



by Chris Dee

## Prologue

Joey Yolinski, known to one and all as Sportin' Joe, was screwed. For the rest of his life—which didn't look to be very long—he was going to be Screwed Sportin' Joe. And all because Pengujn's man Pavo had a mother. Shit, everybody must have a mother, but ya never think of it with guys like Pavo. But it turns out he did, and she had some kind of problem with a disc in her back, havin' a little surgery, and Pavo wanted to be at the hospital. So he lined up good ol' Sportin' Joe to go to the Iceberg for him, ask for Talon, pick up five large of Penguin's money, and lay off whatever game he was told. Paid two hundred cash or two fifty if you wanted to bet it right there through the 'Berg bookies. Easy money, easy as a whore with a habit.

'Cept it turned out it wasn't five large this run, it was fifteen. All to be put on a single game, Knights/Cougars. And nudge-wink, Talon told him, the fix was in. Joey couldn't believe his luck. All 'cause he was doing Pavo a favor, he had a line on a sure thing. He needed more than a lousy two hundred stake though, more that he could get on short notice. He called his cousin Boxy for the tip of the day. If he could just get a 2-to-1 payout before the 5th race, he could double Penguin's money and still make it to the bookie in time for the Knights game.

Except Battouta-Hell dropped dead from an overdose forty feet from the finish line, and Sportin' Joe Yolinski knew his life was over. Only one thing to do now was go to Mickey's on 12th street and drink himself to death before Penguin got him.

But then, low and behold, Mickey put on GCN and SALVATION! Right there on the big screen, right above Mickey's shiny dome, the announcer was saying something about pandemonium at Knight Stadium. An attack by Scarecrow! Spiked Gatorade! 120+ players, coaches, and fans of a certain body mass, all terrified of nerds and cheerleaders...

But what did it mean for the betting?

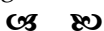
Joey made his way towards the Iceberg, desperate to somehow make this work for him. Was all Scarecrow's fault, right? He rehearsed his new mantra about the villainy of crows as he shuffled down the sidewalk, heading for the Stanton cross street—when a fire engine sped past him, all lights and sirens.

Then another...

And another...

All three turned right onto Stanton, right where he was going...

What the hell happened to the Iceberg?



## The Z

It's quite an accomplishment making Batman feel absurd. A man whose chosen persona involves a mask with pointy ears and a scalloped cape isn't apt to feel silly doing what he does best in the manner he himself chose to do it. He had seen too many weapons, too many persons, and too many situations as lethal as they were ridiculous. He had faced death at the hands of a teacup, a snow globe, a 9-foot daisy and a 13-foot cupcake. Harley Quinn once encased him in plastic and slapped a bow on his head to give Puddin' a "Batman action figure" on his birthday. After a few such incidents, you learn not to laugh off a threat because it's painted yellow with pink polka dots. You *really* don't laugh it off if it's got a smiley face. That's just the way it was, being Batman. And a string of Robins inclined to poke fun at these absurdities had only calcified his grim resolve...

Which is why he was glad he was alone tonight. Tonight he did feel silly.

The two-tone van, painted brown and orange and parked where it shouldn't be behind Gotham National Bank, was not, in itself, a silly vehicle. It had a stupid paint job, but that didn't concern him except as a point of identification for later. The license plate Z3181423 was a more precise ID, but easier to change and harder to spot from a distance. The stupid paint job, on the other hand, was a crimefighter's boon.

The silly feeling only kicked in after he inspected the rear entrance to the bank and saw that it had been compromised. He went inside, made his way to the vault, and discovered two individuals stuffing sacks with cash. They each wore zentai complete with full-face hoods, rather like Batgirl's cowl except lacking any distinctive markings... Lacking distinctive markings, that is, other than that both costumes were the precise shades of orange with brown trim as the van.

Criminals in oddball clothing were certainly not unusual and definitely not silly in Batman's eyes. They were usually insane. They were almost always deadlier than their blue jean-wearing counterparts. And their crimes were often only a means to an end, the true goal being to take on the notorious Batman.

At first glance, these two were only notable because, for costumed crooks in Gotham, their outfits were quite generic. Full body stockings made from some kind of spandex and PVC... Batman hadn't researched it, but such garments had to be available in a dozen fetish shops in the city, to say nothing of the Internet. These two hadn't taken the trouble to customize their costumes in any way. Not so much as a single patch was sewn on. There was nothing individual about them. They may as well have been two anonymous thugs in Dockers and leather jackets with ski masks or nylon stockings over their heads... instead they were two anonymous thugs in really hideous brown and orange zentai. It made no sense. Why take the trouble to wear such ridiculous outfits if it wasn't important enough to— But then, it didn't have to make sense. Whatever they were, they were criminals, they were caught red handed, and they were going down.

"Don't move," Batman ordered, readying a batarang. "Slowly open your hands and let the sacks and money drop to the floor, then slowly raise your hands."

"Zounds!" the first one exclaimed.

"Zooks!" his companion replied.

*Zounds* and *Zooks* is where Batman did, in fact, feel absurd. They were robbing a bank in orange and brown body stockings. They painted their getaway van to match. They were just accosted by Batman, scourge of wrongdoers in Gotham, in what was quite possibly their first attempt at criminal enterprise. And they expressed their dismay by exclaiming *Zounds* and *Zooks*. It was an utterly ridiculous moment.

Then, the ridiculous vaporized in a flicker of “Zooks” left index finger, a flicker that Batman’s instincts were trained to see and respond to without hesitation. He flung the batarang an inch high of the movement—but before the weapon could reach its mark, the vault erupted into blinding flashes of light and a concussive ear-splitting bang.

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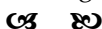
Batman pulled himself off the ground and raced towards the rear door, reaching the alley just in time to see the van squealing onto the street. Cursing, he ran to the Batmobile, calculating how much lead time they had. He knew a standard flash-bang stunned a subject for about six seconds, but thanks to repeated exposures his recovery time was more like four. Usually. Except, in the close confines of the bank vault, the effects were intensified exponentially. He might have been down for as long as twelve or fourteen seconds... Hell, if not for the body armor, he might still be lying there.

The Batmobile tore down Broadway, but there was no sign of the van.

Again, he cursed.

Why hadn’t he planted a homing beacon before he’d gone in? He knew better than that. He’d been overconfident. The stupid paint job did not mean he was dealing with stupid crooks.

