imagine why Sly likes it here.

It's like we always say. Nice people plus nice people equals a cacophony of niceness that is simply wondrous to behold. Well, we always say it when we are drunk, anyway.

We reached the bar with little difficulty. We laughed slightly as we saw it. It was very normal on the outside in terms of bars, the only thing to distinguish it was the

word 'Sly's' in red lights. We were glad to learn he hadn't changed that much; he never had been the most inventive of fellows.

We sighed heavily. It was now or never. The whole damn point of our trip rested on our shoulders! Now was, in fact, the moment.

We dusted ourself off, inspected our teeth for spinach in one of the car's wing mirrors, dabbed at our hair, took one last long determined breath, and pushed open the door of Sly's bar.

Of all my objections to Jonathan Crane—and it is a lengthy list—the one point I will concede is that sometimes Fear has a purpose. Sometimes, fear is nature’s way of saying: Whoa there, Sundance, you sure you want to be jumping off that cliff, what with the rocky bed of the Colorado River churning 300 feet below?

Sometimes, Fear has a point.

Of all the little expressions having to do with cats—and I’ve heard ‘em all—the one that really burns my butt is ‘fraidy cat. The cat has eight more lives than you do, Pal. If you’re charging forward and she’s hanging back, you might want to stop and consider the possibility that she knows something you don’t.

‘Fraidy cat.

Intimacy is scary stuff. Much as I... love... Bruce, much as I’m happy to have helped him, I can’t help but feel we’ve crossed a line—a very serious line. Like the masks. The first time we made love without masks. After he was asleep, I crept into the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub. I sat there for an hour, naked, staring into the darkness. The thought I couldn’t shake: it was never supposed to happen. We’d convinced ourselves Batman and Catwoman could never get past that fundamental impasse: he is a crimefighter; I am—or was—a thief.

We had done things as Bat and Cat; we’d tasted, taunted, and torn at each other... because it was safe. Everything was allowed because nothing could ever come of it. And now, suddenly, Batman and Catwoman were gone, like a spell broken at the stroke of midnight, and Selina found herself looking into the eyes of a lover who said his name was Bruce. It was a lot to process.

Compared to the cave, that hour on the edge of the tub was nothing.

He was hurting. He was in pain. And I wanted to help. I’m *glad* I could help. But the helping took us somewhere nobody is supposed to go: Inside his head... Inside his soul... I don’t need to understand him that well. I don’t need to understand *anything* that well.

Now what? Was he entitled to crawl inside my skin just as deeply? It sure seemed like it. Inside my heart and my soul. It was never supposed to happen *AT ALL!*

...

...

... I know I’m overreacting.

Lack of sleep will do that to you. Your perceptions go wonky. The last real sleep I had was the post-Iceberg catnap, which, considering the martinis and jetlag, may not count as actual sleep. The cave was draining. And after that, even a lazy evening purring in his lap turned into a nightmare. Literally. We were dozing in front of the fire when I felt this spasm shoot out from under me. It was Bruce’s arm, twitching, and he was moaning.

I’d heard about wives of combat veterans waking up in a stranglehold when those night-terrors take hold. It’s never happened to me, although Bruce’s nightmares are a regular occurrence. Still, these dreams were obviously a lot worse than normal. Understandable, I suppose. Between Hell Month and the ordeal in the cave, his dreams were worse than normal. The more serious complication was that he was so exhausted he wouldn’t wake up. I soothed him as best I could: stroking his brow, whispering that he was safe and at home, assuring him the horrors weren’t real, only a

dream and an echo. It would seem to work for a while, and then just as I'd start to doze off myself, he would start twitching... or shaking... or moan again. It made for an awfully long night.

Morning came, finally. Alfred brought a tray around seven. Juice, coffee, muffins... I tried to apologize for spending the night on the couch, but in my frazzled state it came out: "About the alfred, sorry, sofa. Too tired, move not..."

That's when he shushed me.

"Don't trouble yourself, miss. It is not unusual for Master Bruce to go wandering the night before the 'anniversary.' I am well accustomed to having to search for him in the morning. This year, the task was much easier than usual, as I see neither of you has moved from where I left you last evening. As Master Bruce is not awake yet, I shall leave the coffee here and go about my business."

There was an elaborate casualness the way he said it: "As Master Bruce is not awake yet..." An overly deliberate airiness I recognized from—it took me a minute to place it—from *the Rogues*:

..."Gotham is so cold in January, I think I'll just pop down to South America and see how many species of orchids grow in the rainforest."

..."Croc visit swamp now. Good time, no tourists."

..."Calloo callay, Hat Expo in Bombay."

..."I left something on the stove at the HA-HAcienda in Mexico, HAHAHAHAAAA."

And now... "Since he's not awake, I'll just leave the coffee here."

It all amounted to the same thing, a fancy way of saying: I prefer to be wherever he isn't right now.

The arrival of a new groupie at the Iceberg Lounge was always an occasion for speculation among the regulars. Whenever a new one arrived, the first thing the villains would do was try to deduce which of them the newcomer admired. The homemade costumes were a good clue, always either mimicking or complimenting the chosen rogue's theme.

In the case of the new girl, her costume consisted of a smoky gray leotard and full-face mask. It was not unlike the getup that made that NightThief character look so much like a potato, but on this girl's trim young frame, the effect was most becoming. Only Scarecrow didn't think so. He likened it to the ruched see-through bodice Gweneth Paltrow wore to the Oscars: "Showing off what, I ask you? Flat breasts ruched down to a non-existent waist."

Mad Hatter disagreed the loudest. "That girl is as frabjous as a Jabberwock!" he declared. Hugo Strange agreed. Both had noticed black curls painted up and down the length of the costume and hoped they were meant to suggest hypnotic spirals. If so, they were both in the running as the villain the girl doted on, and each was mentally redecorating his hideout to accommodate the new henchwench.

When they learned the curls were not hypno spirals but wisps of smoke, and the costume was meant to salute Firefly the pyromaniac, both Hatter and Hugo revised their opinion.

“A frumious bandersnatch,” Jervis announced, causing Hugo to mutter something by way of agreement that raised eyebrows even at the Iceberg bar.

Beneath the newcomer’s mask, Cassie Cain decided the exact tendons she would sever in punishment for that remark when Batgirl next encountered Hugo Strange. She then smiled, pleased that her disguise was such a success. She took a seat at the bar and reveled in her proximity to the adored one, the Adonis tending bar, Gregory Brady.

“Are you wearing those shoes? You might want flats if it’s muddy.”

That was the first inkling I had that he was expecting me to *accompany him* to the gravesite. He brought me to the alley last year, but it wasn’t planned. It’s just the way it played out. Because we quarreled, and because we were together when he had some sort of epiphany about the past.

I rummaged in the little corner of his dressing room where I keep a few things, looking for a pair of flat-heeled shoes and reflecting on the RBD Theory.

RBD Theory is Joker’s brainchild. It says: All it takes to turn one of *them* into one of *us* is a **Really Bad Day**. The Quinn AA-Postulate, added a few months later, is as follows: in the throes of a RBD, *anyone* is capable of *anything*.

The vehemence with which any given individual will argue the RBD Theory depends on whether or not they’ve had one.

I haven’t.

However, I have heard Harvey Dent go off on the subject a number of times. And all I can say is: I didn’t know Harv in his prosecuting days, but when he argues RBD Theory, I get a glimpse of the brilliant advocate he once was. If that acid hadn’t scarred his face, creating Two-Face one RBD in August at the Gotham County Courthouse, I have no doubt he would be Governor Dent, Ambassador Dent, or Chief Justice Dent today.

Was I in the midst of a RBD, I wondered?

The disguised Batgirl first realized something was amiss when the villain known as Crazy Quilt entered the Iceberg Lounge. He looked exactly as he did in his mugshots: a pencil thin mustache... a patchwork costume of yellow, red, and blue... a helmet which threw colored light of those hues onto his victims’ faces, causing disorientation. He sat next to her at the bar, ordered a Mud Slide, and launched into a spiteful diatribe against Robin.

Robin thwarted him in the early days, it was said. He held a grudge. Robin was his particular nemesis—like Sideshow Bob had Bart Simpson. Robin was the ruin of all his great plans. He could a’ been a contender!

He didn’t seem to distinguish between the Robin of then and the Robin of today. But that was not what troubled Cassie. What bothered her was that he wasn’t supposed to be here at all.

To select a villain on which to model her disguise, Cassie had researched “B-List” rogues recently captured outside of Gotham. That way, she could be sure the villain

her 'groupie' cover supposedly admired did not actually show up. There was no shortage of names to choose from; almost everyone was out of town for Hell Month. Crazy Quilt was one of those she considered, gone to Keystone City and apprehended only last Thursday by The Flash.

So how could he be sitting next to her drinking a Mud Slide?

Was I in the midst of a RBD?

Well, I was standing on a hill on a particularly gray corner of the vast Wayne property, where the family has interred their own since Robert Wayne wrested the manorship from the Dutch in 1679. I knew this because the little stone plaque honoring the event was the only place to stand without sinking ankle deep into the snow. It was nearly an hour since Bruce hugged me and disappeared over the far side of the hill where the more recent generations were buried. By now, I could tell you the complete saga of First Manorlord Robert, the first Wayne in America, son of Joseph "the Uncompromising," who left Scotland to seek his fortune in the New World when the family ran afoul of the new English king...

It was never supposed to happen at all, that's all I'm saying. From scuffling on a penthouse terrace so he won't notice the timer to creeping from his bed so he won't feel me trembling... not supposed to happen. From swinging the whip handle across a throat not shielded by body armor, to running my fingers through hair not covered by a cowl... what were the chances? From "the easy way or the hard way" to "My name is Bruce; I'd like to hear you to say it." From a humid rooftop in July, toying with the emblem on his costume, looking for a moment's indecision to kick an incriminating knapsack over the edge... to a freezing hilltop in January, reading how Robert Wayne infiltrated the Nieuw Nederland colony, earned the trust of the Iroquois by learning their language, and exposed a criminal enterprise in the fur trade.

A shadow fell across the snow, the bottom of an overcoat billowing like a cape. That he could cast a shadow when it was so gray and overcast was one of his creepier mysteries. What was even creepier was the way that, apart from the pointy ears, the shadows looked so similar in costume and out.

I turned and looked at him. He seemed better... There was a tiny mark of a dried tear on his cheek, but apart from that he looked... calmer... Something about the way he stood was both relaxed and resolved. While I paused, searching for something to say, he leaned in and... kissed me. That was, frankly, creepier than his casting a shadow without sun. It was a good kiss; don't get me wrong. Long... loving... tender but... nonsexual, if you know what I mean... Pure...

I shivered.

'Fraidy cat.

"Let's head back," he said finally, "I'm famished."

"My battle against the Batman raged on!" Signal Man narrated with dramatic flare, "Until chance intervened. A bystander, young boy, wandered too close to the fight. The Batman was distracted. The moment's diversion was all I needed, and I struck! Clubbing him into unconsciousness! I bound his inert form and encased him INSIDE THE BAT-SIGNAL! What a triumph! An anonymous tip called in to that fool Gordon,

and he raced to the roof to light the bat beacon! The Batman would have been fried in his own signal!”

“It’s the ‘would have been’ that robs the tale of panache,” Oswald observed dryly.

“That and the fact that you tell it incessantly,” Hugo grumbled.

“You must picture the scene,” Signal Man insisted, gesturing to the bartender to refill his glass with the blend of hot coffee, whiskey and amaretto known as Tennessee Mud. “Imagine my loathed foe waking up to see that bat on the glass right in front of his face! It was a triumph, I tell you!”

The only Iceberg patron that didn’t groan at the outburst was the new groupie they’d dubbed ‘Smoke.’ The rogues assumed she was attentive only because she hadn’t heard the story before, 19 or 20 times, as all of them had. In fact, the reason for her rapt attention was puzzlement. Batgirl had confirmed, through a hurried communication with Oracle, sent over her touchpad-OraCom from the Iceberg washroom, that Crazy Quilt was indeed in Iron Heights prison in Keystone City. Yet he appeared at the Iceberg. Now he was gone, but in his place, actually seated on the same barstool, was another villain that Cassie’s research told her should be incarcerated on the other side of the country!

Green Arrow, the Emerald Archer who had been such a lively guest at the satellite cave that night, had captured Signal Man in Star City last Saturday!

So how could he be sitting next to her now drinking Tennessee Mud?

On the walk back, I jettisoned all thoughts of the RBD Theory. It was comfortable, walking along, talking. Bruce was in good spirits, like a weight had been lifted. He talked about making lunch himself.

Cut to Alfred’s kitchen twenty minutes later, Bruce had me seated on a stool, watching, while he laid slices of lunchmeat on toasted bread.

“Now, heated turkey on one slice, sprinkle with a little pepper, ham on the other slice, sprinkle with a touch of garlic, and just a hint of oregano—the real stuff—very important, not the generic kind from a supermarket. You listening, Kitten?”

I nodded... I may have nodded off actually; because the next thing I knew, there was talk of melting cheese and a dash of paprika.

“Then I do sliced up cucumber... a little lettuce... and a pickle.”

I could have kicked him off that terrace all those years ago and nobody would have been the wiser.

“In the dining room?” he was asking, handing me a plate, “or better still, there’s a fire in the library. It’ll be cozy.”

Cozy. Home and hearth mode. Shudder.

We ate... he talked about his parents... the portrait over the fireplace....

“I remember my mother wearing that dress. It was my father’s birthday. She gave him... something to do with ships?”

I listened while he talked. I didn’t know if he was aware of my sleepless night. You’d think he should be, great detective and all. It would be obvious from the bags under my eyes. What I really wanted to know was: did he know why? Did he remember his nightmares? Did he know he spent the night writhing and moaning?

I'd consider asking, but not after last year. I didn't know anything about Hell Month then. I had no idea why the dreams were getting worse. So I told him. His reaction was... ugly. Hurtful. I'd never seen him like that.

"A model sailboat, that was it, the kind you steer with a radio control..."

Now, Catwoman has a rule: Rule #7. Never EVER cease a behavior or alter course because of what he's said or done in the past. If he went ballistic over a Monet, that was my cue to stick with the Impressionists for a while. Or if he grumbled because I used the signal to call him, I'd make a point of doing it again by the end of the month. But the dreams, well, obviously, that's a different animal.

'Fraidy cat? Or a prudent pussy negotiating a Really Bad Day? You tell me.

