



Cat Sales Capes and Bats



by Wanders Nowhere

CAT-TALES
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*This story is dedicated to Heath Ledger,
my countryman, a light gone out of the world too soon.*

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CAPES AND BATS

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FORWARD

“The Dracula of fiction is a metaphor,” Selina says in her dance with the real one. “The old fears of the night in a world moving on into daylight, a modern world overturning one ancient scourge after another... And of course sex.”

Bram Stoker’s Dracula was written at a time when houses had two sets of stairs coming up to the front door: one for the men and one for the women, lest the men glimpse a little ankle as the women gathered their skirts. Today we have HBO, Victoria’s Secret—and Catwoman. Like Batman, Dracula’s story has been around for decades of tumultuous change. Like Batman, the writer who attempts him must decide which elements which can be updated and which are essential and sacrosanct aspects of the character. While Dracula has had a number of facelifts over the years, few if any have allowed him to confront his own myths.

Not Wanders Nowhere. Here, at last, is a Dracula worthy of the name. A powerful and imposing villain who is worthy of his legend. A powerful and imposing villain who is worthy to go up against Batman. But he hasn’t come to any generic Gotham City to challenge a generic Batman. He’s come to Cat-Tales Gotham. He’s come to a world where the real people who have invented themselves must come to terms with their public images and what those images mean. He’s also come to a Gotham where Christopher Nolan is shooting a movie about Batman.

The story that results is a magnificent tour de force by a writer who is as connected to Dracula in all his many incarnations, who is as knowledgeable about those nuances and *what they mean*, as I am connected to Catwoman. Wanders Nowhere’s Dracula meets Chris Dee’s Catwoman... This could be quite a Halloween for Gotham.

—Chris Dee

Author of the Cat-Tales

CAPES AND BATS

Mist oozed in a cloud of vaporous poison from the wound of an open grave. Amid the headstones, a brutish, hulking shadow moved with shuffling inefficiency, arms outstretched, dead white eyes staring in every direction and none, fingers hooked in nerveless rigor mortis -

Edward Nigma flicked the TV off and tossed the remote aside with a sigh. It was a tragedy. He had "Rogue's block" - the next scheme of genius would not leap to mind - and he had turned to more relaxing pursuits. Yet tonight, and there lay the tragedy, he simply couldn't find the mood for Plan 9 from Outer Space.

He would never, of course, admit to being an Ed Wood fan in front of the other rogues. They wouldn't understand; they'd see only the irony of the great Riddler dulling his famous brain on Z-grade flicks by the infamous 'worst director' in Hollywood history. They'd only laugh.

But Eddie saw deeper into the director than even the cult film enthusiasts who loved his films for their zany eccentricities and Wood himself for his tenaciousness. To Nigma the director's zeal hid obsession; his films were puzzles, riddles no less, not particularly well thought-out but nonetheless iced with layers of meaning. Edward D. Wood did not direct films for profit any more than Edward Nigma committed crimes to get rich. There was an underlying passion, a compulsion, to pour his soul out there, reel after reel of hastily-painted canvas for the world to see. Eddie imagined him to have felt the same wild, burning feeling racing up from his heart and throbbing in his temples when he was in his element that Nigma himself felt when arranging a spectacularly perfidious riddle-caper and stroking his fingers while watching Batman's brain tick over trying to figure it out.

Yes, Ed Wood would - a pun, lament! - have made a magnificent Rogue, had this unrealized genius been of a criminal bent. And then there was the name. Edward D. Wood, Jr - Edward - Ed-wood - DO DRAW, DO WED? - oh, for an I to make DEAR ODD WIDOW! - the only Hollywood-spawn with a better name was Edward Woodward.

Of the Rogues, only Selina and perhaps Oswald would have the tact not to blurt out 'he has the same first name as you! Ha ha ha!' and dismiss his interest as merely stemming from that association. Cretins. SINISTER LENS CRAB -

Nigma jumped from his couch, hand snatching up the question-mark cane, as something black fluttered back from his window and into the night. SINISTER LENS - no crustacean, but he could have sworn he saw something watching him, staring through the glass - something that fluttered away on leather-black wings...

He was absolutely not hiding behind the couch right now. He was tactically using it as a brace against impending attack, a stratagem honed in many confrontations with Batman. Yes, that was it. He was absolutely not hiding behind a couch brandishing his

cane from seeing a bat - a stupid little bat of the non-riddle-solving, non-leg-breaking kind - at his window.

A bat. A stupid little bat. And Riddler knew that fear of the other Bat wasn't even the reason he had reacted with such paranoia. It certainly wasn't the 'horror' of the Ed Wood film he'd been viewing.

It was something else entirely, and it was the reason tonight wasn't a good night to be watching Plan 9 or anything else that might remind one of B-grade horror antics in any way. It was the calendar.

October 26th. Halloween was coming up, and Jonathan Crane was about to be insufferable.

Halloween. It was his time. A kitschy, laughable modern holiday cobbled together out of a jigsaw of ancient, world-wide traditions. Pagan rites, harvest festivals - invoking the whispering gasp of the autumn's cold wind through fields of corn - the stench of rotting pumpkins, their carved orifices more and more corpse-like as they grew putrid - the death-omen cry of ravens - NEVERMORE - a time of simultaneous growth and decay, when the spirits of the dead and the devils of the Pit were free to walk the world and sow terror wherever they went. It was truly meant to a celebration of the macabre, a festival of Fear.

The other rogues would never understand. He was the Scarecrow. This went far beyond mere theme. The fools would see only 'Halloween, pumpkins, scarecrows, Trick or Treat. Boo! Ha ha!' The fools! How could they understand? He didn't like Halloween. He hated what it had become. Commercialism had wrapped its clammy paws around the holiday and strangled the fear out of it. It was all about candy and children in silly costumes and that Disney Halloween special with its comical - but in places, pleasantly chilling - interpretation of Sleepy Hollow. All Hallow's Eve as it was meant to be had been mangled into a mockery that was safe, complacent, and comfortable. That would need to be rectified.

Batman had, for whatever reason, Hell Month. Calendar Man - ha! - had all his little 'events'. The Scarecrow needed Halloween. Oh, the other rogues used it, too - in the early days there had been the 'Holiday' killings, all but wiping out the Mob as it existed in Gotham, paving the way for the rise to power of costumed lunatics, and starting on Halloween - and Joker sometimes used the holiday to play some particularly murderous prank. Crane would be offended, but the jester's penchant for a gruesome body-count left the city quivering in fear, which the Scarecrow could redirect with ease to his own efforts. Yes, this Halloween - he had said it many times before, but now he really meant it - would be one Gotham city would never forget...

Crane unfolded from the hotel room couch and crept to the bathroom mirror, studying his reflection. He had little love for his own face or his own body; 'thin' was the only description that stuck to him. He was not handsome; he was not ugly. His appearance other than his height and gangling build was unremarkable in every way. He did not enjoy the benefits of macabre features sported by many other Rogues - Penguin's beaky nose and rotund body, Joker's ghastly rictus and bleached flesh, Two-Face's scarred visage, Ivy's green-tinted skin, not even approaching the real freaks - Killer Croc, Clayface, Manbat. Jonathan Crane could walk into a McDonald's and ask

for a burger and the perky little bint behind the counter wouldn't skip a beat, or even register his face as belonging to a well-known, murderous criminal. The face of Jonathan Crane did not inspire attraction or repulsion, awe or disgust, hate or terror. Aside from, perhaps, a jolt if they met his watery blue eyes and saw the hollow coldness there, the face of Jonathan Crane did not inspire much of anything. He was utterly forgettable.

Hence, the Scarecrow.

As a psychologist, he had delved into the psyche not just of individual humans but of humanity as a whole. In his early days as Scarecrow he had been motivated by revenge - and, he admitted, in many of his capers since he had been motivated by money. But there was a secret he held close to his shriveled black heart. He had truly come to believe that civilization was making mankind weaker and weaker. As Joker in his more lucid, anarchist-Messiah-wannabe moments would often rant, human society was a house of cards just waiting for one push to come tumbling down.

But in Crane's professional opinion, the human race, especially the decadent industrialized world with its massive middle-to-upper class comfortably squandering lives that had never known a greater fear than failing a high school exam or missing the train to work, was not psychologically ready for the kind of apocalypse Joker or that ridiculous Al-Ghul fellow fantasized about. If they met a killer in an alleyway in a seedy part of town, most modern humans would not have the fight-or-flight instinct to escape and preserve their lives and dignity. In case of a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, or the end of the world, they would be utterly helpless. They would die in droves because they no longer knew how to feel Fear - how to use it. Fear was primal, necessary, essential, for survival in a harsh world, and it was slowly being forgotten.

Really, he was doing them all a favor.

Jonathan Crane looked at the nondescript man staring back at him from the mirror. He reached without looking to the hideous costume hanging from the cramped bathroom's towel-hook. He broke eye-contact with his reflection only for the moment it took to pull the stitched burlap mask - his newest, the most horrific yet - over that fake face, replacing it with his real one.

Stepping away from the bathroom, he glanced over at the TV. The fools would, of course, all assume he was watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Or maybe one of the old-school slasher flicks, *Friday the 13th* or more fittingly *Halloween*. How little they knew his tastes.

Soundless, in the otherwise-darkened room, a wild-eyed ship's mate wielding an axe against a sea of rodents looked up and froze in terror as Max Shreck rose, stiff-backed, from a crate full of grave-earth. White talons outstretched, the rat-like mouth, the horrible staring eyes.

Nosferatu. Now that was a face to be feared.

Smiling, Jonathan Crane opened a window and snuck his spidery frame through it like a silent-movie silhouette brought to life.

"A movie?" Bruce spat with enough gravel that it would've hardly been surprising to find pebbles in the bottom of his coffee mug.

He stared at the printout in his hand, then flicked the paper down and looked across the room to Barbara.

"You came to visit me in person, at the Manor, in the daytime, with 'urgent work-related business', in broad daylight instead of the Oracom, and it's about a movie?"

That'd been his initial reaction when she'd wheeled into the kitchen, Alfred having shown her in, and thrust the paper into his hands, wearing Oracle's stern face instead of Mrs Grayson's cheerful smile. He'd met it with incredulity.

Then he'd checked the title.

"You know Hollywood rumor mills aren't Oracle's usual scene, Bruce, but when I saw this, I didn't know how to, uh, properly get the point across over the 'com."

Lies. She was here to see his face.

"They want to film in Gotham?" he asked, resisting the urge to voice the former deduction.

"Yes."

"Dangerous. Irresponsible. Do they have any idea -"

"They wanted to contact Batman."

"Futile. He's not interested."

"Probably just for 'consultation' or something."

Bruce grunted, staring down at the paper. It wasn't a newspaper article; the production company had been keeping a tight lid on this, but some nameless crew intern had leaked it onto the net and the fan sites were going wild.

"They have some Australian guy playing Joker."

"..."

"They were talking about Nicholson, but he's really getting too old. This guy Ledger, though, he's a hunk, he can act, and he's getting rave reviews from on-set, but..."

"What is wrong with these people? Joker is a real homicidal maniac, not a god damned matinee idol. They must be -"

"Bruce, they have him wearing makeup."

The air temperature in the room palpably dropped.

"No chemical vat, and the grin's just lipstick smeared on the scars from a Glasgow smile."

"...apocalyptically reckless."

Bruce's mind snapped into Psychobat-mode the moment the last word had breathed between his lips.

"Status."

He didn't really need to ask; he had current At-Large list memorized at all times, especially Joker's whereabouts, but with someone as volatile as the Clown Prince, it never hurt to be sure.

"Arkham, for now. I don't think he or anyone else in there has Internet privileges after that incident with Hugo Strange and the subliminal Flash video, but..."

"Harley's at large." Batman rumbled through Bruce Wayne's unmasked face. "And much more likely to pay attention to Internet trivia. We need to stop this. Get me every detail you can on the production. Names of cast and crew, shooting locations, names and addresses of the manufacturers of their equipment..."

"Bruce, there could be a good five hundred to a thousand people connected to a production of this size, and millions of dollars invested in it. The Hollywood machine doesn't know Gotham, doesn't play by its rules. It won't stop even if Batman asks nicely. What are you going to do? Sabotage the production?"

"If it comes to that."

"Hundreds of people, Bruce, millions of dollars..."

"...Millions of dollars in property damage and hundreds of SmileXed corpses if Joker gets wind of it, Oracle, and that's only if no other Rogue beats him to it! Filming a movie about Batman! On location in Gotham City! With a Joker who wears makeup and dyes his hair!!"

"You forgot Halloween."

"No, I haven't, and I can't afford to." Batman-through-Bruce growled again, "Scarecrow is loose, in my city, with Halloween only days away, and these Hollywood idiots want to play Russian roulette with the Joker!"

"You didn't even ask who they have playing you."

Bruce grunted, gave her a death-glare, and snatched the paper from the desk he'd placed it down on. A moment later he vanished through the door. To the cave, no doubt, to his console, to Work.

"You're welcome, Bruce," Barbara called out with only a hint of sarcasm. "Don't worry about me, I'll see myself out."

She glanced out the window, in the direction of Gotham. Even above the haze of smog that perpetually swathed the distant towers, she could see the thickening clouds of an almighty thunderstorm rolling in over the ocean.

It was going to be a dark and stormy night in every sense of the cliché.

"May I fix you a tea before your return home, Ms Barbara?" Alfred's pleasant tone interjected. He had made one of those silent butler entrances of his, and stood a respectful, practiced distance behind his guest's shoulder, just within the corner of her vision - making himself visible without being obtrusive. "Though perhaps we may wish to hurry, lest you be caught in the storm."

"Coffee please, Alfred," she decided, watching the rolling clouds and deciding to call Dick and tell him she'd be a little late getting home. "I think I'll consider waiting it out - but only if you'll join me until Selina gets home." She grinned up at him. Come out all the way to Wayne Manor just to get snubbed by a Bruce-grunt and then drive home through a raging storm? Forget it. She was here, she'd relax. Preferably with Alfred's friendly company, and a plate of -

"I shall fetch the cookies, madam." Alfred replied, with a subtle shift of his eyes in her direction that was his equivalent of a grand, conspiratorial wink.

It was the kind of black that felt thick and alive, and it encased the silent form that lay within it completely, barring even a sliver of light from piercing through. It was in every sense a womb, save its construction of cold, dead metal and colder, damp earth rather than warm and living flesh.

It could not have suited its occupant more.

For anyone else it would have been a claustrophobic nightmare. Every sense available to human beings would be choked in the cloying morass in which he was engulfed. But this one had senses beyond those dull and flimsy five, and he knew that he was not totally alone. His surroundings had been efficiently stripped of human life, but not all life. There were eyes and ears even now joined to his, staring out into the gloom, watching the skyline of Gotham approach. There was a will at work guiding even the blackened heavens beneath which the vessel moved. A will concentrated within the womb of earth, borne to the new city upon stormy waters.

It had taken longer, this time. Much had changed, and needed to be adapted to. But he was nothing if not patient.

CHAPTER 2: THE COMING GUEST

Rain pounded on the roof of the dockside warehouse, dribbled from the rusted gutter, gushed down the stormwater drain - and fell like a million tiny bullets all over Batman's cape as he rose impressively from the crouch in which he had landed on the rooftop opposite the gangling grotesque he now stared down.

"Scarecrow."

Crane could appreciate the imagery; the way the little white splashes of water burst off that wall of impenetrable black that was Batman, framing his outline in a way that was strikingly reminiscent of the bristling fur of some huge, furious beast. Scarecrow himself, he reflected, would be cast by the same effect as more of a ghastly chalk-and-charcoal sketch, all spindly lines and blurred, uneven silhouette. Something out of a half-remembered, evil dream. The thought pleased him.

"Batman..." He whispered, in his best gasping death-rattle. "Come to share the ambience?"

"I'm watching you, Crane."

"Then you'll know I haven't done anything wrong."

"You will."

"Oh, Batman. No bravado. You can't touch me and you know it. Arkham released me with a clean bill. I'm simply enjoying a stroll in the rain."

"In your Sunday best."

Crane gave a raspy laugh and theatrically lifted his taloned fingers to his face. It was an uncanny, spider-like move that sent shudders into everyone who saw it - except the Bat, of course. "Perhaps I just like the feel of sackcloth against my skin...there's no crime in unusual fashion sense, now is there?"

Suddenly, the Bat was there, gripping the Scarecrow's collar, hoisting him up as he had so many times before, staring without the slightest trace of fear - without the slightest trace of anything but raw, animal rage - straight into, straight through, both of their nightmare masks.

"I'm watching you, Crane." Batman reiterated, the narrow eyes that seemed so white against all that black becoming mere knife-slits. "I know you. What you eat. Where you sleep. Where you walk. One slip."

Crane felt the initial hot sting of shock and surprise melt away into a cold crawl of dread, and somewhere deep within him shivered with delight. Fear was his tool, his weapon, and he felt a special, intimate kind of thrill watching it freeze the souls behind people's eyes. But he had to confess, if only to himself, that he felt a similar rush from being on the receiving end. From being the prey as well as the predator; from the epic game of trick-or-treat he played with this relentless, intimidating bastard in the pointy-eared cowl. He let the Bat continue.

"So you can tell me right now what you're planning for Halloween...or I can find out, and *stop* you."

So much primal, seething violence pouring off that cape and out of that cowl and through that voice. Batman never killed anyone; everyone knew that. But somehow he managed to inject a thousand times more threat into a humble word like 'stop' than any lowlife thug ever could, even if they had you strapped down with a gun pressed to your temple.

Batman would never pop you; he would never cut you open and pull out your lungs. He wouldn't even sever your finger as a trophy. Yet somehow the fear he generated in the criminal community was palpable, pervasive, and lingered far longer than any emotion stirred up by people who were capable of *doing things like that*. The worst Batman ever gave you was a few cracked ribs and a stint in Arkham, yet there was not one criminal in Gotham who went about their business without jumping at every shadow that might turn out to be the silhouette of a black cape.

The fear of Batman, Crane had concluded, was an actual, classifiable phobia, because it was as irrational as it was inescapable, and it all stemmed from the persona, the mythos, deliberately created by this one man.

Brilliant. Breathtakingly brilliant. Jonathan Crane, the Scarecrow, had never been able to achieve that kind of legend. He hated the Batman; he envied him - and worshiped his genius.

"Thinking of poisoning the water supply again? I'll have the entire city inoculated against your toxin before you can blink. You should think about sitting this one out, Scarecrow, in the comfort of a padded cell."

Scarecrow began to laugh. It was a hollow, breathless kind of sound, but it added a slight tilt of the head to Batman's scowling, dagger-eyed glare.

"Joker got your tongue, Crane?"

"Not the toxin, Batman! Not this time. I'm better than that. You'll see. I'm not some sad featherweight who can't let go of his gimmick. You know me better than that! I know the human mind, as you do. I know what makes flesh crawl in the dark. I am Terror. I am Nightmare. I am Scarecrow."

I am Vengeance, I am Justice -

Batman threw him down.

"Trick or treat, winged harbinger." Scarecrow crooned, when he'd managed to pull the wind back into his lungs. And just as he did, a vast shadow loomed out of the wall of steaming fog and rain to their left - from the ocean - and Batman's eyes widened as a 40,000 deadweight tonne cargo freighter with all of its lights out careened through the harbour, shattered the nearest jetty into kindling, and jackknifed straight into the warehouse they were standing on.

Batman seized Crane's collar and jerked his lanky body out of the way of exploding sheets of corrugate and beams of iron. He leapt down to the wharf on the warehouse's other side, and slammed Scarecrow into the damp wood.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?!"

"N-not-"

"TELL ME NOW!"

He only stopped when he saw Scarecrow's eyes; wide and blinking and dull with confusion, not concussion. The Bat-mind didn't take long to snap to the fact that the freighter had narrowly missed turning Crane into a smear on the wall and probably

would have killed him if it hadn't been for Batman. Scarecrow was many things, but suicidal was not among them. So either something had been bungled, or -

It wasn't him. He had no idea.

"N-not my...trick." Crane managed to gasp.

Batman let him drop and jabbed a gloved finger into his chest. "Stay." And then in a ruffle of black, the Bat was gone.

∴ You've reached Selina Kyle. She's a little busy right now doing things good little girls shouldn't talk about, but if you ask nicely she'll think about getting back to you. Leave some catnip after the meow. Meow.∴∴

Selina? It's Eddie. Listen, if you don't have any romantic plans with Bruce for ONE AW HELL, why not join me at my apartment for a B-movie marathon? I promise it won't be 'Pumpkinhead' or 'Children of the Corn'. 'Cat People' if you ask nice. Call me.

BLEEP

The original. Not the remake with Natassja Kinski running around in the buff for half the movie.

BLEEP

***Not as if that's in my collection, or anything. SON COME ALL ***

BLEEP

"Oh Hell." I muttered.

Eddie leaving a message that started with "Selina? It's Eddie," instead of "Riddle me this, my dearest!" The slightly strained, mousy quality Eddie was trying to keep out of his voice. The mention of us spending a quiet Halloween together, at Eddie's apartment, not the 'berg. Not at the requisite Jonathan Crane Halloween Shindig that you really, really didn't want to miss, lest you wind up huddled in terror of the monster under your bed or trapped in a hallucinatory murder mystery like Bruce was last year for snubbing the invitation from 'crow.

That could mean only one thing. The invitations weren't sent. Which meant Scarecrow wasn't throwing his little pumpkin bash; he was either holed up in Arkham, or loose and planning a more *inclusive* party.

I lived with Batman. I knew the At Large list, and I knew Scarecrow wasn't in the loony bin right now. Shit. No wonder Eddie wanted to huddle up and fortify himself in his apartment with some old movies and a close friend (one capable of snapping Crane like a matchstick) for company on Halloween. I should've been angry that he wanted to use me as Guard Kitty, but I was verging on being touched that he was just plain making sure neither of us was going to be alone on Scarecreeper's Night of Nights. Anyone who'd offended him in the past year might potentially be a target, and everyone had rubbed Crane the wrong way at some point or other.

He was Scarecrow. He was physically a pushover for the likes of Bruce and I, he (generally) wasn't as sick as Joker, his schemes weren't always that creative and sometimes amounted to cheap carnival scares. And then there was his over-reliance on the good ol' fear toxin. There were times when the Iceberg crowd treated him as a bit of a second-rater. But there were other times when he chose to remind us that he could live up to his hype when he felt inspired.

And he was always inspired by Halloween. He was like Jack Skellington's murderous redneck cousin.

I knew in advance that Bruce would be occupied on the big night, either thwarting whatever scheme straw-head was planning or keeping an all-night vigil in case he'd left any surprises. That left me free to accept Eddie's invitation. And it'd been a long time since I'd watched Cat People.

The original, anyway.