He alerted Oracle to alert the GCPD. It was a longshot that the van would be spotted, and he wasn’t going to waste his time on a longshot. He returned to the bank vault to harvest the spent remains of the stun grenade and any other physical evidence.



In the Batcave, Bruce scowled down at the worktable where the spent flash-bang canister, fiber samples, and debris were laid out in neatly labeled trays. So far, the analysis was producing more questions than answers.

In terms of dry forensic analysis, he’d learned that the canister held an 18-gram charge of flash powder. That meant a variation on the M116A1-modified used by the LAPD for a number of years. Except that device used a pull pin with a 0.7 to 2-second delay compared to the 6-second friction fuse of its predecessor. Whereas *this* device was never in that Zooks character’s hand. Batman would have NOTICED, for one thing. Overconfident or not, a perp holding a weapon instead of a bundle of cash is not something he could have missed. It couldn’t have been a pull pin. What’s more, the flash-bang stunned him for more than ten seconds and he was wearing body armor. “Zooks” and “Zounds” were in spandex. For them to be able to run out as they did, the canister had to have been positioned where the crimefighter standing at the door would bear the brunt of it. And if “Zooks” wasn’t holding the device, that meant he must have placed it in advance and detonated it remotely...

Now knowing what to look for, he sifted through the dust and debris harvested from the crime scene until he found... yes, there it was... the splintered remains of a micro receiver. That particular method of decoding binary infrared pulses was familiar: Mad Hatter favored it to activate certain types of control chips, Scarecrow used it more than once to set off various fear toxin delivery systems, and even Maxie Zeus had one to simulate the effect of lightning bolts responding to his verbal commands.

It didn't mean much on its own, but then dry forensic evidence seldom did. CSI was the least part of real detective work. The psychological puzzle that was emerging, that was the real problem to be solved. Unlike most costumed types, the "Zs" didn't waste any effort taking him on, nor did they make any attempt to kill or capture him when he was down. They just took the money and ran. But unlike most take-the-money-and-run types, they were prepared for him and prepared in a manner consistent with costumed rogues.

They didn't fit the profile of theme criminals. They didn't fit the profile of unthemed criminals. So what the hell were they?



Some nights, all Selina wanted after a prowl was bed. Some nights, all she wanted was a long, hot bath. And some nights, she didn't know what she wanted. This was one of the latter, so she went down to the cave. It was still a bit early to expect Bruce to be home, so she headed for the gymnasium. She figured she'd either twist and contort on the parallel bars until he came home, in which case she'd pounce on him, or until she was exhausted, in which case she'd go to bed and it was his loss.

As it happened, she twisted and contorted until she heard the roar of the Batmobile, but when she crept into the main chamber for the pouncing, she didn't see him. She was looking at an empty cave, and then heard a faint bang-thud-damnit coming from somewhere behind workstation 1. So she walked towards the muttered cursing, but not silently as she would for a pounce. Instead, she allowed her boots to make the telltale clip-clip sound on the cave floor, signaling her approach. Batman's head shot up at once. He was bent over behind a console.

"That's not a good sound," she observed.

"It's nothing," he growled. "I broke something."

He looked down and Selina followed his eyes. A shattered Wayne Tech mug lay at his feet, floating in a puddle of stale coffee.

"I'm sure it deserved it," she said with a naughty grin.

She waved him away, and he began the logs while she picked up the bits of broken glass and eventually brought him a fresh mug. He grunted when he saw it contained cocoa instead of coffee. Then he ignored her and it as he resumed typing.

After a minute, he turned to see her curled in the chair at workstation 2, picking and repicking the lock on a set of batcuffs.

"I thought you'd gone up to bed," he graveled.

"No, I'll wait," she smiled.

He resumed typing, then stopped.

"Go up to bed," he ordered.

"I thought so. You're in that Lorton Tower mood."

"WHAT?"

"Lorton Tower. Maybe you don't remember. It was an awfully long time ago. I'd just finished up at Tiffany's and I saw your silhouette off in the distance. So I swung past and let you see me."

"You LET ME see you?"

"Yeah. Tiffany's had been a total yawn, and when I saw that cape flapping, I thought 'there's fun.'"

"Impossible woman."

"Meow. Anyway, it was the old Lorton Tower where you finally caught up with me and... well, you were in quite a state."

"Wasn't January was it?"

"No, that's just it. It was May. It was a nice night. At least it *had* been a nice night. You were just... spitting bullets. The way you snarled at me, you'd think I never called you 'handsome' before. You'd think *that* was the crime, not what went down at Tiffany's. And you hit hard."

"Oh yes, I remember now. That was... you kissed me before you took off?"

"Yep. I pushed and pushed until you finally popped. You obviously needed it. But I figured it was just as bad to leave you in that condition, so I..." Selina licked her lips, remembering the stolen kiss, and Batman touched a button on the console, bringing up an early log before he took up the narrative.

"May 13<sup>th</sup>," he nodded curtly. "Joker had slicked his escape route with axle grease. He got away. Four bystanders were SmileXed. One DOA, the rest were still in the ICU when you found me."

Selina nodded.

"And tonight?"

"Hm?"

"Who got away with it tonight?"

"I wish I knew. I've been calling them the Z. There are at least five of them, but they work in pairs. Hit targets with a lot of cash. The first night it was two men, similar height. They used a flash-bang to get away. The second time it was a man and a woman. Surprisingly good at karate. The third time..."

"The *third*? How often have you run into these guys?"

Batman slammed his fist on the workstation, causing the cocoa mug to rattle dangerously near the edge and nearly sending it the way of the coffee.

"Four times in the last six weeks. The first three encounters were all in the first week. They wore these ridiculous orange and brown zentai and rode around in a matching van."

Selina made a face.

"Orange and brown?"

"Until tonight. They and the van are now green and yellow."

"Okay.... I guess that's an improvement. Ivy green?"

"Riddler green."

Selina bit her lip.

"Eddie's due to be released next week. Could they be working for him?"

"I thought of that, but there's been no riddle. And none of the targets have been of any thematic significance. Just cash-rich... wait a minute."

He swiveled the chair back to face the computer and typed feverishly until the Arkham database appeared simultaneously at his workstation and the main viewscreen.