The light in the room reddened, and the shadows lengthened. Soon it would start to get dark. So would he...

He told me about the ritual of Anniversary Patrol. It wasn't a ritual in his mind, it was sound strategic thinking: Batman always patrolled the city twice each night: early patrol and late patrol. On this date, he observed his parents' deaths by visiting Crime Alley. But it would be sacrilege if this visit allowed a crime to be committed that he otherwise would have prevented, if innocents were victimized because of his observance. So he would still cover the full route of his early patrol, looking in on all the locations—but he was on the clock.

If God forbid he found criminal activity, they weren't just committing a crime on the hallowed day, they were threatening his schedule. He knew if it took him too long to dispatch the perpetrators and if he suffered more interruptions later, he could conceivably not make it to the alley before dawn. Bruce said he was aware that factor made him more 'agitated' in these encounters. (Dick had a different way of phrasing it: "Like something you only see in Rocky movies," while Tim said: "Tyson fights. Violent, brutal and wicked fast.")

By now, the light outside the window had faded and the city across the river glimmered like a jewel. The sixth sense that told me Batman was near quivered. We'd been together all day, but only now did I feel the tingle. And I knew he was looking at it too... out the window... his city. I knew too that he was about to speak, and when he did, the voice would be the deep gravel of the Bat.

"I better get going."

I smiled, kissed his cheek, and stood to gather my things.

"Just as well," I said, collecting my bag, "you wouldn't know it to look at me, but I haven't had much rest since Paris. I can't wait to get home, draw a nice bath and—"

"No."

"..."

I paused, because that is one of those words you want to be very sure you heard correctly before responding. Giving it due reflection, I was satisfied I had, in fact, heard the deep Batman gravel saying exactly what I thought it said. But just to make sure, I prodded:

"Excuse me?"

"I said No. I don't want you leaving. I want you to be here when I get back."

Like a spaniel.

Like Krypto, the goddamn faithful wonder mutt.

I was trying to be supportive and patient. I was trying to finesse the whole no sleep, hangover, cave, jetlag, freezing hilltop, and new mood of unnerving togetherness. But there are some things a self-respecting feline simply does not let pass.

"You seem to be confusing me with someone you get to order around," I said, "I don't do 'sit and stay' and I especially don't--"

"No. I want you here tonight. Honestly, I don't understand why you haven't moved in full time."

"..."

That's the last really solid memory I have.

I know I was still standing there alone after he'd left, trying to process those last words spoken before he vanished:

"Think about it. We'll talk about it when I get back."

When Firefly, a villain Cassie knew *for a fact* was hospitalized in Keystone City, entered the Iceberg Lounge a scant twenty minutes after Signal Man left, the disguised Batgirl decided to take action. He sat on that same barstool next to her, and began instructing Bartender Brady how to make a shooter called a Clay Pigeon: "Vodka. Apple Juice. Stir."

Her vocabulary was limited, but not so limited that she couldn't tell this imposter, point blank, that the real Garfield Lynns, a.k.a. Firefly, onetime Hollywood F/X wiz turned criminal pyromaniac, ran afoul of a Flash villain called Heat Wave and was currently laid up in the hospital ward of Iron Heights Prison.

The ersatz Firefly pulled her into a quiet alcove away from the bar, near the door to Oswald's office. Those who saw the move tittered, assuming Firefly was picking up his option, deciding to make the devoted groupie Smoke into an official henchwench.

Instead, the moment they were alone and out of sight of the bar patrons, "Firefly" morphed. The hand that clutched Cassie's elbow melted into a thick muddy ooze - that still maintained a surprisingly strong hold on her as the man before her twisted and glurped into a massive bulk of grayish brown clay.

Batgirl's warrior instincts kicked in and she delivered several crippling blows to the creature's arms and torso - what should have been crippling blows - except that the torso just softened on contact, allowing her punches and chops to pass through without resistance, spattering a bit of muck onto the walls, but inflicting no damage on her target.

Screaming for help was not Batgirl's style, but even if it had been, one of the cloying clay appendages snaked around her mouth, making even guttural battle cries impossible. Breathing became difficult when the gooey claw stretched over her nose, and her struggling slowed. An alarming rushing sound rose in Cassie's ears and the sight of her attacker blurred into spots before her eyes. And then.... nothing. The crushing foe was pulled away from her.

Realization flooded with the first full breath. Leafy vines were coiled through four separate mounds of dirt that had once been the solid mass of her attacker. The vines held the tiniest drops of animated mud in place with tenacious grasping roots.

“Hello, Hagen,” the pleased voice of Poison Ivy sang from the doorway, “I would have thought you learned your lesson last time, Clayface. But no matter, a great mass of potting soil like you is just what I require to fertilize my new babies.”

I went down to the cave and put on the catsuit. I think better in the catsuit. Usually. Tonight, I only managed to freak myself out even more. At first, I couldn't find the damn thing. I'd forgotten — note to self: I've GOT to get some sleep soon — I'd forgotten I left it in the costume vault when I went in and discovered the shelf smashed to bits.

The catsuit — MY catsuit — Catwoman's catsuit — in *his* vault.

Like Catwoman is something that belongs to him. *“We'll talk about it when I get back... I want you here tonight...I want you here when I get back”*

... I want you waiting here where I tell you to be, because you're mine now, my little kitty cat. Property of Batman. We'll get that insignia tattooed on your pretty backside any day now...

... Selina, I've decided Batwoman would be a more appropriate guise for you from now on. I'll be flying you to Mr. Kittlemeier's for a fitting this afternoon...

...of course you can't leave against my wishes, Selina. Remember all those times Catwoman got away when, let's face it, we both know you wouldn't have if you were anyone else... you owe me, Kitten. I'm calling in the marker...

There was a click and those new, modified Batcuffs were on my wrist. *“We'll talk about it when I get back.”* He couldn't possibly think those would hold me. I was out in seconds. Dashed upstairs and... something was wrong. The moment the grandfather clock closed behind me, I could tell something was wrong.

The ornaments, for one thing. It's an occupational hazard. Walking through a doorway, Catwoman catalogues a room's contents like other people wipe their shoes on the mat. The first thing I noticed, there was a bright Impressionist landscape where the picture of Bruce's parents was supposed to be. Instead of the wrought iron bookstand with a first edition of CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, there was a little mound of needlepoint and an old-fashioned wooden tennis racquet. In the corner, in place of Michael the Archangel, there was a spray of rhododendrons, a radio controlled model sailboat, and a roll of wrapping paper.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, dear,” a crisp voice said behind me, “Alfred would have offered you some tea, but, you see, we're having a dinner party tonight. It's my husband's birthday, and I'm afraid the setup has proven slightly more complicated than the staff anticipated.”

I turned, knowing what I would see: Martha Wayne in the smart, tailored dress from the portrait. She sat at the desk and consulted a sheet of paper as she spoke:

“Now then, Selina, isn't it? I see you're going to be moving in soon. About time he got around to that. Of course, you could have helped him along, my dear. Men want encouragement for that sort of thing. And, if I may say, you haven't entirely been doing your bit. Considering the way you began, I mean. You used to be the aggressive one, weren't you? ‘You're part of the night just like me,’ ‘How hard do you want it to get,’ etc.”

Again, she looked at the paper, as if it was a resume and I was a job applicant—actually, more like I was already on staff and that paper was my annual review. When she continued, it was with a tsk-tsk quality that was pure Bat:

“And yet, despite this admirable beginning, it seems as though my son has been taking the initiative since this situation began to develop: sending the note that brought you to the opera house roof for that first date, kissing you in the vault, following to your apartment, inviting you to Xanadu, revealing his identity, he was the first to say ‘I love you’...”

“Now look here,” I cut in, because Catwoman’s Rule #4 states that you never, ever allow that Bat-tsk-tsk routine to go on for more than six seconds. It was seldom an issue with Batman, but with this woman...

“I’m not criticizing,” she went on seamlessly as if I hadn’t spoken, “you’ve more than evened the score with that scene in the cave yesterday. That was admirable, Selina, it really was. Opened him right up. Brought you both to the next level.”

“...”

“Close your mouth, dear. Ah, I see now, *that’s* the difficulty, isn’t it? *You* took the initiative this time. So now... what? You’re wary of the consequences? You’ve always done what you pleased up until now and damn the consequences, correct?”

“It’s different,” I stammered, “I *do* do whatever I please. But sometimes... well, sometimes that’s gotten me in over my head. And when that’s happened... damnit, whenever that happened he’s always been there to get me out.”

“Ah. And he obviously won’t be doing that if you get in too deep this time... You are quite the ‘fraidy cat, aren’t you, Selina.”

“He didn’t even ask,” I mentioned, feeling the focus of this little chat had really drifted off the point, “He just told me to stay. TOLD me. Told ME! Like I’m something that belongs to him. Nobody does that, nobody!”

“Look around, dear. It’s Wayne Manor. You notice that great big ‘W’ on the front gate? And the one on the mantelpiece. The one etched into every piece of silver in this house, embroidered on the table linens and the bedsheets, embossed on the corporate letterhead...”

While she went on listing items that were branded with the Wayne monogram, I thought of another series of items: the utility belts, the homing tracers, the batarangs, the lasers, the grapplers, the body armor, the handsets, the batcuffs, all with the emblem, the sleek silhouette of a bat...

“...and always inside an oval. It’s the way they are, the Wayne men, they like marking their territory. And there is a certain tendency to regard anything within that territory as theirs. But that’s nothing smart women like us can’t handle, now is it? One day, Selina, I really must show you a set of letters I received on my wedding day...”

“Excuse me, Martha,” a warm masculine voice interrupted, “Oh, I see you have a visitor. Selina, isn’t it? Thomas Wayne.” The new arrival took my hand as if to shake it, then lifted it and touched the fingers to his lips. “I hear you’ll be moving in soon. Well done, Kitty.” He winked then turned to his wife, “I just wanted to tell you Annie Hall is on television in the study. That scene you like so much, where Diane Keaton and Woody Allen move in together. She’s ready to give up her apartment, but he says ‘No, it’s like a floating lifeboat; why cut it loose.’ Ha, ha.”

He winked again... "Nice meeting you, Miss Kitty"... and left. I'm afraid I was staring after him. It was Bruce... Bruce's face, Bruce's voice... except... so...

Light.

Charming.

Carefree.

Martha must have read my thoughts because she said, "Almost like the Fop, but not shallow, not stupid... and not faked. Now you understand: What might have been, what's been lost. Does it really matter so much if he occasionally barks an order instead of wording it as a question? Come now, Selina, you of all people must know, a woman's role, like a cat's, often amounts to letting them believe they're in charge. It doesn't mean you can't get the sofa cushions arranged exactly the way you want them, have your catnip and caviar prepared to your liking, and your fur stroked exactly where you please. It merely requires a little feline finesse."

She paused, smiled, then added:

"So wake up and get to it, Kitten. Kitten. Kitten, wake up."

I blinked and Bruce was bending over me.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Love, but another night on that sofa is the last thing you need. Come up to bed."

The little voice in my head was quick to object: *C'mon, girl, come when called, like a good puppydog.* Instead, I looked up into his eyes, and caressed a fresh bruise on his cheek.

"Rough night?" I asked.

"I've had worse."

"Okay then. You can tell me about it in the morning."

Sly's is a rustic but comfortable establishment on the waterfront. He's done really well for himself, and we were extremely proud in an odd kind of paternal way.

Maybe that's what all this comes down to, we wondered. Harv and Gilda, despite their efforts, had remained childless. Although he was a little old for the role, we couldn't help but think of Sly as a sort of son, our lighthouse in the fog of insanity.

Things had, of course, become complicated during the Roxy Rocket affair. We suddenly realized we hadn't really spoken to Sly properly since. We cursed ourselves for our lack of forethought. We knew it had hurt him, and to see him hurt had hurt Harv in turn. Masochism is quickly becoming our trademark. The unresolved issue would no doubt make this potentially volatile discussion even trickier.

A smell of "Floribbean cooking" hung in the air, spicy and fragrant. For those who have never experienced it, you cannot imagine a smell so wonderful. It seems to caress your senses like a lover.

Ever the old romantic, eh Harv? Shut up, Two-Face.

There was a deck with some tables at the back of the bar. The deck looked out onto the sea—a picturesque setting to enjoy a drink that puts Oswald's *faux* ice chandeliers to shame. Inside, there are dollar bills taped to the walls, a tradition whose roots lie in the past. When sailors or fishermen were fairly well off, they would sign their name to a dollar and tape it to the wall. That way, if they were broke on some future visit, they could still be assured of a drink. Somehow, this idea has never caught on in the Iceberg.

This unique decorating gimmick started us thinking: Sly is often seen as laboriously normal by the rest of Oswald's clientele. This is not at all fair. He may be conventional compared to many of us, but that does not mean he is boring. He is a man of hidden depths previously obscured by the bizarre nature of those around him. This bit with the dollars on the walls: an attempt to please both the regulars (by showcasing their proud heritage) and the tourists (by presenting them with quirky decoration) was evidence of his clever business brain, one of his many qualities that would previously have remained hidden. We smiled as we looked around, noting iceberg-shaped salt and pepper dispensers on the tables that littered the room. It seemed to prove our point. What the locals undoubtedly saw as a note of whimsy had hidden significance to those of us in the know.

We looked up. The bar itself was a small island in the center of the room, the tables like little ships circumnavigating it. And there was Robinson Crusoe himself.

Sly squinted at us in disbelief.

"Mr. Dent? Is that you?"

We nearly laughed out loud. Who else could it have been?

"You bet it is," we said, striding towards him, a warm grin on half of our features. "How have you been, Sly?" we asked, reaching out our hand for a handshake.

"I'm good!" Sly said, wiping his hand on a novelty towel that depicted a map of The Keys before taking our outstretched hand and shaking it. "Good to see you, Mr. Dent, sir. Awfully good to see you. Far from home, aren't you?"

"We could say the same for you, son," we said, deciding to try and keep this as light as possible. Besides—telling him that we had driven for three days solid just to try and tempt him back to Gotham might not have been the best way to break the ice. "What

made you come all the way out here? We miss you! 'We' as in the gang en masse, not 'we' as in us... Oh hell," we said, feeling the color rising to our cheeks.

The sensation was strange. We hadn't felt this way since we tried to work up the courage to ask a young woman by the name of Gilda to our high school prom.