I hit Eddie's speed-dial.

Batman sat at his console, fingers steepled, brow creased beneath the scowling mask, staring at an incomplete log and the blinking cursor that marked the point at which he had stopped.

...no survivors, no bodies, no traces of gunfire, chemicals or explosives. No sign of sabotage. The navigational equipment was left functioning and the engines were running and maintained, suggesting someone was guiding the ship into port. The ship's logs, however, are missing. It's as if every trace of the people aboard that ship had been deliberately, almost supernaturally erased.

And that was where the cursor sat. Why had he used 'supernaturally'? There were a thousand logical possibilities. Some kind of danger or threat that forced the crew to abandon ship. But an emergency like that wouldn't explain the removal of the logs. Perhaps a relatively bloodless act of piracy - or one that was covered up very, very well, but maritime piracy was almost completely unheard of this close to the US. Batman had found nothing unusual in the Coastguard's records over the past few days; the last contact with the ship had been a Coastguard radio officer warning the vessel of the large storm building in its path. There had been a note that the response from the ship sounded unusually strained, but the officer probably expected it from sailors nearing the end of a long run and needing to navigate a heavy squall. That call had been made two days ago.

Why 'supernaturally'? Batman selected the word, and his finger hovered over the delete key.

A pair of warm arms draped around him from behind and a pair of warmer lips kissed his masked cheek.

"Hey, stud. Heard about the dockside incident. Did you get Crane?"

"He wasn't responsible. But he's been taken back to Arkham - for observation."

Selina laughed softly, and squeezed Batman's shoulders. "Thank God. Eddie can at least relax now, and I might not have to sit through *Glen or Glenda* again."

Batman's eyes narrowed as they did every time she mentioned her 'friend Eddie'.

"Explain."

"Well," she started, aware of the tension but - being Catwoman - not about to change her attitude for it. "He invited me to watch movies with him over Halloween. Y'know, I thought since you'd be busy..."

Scowl.

"Oh, Bruce. He's scared, okay? We all get a bit edgy around pumpkin-time, if Jonathan's loose, and especially if Jonathan's loose and hasn't sent out his party invitation. As painful as that party is, the entire Iceberg crowd breathes a sigh of relief

if they get the invite, because if it doesn't go out then he's planning something big and it's time to break out the fear-toxin litmus test for everything you intend to eat, drink or inhale for the next month..."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She shifted, so she could drape across the keyboard and poke his nose playfully. "Would it really have been news?"

Batman grunted.

"As cute as you are when you go all grunt-Alpha-Male on me, gorgeous, I'm telling you seriously this time, give Eddie a rest. There's no riddle crime, it's a movie marathon."

"GLEN OR GLENDA. Could be an anagram." Batman turned back to his log, saved it, and opened another window.

"So sue the man for liking Ed Wood."

"I don't trust him, Selina. He's *The Riddler*."

"Gee, that's news." Selina rolled her eyes lightly, and kissed him. "Mmm. But this one I can give you an answer to right now; Crane free. No party invite. Scared Eddie. Wants to lock himself in his house with one baddass scarecrow-snapping kitty-cat and watch bad movies on Halloween. Riddle me that."

Batman smirked. He kept up the gloomy disapproval, but it had - however slowly, and however much it bothered and grated him - begun to sink in that if there was any aspect of Edward Nigma's life where there was a shred of conscience and honesty left, it was his friendship with Selina Kyle.

"I'll let him rest. For now." As she withdrew, his eyes followed her, and he closed Nigma's file. The smirk remained. "But only since you asked so nicely."

"Mmm. Do you mean to tell me that a purr in Batman's ear and a little kiss from a sultry kitty can actually change the World's Most Inflexible mind?"

The smirk became a mild glare. Bruce cleared his throat, and turned back to the unfinished log concerning the derelict freighter.

"Are you sure they didn't scrape an iceberg and abandon ship?" Selina tossed in, leaning against a bench nearby with a languid tilt of her hips and watching. She might've been dressed in slacks and a sweater, but the pose was pure Catwoman. Bruce tried - hard - not to be distracted.

"No. There's something else going on here." Batman growled. "The ship and dockside have been cordoned off by quarantine. High alert, possibility of contagion."

"Me-owch. What the hell was the cargo?"

"Large quantities of experimental soil samples. With the ship's logs deleted, they're not going to take any chances until they've traced the ship's port of origin and any other ports it might have contacted on the way."

"The cargo was *dirt*?"

"Nothing else. And nothing alive on the ship except an unusually large population of rats."

"Dirt and rats. Great. No wonder they've put up the red flags." Selina rubbed her brow. "I'd offer Whiskers' services, but I don't think he's up to it on an industrialized scale."

The Bat-brooding continued without skipping a beat. “Most of the rats were contained and the ship has been scheduled for fumigation, but a quantity escaped during the initial opening of the ship, and we don’t know how many more slipped out through the hull damage from the crash before quarantine arrived.”

“So do you think we might be looking at some kind of outbreak?”

“We’re going to find out. The easy way or the hard way...”

Why, Batman, how **hard** do you want it to get? The thought flashed through his mind, but the context was completely inappropriate.

“And did you get in and out before quarantine and the feds showed up?”

Batman smirked, and held up a vial of soil.

“I’ll have Alfred warm some milk.” Selina kissed him again and waved gently as she drew away and left the cave.

She didn’t hesitate to touch me. Even knowing I might’ve picked up whatever contagion could be on that ship. What a woman. She must’ve known right away that he wouldn’t have let her near him until he’d already run every test the Batcave’s medical equipment was capable of and probably inoculated himself against every possible pathogen carried in soil or spread by rodents.

She trusted him. Implicitly. Years into the relationship, he was still getting used to it.

CHAPTER 3: PAPER TRAIL

Michael Stanton scratched the side of his nose with the capped end of the pen, staring down at the paperwork, then up at the man standing across from him.

The guy honestly looked more like some rich European banker on vacation than a senior Customs official. He had his hands folded and was smiling pleasantly at Stanton as he went through the reports, but there was something straight-backed and immobile about his stance - though Stanton would not have thought to use either term for it - that said he wasn't in the mood for compromise.

"Well it's all here," said Stanton, turning over the last of the papers - "My people have been working at it since last night and we can't find any traces of disease in the soil samples, but we can't possibly know for sure until we've completed all the tests. Once the fumigation starts we won't be able to continue work inside the ship -"

"The clients assured me, my dear friend, that their cargo was appropriately checked before it left port, and as you can see, all of the required papers were completed."

Stanton turned the papers over in his hand a few more times. Yes, it all seemed fine. There it all was; the reports signed by a selection of Bulgarian customs officials, the receipts of purchase, it all checked out. A strange uneasiness that had been building in the back of Stanton's mind began to clear - or rather, it was dulled. Mike found it hard to concentrate. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Look, I just don't know if it's policy to release the cargo to the client at this stage. Fumigation hasn't started and the ship is still a red zone -"

"The clients are concerned that the - fumigants - may contaminate their samples." The official's voice gave Stanton the creeps - he had an odd accent, so faint as to be unidentifiable, it was more the deliberate way he lingered on certain words, as if tasting them for the first time. "They have passed to me their assurances, my good friend, that the soil samples were thoroughly treated for any dangerous bacteria before they were packed. I was also informed that the samples came to them only at great expense and with some difficulty in preserving them intact for seaborne transport. The first time the crates were unsealed since they were packed at port was by your workers, so they could not be tainted by anything carried by the rodents. It is indeed a terrible tragedy about the crew - whatever fate has, how is it you say, befallen to them - but the clients would still be at their most comfortable if their property were released to them, post-haste."

Stanton shook his head, trying to free it from the haze. Maybe it was just the way the man kept calling him "dear friend" every few sentences. Yes, that must be it. All the reports were there in his hand - the soil samples were clearly clean, and the science nerds at Corvinus Laboratories were perfectly within their rights to be worried about the fumigants. Why was Stanton bothering to make a fuss? The guy was a high-up

anyway, it wouldn't do to argue with him. Stanton didn't know which branch of what agency he was from. Better safe than sorry.

"Allright, you got it, sir," he finally relented, adding his signature to the papers. "You'd better have your boys load them for transport, though, the Coastguard guys are getting twitchy about the possibility of the fumigants getting into the bay. But someone's gotta kill all these rats, and we don't have time to wait for the lab tests on the ones they caught to come back. Honestly, this whole thing is a huge mess and I can't wait for it to be over."

"Ah, of course," The official said, smiling that unpleasant-pleasant smile again. "It would indeed be a difficult task to contain this event entirely. Rats are, after all, excellent swimmers."

He took the papers from Mike's hand and melted away, leaving Stanton scratching his head, wondering what the conversation had actually been about.

He was sure he'd figure it out when the dizzy spell passed.

Bruce hadn't emerged from the cave much in the past day. He'd come out, done a brief patrol, come back, spent a few more hours in the cave before crawling into bed with Selina and sleeping like a log. Not a word. It was like this when he was working on a lot at one time - and things had gotten pretty hectic since the docks incident.

Scarecrow was being held for observation, officially due to any 'traumatic stress' that might've been inflicted by his near-death experience at the docks, but without any real dirt on him he might even be able to slip a release before Halloween and he was busily being a model patient to ensure it would be so.

The Joker hadn't made a move and was still in his maximum security cell. Attendants were keeping a close watch on him and noted that he was his usual self - as much as Joker had a 'usual self' - and hadn't yet shown any signs of extreme violence or intent to escape. Batman had sent them a warning to closely check any incoming correspondence from 'Patient H. Quinzel', but if they weren't subtle about it, that alone might pique Joker's interest. It was a dicey game.

Batman's progress into the issue of the upcoming film had hit a dangerous bump; Oracle's sources hadn't been clear on the date of the production's beginning, and it turned out to have been much farther along than either of them had realised. Security around the project had been remarkably tight - almost the envy of a CIA operation - until the intern leak there hadn't been a whisper beyond vague rumours of casting talks. Batman was alarmed to learn that pre-production was almost complete, location scouts had been in and out of Gotham unnoticed, and the crew was preparing to move in for some preliminary shooting within the next week. They'd already been filming at studios in LA and Metropolis, under a fake script title; now the cat was out of the bag, it was time for their prime 'location' shoot to begin. As long as Joker was in Arkham, Batman couldn't justify interfering with the production, but everything about it screamed danger to him.

Yet as deeply as it chafed him that they were making a Batman movie at all - painting the shadowy symbol of rumour and urban myth he had carefully cultivated onto the broad, crude canvas of the silver screen for all to see - he had to acknowledge

that its existence was a tribute to the success of Batman and would bring the world's attention to the issue of crime in Gotham and his efforts to rein it in.

That is, if they got it right.

And then there was the dockside incident. That had taken priority over everything else. The possibility of a Scarecrow attack or even of some kind of vengeful rampage from a currently-incarcerated Joker paled in comparison to the concept of an outbreak of contagion in Gotham. If Customs, quarantine and the Coastguard - not to mention the impending FBI - found nothing amiss, there might be no need for Batman to look into it. But he couldn't pretend it would be that easy. Scarecrow's suspicious proximity just before the derelict vessel's appearance, the missing crew and unusual cargo. Everything suggested that something very sinister was afoot, and today's events had simply deepened his suspicion.

Quarantine had released the crates of earth to their original destinations, several small research labs and botanical institutes scattered throughout Gotham. Shortly after their removal from the ship, and just as the fumigators went in to start their work, the entire ship had suddenly listed astern, slid off the docks and sunk into the bay, taking a good portion of the mangled dockside and two quarantine workers with it.

Drowned. A third was in critical condition after part of the collapsed dock had crushed his leg. The tragedy had occurred, the word was, because of a bungle in removing the crates - the change in weight distribution in the already heavily-damaged freighter had released pressure on a breach in the hull and allowed water in, sinking the ship. Nobody was quite sure - but the result was the same; two lives were lost, as were the hundreds of rats the fumigators had been heading in to destroy.

Batman knew better. Someone had scuttled the ship, just as they had removed the ship's logs, just as they had covered up the fate of the crew - and they weren't finished.

He tapped the Batcomputer console in grim thought. The screen showed a police report; workers from the quarantine labs had called it in early this morning. Shortly after finishing their preliminary tests on the captured rodent specimens from the derelict, they'd returned to find the specimens missing. There was no sign of forced entry, nothing on the cameras, no fingerprints in the vicinity. Security at a quarantine lab wasn't first-class - it was more to keep things in than out - but it would nonetheless take a professional to get in and out that effortlessly.

In the back of his mind, Batman wondered why the reports themselves hadn't been taken. The perpetrator had so far been exceedingly thorough in cleaning up the evidence - it was hard to imagine such a person overlooking a few computer files and printouts that could blow the lid off whatever it was he or she was attempting. Either they had seriously slipped up, or the reports were spared on purpose.

It could be a she, Batman clicked suddenly. It could be a very particular she. *Soil* samples, *botanical* institutes...

Poison Ivy.

And she was at large. It was unlike her to use animals, but it would be much more difficult to spread a contagion from plants to humans and she might find irony in using filthy verminous rodents to wipe out what she considered to be filthy, verminous rodents of a two-legged variety -

He would definitely be paying Ms Isley a visit. But the most immediate concern was finding out just what it had been on that ship that the perpetrator - Ivy or not - was so keen on covering up....

Deep within the fetid bowels of Arkham Asylum, Jonathan Crane sat, frustrated, like a hunkered-up spider, tapping his chin with long fingers and glaring at the wall.

Down the hall and through the door to Maximum, Joker was laughing his ass off at something. Joker was always laughing his ass off at something. The doctors had, helpfully, tried soundproofing his cell, but that only meant the next time he cut the camera feed and hogtied the attendant with the straps of his own straitjacket nobody was able to hear her frantic screams for help. So that nixed that great idea.

They'd then considered building a new wing just for him, but the budget hadn't come through, so the peace of mind of the other inmates - few had any illusions of actually being 'patients' - was sacrificed for the sake of security.

Thus Crane's patiently-acquired unsupervised time in his cell was being interrupted, as his methodical plotting of the next step after his release was being consistently derailed by pleasurable thoughts of a ball-gag (or perhaps one of those magnificent bladed mouth-traps meant to silence gossipy women in ye grand old medieval days - ah, misogyny!) stuffed between Joker's yellowed choppers. Possibly assisted by a sledgehammer just to make sure it fit.

"Ignominious codpiece." Crane hissed, clunking his head against the wall - no, better not start that, that way cliché madness lay - "Why does he never run out of air?" He was beginning to envy Mr. Freeze, who from what Jervis said had found a way to soundproof his cell against Joker's constant cackle by insisting the acoustics were interfering with his delicate medical equipment, required to revive his precious, his beautiful Nora, and how if he were only given the silence in which to work, he would surely be able to heal the terrible aching pain within his frozen heart, and once more rejoin society as a whole human being instead of but a frigid shard of a once warm and caring soul...

So the docs had doubled the thermal padding on Freeze's specialised cell and included a soundproofed layer so that he could sit in his little bubble of misery and emote at his snow globe without hearing so much a pipe of La Serenade de Joker. Smug bastard.

"HAAA HA HA HA HA HAHAAAAHA HAHAAAAHA EEHEHAHAHA AAAHAHAHAHAH -"

Then, from a few cells over -

"Jack SHUT HELL UP or Croc PULL JAW OFF AND BEAT JACK SKULL IN WITH IT!!"

"HA HAH-HEE HEHEHEHE HOOOO AHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHAHA..."

Crane doubted the jaw Croc was referring to was his own. Whatever jest the Clown was giggling over this time, it must've been a cracker, because he'd been going for - six hours and counting. If it kept up, the other rogues might just finally put their differences and mutual fear of Joker aside and kill the scrawny bastard. Preferably with every fork in the lunchroom, plastic or no. Crane had a feeling the doctors wouldn't miss him much either.

And then, just like that, the laughing stopped.

Scarecrow wondered if someone had beat him to it and a surge of jealousy shot into his gut like a gloved bat-fist. Who would dare!? Croc, that lumbering brute, Jervis, that twittering buffoon -

Crane felt an oozing chill seep through the walls of his cell. He crept to the heavily barred window as if drawn by an unseen force - and, staring out, spied that dead tree that had always so inspired him, save that silhouetted in the moonlight it seemed somehow thicker, darker, and more knotted.

~Jonathan.~

The voice seemed to resonate partly in his ears and partly in the back of his mind, bouncing around his skull like the echo of a dream -

~I am very pleased with you, Jonathan. Your services have been well-timed and well-received. It is time to move on. You will leave this house of fools to-morrow morning.~

"I don't want to escape. It's almost Halloween..." he found himself whispering. "I can't afford to waste time evading police and Batman - I can only have that freedom if I'm released."

~Do not fear, my dear and faithful friend. I have arranged for your pardon.~

"How?"

~You will see. Trust in me and you shall be rewarded.~

Crane swallowed, as he saw a pair of gleaming red eyes open at the top of the tree, staring right into him, and he felt the will to protest and question drain away.

~Trust repaid with recognition, loyalty with protection, obedience with a gift most treasured. Will you obey?~

After the first pair, others - hundreds, thousands! - the tree became a seething mass of eyes, all of them red like *His*, all of them turned toward Crane, pouring out further into the field beyond. The Scarecrow felt his heart catch in his throat, and his lips tweaked into a grin that would have frightened the Joker himself.

"I will obey, Master."

CHAPTER 4: OUTBREAK

The first cases came the next day. By midday, the hospitals in Gotham were bringing in dozens of reports. Weakness, debilitation, strenuous breathing, and swollen lymph nodes...

Bruce hadn't surfaced, so I was in the kitchen, chatting with Alfred while he prepared lunch. We heard it first over an old-fashioned radio Alfred sometimes turned on while he worked. He had a great love of peace and silence, it was true, but when he was alone or in an informal environment Alfred frequently read books and journals, listened to the radio, or watched those news networks he considered to have retained some dignity and truth in an age where the media were 'increasingly sustaining themselves on sensationalism and distortion'. Anyone who thought a butler by definition was so insular that he was only concerned with the world of the household he tended to had never really known one. I'd always found Alfred to be as well-informed as he was well-educated, and he made every effort to keep tabs on the world at large, not only for his own sake, but for the effect it had on Master Bruce and his work – his day job *and* his night.

We were talking about the Catitafelines and the deplorable state of worldwide poaching, when Alfred interrupted me with a quiet "Miss Selina" and reached past me to turn the volume up. As the report droned on and the smiles faded from our faces, Alfred silently opened the fridge and slid the antipasto platter he'd been preparing onto the second shelf. I nodded at him gratefully, and headed straight for the cave, with those two awful words repeating over and over in my head.

Black Plague.

Bruce was staring at the console with a hard, unwavering glare when I came in. It was unusual for him to be down in the cave this much in the daylight hours - but this wasn't the usual case. I watched his face, all those little twitches along the jaw and between the brows - the sign of that great steel-trap mind gnawing away at a problem. Dead serious. Dead sexy.

If only I was in the mood to enjoy it.

"Bruce." I murmured - "I checked the Rogue grapevine, Jonathan's out, some rich Ukrainian second cousin offered him board and a job."

"Where. When." Bruce graveled, still staring at the lab reports he'd copied from the quarantine office - the only surviving results of the tests on the captured rats.

I scowled at him, but I resisted the urge to prop my booted toe against the back of his caped shoulders. He wasn't being a Bat-jerk; he was focused, committed, and today he had a damn good reason. Under all that intensity he was just as scared as I was.

That was one of the things that very few people knew about Batman. It was obvious, really, but nobody really saw it save myself, Alfred, and the Bat-family. Sometimes

even we forgot, got lost in awe of him and missed the vulnerability revealed, not obscured, by that raging black mask.

Someone who used fear so powerfully was doing so not because he was immune to it but because he was driven by it. Not just by the echoes of the fear of that horrible night that took his happy life away, but by the fear he felt every time Joker broke out of Arkham, every time an Oracom alert came up, every time he was on patrol and heard a gunshot or someone scream in an alley. The fear that if he failed, if he slipped, if he compromised, bad things would happen, people would get hurt and people would die.

Sometimes he did slip. Sometimes people did die. Frankly, I would never, ever consider any of those deaths to be on Batman's head. He did everything humanly possible and plenty of things that shouldn't be to save people and stop crime. But I knew that, when it happened, he took that weight anyway.

"You might want to look at me when you're grunting at me, honey." I chided him gently. "It's the Danesti Institute for Botanical Research and Environmental Resources. Crane's been hired as a research chemist." I normally wouldn't have looked into it that deeply, but Bruce needed the headspace, and though it still vaguely grated on me to be running errands for the Batman, I couldn't pretend this was about us. This was someone ramming a 40,000 deadweight tonne cargo freighter full of plague rats into Gotham harbor. It was ugly already and going to get uglier by the day, and we were, for once, entirely on the same side of the moral soccer team. This had to be stopped and Bruce needed me.

Something about it bothered me. The whole thing. It was strikingly familiar, reminding me of something that felt like it should have been blitheringly obvious but was just out of reach. I hated déjà vu. And oddly enough, I had the impression that Bruce under the cowl was fighting that same sense of maddening familiarity.

"It's not enough." he grveled, but it ended in a sigh.

"I'm sorry, Bruce. I didn't really get time to look into it deeper."

"The plague," he said, distractedly - "It doesn't fit. Bubonic Plague is easily cured in the modern industrialized world. There won't be an epidemic out of this. It's just not enough, it's pointless. It won't achieve anything. If it was Ebola, S.A.R.S, something that's made recent headlines, something that would do more than just spread panic..."

He'd already ruled out Scarecrow as the master architect, though he seemed to think he might still have a hand in it somewhere. That meant we needed to expand our options.

"Maybe we're dealing with someone new. An outsider? Maybe an old-world hairdo like Ra's who doesn't keep up with the times?"

Bat-glare. I knew he didn't like it when I mocked his feared, immortal nemesis, which was precisely why I did it. Ra's was a hairdo and he should damn well know it.

"No, Selina. The destruction of the logs, the break-in at the lab, the scuttling of the ship. Each event was timed to leave the investigators with the information the perpetrator wanted them to have, and *nothing* more. That suggests a familiarity with operational procedures, or someone who did his - or her - homework."

"Her', huh?" I couldn't hold back the smirk. "Well you're not thinking of Harley or Roxy Rocket so I think this is about the part where I tell you that Danesti Botanical Institute is where Pammy does her garden shopping."

"....."

"You can thank me anytime. Preferably when this is all wrapped up and you've got time to thank me *properly*."

"....."

"Seriously, a nice dinner and a warm bubble bath for two would do me just as well as a shopping trip to Paris."

"....."

Still no answer. I couldn't figure out if he was going to smile or scowl. "Woof?"

