



by Chris Dee

I was having a good day, that's the thing.

Since Bruce, there are more of those than there used to be, but a good day is still not something to take for granted. And this was a good day.

The Girls' Night Out was more fun than I expected, and the epilogue - MeowPurr - that went way beyond fun.

Next morning, I drove up to the Catitat. There was still a lot of squabbling going on in Gotham, fallout from Nocturna & Anton, and I wanted to slip away for a bit.

Nirvana had a cub with her. You can't *NOT* have a good day meeting a little handful of baby ocelot no bigger than Whiskers and Nutmeg.

When I got back, I had two new messages: Bunny Wigglesworth wanted my opinion on a painting she was buying. And Dick. Grayson Associates got a contract...

::-beep- Glory Hallelujah, Selina, I got a job! Goldberg and Sons. Not exactly Wall Street, not yet anyway. But a solid third generation business. In the diamond district. I'll have a site study for you. ::

Isn't that too cute for words? A site study. That's the bat-influence. He doesn't like phrases like *casing the target* or *breaking and entering*. They're paying him to fix up their security, and he's paying me to work out how it needs fixing. He wants me to case their operation, break in, and crack their safe. A "site study." You gotta love him.

I had a fitting at Kittlemeier's. He was a shameless flirt, as usual. And a stickler for his rules, as usual. Bruce had wanted me to pick up his order for him.

"You want fries with that?"

"Selina, he's not an idiot. He's repairing a utility belt with a catclaw jammed into the winch. He knows we're together."

"He's still not going to go for it. Hell, I don't think he lets Harley and Joker pick up each other's stuff."

"It can't hurt to ask, can it? Smile pretty. Meow."

Can you believe it? "Smile pretty and meow, Kitten; it can't hurt to ask." Shall we revisit just how successful smile-pretty-and-ask has worked in the past: "Put the diamond back... pretty or not, it's not yours... put it back and maybe you won't spend the rest of the night in a cell."

And yet, there he was, my Dark Knight, telling me to bat my eyes at Kittlemeier and ask to bend the rules.

It went like you'd expect. People who think Batman is a black-and-white proposition have never dealt with Mr. Kittlemeier, that's for damn sure.

"Ze rulez is ze rulez, Zelina, you know diz. I make exzeption for you, next time he zend Nightwing. Pretty zoon, Mizz Quinn and Mizz Query want to come zhopping together, what do I zay? Now I got zilly girls giggling in my fitting roomz. No, no, no. No exzeptions, and I gonna charge you both extra for asking."

"Okay, okay, okay. Mr. Kittlemeier, I apologize. I really do. And I have never apologized, all right? I won't ever bring it up again. You can tack on whatever surcharge you like onto my account, I'll pay it gladly. Just one thing: You *MUST* let me tell him he's paying extra because he tried to break the rules. *PLEASE, LET ME TELL HIM... Meow?*"

He smiled. See, when it's *my* idea Meow/Ask Nice does occasionally work.

I got dressed to meet Bruce at d'Annunzio's. A new dress – with a short skirt – which I knew he'd enjoy almost as much as pretending not to notice that it was a new dress with a short skirt.

And yes, new ivory pumps. I still don't get the whole shoe-shopping thing. But I had to make an effort with Doris, for Eddie's sake. And she is a civilian. It's what they do, right? Normal women that don't wear spandex and prowl rooftops, normal women that work at Barnes & Noble, they go shoe shopping. Besides, these pumps are the perfect color.

I got to the restaurant only a little behind schedule, and Giovanni d'Annunzio was deliciously understanding.

"*Cara gatta,*" he assured me, "For a beautiful woman, there is no 'late.' She is always on her own time, *perfetto!* If the man he must wait – all the better to appreciate her when she appears. And you are not so cruel as you might have been. Signore Wayne, he is only waiting a few *minuti.*"

Just as Gotham City is Batman's turf where he metes out his own brand of justice, just as Kittlemeier's shop is his domain where he enforces his rules as he sees fit, so too is Giovanni the master of his realm. He has his own system of rewards and punishments. If you've displeased him, you'll wind up waiting for a cramped table in the bar. If he's happy with you, he may invite you to proceed unescorted to meet your party in the great dining room.

"You make an entrance, Selina! Go right ahead. By yourself. Just for wearing that dress. *Bellissima.* Not many women know how to enter a room with class."