Sly chuckled amicably. "Of course, sir." Without asking, a double shot of double malt scotch whiskey appeared in front of us. We laughed happily.

"OK. We take it back, Sly. 'We,' as in *us*, miss you."

"Aw shucks, Mr. Dent, you'll embarrass me," Sly said, adopting a farm boy accent, dodging the compliment like a pro. We laughed again.

"Point taken. So... how have you been? What have you been up to?"

"Oh, I'm getting by. Getting adjusted. Learning all my new customers' names and preferences." As he said that, one of his regulars walked in. Before he had even reached the bar, Sly had prepared his favorite drink with a friendly nod. They exchanged a few pleasantries before the man retired to a table, allowing ourselves and Sly to continue talking.

"Impressive," we noted. "So... how've you settled into the area, then?"

"What's not to like? It's just like Mr. Nigma's letter said. The weather is wonderful, we're right on the beach, the women.... oh Mr. Dent...the women come in off the beach in bikinis. Won't see anything like that in Gotham. And of course the locals are very freespirited folks, just like the Iceberg except... well..." He trailed off. There was an awkward pause. We knew full well what he had stopped himself from saying, something to the effect of 'the locals here are flamboyant without being homicidal.'

The conversation was turning in a way we didn't like. Sly seemed happy here (we silently cursed) and actually seemed quite negative about his old watering hole. Two-Face stumbled into the argument like Killer Croc at an antiques roadshow.

"*Hey! We have attractive women in Gotham too! And the locals aren't ALWAYS... what was your word? Freespirited...*" We thought of the mayhem of this trip so far, realized it was not the best illustration of our point, and decided on a change of tack. "Well, I'm glad you're enjoying things here anyway. So when do you plan on coming home?"

"Coming home?" He had a look in his eye like he was about to tell us our hamster had died. "Oh... well, it's not like I don't miss everybody back at the Iceberg, but..." Sly paused. We felt our heart sinking. "This is home now."

"Oh. OK." We silently digested that, pain welling up in our chest.

Sensing this, Sly desperately tried to change the subject. "How is, er, everybody?"

Our lawyer instincts began working in overdrive. We had been reminded in earlier conversation of Sly's weakness for women—one of them in particular, whom he seemed to be alluding to now.

"They're all fine. *Roxy's doing well.*" We mentally bitch slapped Two-Face back to his kennel. This was going to be a very delicate train of conversation and we could do without his clumsiness. "Truth be told, we haven't seen much of her since... uh... the incident... we aren't seeing each other anymore, by the way." We could almost see his ears pricking up. We pressed on. "She talks about you a lot, though, and how much she misses you. Something about you being the only guy in the 'Berg who treated her like an equal rather than just another gimmickless wonder? We don't know..."

We trailed off, realizing that, for a guy who claimed to not see much of Roxy, we seemed to know a lot about how she felt. This momentary slip could bring us back to square one!

Fortunately, only four words of our rambling had mattered to Sly.

"She talks about me?" he asked, almost in wonder. Sly had clearly stopped listening to us at that point in our diatribe, as we had expected he would. Our impassioned speech appeared to be having the desired effect. What can we say? You don't get to be D.A. without being crafty now and again.

Sly served up a basket of grouper and fries to the flamboyant locals. It smelled heavenly. We eyed it hungrily. Seeing this, Sly pushed a small basket our way and topped up our drink.

We knew what his game was, but we were too hungry to care. What can we say? You don't get to be D.A. without taking the odd bribe here and there. And we were more than happy to swap information about Roxy for some of those sumptuous fries.

"Yeah," we said, "She does. She says how much she wishes she could see you again. Sly, we've got Hugo Strange running your bar at the moment. All he does is stare at her breasts all day. She misses the conversations you two used to have."

Sly tensed, like a dog hearing a suspicious noise.

"Dr. Strange is ogling her?" he said, twitching slightly.

"Kind of... we guess..." we said, moving away from him slightly. We fully expected him to rip open his shirt to reveal that blood red 'S' in the golden triangle, comb his hair into a kiss curl, and burst through the roof of the bar in a blaze of glory. We pressed on despite ourselves. "She always talks about how she could do with some nice guy to take her away from it all."

"Think she'd like to come to Florida?" Sly said, eagerly. We suddenly deflated and sighed, exasperated.

"That's not quite what we... uh... she had in mind. We think she's got family or something in Gotham. Besides—it's a big step to completely sever all links to a place and move away. It takes a lot of thought—can't really be done on impulse. We were worried you'd think you hadn't given it enough thought and would regret your decision..."

The basket of bayfries was slowly withdrawn as we spoke. We silently cursed again. There was a slight commotion over by the jukebox. We turned. The locals looked pleased with themselves. The opening chords to a familiar song were heard. Jimmy Buffet. Sly visibly slumped.

"They play an awful lot of Jimmy Buffet music down here."

We shuddered. "Yeah, we know." We looked longingly at the fries. "In the short time we've been here, we've become thoroughly sick of the old guy."

At the chorus, the locals started singing.

"Changes in latitude, changes in attitude, nothing remains quite the same... If we weren't all crazy, we would all go insane."

We groaned. We hate songs in which the lyrics could be applicable to the current situation.

"We really don't like him."

The fries inched closer.

"Neither do I. He's the one thing they don't tell you about in the brochures."

"You know, Sly," we said thoughtfully, "the jukebox in the 'Berg has no Jimmy Buffet stuff on it at all... ok, so there's far too much Brian Adams for our liking but still..."

Sly laughed. It was a strange, almost evil kind of laugh.

"Yeah, and if they ever had a singalong like this, Mr. Joker would shoot 'em all and let God sort them out."

Now we expected him to pull off his wig and reveal his true green hair and bone white skin. We inched away again.

"Can you imagine a sing song in the 'Berg?" we said, turning the screw as only a lawyer can, "Jeez, and you thought our karaoke parties were bad..."

...Changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes, nothing remains quite the same, through all of our running and all of our cunning, if we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane...

We made a mental note to ask Jack if he was a Jimmy Buffet fan. The basket of fries was inching closer. It seemed to us that it was acting as a barometer for how we were doing. The closer it was to us, the weaker Sly's resolve... the Jimmy Buffet medley was working its horrible magic... If we could just sneak a bite...

"Why just the other day, Roxy was telling us how much she hates Jimmy Buffet..."

"Stop it, Mr. Dent."

"What?"

We looked at Sly. He was smiling. He offered us the basket of fries. We took one and bit into it. Our palate was in raptures.

"I know what you're up to, Mr. Dent. I have from the minute you walked in here." We cursed. Maybe we should have taken Jack's advice about the sombrero? Sly continued. "And I'm flattered, I really am. It means an awful lot to me that you'd come all the way out here just to try and get me to come back to the 'Berg."

We held our breath.

"But I just don't know, Mr. Dent. If I was to come back..."

We were so close. We had almost got him. We weren't going to let him off the hook now. We were far too close!

"...What would I do about this place?" Sly continued. A waiter was passing, and we grabbed him by the arm, dragging him into the conversation.

"What's your name, sonny?" we snapped, our nerves beginning to fray as our desperation grew.

"Ken, sir."

"Look at this man, Sly! Ken can clearly be trusted! Ken is a name you can trust!" You would be forgiven for thinking we were running his election campaign, we thought ruefully. "You've got a whole host of loyal staff here, any one of them more than capable of running this place in your absence, we're sure."

He seemed to be wavering.

"Come on, Sly! Any of them would be able to handle the day to day operations of this place. And then you could mastermind the overall administration yourself. Think about it, Sly! You as the Mastermind, Ken as your loyal henchman — minion — deputy. We meant deputy. We said deputy, right?"

"But it's miles in between here and Gotham, Mr. Dent! How would I look after the books over such a distance?"

We wavered, caught off guard for a second, but managed to roll with the punch as any good lawyer should.

"Internet! How does anybody do anything these days? On the Internet! You should see what Eddie can do on a PC. Other than setting a new Tetris record every time he turns the damn thing on. He could set up everything you'd need, explain how to use it, trouble shoot if you had any problems... And think how impressed Roxy would be by a Mastermind clever enough to run his own business from miles away."

He began to say something, but we cut him off, second-guessing what he would say. We were shamelessly pulling out all of the old courtroom classics here, and it seemed to be working.

"And don't worry about them," we gestured airily at the regulars. "They'll be here when you get back—that's what makes them regulars. And when you do come back and visit, you'll have all kinds of things to talk about, firming up your already strong friendships."

The words were forming on his lips. We could tell. All he needed was one last push. We played our trump card.

We leapt off the stool and strolled over to the jukebox. We fished a quarter from our pockets, and looked over at Sly. He was fixing at us with one of his patented, 'Don't you dare' glares he had perfected during Jack's infamous ketchup rampage of last year. We grinned, and placed the coin into the slot. The familiar strains filled the bar, the locals cheering the old favorite.

Changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes, nothing remains quite the same, through all of our running and all of our cunning, if we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane...

We looked at Sly. He looked at us.

Case closed.

"Tell you what," he said, "I have got a great deputy here—the best. I'd trust him with my life. And I'm going to trust him with my bar. You're right, I can still do all the admin for this place in Gotham. I'll come back occasionally to oversee it, obviously, but you know, I have missed the Iceberg and its crazy inhabitants. Tell Mr Cobblepot if he's got any bar jobs going, I'd like to apply."

We said nothing, merely looking at him passively. We motioned for him to wait for just one moment. We fished into our breast pocket, and pulled out our silver dollar. We flipped it. Sly was looking a little nervous—understandably. He looked positively terrified when it landed in our palm scarred side up.

We grinned wickedly at him. Leaping over the bar, we buried him in a monstrous bear hug. He laughed.

"OK, OK. Mr. Dent? I can't breathe."

"Oh. Sorry."

We stood up, dusting ourselves down, before giving him a hand up.

"And if it had been unscarred side up?"

"We would have patted you on the shoulder and told you how glad we were to have you aboard, soldier."

"Just my luck," Sly grumbled, before breaking into a grin.

We turned, giving Sly one last rueful smile. He waved back, smiling at us before resuming his duties behind the bar. With our heart lifted, we pushed open the door.

Immediately, we were blinded by what seemed to be a myriad of light and noise of almost biblical proportions. We raised a hand to our eyes, grimacing under the fusillade, completely caught unaware.

With gritted teeth, we managed to steal a glance at what lay before us. A huge crowd of reporters and photographers. We had what seemed like a hundred microphones thrust into our face. We stammered, no idea whatsoever what to do.

A burly man was bustling his way through the crowd. We felt our heart sink as we recognized the familiar gait of a detective. When you're in our line of work, you can spot a cop a million miles away, and there was absolutely no doubt in our mind that this one had our number.

Sure enough, before we could even say travesty of justice, he had shoved his badge in our face and quoted us our rights. We silently mouthed the words with him as we were led from the bar, so accustomed as we are to hearing them, the throng of reporters clamoring behind all around us.

As we reached the squad car, we paused, shrugging his hand off our arm so violently that we found ourselves staring down the barrel of his pistol.

"Look, buddy," we said, genuine confusion in our eyes, "Just what is it we're supposed to have done?"

"Public order offences," he stated sharply, not lowering his gun, "Disturbing the peace. Criminal damage. Get in the damn car."

We sighed. So much for our holiday.

Edward Nigma cackled gleefully as he discovered the quaint little Key West souvenir shop. Unbeknownst to all but his closest friends, he had a real weakness for souvenirs: the cheaper and tackier, the better. Suffice it to say, in this regard he was not disappointed by this particular tourist trap.

Carrying his question mark topped gold cane under one arm, he strolled into the shop with a friendly nod to the proprietor.

Suddenly, a particularly ugly porcelain dessert bowl caught his eye. He whirled to get a better look at it, knocking a whole host of equally hideous ornaments off the shelf with his cane as he did so. Performing a dive from the counter that many would not have thought a man of his years capable of, the storeowner managed to catch the falling crockery.

Turning to see what all the commotion was about, Eddie managed to knock off another of the dishes off of its display stand. It dropped, inevitably landing with a crash on the storeowner's head. He cursed violently.

Grinning weakly, Eddie apologized, walked over to the counter, and placed \$10 on top of the cash register. Seeing something else catch his eye, Eddie wondered, goggle eyed, over to the section of the shop dedicated to ornamentally carved glassware.

The storeowner, who had been strapping on his trusty baseball glove, cursed violently again, and dashed over to grab Eddie by the shoulder and stop him from destroying any more of his merchandise.

As he caught Eddie by the shoulder, Eddie whirled around instinctively, expecting to see Robin bearing down on him with a roundhouse kick. With his flailing arm, he managed to knock off a whole row of glass animals that were perfect in their ability to induce nausea in art lovers.

Somehow, in the resulting melee, Eddie's gold cane became lodged in between the storeowner's legs, causing him to stumble, crashing precariously into a shelf of novelty Florida Keys snow globes (despite the area not being famed for snow scenes).

The shelf snapped in half under the impact of the man's head, causing all of the merchandise to slip with a crash onto the floor. Always one to know when best to slip into the shadows, Eddie grabbed his cane and flew from the store, slamming the door behind him.

The building was old, a true relic of times gone by. The door slamming caused the shelf nearest it to topple. This in turn slammed into another shelving unit, causing it to topple in the inevitable dominoes effect. When the crashing and toppling finally came to a halt, there was not a single piece of merchandise left intact in the entire store. After a moment's silence, there came a scabbling from underneath the rubble.

The storeowner looked around in utter shock and horror, his livelihood destroyed.

OK, so he could buy everything he had lost for fifty bucks, so deliberately worthless (and thus attractive to tourists) was it, but that was completely beside the point!

Remarkably, the counter and cash register had remained largely unharmed. There was a phone he kept behind the counter. With shaking hands and a pretty good description of the question mark man in his mind, he dialed 911.

We knew we were in for a rough night when we were led in handcuffs down a flight of spiraling stone steps towards where we were told our cell was to be. There had been a crude rope handrail erected at the side to aid climbing and descending the stairs, as they were treacherous, to say the very least. We wondered how many wanted felons had thrown themselves down this flight to avoid capture. Quite a few, we reasoned, judging from the extremely tight grip with which our shoulder was held as we descended.

Key West, we had heard, was an old pirate colony. As we were led downward, the arresting detective verified this, and also told us that this building had been a police station for centuries and had held its fair share of smugglers and pirates. He noted, with a slight smirk that only a cop can pull off, that the conditions hadn't improved that much since then.