Then he was out of his chair, his eyes were smouldering right before my own, and he touched my chin with a fingertip as he drew close.

"I promise, Kitten." He rumbled, and pressed his lips to mine. The moment was perfectly delicious. Naturally, Psychobat had to ruin it.

"You should go have a prowl." He murmured as he drew away, and gave a cocky wink that would've been par for the course for the Fop, but was utterly *bizarre* in the cape and cowl. "I'll handle the detective work from here. Don't wait up." He paused, and added more seriously – "No, not a prowl. A holiday. Head out to the Catitat, take the *Gatta* for a run. On second thought, Lois and Clark could use the company. Take Alfred with you, Wayne One to Metropolis. Just until this has blown over."

I froze. Oh he did *not* just - *Dismissed*? It didn't sound like Psychobat speaking, but the subtext was there. He was sending the little lady out of harm's way so he could concentrate on his Serious Business. Ignoring the fact that I'd brought him vital intel, brainstormed the case with him, that I was offering, without even being asked, to work with him side by side on this one. Ignoring that I had real skills and resources that I was laying on the table for him to use, no strings attached. Totally ignoring the fact that I was *Catwoman*.

He didn't mean it that way, of course. I could understand his need to be free of any and all distractions to focus on this case, and a biological threat like the Plague could hit anyone regardless of their capabilities. He was worried about me and he wanted me to be safe. It was the way he worded it, the subtle emphasis on the word *detective* more so than the tired excuses to get me out of town, which grated on my nerves. Still, I wasn't going to turn it into some childish spat or trudge out the old Cat-Bat animosity. The case was too serious for that. There was a much more constructive way to prove to him that the World's Greatest Detective could use my help.

I smiled and nodded. "That's sweet of you, honey, but I'm not going to skip town just so you can breathe easier, plague or no plague." Just enough Cattitude to let him know I was offended without clueing him in too soon to how deeply. I turned and strolled out of the cave, letting him overhear my words just as I slipped out -

"A prowl, though. I think I could go for that."

I took that prowl later. I needed it. Working with Bruce was great and I had to admit that being able to get that close to all that Bat-intensity without necessarily needing stitches for it like the old days was yummy. The detective work and clue-chasing was growing on me, like a ball of intellectual yarn just waiting to be pounced on and batted at until it unraveled. Finally, we had a case we could work on together without

treading on Catwoman's independence or my connections with the Rogues in the process. It had me worked up, excited, ready to do business with Batman that felt like we were partners, not as if I was temping as a surrogate Bat-operative, or worse, his pet spy in the enemy ranks.

Then he'd brushed me off. Don't wait up. Go to Metropolis with Alfred. It was sweet of him to want to protect the people he cared about, but I wasn't scared of catching the Plague, and he'd gone about it the *wrong* way.

I was a smart woman. I might not be Batman's equal at detective work the way I matched him - or outmatched him, let's be frank - in other areas, like stealth, breaking and entering, and kicking his gorgeous butt on a rooftop at midnight, but I was enough on par with him to follow his trains of thought (with the possible exception of excessive science-geek-babble). I had insights that wouldn't necessarily occur to him, and he appreciated them. That kiss, the love and admiration in his eyes, had proven it. Why had he immediately gone on to try to cut me out again?

Kitty wasn't happy, and she had an answer to it. I'd strike out on my own, and find out what was really going on and who was behind it before Batman did. I'll admit it was a little petulant. But if I beat him to the punch, it would prove my point *and* it would save valuable time and energy for Bruce that might, in turn, save lives. Win-Win situation, really.

But it was still irritatingly close to being 'crime-fighting', and Catwoman's tolerance for being cooped up in a guano-smelling cave tapping at a keyboard while scowling intensely was thinner than the Bat's. Cats are, of course, curious, but we like to be active about it. All that meticulous planning isn't feline at all. We snoop, we prowl, we spy, we play it by ear, we butt our little wet noses in where they shouldn't be and we look damn good doing it. The Egyptians were clued into the fact that cats are great big know-it-alls and they also knew that unlike owls and foxes and all those other creatures that are supposed to be mysteriously wise and clever, we knew things because we bothered to go sniff them out first-hand.

By the time Oracle and Batman had given themselves eyestrain discerning between them that the several hundred tons of topsoil had been delivered to several different companies - Drachenskind Pharmaceuticals, Corvinus research laboratories, Danesti botanical institute, White Knight industrial supplies - and that they were all owned by offshore interests, many of them European, with obscure ties to aristocracy - Catwoman had enjoyed a pleasant chat with a plump, talkative delivery supervisor who turned out to be a huge fan of the Cat Tales show, observed a very in-depth conversation between a pretty blonde lab technician and her cheeky college-age intern from the comfort of the outside of their tenth storey window, and had an even more cheerful chat with a sleazy black-market goods courier, whom she had persuaded with her whip around his neck and her boot in his ribs to tell her everything he *didn't* know.

From these I'd gleaned that Drachenskind was owned by someone named Graf Ordog, Corvinus by a Marquis DeLaempri, Danesti by a guy named Volkoslak. He was Russian or Serbian as far as any of his employees knew. White Knight was run by a poorly-known Arabian sheik named Al-Daruc. Nobody working at any of the

companies had ever met their employers in person, which was understandable, as they were all based overseas.

That was where it went suddenly cold. All of them had been in business for between ten and twenty years. Legitimate business, even the sales to Pammy were on the books. They weren't covers for anything. They had no connection to anything illegal whatsoever, not so much as a management exec with gambling debts.

The only thing they had in common was the clue - they'd all been receiving shipments of soil samples from Eastern Europe for several months now. Those shipments hadn't been used on site, however. They'd been sent to the various companies, signed off on, and picked up by deliverymen to be sent, allegedly, to a selection of warehouses. Only nobody at Corvinus, Drachenskind or the others knew the addresses. None of them had ever seen the stock after that, or visited the storage places in person. And I couldn't find a warehouse in town that had anything resembling Eastern European soil samples stored there.

Again, the twinge of familiarity. It was bugging the hell out of me. What was I missing?

The annoyance was starting to eat away at the glow of fun from the evening's play. And as much as it would make me smile to be able to bounce back into the Batcave and triumphantly drop all this fresh evidence into Bruce's lap, there was every likelihood he and Oracle would have come this far between them and then it'd be his turn to be smug. I couldn't have that. I needed a trump card before I could go to him. I needed to know exactly what Pammy - or whoever - was up to, before he did.

I stared at the names of companies again. Drachenskind was German for something like 'Dragon's child' and Corvinus - Latin for 'crow', and Crane *was* out again. It was Halloween. Jonathan hadn't sent his invite, Bruce hadn't found any evidence he was planning anything, and he was out now...and working for Danesti.

God damnit.

White Knight didn't ring any bells, unless it was meant to be the opposite of Dark Knight. Or an obscure winter reference and Freeze was tangled in this. Freeze? Now I was really grasping at straws.

Pammy wouldn't work with any of them closely. She was far too uppity and selfish, and they were all male, and unlikely to slip up and let her green them into servitude. And if she had them greened, they wouldn't have the mental faculties to organize something of this complexity. None of this stuff had any of her hallmarks - but Danesti, she was involved with them, so was Scarecrow, and now the botanical supplies...

Sighing, I turned to the names of the employers themselves. Ordog, Volkoslak - I didn't know what those meant. Russian, Romanian, Czech? DeLaempri sounded French, but wasn't, and I had no idea where the Arab sheik could possibly fit. The only thing that connected them were those boxes of earth.

Something clicked.

I found myself pressing my cell phone to my ear.

:::What is at home in darkness but basks in firelight, and calls only when she has something to say?:::

:::Meow. Hi Eddie:::

:::It's good to hear your voice, Selina. Crane's out:::

:::I heard. Wanna have a little pre-Halloween get together to take your mind off it?:::

:::Riddle me this: if a black cat brings bad luck, does a purple cat bring good?:::

:::You're about to find out.:::

Pamela Isley stalked down the hall of Danesti Institute for Botanical Research and Environmental Resources. It was one of the few truly 'green' laboratories in Gotham, at least by Pamela's definition, because it supported research into genetic enhancements for plants - strengthening them against parasites and pollution, trying to isolate the genes for quick growth to ensure trees that would swiftly populate the lands grievously stripped by the forestry industry. That kind of work would never be preferable to cutting out the human infection at its source, but it would help. So, she had taken interest. She had purchased from them. They did not know to what use she had put their botanical specimens - they did not need to know.

It was most like a Goddess, she decided, to elect when and to whom to impart wisdom and knowledge.

But now, as she had come for her purchase, the owner of the laboratory, apparently visiting from overseas, wished to see her. Why he had invited her to join him in his office was unknown; perhaps this man - though he was just a man - shared her vision of a world where flora would no longer be brutalized by the stupid and the greedy. Perhaps that was the reason for his magnanimous choice of a research field - perhaps he would recognize her for the authority she was, and offer himself and his resources to further her goals. If she wanted to, of course, she could make him see that anyway -

Starbucks was risky simply because it was public, and with the Black Plague apparently striking Gotham, anywhere public suddenly felt dangerous and exposed. The news had broken by evening and there were few people on the streets, and those who were out were wearing white surgical masks - which might help with the pneumonic variant, but would hardly protect them from plague fleas.

But Starbucks, though nearly empty, was where Eddie and I sat, sipping our coffees, while the girl behind the counter watched us nervously.

"YES, WAR FROZE CREVICE."

"Eddie, c'mon, it's been a long day."

He chuckled. "Selina, I just can't see it. Ivy might tolerate Freeze but she can't stand Scarecrow, and he wouldn't work with someone who was immune to his fear toxin."

"He didn't try did he?!"

"Oh he did. Once. As you can imagine, it was once only."

"Twit." I sighed over my coffee - "But, seriously, Eddie, we're in trouble here. There has to be something linking all these companies and we're running out of time to find out what."

"Don't you feel bad that we're essentially meddling in what is probably the biggest rogue scheme in three years running?"

"I would, if it weren't going way the hell too far - spreading a contagion in Gotham city? That killed a third of Europe the last time it was loose? Who the hell do they think they are?"

Eddie bit his lip on a thought that was probably *you're sounding like him, you know*, because it would do far more harm than good. I knew what he was thinking, but I didn't call him on it. This time.

His finger tapped against his lip. "What about the shipping company?"

"Hunyadi international shipping. Black Sea, departed from Varna."

"Varna."

"Got something?"

Eddie narrowed his eyes. He tapped his fingertip on the list of names laid on the table, with a ring of brown coffee slowly spreading to stain it. "..."

Then he started laughing. It was a strange, sickened little sound. "Oh that's just *too* ridiculous."

"What?"

"A derelict ship, bound from Eastern Europe through an ominous thunderstorm, crashes dramatically into the harbour, nobody on board, bearing a mysterious cargo of earth-filled boxes and pestilent rats...madness, death and darkness spread in its wake. Does this sound familiar?"

"Yes, and that's what's been driving me furniture-scratching *mad*. It sounds like some corny old horror flick--"

A thought started congealing in my head even as Eddie, hysterical smirk in place, pulled out a pair of scissors with a flourish and started furiously snipping at the paper. I watched, curiously, as he began to rearrange the letters.

I had it almost as soon as he began.

L-A-E-M-P-R-I

A-L-D-A-R-U-C

I sucked in a breath.

"You are fucking *kidding* me."

She found him sitting in the dark. There was no-one else in the building at this hour; no secretaries to serve him coffee, no research staff puttering around in their labcoats. Just him, sitting in his office, behind the desk, with all the lights off.

"Good evening, Ms Isley."

The voice was a silken baritone with a delicious, if very faint accent that masked a kind of metallic harshness just below it. Pamela felt a tingle pass up her spine - something that very, very rarely came over her in a man's presence. It was something she felt last clasped in Harvey's arms, staring into the ruined beauty of his face -

A scowl spoiled her beautiful brow, and she didn't like that she felt one there. She didn't like this feeling at all, because it was mingled with a deep, gut-instinct repulsion that didn't stem from her general hatred of humanity and its male population in particular.

"Please, sit, and drink." A white hand swept in smooth, if somewhat theatrical gesture to the bottle of wine laid upon the desk - no, a dinner table, in an office - and the single glass that had already been filled - "You must excuse that I do not join you. It is not my custom to partake."

When someone offered you wine but excused themselves from it in Rogue circles, there was a certain assumption made. But if he knew the first thing about her, he wouldn't even think about it - would he?

She watched his face. He was old, elderly even, but handsome in a "distinguished" kind of way, and she found it hard to place just how old he was. He had a thin, hard, hawkish face, the face of a man around forty, perhaps, but his hair and moustache - both of them long, flowing, their style probably last fashionable in the 1500s - were white as snow. Not her type. Yet, she found it hard - found it took an actual force of her considerable will - to pull her gaze from his eyes.

With an expression like a fox sliding its leg out of a steel trap, free, but with its strength still sapping away, she put up her haughty visage and reminded herself that she was a goddess, and no smooth-talking man would be allowed to take away even a shred of her dignity.

"I prefer to stand. It gives the proper perspective to those I deal with." She purred, narrowing her eyes at him. "I assume you have called me here to speak of business?"

Part of her was tempted to drink the wine with a smile, hoping that this smug snake really was trying to poison her - so she could see his face when it failed. But she wouldn't deign to drink something so brutally squeezed out of harvested grapes. The bastard had to know that. He was mocking her. She was sure of it.

"Of course." She watched the white hands fold - saw the white angles of his face half-draped in shadow. "I have a great need of you, Ivy. You are much more in person than I had hoped for. You are unique. Your beauty, your strength, your unusual abilities...you possess everything that the women of the past were lacking."

Flattery was a language Ivy never quite tired of, though the man spoke it too simply for her like, without groveling or self-debasement. She could fix that.

She swayed gently toward him, placing one delicate hand on the table, leaning over to smile at him and give him a generous view of what would never be his... "Why, you sweet man. You know how to charm a lady. I bet you have lots of little dolls lined up to hang off your arm and keep your bed warm." She lifted a fingertip to trace his jaw, in a motion that might have been mistaken for a friendly tease, were it not so lingering, so deliberate - "But can you handle a woman like me? I know already what the answer is, but I challenge you to be man enough to find out."

She noted with an odd detachment how cold his skin was. The moonlight filtering in from the window did things to his eyes, gave them a reflective gleam, like a cat's, save tinted inexplicably red.

He smiled. His lips, too, they were unusually red, but the teeth behind were stark, icy white.

"I accept your challenge, my dear. But I wonder. Are you prepared for the consequences?"

Consequences? Was he daring to threaten her? She smiled. He'd find out what 'consequences' meant.

She draped a fragrant arm over his shoulder, leaned closer - and spritzed him.

He didn't flinch. His breathing, his body temperature, his heartbeat remained exactly as they had since she had entered the room - *nonexistent*.

Poison Ivy sucked in a breath and her eyes flew wide.

In the dark, he grinned razors.

"No-"

He was out of the chair, his face dissolving instantly from faintly predatory to snarling, wolverine - the red eyes wide, the red lips twisted around white teeth - the canines - he was a blur of white and black striking her body like a freight train, hurling them both against the closed door. Ivy couldn't scream; her face froze in shock.

Pain shot into her throat; two white-hot pinpoints that seemed to embed and burn forever.

CHAPTER 5: BREAKTHROUGH AND BREAKOUT

Danesti. Corvinus. Hunyadi. Volkoslak. Ordog. De Laempri. Al-Daruc. What was I missing?

Ivy and Scarecrow were involved. I was certain. But neither of them were in a position to pull it off - if they did this, they had help. My attention had turned to the overseas backers; three hours of digging into Middle-Eastern terrorist networks had turned up no connection to the mysterious sheik; six hours of profiling Russian mobsters operating in Gotham had brought me no closer to Volkoslak. The laboratories who had claimed the soil samples were clean; in operation ten, twenty years each. The names swam in my head; something was connecting them, something seemed to be a common thread, but I could not place it.

The World's Greatest Detective was stumped.

I slumped back in my chair and felt the weight of the evening's work - of yesterday's work on top of it - fall on my shoulders like a mantle of woven lead. I needed out of the cave. I needed to patrol, yet I was still stuck here. There would be crimes slipping under Batman's radar tonight - muggings, break-ins - but I could not afford to leave this case sit. So far there had been no confirmed fatalities from the plague; that was thanks to the lab report, and Batman had sent a full dossier to every major hospital in Gotham of exactly how to treat Bubonic Plague to back up their own standard procedures.

However, the report had mentioned discrepancies in the shape of the bacteria, but had been unable to examine them more closely before the samples were stolen. This coupled with the fact that the planting of the disease in Gotham was a deliberate act by an unseen enemy led me to believe - no, to know with utmost certainty - that the bacteria had been modified, weaponised, that there was some greater disaster waiting to be triggered.

It was the rats. It had to be. The soil samples were clean, they were simply topsoil, apparently of Eastern-European origin. No unusual bacteria -

That was when Selina came flouncing into the cave in full Cat-regalia, with a spring in her step and a smirk across her face so feline it wouldn't have surprised me to see canary feathers poking between her lips.

"Evening handsome. Guess what?"

I felt the grunt escape before I could congeal a more appropriate response out of my thoughts.

"I got your man."

She dropped a book in my lap. I glanced down at the author, then the title.

Bram Stoker.

DRACULA.

The tumblers fell into place.

"Is this a joke?"

I hadn't meant it to sound so harsh, but Selina scowled prettily at me and tossed a second book in my lap - a bigger, heavier one. I flinched. She obviously wasn't wanting kids.

Florescu, Mirceau: Romania - A Medieval History.

"You're still the World's Greatest, stud, you were just looking in the wrong place and time. Matthias *Corvinus*, John *Hunyadi*, aka "The White Knight", they were all contemporaries of Vlad the Impaler. Dracula. The *Danesti* clan were bitter rivals of his. *Drachenskind* - Dragon's child - Dracula means 'Son of the Dragon'--"

I sat and stared at her. The revelation of who was seemingly behind all of this was only part of the reason I was stunned - the other was all of that detective work. Selina. Selina Kyle, Catwoman, the woman who would never concede to becoming a crimefighter, that gloriously free-spirited cat-burglar who cased her targets once and then went at them and took them to pieces through intelligence, skill and gut instinct rather than meticulous planning...Selina Kyle had taken one night's prowl and come back with the vital evidence I had missed.

Ironically, it was probably the greatest single victory Catwoman had ever won against Batman. She seemed to have missed that significance, but I hadn't.

" - Ordog and Volkoslak - it's actually *volkoslak* - are names for devils and vampires in that part of the world - L-A-E-M-P-R-I is an anagram for Impaler and A-L-D-A-R-U-C is Dracula. We're dealing with Count Vla-ah-ah's biggest fan."

"Or Dracula is real, and we're dealing with *him*."

It took the haze out of my brain and wiped the smirk off Selina's face. We stared at each other quietly, expressions mirrored in their seriousness.

"I thought you'd ruled out old-world hairdos."

"I had. But this changes everything. 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.'" I said, in earnest, but Psychobat was glowering at me for using the sacred Holmes to justify believing in probably the most ridiculous premise for a bad horror movie ever; Count Dracula had come to Gotham for Halloween.

Where were Abbott and Costello?

She cocked her head. The green eyes looked straight into me as they always did. "Am I missing something?"

I opened my mouth to reply. Was she? She had all the evidence - first - and she had come to the quite logical conclusion that there was some new Rogue out there running around with the same obsession for Bram Stoker that Jervis Tetch had for Lewis Carroll. I had leapt immediately to the possibility that it was Dracula himself. *Why?* Gut instinct was useful, but relying on it was for dime novel detectives. Research, analysis, protocols, hard work. That was Batman. So why had I typed *supernatural* in that log? Why was I thinking *vampires in Gotham* now? Maybe Selina wasn't the one missing something.

For a moment there, when I'd first suggested Dracula, she'd frozen. There was a very rare fear in her eyes, an instant when she realized that the game we were playing was not the game she'd started to play. Now she, studying me intently, seemed to take my silence for an answer unto itself. She began pacing in a way that was far too feline to be

called anything but 'stalking'. Thinking was not an act of stillness for her. Like all cats, she thought in motion, with fluidity, with all of her senses alert and awake.

"I'll call Jason."

I was - troubled, uncertain. I don't know. But there was only one response I had to that; Psychobat flared. "No."

"Bruce, if anyone is going to know about a real Dracula, it'll be Jason Blood. I won't invite him into things, this is ou- this is your case -but we should at least use all of our available resources, right?"

Growl.

Magic. Just because Dracula was a supernatural monster, she was going to bring *magic* into the game. As if my methods were somehow inadequate. As if *I* was somehow inadequate. *Use all of our available resources* - we had intelligence, we had detective work, we had an intimate knowledge of Gotham City that our enemy did not have. We had the evidence we had collected. And her kneejerk reaction was to abandon all of that and turn to a medieval leftover and his incense and candles, and that hateful, *unnatural* manipulation of the laws of physics that his kind used as an all-purpose, fix-everything excuse for...

The Bat loosened his stranglehold enough for me to see Selina's expression; the hurt exasperation in her eyes. I realized that I must have blurted 'NO' again while Psychobat was in command, and now she was irritated. Upset that, even after all he had done for us in the past, I hadn't been able to move beyond this and consider Jason Blood a friend and ally the way she did. That I had, by proxy, once again shut her out.

I wanted to apologize. Naturally, Psychobat chose instead to make it worse.

"You're staying out of this." I found myself saying. "I appreciate that you helped me identify the perpetrator. But this is not a Rogue issue and it's not some competitive game between you and me. It's much bigger than that, and it's out of your field of experience. You'll be putting yourself in danger. I want you out of it, or you *will* get hurt."

Her eyes hardened. "No kidding, genius. Haven't you figured out that's why I *am* involved? Because I wouldn't be bothered if it was Freeze breaking into the zoo to score some new pet polar bears. You're right that it is bigger than that and I'm in danger. *Everyone is, Bruce!* I'm not going to sit in the tower pining and brushing my hair while you're out hunting vampires. We all know what happens to that girl in the storybook, don't we? And incidentally, honey, I'd appreciate you toning down the Bat-jerk, because it's really getting old, and we have work to do."

We. She really wasn't going to back down. I grunted, but there was just enough of a sigh in it to signal her that I wasn't shutting the door. She continued. "So am I calling Jason Blood to ask him for *information*, or not?"

I felt the tension deflate a little. She'd won, or at least held her ground, and it was pointless trying to push her. But neither was I going to let her think I'd compromise on the magic issue.

"Fine. Do it. But I am *not* having him sending his little glowing light balls into Wayne Manor again."

She smirked, and shifted to her other side - giving a casual, almost dismissive shrug.

