



Something New

by Chris Dee

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 ... Foreplay: 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 ban*DAMNIT! 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."

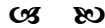
"Indeed, sir."

"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 cell 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.

Batman hovered ominously then hissed, "What did you do – or have done – and to whom?"

Joker looked up suddenly.

"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.

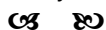
She was quite extraordinary, Bruce observed, removing the cowl and opening the costume vault. She was leaning back against a tall stalagmite, stretching out her back and arms dramatically. He smiled as she flexed, pulling her weight onto the rock and balancing. When Dick was young he was forever climbing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