Fantastic, we thought bitterly.

Catman had chosen to explore the back streets of the Keys, which are in many ways just as fascinating than the better-known tourist areas, if not moreso. He looked in awe at the ancient buildings, enjoying taking in the air of history that hung over the place.

Suddenly, the most delicious aroma invaded his nose. He twitched, his moustache trembling, as might the whiskers of a cat.

Feeling he had very little say in the matter, his feet moving almost without his commanding them to, he floated towards the epicenter of the smell. He found his stomach growling even more ferociously than that lion he had bagged last fall. He recognized that smell... it was... it was... As he came to the restaurant, he finally recognized it... *Pizza*.

The way to Blake's heart, being a true blue blood, was most definitely through his stomach, and it was for this reason that he marched imperialistically into the restaurant and sat down. He clicked his fingers. Nobody came to serve him. He tried again. Still nothing. Beginning to become a little perturbed, Catman angrily looked around him. There was no staff to be seen. There was merely a hugely fat ginger cat sitting on a table. Surrounding the cat was the most heavenly looking pizza imaginable. Unsure of what to do in these odd circumstances, Catman walked over to the cat and began stroking it. It started purring, much to his delight.

Next to the cat was a bowl containing a good couple of hundred dollars in small bills and coins. Blake's eyes goggled. He looked around, still bemused. There really were no people around that looked common enough to be staff. There were a couple of diners he noted, but he really didn't want to lower himself to their level and ask what he was supposed to do.

It dawned on him. It appeared that one simply took what one wanted in terms of pizza and then paid the cat, so to speak, dropping the money directly into its bowl.

Blake scoffed. A ridiculous idea. Surely it wouldn't work? This was a smuggler town, after all! What was the point of using the honor system, for this is what it appeared to be, in a town like this? It was like that time The Cavalier left his PlayStation in the recreation room back in Arkham and expected it to still be there when he got back. Insanity.

Blake looked at the pizza. He really was very hungry... and the wonderful aroma coming off of them was making him feel even more famished. Shrugging, he chose a suitably large piece (the anchovy and tuna piece particularly appealing to his feline senses) and retired to a table to devour.

Five slices later, and Blake was feeling rather full. Conscious of the effects of an expanding waist band on his magic cloak, he tottered over to the cat and its dish, looking like a particularly haughty version of Humpty Dumpty.

To his horror, he saw another diner get up and walk towards the door without paying.

Blake cantered over to the diner and tapped him on the shoulder. The man (who Blake suddenly realized was a lot more intimidating than at first glance) turned around.

"Sir," said Blake, suddenly less sure of himself, "You have not paid for your food."

"Yeah?" said the man sneering, "And who's gonna stop me? That cat? Get outta my way, Shorty!"

He pushed Blake back with one ham fisted hand. Blake, as with many people born with a silver spoon in their mouths, was very quick to anger when they felt the spoon was in danger of being forcibly removed, and this situation was no different. He began to remove one of his leather gloves.

"Actually, sir, THIS cat does intend to stop you! You have insulted the honor of my ginger friend, and as a fellow cat, I feel equally affronted!"

Catman slapped the man hard around the cheek with the now empty glove.

"Sir, I challenge you to a duel! Sundown! Bring your dueling pistols, you incongruous oaf!"

As we neared what was to be our cell, we heard a sound that we have come to loath.

Bickering.

There was no doubt that the voices belonged to our esteemed colleagues: Catman, Riddler, and Joker. The fact that they were in the same cellblock that we were being led to could only mean that one of them had somehow managed to get the rest of us into trouble. Guilt by association, it's called.

This was the Florida Keys. The people around here are more easygoing than the entire cast of *Cool Runnings*. Then you take into consideration that the whole group was in trouble - not just the perpetrator, but the entire group. Whatever had happened must have been really bad. Taking these factors into consideration, we came to the obvious conclusion:

Jack.

As we came to the bottom of the winding staircase, we saw them. Catman, Eddie, and Joker were attached to the wall by wrist and ankle shackles. We should have expected no less, we thought with a sigh, but sight still came as a shock. We stared at the guard incredulously. He merely grinned toothlessly back, pointing to an empty set of shackles.

We had a really bad feeling about this. We glared furiously at Joker. What could he have done this time? He met our anger with a bright grin. We could almost see his halo tilting in the non-existent breeze.

Unable to contain ourselves any longer, we strode over to him and shook him violently. He jabbered like a Furbie as we did so, which infuriated us even more, so we shook harder. The guard pulled us away angrily.

"For that," he said panting, "You're gonna hang upside down."

The bad feeling in the pit of our stomach had officially developed into a full-blown pain in the ass.

Whistling a jaunty tune, Joker strode into the *Cheese Burger In Paradise* restaurant. He nodded to the bemused looking greeter, who had temporarily forgotten he was supposed to greet him. Joker made encouraging hand motions. The young man eventually understood, and welcomed him to the restaurant. Joker smiled, patting the man on the shoulder, putting the Smilex canister back in his pocket with his free hand.

He sat down, folded his arms, and smiled warmly at the equally bemused looking waitress. Taking a deep breath, he ordered.

Six of Jimmy Buffet's famous burgers later, Jack was feeling contented.

"Whew," he said to the waitress, as she began clearing his table. "That was great. How do you make those burgers?"

She smiled at him. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that, sir. It's a secret recipe."

Joker laughed, then became serious. “HAHAHAHA—no, seriously. I don’t wanna traipse all the way to Florida each time I want a quality burger. What’s the recipe?”

“I can’t tell you, sir.”

Joker sighed. “Look dear, much like the Conan O’Brien show, where only the host may dance, in my presence, only I may tell jokes. Now, I’m gonna ask you again: how do you make ‘em?”

“Sir, I can’t tell you...”

“I was afraid you’d say that, Samantha.”

“Sir, my name is Anne.”

“Daphne?”

“Anne.”

“Dana?”

“Anne.”

“Look Billy, it doesn’t really matter,” Joker said, drawing the Handi-Dandy Extendo Boxing Glove he always carried for occasions like this, “because if you don’t tell me what I want to know, then you’re gonna find out how Mike Tyson’s trainer feels.”

“Nobody move!” he said, putting the glove close to Anne’s eye, “or Dave here is going to make *Rocky* look like *Sesame Street*! Now—here are my demands. I need paper, a pen, and the head chef.”

“YOU DID WHAT?!” We managed to stutter, anger causing our body to shake and our vocal chords to catch in mid-rant.

Fortunately, the guard’s threat had proved hollow. We were upside down for about ten minutes, just long enough to bring on a nasty headache as the blood rushed to our brain, but after that, another guard came and released us. Only to shackle us the right way up to the wall.

Joker grinned at us sheepishly.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“This,” pronounced Catman, “is just wonderful. A scintillating end to an infamous trip!”

“Do you even know what those words mean, you cretin?!” Eddie yelped. He had about as much as he could stand of Blake’s whining.

“Naturally, Edward. Why? Don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, or at least I think I do. Why don’t you tell me what you think they mean—then we can compare notes!”

Catman blanched visibly. “Well... they mean... I don’t intend to lower myself to your level, you insubordinate youth!”

“Alright, alright, keep it down.” This was a new voice to us, and we turned to see whom it belonged to. A cop, judging by the posture and days of unshaved stubble on his chin. The Bermuda shorts and Hawaiian style shirt had thrown us a bit, but there was no mistaking that badge as it was flashed in our faces. Joker wolf whistled at this, which brought a scalding glare from the detective.

“So, what can we do for you, Officer?” we asked, with a sneer, “You’ll have to forgive our inhospitality—we’d normally offer you a cup of tea or two—but we seem to be all tied up at the moment.”

"Then you'll be glad to know that you won't be for much longer, won't you, Dent?" the cop said, with a snarl.

"Question: What on Earth are you talking about?" Eddie asked.

"Tomorrow, you're being deported back to Gotham," the cop said, with disgust.

"WHOOHOO!" Jack said, grinning broadly. "And there are no cops in Gotham City, and the streets are paved with bodies..." He sung.

"Shut up!" we snarled at Joker, "What are you so happy about? Don't you understand, you idiot clown, that I am an innocent man? I have committed no crime! I am a patsy! A patsy!"

"Really?" Joker asked. "I'm a Libra."

We could feel the vein in our forehead sticking out at an alarming angle. We turned to our side to deliver a scathing response, but the police officer cut in.

"So, you're an innocent man are you, Dent? Then how do you explain the graffiti we found on the 'Southern Most Point In Continental United States' monument? The graffiti that reads '2face woz ere' ?!"

I gasped.

"I was framed!"

"*Sure was. By us!*" we snarled, jerking a thumb at our left hand side. I shrieked in horror.

"Whatever!" snapped the cop, "Sort it out in your own time, Dent, you sick freak. Here's the long and the short of it. You made bail. It was paid half an hour ago by one Mr. Bruce Wayne."

We gasped. What with all the revelations and resultant gasping and shrieking, we were becoming quite short on breath. Joker cackled.

"Brucie! Is there any end to that man's talents? Hell, I'd give him a rousing round of applause if I could move my hands."

"Shut up!" spat the officer. "Mr. Wayne said something along the lines of how your plight had made him feel sympathetic enough to part with the required bail. He also said that if you guys are gonna serve time, then he wants it to be in his city. It makes me sick. That man could wipe his ass with dollar bills. Why's he wasting his time on lowlifes like you? I just don't know. It makes me sick."

He paused. We are glad to report he was not sick, although he could have been with the amount of bile he must have built up on his diatribe.

"Anyway, tomorrow, January 25th, on flight number CO9173, you four are to be deported back to Gotham to be dealt with by the local authorities. Frankly, I'll be glad to see you go. Between the four of you, you've caused more trouble than Key West has seen in years! People like you make me sick to my stomach! We're gonna be a damn sight better off without you. And frankly, when you're on that plane headed back to Gotham, there'll be a grin on my face even wider than Laughing Boy over here." He gestured angrily at Joker.

Who was no longer smiling.

Neither were we. Eddie and Catman looked positively horrified.

"Did you say..." we managed to stammer.

"January..." Joker said, with a frightened snigger.

"Twenty..." Catman said, without his usual pompous sneer.

"Fifth?" Eddie fittingly finished the question.

"Yeah, I did. That a problem for you guys? Doesn't work with your schedule? Well, tell you what, you have your people call my people, they'll tell you where to shove it, and I'll be back later to take you to the plane. You people make me sick!" he said, angrily, stomping up the flight of stairs. His sandals on the flagstones made an eerie ringing noise in the stunned silence of the old cell.

Our head was beginning to swim.

January 25th.

Hell Month.

In full swing.

And suddenly He was to be presented with four new chew toys. Toys that were, so far, untouched. Toys that in His eyes were surely due the chewing of a lifetime just to make up for their protracted absence.

"If you guys are gonna to serve time, then he wants it to be in his city," the guard had said. What an unfortunate choice of words, we reflected gloomily. His city... Serving time in His city... Hell Month...

Jack succinctly summed up the mood.

"We're doomed," he sighed.

Cassie Cain, aka Batgirl still disguised as the Firefly groupie Smoke, was uncertain how to proceed. Her initial training under the master assassin David Cain dictated that the mission objective superseded all other considerations. Her training under Batman taught that the safety of civilian bystanders was paramount. No undercover assignment was worth risking harm to the innocents of Gotham.

Although undertaken for personal reasons, her infiltration of the Iceberg Lounge was, in a manner of speaking, an undercover operation. Her objective, being close to her adored Gregory Brady, was defeated when she was attacked by Clayface, rescued by Poison Ivy, and her rescuer spirited her away—away from the Iceberg, away from Gregory—and towards Ivy's lair in the wilds of Robinson Park.

Cassie didn't want to leave the Iceberg, but she went along at first because she simply couldn't find a way not to. Poison Ivy was being quite ridiculously helpful: brushing bits of Clayface dirt off her leotard, assuring her "the murdering fiend" hadn't done her serious harm. This wasn't the way the villains of Gotham were meant to behave to one such as her... then she realized that, in her disguise as a groupie, she appeared as one who admired them, who hoped to be recruited to work with them.

Nevertheless, Cassie refused at first, shaking her head "no" when Ivy offered to take her back to her lair.

"You don't talk much, do you?" Ivy observed.

Again, Cassie shook her head.

"Did he knock the wind out of you?"

He had, so Cassie nodded yes. There seemed no reason to lie about it.

"Let's have a drink then. A Cosmopolitan is what you need."

It wasn't. But a drink meant returning to the bar and Gregory, so Cassie nodded and went along. There she saw the villainous criminal menace Roxy Rocket, decked out in a tight new costume, throwing herself—positively *throwing herself*—at Greg Brady!

"Joker," the slut cooed, "you worked for the Joker, how marvelous! That's really the big time, Mr. G. Is it okay if I call you Mr. G?"

"Eh, it's Giggles, ma'am, just Giggles," he stammered, obviously embarrassed by the hussy's brazen advances. "Or Greg, if you like," he added with a wink that crushed Cassie's hope that he was embarrassed. She turned her thoughts to the feasibility of tying Roxy's hair to her motorcycle and dragging her through the streets.

"Disgusting," Poison Ivy muttered, watching the pair. And Cassie began to realize that, for a villain, Ivy was much more insightful than the typical Gotham badguy. "Setting her cap for the new bartender, tsk, tsk, and all because Sly chased her and that got her noticed by the right people."

Poison Ivy turned to Cassie and announced: "I have no desire to watch this disgusting exhibition, do you? Let's at least split a cab. If you help me getting the, heh, *fertilizer* to my lair, I'll give you a ride home."

The objective of staying near Greg Brady was no longer an appealing one—certainly not if it meant witnessing what Ivy so rightly described as "the disgusting exhibition" with Roxy Rocket. And Cassie was somewhat curious what Poison Ivy intended to do with Clayface, and if it was something she, as a crimefighter, ought to prevent. So she nodded and followed Ivy out of the Iceberg Lounge. A mass of vines followed them,

each holding fast to a large clump of brownish gray formerly known as the shape shifter Clayface.

Outside the lounge, Cassie detected the distinct smell of a misty jungle, sultry, warm, and slightly sweet. The cab that had been sitting idle snapped on its ON DUTY light and edged forward, stopping just before Poison Ivy when the IN SERVICE light popped on.

“Robinson Park,” Ivy ordered while the vines that held Clayface packed themselves into the trunk. “Same as last time.”