"Nigma is scheduled to be released Thursday, that's six days from now. Let's see who was getting out of Arkham or Blackgate six days after their first appearance... YES!"

Again, Batman had pounded the workstation, and again the mug rattled precariously towards the edge.

"Crane," he pointed accusingly at the screen. "Orange and brown... In fact..." He typed with renewed vigor, and Selina reached over silently to rescue the mug before his next outburst.

"Z318—put that back down, please—Their license plate on the first job was 3-18-14-23. That's C-R-O-W."

"Z-Crow?"

"Zs again. Zounds, Zooks, and Zoink... that's what they've said, individually, when I've surprised them."

"You let someone that said 'zoink' get away?"

"You once locked your keys in your car," he reminded her absently while he pulled up more records from the Arkham database.

"Jackass," she replied, just as absently.

"Crane's release was deferred, some kind of 'incident' with Croc and... and *Temple Fugate*? What the hell goes on up there? Anyway, details are sketchy, but Jonathan Crane was involved in an incident, it's logged as a setback and his release was deferred pending reevaluation... that's when the first crime wave, the brown-orange ones, subsided. Now they're at it again, wearing green and yellow, and Riddler is due to be released."

"Well, there's obviously a connection," Selina said, "but I can't quite connect the dots. Can you?"

He grunted.

"Let's say you were in Arkham."

"Oh let's not!" she exclaimed.

"Hypothetically."

"Hypothetically, let's say someone *else* is in Arkham. Let's say whatshername-Gretta is in Arkham."

"Fine. You're whatshername-Gretta, a criminal who regularly challenges Batman, and you're in Arkham."

"Woof."

"Someone comes to you offering a service: a week before your release, they'll commit a series of crimes, pulling jobs of little thematic significance but which raise large amounts of cash. Possibly they'll set up a lair and do other spade work. And they'll even do it 'flying your colors,' so to speak. Is that an appealing proposition for a rogue eager to pick up where she left off?"

“Yes. Yes, it really is. Some kind of advance team. I get seed money for whatever I’m planning without lowering myself to dreary non-theme crimes that have no panache.”

“It explains why they don’t behave like costumes. It’s not about ‘beating Batman’ for them, it’s all about getting away with the money.”

“Imagine that.”

Batman said nothing, and Selina merely studied him.

“No more Lorten Tower vibe,” she noted. “More a ‘now I know what their objectives are’ gleam in your eye, and a definite ‘going to be up all night constructing protocols’ clench of the jaw.”

His lip twitched.

“I told you, you can go up to bed.”

“Nah, I’ll just vanish the cocoa and make us some coffee.”



## HNWI

Bruce hung up the phone, a sour unease settling at the base of his spine. Redford Briggs was coming to Gotham. Briggs wasn't a criminal menace like Luthor or Lay, he was simply a very rich man. His name appeared on lists with Bruce Wayne's, Lex Luthor's, Bill Gates and/or Paul Allen, assorted Windsors, members of the Saudi royal family and, depending on the list's focus, Ted Turner, Richard Branson, or Donald Trump. The order varied from year to year and from list to list, but Redford Briggs never appeared under the same name twice. If you had the bigger yacht last time, he would be sure to beat you next year, if only by ten meters. When the Megayacht 100 data was collected again, he might not be #1, but he would be #15 if he was 16 last time and you were in that slot above.

It always made Bruce slightly ill, having been brought up as he was with a strong ethic about the obligations that went with privilege. To squander hundreds of millions playing "whose is bigger" with boats and planes had never sat well with him. But he did play that game for the sake of his image, and, having played, he couldn't feel the blanket contempt that others might. No one is a villain in their own eyes, and in pretending to be one of them, Bruce had to adopt the mindset. It gave him an insight into the Redford Briggs of the world and what made them tick.

*Insight* didn't make it any easier to take when they started goading him. The last time Bruce saw Redford Briggs in person was at EADS, the annual show for business jets in Geneva. Wayne One was more than adequate for his personal needs, but Wayne Enterprises needed a new Boeing. That's all he'd gone for, but then he ran into Redford on the stairs of a 767. To be precise, he ran into Redford *counting* the steps up to the 767. Redford Briggs would not consider buying a plane if it took less than 4 steps to reach the door.

"Seven, eight, nine" he mouthed before he saw Bruce, and then his features transformed into that evil pixie expression. At the best of times, Briggs looked like cross between Oliver Queen and a Norwegian mountain troll. Whenever he saw Bruce, it was as if Queen had chased a suspect without paying attention to where he was going and suddenly realized he was in the dressing room of the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. At the same time, the mountain troll had gotten drunk on mead.

As the whole world knew, Redford Briggs was building his own space program. He started hinting that Bruce could do the same and they could have their own, personal, two-man space race. Why, with all of Wayne Tech's aerogel patents, Bruce had a headstart. Hadn't they already locked up the Justice League market, making a whole line of ultralight materials for that lunar space station the League was building?

That, of course, was never confirmed, but Bruce knew how small the high tech world was at the very top. There were only eight companies worldwide that could make what the League was buying. Redford owned two of them, and Lex Luthor owned a third. Redford wouldn't need Bruce's confirmation to know his guess about WayneTech was right...

...And PsychoBat went on a tirade. He bought two 767s for Wayne Enterprises, and a Gulfstream just for WayneTech. Then he bought the hotel he and Briggs were staying

in after an incident with four Swiss Air stewardesses, two fashion models, and a sales girl from Raymond Weil.

Obviously, this was an overreaction.

Nevertheless, Bruce had to admit if he was faced with a similar situation, if a competitive bulldog like Redford Briggs started dancing on a link between Bruce and Batman, he couldn't say he wouldn't do it again.

Obviously, with Selina in his life now, that was not acceptable.

Nevertheless, Redford Briggs was coming to Gotham and some sort of preemptive steps should be taken.



Selina's suite had once been the Chinese bedroom, so called because of a garlic head vase of the Wan-Li period, Ming dynasty, displayed in the hall just outside the door. Really it was called that because, in the days of a large domestic staff, there were more than two dozen bellpulls throughout the manor from which the family and their guests could summon their butler, personal maids or valets. The corresponding bells in the servants' hall had to be labeled precisely so the staff knew where the ring came from. That told them who was being called and where they should report.