"You won't have to. I talked him into buying a cell phone. Just for you." The way she said that last part made it clear it hadn't been easy. "If we're in luck, they'll turn out to be old college buddies."

"This is not a joke, Selina. There's a contagion spreading in Gotham, we've lost all this time tracking it down, and the culprit may just be an immortal blood-sucking monster."

"Oh, as if you're so unused to dealing with those. You can hear Ra's shrieking "I'LL GET YOU NEXT TIME BATMAAAN!" across the Atlantic every time you hand his cadaverous ass back to him on a silver platter. You're seriously worried you couldn't handle Dracula? Are we talking about the same Batman here?"

I rose from the chair and stood watching her. Damn her. People's lives were on the line. The plague was spreading. Hundreds of rats were disseminating throughout the sewers and alleys and hovels of Gotham's underbelly, spreading it inevitably further. And if it was Dracula, really Dracula, then the plague itself was just a cover, and another disease was spreading underneath it, with every victim the vampire chose - vampirism itself. I couldn't possibly fathom why Selina would be making light of something like this.

No. She wasn't making light of *Dracula*, She was ribbing *me*. Challenging me. Impossible woman. What was she aiming for?

"So should we start by rounding up anybody who looks suspiciously like Bela Lugosi?"

"Selina."

The playful demeanour dropped, and she met my eyes with a small sigh. Then she smiled and took my hands in hers. Even with the claws, the touch was gentle.

"Bruce. I know this is serious. I'm taking it seriously. I just don't want you to fall into the trap you do every time DEMON comes calling. So what happens if it's Dracula? So he's a world-famous vampire, he's six hundred years old, and he can turn into a bat? You deal with things like that in the JLA. So they don't come to Gotham that often. So what?" She leaned close, brushed her lips over mine, and smiled again. "You're Batman. You *will* take him down."

Trust. Faith. In everything I, and Batman, represented. I couldn't find words to answer. Psychobat, shamed, crept back into his cave.

With a knowing wink, she slipped her hands from mine. "I'll make the call."

But even as she reached for her phone, the Oracom suddenly beeped.

Our eyes met, and we knew before we heard Barbara's voice.

:: B. This is O. Cuckoo has flown the nest. Repeat. Cuckoo has flown the nest. ::

Joker's sudden silence had alerted the attendants and surely enough, the orderly, Driscoll, had been sent up to check on him.

As innocent as it sounded, checking on the Joker was one of the worst parts of working at Arkham. Staff drew straws to choose the unlucky member of their number who had to do it. If you drew the short straw, you'd better have your affairs in order and a good deal of medical insurance, because there was about a 20% chance you weren't coming back with all of your appendages intact, and about a 10% chance - 60% if it was Tuesday - you weren't coming back at all.

The Joker was at his worst when you put him in solitary. At least in the common room, the other Rogues could be trusted to keep him mostly in check (for their own sakes, of course, not out of charity) and if Harley was around she diligently bore the brunt of his pranks. But a few days of stewing in solitary worked all manner of nightmares in his brain. Sometimes he got *bored*, and sat there in the gloom coiled up like a spring waiting to pounce on the first person to open that door. Sometimes he would withdraw into himself, quite happily alone, which was even worse - because it meant he'd spend all of that time merrily cooking up the next mad jest and everyone would feel it when he came out. Sometimes he'd be perfectly docile. It was impossible to predict.

Driscoll found him sweeping about the room, eyes closed, arms swinging theatrically, and humming *There's No Business Like Show Business*, like he was the star in a musical only he could hear. When Driscoll opened the door, Joker burst into full song, and despite drowned-out, calm pleas of "Patient J. Please calm down. Patient J. It's time for your medication. Patient J..." he ignored the attendant and kept going until he'd finished with a grand, vaudeville flourish in the centre of his cell.

"Patient J--"

"DRISCOLL, you hairy old scrote, it's been a while! How's the fingers?"

Driscoll winced, unconsciously flexing the once-crushed digits. "Fine. Much better."

"You'll really have to accept my apologies. Vices are my vices after all, just like the one I squashed your little fingsies in. HA HA HA. Served you right for sticking them where they didn't belong. HA! You think you got it bad, you shoulda seen what I did to my proctologist. HAAA HAHAHAHAHHA!"

"Patient J, I'd prefer we changed to a different topic--"

"Oh, no hard feelings, Drizzy, you know, not like the ones it took six months of physio to get back in your hand. Bet that smarted. But I digress!" He slung one arm around Driscoll's shoulder, and the orderly wrapped his fingers around his whistle, both to warn Joker about the physical contact and to keep him from doing anything dangerous with it.

"I digress!" said the Joker again, ignoring him, swinging his free hand out to gesture about the room. "Mister Driscoll, I hereby declare myself cured! I am a sane man. I have looked into the abyss, found it looking back, and blown it a raspberry. I'm ready to rejoin polite society, get a job, and a little house in the 'burbs with a white picket fence and two and a half kids, and I'll even be a sport and make sure it's the *top* half!"

It would've been too good to be true even if he *wasn't* still an obvious box full of crazy on legs.

"Patient J, don't you think that's for the doctors to decide?"

That was a mistake. Joker's eyes glittered dangerously, and he pulled away, affecting an offended sniff.

"What? Am I hearing this right, Drizzy? Are you putting yourself in the way of a man's path back to the righteous world of the drab and morally-retentive middle-class? Are you *denying* me my God-given Constitutional right to swill beer, bitch at my wife, and hunch over a desk for eight hours a day whoring out my self-esteem to put my brats through college?" Joker stepped back, staring, appalled - "-a-a-are you saying - that I'm not good enough to be NORMAL!?"

"You're the Joker." Driscoll blurted. Mistake number two - never, *ever* refer to a Patient by their chosen delusional moniker. Dr. Bartholemew would be furious, if Driscoll made it out of this cell alive for him to be furious *at*.

"Not anymore! Haven't you heard?! I've been *replaced*." Joker wailed, thrusting his hand dramatically to his brow. His other held up a printout of some kind, looked like a webpage, with a large-print heading: *AUSSIE HEARTTHROB NAILS JOKER ROLE* - "What's a man to do, when the man he was is no longer the original? You know what, Driz? Sod it. Who was I kidding, thinkin' I could go blue collar? I've gotta think of my SKILLS--"

Murder, mayhem, volatile chemicals... Driscoll mentally listed, watching the madman warily and readying to call for assistance.

"- And, hey, I'm due a change of pace! ...WAIT! That's it! I know what I'll do!"

Oh no.

"Replace me, will he? I'll replace him right back! I'm headin' for the big lights, Drizzy! The glam! The glory! The babes! Home of sex tape scandals, cocaine parties, the casting couch!"

Driscoll blinked.

"Oh *Hollywood*-" Joker segued into his Broadway best, springing off the rubber wall and pirouetting across the floor - "I'm headed for the walk of fame! I'm done with Gotham! I'm done with mister Why So Bat-Shit Serious! I'm done with being the Joker! It's ME who's going to be serious business, Driz! I'm gonna be on every gossip rag's front page, my gorgeous puss is gonna be grinnin' off the covers of Time and Woman's Day alike - I'm gonna be A-list! HA HA - Oscars! MTV awards! Razzies! Strollin' down the red carpet with Scarlet Johanssen on one arm and Orlando Bloom on the other! Yes, Mister Driscoll, from this day on, you can call me..." He thrust his hands out as if he were Spielberg framing a shot - "The *ACTOR*!"

Driscoll couldn't help it. He snorted.

"....Do you think that's funny, Henry Driscoll?"

The sudden drop in the Joker's voice froze the blood in Driscoll's veins. His smirk fell from his face, but he didn't back away from the madman. He kept to his training. You didn't back down from them. You didn't run away. You didn't lower your eyes. You faced them firmly, you stood your ground, like you would with a dangerous animal, until they tired of it and wandered off. The moment you folded and turned your back to run, they'd have you...

That's what he kept telling himself. But he found it so very hard to meet the Joker's eyes.

He had his lips drooped down into recursive frown. They say it takes more muscles and more effort to frown than to smile; this was doubly true in the Joker's case, where his mouth when it relaxed slipped into the chemical grin by default. To see him frown was *dire*.

"Patient J, we're finished here. Step back."

"I really don't wanna leave, you know." Joker stepped forward. "I was just getting cozy in here again. Thinking of installing Cable."

He glanced back out the window, as if he was seeing something there that Driscoll couldn't. Many of the orderlies didn't like Joker *having* a window, but they'd found out

the hard way what he could do with an air conditioner and a ventilation system. At least it was too small to crawl through.

"But there've been developments, Drizzy - see - first I get this -" He held up the *AUSSIE HEARTTHROB NAILS JOKER ROLE* note, and Driscoll observed creases indicating that it'd previously been folded into a paper plane. God damn Quinn. "From my darlin' Harley. Then I see..."

He fell silent, staring out the window a little more, the frown becoming more thoughtful. "HEH. I won't tell you what I saw, Drizzy. You'd think I was *crazy*." He licked his lips, the smile starting to twitch up again. "There've been some changes outside. I need to take a walk, you see. You understand, right? When a man's just gotta do what he's gotta do..."

"Patient J. It's time to sit down now. You're not going anywhere." Driscoll swallowed. The hole kept getting deeper.

Joker's gaze snapped back to him. "But I haven't told you my latest! My last great joke before I hit the silver screen. You wouldn't begrudge me that, now would you?" Joker was almost purring, and it was the single most disturbing sound Henry Driscoll had ever heard.

Suddenly, Joker was grinning to beat the Devil. "See, there was this guy, let's call him Henry - HA HA - funny coincidence, that, don'tcha think? Well he had this co-worker Bob, you know, we'll say he's as fat as your buddy Bob down in Laundry, thinning hair, kind of a slob, you know? Well Bob and Henry, they go way back, but Bob, you see, he's got - HA HA - wouldn't you know it? This ROWZA hot piece of patty-cake for a wife..."

Driscoll swallowed, and reached for his whistle as the Joker advanced.

How did he know!?!

"Well, Drizzy, so our boy Henry just can't keep outta her panties. Poor old Bob, he doesn't know, won't hurt him, right? And what right does a fat slob like him have to get a stunner like that anyhow? Why it's our Henry's *calling* to fulfill her needs..."

Joker flicked his wrist, and something appeared from his sleeve. But it wasn't a razor-edged playing card. It was something worse, so much worse, and he dropped it on the floor at Henry's feet.

His fingers shook about the whistle. *How did the bastard KNOW?!!*

"...on the sofa...in the pool...on Bob's desk - OUCH! - Bob's favorite tie as a bridle? That's *cold* -" Joker dropped another photo on the floor. Another. Another. "- my, is that a Russian schoolgirl costume?"

Henry forgot utterly who he was dealing with and lunged at the Joker, trying to snatch the awful photographs away. But the madman simply swatted him aside and ducked between his arms, slippery as an eel - Driscoll was forced to quickly switch positions to remain between the Joker and the unlocked cell door.

"...who knew fatty Bob could afford so many 'household security' cams on his lousy salary? Certainly not Mrs Bobbinson! She wouldn't be making THAT face for the camera if she did, now would she?" He held up another photograph, grinning wickedly, and hammed on a girly voice with a bad accent. "Oh *Boris!* You can put the beef in my Stroganoff *any* day!"

"Y-you bastard-"

"And heere's the punchline. HA HA. You're gonna love it."

Henry had more than had enough. He figured he had enough time to grab the photos before security made it to the room. Not enough time for Joker to finish him with his bare hands before they did. He hoped.

He blew his whistle.

Only instead of the shrill sound he expected, there was a tiny, wet click, and a stabbing pain in his tongue.

"Poor Bob, right? Desperate guy. *Crazy* for revenge. Sucker for a pretty girl to boot! So when the former Doctor Quinzel asks him oh-so-sweetly '*why the long face, Baby-Bob?*' he tells her *all* about it. Even shows her the photos. Even agrees to make *sure* his *good pal* Henry Driscoll pulls the short straw..."

Henry clapped a hand to his mouth, swaying, staring at the Joker. He tasted blood, and something else, something - chemical.

Joker's eyes were fixed on him.

"Even let her lend him a little helping hand sterilizing the staff's whistles. Such *good* behavior, Drizz, got an early release for my Harle, an early grave for Bad Boy Henry...HAH!"

Driscoll felt his cheeks tighten, and the corners of his mouth twitching, and something bubbling up in his chest, burning in his nostrils, stealing his breath, leaving him frantic, drowning -

Joker pushed Driscoll's chest with a bony finger, sending him to his knees, and stepped over his collapsing, shuddering body. "See what happens when you wet another man's whistle? BA-CHINNG! It's been a gas, Drizzy! See you on the Red Carpet!"

He ducked out the door.

"-at the funeral parlor. Natch!"

Joker winked at him and vanished, strolling cheerfully down the hallway just as Driscoll finally burst into shrill, howling, terminal laughter.

"There's nooo business like Showww-business..."

Jason Blood closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, trying to blot out Etrigan's howls of raucous laughter long enough to concentrate on Selina's voice. He was glad she couldn't see his face.

"Yes, he's real. No, we never went to college together."

*Bitter tongue spills lies without end,
Speaks false to true and faithful friend,
The Scholomance did we attend,
She's close to truths you can't defend!*

"Not in...normal terms...at least." Jason conceded, cursing Etrigan inwardly.

:: Okay. I'm not gonna pry, Jason, as long as you promise not to get involved in this one unless we really, really need you. You know how Bruce is and it's his case. ::

"Selina. You really, really need me."

:: Come on, Dracula? Cape and tux, bad accent, smooth with the ladies? He can't be that bad.

::

"He's not like the movies, Selina."

:: *I figured. It'd be too easy if he was. Go on, give it to me straight.* ::

"He's - Evil. Cunning. I know, that doesn't tell you anything -" if only Etrigan would shut up, maybe Jason could collect his thoughts enough to - "He isn't your run of the mill immortal knave and he isn't your average vampire either. There are *Demons of Hell* who are less of a threat than Dracula, because they might overpower him a thousandfold, but they rely too much on it, they allow arrogance to delude them. He knows his weaknesses, and he uses them as well as he uses his strengths. He is...like a Gotham rogue, in the way that he *thinks*. A mind like Riddler or Joker with ten times the strength of Killer Croc, Ra's Al Ghul's experience, and Etrigan's moral compass -" The Demon took a mental bow - "Not to mention shapeshifting, mind-control, a grab bag of all-purpose black magic, and a virulent supernatural plague dripping from his fangs with every bite."

:: *Woof. If you wanted to scare me, Jase, you're almost there.* ::

"Selina, I know you're having a hard time separating the Hollywood fiction from the reality, but I am here to tell you, Dracula is bad news. Out of respect for Bruce, I won't get involved until it becomes absolutely necessary, or unless you call on me. But you will call on me."

:: *That's all I needed to hear. But if you'd like to clear up just how he's different to the movies, or you have anything else that might put Bruce and I on the fast track to catching this bastard, feel free to enlighten us.* ::

"Mm." Jason would have preferred to be face to face for this part. He would summarise as best he could. "Stoker's novel is *essentially* fiction. He already had half of it written when his friend Arminius introduced him to a Professor Van Helsing from Amsterdam. Yes, he was real too, and he was the one who defeated and destroyed Dracula in 1892, five years before the book was published. I don't know why Van Helsing chose to tell his story to Stoker, but nonetheless, due to Van Helsing's input, much of the vampire lore in the novel is accurate, if only to Dracula's particular strain. I'll do what research I can, but until I have more, you can consider the book a fairly reliable source."

:: *Understood. Jason, do you have any idea why he's in Gotham in the first place? What is he up to?* ::

"That one's harder, Selina. All I can say is that he will be wanting to spread his vampire curse. It's almost a compulsion for him. Living people are compelled to breathe, to eat, to sleep. Dracula is compelled to drink blood and make vampires. Other than that, Dracula is unlikely to stick to a predictable plan, but there is one element he cannot resist."

:: *Lead on, Exposition Guy.* :::

"The Brides of Dracula. There are always three. He *will* make new Brides before he bites anyone else, and he will seek out the most beautiful, most powerful, and most dangerous women in Gotham. He will settle for nothing less."

CHAPTER 6: A GOTHAM WELCOME

Ha-Hacienda Three was quiet, save for the occasional pulsing giggle from one of the hyenas. Harley Quinn lay draped over the passion pit, spread out on the pillows, dressed in a ridiculously short goth-loli dress with smiley-face pom-poms hanging from her pigtails, a huge pink ribbon tied around her chest, and a red-lipped pout on her painted face.

He wasn't home yet!

Where was Puddin'? He escaped hours ago, just like they planned! That stupid goober Driscoll was spending probably his last hours on earth hysterically cackling at the Arkham infirmary ceiling, all the incriminating evidence Mistah J had left on the floor had led to Fatty Bob being fired and under investigation by the cops for his involvement - the Joke had played out perfectly, and she was waiting for her reward, because she *helped*, she really did, he couldn't have dunnit without her, and Mistah J damn well *owed* her a wild night of rubber-chicken-honkin' love and a nice cuddle afterwards and maybe a movie and some flowers and -

And Harley was still lying here alone all trussed up in a pink bow bored outta her brain and *MISTAH J WASN'T HOME!*

It had to be Batman, or the cops. He was caught up, giving them the slip, he'd be home any minute. It couldn't be that he'd found something more entertaining to do than be with her. It couldn't *possibly*.

HAAA HA HA HA!!!!

The sound broke through her thoughts. The doorbell. Finally.

"Come in, Puddin'..." She purred in her very best Marilyn Monroe - much less squeaky and much more breathy than her regular voice. "I've been a real naughty girl and I'm just waitin' for ya to fetch the rubber mallet and give me a good hard spa-"

The door clicked open and a very different form staggered across the threshold, sending Harley hopping up, eyes wide, Marilyn dissolving into the harlequin squeak in an instant.

"RED!?"

Ivy pulled herself into the Hacienda, eyes red-rimmed, looking downright atrocious. Her skin really *was* alabaster now, but she didn't look to be in any mood to enjoy it. She didn't even register Harley's embarrassing attire, she just took a few swaying steps into the room and collapsed into the passion pit with a most un-Goddess-like grunt. Harley's carefully-cultivated environmental aroma of cotton-candy incense and bubblegum was dissolved within moments by a *very* heavy whiff of Lemon Pledge.

"Red - what's wrong? Red? Are you okay? Hey RED! Wake up, huh?" Harley shook her friend's shoulders, hopping about her body like a puppy upset to find its human companion in a bad way.

"He bit me." Pamela snuffled, rubbing her face into the pillows. "He *bit me*."

"Who? What? Harvey? Your new Ivan? *Batman?!?*"

"The goddamn *bastard*. I'll kill him." She snarled suddenly, sitting up, slamming her delicate fists into the pillows. "He *did something to me*. How is that even possible? There's no poison that can harm me! NONE! But I feel..." The exertion of her outraged outburst dimmed her eyes, and Harley watched her angry face melt into glazed dizziness. "I feel..."

Ivy slumped into the pillows again.

"Who? Who did this to you? Red?" Now Harley was really starting to fret. She could see Ivy was in a bad way; she wasn't bruised or roughed up, and Harley couldn't imagine anyone ever managing to overpower Poison Ivy and have their way with her - and anyway, they'd *die*. But something was terribly wrong with Red, something seemed to have taken the life out of her.

That's right about when Harley spotted that her skin wasn't alabaster all over; there were two little red holes in Ivy's throat, right over the jugular. They seemed sealed over, they weren't leaking blood, but they were angry and red and very fresh.

"He said he'd come -" Finally, Pamela dissolved into sobs, scrunching Mistah J's favorite pillow furiously in her hands - "come back for me - hic - bastard - 'three kisses' he said - *I'll kill him...*"

Harley's eyes dropped and she settled in the pillows beside Ivy, tugging her friend's head into her lap and stroking her hair. A hard, cold look came over her face that very few people ever saw on Harley Quinn. Those few people had found it terrifying.

"Dun you worry, Red. He comes here, I'll kill him *first*."

Professor Jonathan Crane had been given a personal laboratory at Danesti and privacy ensured by Mr Volkoslak, ostensibly his Ukrainian uncle. Ostensibly his extensive knowledge of the chemistry and biology of the fear emotion would help research into a way to splice a certain gene into Danesti-brand wheat that would trigger chemical reactions in rodent brains and literally scare the vermin away from any grain stores they started to infest. None of the company employees, of course, thought that letting The Scarecrow and his fear chemicals anywhere near anything intended to be *eaten by human beings* in the future was anything short of utterly insane.

Jonathan Crane did not care.

Batman would come. The bait was all there. Batman would come and Batman would find him engaged in legitimate research. Batman would find nothing illegal whatsoever about his employment or his experiments. And Batman would be stymied, just in time for Halloween.

Crane spied a cockroach crawling doggedly across his spotless workbench. Without a second thought, he snatched it up and stuffed it in his mouth. *Crunch*.

What the fool did not realize was of course that the *real* modifications to Danesti's wheat products had already been on the market for two years before Scarecrow's 'employment' at the company began.

That was what he liked - *crunch* - about his new Maste-*squish*- his new *employer*. He thought big, and he was *patient* in a way no Gotham rogue had ever been. He had the time to set traps years or even decades in advance. He never told the enemy what he was doing until it was already irreversibly done. No riddles, no clues. In fact he preferred never to speak to the enemy at all. He preferred to remain unseen, a shadow,

a rumour, always just out of reach. Just like the *other* Bat, only on the side of Bad. It promised to be, no, it had already been, a most fruitful - mm - *crunch* - servitude. *Partnership, partnership...*

The modifications on their own were untraceable and harmless. However, they were designed to trigger a reaction in a certain other pathogen, when the person came into contact with -

A ruffle at the window told him the Master was home. Crane turned to watch that mass of chittering shadows and gleaming red eyes pour through the open space, condensing out of a multitudinous host into a single tall, white-faced man clad in a simple, if old-fashioned, all-black suit.

He cut an impressive figure, less due to his appearance than to the sheer presence he radiated when he was like this. Waves of predatory hunger and ancient wickedness poured off him in every direction even before the last bat had dissolved into part of his overcoat.

Just like that other Bat, only on our side.

Dracula smoothed his lapel with a hand that seemed more spidery for its long, sharp nails. Crane noticed that his previously white hair was now iron-grey, streaked with black.

"Professor Crane." The Count said pleasantly. "You have a most unsightly leg sticking out of your mouth."

Crane glanced down, wiggled his lips, and sucked the cockroach's last foot between his teeth. Crunch. "Sorry about that, Master. Please forgive the poor wretch who, in seeking to emulate your magnificence, has deigned to take the life of only the meanest of things -"

Crane shook his head. Why was he talking like this, spewing all this servile rubbish? He sounded like one of those fawning DEMON losers. But he couldn't help it. It just slipped out of his lips like a stray cockroach leg, every time the Count was looking at him.