I paused in the archway for just a second, taking in the room, pretending to look for Bruce's table. This was unnecessary; Bruce is always seated at the best table. But the pause gave him time to see me. The eyes flickered over me, top to bottom before he met my eye. I smiled a greeting, and walked to his table... not too slow, not too fast... 2/3 a Bryn Mawr walk, 1/3 cat.

Bruce was appreciative, I could tell. Like me, he felt the room watching. For their benefit more than his, I kissed his cheek as he stood to greet me:

"Good evening, Darling. Sorry I'm late."

"You look... fabulous," he murmured.

~*And good evening to the fop.*~ I signed, secretly.

~*Not the fop talking,*~ he answered. ~*You're stunning.*~

So you see, it had turned out to be an extraordinarily good day, and I was planning to stretch that into an extraordinarily good night. Then it happened. Giovanni brought my regular cocktail, and as I turned to thank him...

"*Grazie, Giovanni, troppo pronto, da vero-*"

...I saw them. F. Miller, author of *Catwoman: an Unauthorized Biography*, seated with the three stooges of Catwoman exposes, the Miller-wannabes: M. Newell, E. Brubaker & D. Cooke!

Bruce turned, curiously, to see what I was staring at, then looked back to me.

"Darling, we can leave. I can take you anywhere you wish. Anywhere. Not another restaurant. Paris. Rome. Let's just go and..." he trailed off. Then Batman's voice picked up..."Selina, you're not thinking of doing anything *rash*, are you?"

Giovanni was the only one who said anything worth acknowledging, so it was him I answered:

"Who is at that table that offends you, *Cara gatta*?"

"Several years ago, Giovanni, that man, in the center, with the unfortunate mop of hair, wrote a book saying I was common, uneducated, a victim, and a whore."

I had to stop for Giovanni to express his outrage. He had no idea, he said, or he would never have admitted such ruffraff into his establishment. Why if *anyone* was common...

He offered, with the Italian machismo of a man half his age, to throw Miller and his party into the street.

"Giovanni, please, no. That would hardly be productive. You know what they say: *Mantenga vicini i vostri amici, ma più vicini i vostri nemici. Sì?* Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer."

Bruce brooded. I went on with the history...

"In any case, he wrote this book. It sold. I wasn't crazy about it, but I figured it would blow over. It's the price you pay, being a public figure. Also, I didn't have the Cat-Tales idea back then. But anyway, the thing is, it hasn't blown over. And every parasite that fancies himself a new Dickens, Raymond Chandler or Judith Kranz goes back to this sorry orphan-streetwalker-headcase he invented..."

"Selina, when you said 'keep your friends close but your enemies closer'..." Bruce put in.

"Not now, dear. Where was I? Oh, yes - headcase he invented, which we all know is not me. Hello? Art expert? Graduated *summa cum laude* from the Sorbonne, thank you very much..."

"Selina."

"Bruce, please, I'm talking to Giovanni. Do you have a pen, by the way? Anyway, I speak three languages. I dated French aristocrats, not mob enforcers. And as for Slam Bradley, oh please! But nobody would buy the asinine adventures of their badly dressed streetchick if they didn't call her Catwoman, now would they?"

"Selina, I do have a pen. If you want it, TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE PLANNING TO DO."

I snatched the pen, and began to write.

"I'm making a list."



Dick Grayson had never been to d'Annunzio's, and he did what all first-timers do. He stood in the great atrium entrance and tried not to gape while waiting to be noticed by the attendant. His eyes fell where they were expected to, on the plaque that read...

*"d'Annunzio's is the quintessential Gotham dining experience in a setting of opulent elegance, offering patrons an award-winning wine list, unparalleled service, and an electric fusion of classic Italian cuisine with modern innovation and flair..."*

If you were standing there long enough to read further, you might as well leave, for the haughty proprietor would not be acknowledging your existence. Fortunately, it was at this point Giovanni noticed Dick.

"And how may I help you." He made it seem like an answer, not a question.

“Reservation for Wayne, for two, for lunch?” In reply, Dick’s answer sounded like a question. But the Wayne name, as it did so many places in Gotham, worked its magic. Giovanni’s features transformed entirely.

“Ah yes! You are Mr. Wayne’s guest. He is already seated. Follow me please, Signore.”