The driver merely gave a dazed nod. Cassie hesitated, but her training said the safety of innocent civilians took precedence over all other considerations. Clearly, this driver was in a diminished condition, in Poison Ivy’s thrall, and Batgirl should not abandon him to the villainess’s dark purpose.

In Robinson Park, the dark purpose became clear: Ivy was going home. The moment the taxi slowed to a stop, she ordered the cabman to open the trunk, and the vines unpacked themselves and their captive clumps of Clayface.

Hence Batgirl’s dilemma: should she stay with the incapacitated cabman and make sure he got home safely, or should she continue in her undercover capacity as Smoke and find out just what Poison Ivy was up to?

“You’re kidding,” Bruce turned his head to conceal a twitch that threatened to erupt into a full-blown smile—if not an actual laugh. He thought the better of it when he turned back, face composed, and saw the look on her face. Of all the times he’d faced Selina as Catwoman, there was only one occasion when he’d seen that particular expression. At the time, he’d totally misjudged its significance.

It was the financial district, not one of her usual haunts, near a brokerage house Bruce Wayne knew was an Old Money institution with an even older alarm system. He had cautioned them numerous times, and always the reply was the same: tradition, we cling to the old ways, the established ways. What was good enough for the founders was good enough for their sons, grandsons and great grandsons.

It was not good enough to stop Catwoman.

He saw her on the rooftop of the Vishnu Trust, heading uptown... He saw in an instant she had already hit her target and carried the proceeds in a small sack. He could tell by her movement it weighed less than twenty pounds... from her path, he traced back in his mind the direction from which she had come and deduced the target: Chamfers & Sons. Bearer Bonds. He wouldn’t learn until months later how she learned of Chamfers & Sons and the childlike faith they placed in their antiquated security. All he knew that night was she was at the top of her form: lithe, agile, fast, and bewitchingly beautiful... heedless as always... carefree... obviously not troubled by the tabloid reports of her capture and imprisonment.

Or so he thought.

It always seemed to play out the same with her. He drew a line, and she laughed at him. He laid down the law, and she pressed against him. He scowled, and she fingered the insignia on his costume. This time, it would be different. It was an experiment, he told himself, test and adjust. Change one thing on his end, and observe the result. He would alter his manner, just a little, and see how she’d respond.

He fired the grappler and swung northward to intercept her in... four buildings, the Dressily Complex. 'Purrfect,' he thought. The Dressily Roof was better lit than most, glowing with intermittent splashes of warm reds and cool blues from a huge animated billboard. Batman watched, fascinated, as the hues made the rich purple that wrapped her body flush pinker...then a deeper purple....then pinker.... He realized with horror that she was now on the roof with him. She'd seen him. She'd stopped. She was standing there... They were... seconds or... longer? minutes? into the encounter and he hadn't spoken a word.

What was worse, he felt himself smiling. The sight of her like that, not laughing, not taunting him, just standing... It felt like a Joker grin, the irresistible pull on stripped muscles through the cheek and jaw when exposed to even a small amount of those horrid toxins. Selina would eventually tell him it was only a twitch, but at the time, it felt like Bruce Wayne's most lecherous playboy leer.

To save face, he made eye contact and graveled, "I thought you were in jail."

That's when he saw the look, the same look that bored into him now in response to "you're kidding." The first time, he merely thought her startled, stunned in fact, for he was able to recover the bonds without a fight. But he thought no more about it. He had no idea until weeks later that that one simple twitch lit a fuse that would explode into Cat Tales. The stage show changed their lives, but Bruce was still wary of the trigger look's reappearance. A fuse was burning. Because he said "you're kidding," a feline fuse was burning, and he meant to find it and defuse it—or at the very least, detonate it in an unpopulated area.

"You're not kidding," he said carefully, "Never mind, my mistake, I understand now."

"You do?"

"Yes," he lied.

"Really?"

"No."

"Bruce!"

"I understand everything but the part about the closet."

"It's *all* about the closet. The closet is making a noise. There's something moving in there."

"And you sent in the cats on a search and destroy mission."

"Cat singular, Nutmeg doesn't go in for that sort of thing. Whiskers is the hunter, but he ran out like something scared him. That's got to be one big-ass mouse."

Again, Bruce felt the sharp tug of Joker toxin pulling at his lip. He hid it (he hoped) behind a thoughtful massaging of his chin. People said he had no sense of humor. JLA, Rogues, Dick, Gordon, Alfred... even Selina implied it from time to time. Selina, who was standing here telling him *Catwoman* was squeamish about fishing a mouse out of her closet. She stood toe to toe with Batman, with Ra's Al Ghul, with Prometheus... she modeled herself, not just her costume but her whole mindset, on cats... and she was freaking out *over a mouse*???

The Joker toxin won; he smiled. It was one of Bruce's more charming playboy smiles, and he hoped that would count for something. He was careful not to let even a hint of Batman creep into his voice as he said, "You want me to take care of it, Kitten?"

In his new role as potting soil, Matt Hagen was philosophical:

The phrase “feet of clay” is biblical. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a statue with a head of gold, but made of cheaper materials lower down. At the very bottom, the feet were made of iron and clay. The statue was struck on the feet, its weakest point, and shattered.

Fools, Matt Hagen reflected, have peculiar ideas about what denotes strength.

Consider Croc: undisputed arm wrestling champion of the Iceberg Lounge, 257 bouts, undefeated. No one would ever conceive Catwoman or Poison Ivy challenging the mutant steroid case in a physical confrontation. And yet, in terms of true strength, indeed, by any measure of clout and of raw power in the Rogue community, both women were heavyweights, while Croc was a ninety-pound weakling.

The strength of clay does not lie in being able to support a 40 foot gold statue. It lies in its inner resources, its malleability and its patience.

Poison Ivy was no different from Cameron, the director whose GhostRider trilogy skyrocketed Matt Hagen to fame. Cameron was what is politely termed “a gifted director,” Hollywood parlance for a delusional narcissist prone to psychotic tantrums. Matt learned early to keep his head down, weather the storm, meekly agree to whatever was asked for, and then blithely play the scene however he wanted. At the end of the day, the director would see a full crew running into overtime, see four days of costly F/X shooting on the horizon, see the studio scrutinizing his budget, and decide Matt’s way would work fine.

The Gotham underworld’s “gifted director” Poison Ivy, the photosynthetically-crazed zealot that still reviled him for a stupid little bag of potpourri, had already forgotten about him. She was busy talking to the girl from the bar... She must be lonely, Hagen reflected, to bother bringing a groupie to her lair... So much the better. Lonely. Talking. Engrossed in the conversation. He would wait a while longer, to make sure she was wholly occupied and then... he would simply ooze away... And these miserable weeds sucking the calcium from his body would starve. That would fix her.

Batman knew his enemies well. Some were easier to predict than others. Catwoman was always an enigma. But even she could be counted on to respond in certain ways to certain events and stimuli.

Selina was a cat in every sense: she was strong, independent, and above all, proud.

If she thought she had appeared weak, if she needed to ask for help, if her pride... if her *fur* was ruffled, she would compensate. She would make a point of proving it a fluke. The night of their first date, Batman knew she would strike out with a bit of felonious bravado. She’d want to prove—to him and to herself—that she was still a cat and a thief. He anticipated her target, and left a note and a gift. It ended well.

Bruce was just as certain now that the mouse would demand a reaction.

“You’re kidding” he had said when she told him. It was a chance remark, uttered without thought or weighing of consequences. Catwoman spooked by a mouse in her closet, “you’re kidding.”

But the fuse was burning. She freaked out, he made a chance remark, and now there was going to have to be a demonstration that: despite whatever ‘fraidy cat episode might have occurred, she was still all she thought herself to be.

Like the jewelry store she went to burgle on their first date, Bruce was sure it had a better chance of ending well if he could predict it and take steps.

Poison Ivy was finding her new companion most agreeable. She listened. Harley never listened like this. Her beloved plants were good listeners, of course, but it had to be said that, on some subjects, their understanding was limited. This Smoke was human. Like all animals, that made her an inferior creature, but she *could* grasp the pangs of the heart which the callous oaks of Riverside Park did not.

Indeed, the girl had a pang of her own from the look of it. Why anyone would devote themselves to the likes of Firefly was a mystery, but still, it was an experience on which to build.

“You’re young,” Ivy told her frankly. “And when you are young, they call those feelings a crush. It is a good word. It means to squash, squeeze, press, mash, pound, defeat, or rout. We should keep that word. It would prevent so many false expectations. But we don’t. Once the pimples clear up, we start calling it ‘love,’ and that’s when the root rot sets in. All those ridiculous romance trollers that think every man and woman are a couple, they come together, fall in love, get married, have children, live happily ever after. Root rot.”

“...” was all Cassie could think to reply.

“I had a crush once,” Ivy continued, encouraged, “After Harvey, before Two-Face. He was a nice boy, for a human. He volunteered at Wilderness Warriors, so committed. ‘We are going to save a million square feet of rainforest by the end of the year,’ he would say. He was called Allaine. Everybody knew him because he always wore his University of Maine sweatshirt. ‘Remember, it’s Allaine from Maine’ he would say. It was light blue and dark blue, school colors, which brought out his eyes very nicely. And he was very tall.” She paused, then sighed. “He’s dead now,” she added flatly.

Cassie continued to listen.

You can’t tell that man anything. I am the expert on cats. And I explained—in language so clear and plain it could not be misunderstood—that there are two schools of thought in the cat world regarding mice:

#1: the mouser view goes like this: YUMMY!

#2: the princess view, the Nutmeg view, which also happens to be *my* view is this: Sitting here on my cushion, the one strategically selected to compliment the color of my spots, if pointed to a mouse will simply look up at you as if to say “and this concerns me....how?”

But you can’t tell him any of that!

Yes, I am Catwoman. Yes, I am a predator. Yes, I am the proud owner of an ocelot, several leopards, lynxes, caracals, servals, cougars, panthers and a tiger. And YES, I

didn't want to be the one to go into the closet and kill the little bugger if I could get anyone else to do it for me. And after Whiskers—who FLED (that has to be one scary mouse!)—Bruce was my next choice. He just happened to be there, so why not? Tell me that, huh? *Why not?* Why not at least ask?

It's not that I'm especially terrified of mice (although there was an hour with Ratcatcher once upon a dark and stormy night that I'd rather forget). But I really don't like going in that closet. I don't like routing around in reminders of the past. I don't even know why I keep most of that junk, but I'm sure not interested in finding out.

But can you tell him any of that? Of course not. He'd just wind up saying the closet is a hellmouth and my moving into the manor is a perfect excuse to clean it out.

"That's why he was so committed to the cause," Poison Ivy continued the sad tale of Allaine from Maine, "he was terminal. It wasn't love of nature that made him so determined to save the rainforest; it was a mark, something he could leave behind. The rat... the miserable two-timing rat..."

This is how Poison Ivy expressed the pain of a bitter irony: she had an immune system that shrugged off the deadliest poisons, and she fell for a man who had, by the end, no immune system at all.

"And that's when I swore off men," Ivy concluded, "an unreliable gender. Can't be depended on. Oh, I know what you're going to say: What about Two-Face?"

Cassie blinked. She was not going to say any such thing.

"That's another matter entirely. Just sex. No emotional entanglements whatsoever. It's long over anyway, but even before it was, I had no feelings for the man. He was a conquest when he was District Attorney, nothing more, and he is still nothing but a conquest."

"..."

"No man can resist me, you know."

"..."

"Remember the taxi driver?"

"..."

"Obviously, I can have Two-Face back any time I wish. I need only subject him to my lure."

"..."

"He will be a slave to his own lust."

"..."

"You're right, that would be cheating."

"..."

"Maybe I could make him jealous!"

Night again.

The feline fuse was burning.

After I left Selina's apartment, I went home, then down to the cave. I thought the logs of our old encounters might shed some light on this.

Unproductive.

I should have realized it was all too recent. Only days ago, I had picked her up at the airport, dropped her at her apartment, then came to the cave to scrutinize the logs for the ritual... to do it all again—her apartment to the cave to the logs—and then read about her, well, I couldn't concentrate. My mind kept drifting away from the events in the log and back to the more recent scene... with her and the logs and the cave... I couldn't afford to get bogged down in that now. I needed to study the past, work out what she would do.

So I left the logs and suited up. It was still an hour before my first patrol, but this time of year, it gets dark early. I settled on the rooftop of Sterling National Bank. Next door to Cartier and three floors taller, this spot affords the best view of the famous jeweler's rooftop. Cartier... Catwoman's favorite. She considers it our first rooftop... December 18th. Feline logic, there's no arguing with it. Our first encounter was October 10th on top of the Gotham Central Train Station. After that, there were six more meetings before Cartier in December: bank vaults, art galleries, museums, but none of them count for some reason...

I will admit, though only to myself, that I used her back in those days. She was a welcome relief from the insanity. She was an escape from the demented clowns and the bisected psyches, a dose of relative reality in my surreal nightlife. I remember every encounter, every run-in with her. I hold those memories in a special place in my mind, stored away like hidden treasure: my nights with Catwoman.

There were those nights—those nights when I seemed to be losing the battle, those nights when it seemed like every step I took forward, the city would take two steps back—when I needed a release. Subconsciously—I don't ever recall doing it purposefully—I would search for her. When I felt lost or frustrated or fed-up with everything, I would glide aimlessly from rooftop to rooftop to find solace in my city, only to discover myself on Museum Row or the diamond district, the park-front condos or this roof with the eagle's nest view of Cartier... all her normal haunts... or else in some neighborhood where I suspected she kept a lair... anywhere I might run into her. She rarely disappointed. Eventually, I'd catch a glimpse of that purple, bounding across a roof or balancing on a balcony, and I'd swing into action.

The fights were physical to be sure, but not overly violent, never vicious. In all these years, she was the only one I ever pulled a punch for. I'd forgo furious jabs and kicks for more grapple-style moves: judo tosses, wrestling grabs, blocks and holds. Anything that involved extended physical contact. More effective with her, I told myself. And it was true. I knew she knew how to fight, that much was obvious. She could hold her own against anyone in any style of confrontation. Yet when I grabbed her, putting her in a hold that had six different counters, she would pause. She would let me hold the maneuver a little longer than necessary. Then, when she finally did counter, she would pick the move that, while not necessarily the most efficient, was the one that forced her body momentarily closer to mine before breaking free. Her counters always involved a little more "incidental contact" than necessary; an errant hand, a snaking thigh, her chest pressing hard against my own while her lips pressed in dangerously close to mine.