And he was looking now, watching him with an amused half-smile.

"It is of no consequence, my dear friend." Dracula turned and stalked in that wolf-like way of his into the centre of the room, sweeping his gaze about it - "You have yet to be visited by the Bat-Man it seems."

"How do you know?"

"I do not smell him," replied the vampire, "but be patient, and he will come. It is likely he is occupied to-night with the pursuit of the Jester-"

"The Joker."

The Count seemed only mildly annoyed at the interruption. "-the Joker, whose coincidental escape has proved so timely for us. It is fortuitous." He folded his hands. "And it gives me time."

Scarecrow felt a surge of strange excitement. "Did you get her? Was she surprised? Was she *frightened*?"

"A gentleman does not tell, Professor Crane." Dracula chuckled, "But as the term hardly applies to me, I shall tell you then that yes, your Poison Ivy has fed my veins." He lifted one finger and pressed it to the point of his long canine. "Although her unique physiology certainly lent a novelty to the encounter."

"You mean she tasted like vegetable juice?" Scarecrow chortled, downright tickled. "No, no. Sour lemonade, I bet. Or is it a different fruit when she's afraid?" The mere thought of that uppity tramp trembling in terror in the grip of a *real* monster gave Scarecrow tremors of his own. "Oh, how I'd *love* to find out."

He snatched up a spider without looking and bit off its head before it could sink its fangs into his tongue in defense.

"I have come to ask you, my dear friend," the Count continued over the crunching of hairy arachnid legs without skipping a beat, "if your Bat-Man's pursuit of the carnival fiend will keep both of them away from said knave's residence to-night."

"Absolutely," Crane whispered, eyeing the tall man in black, "Joker has a hard-on for harassing this Hollywood crowd filming a Batman movie - *ha* - in Gotham and he won't run home until he's messed with them a little. And you've just bitten Ivy, and that means..."

That means Ivy will be headed straight to the arms of her best friend Harley Quinn for consoling, and with no Joker or Batman around to interfere...

"Will you need an invitation, Master?" Scarecrow licked his lips with anticipation. They tasted like spider.

"No," said Dracula through a grim crimson smile, "I think not."

The moon, that ghostly eye set within the ebon cheek of the heavens, cast the cobweb pallor of its glow through the window of the Hacienda - and onto the forms of Harleen Quinzel and Pamela Isley, where they lay sleeping, still curled within the passion-pit, as peacefully as children untroubled by the woes of their dark world.

None there were to see the motes of glowing dust drifting upon the rays of moonlight - none there were to watch them filter through the cracks in the dusty window. Only one heard the whispered command - *~Come...~* - though the other may have felt its resonance ripple into her dreams, for she flinched in her sleep, a tiny whimper of disturbance leaving her lips.

She did not feel the weight of Ivy's head leave her lap nor the henna-stained tresses slither away. She did not hear the window open...she did not hear the entranced Ivy murmur with her own lips words of welcome, breaking the *geas* that bound the undead spirit to remain outside uninvited. Harley slept on, her eyes flickering wildly beneath their closed lids, and she did not stir until the cold breeze tickled her arms, with the breath of nocturnal seduction - the murmur of the Incubus, the call of the Wampyr...

"Mmfff...Puddin', shuthewindows, Slobberpuss'll get out n' eat another cat..."

Harley rolled to one side and broke the image of the dreaming, vulnerable waif by sucking a snorting breath into her nostrils and commencing to very loudly snore.

At the window, a pair of crimson eyes turned from their feast to regard her. They almost blinked.

Almost.

Harley rolled to the other side, crossing her legs and sucking her thumb. "Mmmmpuddinshouldn't do tha with the cream pie....s'naughty...real naughty...Puddinnnnnnn..."

Very well. *Now* they blinked.

~ Wake. ~

Sleepily, Harley's eyes fluttered open. She stretched like a matinee idol, though the effect was ruined by the gothloli getup she was still wearing. Slowly, she arched to her feet, as if drawn up by invisible arms. Slowly, her eyes settled and focused on the blur before them...

Pamela Isley floated by the window, her arms outstretched and coiled about a form that was only half-solid; half-formed of those very motes of dust upon the moonlight that had danced with faerie-fire only moments before. Her head was tipped back and tilted to one side, and the thing - a mass of inky shadows, fluttering like leather wings - was wrapped around her body, only an indistinct shape with an awful white face pressed to Ivy's throat.

It had horrible glowing red eyes, wide and staring and wolf-like and set into charcoal sockets set in turn into chalk-white cheeks. The head lifted, like a man's, only sharper and more bestial, its ruby lips peeled back from teeth stained just as red. A trickle of crimson snaked down Ivy's throat. The horror let her body arch gently back against its own, and lifted one hand - just as pale as the face - to beckon Harley closer.

She felt her body stiffen, paralysed. Some tiny part of her brain was still fully conscious, and screamed to run, as fast and as far as she could, but she found herself stumbling closer, lifting her hand toward the white face in the window with its mouth that dripped with her best friend's blood -

~The blood is the life, the life is the blood...open your veins and give yourself to me. My bountiful winepress for a time and then baptised to a life within death.~

"I..." Harley breathed, touching her hand to the white cheek, meeting the terrible red eyes. Her fear froze within her. There was nothing to do but to come closer, closer, to those fangs and their promise -

At that precise moment, the Hacienda door flung open, and the Joker sprang in, arms full of rolls of film and movie props.

"HONEY! You won't BELIEVE what happened on the way to the office today!"

The red haze fled from Harley's brain. She stared from her Puddin', who was fumbling for the light switch, to the white-faced demon sneering only inches away from her.

Harley's face scrunched in outrage, and Dracula narrowed his eyes sharply.

"YOU!"

With that, she swung the sledgehammer she'd gone to sleep clutching around in a wide, vicious arc, straight into Dracula's cheek.

Joker dropped his props and gaped at the scene as the rest of the vampire's body was torn out of the aether and flung against the wall by the impact. The Count's face twisted in fury - the sheer demonic *hate* in those eyes stopped Harley from swinging again and froze her to the spot - but Ivy, no longer held in Dracula's arms, dropped against Harley with a squeak, and bowled both of them off the windowsill and into a tangle of limbs in the passion-pit.

Joker flicked on the light, illuminating Count Dracula peeling away from the wall like Shreck from his coffin, casually twisting his shattered jaw back into place with a sickening pop. He cracked his neck once, rolled his jaw from side to side, and smirked. Then he lunged with all the ferocious suddenness of a leaping wolf.

In doing so, however, he set off the chain of death-traps Harley had set up in case Ivy's attacker dropped by.

Down swung the giant bladed pendulum. He darted aside with preternatural grace. Up popped the mechanical sheep with the flamethrower in its mouth. He became a cloud of flapping bats that flew just out of reach of the gushing jet of fire. Out came the hot pink XM134 Minigun that fired the exploding ping-pong balls with smiley faces painted on them. The bats dissolved into mist, through which the projectiles whizzed harmlessly before detonating against the walls of the Hacienda, reducing Joker's favourite Big Mouth Billy Bass with the lipstick and the Elvis wig to a rain of smouldering plastic fish-chunks.

"HAAAR-LEY" Joker howled in fury, stomping his foot. "Who the HELL is that?! AND WHY, IN GOD'S NAME WHY, DID BILLY BASS HAVE TO DIE?!?"

He stopped and choked, suddenly, as the man in question - not a man at all - materialised out of the very air in front of him, clawed fingers wrapped about the Joker's throat, lifting him from his feet to stare into an aquiline face with black hair streaked with white at the temples, a black goatee, and bushy brows meeting in a furious V over smouldering crimson cinders of eyes.

"I am Dracula." The Count sneered. "Bid me welcome."

And with that he hurled the Joker across the room, straight into the passion-pit, where now Harley and Ivy were trying to disentangle themselves. Harley rose first, catching 'Puddin' in her lap with a squawk like a startled parikeet.

Dracula brushed off his coat, the calm aura of command returning to him, and he regarded his hosts with malevolent dignity, touching his hand to his brow in a courtly, mocking greeting.

Joker and Harley exchanged a glance, then glared up at their intruder.

"Dracula?"

"Dracula."

"HA HA HA. He looks NOTHING like Christopher Lee."

Dracula cocked his head, scowling.

They...knew him?

"Aww, Puddin', he don't really look much like Gary Oldman either."

"What!?! OLDMAN?!? Come on! Lee was the best!!!"

"Oh pff. Gimme Gary any day ...except in that icky old fart suit with the wig that looked like a pair of buttocks... or ...mmmm....Frank Langella.." Harley sighed dreamily. "He could lock me in a cawffin any time he wanted..."

"Ewww, Harley, he's ANCIENT now. Yuck!"

"You ain't gettin' any younger yourself, buddy!" Harley retorted, poking her tongue out at him. "Frank Langella!"

Joker hopped up onto his knees and got in Harley's face, nose to nose, shouting at her. She bunched her cheeks, pressed her forehead to his, and gave as good as she got.

"Christopher Lee!!" "Nuh uh! GARY OLDMAN!" "GRR!! BELA LUGOSI!" "RICHARD ROXBURGH!" "JACK PALANCE!" "GEORGE HAMILTON!" "LESLIE NIELSEN!"

"ENOUGH!" roared Dracula, and his voice cracked like a thunderbolt, shaking the walls of the Hacienda, rattling the deathtraps in their casing and sending the hyenas whimpering, wriggling head-first into their kennels. Every lightbulb in the building

burst in a shower of glass, casting the room into a darkness in which Dracula's eyes glowed with blood-red malice. "You will *explain!* NOW!!"

The two clowns stared in a kind of stunned awe for a moment, before Harley broke the silence - "Hey, buddy, you're *totally* payin' the electricity bill!"

"*How do you know of me?*" The Count barked, wondering if perhaps in all of his research - all of the studies he had made of America, of its culture, its language, its history, he had somehow overlooked something vital. Then the rage fled his voice and it became a thing of languid, honeyed venom instead. "I wish to know, my dear friends, and you will tell me, or I will consider the waste of your blood worth the enjoyment of decorating the walls with it."

Joker glanced at Harley again. But it was Ivy, finally stirring, who spoke, in a raspy, hungover voice.

"You pair of idiots had better tell him before I do."

Joker and Harley glanced at Ivy, glanced at each other, and then looked at Dracula.

Both of them grinned ear to ear, and simultaneously made a grab for the remote.

CHAPTER 7: HE'S LAUGHING

Batman met me on the roof of an empty apartment block on Loeb street that was said to be haunted by a woman in a blue bonnet. True or not, she was quiet tonight, and I'd been waiting there with no sign of ghosts, vampires - or bats - until *that* one landed right beside me in a whirl of black cape, his eyes seeming so white in the cowl, narrowed in rage. Bat-intensity crackled in the air.

It didn't bode well. But it was still God. Damn. *Yummy*.

"You didn't get him, huh." I wasn't afraid to be blunt.

Batman spat a little blood on the roof tiles, and I could see his lip was split. "He knew I'd tail him, of course, knew I'd know where he was going. He bypassed security with a fake ID as Ledger's stunt double and went straight for the director - to *audition*."

"Sounds like Jack logic." It was the only thing in Batman's world that made less sense than Feline logic. I'd give Joker that much.

"When the director refused to see him, not knowing who he was, Joker threw a tantrum." Batman snorted. "He broke into the costume department and he - he -" Batman was livid with rage.

I felt a cold chill. Joker must have done something truly awful to get that look from Bruce. Dozens, maybe hundreds of people must have died -

"...What did he do?"

Batman mumbled something.

"Bruce, I can take it. Please tell me. What did Joker do?"

"HE GLUED RUBBER NIPPLES TO THEIR BATSUITS, OKAY!?"

I clapped my hand over my mouth so hard I nearly clawed my own cheek.

"It is *NOT FUNNY* Selina. The costume designer *liked the changes* and they wanted to hire *JOKER as a consultant. HIRE HIM!!*"

I flopped to my knees as if bowled over by a Bat-fist. They just gave out under me. Poor Bruce, but I couldn't stop laughing.

Batman folded his arms, and levelled his best bat-sowl at me. Nope. Didn't stop the SmileX-alike hysterics he'd managed to reduce me to. Finally I managed to wrest control of my breathing.

"Are you finished?" He growled.

"Y-yes. Sorry, stud." I wiped my eyes with the back of my glove, and looked up at him from my knee-flopped sit on the rooftop. "Just...images of Joker winding up as a host on *FAB!* ... and you, swinging around in a bat-*snort*-nipple suit...must be *really* cold in the cave..."

"Selina, it's no laughing matter. Joker's still at large."

"Alright, you've made the point." I purred at him, sliding up his legs and body till we were face to face - "...did you at least grab one of the suits? *I* might like the changes too."

"Ha. Ha." Batman wouldn't deign to smirk at that. His mouth stayed a thin, pursed line. I kissed it anyway.

"You're sexy when you're swallowing your pride. Serious though, how'd he get away?"

"I..." Batman scowled again, and cleared his throat. "I almost *had* him. I tracked him to the costume department and then -"

"Mm?"

"Then I met the director."

"Don't tell me he wanted to hire *you* too."

"No" Batman gravelled. "He thought I already *was* hired. He - kept calling me 'Christian'. I told him two dozen times that I was Batman. He refused to believe me. That stubborn, insolent -"

Selina Kyle held her face together, because Catwoman's Cheshire smirk might have made him clam up and ruin the story.

"- said *"I appreciate the depth of your Method acting there, Christian, but we have to keep to schedule"* - I told him I *had* to apprehend the Joker, *lives* were at stake...he told me Heath was in makeup and wouldn't be ready for fifteen and I was absolutely required at the Batcave set -"

Images of a fretting Hollywood director - though to be fair, this guy was supposed to be English - herding *the real Batman* in front of the lights and cameras thinking he was the actor playing himself were just too damn surreal.

"So did you get to meet Liam Neeson?"

"No."

"Gary Oldman?"

"No."

"What happened, then?"

"I couldn't exactly take off the cowl and prove I wasn't this Bale person, and nothing I said got through to the director, so I decided to play along until I could locate the Joker." Batman paced on the rooftop, cape flowing behind him, hands by his sides. It made him look very animal, very predatory. I sat, amused, and watched him. "They sent me to a part of the set where they were setting up for a stunt. Remembering that Joker was disguised as a stuntman and aware of the amount of dangerous props and materials he now had access to, I told them I would do my own stunt and while they were briefing me, I spotted him."

Batman really had no idea how good a storyteller he was. When he got going he had that gravelly, first-person Sam Spade thing down pat and he played through events in his mind and his words in a paced, cinematic way. As a result, while I should have probably felt bad for him - Joker getting away was going to lead to grief one way or another - I found myself enjoying the story too much to share his airs of foreboding doom.

"And then?"

Batman growled. "And then we went through the stunt as planned. Both of us."

"Wow."

"The director said the fight scene on top of the giant crane looked particularly realistic. The fight choreographer was furious."

"Congratulations, Bruce, you're a movie star."

"This is not how I imagined revealing Batman to the public."

"Oh, lighten up. Nobody will know it's you. You HAVE to tell Dick and Tim. They'll be hanging out waiting for your big moment."

Growl. "Yes, seeing the real Batman and real Joker fighting it out *in a movie* because the filmmakers mistook them for their *stunt doubles!*"

"You seem pretty miffed. This would be the part where the Joker gets away."

"He rigged one of the stunt nets," Batman growled, rubbing his jaw, "and clocked me with a fire extinguisher. By the time I'd escaped all the set medics that swarmed all over me trying to make sure 'Christian' was okay, Joker had slipped out and stolen a car. I don't know where he is now. They must have a new Hacienda, the old ones are abandoned."

"Ugh." It sobered me up, and explained the split lip. I slipped an arm about him. "Sorry, love. At least nobody else was hurt. You being there at all probably kept him on the run enough to stop him from setting up anything lethal. Who knows, maybe he's had his fun with this movie crowd now and he'll let them be?"

Batman gave me a dark glare. "Your call to Jason?"

"Ah." I'd almost forgotten, but that was entirely Bruce's fault. Bat nipples indeed. "Yes. He's real, no, they didn't go to college together. Jason seemed to consider Dracula to be extremely dangerous, though, and you know how serious Jason is about supernatural threats. Not as serious as some." I nudged his ribs with an elbow. "Though at least he has better manners."

Grunt. "Then the plague is a distraction. Dracula is using it to cover his tracks. With the outbreak and the hysteria it will cause, none of the hospitals will notice an unusual surge of patients complaining of sudden pallor, fatigue, and difficulty sleeping."

"Right. And he chose the Black Death because not only is he familiar with it, but he knows it's easily curable, so it won't kill off too many of his potential dinners."

"Yes. But there's more to it. I don't know what. Scarecrow is involved. Possibly Ivy."

"Through Danesti."

Batman nodded. "That's his one mistake. Using a criminal as well-known as the Scarecrow in one of his puppet companies to make whatever modifications he's made to the plague bacillus." The eyes narrowed. "I intend to make him pay for it."

I opened my mouth to tell Bruce about the Brides thing, and ...nothing came out. It was one of those moments where even at the time, I knew I'd regret it later. But I also knew it'd send him off on an overprotective freak-out right when he needed to be fully focused on bringing Dracula down, and I guess I didn't want to bring up anything that might make it more complicated than it had to be. Instead, I found myself saying, simply enough;

"How do we stop him?"

"The earth-boxes. According to Stoker's book, Dracula can only sleep in his native soil. He brought tons of it here..." Batman growled, clenching his fist. "But not just this time. He's been sending boxes on and off to his puppet companies for almost a year. And as you know, all of those boxes are missing. This is a war, and this enemy is a master strategist. He deployed all of his pieces long before he made his opening move. So far, he's winning."

Batman crossed to the edge of the rooftop, gazing out across Gotham. *His city.* There'd never seemed to be more truth in those words than now.

"Dracula's out there somewhere, Selina. In my city. I can feel him. And he's laughing."

"I am...Dracula. I bid you....welcome."

click The TV screen glowed with a Hollywood-devised reflection of a man who would never cast one of his own.

"I never drink...wine..."

One reflection after another. Each time growing more distorted, more diluted, more of a caricature.

click *whzzz*

"I...am...Draculéa. And I bid you welcome Mister Harker to my house."

click The Count's ghost-pale hand clenched slowly about the remote.

"Children...of de niight. What a mess dey make!"

Dracula's fingers squeezed, cracking the plastic.

"Allow me to re-introduce myself. I am Count...Vladislaus...Dragoolya."

click

"Vun apple! Two apple! THREE APPLE!! Vlah ah ah!"

Finally, the remote control gave way, crushed to powder in the vampire's iron-strong grip. He dropped it in his lap and sat staring at the television.

Joker, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn watched the Count's stunned, blank face with bated breath. Whole minutes passed; Harley's face was slowly turning blue from lack of oxygen. Still, Dracula didn't move.

"..."

Lugosi, Carradine, Shreck, Lee, Oldman, Langella, Palance, Kinski, Roxburgh, Hamilton, Nielsen, the names and the faces - all claiming to be his - lay etched into the covers of the DVD collection scattered over the pillows around him. Decades of emulation, of glorification, of mockery.

"Count?" Ivy whispered in the silence, hesitant to break it.

"...heh."

"I think he's upset about the hair-buttocks." Harley murmured in Joker's ear.

"...heh...hm hm hmh." Dracula lowered his head into his lap, and they couldn't tell if he was actually about to break down in tears until they heard the muffled chuckling.

"Uh oh."

Dracula threw his head back and peals of bitter, self-mocking laughter broke from his throat, to echo through the midnight sky.

"Heh," chuckled the Joker, "I like him more already."

Jonathan Crane sat in the dark, fingers twitching, staring down a fat, juicy black rat he had spent the past half hour patiently luring out of the hole in the wall with a sample of Danesti's wholemeal grain.

He could claim it was an experiment. Yes, that was it. A final test, even though they already knew the modifications had been a success. Oh the Master would be *ferocious* if

he saw Crane risking exposure of their best-laid plan like this. But it wasn't his fault! It was that *rat*, watching Crane as he worked like that, with those beady little eyes and that sleek, furry black body so ripe and full of rich, red, delicious *life*.

Yes, the little bastard had it coming, and as soon as he took a nibble at the grain, he wouldn't even care about Crane's fingers around his neck.

"Crane."

The evening lacked a punctuating flash of lightning, but Jonathan paused and widened his eyes anyway, slippery-sliding to his feet and turning to face the giant caped silhouette looming behind him. He tried – very hard – to seem like a dangerous criminal confronting a crimefighter and not a teenager trying to hide a porn magazine he'd just been caught reading, but with the rat behind him and all it could spoil, the latter image certainly sprang to mind.

"Batman! What a perfectly pleasant *shock* you are. Welcome to my laboratory." Crane gave a deep bow, which would've looked far more disturbing had he been wearing his Scarecrow garb and not a simple white lab coat.

God damn it, why was the rat not *moving*?

Batman glanced between Scarecrow's lanky legs at the rat squatting passively near a small pile of grain behind him.

"Trying to catch the plague, are we?"

Damnit. The little furry bastard chose *now* to finally eat the grain. Scarecrow's eyes didn't flinch away, though, and he stared back at Batman to keep the Dark Knight's attention fixed on himself. "Is that what you think, Batman? Perhaps I am! Wouldn't it be a *frightful* way to end my career as a criminal? Unfortunately you're wrong. I am already a criminal no longer."

Batman's fist shot out, grabbing his collar and hauling him close.

"I know who you're working for, *Scarecrow*."

"Danesti Botanical Research Institute, dear Bat, and you will find that I am doing *nothing* illegal here. I was offered this job. I am doing what I am being honestly paid for, no more and no less. I, *Professor* Jonathan Crane! You can't throw me back in Arkham! I'm a reformed citizen, I'm..."

Batman's patience wore thin and he swung Crane away from the rat and slammed him hard into a filing cabinet. "WHERE IS DRACULA?"

He knows. *SHIT!*

"You've *crossed the line*, Scarecrow. You've brought a *monster* to Gotham and endangered *thousands of lives*. *IT ENDS NOW. WHERE IS HE!?*"

Scarecrow hadn't seen him this level of pissed outside of Hell Month. It made their dockside confrontation look like a kindly schoolteacher chastising a kindergartner. His gut twisted at the thought of months wrapped in plaster in the Arkham infirmary. No! Not this time! Not when he was so close to the perfect scare!

"D-dracula?" He blinked innocently – "-what *have* you been sniffing, Batma-OOF!"

Crane doubled over as Batman's fist met his belly, and was caught by his rising knee and flung back against the cabinet. Batman grabbed him by the collar again and swung him in a wide circle. Then he kicked his prey again, sending him sprawling. Dizzy, Scarecrow coughed a few times and shook his head.