Dick was surprised, moments after their greeting, to realize he was dealing with neither Bat Bruce, at home Bruce, nor Fop Bruce. Instead, this was executive Bruce. It was the persona Dick had the least experience with but, like all the others, it got straight down to business.

“After the last time we spoke at your office, I thought it best to have this meeting elsewhere,” Bruce said crisply. “I want to hire you.”

Dick gaped.

“You want to hire me?”

“Yes, for a job. That is the purpose of opening an agency, isn’t it?”

“Bruce, if this is a joke, I don’t think it’s funny.”

“It’s no joke. I have something that needs looking into that Dick Grayson can accomplish that better than *anyone else*.” Dick understood the emphasis on the final words meant ‘better than Batman or Nightwing.’

“Selina sat in this room last night, in that very chair, making a list I shudder to even describe. Your name is on it. So is Barbara’s. So is Two-Face, Riddler, Joker and Scarecrow. It is a scary list. One line reads ‘Wonder Woman OR Ra’s al Ghul’. That comes underneath ‘Oswald-dash-dollar signs’, and before ‘P. Ivy-smelly plants’. I’m sure Diana and probably even Ra’s would want to know what’s going on there.”

Dick chuckled.

“So that’s the assignment? Find out what the list is?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

Bruce glared.

“I did. Seven times.”

“Ah. Did, uh, Batman ask her?”

“I don’t especially want to remind her of Batman at the moment.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“*Mantenga vicini i vostri amici, ma più vicini i vostri nemici.*”

“Huh? And what does that mean?”

“It means I’m very glad Batman never touched the particular nerve that set off the making of this list.”

“Bruce,” Dick began, then stopped. He saw an expression on his mentor’s face he’d first seen as Robin. It was the “No Trespassing” sign. He’d first seen it the night they didn’t chase Catwoman once she ran from the museum. “But she’s getting away!” Robin had wailed. He continued complaining throughout the patrol and half the way home. Batman never responded, and eventually Robin noticed that he wasn’t getting an answer. He looked over – and that was what he saw. Jaw set, eyes square. Private Property. Keep Out. Trespassers will be frozen out.

“Ok,” Dick sighed. “I’ll look into it.”



The P.I. of bathetic fiction would have begun his investigation like so: *Go to a seedy bar. Drink self into a stupor accompanied by theme music of a soprano sax passing a kidney stone. Stagger into parking lot and fall victim to menacing thugs in bad suits with warning to "drop da case or else, Mack, oooupph."*

Dick Grayson, not being a geriatric bachelor with a drinking problem, left the luncheon at d'Annunzio's around 3:30, checked his office voicemail via cell phone, and headed home to his loving wife – who, he discovered, was having the object of his investigation to tea.

"Hey, Selina," the Private Dick began.

"Hey, Richard," the femme fatale answered.

"You weirded out Bruce big time with that list last night. What was that about?"

"It's a little thing I like to call 'People who Owe Me a Favor,'" Selina answered.

And there ended *The Case of the Loathed List*.

"So am I on your list?" Dick asked, already knowing the answer but reasoning this was as good an icebreaker as any.

"You are. Did I not go along with your Girls' Night Out setup?"

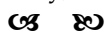
"And you had such a miserable time doing it," Dick joked sarcastically. "Really, Selina, it was the least you could do, I'd say – after Ivy went and ate my cookies."

"Excuse me," Barbara interjected.

"Um, nothing, Honey. Okay, Selina, you're right; I do owe you one. So what do I have to do?"

"Simply remind your wife that I wore yellow ruffles for her."

"I know, I know," Barbara wailed. "Okay, Oracle is in."



::Bruce, it's Dick. Secure the line.::

-snirk-

"Check," Bruce grunted as soon as they heard the click of the OraCom encryption engaging the landline. "Yes, Dick. What'd you learn?"

:: The list is mostly people who owe her. She's calling in favors. And having heard why, Bruce, I gotta say, I'm totally on her side. ::

"Dick, there's a conference call going on right now. She's on a speaker-phone with Joker, Two-Face, and Scarecrow. They're 'brainstorming' – their word, not mine. You should hear this. If you heard, you wouldn't be on board, believe me."

:: Hey, whatever they're coming up with, better it's directed at Miller than at us, right? ::

"Bruce, sweetie," Selina called from the other room, "There's a carnivorous plant that gives off an odor; it smells like rotting meat. Do you know what it's called?"