To the generations of Wayne family servants, the Chinese bedroom did not really mean the vase with birds and flowers in wu-ts'ai enamels. It meant the houseguest staying there, which meant it was their own maid or valet they were ringing for, at least in the early days. Later, it meant the Wayne footman or parlor maid assigned to attend them, after the world changed and personal servants became less common.

The first thing Selina had done was remove the bed and other furnishings, and move in her own sofa, coffee table, and other pieces from her old living room. The former boudoir was similarly cleared, and in went her exercise mats, stereo, and Bowflex, to make a dream of an exercise room. It was there she sat now, comfortably contorted in the lotus position after her workout. Theoretically, she was meditating, but she thought of it as cooling down. She was too hot and sweaty to meditate after a workout and found it hard to believe anyone else could either.

So she did not have that serene Zen-like awareness of her surroundings that alerts the sensei of cliché to the clumsy student's approach. She merely felt the tingle she always felt when the Dark Knight was near.

"Yes?" she asked without opening her eyes.

"I can come back if it's not a good time," a foppish voice offered.

Her right eye opened suspiciously, half expecting to see that Bruce wasn't alone, for only an unexpected visitor could justify the fop's emergence on a lazy weekend at home.

Except he was alone. He stood there, in a Loro Piana cashmere polo, leaning against the doorjamb in a too careless Casual Fridays pose.

"Really, it's no trouble, I can come back."

It wasn't the sweater. The sweater was pure Bruce, so dark a blue it was practically black. But a sweater wouldn't set off the Dark Knight tingle. That only happened when he was in Bat mode. Bat mode wasn't the end of the world in the middle of a lazy weekend; Selina loved his Bat side as much as Bruce himself. But its emergence

did change the tone of the day, and she had to wonder what set it off. She also had to wonder what the hell the fop voice and the pose in the doorway was all about.

"No, no, it's fine," she said, stretching forward still in the lotus before getting up and then indulging in an even more luxurious feline stretch once she was standing. "I was just finishing up."

The foppish aura didn't flicker, and Selina was disappointed. She had hoped her evocative stretching would blast the Dark Knight out of hiding, but whatever he came for refused to be superseded.

"What's up?" she asked, abandoning the seductive for playful felinity.

"I was wondering if you'd like a Lamborghini."

Very slowly, Selina sucked her lip inward to moisten it with her tongue, and then tilted her head at a thoughtful angle, a cat contemplating cream.

"I think it's fair to say anyone would *like* a Lamborghini," she said finally.

"So you're not married to the Jaguar because of the cat thing?"

This time, the tongue came out on its own and moistened the lips rapidly.

"No. There is something it's always nice to nod to whenever the opportunity presents itself. Being offered a Lamborghini, on the other hand, when that opportunity presents itself, there can go sit in the corner and lick its paw for a while."

"Good."

He grunted, turned, and left.



Alfred always found reading to be a relaxing pastime, much more so than watching a movie. His duties for the morning were very light. Master and mistress had both taken breakfast in bed, which was a much easier cleanup, and Miss Selina ordered a frittata for lunch, the simplest of egg dishes requiring little preparation. So he had time on his hands. Another day, he might have inventoried the medical supplies in the Batcave, but for the next three months he was to have an assistant for such tasks. Miss Cassandra had been assigned to him, less to ease his burden and more to help educate her. She would benefit from the conversation, certainly, although the particulars of maintaining a crimefighter's inventory and placing orders through shield companies was unlikely to be of much use to her. In any case, Alfred knew he should wait until her Wednesday visit before attending to the Med Lab inventory, which left him with nothing in particular to do today. So he perused the library shelves and selected a morocco bound volume of *The Rivals* which he had not read for many years.

In another household, in another era, he would certainly have taken the book to his room, but Master Bruce disdained such formal divisions. He wanted Alfred to treat the manor as his home, and while Alfred would never abandon some formalities, he did feel at ease settling into one of the deep library chairs to enjoy his book.

"No, no, no, you don't get to just 'grunt-good' and do the bat disappearing act after a bomb like that. What Lamborghini? What Lamborghini?! What's going on?"

Alfred closed his eyes as the tumult approached the library door, then breathed a sigh of relief as it faded into the distance.



"Wayne Tech is developing a series of designer electronics with Lamborghini," Bruce explained. "Incredibly sleek, high impact designs. Cell phones, laptops, plasma screens."

"A Lamborghini... phone."

"You'd be surprised how popular the idea is. Anyway, I was just on the phone with Bologne trying to coordinate schedules with Stephan Winkelmann, their CEO, so we can set up a joint press thing announcing all this to the public, and he mentioned this new car they're putting out."

"A real car? Not fancy packaging for a phone?"

"A real car. More than that, it's 'a car' in the same sense that you're 'a thief.' 650 horsepower and 487 lb-ft of torque, with an 8000 rpm redline. Superior aerodynamics, a robotized gearbox that transmits power to all four wheels..."

"Bruce, I know we're dealing with Batman's ear for detail, but for something that was casually 'mentioned' at the tail end of a phonecall, you seem to have retained an awful lot of very specific details."

"Its design is inspired by a fighter jet," he grinned.

"Ah," a slow cat smile formed. "Seems I've heard that about another car."

"Exactly. If half of Stephan's description is correct, this thing is way too much like the Batmobile for me to consider driving it."

"But..." Selina's smile widened into the Cheshire variety. "You have to have one anyway."

He nodded.

"Enter Kitty, high priestess of things you want that Psychobat won't let you have."

"It's a limited edition car. They're only making twenty, all to be presold before it's announced to the world. That's going to be a unique list of buyers, to say the least, a list that could garner some attention. I can't just make up a billionaire that nobody else in the world has ever heard of. If I want the car, Bruce Wayne has to buy it. And since I can't buy it for myself..."

"Mrrrrrolw. Score one for Kitty."

Grunt.



Briggs Global Group had grown from a humble London publishing firm into a multi-national juggernaut encompassing retail stores, travel and financial services, cinema, radio, and now, an airline. Its business practices were sound, but it was the cult of personality that made a BGG enterprise what it was. It was Redford Briggs, the bad boy billionaire. He'd come to Gotham to promote his new airline. Booked on a half-dozen talk shows, he had cancelled all but one at the last minute. The last interview he did give, throwing a tantrum on the air and dousing the host with water. A "shocked audience member" had "leaked" the incident in an internet blog, and an inferno of publicity resulted—which is, of course, what he intended all along.