"N-no Batman..." He snarled, blinking away tears of pain. "It's *you* who've crossed the line. *You* who've committed assault on an unarmed civilian engaged in the - *cough* - legal activities for which he is employed. You've *had it!*" He laughed, taunted the great bat-eared bastard, lured him into the trap just as he had lured the rat Batman had, mercifully, seemed to have forgotten about. "You've finally snapped! Breaking into my workplace, ranting about *vampires*, harassing and attacking me for no reason! There's only one tinfoil-hat Arkham headcase here now, Batman, and it's you!"

"You're not convincing anyone, Crane." Batman growled, cracking his knuckles and taking a menacing step forward. "I *know* what you're doing and I am *stopping* you."

"Do you?" Crane murmured, narrowing his eyes, "Do you really? Let me enlighten you to a few things you aren't aware of. One is that the security cameras you disabled on the way in were functional decoys and I've been recording this entire conversation. Two is that I've already taken out a restraining order against you that the police are processing as we speak. They'd have handed it to you already if you had a legal address. I guess they'll be leaving it at your bat-signal." Crane smirked, straightening and looking the Bat in the eye. The fear was delicious; and he detected a hint, just a hint, in the eyes of his nemesis.

"That won't hold up in court once I hand them the evidence proving yours and Danesti's link to the plague outbreak."

"What? Are you insane?" Scarecrow said just a little too loudly – for the unseen camera's sake, no doubt - and then broke out into a full rant. The emotion in it was not entirely faked; the fear and frustration at having been caught unawares despite the meticulous plan was very real, and he poured it into every word.

"What could my work here possibly have to do with the plague?! That was an accident at the dockyard I had nothing to do with and you know it! There's no such evidence because there is *no such link!* You just can't stand the thought that one of your punching bags might have actually gone clean! Admit it! You don't want ANY of us to reform because it would deprive you of the excuse to vent your violent sociopathic urges on those you don't have to feel guilty about brutalizing!"

That gave Batman pause. The Dark Knight narrowed his eyes. For a moment, Crane thought he may have taken his pantomime too far. But when Batman spoke, it was in a calm, level, and lethal tone of voice.

"Crane. Enough. Give yourself up and tell me where Dracula is. *Now.*"

Backed into a corner. But not out of the game.

"You're crazy! Crazy! I'm calling the police!" Scarecrow stumbled back against his lab-bench, dramatically, but his thin fingers closed around an object he had hidden there. Batman didn't miss it. His eyes narrowed and he stepped closer; but he was now a little more cautious about pummeling Crane on camera without probable cause.

Crane smirked. "Batman! I believe after all this time, I just figured out what you *really* fear. The very law that you claim to enforce." He straightened, stepping closer to Batman, gathering his dignity. "Or is it something a little more primal?"

At that precise moment, Batman saw two things; the rat Crane had been examining earlier sitting on the floor, licking its forepaws, perfectly placid despite the chaos taking place very close to it. And an oozing shadow pouring in through a crack in the wall – something that congealed into a tall, humanoid shape.

"*Dracula.*" Batman hissed, turning his full attention to the new entrant. He felt a cold chill enter his body, seeping straight through the suit. It could be an illusion. Crane could have somehow slipped him his toxin during the struggle...but somehow, Batman *knew* he was not facing a hallucination. There was a tangible presence that had entered the room. It was *him*. The vampire lord had finally made his appearance.

Batman clenched his fists and prepared to take him on. His mind snapped into protocols designed for the JLA missions, for confronting enemies of superhuman strength, speed, and supernatural abilities. He would opt for a strategy of strong defense, while harrying the enemy with fast and constant hit-and-run strikes, forcing the Count onto the defensive and preventing him from using his metahuman powers in offense while conserving Batman's stamina for the critical moment. In this way, using an attack that seemed more aggressive and undisciplined than it actually was, he would play on the monster's arrogance until it made that one, fatal slip.

Only when the white face coalesced momentarily into being, and Batman saw Crane's victorious grin, did he realize he himself had fallen into a trap.

Dracula exploded. What had for an instant seemed to be a humanoid form became a cloud of flapping, fluttering, chittering beasts, and they poured straight into Batman's chest and swarmed around him with a vicious, controlled aggression that real bats would never possess. His vision was obscured by snapping, slavering white teeth and tiny red eyes amid a wall of roiling black leather; he stumbled back, fumbling for his belt, for *something* that would repel the damnable mass. Their fangs couldn't penetrate the Batsuit, but they came at his face, his mouth, his eyes...

A childhood terror long since suppressed by creating a persona modeled after the object of his phobia (and working in a cave full of them) suddenly returned in full force.

And Crane smiled as he watched what the hidden camera would record only as Batman having a mysterious convulsion fit. Dracula cast no reflection in a mirror, no matter what form he happened to be in, and they had discovered to their pleasure that he was also invisible to the medium of film.

Crane slid the object into his palm and turned it over, pressing buttons. It was, of course, not the controls of a death trap at all.

"Police? Hello. I... I want to report a break in and – and assault - it's Batman, and he's gone crazy, he's having some kind of violent fit. Please hurry." Pause. "Danesti Botanical Institute, corner of fifth and-"

Batman lurched out of the cloud, grabbing for the phone, the demonic bats that made up Dracula's body still clinging to his suit, while more regrouped in the air behind him for another surge.

Crane dropped the phone, snatched up the *second* object he'd strategically placed, and sprayed Batman full in the face.

But it wasn't the fear toxin. Batman habitually carried his cure for that in his belt. It was something a little more mundane. Something a civilian fearing for his life might use on a menacing, crazed assailant. Something like... *mace*.

Batman's world burst into a white wall of pain. Choking, blinded, and very aware that he was still surrounded by a six-hundred year old supernatural monster who could change forms and go for the killing blow at any moment, Batman conceded

defeat. It was time for a strategic withdrawal and he had a split second to make it. He open-palmed the Scarecrow in the chest, hurling the thin man over his lab bench, and pushed away. He dove through the maelstrom of bats and rolled as he hit the ground. His hand went for his belt, for the Bat-sonar.

It was a gamble. He had no idea if Dracula would be affected, but it was his only chance. He cranked the sonar to levels that would be paralyzing to normal bats.

Evidently the Count's chiropteran mode had senses similar enough to real bats to feel the high-pitched sonic pulse; the bat-swarm screeched and scattered, if only momentarily, but it was long enough for Batman to haul himself to his feet and leap through the window, landing with a less-than graceful, jarring thud. He hit the controls for the Batmobile's emergency autopilot and followed the sound of the wheels he heard, with great relief, tearing around the corner of the building. It took him scant moments to get inside the car and activate the Batmobile's shields; but he was just in time, as he heard a sinister fluttering and, moments later, felt a series of soft thudding strikes as Dracula, still in bat-cloud-form, futilely attacked the windshield.

Then the fluttering stopped and there was a wolveren snarl from outside. As Batman fumbled with anti-irritants to cleanse his eyes and restore his sight, the entire Batmobile was suddenly rocked by a heavy impact from the left side. Then another. The car tipped up onto two wheels, despite weighing as much as a tank. If it was hit again it would overturn. It was time to go.

"Autopilot. Batcave." Batman barked, and the car's computer blipped in recognition. The engines roared and the Batmobile shot like a bullet out of Danesti's carpark, winding down Gotham's narrow streets, dodging traffic with pre-programmed ease. As he applied the anti-irritants, Batman muttered a series of further commands to the car – '*Evasive route*' – the vehicle would take an indirect trip home and throw off any pursuers – '*Detect intrusion*' – to make sure the damned vampire wasn't clinging to the hood. The car beeped a negative. Batman had escaped.

Joker. Scarecrow. Dracula. Batman was having a *really* bad night.

He could only hope Catwoman's mission had fared a little better.

Plucking himself from the tangle of limbs in which he had landed, Scarecrow brushed off his labcoat and resisted the urge to chortle and gloat until he had deactivated the hidden security camera.

When it was done, however, he fairly whooped with glee, slapping his hand against the overturned bench. "We got him, we got him we got him! Ha ha! Master! Master we got him!"

He turned around, only to be suddenly lifted from his feet. His laughter was choked off by white fingers around his throat; they were biting cold, and the effort with which they lifted him was minimal to the point of nonexistence.

Dracula leveled his terrible red eyes straight on Crane's own. Scarecrow stared in terrified fascination as the crimson tint in the irises seemed to darken and spread, snaking in wet veins through the whites until the entire eye was red. It was like watching blood spill on a frozen lake.

"M-master, wh-why?"

Dracula lifted his other hand, dangling the placid, plump black rat by the tail. Even now, held in the grip of an unnatural Undead horror, the creature did not squirm or panic.

Dracula threw Crane down and tossed the rat on the floor in front of him. He did not say a word, but such was the storm of fury behind those eyes that Crane knew with utmost certainty the exact meaning of the vampire's rage; he had nearly been caught doing something that would have clued Batman in to all of their plans, and if he made another mistake like that, he would end his alliance with Dracula as a red smear on the floor.

The icy red stare remained, unblinking, as Crane groveled and fawned in apology. Then the eyes narrowed and shifted from Crane's own to the rat at his feet, then back. The command was unmistakable.

The police were on the way. He was to remove the evidence, while his Master watched. If he flinched, if he choked, if he vomited, he was dead.

Trembling, pulling his eyes forcibly from that demon's glare but feeling it beating down on him from above, Crane grabbed the rat and forced it whole into his mouth.

CHAPTER 8: CHANGES

I'd like to take this moment to confirm that, while cats do not necessarily hate water, I, both as cat and woman, absolutely hate *sewers*.

I reflected on this as I crept through the dank, reeking tunnels beneath Gotham, trying very hard not to step in the 'water'. This, I realized, was why Killer Croc or Solomon Grundy never hosted Rogue get-togethers. Real sewers weren't cool, scary subterranean labyrinths ideally suited as the lair of a discerning villain. Real sewers were cramped and smelled beyond repulsive, and nobody even remotely sane would go wading in the murky sludge of waste water and human excrement and expect to come out with any less than six severe diseases. Real sewers were *no* place for a cat, and I felt the growing urge to take out my disgust with the environment on the block-headed Batman who was responsible for me being here.

Of course I was fortunate that the architects of Gotham City had applied the same obsession with grandiose, gothic Zeerust to Gotham's waste water system as they had to the rest of the city. The tunnels were man-sized, with oddly vaulted ceilings and walkways on either side. There were open sections further in that would have seemed more at home beneath a fanciful version of Paris or Venice. Someone had clearly seen or read *Phantom of the Opera* about eight times too many. But I didn't feel fortunate. I was regretting never having designed a Cat-gas-mask and not having thought to borrow a Bat one. I was imagining how long it would take to wash the smell out of my hair. I was hoping to get this over with and I admit I was hoping for a chance to put my fist in the face of the man I'd come to see, to repay him for forcing me to chase him around in such a *pleasant* locale.

Otis Flannegan. The Ratcatcher. Not exactly an A-list Rogue. He was quite popular at Arkham for his ability to gather information from the outside through his little furry friends. But he wasn't invited to the Christmas parties; he wasn't a regular at the Iceberg. Granted, most Rogues aren't particularly gregarious creatures, being for the most part sociopathic lunatics, but the Ratcatcher was a real recluse, and who could blame the guy? With a moniker like that and his choice of company, he wasn't going to be pulling many henchwenches.

My violent urges faded when I found him, huddled in a corner. I didn't recall him to be well-presented the last time I saw him, but he looked terrible now. He was sobbing, surrounded by piles of dead rats, clutching a few that were still alive close to his chest. His eyes were puffy and red from crying. I'd been readying the Cattitude for hours now – "Kitty's not happy with you, Otis, so you'll appreciate that since I'm going to have to burn this costume and soak in sea salts for about a week before I feel passably clean again, you're going to tell me everything you know before I claw it out of you." But now I saw him, I found myself folding up my whip, crouching gently opposite him, and saying –

"Hi, Otis. Long time no see. You don't look so good. What's happened?"

“My rats. My rats are sick. My rats are sick...” He repeated in a blubbery whisper, blinking at me. “My friends, my poor friends...”

My stomach clenched. I normally wasn't the type to pity other Rogues for their... issues. But sitting there, crying his eyes out, surrounded by his dead ‘friends’ and regarding every little cold body with genuine grief – it was *heartbreaking*.

I reached with a claw to gently turn over one of the dead rats. Its lymph nodes were swollen; ugly lumps under the fur. I recalled that the plague often killed the rats that carried it.

Damnit. We were too late. The plague wasn't just being carried by Dracula's cargo-ship rats anymore; the plague fleas had multiplied and begun infesting the local Gotham population. It was what Batman and I had feared all along. While Black Plague itself was curable once identified, the squalor of Gotham's less pleasant neighborhoods and the large population of rats in the city meant the plague could settle in and linger, perhaps even indefinitely, cropping up in the human population at intermittent intervals. A dangerous enough thing in itself, but it was also perfect cover for the predations of Dracula and whatever new vampires he chose to make. It would make hunting him down incredibly difficult.

“When did this start, Otis?”

“A few – few days ago – some new rats came. *Foreigners!* But we welcomed them. They were visitors. Guests in our Gotham! So we made them welcome, didn't we, we never knew what they were carrying...” Otis wasn't usually much of a headcase besides being more sociable with rodents than people, but it sounded now as if he'd really flipped – “-they betrayed us, us and our friends, they serve the Devil! They're spreading his pestilence! We're all infected, infected!”

“Otis.” I repeated his name, waving my hand in front of his eyes, getting him to focus on my hand, then my face. “Look at me, Otis. I'm working with Batman. Shh. I know. He wants to help you. *We* want to help you. Everyone is in danger, people and rats. We need you to help us catch the...foreigner rats.” I felt ridiculous saying that last part, but he seemed to be responding well to it, calming down. “...then we can help you cure your friends.”

It was the right thing to say. The Ratcatcher's eyes cleared and he looked at me directly.

“Yes. Yes. I'll help you. I'll do *anything*. Anything to stop the Devil murdering my friends! Tell Batman I'll help! Tell him!”

“I will, Otis. But you have to come with me.”

Now he was sitting up a little more, I could see the discolored lumps underneath his throat. Oh, God. I had to get him *out* of here.

“Come? Come where? No...No, I can't leave. I can't leave my rats, not while they're suffering so much! I just can't!”

He'd be dead within days. Fighting off nausea, I tried to come off as calmly authoritative as I could. “You're sick. You need to come to the hospital with me. Please. We can help your friends as soon as you're better.”

That was the wrong thing to say. His eyes went wild and he started to get up, evidently meaning to do something – fight me, run away, I don't think even he was sure which. I sighed.

It hurt me to do it, but a quick strike with the butt of my whip brought Otis down like a sack of potatoes. His limp fingers spilled his rat friends onto the floor, where they lay twitching, too weak to flee. I moved to pick up Otis, and felt a pang.

His rats wouldn't have a chance without him.

I slipped Otis' coat off him, emptied the many pockets, and picked up those of his rats that were still alive. I bundled them into the pouches, hung the coat on my shoulder, and then gently lifted Otis over the opposite shoulder. He was a deadweight, but so scrawny from malnourishment that dragging his unconscious carcass out of here would be possible. I started shuffling down the corridor, back toward the nearest manhole, thinking that this was about the strangest interaction between cats and rodents in history.

You know, if those ignorami in medieval times hadn't considered cats to be witches' familiars, and therefore minions of Satan, and killed them en-masse when the Plague started, they'd have gone a long way to stopping the spread. And right now, centuries later, I'm picking up where those poor murdered kitties left off.

Goddamnit, Bruce. You owe me for this.

Across town, Harley Quinn was also burdened with carting someone home in a dubious state of consciousness.

"Hold on, Red. We're almost there. Wanna play I Spy?"

After Dracula's outburst, he had simply gotten up, gathered his imperious dignity and left without a word. They hadn't heard from him again and after resuming their argument about actors for another half hour, Ivy had requested to be taken home.

Joker of course had insisted she could stay the night at the Hacienda, provided she and Harley put on 'a nice raunchy girl-girl show' for his benefit to make up for the lamentable death of Big Mouth Billy Elvis. After prying Ivy's fingers from her Puddin's throat and noting the ugly purple bruises she'd left behind, Harley decided Red was feeling better and she should drive her friend back to the nearest Ivy lair. It gave her time to collect her thoughts and let the evening's events really sink in.

Wow. Dracula, I mean, *Dracula* had come to the Hacienda! Dracula had bitten Red right in front of her. Dracula had wanted to bite her too, only Puddin' had come in and she'd whumped him with a sledgehammer. It was enough to give a girl the shivers.

She had to admit this Dracula didn't look anything like Frank Langella and she'd never really been attracted to facial hair (at least he didn't look anything at all like Tom Selleck or Burt Reynolds), but he was hot, in a sleazy old foreign guy kinda way. And he was *Dracula*. He was a *celebrity*. He was at least as famous as Tom Cruise only he didn't jump up and down on couches and giggle about Katie Holmes. Puddin' did that sometimes too and it really annoyed her, though she doubted Mistah J was giggling for the same reasons as Tom. But she didn't think *Dracula* would find Katie Holmes appealing at all. He seemed more the type Harleen had been attracted to before she met Mistah J; distinguished, powerful, commanding. Just like *Batman*, only without the stupid tights.

She was quite comfortable being Harley Quinn, but she admitted she and Mistah J had some rough times and she'd had a couple of 'breaks' from him, recently, that had

shown her the way she might be treated were she with someone (basically, anyone) else. Things with Matt had been... platonic, but nice. He'd been really sweet to her. And then there was that French guy, how'd you say his name? Fronz-waa? He'd been so funny and romantic! And he was a Count, just like Dracula. And if the last Count she had spent time with had taken her on a cruise of the Riviera, could being an immortal vampire Bride really be so bad?

Ivy was asleep again in the back seat and Harley's thoughts were wandering. She saw herself as a vampire queen, with beautiful *alabaster* skin that didn't even need greasepaint to stay white, floating through graveyards in a billowy black and red gown with her long golden hair flowing behind her, fluttering her lashes at any men she thought were cute, only to sink her fangs in their necks when they were unawares! And she would look *totally gorgeous* doing it. The glamour, the excitement, the murder and mayhem! If Red was a vampire too, she'd have her best friend with her *forever*, and they could make anyone do anything they wanted. They could *both* enslave any man to their will! Ha! Wouldn't that be great! She could have an army of vampire underwear models to brush her hair (wearing that tasseled hood made it snarl more than the hyenas) and manicure her toenails whenever she pleased! She could have *Batman* do it if she wanted, she could have Puddin' do it, she could make him to anything, she could make him...

Harley hit the brakes, stopping in the middle of the road and eliciting a muffled cry of protest from the half-asleep Ivy.

She could make him love her.

Not just love her sometimes when he wasn't shouting at her or throwing sharp things at her head. Love her all the time, curl up in her coffin with her by day and unfurl at night for evenings of horrible, horrible fun at other people's expense. Then a candlelit glass of blood and a few more hours of cuddling before the sun came up. It would be dreamy.

And being a vampire was really, really permanent. It made *I will be with you forever* really *mean* it. It would be even better than finally getting Mistah J to marry her, and if she was the one who bit him, he would be bound to her for all eternity...

She blinked herself out of the reverie and saw she'd stopped right in front of Ivy's lair, a small, abandoned greenhouse overgrown with weeds. It wasn't her main one and she only paid it the occasional visit, but it would do as a safehouse while she was sick.

"Time to get up, Red." She turned in the front seat and glanced over the back.

Ivy was curled against the back seat, arching her back, gasping as if she was having trouble breathing. Harley could see in the glint of the moonlight that her canine teeth were pushing past her lip, growing visibly while Harley watched; there was a rumbling, growling sound coming from within Ivy's chest, quite separate from the gasping for air, as if two voices were trying to speak at once.

"Red..." Harley whispered, eyes dull with shock. Then she snapped out of it. "Red?! Red! Come on, sweetuns, talks to me! You're gonna be okay! You're gonna be okay!" She shook Ivy's shoulders, but her friend wasn't responding. The growling sound consolidated into an eerie, flesh-crawling moan, and then into a high-pitched, unbroken wail that forced Harley to let go to clamp her own hands over her ears. This was bad. This was really bad.

She decided she didn't want to be a vampire anymore.

The car rocked slightly. Harley's eyes darted to the window, and to her horror she saw the grass and vines from the entrance of the greenhouse and the roadside snaking across the bitumen and climbing the car doors. More were cracking the pavement beneath the vehicle, wriggling their way into the darkened air, as if reacting to Ivy's ongoing, keening cry. The vines were growing darker, flowers budding and blooming on their stems even as Harley watched - only these flowers had gaping, suction-cup mouths and awful, thorny *teeth* inside them. These were flowers designed for a very warm, red kind of fertilizer, and the way they were pawing at the glass, feeling around like starving lampreys, made Harley want to throw up.

She only knew one thing to do. She punched Red in the face.

Pamela's head snapped back from the impact and the scream choked off. Her eyes rolled back and, still conscious, she seemed to be fighting off whatever it was that had taken her over, and in the process, the vegetation that was slowly swallowing the car gave a shiver and started to retreat.

Harley wondered if even Dracula knew what he'd done by biting Poison Ivy. Her powers over plantlife were going berserk, mimicking the changes within Ivy's own body and becoming just as vampiric as she was. If this kept up she'd have to change her name to "Venus Flytrap". Harley would have laughed if she weren't trapped in a car with a psychotic vampire plant-woman. I mean, "Venus" yes, but "Flytrap?" Ew. Least it was better than "Pitcher Plant Lady"...

Harley turned the key and gunned the gas, thinking with uncharacteristic strategy of all the places she could take Pamela - quarries, industrial sites - where there'd be no vegetation for her to unleash if she had another fit. She found, however, that she wasn't going anywhere - the damned vines had snaked into the engine and clogged the wheels - the car made an unpromising gurgling sound and then fell quiet.

Harley glanced into the rear view mirror and had another terrible shock. Red was sitting in the back seat again with her head tipped back, but Harley could *see the seat through her body*. She looked over her shoulder, but Ivy was sitting there, solid as ever, while in the mirror her reflection was slowly fading to transparency.

"Oh, Red..." Harley murmured, feeling tears on her cheeks. "You can't fade away on me. You're my best friend. You hafta stay! You just...hafta!"

In response, Ivy's eyes finally opened. Gleaming, ruby red, just like her now-smiling lips. Her canines glittered long and white beyond.

"Oh."

Harley kicked the car door open, tearing the vampire vines away, and leapt out of the car, intending to run for it, but something snaked out and wrapped around her foot. Her fingers scrabbled in the dirt as she was pulled back - back to where her best friend now squatted on the front seat like a hungry beast - back into the dark.