Bruce shook his head sadly.

"Never mind," Selina called again, "Harvey's got Pam on the other line."

Bruce turned back to the phone.

"They're now discussing a plant, the Malaysian Devil's Tongue. If, in the next year, Nightwing finds himself confronted with a giant carnivorous blossom with a foul, carrion-like stench, think back to this moment and remember this brainstorming you dismissed so airily."

:: Bruce, it's not like she's the only one Miller libeled, you know. He's got Batman using a gun and killing people.::

There was quacking Bruce recognized as Barbara talking in the background.

:: Besides, Babs thinks after all the fights last month, this could be a very constructive exercise. Sure, we quarrel among ourselves, but we can still all come together and make this guy eat his spleen... ::

More quacking before Dick added:

::...with a spork. ::



"Well, that was entertaining," Selina purred, catching up with Bruce in the cave gymnasium, "but not especially productive. They mean well, poor dears. But smelly plants and fear toxins, well, it's not exactly the right tone."

Bruce continued his workout. There was no sign that she was being listened too – except for a single grunt that had more to do with the parallel bars than anything she was saying. Upstairs, Selina had been preoccupied with the conference call. She hadn't noticed the "brooding bat" quality of Bruce's vanish from the study. But she was now beginning to detect the unmistakable aura of Bat-disapproval.

There was only one way to deal with Bat-disapproval, she'd discovered long ago. You had to feed it until it popped.

"I mean, really," she cooed, "this thing needs to be fought on a certain level, and I don't see that Jervis & Jonathan debating whether to make him afraid French fries or pens..."

Another grunt. Good. He was getting angry.

"Although I must admit, Harley's little brainstorm of making him deathly afraid of toilets, that's got some style."

Bruce leapt off the bars, grabbing a suspended jump rope on his way to the mat.

Selina appeared to ignore this and chattered on...

"By the way, Jack is on some kind of kick with fondue forks, you might want to be aware. Nobody knows what set it off, and obviously no one wants to ask."

Bruce slammed his jump rope into the mat.

"You're going about this all wrong, you do realize that, don't you?" he blurted angrily.

Catwoman's iciest stare was his answer.

"What would you have me do," she countered. "Turn the other cheek? I did that. If I'd dealt with him as he should have been dealt with all those years ago with that first smarmy book, then Carlton, Brubaker, and the rest of it never would have happened. I gave them an inch, look what happened. It ends now."

"Selina, do you want to cause him pain? Or do you want to win? Because if it's the latter, Joker and Scarecrow don't have the answer."

"So what do you suggest? Write a terse little letter to his editor, the same editor that's greenlighted all this shit?"

"Are you asking for my help now? Because, if you remember back that far, I *was* at the restaurant. I would have helped then if you'd asked for more than a pen. I'm not

crazy about you looking right past me while writing down Dick, Barbara and Ra's Al Ghul."

"Ra's has a grudge against the American press, *and* he says he knew Cleopatra. That reminds me, did Wonder Woman? She's borderline immortal, right? If she did, that'd be better. It would be much better coming from a woman."

"I...don't know. I think Vandal Savage mentioned her once."

"No good. If Diana can't help, I'll go with Ra's."

"Don't do that. You've totally changed the subject. I hate that. Could we please stick to the point?"

"Cleopatra *IS* the point."

"The point, Selina, is are you going to let me help you? Or not?"



"The point, Selina, is are you going to let me help you? Or not?"

I hadn't felt like this since he hit me with "a crimefighter loving a thief." It came out of nowhere. He wanted to help. I had thought, I don't know why, I just *assumed* he'd go all judgmental-jackass about this. But that wasn't it. It wasn't disapproval. He was upset that I didn't go to him first.

"Well?" he asked.

Just like he used to be, all hard and moody and monosyllabic. I could never resist him like that. I got close and fingered his shirt collar as I might the bat insignia.

"And if I say 'Help me, please'," I purred, "what have you got to offer?"

His breathing was ragged. I was getting to him.

"Martin Stanwick," he rasped, and I tried to concentrate, but I must admit, that voice doesn't make it easy. "From the wedding. He might be useful to you. He's really 'Hermoine,' the society columnist."

Meow.