The international press would be a-flutter, the show's own publicity machine egging them on if their interest waned before the episode aired, and the public would work

themselves up to a fever pitch until the interview was televised on the very day the first flight took off London to Gotham to LAX.

Redford Briggs smiled. The business of his trip completed, he could now devote all his energies to pleasure. Gotham was Bruce Wayne, after all, and if Briggs had a rival in the bad boy billionaire racket, Wayne was it. That's why he called Bruce before he came to town. That's why he asked to use his skybox. Briggs really didn't care for American baseball. He didn't care for any sport that you sat and watched instead of playing. But if he had to watch, he would much prefer cricket, because it was cricket, or tennis, because he nearly got lucky with one of the royals at Wimbledon that time and had every reason to think a second encounter would have a happier conclusion.

No, the point of attending a Knights game at Knight Stadium was to ask for Bruce Wayne's skybox and insure a meeting. He made his way along the thickly carpeted hall, the elegant pinstripe wallpaper discreetly evoking the hometown team, passing the doors for Sterling Trust, Drake Industries and Larraby Chemicals, until he came at last to the one reading Wayne.

He didn't knock but walked right in, reclined comfortably on the sleek designer sofa, and glanced disinterestedly at the massive TV screen before him, and with little more attention at the panoramic view of the field below. A waiter appeared with a menu, which Briggs took without acknowledging the man's existence. The usual skybox fare: shrimp and sushi staples with more luxurious options available, filet mignon, Beluga caviar and Dom Perignon for an extra \$300. Not really what he felt like. A hamburger perhaps, that was the traditional American sports food... the one served here was ground from three kinds of beef—Argentine sirloin, U.S. and Japanese beer fed kobe—with a balsamic mustard mixed with champagne and white truffles. That sounded rather good. He ordered it with a 15 year Dalwhinnie malt and sat back, rubbing his hands together as he waited for Wayne.

Only now did his eyes fall on the low table—Sawaya and Maroni, he noted. He almost bought it at the Milan Furniture Fair last year—and in particular, the magazine lying on that table. HNWI, the new issue... apparently an *advance copy* of the new issue, because Redford subscribed to High Net Worth Individual and *that cover* he would have remembered. It pictured one of the new Lamborghini Reventóns and its owner, hardly unexpected, a cover story on the car was a foregone conclusion. Redford had already received an email that his castle in Surrey had accepted delivery of his new Reventón last week. But *this one*... this was detailed in a vibrant purple, which wouldn't have been Redford's choice of color before he saw the woman standing beside it in an ultra-tight driving suit of the same hue. An absolute *stunner*. Both the girl and the car, now that was a—

"Excuse me, Mr. Briggs," the waiter's voice intruded.

"On the table," he ordered, assuming it was his burger and scotch.

"A note for you, sir."

Redford Briggs snatched at the envelope, and the waiter retreated to watch from a safe distance.

*Redford,*

*So sorry to have missed you. Selina wanted to play with her new toy, and I couldn't say no. So we've gone upstate to do some racing. I doubt my old Murcielago can beat her, but it's such fun losing to her. I'm sure you know what I mean.*

B.W.



## **Fantasy**

Eight or ten nights a month, Batman made sure he patrolled with Robin for at least a few hours. At least one of those nights would be the full early patrol, one the full late patrol, and one night a month, both. It was important for the boy's training, and not just as a crimefighter. Everyone agreed that Tim was a promising young hero, a superior martial artist, a good detective and team leader. His talents and dedication sometimes blinded those singing his praises: one day he was going to become a better Batman than Bruce, a better detective than Sherlock Holmes, a better martial artist than Shiva. While Bruce was proud of his protégé, no less than he was of Dick, he knew that Tim was still a boy and had a lot of growing up to do. He also knew that Tim was enough of a detective to find out what was said about him, and he sometimes worried the superlatives might go to his head. Regular patrols with a senior partner were the best way to monitor the situation and check it if necessary. More importantly, they gave both Batman and Robin the benefits of a true partnership. They watched each other's backs, and they provided a second set of eyes and an alternate point of view on any problem they encountered. Tonight's problem was... certainly problematic.

Summoned to the Batsignal where a Riddler clue was waiting for them, they had observed all the usual precautions opening up the signature green envelope. Inside, a simple index card bore a triangle consisting of three bent arrows drawn in magic marker.

"It's the recycling symbol," Robin noted. He flipped it over and on the back, written in block letters with the same marker, it read: BRING A REBREATHER.

"I don't get it. Is that a riddle?" he asked.

"Or a challenge. Or even a warning," Batman replied. He hated admitting the last, but it wasn't unprecedented.

"But most likely, it's an anagram," he grveled, taking a palm unit from his belt and entering the letters. By the time they reached the Batmobile, the onboard computer would have run the possibilities. Minutes later, they scrolled through the words on the miniature viewscreen.

BARGAIN was a good possibility for a partial business name, one that might be the target of an upcoming robbery. But their next query, scrambling the remaining letters ERBERTHRE and running the results against the city business directory, came up empty.

ARBITRAGER was another possibility, but it would take longer to check the remaining letters HERBEN (possibly short for HERBERT N. or possibly a name in its own right) against the names of all persons working in arbitrage in Gotham City. They forwarded that one to Oracle and went on...

Robin became convinced that REARRANGE HERB BIT meant they should just concentrate on those last seven letters. Somehow H-E-R-B-B-I-T was the key! Rearrange HERBBIT. Batman knew the phenomenon: clinging to a solution because you liked it, not because there was any reason to believe it was right. Robin found this 'Rearrange it' tack clever and was proud of himself for figuring it out. But that didn't mean it was the answer, and Batman was losing patience with his sidekick's stubborn refusal to look for new possibilities. HERBBIT didn't translate into anything that

useful, and he was about to grunt-give Batman's final word on the subject, when the whole question was rendered moot: Oracle picked up chatter on the police band about a suspicious van crossing the bridge into Bludhaven not five miles from the recycling plant. It matched the description of a Mr. Freeze vehicle that escaped pursuit last week.

Batman and Robin looked at each other.

"The recycling symbol means the recycling *plant*?" Robin said finally. "What, did he have a stroke or something?"