Batman stumbled up from the Batcave just as Catwoman was dragging herself to the secret staircase. They met there at the top of the steps, pausing as each took in the other's miserable condition.

"Look what the bats dragged in." She murmured wearily.

“Speak for yourself. You’d think *you* were the one who just went ten rounds with Dracula.”

“Your eyes are so bloodshot I thought you *were* Dracula.”

“You smell awful, Kitten.”

“Gee, thanks stud. Way to make a girl feel welcome. Are you going to tell me my hair’s a mess and the catsuit makes my ass look big, or can we draw a bath and call it a morning?”

Bruce’s lips twitched up at the corners. Perhaps it was just his stoicism weakening in the face of pain and exhaustion. Perhaps – no, probably – it was just Selina.

Joker had brained him with a fire extinguisher, Scarecrow had sprayed his eyes with Mace and Dracula had nearly totaled the Batmobile. Yet he was standing here smiling, because of Selina. He really couldn’t fathom this effect she had on him.

She was smiling back, and weakly punched his shoulder “The smell is your fault, by the way, for sending me to a *sewer*, and you’re very lucky I’m too tired to claw the hell out of you for saying that.”

“So how was your date with the Ratcatcher?”

He was expecting her to make a face and level another playful barb at him, but instead she sighed.

“Bruce, it was damn lucky I found him when I did, because the Plague found him first and he was in a bad way.”

“Where is he now?”

She took a deep breath, and explained how she had hauled Otis halfway across town and taken him to Gotham General Hospital, only to find the place swamped with Plague patients and a waiting list a mile long. Other hospitals in the area were suffering from the same problem and some of them refused to speak to Selina on the basis of her costume – assuming, instantly, that Catwoman the dangerous criminal was up to something, she’d had more than one reception staffer threaten to call the police before they’d even taken a close enough look at Otis to see his condition. Having no time to fill out reams of paperwork or provide medical insurance documents – damnit, it wasn’t as if she carried a purse with ID in the catsuit, what was *wrong* with these people? – she had been forced to move on, dragging Otis with her all the way.

She’d finally found a small, specialized hospital whose staff, she had found to her relief, were familiar with Batman from a foiled Mad Hatter breakin on their premises and weren’t intimidated by her costume. They’d recognized that Otis was an emergency case and taken him in.

“They said it’s likely he’ll pull through but if I hadn’t brought him in tonight he would have been dead within the day.”

“Good.” Bruce said, in a particularly gravelly Bat-voice, “We’re going to have to make sure they don’t take him back to Arkham before we’ve had the chance to speak with him and find out what he knows and if he can help us.”

“He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“They don’t know that. The hospitals in Gotham transfer known costumed felons to Arkham’s infirmary by default as soon as they’re in a stable condition. It’s the safest route.”

Selina felt a twinge of anger. Small, but it was there. “Let me guess, that would be your suggestion? A protocol?”

He couldn't deny it. "It keeps the other patients safe, Selina. Would you really want Joker or Mad Hatter hospitalized in a building full of dangerous chemicals, surgical equipment and sick people?"

"And what part of that description doesn't apply to Arkham?" She rubbed the bridge of her nose. Too tired to argue, barely conscious enough to think. "...Never mind. There's something you should see."

With that, Selina stepped back and brought out a small cardboard box. She opened it to reveal its insides stuffed with newspaper, and seven very sick-looking rats.

"Selina, did you bring plague-infected rats into my house?"

"When I found Otis he'd tried to – to set up a kind of rat hospital for his sick 'friends' down in the sewer, but by the time I got there these were the only ones still alive. If I took them to a veterinarian they'd be put down on the spot."

Bruce looked at the box, the rats, and then up at Selina, wondering what had spurred her to do this. Did feline logic extend to diseased rodents?

"I promised him, Bruce." She said softly, "stupid, I know, but they're all he has. You didn't see the look on his face. And I thought you would find them useful, since Dracula stole the lab samples..."

Bruce watched her quietly. She'd been through a lot tonight, for his sake, and for Gotham's. She'd shown mercy and compassion toward a sick man and, in something unprecedented for a cat-themed ex-criminal, toward his rodent pets. And that act of kindness, Bruce realized, might have repercussions Selina had not anticipated. It might just turn the tide of their battle against Dracula.

"It was... good of you to do that."

"Bruce, he was dying down there, and those rats mean everything to him. I don't know Otis well and I can be a tough kitty when I want to be, but I –" she stammered just a little, and the catty voice found its stride again and concluded "–well, I just felt I might owe him one for knocking him out cold. I wouldn't be a lady if I didn't repay my debts."

"I'm proud of you, Kitten."

It was strange how those little words resonated through Selina's mind. She had never required a pat on the head; never *needed* his approval for anything she had ever done. But hearing that praise left a warm glow in her chest that felt incredibly good, even if she felt she shouldn't quite be so comfortable with the wording.

He wrapped an arm around her. "Let's take the rats down to the cave. We'll administer treatment to them and do some tests on you. Then you can have your bath."

She stiffened. "Tests?"

"You've been in very close contact with a plague sufferer and the rats that infected him. Your costume probably protected you from flea bites, given how much flesh it covers, but it isn't a HAZMAT suit and we need to be sure. Please."

He didn't have to tell her twice. Her hand slid down and clasped his, cat-claws on bat-glove.

"Sure, handsome. But if you're going to stick a needle in me, it'd better be a bath for two."

Joker had fallen asleep in a sulk, and woke up at around three in the morning in a sulk of equal proportions.

Pooh-pooh on Harley Quinn! He had been having a great night! He'd scoped out the movie set, humiliated Batman, and made a charming aesthetic change to the very Batsuit itself that the real Bat would no doubt take *years* to iron out of his rep, especially after the Post got those secret insider scoop photos of 'Batman's hidden fetish wardrobe' that the Joker had mailed to them on his way home. HA HA HA! Priceless! You couldn't *buy* that kind of win! For his next trick, Joker had an idea about calling that gullible costume designer and suggesting that what the audiences *really* wanted to see were crash-zoom closeups of an extra bulgy Bat-codpiece...

Then he'd come home to find *COUNT FRICKING DRACULA* having a threesome in the moonlight with his Harley and that god damned weed lady! And she'd even whacked him with *their* sledgehammer!! How *could* she?! That harlot! That hussy! That scarlet wench! They had such fond and intimate memories of that sledgehammer, memories she had heinously betrayed! And how dare she refuse to give him a repeat performance! After her *CALLOUS AND UNFEELING MURDER OF KING BILLY BASS*, she owed him! He had loved that bass like a brother, like a son, like a sister he thought had pretty lips and a great singing voice! HOW DARE SHE!?

He decided he was going to have an *extra* surprise for her when...when he...

Wait, where the hell *was* Harley?

"HARLEY!" He shouted, groaning as the headache of last night's near-asphyxiation at the hands of Poison Ivy leapt into recurrence – "HAAAAAR-LEY! GET DOWN HERE!!"

"You dun hafta holler, honey," purred a silky voice, "I'm right here."

Joker turned. His eyes bulged. Harley was leaning against the wall, half in the shadows, wearing a low-cut satin dress, a red silk choker, and *nothing* else. She had one bare leg slightly raised, sliding out of the dress, and her hair was unbound from its usual pigtails, and it flowed down over one eye and pooled around her shoulders in a kind of Veronica Lake way that evoked all sorts of images of 50's Hollywood goddesses and sultry film-noir lounge singers – the kind of image she was clearly hamming up now.

Many inside and outside of the Rogue community frequently wondered at the Joker's sexuality, since he was ostensibly going out with a gorgeous and devoted blonde bombshell he seemed to brush off and ignore most of the time and randomly abuse for the rest of it. Some of them suspected he didn't even *have* a sexuality, or that it was just as fragmented and arbitrary as the rest of his personality. But somewhere buried in the Joker, there were still splinters of a red-blooded man, and they were now very, very awake. She had his attention.

"Heh. Why, snugglebumpkins, you've got a new dress." He licked his teeth. It bothered him that she bothered him. There was only one thing to do; crack a joke! "What's the deal? When did I start dating Jessica Rabbit? Have you been shopping with my credit card again!?"

Normally Harley would've pouted and fussed when he teased her. This time she just gave a voluptuous smile and shifted slightly, baring even more of her leg. "Oh, my love! How could I keep any secrets from you?" She flung her hand melodramatically to her brow, tipping her head back, then letting her hand drop slowly, sliding over her

cheek, lips, throat, and chest as it did. "I dun it. It was me. I'm a bad girl, after all." she murmured, her one visible eye vanishing in a wink, "But you know what I think, Puddin'?"

She stretched an arm, gesturing for him to come closer. He crept toward her with a suspicious glance, noticing for the first time that there was a red, swollen mark peeking from under the choker, and that her flawless skin was marked in several places by what looked like round, angry red suction-cup rings...

Funny place for a hickie, Joker thought absently, has she been cheating on me with an octopus or what!?

She leaned closer to him and slid an arm around his shoulder. "I think you're gonna let me get away with it." She pressed her cheek to his, nuzzling him, rubbing her face against his jaw, his ear, his throat...

"Ha ha, you know..." Joker vocalized a thought that had popped suddenly into his head, as her lush red lips pressed to the skin over his jugular "...if you were a vampire, this would be a perfect opportunity to--"

CHAPTER 9: KNIGHTS OF THE BREAKFAST TABLE

The dawning of the next day at Wayne Manor brought both relief and trepidation. They'd bathed, thoroughly, and then curled up together, too exhausted to talk, make love, even to dream. Selina would later reflect on how rare these dreamless sleeps were for Bruce, but the source here was simple weariness. He'd been relentlessly focused on this case day and night since the dockside and by now, even with his formidable stamina, Batman was running on empty and the triple confrontations of the night before had been his body's trigger to rebel and demand a little shuteye.

Selina had an odd, listless night by contrast. She hadn't dreamed, it was true, but she had woken in the twilight hours to a cloying, nauseous feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. She still felt deeply exhausted, though the ache in her muscles from hauling Otis about had subsided. Bruce was fast-asleep, and she envied him. She was also worried about him, but with the threat intensifying from moment to moment there was precious little time they could take to rest.

She, and Alfred, had insisted however that they make their first discussion of the day at the breakfast table instead of the cave. Nonetheless, the topic had quickly turned to the case, and the setting had proven advantageous, with the two of them – soon joined by a hologram of Oracle - sitting around the trays of coffee and exquisitely prepared French toast like the Knights of the Round Table at a war council.

"Let's go over what we know about our enemy."

Bruce tapped his fingers against his lips, staring with focused intensity into his coffee mug. The text of *Dracula* sat open beside his tray.

"From the book we know his weaknesses. Sunlight destroying vampires is a Hollywood invention. It won't harm or kill him, but it will deprive him of his powers, especially his ability to shapeshift, during the daylight hours. We can't afford to assume, however, that he won't move about freely in the day if he feels the need, or that the sun will deprive him of his strength and speed. We have to be prepared to confront him anywhere he might show his face."

"So sunlight will limit him but it isn't the weapon of destruction decades of pop culture has ground into us." Selina picked up, tapping her finger on her coffee mug in turn. "Fresh cloves of garlic or Christian iconography will repel him and may be used to seal him out of a building. I don't know about you honey, but I'm not exactly a devout churchgoer and if these things run on actual faith, we may be screwed if we try to use them without knowing for sure. I say we stick with the garlic."

Bruce chuckled, taking a small sip of his coffee before nodding. "Agreed."

The hologram-Barbara spoke ::*We also know that he can't enter a private residence without being invited, but once the first invitation has been given, he's free to come and go and may employ all of his powers to do so unless sealed out by one of the previously mentioned methods.*::

"If I might request, sir," Alfred spoke up from the background, where he was diligently tidying the room, as he tended to when unobtrusively keeping tabs on what his Master was doing, "that such precautions be put in place at the Manor, since this supernatural foe may well target one or both of you should he discern the identity of his opponents."

"I'll look into it." Bruce replied, troubled. The likelihood of Dracula discovering that Batman was Bruce Wayne should not in theory have been any more or less likely than another Rogue doing so. But Selina was also working the case and her identity as Catwoman was, thanks to the show, common knowledge, as was the fact that she lived with Bruce Wayne. Another troubling factor was the possibility that if they *did* seal the Manor against vampiric intrusion, should the Count pass by he might start wondering just why playboy billionaire Bruce Wayne was so crazily prepared for a vampire attack. He might chalk it up to Catwoman's planning, but that wouldn't make it any less dangerous. The risk was still there that the very act of protecting their home might alert Dracula to the identity and location of his adversaries. And while Alfred would certainly not be tricked into inviting him in, he wasn't immune to mind control.

:: He can't come into anywhere that isn't public uninvited, he can't cross running water except at high or low tide unless he's sleeping in a box and someone else is taking him. Garlic and crucifixes repel him, sunlight prevents him from changing forms and using his other powers, and he has to sleep in his native soil to recharge them. That's a lot of limitations we can play on. ::

"Indeed." Bruce murmured, and Selina could see from his expression that he was conjuring new protocols as they spoke, "Let's move on to what he's capable of."

:: I'm hoping Van Helsing was exaggerating about him having the strength of twenty men. ::

"He wasn't." Bruce attested grimly. The dents in the Batmobile's door proved that.

Selina had pulled the book over to her while Bruce and Barbara were talking, and added her two-cents. "Okay. So Dracula's ridiculously strong and fast, Croc meets Flash, he can shrug off wounds that would hurt or kill anyone else because basically the only *vital* organ he has left is his heart. Book says he can 'grow and become small' – the part with Lucy has her slipping through a knife-wedge crack in a wall. He'd make a hell of a thief. Basically there isn't a security system on Earth that could keep him out if they didn't think smearing garlic on the windowsills was as worthwhile a precaution as a motion sensor. Even your pals in the Justice League never added that."

Bruce shot her a mild glare, but she continued unconcernedly.

"He can summon fog and control storms, can control certain types of animals. So... that's now Croc, Flash, Weather Wizard, and Aquaman. He can turn into mist or into...elemental...dust...on moonbeams...what the hell? They never put *that* one in the movies. He can turn into a wolf or a bat--"

"Several bats." Bruce muttered under his breath.

"The guy is a powerhouse. He's inarguably the most potent vampire in Victorian literature, and if that has any bearing on the real thing, that means he's more powerful than your average real-life vampire by far. My question here is, why is that? Who the hell is this guy, and how did he get to be such a cut above the rest?"

~The Scholomance~

A glowing ball of light had joined them at the breakfast table. A round of startled jumps and a quiet "My word!" from Alfred, and all eyes were turned to the hovering sphere that positioned itself just next to Barbara's hologram.

Bruce's eyes were instantly narrow and he stood from his seat, fingers pressed to the table, tension building around him like a thunderstorm.

"Jason."

~Bruce. Please excuse the intrusion. I know I promised Selina I would not interfere unless asked, but the situation has grown urgent. I could afford to wait no longer and I am afraid that I have not been entirely upfront with you.~

Selina couldn't withhold a quiet groan. "Jason, this is why we have the cell phone, remember?"

~I feared waking you unexpectedly~

"Trust me, I really would *not* have minded. This, I mind." Not because the light-balls bothered her in the slightest, other than being a little unnerving when they appeared so suddenly, but Jason had the absolute *worst* timing in the world and she had *asked* him not to do this, because Bruce was reacting in the exact way they all knew he would.

"This is my house, Jason Blood." Bruce said quietly, but the Bat-thunder in the air around him was growling and the Bat-clouds turning an ugly black. "And I thought I had made my feelings clear about the intrusion of magic into my home."

~Forgive me. Please. I must tell you things urgently before I embark on my own battle. I will not interfere with your investigation, but as Gotham is also my home I must do whatever I can to protect it from the threat of Dracula, with or without you. I would infinitely prefer to work with Batman and his allies but if your distaste for my methods is so great, Bruce, then I regret that I can only provide you with information and my best wishes for your success. I will, nonetheless, do what I must.~

My God, Selina thought, *He really IS as stubborn as Bruce.* She would have to nip this in the bud before Bruce got started. She cleared her throat.

"Then with us it is. You were saying something about a Scholomance? What exactly is that?"

Bruce bristled with contained fury; it was like watching a sentient bomb trying not to explode. But as the intel started flowing, he managed to hold it in. Selina, for her part, masked a sigh of relief.

~It is mentioned in Stoker's book that as a living man, Dracula was a student at a clandestine school of magic in the Carpathians known as the Scholomance. A school where only ten students are ever admitted at a time, because the Devil himself is the teacher and every tenth student's soul is taken as his payment. This is not a fantasy. The school is real and I – I and Etrigan – were present when Dracula attended it.~

"I'll be damned," Selina stared at the orb from which Jason's voice was echoing "You *did* go to college with him!"

~In a manner.~ Jason's voice sounded strained. Selina glanced to Bruce, who was still standing, glaring silently, making her aware that when this was over, someone was going to pay for this violation of his home turf and for agreeing to Jason's input without waiting for his answer, but he was at least going to listen to Jason's information before laying down the law.

~In order to combat evil one has to know the enemy. Intimately. My struggle against the forces that seek to corrupt humanity, Bruce, is just as complicated as yours, maybe more so. A demonologist by definition is one who studies demons, not one who battles them, and my...position with Etrigan has left me uniquely placed to do so. One who delves into their world is forced to play their games by their rules, and they are deadly games indeed. One of those games led me to enroll in the Scholomance, to find out just what kind of black magic was being taught to those ten sorcerers and for what purpose.~

“And that’s where you met Dracula.” Bruce graveled, finally speaking. Alfred was busying himself with something in the background and Oracle had fallen silent, listening. Selina, nonetheless, felt an uncomfortable and distinctly feline sensation crawling up the back of her neck. Raised hackles.

~Yes. As a result, I am privy to certain knowledge concerning Dracula’s past that almost nobody else ever had, and certainly nobody alive today would have. When I met him he was a young man, shrewd, ambitious. Brilliant, but hungry for power and unafraid of the price. It was to be expected of one like himself, who felt already connected to the world of the demonic, and believed he had nothing to lose.~

“This doesn’t sound very much like Vlad the Impaler. He was a prince, and the driving purpose throughout his entire life was to hold onto his throne, from what I’ve read.” Selina leafed through the pages of the book before her, noting for the first time how the Stoker vampire’s monologues were vague and jumbled on the topic of his history, alluding to but never directly connecting to the life of Vlad Dracula, the man upon whom he was frequently thought to be based. “He was also a devout Christian knight right up until his death. What would make him take up devil-worshiping and sorcery?”

~You’re correct, Selina. Well read. The reason it doesn’t fit is because Count Dracula is not the man you think he is. He is not Vlad III Tepes. He is Vlad’s firstborn son.~

That had everyone’s attention. Jason went on.

~When he was a youth, just after his return from imprisonment in Turkey, Vlad fell in love with a beautiful Szgany gypsy woman. Their affair was...illicit, to say the least, as gypsies were and still are considered to be dirty thieving scum at the best in that part of the world, and Vlad was a prince of Wallachia and soon to be married to a girl of appropriately high birth. The truth of course is that the Szgany and their ilk were, and still are, an ancient and highly-traveled people and the keepers of many secrets lost to the rest of the world. The dark-eyed woman to whom Vlad lost his heart was also a powerful witch.~

~They were careful, applying all of her arts to ensuring that she did not conceive, but conceive she did. Vlad was furious, but he loved her, at first, too much to have her murdered, and feared drawing attention to himself, so he simply exiled her entire tribe to neighbouring Transylvania as soon as he had risen to the throne. Yet the lure of his first son was too strong, and he returned to her in secret to witness the birth.~

~The son was born with a caul on a full moon night under an inauspicious star. A pack of wolves serenaded his entrance into the world. He was born with his eyes already open, with fully-developed teeth and fingernails. Every superstition these people had concerning ill-omened children destined to become a vampire, witch or werewolf played out that night in succession. It was a different time, then, and Vlad Dracula was a man capable of the most sadistic cruelties ever conjured by a human mind. His response was instant. ~

::I don't want to hear this.:: Barbara, being of the three the least hardened to violence, murmured through her hologram.

~Then I will say no more than that he had the infant buried alive and the mother executed in...a horrific fashion. She cursed him as she died, but he did not feel the effects until many years later. She had opened Vlad's eyes, you see, to the world that exists within and around our own, and after her death he became as vehement a nemesis of the demonic enemies of Christ as he was of the mortal enemies of Christendom. He hid among his famous impalements and tortures the deaths of thousands of vampires and other supernatural monsters, masking them as political purges aimed to weed out his rivals and enemies. He all but exterminated the vampire population in Eastern Europe, and drove most of the survivors into Styria and Greece. It is ironic that the world now remembers him as a vampire, for Vlad Tepes was in truth the greatest vampire hunter who ever lived.~

"But you're saying his son became the vampire Dracula...the son that he buried alive?" Selina spoke up, casting a glance across to Bruce to check his temper. He had calmed. The story was too bizarre *not* to give his entire attention to.

~Yes. It is my theory that the child had demonic blood on its mother's side, or that perhaps a demon of considerable ranking possessed Vlad on the night of conception. I have never identified the demonic father of Count Dracula, but his unusual physical features, his natural aptitude for black magic – it all suggests him to have been born of a union between a mortal and a demon of Hell. In any case, the child did not die when he was buried alive. He lay dormant and grew to adulthood in the womb of the earth itself. It was only when his father was killed on the battlefield, when his mother's curse came into effect, tearing Vlad's soul from his body and imprisoning it within his son, giving him all of his father's knowledge, memories, and skills...~

::Oh my God.:: Barbara hissed over the com.

~...that Count Dracula awoke and rose from the grave, as it were, for the very first time.~

"That's why he has to sleep in his native soil. He was literally born from it." Bruce fairly snarled, turning from the table to stare at the wall as if he could glare through it and see the Count even from here. "That's why he so callously disregards human life. He was never really human to begin with. He is a monster born out of lies and murder and he's in *my city right now and you did not see fit to enlighten us with any of this until this moment. Why?!*"

~You haven't exactly made it easy to talk to you, Bruce. Frankly, since the incident with the cosmic spark, you've treat me with all the hospitality I would expect if I were visiting a 12th-century French village dressed as a leper.~

A low growl rumbled in the back of the Bat's throat. "You're here now. You're talking. I'm listening. I want to know everything you know about this enemy. No secrets, no games."

~I was unaware that I was ever foolish enough to attempt mind-games with Batman. But I thank you again for hearing me out. To continue, Dracula was not yet a vampire when we studied together at the Scholomance. He and I were...friends.~ The strain returned to Jason's voice. *~I think I knew better than anyone what it felt like to be someone who had evil coursing through his very veins. I tried to talk him out of continuing his studies, but he was relentless. He pursued his purpose as single-mindedly as someone else I know.~*

Bruce scowled.