Martin Stanwick was in Hermoine Heaven. As the secret identity of Gotham's most illustrious society columnist, Martin was experienced in angling for invitations. If there was a party, a race, an opening, or a gala that was *the* place to be, he made it his business to be there. But it was rare for a hostess to call out of the blue and ask him to lunch. A last minute fill-in for a dinner party, yes. But a luncheon *intime* to meet the Princess of Themyscira? That was unprecedented.

Martin had presented himself at d'Annunzio's promptly at one o'clock and was surprised to learn the royal reception wasn't hidden away in a private room. He was told "the ladies are already seated" and followed Giovanni into the main dining room. He gasped on seeing just how intimate the luncheon *intime* really was: four ladies and an empty chair for him. Hermoine Heaven.

The one in the tiara was certainly the princess. Next to her, Martin's internal dictation began...

...Bunny Wigglesworth, keeping better company than at that horribilino party last week...

...Selina Kyle, who had invited him. How long are she and Wayne going to go on pretending anyway...

...And, speaking of pretending, in the fourth seat was that divine woman from the Grayson wedding, who wouldn't admit her connection to the Lances of Newport...

Having shown Martin to the table, Giovanni gave an odd sniff before returning to his station.

"He's not convinced Diana is really a princess," Dinah Lance confided. "We've been laughing about it. Seems royalty doesn't dress that way back home."

"This is Amazonian ceremonial garb," Diana insisted.

"He's miffed because he got suckered," Selina explained. "Giovanni is Italian and he's breathing. You walked in dressed like that, he ogled. Then he found out who you were. He's embarrassed, so he takes a position: royalty and cleavage, it isn't right."

"I think it's lovely," Bunny Wigglesworth said, feeling that good manners meant making the guest feel comfortable. She defended Diana's outfit, "And as for what royalty does or doesn't wear, I'm buying this painting - Selina can tell you, she's advising me - it's of Cleopatra and, my dears, her dress, if you can call it that, is positively *shocking*."

"I'm advising you, all right," Selina answered, "I'm advising you not to buy it unless they admit it's Victorian, not 17<sup>th</sup> century, and then cut the price accordingly."

"You're sure?" Bunny asked.

"I'm positive. Look, Cleopatra lived two thousand years ago. What we know about her, it hasn't changed. There are two sources: Plutarch, who gave us the Roman view..."

"The Roman view," Diana interrupted, "was Augustus Caesar's propaganda machine, the party line of her enemies after they'd won."

"Yes, okay, that's quite true," Selina broke in quickly. She'd heard from both Bruce and Barbara how Diana would take over the conversation if given the opening. The Amazon Princess did have a role to play in this particular conversation, but she had to be led to the right spot. "The other source," Selina continued, "is Flavius Josephus. He

was closer to the action in Egypt. He tells more about her actual rule in between the affairs with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony that everyone else focuses on."

Selina paused and saw Diana smile approvingly, then she went on.

"Now, whatever you think of the bias on either side, those two works are *all there is to go on*. Every century goes to that same fixed pool of information, zeroes in on some aspects, ignores others altogether, and comes up with a *completely different Cleopatra*. To the 17th century, she was a romantic heroine dying for love. Your painting, Bunny, is 'the Nile slut', a man-eater that seduces an innocent young pageboy each night, and then has him killed in the morning just to be evil."

"That's preposterous," Diana interrupted, "I knew Cleopatra; she wasn't promiscuous. On the contrary, all the Ptolemys were so obsessed with their Greek lineage, they wouldn't dilute their blood with that of the Egyptians they ruled. They married brothers and sisters to avoid doing so. The idea that Cleopatra would sleep around goes against everything that made her Cleopatra!"

"Purrrfect" was Selina's thought. Diana couldn't have chosen her words better if she'd been given a script.

"None of these versions tell you about the real Cleopatra," Selina brought the point home with a cat-like smile as Giovanni showed an expected 1:30 reservation to their table. "Not one of them. They just reveal the people telling - or making up - the story. Bunny's painting, the man-eater? That's painted by a Victorian. The artist has a screaming fear of female sexuality, so he needs to demonize it."

Selina paused, wondering if this was enough. She decided to continue, not because she feared Martin wasn't getting the point, but because Dinah hadn't had a chance to contribute yet. Selina had invited Dinah as a backup if Diana didn't come through - for Ra's al Ghul had also known Cleopatra and boasted about it to Black Canary. If Diana refused to provide the relevant information, Dinah could easily pick up the slack. Diana had come through, so it was a moot point. But Selina could see that Martin was quite taken with Dinah. It would be a shame not to let her shine. For in Selina's experience, men of substance *enjoyed* having the women they admire demonstrate their smarts and understanding. It was only the inadequate ones, the Millers, the Cookes, and the Brubakers, that needed to think such women were foolish, stupid, or confused.