Then she would break free and run, leaving me standing alone on the rooftop, my mind swimming. The chase was on. Our little game of cat and... bat. Perhaps I stalled a

little longer than necessary. Maybe I'd take the route that let me watch her lithe body spring and twist... from roof to fire escape to alley to roof.... High above the city streets, she was truly magnificent to behold. Eventually, I would catch up; I'd land on a rooftop just as she made the other side of it. I'd call out, tell her to stop, and unlike her other... compatriots, she would actually listen. She'd stop, her hip cocking to the side ever so slightly, and then turn... slowly... so slowly, making sure to give me an eyeful of that profile, the city lights dancing around her like a thousand twinkling stars. Then she'd start to move... toward me... not threateningly or menacingly, but surely predatory. She'd have that sly smile as she sauntered towards me, her whole body alive with movement. She'd always make some comment ("Well, now you've got me, Dark Knight. What are you going to do with me?") that I would reply to with a growl or a glare. Then she would be on me, so close, that smell of her skin, vanilla and lavender, invaded my senses. Then came the touch: a light teasing along the edge of the cowl, a slow claw down my arm or a gentle fiddle with the edge of the cape. Or possibly even the worst... and best... move of all, the one move that would thrill and numb me into a feverish daze. She'd come in close, her hand slowly raising up to my chest, and my heart would leap into my throat as her fingers danced over the emblem, lightly caressing the oval, slowly tracing the outline of the bat... I'm sure there's something obnoxiously Freudian about that, but I long ago decided to ignore it.

That's when The Bat would take over. I'd reach up and forcefully grab her arms, growling something about that being "enough." She'd smile wickedly, break free of my grasp and launch off the roof and into the night. I wouldn't follow that time; the game was through. We'd go our separate ways, knowing we'd return to play again another night.

To be fair, it wasn't always like that. There were nights when she toyed with me, trying to steal my attention away long enough to kick a knapsack of loot off the roof. There were the nights when she frustrated me beyond belief. She had this insidious knack: she could infuriate me and turn me on at the same time. And she knew it. She'd come at me with her defiant independence, her cavalier attitude and her undeniable sexuality. She'd banter and prod at me, trying for any reaction she could get. I may have remained stoic on the outside, but internally I was screaming to grab her and kiss her, or hit her, or both at the same time. It was those nights I'd end up going a few rounds with Strategic Self-mutating Defensive Regimen 4 before heading off to the shower and bed.

Regardless of the nature of the confrontation, I always ended up frustrated, excited, happy, anxious, and furious—all at the same time. It has long been said that emotions can get in the way, interfering with your ability to perform your duty. Catwoman did affect my emotions, on so many levels. But I don't recall that ever hindering me.

...except possibly in the sense that I let her get away...

But subconsciously, that was the price I was willing to pay for what she gave me, for all that she did for me. She made me feel things I'd tried to forget, tried to suppress in my role as the city's defender. In a word, she made me feel... alive.

With a start, I realized it was time for patrol. It was *six minutes past* time to begin patrol. I'd been on that roof for an hour, and I hadn't accomplished a thing. This wasn't meant to be a stroll down memory lane, it was meant to determine exactly what Selina might do after the mouse incident to demonstrate that she was still as much a cat

as she ever was... Oh... of course... I could see the answer clearly then, not because of the hour's thought I'd given it, but because it moved, shifted actually, three floors beneath me, on the roof of Cartier, our first rooftop, purple coated in moonlight.

Oracle's finger stroked the control button thoughtfully without depressing it. She preferred waiting a full ten days after the anniversary before resuming usual contact protocols for Batman. In Hell Month, she would certainly not bring him anything this thin—a maybe of a maybe of a maybe. She would make damn sure Nightwing was missing, that it was not some flukish interference with the OraCom and GPS. He'd gone much longer than this without checking in, they all had. It didn't mean there was a situation... And there was nothing particularly sinister about the OraCom and GPS going out together. It wasn't like it was all coincidence. Any number of environmental factors could flood the frequencies or play havoc with the encryption sequence on both devices. Once, Robin fried his communicator and transponder just by landing on a TV news van with a satellite dish... Of course, if Nightwing noticed his communicator was out, it wasn't like him to ignore it. Usually he'd find a pay phone and call that way, something safe and innocuous on an unguarded channel. Most often, he'd pretend to order a pizza with pineapple and anchovies... but he might not have even noticed the communicator was out. Or if he did, he might not be able to get to a phone. He would be counting on the fact that she was a professional that knew what it was to be in the field, and not some excitable newlywed jumping to conclusions because her husband didn't call... And yet... the fact was, Hell Month technically ended with the anniversary. There was no rule that said she had to wait ten days before resuming normal procedures, and under normal circumstances, she would certainly call any information in to Batman regardless of the certainty of what it meant...

“Banned!” Oswald Cobblepot declared, pointing at Poison Ivy.

“Banned!” he repeated, pointing at Hugo Strange.

“Fired!” he yelled, pointing at Greg Brady.

“Banned!” he cried, pointing at Roxy Rocket.

“Fired!” at Gina the washroom attendant.

“Banned!” at Jonathan Crane.

Then finally, the tip of his special machine gun umbrella pointed to the petite groupie covered in vine leaves. He considered for a minute, as a king might weigh arguments of clemency for a first time offender. “BANNED!” he pronounced finally, then turned and left the exiles in the street outside the Iceberg Lounge, returning alone to the ruin that was once his nightclub.

“Root rot,” Poison Ivy hissed. The birdman would come around. And if he didn’t see reason on his own, a whiff of jungle mist would bring him around. Having a tantrum because his precious bar suffered a little damage. Why, if anybody should be complaining... she was the one who was humiliated! She had honored his bar with her presence, she had honored his bar as the site to unveil her new creation to the world, and this is how she was being repaid???

Certainly it was her prerogative to take this sweet young thing, so naïve as to be infatuated with Firefly, under her wing. “Smoke,” she decided, was a promising seedling that chanced to sprout in unhealthy soil. She needed to be transplanted to a more fertile environment. Consciously, Poison Ivy saw an open and malleable specimen she could mold into something great. Unconsciously, she was lonely and knew she had found a sympathetic listener.

“First things first,” she had ordered, “you’ll need a name. Leaf? No. Sounds like a contestant on American Idol... Petal? Er, no. Harvey called me that once when we were—Never mind... Flora! How about Flora? No, you’re right. That’s a middle-aged cafeteria worker in a hairnet... Oh, I’ve got it. VINE!”

Then came the weaving of leaves into a becoming tunic to replace that leotard. The girl was hesitant at first, but Ivy made her understand the great honor: She herself, Poison Ivy the Irresistible, Chosen of Gaia, was to be her mentor. Ivy would train her. They would begin... well, we had to run before we could walk... they would begin at the Iceberg, by enticing that new bartender away from Roxy the Rocket Harlot. That brought the girl around, and Pamela preened herself on her powers of persuasion.

Vine started off well enough, entering the room with a grace and majesty befitting one decked out in leaves. She approached the bar as instructed, emitting a silent aura of irresistible sexuality.

The object of her seduction seemed appropriately awed and receptive, waiting, it seemed, for an order from his goddess. Ivy waited for her protégé to exert her power.

...

Then, as sometimes happens in cultivating a new hybrid, things took an unexpected turn. The bartender got tired waiting for his goddess’s command and asked outright: “What’re you drinking, beautiful?”

He was only waiting for a drink order. A setback, to be sure, but one that could have been dealt with if Roxy hadn’t chimed in that “the little sprout” didn’t look old enough

for more than a Shirley Temple. Snickers led to slaps which led to hair pulling which led to...

Hugo Strange really was a vile pustule on the buttocks of Mother Earth. It could have all been handled if he hadn't pushed her buttons with that smarmy suggestion about mud wrestling. *Women*, nature's chosen vessels of life, slathered in *mud*, the earthy soup from which all plants spring! For the gratification of loathsome, drooling, slimy cretins like that... that... that... *STRANGE!* Poison Ivy could not contain her disgust and she let fly as any sane woman would! And if that *WASHROOM ATTENDANT* was so wanting in sense that she actually saw Hugo Strange's desecration of all that was beautiful and magical in female sexuality as something *POSITIVE*, then the traitor to womankind would have to be punished along with the men... While Ivy was distracted with these matters, the repugnant Jonathan Crane, the only lowlife low enough to hang with a human weed like Hugo Strange, went to work on the bartender.

"Fearsome choice before you, I fear," the Scarecrow began, warming on his favorite subject.

Greg Brady did not see it that way.

"You mean the girls? Girls, girls everywhere, I don't know that that's anything to quake about, sir," he answered respectfully.

"Two of those girls are wearing leaves, boy," Scarecrow insisted. "Around here, leaves mean trouble. And usually a rash."

Compared to the dangers at his old job, a rash didn't seem so terrible a fate, and the former Joker henchman said as much. "An exaggerated immune response to nothing much. Bring on the rash," he quipped.

Cassie and Roxy both heard, and the bar was assaulted with a hail of tables, chairs, bottles, and novelty Iceberg Lounge glassware.

It was just like the Ha-Hacienda on movie night, Greg thought, before Poison Ivy's special wood-free polymer table hit him in the sternum.

I think better in the catsuit. Always have. It's a sensual experience, not "changing into" but "becoming" Catwoman: the caress of butter soft leather pulled tight across my skin, pulling on the gloves, patting them smooth, tugging on the folds, then the same with the boots... pulling on the cowl and adjusting the mask, drawing my hair out the rear flap... something about it makes all the complicated questions simple and clear.

All but one.

Tonight, the caress of the leather only stirred memories of another caress, great hands, warm knowing fingers... and when I pulled my hair through the flap, it tilted my head back, like he does, running his fingers through, kissing me over and over...

Actually, the catsuit might not help me think when *He's* the quandary I'm thinking about. But it was either this or a trip out to the Catitit to see Nirvana, and I was already here so...

"Here" was Cartier, our first rooftop. First time it got interesting, anyway. I don't want to think about that right now, though. Something about Hell Month, all his rituals, it all gets bogged down in the past. All the junk in that damn closet. That was

then and this is now. It wasn't "those jewels don't belong to you" anymore, it was "I don't understand why you haven't moved in full time."

I still didn't understand how we could get there from here. From *here*, this very roof and "those jewels don't belong to you."

Reflexively, I began thinking through how to get to those jewels that don't belong to me, how to get there, into that vault, from here, northwest corner of the roof: Attach a jammer to the Phoenix relay and pop the vent hood over the power conduits. Swing to the alley and disarm the floor alarms from the electrical panels, in through the service door and attach a thirty-second video loop to the surveillance feeds. Back out the service door and return up here, in through the office ventilation ducts, left, down, left, left, down, right and squiggle. Drop out in the corridor between the private showroom and the main vault. 0010-048-73. Jewels that don't belong to me. Then the tingle... and the voice...

"That's far enough, Catwoman."

The jolt back to reality was almost physical, as if I was physically sucked out of that vault in my imagination through space and time back to the rooftop here and now.

Catwoman's Rule #12 states that you never ever react with surprise when he makes an appearance, no matter how sudden or unexpected. But Catwoman's Rule #12 was written when I really was opening the vault, not just thinking through how. Catwoman's Rule #12 never anticipated anything this surreal.

What was he doing here?

And "That's far enough, Catwoman." What the fuck?

Batman was irked, just for a moment, that he hadn't anticipated this. He'd wanted to predict Selina's response to the mouse, and here it was: Catwoman. Looking to play. Watching her alone on that roof, there was no need to confine himself to a twitch, and he felt a full smile melt over his features. He'd just been remembering this, how she'd show up whenever he subconsciously needed one of their run-ins, and now, here she was. He fired the grapples to the cupola of the Frith Building, a spot he knew was high enough not to be heard on Cartier's roof, yet afforded the perfect angle of descent. He swung down to meet her, his mind locked on old times, fully in the mood to 'play.'

He landed.

"That's far enough, Catwoman!" ...in his best BatGrowl, expecting the obvious, "It's never far enough, Dark Knight."

...except...

All he got in reply was shocked silence.

It took him a moment to process: She looked like she just got caught at something... and wasn't expecting to... In the old days, there was always that hint that, regardless of how careful she was being, she *expected* to get caught by the Bat. That was part of the thrill. This time, she honestly looked like she never expected him to show up...

It threw him...

Hard.

He began to suspect something was wrong.

In the spirit of Hell Month, he began to suspect the worst.

“What exactly is *Catwoman* doing on Cartier’s roof?”

The moment had passed to register surprise or not at his appearance. The only choice now was banter or a serious reply. “That’s far enough, *Catwoman*,” he had said. A stunning *Catwoman* rejoinder was called for, and it came out “...” That led to “What exactly is *Catwoman* doing on Cartier’s roof?”

The only choice now was *banter* or a *serious reply*... The fact that it was a rooftop, this rooftop especially, argued for banter. It would be an insult to all that Cartier meant to fall back on something as mundane as the truth. And yet, somehow I heard myself saying: “Thinking. Just thinking.”

The un-cattiness in my voice startled me much more than his entrance had. What was I saying? Like I owed him some kind of explanation? Like I needed him to know I wasn’t here to steal?? Like there was something wrong with all the times that... *oh screw it!* “I come here to think, okay, I don’t have a cave.”

Shit! The catty edge was certainly back in my voice, but at what price? “I don’t have a cave!” where did that come from? If the son of a bitch had his way I *would* have a cave. *SHITSHITSHITSHITSHIT!*

“Thinking?” he asked. I don’t know if it was Hell Month or what but it came off like: “*YOU, thinking, since when?*”

“Yes, *THINKING*,” I shot back, “You rub two brain cells together until they make a spark.”

Okay, that was a little more like her, so he grunted. But still, there was something else behind it. It was more “catty” than he expected, even from her. No playful innuendo, just... hostile. There was something behind it all. Concern? Anger? ... *Fear?! He decided the best course was to get to the heart of it quickly.*

“And Cartier helps? What exactly were you thinking about?”

Without even realizing, he scanned her for an empty loot bag—then immediately shifted his gaze back to her face when he discovered what he was doing.

Did he think I didn’t see that? The once over, he just glanced down at... I felt insulted, and at the same time I wondered why. I decided to turn the screw. What was I thinking, he asked?