It was too ludicrously simple, especially for Nigma. Batman glared at the list of anagrams, looking for any phrases meaning 'decoy' or 'red herring.'

"I got it," Robin exclaimed. "It's a bet. He made one of those bets with Mad Hatter or Ivy or someone, maybe even with Selina, to see if we'd be wearing rebreathers when we check this place out."

"Hardly," Batman grveled.

"Okay, okay, *not* Selina. Sheesh. But I'll bet you anything that it's all a setup to see if we take 'wear a rebreather' literally when that recycling part is so obvious. Mark my words, Batman, when this is all over, somebody's going to be delivering a peanut buster parfait, because it's going to turn out this was all for some crazy ass, bored on a rooftop at 3 am, 'yes they will' 'no they won't' 'want to make it interesting?' bet."

Robin changed his mind when they reached the recycling plant. There was only one entrance, a loading dock, and only one way to approach it without being seen. They'd have to cross over a stretch of "subway grating" that would have been perfectly natural on a midtown sidewalk but seemed out of place in a Bludhaven industrial park. There was no subway under their feet, so what the heck was that grating for? Batman and Robin strapped on their rebreathers, hypothetical Riddler bets be damned...

...and so escaped jets of paralyzing gas powered by an air conditioning curtain. The curtain of specially treated air was made for stores in tropical climates that want to keep their doors open. Typical of Victor Frieze's obsession with coolant technologies, the same mechanism figured prominently in the deathtrap they discovered inside after Freeze's capture—a deathtrap Robin was now assigned to break down and analyze piece by piece in his log supplement.

Tim wanted to believe it was a legitimate crimefighting assignment and not a punishment for being wrong about that REARRANGE HERB BIT, but he couldn't quite convince himself. He'd asked Batman point blank: was this a punishment?

It was pretty dark on that rooftop but he could have sworn he saw a lip twitch before the answer.



*Where is it you sleep, bathe, and go when you die?*

Bed, Bath, and Beyond... where he found Mad Hatter outfitting pillows with remote transmitters to program victims in their sleep.

*I know what my job is; the point has been made.*

*You say I have a big head, and you're right, I'm afraid.*

*So put me in my place, and then leave me alone.*

*What I need most is someone to drive me home.*

A Nail... the day before National Alloy Importers Limited was displaying a rare sample of Thanagarian copper at the Expo Center. Catman went after it. Batman stopped him.

*What kind of tea do the King and Queen drink?*

Royalty, the name of a perfume being launched by movie legend Margo Kishley, in town for the big press event and staying at the Excelsior Towers... where Poison Ivy tried to kidnap her to punish the massacre of flowers in the making of perfume. Batman stopped her.

And tonight: *At home at the rodeo as much as the circus, but not feeling so homey at the madhouse...*

Circus and rodeo. Such an obvious allusion to clowns demanded that he drive up to Arkham and check on Joker... only to discover the killer clown had amassed a cache of cleaning supplies and had somehow smuggled in a set of wax lips, clattering teeth... and a taser. What he had planned was anybody's guess, but it certainly involved his own escape and probably the death of innocents.

Five riddles. Five absurdly easy riddles. And because of them, five foiled crimes. What was Nigma up to? That was the real riddle, obviously. Batman had tried to solve it on his own, but he was getting nowhere. Now, this Joker episode was an escalation he couldn't tolerate. He had to utilize every means he had of finding the answer, no matter how uncomfortable it made him. He cut short his late patrol and went home to Selina.

He hoped he'd find her in the cave. It would be better to talk there, in costume and with ready access to the logs and police reports. So, of course, she wasn't there. Of course, she had already gone up to bed. Of course, they would have to talk about "Eddie" as Bruce and Selina.

She was in bed, reading an article on Redford Briggs in HNWI.

"His yacht has a helipad," she mused without looking up at him. "Somehow my Lise Charmel doesn't seem so decadent."

Psychobat fumed. He was coming to her with a Riddler problem. Bad enough they had to talk in the bedroom instead of the cave, now she was throwing French underwear at him. He could feel that inner core of his resolve weakening as it had on a hundred rooftops, weakening at this specter of her in some Paris fitting room, trying on wisps of silk and embroidered lace, pffting at the price tag, and purring at the indulgence. His lip twitched of its own volition, and he found himself sliding into bed beside her and running a finger along the path where the bra strap would be.

"A far wiser expenditure than the helipad," he murmured, kissing down her shoulder.

Half an hour later, Selina rolled over to turn out the light, then rolled back to face Bruce. In the darkened room, her eyes seemed more feline. When she spoke, it was with Catwoman's voice.

"So, my dark knight, what did you want to ask me? You came home early, and I don't think it was to curl my toes."

Over PsychoBat's objection, he leaned over and kissed her.

"Very perceptive. I did want to talk about something."

He explained about the string of Riddler clues, noting annoyed little shakes of the head at each new development.

"No way. Eddie would never give you something that simple."

"I don't think so either. His riddles are difficult, clever, and usually original. These are none of those things."

"Right. And he doesn't send clues to give you a heads up anyway. When he wanted to warn you about Cluemaster gunning for Robin that time, he just asked me to meet him at Starbucks and said it straight out."

"That's true, I hadn't thought of—at a Starbucks?"

"Yes. Is that important?"

"No, just... I'll never get used to it, that's all."

"Used to what?"

"This, the part where I start trying to work out a sound, logical reason why Riddler would pick Starbucks as a contact point, and you say it's because he likes their cranberry scones."

Selina smiled warmly.

"Then you'll be happy to know that I have absolutely no idea why he picked Starbucks and it might just be because their logo is green."

Bruce grunted. Then he scowled.

"We're getting nowhere," he said grimly.

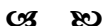
"What did you expect? That I could say for sure if it was Eddie or not, and what he was up to if it was?"

"I hoped."

"Well, I'm sorry, no telepath gene here. I do agree with you that it probably isn't him, but that's just my opinion. Only way I could say for sure is the same way you could, ask him."

He nodded curtly.

"Yes. I was hoping it wouldn't come to that, but yes."



Now this is what one expected of Edward Nigma: Garns and Rubik Recording Studio with a window card displayed on the door advertising a new CD from the Nuked Scuba Duo. Nuked Scuba Duo = Sudoku and Cube, two puzzle fads created by Ernő Rubik and Howard Garns respectively.