"I remember hearing something similar," Dinah picked up the Cleopatra theme exactly where Selina had left off, and Martin leaned in to take in every word. "After the, what was it you said, the 'man-eater' era, the next group, also unable to cope with her sexuality, made her childlike: naïve, a pawn, manipulated by political forces she didn't understand."

"Vivian Leigh played that version," Martin cut in, anxious to support Dinah's position. "You're right, I never thought of that. They had to remove her sexuality altogether. How sad, when it was such a vital part of her story."

Selina could have kissed him.

"Well, don't feel too bad. She got it back. But not until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Elizabeth Taylor movie. By then, they could handle the notion that she was a politician herself, and a mother, and an intellectual."

"Yes, indeed. That library at Alexandria was her baby," Diana put in, feeling that far too much time had passed since she had been listened to. "And an aristocrat,

descended from a 300 year old dynasty. Frankly, she looked down her nose at those upstart Roman generals whose fathers were, what, farmers?"

"So, in each Cleopatra," Selina timed the closing just as her prey noticed Bunny Wigglesworth and was readying to step into the trap, "you're not seeing Cleopatra. You're seeing a commentary on the person that choose to show her this way. And what kind of a sorry excuse for a man needs her to be... Oh, good lord, is that F. Miller sitting over there? Bunny, I know he was at your party, and I'm sure he'll want to say hello. Frankly, I'd rather not meet him. Excuse me, dears, I'll just go powder my nose."

The man who was so ill-bred as to wear red Chuck Taylor tennis shoes at d'Annunzios never recognized the elegant brunette in the Ferregamo pumps that cut him so coldly as she passed. No matter, Martin thought, Miller would learn her identity soon enough. From Hermoine's column.



Bruce Wayne sat at his Batcave workstation, trying for Batman-mode and failing. He stared at the monitor displaying costumed criminals at large, as if willing it to do something:

**At Large:**

Harley Quinn

Joker

Mad Hatter

Hugo Strange

Poison Ivy

Riddler

Roxy Rocket

Scarecrow

Two-Face

Not a short list. Yet none of them were *doing* anything. Batman did not *WISH* for crime to occur. It was just that, for each and every one of them, it was only a matter of time until they *would* do something. So why not get one out of the way now?

*Joker, he thought, fondue forks? Losing your edge, Clown. Let's have it out, once and for all, while you're fixating on melted cheese instead of mass murder.*

*Scarecrow, that was an emasculating scene at the Iceberg with Hugo; no urge to take it out on the bullies?*

*Ivy, the new flytrap has to be trained sometime, doesn't it?*

*Two-Face, be a pal. You know what she's like. Do something. Get me out of this cave. She's driving me crazy.*

The object of his torment came up behind him and nuzzled his neck.

"I'm worked up," said the hot breath tickling his ear. "Come and play."

He sighed.

"I really should study this. Almost everyone's free right now."

"No one is in the city, it's too hot. It's quiet. Come and play."

"Selina, please."

"I'm restless. Work out with me."

"We've tried that; it doesn't work. Sparring turns into petting which turns into..."

"I'll wear the old suit you like, with the skirt, slit up to--"

"Kitten, you're killing me."

"I can't help it," Selina moaned, exasperated. "I've got all this pent up energy. I'm not like Oracle; I hate sitting tight away from the action, just waiting to hear the reports."

"I appreciate that, my love. I'm the same way. But in this case, you're going to have to wait until--"

"Sir, miss," Alfred announced from the landing, "Ms. Lance has arrived upstairs."

"Thank you," Bruce answered with ill-concealed relief, "Alfred, we'll be right up."



Alfred left Bruce, Selina, and Dinah in the east drawing room. He expected that, by the time he returned with the tea tray, Ms. Lance would be well into her report. He was sorry he would have to miss so much of the story. Only Dinah could tell what happened at the restaurant when Selina left the table, and what Martin Stanwick might have said when he walked Dinah home. This was not idle curiosity, Alfred assured himself. He had contributed more than a little to Selina's overall strategy. Batman and Catwoman were brilliant tacticians in virtually every arena of combat. Yet for the kind of subtle, social warfare that is waged in places like d'Annunzio's, they thought to consult a greater expert: Alfred Pennyworth. It was he who worked out the timing for each development to have the desired effect, and he would be disappointed not to hear firsthand how it had all played out.