“Just thinking about old times...”

Maybe it was nothing after all! She was in the same frame of mind that he was, a return to the rooftop games. Except, why the new reaction if she just wanted to play?

“...vent, left, down, left, left, down, right squiggle, vault, 0010-048-73.”

Not thinking about old times like he was.

He felt his blood freeze, and something leapt into his throat from the vicinity of his heart. His worst fear was becoming true: She was stealing again.

"You *know* that's not going to happen," he grveled, trying to hide the shakiness in voice, hoping the growl didn't betray him. Why? Why was she doing this?!

"Careful, Dark Knight, that sounded a little like the voice of the master."

For just an instant, two fingers on her right hand twitched ever so subtly towards the whip...

This couldn't really be happening. Not Selina. Not *his* Selina. This wasn't banter; this wasn't play. It was real. This was like what their confrontations *should* have been all those years ago. Crimefighter vs. Criminal. Good vs. Bad. Right vs. Wrong. It was suddenly all too much, like a bad dream. He started to feel something he hadn't felt in eons: Fear. He was afraid of what this meant, for him, for her... for "them." And with Fear, came The Bat. The Psychobat, the Hell Month Bat. Ready to handle the situation like he would with *any* of Gotham's criminals. He stepped toward her, almost daring for her to go to the whip.

"If you're talking about a crime, in *MY* city, then 'master' is the least of your concerns."

The reaction was not that of any of Gotham's criminals, only this one: eye to eye, nose to nose, never been impressed by that routine and never would be...

"If you're talking about cutting off the last link to my own life and moving lock, stock, and Whiskers into yours just because you say so, then a crime in your city is the least of *YOUR* concerns."

Lock, stock, and Whiskers? What did she mean by that? Bat, Psychobat and Bruce himself stared in deathly silence, until one of them forced out a bewildered "*What?*"

It did not defuse the bomb.

"Why haven't you moved in yet—like a good little housecat—little shelf in the vault, little bowl with my name on it in the kitchen—how about a collar with a bell! Have Alfred change my water now and then. Insufferable jackass—"

Batman began dissecting the words like one of Nigma's riddles. Move in? What was she talking about? Where did she get an idea like tha-ah. In his mind, it was almost as though Bruce tapped Batman on the shoulder as the memory clicked. The previous night, before patrol, a remark blurted in the heat of the moment... a casual, simple remark, that was all it was. It had been in the back of his mind since missing her in Paris, but he never meant to... It was the anniversary, he was going on patrol, he didn't want to have an argument about her staying the night or not. Why were they even wasting time discussing it: Kitten, you're here so much, why not dot the i and cross the t?

His stomach knotted. OK, she was freaking over his suggestion to move in. She felt cornered by it, and struck out. But all of that led her *here*?!

"So that's what this is? You're going back to stealing just because I ruffled your fur a little?"

The incredulous "*WHAT?*" that answered him echoed his own confused outburst a moment before. But Batman was still at the helm, and Batman knew the criminal mindset: Denying it, like they all do.

"You heard me," he growled, "You're trying to get back at me and you think *this* is the way to do it?"

The moment hung suspended in the icy stillness of a Gotham rooftop in January until an invisible string broke with a silent plunk. Nothing had changed, neither had moved or spoken, but suddenly, everything felt different.

The first thing Batman noticed was her eyes—while he was not actually being laughed at, the amused “you’re so cute when you’re stupid” expression was aimed directly at the tip of his nose.

“Yes, that’s it exactly...” came the answer at last, a blend of sarcasm, amusement and affection as only Catwoman could deliver them. “I came back here to ventleleft-downrightsquiggle-001004873-jewelsthatdontbelongtome, all to get back at you for ruffling my fur. That’s it exactly...”

Wait for it.

“...I salute you, World’s Greatest Detective.”

Banter. For the first time ever, it was music to his ears. She really was *just thinking*, stewing over what he’d said. He still didn’t quite understand what that had to do with Cartier, but then he didn’t understand how Cartier could be their first rooftop when it came 69 days and 7 encounters after the train station.

“Fine,” he grunted, then realized that simple sound was a throwback to the old way. This was a new game and new rules were called for. Perhaps the truth:

“Was it really that bad a suggestion?”

Bruce’s voice. Cheap shot, Dark Knight.

“It...”

Still.

“It... ..”

My heart was racing.

“... ..”

I love him, I had to admit, both of him. All of him. I love being with him. He brings out the best in me.

“... ..”

I like myself with him.

“... .. It’s an awfully big mouse,” I whispered finally.

TwitchSmile. Does he know how sexy that is?

“But catchable,” he said. The combination of Bruce voice and choppy bat syntax is freakier than I can begin to express. It unnerved me. And not wanting him to think he had the upper hand, I felt I better make it clear I wasn’t rolling over like a spaniel.

“If I were to say yes, I’d need to have my own space, totally mine, like an embassy is foreign soil.”

“No.”

Instantaneous answer. Compromise has never been a happy notion for the right & wrong crowd. “No chance,” he said with another sexy lip twitch.

This, I decided, was no different than getting to leave with the diamond necklace. It only required a little feline finesse. I leaned in close and stroked the edge of his mask, just at the cheek. I felt him tense and I drew a claw down his arm.

“A little space of my own,” I repeated, fiddling with the edge of his cape. “Totally mine...” I purred, fingering the insignia on his chest, that oval he uses to mark all his

possessions. "...Like an embassy..." There was a rumble from deep in his chest as I traced the batwing on the emblem. "...Foreign soil."

There was one final pause, not at all awkward. He was thinking. And then...

"Do you want to pick a room or should I build you a new wing?"

I'll admit I wasn't ready for the win. And I knew I only had seconds before the window of opportunity closed.

"Just a room or two on the second floor will be fine," I soothed, "and an acre on the grounds for Nirvana's pen." Was that greedy? Yes. Why not. Cats always take what they can get.

"We'll talk about it later," he brusked, pulling away, "I have to get to work."

It stung. I should have expected it, the gruff "that's enough" dismissal from the end of every encounter, but still it stung.

"That was only 'if I said yes,'" I reminded him, letting him off the hook. I turned to go, hoping he'd stop me but knowing he wouldn't, when...

"Wait!"

I turned back, floored, and saw him pressing his hand to his ear.

"Say again, Oracle... How long ago? ... No, I'll check it myself... Batman out."

In one lightning move, his hand dropped from the ear to the utility belt, drew the grappler and fired. "C'mon," he ordered, extending the free hand, "Game over. It's Nightwing. He's missing."

We pressed the record button with practiced flair, listening to the soothing hissing noise as the tape began rolling. We immediately felt our taut muscles beginning to loosen.

There is something about talking about us that puts us in a good mood. We are a subject very close to our own heart. We suppose that's why we write these little memoirs of ours? Our fondness for ourselves, however, does often result in the most outrageous acts of digression, of which this is one.

Placing a trained hand to our brow in true Oscar Wilde fashion, we began speaking to the recorder with a voice that we believed conveyed pain, anguish and the sufferings of a man before his time.

"Personal log—entry number 18. We hope that you do not mind, dear Dictaphone, that we number these entries only with even numbers, this in fact only being our ninth entry to your hallowed library since our return from the accursed Florida Keys. We doubt rather strongly that you mind—you are a Dictaphone, and your kind are not known for their free thinking attitudes. We have resisted the urge thus far of making any record of that fateful trip—the first eight visits to this machine being confined to our last will and testament parts one through two. But that is immaterial. We shall say this about our quest: In essence, it was successful. Our good friend and favored barman, Sly, is to return shortly. However, as we know only too well, every coin has a flip side. Due to circumstances totally beyond our control—partially—we were deported back to this hideous place. Fortunately, Catman, Eddie, Jack and myself were able to forcibly commandeer the little plane and then make good our getaway once back in Gotham Airport. There ends the good news."

We rose, sighing dramatically. Suddenly, our entire demeanor changed. Gone was the befuddled look from our eye, the quizzical pout from our lip. In its place—anger, hatred, and fear. Howling as if in pain, we wrenched up the chair we had been sitting on and threw it into the wall. It shattered into many pieces. Losing interest in it as soon as it had left our hands, not even turning to look on the beautiful destruction, we turned our attentions to the coffee table on which the Dictaphone perched. Scooping the machine up in our arms like a protective mother, we flipped the table up and over, letting it spin in the air, landing with a delightful crash on the floor. Moving next to our desk, we swept all of the papers on it away with a flailing arm, howling as the whirlwind of documents blew up around us. Like Frankenstein, a prisoner of our own creation, we staggered blindly through the assorted stationary, looking for something else to destroy. Gibbering like a monkey, we proceeded to pull our PC from its moorings and throw it onto the floor—a surprisingly pleasurable task that everyone should make a point of doing before their death.

"WHY?!" we shrieked, dancing amongst the debris as if we were performing intricate steps in a rain-dance. "WHY?! Why is he ignoring me?! THIS IS HELL MONTH! IN GOTHAM! Catman was found beaten to a pulp inside a suitcase on a baggage carousel. He didn't even manage to leave the airport before being taken out! As for Eddie, well, what happened to him is too horrible to contemplate... Every day, there are stories in the news of random clowns being found beaten senseless in the early hours. The newspapers are baffled, but we know the truth, we see the

correlation. So why—WHY—have we been spared?! WHAT HAVE WE DONE TO DESERVE SUCH TREATMENT?!”

We ran our hands, cold and clammy, through our already sweaty hair. Our eyes were wide and staring.

“What on Earth can it mean? What does he have in mind for us? For us to have survived for so long can only mean that when the sword of Damocles falls from on high it will land in our midriff, resulting in a slow and ultimately painful death as opposed to the joyous relief of a swift end. We do not mind admitting to you, a machine without a tongue to mock or eyes to scorn, that we are afraid. Indeed, we have never been so afraid in all of our close to forty years. Never. We know full well that there is a terrible burden hanging over our head—an unspeakable punishment for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He strikes like a disease at the heart of the rogue community—merciless—without reason. Why have we been spared? Why?”

We were close to tears. We held our hands out in front of us, and laughed tautly at the shaking we beheld.

“Look at us. A wreck. A miserable, nervous wreck. We need coffee. Yes... Coffee will soothe our pain.”

We looked around with jerky movements of the neck born of paranoia, looking for our coffee machine. A thought struck us, and we slowly looked downward, hoping against hope we were wrong.

It had been on the coffee table. It was now in pieces, its component parts hanging out of it as if to mock us. We fell to our knees, and openly wept.

“No... the first victim of this pointless conflict. WHY?! Why did this young one have to die? Never again to imbibe its protector with its sweet sepia goodness. OK, so we pushed the little guy hard over the past few days—today alone, we’ve had a good eight mugs of the stuff—but even so. A tragic waste.”

We looked away, unable to bear it any longer. Drawing some of the scattered papers from our desk towards us, we covered the poor little machine, allowing it the honorable burial it rightly deserved. We stayed at its side for a while—drowning in a sea of tears and self-pity.

What could we possibly have done? What did Batman have in mind for us? What was to become of Harvey Dent?

Our head sank. The situation was hopeless.

“Mental note,” we said mournfully, “Buy new coffee machine.”

Patting the mound of paper respectfully, we turned to stand and leave this scene of reckless carnage.

It was then that we spied it.

It had apparently been hidden in one of the piles of paper we had swept from our desk. We were amazed we still had it. We clutched it in outrage, the grip growing tighter all the time, our arms and hands shaking ever more violently.

Spying the dictaphone to our left where it had fallen, we reflected verbally on the issue of the gossip rag we had just found—the same issue we had bought on the way to Key West.

The issue with Nightwing and Ivy on the cover.

“Nightwing,” we hissed through clenched teeth. Our teeth were so tightly locked together, it was beginning to hurt.

“Nightwing. The boy who became a man. The man who promptly stole our beloved Poison Ivy from us. How we HATE you,” we breathed, our breath coming out in short and painful bursts. “For all her many innumerable faults, Ivy was ours, and ours alone. As far as we are concerned, Nightwing, you have crossed a line. And now you must pay the price.”

We stood and turned menacingly. We advanced towards him, grinning evilly, our head throbbing. We watched him squirming in the chains we had placed him in, hanging upside down from a hook deliberately installed for such an occasion.

Beneath his rubber facemask, we saw his eyes: Fear and panic mingled together—a joy for us, his tormentor, to behold. We watched him frantically trying to tell us something through the duct tape we had placed roughly over his mouth. Even if what he said had been intelligible, we wouldn’t have listened. We were in no mood for his lies.

Marching towards him, our eyes clamped open, a Smiley grin fixed to our face. The cold wet skin of our hands as we wrung them did little to calm our fluctuating mood. Anything to hide the cowardly shaking from him.

Unable to contain ourselves any more, we ran towards him and kicked him hard across the jaw with the steel capped toe of our boot. He flew backward, only to return to his original position, the hook making the chained Nightwing into a human punch bag. He groaned beneath the gag.

“SHUT UP!” we screamed, punching him hard in the stomach. He hacked, his body attempting to curl into a fetal position but unable to do so for the chains. “What do you people want with us?! First, you take Ivy from us. We cannot even begin to emphasize the pain and consternation that single act of selfishness has caused us. You nearly destroyed us, Nightwing! We care for Ivy more than a worm like you could possibly imagine—to find out in such a public manner of your theft was more than we could take.” He shook his head frantically, and tried to speak more. We kicked him again. “SHUT UP! We don’t want to hear your lies OR your apologies! Then we take into consideration the second factor. Soon, your master, the puppet master, will beat us to within millimetres of our lives just because he feels like it—or so it would seem. This in itself, we would not mind. But it is the waiting, waiting for the inevitable, waiting for the hammer to fall... IT’S KILLING US! When will the blow come? Tell us, Nightwing. TELL US!”

We punched him again, in the back this time. The punch soon became a flurry as we let our frustration overwhelm us.

“We really shouldn’t be admitting this in front of witnesses,” we said, gesturing to the Dictaphone, still clinically recording the proceedings, “but maybe it was a little unfair of us and twenty of our finest hired help to jump you in that alleyway. But don’t worry, we left that little old lady you were trying to save well alone. We had snared our prey.”

We shook our head, grinning in wry disbelief.

“How could you do what you did to us, Nightwing? How could anyone be so callous? Now, it is not only our face that is broken in two—our heart falls into the same category.”