A trap was certainly likely, but still Batman felt on surer ground as he entered such a typical Riddler lair. He entered with care, but no traps were sprung. It appeared he was not expected: when he reached the heart of the lair, he heard a television playing. It sounded like a Japanese game show. And he smelled fried chicken.

Taking even greater care as he entered he saw—yes, Edward Nigma, alone in his lair, eating dinner and watching TV. This was not going to be pleasant.



"Bed, Bath and Beyond?!" Nigma roared.

Insulted beyond reason, he threw a haymaker at Batman's jaw—which Batman easily blocked, but he did it with an air of understanding. He could appreciate the slur

as well as Nigma did. The very idea that he, the one true Riddler, could have asked Batman, the one true mind fit to do battle with his own, “*Where is it you sleep, bathe, and go when you die?*” It was just...inconceivable!

“Thought as much,” Batman graveled, turning to go. “You might want to start leaving a thumb print on the envelope again. Avoid this kind of thing in the future.”

“What, because you can't tell the difference between a finely crafted Nigma original and the, the...barely literate ramblings of a, a...”

Batman turned back slowly, and leaned in almost imperceptibly, waiting for him to somehow stumble on the solution unawares in his ranting.

“...a constipated jingle writer?!”

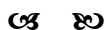
Batman lost interest, and again he turned to go. Riddler ranted on, but he returned to his seat as he did so, assuming his nemesis was gone, as always, in one of those oh-so-scary vanishes into the shadows.

“Start leaving a thumb print—good chicken—on the envelope again. A thumb print to prove who I am, after all this time. Bed, Bath and Beyond, indeed. Kind of crap freelance henchmen come up with trying to get a regular gig.”

“**Thank you,**” an ominous voice growled from the shadows.

Edward Nigma held up his middle finger, but the effect was somewhat diminished by the chicken leg still tucked between the index and the thumb.

“**Good night, Edward.**”



The man leaving Vault twenty minutes after last call resembled a dozen regulars: 6'3", with thick arms that delivered short swings and ill-fitting clothes that made his impressive build seem awkward rather than athletic. He was hairier than most, but otherwise typical of the henchman/tough guy breed.

He left the bar with a quick, choppy gait, until he passed Jintara's cart. This hole in the wall Thai place had apparently noticed the late night bar traffic in the neighborhood since Vault opened, and they set out a cart selling street dumplings from midnight to three. The henchman didn't want to eat, but he slowed all the same to see if the girl was working the cart tonight. She was probably jailbait, but she was fine... unfortunately, tonight it was the brother. Shit.

The quick, choppy gait resumed... until a pointed shadow fell across his path.

Scalloped and pointed.

Shit.

The man ran with the speed of a scurrying rat, exerting a lot of energy (at least the dumplings woulda provided some carbs—shit) but feeling he may as well have been moving in slow motion. Each turn, each alley, each mad dash down to the subway produced the same result, a moment of hope while he stood there panting, and then the shadow again.

At last, the opportunity came. There was a siren in the distance, and it must have drawn the bat's attention because the shadow shifted. The henchman made a mad dash for the A-train and held his breath for two stops.

He got off at 81<sup>st</sup>, not exactly his neighborhood, and was trying to get his bearings... when he heard this weird *wfffft* and found himself face down, eating a puddle. It was

only after he was down that he felt the pain under his knee. What the hell was that, one a them...

Batarangs.

It wasn't anything about the pain in his leg that provided the answer. It was the boot that suddenly appeared an inch in front of his face.

"I din't do nuthin, Bats. Nuthin' at all," the man told the tip of the boot.

**"Sporting Joey, isn't it?"** the voice from a nightmare asked.

"No. No, ah, I never heard a him."

"That's odd, your face is on his mug shot. Yolinski, Joseph Paul Jr. aka Sporting Joey... and your father, Yolinski, Joseph Paul Sr. is listed as his next of kin."

"Honest, Bats, I ain't done nuthin. Just checkin out a new bar 's' I heard was a good place fer guys like me ta hang out. That's all, honest."

"Don't be so modest, Joey. You've been doing quite a lot. Providing intel on Mr. Freeze, Mad Hatter, Catman, and Joker. I would thank you, but I have a distrustful nature. I get... suspicious, when scum like you become **helpful**."

Batman pulled Joey Yolinski to his feet and hoisted him an additional inch off the pavement.

**"WHY are you suddenly giving up the big fish, Joey, and WHERE are you getting your information?"**

As Batman expected, the next five minutes consisted of sputter-sputter-sputter, denial-denial-denial, gutpunch, and then coughing.

**"Let's try this again."** Batman growled, torquing Joey's wrist into a nerve-pinching nikyo. **"Freeze's hideout, how did you know where it was and what he was planning?"**

"I helped set it up," Joey wailed through the pain.

**"The Z?"**

"H- h- how'd you know about that?"

Rather than easing up at the information, Batman only torqued harder.

**"And why, after 'helping set it up', did you decide to tell me?"**

"Freeze was Deuce's first round draft pick. I had to get him off the playing field!"

**"You WHAT?!"**

It was a new tone, and Joey didn't know if that was a good thing or more trouble than low level muscle like him should ever know. Whatever it was, Joey decided the truth – at least part of it – was the only way to answer.

"I needed money, Bats. I screwed up real bad with a roll of Penguin's dough right before the Iceberg went up in smoke. I gotta replace it before he gets back or I'm lookin' at the business end o' that umbrella fer sure."

**"And HOW does stopping Freeze, Hatter, Catman and Joker—"**

**"Fantasy Injustice League."**

"..."

"..."

Joey felt his wrist released, and found himself stumbling towards the wall in response to a push. But he was no longer in pain, and that was an improvement. The way to stay that way was obvious, but Batman gave the unambiguous instructions anyway.

**“Talk.”**

“I come up with this idea, y’see. Like fantasy football, there’s a draft. Any a the Gotham Bigs is fair game. Outta towners like that Rozzle Ghoul is allowed, but it ain’t so smart cause what’re the chances they’re gonna show up right when ya need’em.”

He laughed good-naturedly, and then subsided at the deathscowl.