Alfred was therefore surprised to find the trio waiting in the most respectful silence when he returned with the tea. It seemed they had waited for him after all.

Bruce nodded as the butler began laying out the tea things, and finally Dinah spoke.

"It was wonderful. Miller no sooner said 'Hi,' and the other one came in. Cooke, I think. He was late for the reservation. Giovanni was furious. Ah, but he had *such a good excuse*. It seems his book signing went to hell!"

Selina's head tilted back as she emitted a low rippling purr.

"I love it when you do that," Bruce murmured.

"You had your chance before," Selina replied. "Go on, Dinah, please."

"Well, you know this winner has a new trash wallow out, cut from the same cloth as Miller, so he's on the book-signing trail. Today, he was at a Barnes and Noble in Chelsea and – tsk tsk – this awful woman brought him coffee and spilled it, piping hot coffee, all over the front of his trousers."

"Go, Doris!" Selina cheered.

Bruce's mouth twitched.

Alfred brewed tea.

"Cooke cursed a blue streak," Dinah resumed. "Even though this woman kept apologizing and trying to make it right."

"Read: rubbing it in, giving the scalding coffee maximum time to burn and stain," Selina guessed.

"Exactly," Dinah confirmed, "and, unfortunately, they just happened to have seated him right next to the children's section. Many irate moms complained: 'That horrible

man. Such language. Our children should not get their ideas of how to behave from people like that.”

“Meow,” Selina observed.

“That was about it until Martin escorted me home,” Dinah went on.

“Wait a minute,” Bruce interrupted again. “What was Diana’s take on Miller?”

“She said he’s a perfect example of why the Amazons left Man’s World and founded Themyscira in the first place. Anyway, Martin took me home. We walked through Gotham Plaza, as planned. And there it was! Barbara’s timing was impeccable. She’d dug up the worst reviews on all of them, also their high school yearbook photos, and had them plastered on the JumboTron. There it was, in colored lights, four stories high:

*‘To say Brubaker is a bad writer is to insult hacks, incompetents, and poseurs around the world.’*

*‘Written in a bland, moronic style reminiscent of Look and Learn.’*

*‘A lack of imagination surpassed only by smallness of mind and banality of thought.’*

*‘Amidst all the dross there is the occasional outburst of really dangerous lunacy.’*

*‘Amidst all the dross there is the occasional outburst of really spectacular ignorance.’*

*‘Amidst all the dross there is the occasional outburst of really spectacular incompetence.’*

*‘The greatest villain in this man’s world is the high school guidance counselor who did not urge him to forget writing, an activity for which he clearly has no skill, and pursue a career instead in the growing field of VCR repair.’*

“And my personal favorite:

*‘There are too many pages between the covers of his books. Paper that could have been used to wrap fish, print jury summons, or on which Marietta Klenofsky might have Xeroxed her lovely derriere at the next office party. Better still, this paper might have been used by Marietta’s son Jonathan. Jonathan is in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He could have used some of the pages squandered on the printing of Brubaker’s latest effort, to write a paper on the most fundamental principles of storytelling, which would demonstrate that a bright 12-year-old has a better grasp of those principles than does Mr. Brubaker.’*”

“Holy hell,” remarked Selina, “and I thought I didn’t like him.”

“From what I saw, plenty of people dislike all four of these losers,” Dinah replied, “but the droogies always shouted them down, so they stopped speaking up. Now you never hear from them unless you go looking. Barbara went looking.”

But something was bothering Bruce.

“The JumboTron is big, but not that big. How did Oracle ever make it display those long reviews?”

“One sentence at a time,” Dinah laughed, “Martin was fascinated, being a writer himself. He made us stay and read the whole thing.”

“In the middle of Gotham Plaza? In traffic?”

“We waited in line at the TKTS both. By the time it was over, we had tickets for STOMP. Which reminds me, I’ve gotta get back. Meeting Marty for drinks before the

show. Selina, I was wondering if I could borrow that pretty green dress? With the low back?"



