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

#21

Cat = Sales
What's New Pussycat

by Chris Dee
Cat-Tales

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WHAT’S NEW PUSSYCAT?

By
Chris Dee

Edited by
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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, eying 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.

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“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, sir—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 Ventriloquists 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.
"…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, the 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 graveled.

“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.


“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 divafit… 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?::

“We’re 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… …rephase 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::

“Oh, 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...ka...y:: 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.
“Paler. 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.

“Our 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—οφαρ!—::
:: 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 Ivyesque: 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.

“Oh, 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/Azreal 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 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’onn 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.
What’s New Pussycat

“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 Ivan!”

“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.


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.


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 allurement 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.
“I’ll say,” Selina agreed with Roxy.
“Barney Fife did it,” Harley noted.
“Captain Lugnut 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...