“Yeah, well, uh, guess you wouldn’t see it that way. Anyhow,” he continued quickly, “Ya put a team together, and each week you pick your starter. The guy you’re up against, he picks his starter. Then we wait around at the Vault with a couple a brews an’ see what happens. Your guy breaks outta Arkham, that’s 20 points. Robbery for cash is 30, robbery for theme stuff is 80. Sidekick in a deathtrap 60, Bat in a deathtrap—”

**“I get the idea.”**

Joey reached into his pocket, and predictably found his arm nearly pulled from its socket as he was spun around and his face pressed into the brick of the wall before he realized what he’d done wrong.

“No gun, no gun,” he winced. “I just wanted to show ya my lineup.”

Batman reached into his jacket and pulled out... Joey’s team and a schedule of “games” with other henchmen.

**“Tweedledum and Tweedledee?”**

“Was slim pickings by the end. Last round it was them or... Calendar Man.”

Batman reached into his belt and pulled out a folded card.

**“Next time you want to tip off the police, use that number. Don’t EVER let Riddler find out it was you leaving those clues at the signal.”**

Joey made a series of semi-grateful murmurings while shifting his weight, testing the waters if he was allowed to leave. Batman let him carry on this way for about 30 seconds, and then...

**“Wait.”**

His eyes narrowed.

**“How did you come to work for the Z?”**

“Erl, uh, y’know, keep my ear to the ground.”

Glare of death.

“Really, I heard it from Pete Pippitone, you know Pete, from Carson City?”

Glare of death.

“I heard Pete shot a man in Reno just to watch him die.”

Glare of death.

Joey ran out of syntax.

Glare of death.

Joey thought how his whole life woulda turned out different if he’d kissed Rosalita in high school and punched Chuck Feril in the Rathskeller.

Glare

of

death.

Then

**“You started the Z.”**

Joey gulped.

“They appeared shortly after the Iceberg burned down, shortly after your ‘dilemma’ with Cobblepot's bankroll. You hired curiously skilled operatives. The kind only another henchman might know about. Maybe you got a few talking 'over a coupla brews' about how unappreciated they were? The 'big fish' just hiring dumb muscle, not interested in who is an amateur mechanic able to soup a derelict looking van, for example.

“After the disaster at Scarecrow's, you lost your operatives, but you still had intel on a number of high powered rogues: what they were planning, where their hideouts were, who was getting released from Arkham officially and who was planning to break out...”

He paused, expecting to be cut off by sniveling denials.

They didn't come.

“Not denying it?”

“Why bother? You got it figured out. Probably knew the whole thing before you came lookin' for me, dintja?”

Batman grunted.

“Always thought I had it in me to be a big thinker, y'know, Bats? The big plan, the big score... sure woulda been sweet.”



## Epilogue

“Ever think they should set up a special satellite that does nothing but take pictures of the Bat-signal?” Eddie said, blowing on his Grande Macchiato and then taking a tentative sip. “Because they really should keep a better eye on that thing.”

Selina gave her cappuccino a final stir, and they settled into comfortable chairs in the back of the Hudson Avenue Starbuck’s.

“Pfft, a camera. Like that pathetic padlock they put on it few years back? One more thing to work around so it takes ten minutes instead of five.”

“Okay, how about a guestbook?” Eddie grinned.

“You know, Eddie, you could take it as a compliment. You were his first round draft pick. That’s why he was using riddles. He knew he wasn’t going to tip them off to any of your crimes, and when you did get busy he’d want to do anything he could to—”

“Selina, please, let’s not call those things riddles. I’ve been insulted enough.”

She chuckled, sipped, and chuckled again.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, he was quite sure it wasn’t you sending the too-pathetic-to-be-called-a-riddle... things. And if it was you, he knew that itself was the puzzle.”

“You mean like ‘why is he sending me brain damaged clues that insult the good name of riddles? Did my great nemesis fall down and hit his head?’”

Selina reached over and confiscated his cup.

“That’s quite enough caffeine for you, Mr. Nigma.”

“So, whatever happened with Crane? I heard his release was pushed back, so what kind of Scarecrow disaster could’ve taken down the Z?”

“Oh, that. Yeah, Jonathan never did make it out of Arkham, but somehow the Z thought his release was back on schedule.”

“Ah, you mean that ‘Oracle’ A.I. that he’s got put a fake release date in the Arkham database.”

Selina sipped her coffee.

“Go on,” Eddie said finally.

“Well, apparently Jonathan has some pretty grisly practices for henchmen, even freelancers like the Z. It hasn’t escaped his notice that they’re mostly big strapping jocks.”

“Wait, wait. I think I see where this is going and it demands proper enjoyment. Stay right there while I get some munchies.”

He returned with a slice of poundcake, and rubbed his hands together gleefully.

“Now, pray continue: how does a man obsessed with bullies reconcile hiring bullies to do his bidding?”

“Well, he wants them fully functional while they’re working for him, but if Batman catches them—”

“Which he knows is likely,” Eddie said with a mouthful of poundcake.

“—right, and he doesn’t want them talking. So apparently he injects them with a special fear toxin that will only kick in if the adrenaline gets high enough.”

“i.e. if they get caught. Bat-interrogation is certain to get the ol’ heart pounding.”

“Charming isn’t it.”

"No way to treat the help."

They both clicked their tongues. They both nibbled the poundcake, and they both sipped their coffee. At length, Selina continued.

"So the Z were going about their business, setting up this chamber underneath a trap door."

"Yawn."

"Tanks in the outer wall for scorpions and tarantulas and things."

"Ah, now I get it. Bats waits until they get the tanks loaded with gruesome critters, swoops in, pummels everyone within an inch of losing consciousness, fear toxin kicks in, Zs cower in a heap, crying and wetting themselves until the cops arrive."

"Something like that."

"Cool."

"I thought you liked them. You hired them."

"Yes, they pulled a job and set up a lair, had it all nicely waiting for me when I got out. All the bells and whistles. Even a satellite hookup, 164 channels. I was real pleased. Paid 'em off, planned to use them again. Then yesterday I get a bill for the satellite hookup. The legal satellite hookup, with \$1400 worth of Pay-per-View charges racked up while I was still on the inside."

"I don't even want to know."

"Boxing and zombie porn."

"I said I didn't want to know."

"I'm not even sure what zombie porn is. Would that be like 'Hey she's hot, except for the flapping skin'?"

"Eddie! Ever ride in a Lamborghini?"