City folks who find themselves in the country are always startled by how dark the night really is. In a city, one never realizes how much glare the cars, the streetlights, the advertisements and the rest of it really do create. Not until they leave the city, look up, and see a sky so black it seems to have mass and texture, a blackness too thick to be the vacuum of space, a black that must be velvet, or liquid, or pudding. And spattered in that bowl of impossible black are more stars than can possibly exist.

Thus it could not be said that the condition through which F. Miller walked home was at all the "dark and stormy night" of fictional cliché. It was through midtown Gotham he walked, and Gotham City – despite the insistence of cliché-bound fiction writers – is never that dark.

But stormy it most definitely was. The rain began at four o'clock, coating the streets with a greasy slick that extended rush hour until seven, when the tourist traffic, the theatre traffic, and the nightclub traffic took its place. By nine o'clock, the air was thick with car exhaust and bad temper. The rain let up, but the winds promised it would return harder and wetter than before.

It was a miserable night. And Miller, like any sane human being, was in no hurry to walk into it. He lingered at Kane's Bar & Grille, not especially caring that some Cal Tech pranksters hacked the JumboTron, reminding ten million Gothamites of the review calling his sequel "a slap-dash fever dream only written because he drunk up the proceeds of his earlier efforts." It wasn't true. And he wasn't going to let such charges force him from the dry shelter of Kane's into that hell of a storm on a night when there was no chance of getting a cab.

That was his thought from midnight until last call. Then the reality had to be faced. He'd hidden in Kane's as long as he could. It was time to face the storm. He headed downtown through the wind tunnel that was South Sprang Blvd, too intent on the rumblings of nearing thunder to notice that he was being followed.

The first crack of lightning erupted when he was still six blocks from home; the downpour began two blocks later. He reached his door, wet and agitated. He dripped into his entranceway, dripped on his evening edition of the Gotham Post, dripped onto his unopened mail... and dripped onto the ominous shadow growing from the floor beneath his window.

"F. Miller," Batman growled, emerging from the darkness, "We need to talk. We need to talk about why you tear down heroes. We need to talk about what a normal human being can achieve with drive and determination. We need to talk about bravery, intelligence, and strength both physical and of character. We're going to get to the bottom of why you tell people heroes don't exist.

"There are individuals out there with initiative, ability and vision, who develop their gifts for the sake of being the best people they can be. There are people who give of themselves, who risk their lives and their happiness, to make the world better. You tell people that's a lie. You tell them an ignorant whore is more realistic than a bright,

witty, sexy, and cultured woman. You tell them an obsessed emotional cripple is more realistic than nobility of mind and spirit, and a life marked by action and purpose.

“Does that make it easier to live with being a petty, selfish parasite?”

“So what if you’ve never done anything worthwhile with your setbacks: it’s okay, it’s just that you’re not so damaged and stunted as some. You’d have to be real messed up to care so much. You’d have to be one pathetic and limited individual to step up to the line and give of yourself to make the world better.

“I see what you are, Miller, you and those who emulate you, and those who insist your sick vision is the way things are. It’s sick, and it’s sad. But if it stopped there, it would be no concern of mine.

“But when innocents start believing your twisted version of things, when they think *THAT* is realistic, when they think the notion that men and women can achieve great things is a childish fairytale... then it is very much my concern. Because there *are* heroes in this world. One person *can* stand up and make a difference. And if one person stops believing that because of what you’ve written, I will rededicate the rest of my life to destroying the rest of yours.

“Be out of my city by sundown tomorrow.”



to: L.Lane@dailyplanet.com

fr: selina\_kyle@oraclesecure.gothamcity.us

Dear Lois,

A little bird tells me one F. Miller has decided to leave Gotham on short notice and is setting up shop in Metropolis. If there’s one person who detests this man more than I do, I’m sure it’s you.

Attached is a list of ideas the think tank came up with that I did not have a chance to act on. I thought you might find it, shall we say, inspirational.

Meow,

Selina

to: selina\_kyle@gothamcity.us [oraclesecure.intercept.decrypt]

fr: l.lane@dailyplanet.com

Selina, this is certainly inspirational. :) On the fear issue, pens and toilets are very amusing, I’m sure. But, as a writer myself, I believe I have a better notion than any that occurred to your ‘think tank’. Please ask if it would be possible to instill a debilitating fear of the letter “M”.

Lois