We stalked away from him darkly, tears threatening to well up once more in our eyes. We blinked them away as we neared the work surface on which we had conveniently placed a handheld electric drill. We stopped as we reached it, suddenly feeling weak at the knees.

"I hope you enjoy your time in the afterlife together," we said, not turning around. We could hear his frantic pleading through the gag.

Our hand hovered over the drill. We could hear Nightwing's muffled grunting increasing in volume and urgency.

We continued to hover.

And hover.

There was nothing for it. With our free hand, we reached for our coin. We do not make apologies for who we are and don't believe anyone should. An occasion as monumental as this simply had to be flipped for.

We spun the coin into the air with a practiced flick. Nightwing's eyes were fixed to the coin—watching it arc. Watching it seemingly hang in the air, agonizingly. Watching it fall.

We caught it.

Looking down into our palm, we looked at the coin impassively.

There we had it. A decision had been made. There was no disagreeing with the coin. It was time for action and screw the consequences. Pun very much intended.

Sighing heavily, we reached for the drill.

"And then what happened?! Don't leave me in suspense, Harv!" Eddie said, tensely grabbing us at the elbow. We slowly turned to him, trying to keep him and him alone in our vision. We find the drab grays and dirty whites of Arkham's hospital wing depressing at any time, but the effect is multiplied in January and or early February, for hopefully obvious reasons.

"We don't know, Eddie. The memories, like the lumps on our head, are a little painful..."

"TELL ME!" Eddie hissed aggressively, taking a tighter grip at our arm. We could feel the circulation being cut. Swallowing, we smiled meekly at him.

"You know, Eddie, before we do continue, we just want to make it clear that, at the time all of this took place, we were on something of a caffeine rush. Although it could be argued, of course, we were going through some kind of cold turkey transitional period after the death of our beloved coffee machine... Note to self, additional: Make sure the new machine has an espresso feature..."

He cut us off, violently jerking our arm to an angle we knew couldn't be 100-percent healthy. We yelped like a wounded puppy.

"OK! OK! You twisted our arm. So... we had Nightwing chained up, reaching for a hand drill..."

We considered the drill. We longed for its grooved faceted handle. We yearned to give Nightwing yet another orifice to worry about.

But the coin had spoken.

Sighing heavily, and with some force, we moved our hand away from the drill and further down the work surface. Hesitantly, we snatched up a small wrinkled piece of paper. We had scrunched it into a ball in an earlier burst of petulance, and now reluctantly sought to smooth it out.

“Now listen,” we said, sheepishly wandering back over to our captive, speaking in a tone that was riddled with shame. “We’re not very good at this kind of thing. We never have been one for male bonding—Hell, we don’t even like him very much,” we said, jerking our thumb at Harv’s side of our face. “So this isn’t going to be easy for us. Please do your best to be understanding. This is, believe it or not, all for your own good. Someday, young grasshopper, you’ll actually thank us for our words of wisdom.”

We weren’t sure if it was possible to convey scorn whilst chained up and hanging upside down, but Nightwing did a very reasonable job of it anyway. We snarled, drawing our foot back to kick the insolent brat hard in the face. Remembering the coin’s ruling, we sighed heavily and began.

“The first piece of advice we can give you is to get used to the idea that Ivy is always right. Whether she is or not is totally immaterial. She is *ALWAYS* right. Get what we mean? Deuce, the horrors we could tell you about daring to question her authority. Take it from a couple of guys who know—don’t do it. Let’s see... If it’s your turn to do the food shopping, make damn sure every single item in that cart when you get to the checkout is organic or, at the very least, has the Ivy seal of approval. You’ll learn by trial and sometimes painful error which items do and do not have said seal. Let’s see... Don’t assume she’s done with you until she says she is. Along those lines, the following two words are a must. ‘Yes’ and ‘Petal.’ Repeat after me. ‘Yes, Petal.’ ‘Yes, Petal.’ Let the words roll off your tongue—oh, you can’t. We put that gag on you, didn’t we? Oh well. Practice when you get home. Aerosols: they’re a no-no. Roll on deodorant is not as comfortable, in our experience. But frankly, the hassle it will save makes it more than worthwhile to just take the extra minute in the mornings and flap your arms until it dries. Not to mention, if there’s a giant cactus rolling around in your underwear drawer, it doesn’t much matter which deodorant you use.”

We paused, looking at him thoughtfully for inspiration.

“As for that hair of yours, you may favor the greasy unkempt look, but she most certainly doesn’t. And seeing as you’re going to have to be washing your hair, you’d better make sure your shampoo is organic. No more of that anti-dandruff stuff for you, young man!”

The hair was a cheap shot, and we admit it. It was Harv’s idea, blame him. In essence, Harv is a man of a certain age, and such men tend to be naturally jealous of younger rivals vying for Alpha Male status, especially rivals who think bald patches are a myth invented by their parents to make them eat their broccoli.

What? Oh, grow up, Harv! No we don’t care about your dignity. It’s not like you have any left anyway...

“Is there anything we’ve forgotten?” we said thoughtfully. “Oh yes. You’re known amongst us rogues as something of a wannabe comedian. A joker, in the innocent sense of the word. In other words, we’ve noticed the little quips you come out with as you pound our faces into the sidewalk. Stop it. Ivy hates smartass comments. The one

and only time we and she robbed a bank together, we told the bank clerk that she had better stop giving Ivy money or she'd just get up and dance. We don't wish to divulge what she did to us for that, but suffice it to say, it involved ice cubes."

We shuddered uncontrollably at the memory. Running another hand through our hair, which by now was thick with grease and sweat, we slowly fought our frayed nerves.

"And seeing as we're digging up our repressed memories, we shall say this—and if you choose to ignore everything else we've said, for your own sake, please listen now. Never buy Ivy flowers. Never. It took the doctors eight hours to remove the shards of terracotta from our anal passage. And yes—it hurts twice as much as it sounds. And never—and we mean *NEVER*—take advice from Bruce Wayne in matters of the heart. Naturally, there's no reason you should. We doubt you and Brucey move in the same circles, but still. Should the opportunity arise, run. Run like the wind."

We paused and panted heavily. We had worked ourselves into quite a state during our diatribe. We looked down into Nightwing's face.

The shock in his glazed eyes was only equalled by the sheer horror. We sympathized.

"Finally..." We paused. We swallowed hard, clenching and unclenching our fists.

There was no point in denying it any longer. The better man had won.

"...Good luck," we whispered bitterly, worried our voice would betray the hurt in our heart. "And consider this. We have given you the tools that you will need to maintain a healthy, passionate relationship with Poison Ivy. Run that thought through your mind. And then try and figure out just which side of our coin came up."

We turned to leave and abandon Nightwing to whatever fate had in store for him. Hanging our head as defeatism gripped us, we did not see the black armor-clad chest until we walked into it. We stopped in surprise, and looked upward slowly, eyes eventually settling on the yellow oval in the center and the black bat that adorned it.

"Hello, Harvey," Batman said, his voice like finger nails on a chalkboard. Although, to us, it sounded like a beautiful heavenly chorus.

With a cry of ecstasy, we leapt at him. Before even he could react, we had clamped him in our arms in a tight embrace of sheer gratitude. With a swift movement, he flipped us over his shoulder and onto the floor. We scrambled up, meeting his scowl with a wondrous stare, a grin tugging at our mouth. His lips were forming into a snarl like the crack on a tombstone, his eyes cold and suspicious.

We were so glad to see him that, for a moment, we could not speak. Eventually, in a tone we had last used when taken to see Santa as a boy, we spoke: "Thank goodness you're here, Batman."

If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

We craned our neck, arching our chin forward, fighting the urge to burst into joyful song by pointing to our jaw cheekily.

"Go on," we said, giving in and smiling wide, "Right there."

When the blow came, it nearly knocked us clean out of our skin. Our head swam. Colored shapes danced in front of our glazed eyes. We were monumentally happy.

It may have been the concussion setting in, but the punch (a real Hell Month classic!) had been a tremendous release. We had been waiting for nine days for our inevitable

punishment. We had been waiting so long that, before we knew it, we found ourselves tearing off the final page of January on our calendar and welcoming in February.

We had survived an entire Hell Month without a beating from The Bat. We knew that this fact, coupled with the vengeance we had exacted on his protégé, meant that when he did finally catch up with us, he would be less than amused. Ironically, in the end, it was the waiting nearly killed us.

Still, he hadn't disappointed. It was by far the hardest we had ever been punched by anyone—and that's including the time we accidentally spilt Killer Croc's drink over his new suede shoes.

We staggered backward like a drunkard, our head hanging loosely on the axis of our neck. "Thank you," we murmured.

We had somehow managed to turn so that our back was now to him. Our dazed eyes saw what looked like Nightwing freeing himself from the last of the restraints we had placed on him.

We did a double take. Yup.

He ripped the duct tape from his mouth with a yelp.

This wouldn't end well.

"WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU ON, TWO-FACE?!" he finally exploded, doing his mentor proud. "There is NO me and Ivy! There never has been and there never will be!" He acrobatically kicked us in the jaw with one well-placed boot. "And *that's* for the mental image. You know which one I mean," he said, shuddering.

We were spinning again. Our vision was clouding.

No relationship...?

If we hadn't been about to collapse, we would have cartwheeled across the room. The wood panelled floor rushed up to meet us. We embraced it with open arms, feeling the cool wood against our cheek. We were in Paradise.

We were dragged roughly to our feet. Batman held us by the throat a good foot off the ground.

"Two against two..." we rasped thoughtfully, choking violently as his grip tightened. "Hardly seems fair..."

"Shut up," Batman snarled, shaking us with all of his considerable might. We felt ourselves beginning to lose consciousness. He was shaking, howling, snarling like a slavering madman. Or a bat.

Suddenly, a strange, surreal calm overcame his features. The clench on our neck loosened. There was a strange twitching at the corner of his lip. We squirmed, genuinely terrified. This was, in many ways, far scarier than the psychopath who had so nearly snapped our neck like a twig earlier. We'd have taken that version over this any day of the—Dear God—was that a smile?

"Welcome home, Harvey," he graveled.

We didn't even see the blow coming. There was the slightest breeze, and then the left side of our face exploded in pain. We flew backwards, landing hard on our shoulder on the wooden floor. We skidded along the smooth panels for what seemed like an eternity, the cotton of our shirt burning our flesh as we slid. Eventually, inevitably, we came to a rest next to the remnants of the chair we had so easily destroyed earlier—a broken pile of a man.

But by the coin... we were happy.

EPILOGUE

"Taken down on February 2nd," Harvey Dent's visitor said aloud as she wrote the words on his cast, "You really are Fate's bitch."

"Don't be catty, Selina," he objected. He would have liked to point a finger at her, tsk-tsk style, to hammer the point home. But the traction table that held his limbs fast made any such movement a pipe dream. Instead, he opted for eloquence: "From the ruffraff of the Arkham Infirmary, we expect scorn and abuse for our misfortune. Only this morning, Catman organized a game of ringtoss around this cat's cradle of weights and pulleys, the object being to bring the cast on our left leg into contact with the cast on our right arm. From his kind, we expect this treatment—no less so because he does have a certain grievance connected with being left at the side of the road somewhere in the Carolinas with a stolen BMW and a neo-nazi auto mechanic name of Billy Bob Jonah Jim—but from you, Selina, we hoped for a little sympathy."

Cold green eyes surveyed him dispassionately. It made Harvey uncomfortable. It made Two-Face horny.

"Sympathy? After what you did? You're lucky I didn't bring the claws."

"When did Pussycat become such a prude?" his darker half asked. "We've done worse. What did we do that's so terrible, roughed up Bridge & Tunnel Boy a little?"

"It's not what you did to Nightwing," Selina insisted, eying the knob that controlled tension on the traction table, "It's why you did it. Harvey, really, the Tattler? The Gotham Tattler. You *BELIEVED* something in one of those gossip rags!"

"He told me to do it—No, we didn't—Yes, you did!" came the frantic reply.

Selina sighed. What the tabloids had written, what some continued to write, about Catwoman was too repugnant to utter. She didn't care about fools, the ignorant mob, but in her own circle, she took citing tabloids as a personal insult.

And then there was Bruce.

Even if she put the Tattler angle aside, there was no question Harvey's little stunt extended Hell Month. Every night Batman returned to the cave without finding Nightwing, his fury compounded. Rage and fear merged into a dread that could bore through solid rock, through time and space, through human flesh... a dread that could fasten to the spinal column and shake a soul into a gibbering mass of slime. She'd seen him do it: to an Iceberg snitch, a Crips tagger, a Maroni soldier, and a homeless guy who did nothing more than take a refrigerator box from the alley where Nightwing's communicator was found. She'd never understood the way other criminals fear Batman—but she'd never seen what he became in Hell Month... nor when someone he loved was threatened.

How was she supposed to ignore that? Write it off as one of Harvey's little quirks?

No, Harvey was her friend and she would always love him as such. But he needed to be punished. It was that simple. Batman got to take his shot, and now it was her turn.

Glancing at the knob again, Selina assured herself the tension was such that Harvey couldn't move his arms more than an inch to either side. Then she smiled...

...for what he did to Bruce, for what he did to Dick...

She reached into her coat, and took out the gift.

...and for what he did to her, nine nights of Hell...

"It took some doing to get these for you, Harvey. They had to be specially made; only one man knows how to do it. And he wasn't at all sympathetic when I told him who they were for, so I had to ask very nicely..."

She removed the napkin covering the basket and a rich, heavenly aroma tickled Harvey's nostrils.

"*Double dipped, double chocolate chip.* These are simply the best cookies ever made... Doesn't that smell delicious? I'll leave them right here on this sidetable. Enjoy!"



The ramp-up to a wedding is never easy, but the ramp up to a wedding at Wayne Manor? Joker, Riddler, Harley Quinn are the least of the problems when Selina's old boyfriend François de Poulignac shows up and a Justice League bachelor party is in the making. Once the vows are spoken, the complications have only just begun. For one thing, someone seems to have killed Ivy's flytrap.

And people wonder why I say if I ever grow up, I want to be Catwoman.

A grand farce.
Absolutely hilarious.

This story is inspiring, uplifting, and downright funny—although *Cat-Tales* fans have come to expect the latter.

I could wish that the writers of Batman, Superman and other iconic characters who have been warped by the confused, marketing-driven storylines of recent years could be sat down and told to read *Cat-Tales*. They might, were they able to overcome their blinkered prejudices, learn something about character, about humour and about heroism.