~Except Dracula derided the human species as a whole. His father's memories and his own experiences simply added up to the belief that humans were either useless sheep or conniving wolves, prey or predators, and that given the choice he would rather be the greatest wolf of them all. He was totally without mercy or compassion even then. I couldn't stop him from going ahead, and after the schooling came the soul-lottery. He was the tenth student.~

~The Devil who ran the school was a very nasty prince of Hell with a list of aliases thicker than a phone book. He laid claim to Dracula's soul, but Dracula actually managed to find a loophole in the contract and forced the Devil-prince to cut a deal with him. Perhaps it was his heritage coming into play, but however it happened, he, alone of any tenth student in the history of the Scholomance, walked out of that school. But he didn't walk out of it alive.~

"That's when he became a vampire."

~Yes, and since then he's sporadically popped up in history, sowing horror and death every time he does. He is a walking Biblical plague. Most vampires have to share their blood with a victim to create a new vampire, and doing so weakens them permanently, so they don't do it often and it keeps their overall number down. But Dracula is so virulent that every person he bites will automatically come back as a vampire if they die by any cause whatsoever, and every new vampire he makes actually makes him exponentially stronger. His time at the Scholomance gave him the weather-control, the shapeshifting, and dozens of other abilities other vampires don't have, and he passes them on to his offspring like a genetic trait. He has been destroyed multiple times, but he can be resurrected just as easily, and he has in the past employed a worldwide cult of devoted idiots to do just that every time he falls. Even I don't know how to kill him forever.~

A beat hung in the air. Batman, brow knotted, stood brooding intensely, Catwoman went stiff-backed as a cat sensing something wrong in the air, and Oracle's hazy projection slumped in her chair, head bowed in thought.

~Now do you understand why I consider him such a threat? He is not Bela Lugosi in a cheap theatrical cape. He is powerful, he is smart, and once he's marked you as his enemy, he won't hold back. I hesitated to tell you all of this because at first, frankly, I didn't believe it was really him. Professor Van Helsing destroyed him in 1892, five years before Stoker's book was published, and he was very thorough in disposing of the vampire's remains. I told you what I could and then went out myself to confirm it. I've since discovered that he's been very busy.

~He's bitten several people so far. If someone is bitten by Dracula or one of his line, they'll rapidly become sick. Stoker drew out the process in the book for the sake of drama. In reality, one bite is a death sentence; the victim has about a week, assuming the vampire doesn't come back for more and nothing else kills them in the meantime. During this time they begin to show symptoms of vampirism and are fully capable of infecting others. They'll be stronger, faster, and crave blood, but they're only 'half' a vampire at this stage, and theoretically, they can be saved, usually by destroying the vampire who made them. If they die, however, for any reason, their corpse will rise the next dusk as a fully-fledged, completely Undead vampire with all of the requisite powers. By that point it's too late; they're already dead, and the only 'cure' is to release the undead spirit inhabiting the corpse. This is done, as you know from the movies, with a wooden stake and a sharp blade.~

Bruce Wayne's expression did not change, but his skin grew several shades paler.

~Dracula may have already started to make at least one Bride. He's slower with those because he wants them to be perfect. He 'kisses' them three times before they finally die and turn completely.~

“Bride?” Bruce’s brows arched “As in, the three vampire women he cohabits with in the book?”

Selina felt a knot in her stomach. With everything that had happened, after that first, gut-instinct decision not to broach the topic with him last night, she had completely forgotten about the Brides of Dracula – and the possibility that he would attempt to make *her* into one based on Catwoman’s reputation.

~Selina didn’t tell you?~

Bruce turned his gaze to the love of his life.

“No.” he said quietly. “But she is about to.”

The ensuing hours had involved an emergency call-around to every member of the Bat-family; Bruce was adamant that he would not expose any of his team to the possibility of being transformed into an undead monster and thus had Alfred, with a list of suppliers helpfully provided by Jason Blood, immediately sent out for provisions required – garlic, wolfsbane and hawthorne, crucifixes and rosaries, cold-wrought iron, silver nitrate. Dick, who was on friendly terms with parishioners in Bludhaven, made enquiries regarding Catholic, Anglican and Eastern Orthodox doctrines concerning vampires and demonic possession. He’d gotten some funny looks, but shrugged it off in his easygoing way as ‘helping his kid cousin with a term paper’. Tim had also played the term paper card with some of the local religious schools in Gotham and had spoken to two priests, a minister and a retired televangelist. They’d turned up a fair amount of information on the history of vampire attacks in the Americas and Europe; but nothing particularly useful had come of it, and they had hit a brick wall when they discovered that the modern Churches took things like handing out indulgences very seriously and wouldn’t bend the rules for *anyone*, but were just as skeptical about things like vampires as the average Joe in the street. There was little they could do to gain religious help short of calling Rome for an exorcist; and how would they explain *that* one without a possessed victim to treat?

Nonetheless, Bruce had called a Catholic prayer-aid supplier and ordered close to a hundred crucifixes. Soon, Wayne Manor would be festooned with them. While Bruce – and Batman – had never been deeply religious, he had seen far too many mind-bending supernatural events in his life, up to and including encounters with actual deities or beings that were close enough to count, to discount the possibility of an almighty God. His scientific conclusion was that, if Stoker’s book was not simply playing a strongly pro-Catholic stance, *something* about Christian religious icons fundamentally repulsed Count Dracula. The dilemma was whether this was caused by faith on the user’s end or Dracula’s own turbulent history and primal conflict with the Church. The difference was far from superfluous and would make all the difference in a face-to-face encounter; it was also impossible to know for sure without having *tried* it in a face-to-face encounter. Nonetheless, while he wasn’t going to go waving a cross at the Count without a backup plan should it fail, Batman, being Batman, wanted all of his bases covered.

Selina hadn't heard much out of Bruce since the news about Dracula's Bridal ambitions had come out. It was of course quite possible that Dracula would never go after her; there hadn't been any sign of him trying and it was plausible that from his perspective she might not top the list of 'powerful, beautiful, and dangerous Gotham babes'. Plausible, perhaps, but she had to admit, she was *Catwoman*. The Count wasn't going to choose Claudia Muffington as his immortal bride. But she wasn't half as afraid of Dracula as she was of Bruce Wayne; the lack of verbal backlash for her - justifiable, damnit, she'd been crawling around in a sewer - lapse of memory was ominous, to say the least, but at least it *was* an absence.

To take her mind off it she'd called Jason back (via the house phone, as she'd decided staring at the light-balls was giving her a headache) and spent nearly an hour on the horn with him, jotting down information on the Count, vampires, and their spread through medieval history and beyond in a small notebook. There were, however, holes in Jason's knowledge; since the Scholomance his firsthand encounters with Dracula had been few and centuries between. He had very little idea what the Count's current agenda might be other than 'drink blood, make vampires'. He openly admitted that he couldn't see the Scarecrow / Ivy connection and that Bruce was the better man for detective work of that nature.

The point was, they now knew exactly who Dracula was and what he could and couldn't do. But they still had absolutely no idea where to find him or what his master plan for Gotham might be.

That didn't, however, mean they were out of the game. A plan was brewing in the back of Selina's mind. A way to lure him out of hiding and into a confrontation. With what they knew so far it was almost certain to be successful. There was only one problem...

Bruce would *never* go for it. And if it worked, what then? If they caught Count Dracula, what the hell were they going to do with him?

CHAPTER 10: WALKING THE LINE

By nightfall Wayne Manor would be a fortress. But it wasn't where Batman wanted to be. I didn't want to be sitting in the cave brooding over the evidence and the new twists and turns in the case. It was *daylight*, Dracula would be bedded down somewhere in the city, in a coffin filled with Transylvanian grave-earth. He would be sleeping, vulnerable. If I could only catch him in that state then there wouldn't need to be a vicious battle in which my life and the lives of my team would be endangered.

Every sunset meant a new victim for Dracula and every one of his circle. They would multiply exponentially until they overran the city like the rats they brought with them. Frustration crawled up my shoulders and knotted hotly in the back of my neck. Damn it. If I knew where he was, where he slept, I could *have* him, and then...

And then what?

Our focus as a team had been so strongly placed on finding Dracula and thwarting his plans that we hadn't touched on the topic that troubled me to the very core – dealing with him once we had him.

Batman doesn't kill.

There isn't a single vampire hunter in the annals of history or the volumes of fiction that would flinch from putting a stake through Dracula's black heart. He is a monster, a walking pestilence, even allowing him to exist is allowing him to add more victims to an endless list.

Is the Joker any different?

Damn it. Dracula is *already dead*. He has lived many times his natural lifetime; he's even been *killed* before, and somehow returned from the grasp of rightful death. He should already be rotting at the bottom of a grave, not climbing out of it every night!

Ra's Al Ghul has also lived many times his natural lifespan, extending it through terrible and heinous means over and over again. Would you stab him through the heart and hack off his head, Bruce? Would you?

Ra's is still a man. I will not consider this thing human. You were there, you *saw his eyes*. There's nothing behind them, no feeling, no humanity, no soul. This is not an Arkham case, there's no chance of redemption or rehabilitation. He is a demonic walking corpse that drinks blood and murders people by compulsion, and then violates even their deaths by making them come back as monsters like him to do the exact same to others. If he is *destroyed* his curse ends and everyone bitten by him who still lives is cured. Instantly. Finishing him saves the lives not only of his potential future victims but of people he has already victimized. We cannot just discard that as a viable solution. Perhaps the only one.

*Batman does not kill. That is **the line**. You **do not** cross the line. Human or nonhuman, natural or supernatural, living or undead. Batman does not make excuses, exceptions or justifications. Dracula walks, thinks, and acts like a man. He knows anger, pleasure and fear.*

*How can you judge that he has no trace of humanity left? After one short encounter? This is a gut reaction. It is irrational, it is based on fear, and it will **not** be acted upon.*

Psychobat had spoken.

I became aware of another person in the cave; a subtle change in the lighting, coming from a flipped-open cell phone, and a warm, feline presence carrying it. She was quiet, but it was not because of guilt. That was a rare emotion for her; her flippant, well-whatcha-gonna-do-about-that-stud attitude was a strong part of my attraction to her and she seemed to be able to justify, via Feline Logic, almost everything she had ever done. So while she knew I was angry with her, she hadn't come down here full of repentance to beg my forgiveness. Thankfully. I think if she ever did that, I would have a heart attack.

She just looked tired.

"Hey." She said softly. "I just got a text from Jason. Something he forgot to tell us. Says Dracula wasn't the only person we know who was at the Scholomance, and we should, uh, 'expect correspondence'. I can't see this being good."

Neither could I, but it was plain to me she'd used the text message as an excuse to break the ice and come down to see me. She clearly wanted to sort things out with me, but there was something guarded about her; her defenses were up. She was ready for me to verbally lash out at her at any moment, for Jason, for not telling me about the Brides of Dracula. But she was here anyway, even though she was *expecting* me to try to hurt her.

No.

If I let Psychobat win the Dracula argument, then he would concede me this one. There was another line. One I was just beginning to grasp, and one which I refused to cross for equally important reasons. It was the line between dealing appropriately with my personal life and becoming an abusive brute.

"Selina—" I started, and I saw the wall go up behind her eyes. Maybe there was just enough gravel in the voice to set her off. I had to stop this.

"Selina. Thank you."

She blinked. The wall fell down just as quickly. "For what?"

"For your help with the case. For bringing Jason into it when I was too stubborn to see that we needed his advice. For the sewer." I felt a wry smile go up, and saw her faintly return it. "For being there when I needed you without even being asked."

"Bruce, you know I wouldn't leave you to handle something like this alone. I'd have to be either stupid or completely callous. That's not me and you know it. You wouldn't be with me if it was."

"I know."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, I just..."

"It's okay."

"You were so – focused, driven. You were going to catch Dracula and that was it. I didn't want to force you to worry about protecting me on top of that, right when you were hitting your stride. I did what I felt was right."

"I know. It's okay."

She shook her head, almost in disbelief, and gave a quiet laugh. "Oh, honey. Stop it. You're being so *reasonable*. It's scaring me."

I could still feel Psychobat squatting, brooding, in the back of my brain, muttering about how she had placed herself in danger, how she had brought magic into my house. I felt a surge of anger at myself; everything she had done was for the right reasons. Why couldn't I let it go?

I took a deep breath. Training. Meditation. Let it flow through me; let clarity take my mind, like a river bearing those ugly emotions away, cleansing me enough to think and see and speak my truths clearly. Psychobat's bitter grumbling faded into a distant murmur.

"I'm not angry with you, Kitten." I found myself saying instead. The words flowed easily. "I could pretend it's because the case is serious and we don't have time or energy to spare on argument. All of that is true, of course, and the case *is* important. But the real reason is that *you* are too important to me for me to justify attacking you for doing what, as you just said, you felt was the right thing."

She let out a soft breath that whispered lightly in the air. "Oh. Now you're really scaring me." She stepped closer, and her teasing smile softened. "Don't stop."

I rose from my seat and her arms slid around me. We held each other there in the cave, saying nothing, sharing a silent intimacy. She rocked gently from side to side in my arms, her cheek pressed to my chest and her eyes closed.

When she finally opened them, their gaze fell on the table I had been working at. It was covered in plans and schematics. Sketches, really, rough and disorganized, an idea I had devised but not yet been able to consolidate into something plausible.

"New coffee machine?"

I chuckled, and she smiled up at me. "A containment chamber."

A beat hung in the air. "For Dracula?"

"Arkham can't hold the Mad Hatter. How could it imprison a man who can turn into mist, squeeze his body through a crack in the mortar, or simply mind-control the orderlies to let him go?"

Another strange, heavy beat.

"You're not going to kill him, are you?"

Her tone was impossible to read; it was a blank statement phrased as a question. She read that half-instant of hesitation before I answered.

"No."

Psychobat had spoken. Selina simply nodded.

"It uses mirrors to bounce refracted solar rays around the entire chamber. Attached solar panels collect the energy and store it for nightfall, robbing him of his power to shapeshift 24/7. The entire thing is sealed with bulletproof plexiglass and a titanium shell. Airtight, since Dracula doesn't need to breathe. I believe if he is deprived of blood long enough, he may go into a dormant state. Hibernation, if you will."

I didn't mention that I would never conceive of trapping a living enemy in a sealed containment chamber and starving them into a coma. It was *not* the same, and Selina knew this well enough not to bring it up. Instead, she broached the other obvious issue.

"When are you going to get the time to build this?"

I winced. Yes, that was it, wasn't it? We needed to catch Dracula as soon as possible and we would need to contain him *immediately* once we had him. She was right. It

wasn't feasible. But it was *something*. A hope that there was another way to end this than taking *that* step. Than crossing the line.

She picked up on it, leaning her head over my shoulder as I looked at the plans. "Maybe you should make a call to the Watchtower. Assembly time would be nearly nil with Clark and Wally on the job, and you could add alien technology to it on top of what you have."

"Good idea." I replied, "I'll consider it. I didn't want to bring them into this, though. This is Gotham business and I..."

And I don't want flashy meta-powered superheroes blundering around in this case when I am matched against this kind of subtle, elusive enemy. This is a detective-work case in Batman's city and Batman will deal with it. Bottom line.

But that wasn't the bottom line. I still didn't trust my comrades. I still hadn't gotten over what Zatanna did to me. I still couldn't be certain that they wouldn't go over my head again if they caught up with Dracula before I did. Batman doesn't kill; Batman wouldn't have lobotomized Dr Light either. If one of them had him cornered and felt they had no choice...

Bottom line.

"It's a thought for another time." I said neutrally, and kissed Selina's lips. She pursed them immediately after, thinking, but again she didn't pursue the subject. Instead she looked off to one side and tapped her fingertips against her shoulder.

"Halloween tomorrow."

"I haven't forgotten."

"Do you think Scarecrow will try anything?"

"It's possible. I've known he was tangled with Dracula since he was hired by Danesti. When I confronted him at the lab, he tried to pretend he'd gone clean, and actually attempted to frame me to the police."

"What?!"

"It was a setup. Dracula attacked me and I barely escaped with my life. I'm assuming he won't show up on the security film, so Scarecrow's going to try to convince them that I went insane and assaulted him without provocation."

"Honey, if even a fraction of Gordon's old guard are left at the GCPD, they're not going to buy Batman having a fit in front of a man famed for his use of *hallucinogenic fear toxins* as proof that you've snapped. That's ridiculous."

"Exactly." I growled, thinking it over, "Scarecrow knows that, too."

Selina blinked, then gave a little hiss. "Damn. He just wants to get the police watching Danesti."

I curled my fingers into a fist. "He knows complications with the GCPD are the very *last* thing I need right now. They're going to suspect he's up to something and investigate Danesti to find out why I went there. Which means that's what he *wants* them to do. There won't be any incriminating evidence at Danesti the police might find but it will keep them busy looking, and me busy trying to skirt around them and get back in to look for clues that aren't there. It's a smokescreen."

"That's pretty damn clever for Jonathan."

"It isn't Crane. It's Dracula."

Selina didn't look entirely convinced, and I could detect a hint of sass in the way she tilted her hips and rested her hand on one that suggested she was thinking that I was

'doing that Ra's thing you do', overestimating Dracula, that Jonathan might have come up with that on his own. She didn't need to say a word.

Crane. What was it about bringing up the topic of Scarecrow that –

A very small memory returned.

I tore my gaze away, to the glass cases set against the wall of the cave where Otis Flannegan's rats were now slowly recovering from the Plague.

"What is it, Bruce?"

"At the lab, I saw..."

Crane, squatting on the floor, feeding a fat black rat with a pile of grain. A rat that had stayed there placidly through the entire confrontation with Dracula. The Count can control rodents, but why would he go to the effort just to make one rat sit quietly and watch?

Selina tilted her head, feline curiosity radiating from her; if she had a tail, it would be twitching right now. She had no way to read my thoughts, so she simply watched as I hurried to the cages, already focused on my work.

I chose the strongest of the rats, carefully reached into the cage, and took a small blood sample. Then I ran a simple pet store flea-comb through its fur and extracted several fat black fleas. I had washed the rats with a flea dip earlier; the fleas were already dead.

Comparing the blood sample with bacteria taken from the stomach of the fleas, I noticed something I had not previously seen; something missing from the Customs lab reports.

The plague bacillus was there, and so was something else; another, common bacterium that would not be paid attention to, as it was normally not harmful to humans. Something that would be injected by the flea's bite, alongside the plague, and lurk in the victim's bloodstream until their system was weak enough from the plague to be vulnerable to the...changes.

This bacteria had been *altered*. In Otis' rats, it lay dormant, behavior more common to a virus than bacteria, and I noticed that their sluggishness was a result of the plague, while Crane's rat had seemed quite healthy. There must be a catalyst, then, something in the grain that Scarecrow had been plying the rat with, something that had triggered its unusual behavior.

Professor Crane the psychologist with the penchant for biochemistry had apparently also taken up experimental pathology.

I returned to the Batcomputer and entered the data on the new bacteria. It did not take long for the computer's sophisticated database to find a match.

"Toxoplasma. Crane, you *bastard*."

Selina joined me, hunkering up and reading the screen; quick, sharp-eyed and alert. And she thought *I* was sexy when I was thinking like that.

"So it's a protozoan that infects people who eat undercooked meat?"

"It infects 33% of Americans over the age of twelve, to be precise. It rarely has serious effects, however, scientists are still uncovering just how it affects human behavior, because its presence severely influences the behavior of other animals. For example, rats."

"Go on."

"A rat infected with toxoplasmosis completely loses its fear of cats. Its other behavior remains unchanged, but it not only does not react to the smell of a cat, but it is actually *attracted* to spots urine-marked by felines. When the rat is inevitably eaten, the pathogen propagates within the cat, which then passes it onward through its feces."

"Ugh. Cats are part of this? I felt dirty enough after the sewer." Selina shuddered. "I see the fear connection. That would be Crane's doing. But what kind of modifications did he make, and how does that benefit Dracula?"

"I can't say for sure just looking at this. But I have a theory."

Selina tapped her finger to her lips – "Cats and other animals freak out in the presence of supernatural monsters like Dracula. Even humans, with much weaker senses, get a feeling of 'wrongness', yes?"

"I felt it myself at the lab."

"So this would be a kind of fearlessness disease? Could it remove the self-preservation instinct a human would feel when faced with a vampire?"

"Yes, that's the theory. This modification actually hitches a ride alongside the plague bacillus. People who catch the plague are then cured and released, but the modified toxoplasma protozoa linger in the bloodstream until they're 'activated' by something in Danesti's grain, like the rat at the lab. If there's no evidence at the lab that Crane is afraid of me or the police finding, then it means the modifications are already on the market, and Crane was working with Dracula long before he came to Gotham."

"Damn."

"Once the toxoplasma is activated it begins reproducing and influencing the victim's behavior. Theoretically, rendering them completely unafraid of vampires, and therefore defenseless if they are attacked by one."

"I wouldn't think Dracula would need help hunting his prey. Isn't that cheating?"

"He doesn't, but any of his new vampires will, like Lucy in the book, be taking baby steps, slowly learning to hunt. Dracula knows he's in a different age; the Victorians were very closed off to the idea of vampires, but now, thanks to pop culture – ironically, thanks to Bram Stoker – people are familiar with the symptoms and might clue in to a vampire outbreak, however absurd the idea at first. And he knows he's coming to Batman's city, and that means going toe to toe with me."

"So how do you raise an army of vampires in a very short time right under Batman's nose? Answer, Toxoplasma." Selina paced – no, stalked – and her face tweaked into a sour, disgusted expression. "And all he'd need was a quick peek at the hospital records and his kids have a lunch menu."

I simply nodded. She gave a soft groan and turned to lean against the bat-console. "Okay. At least we know what the bat-bastard is doing now."

"Yes, we do. This is his idea of Blitzkrieg."

"So what do we do?"

"Tonight?" I growled a reply, pausing as Alfred silently appeared from the elevator with a mail parcel held gracefully forth. I took it without looking at it, giving Alfred only a casual nod – "Tonight, we take the fight to him. Tonight, we..."

Alfred cleared his throat, and I stopped, turning the package over in my hand, eyeing the symbol marked clearly on the wrapping. The look on Selina's face suggested she too had spotted the return address; somewhere in Outer Mongolia.

Jason had said we were to 'expect correspondence'.

"I trust you scanned this."

"Of course, sir. No traces of explosives, traps or harmful chemicals. It's a book, sir."

But his assurances did little to ease my suspicion as I opened the package. I knew that symbol well; it was not one that I enjoyed seeing in Wayne Manor. There was a note attached - in the form of a papyrus scroll fastened along the spine of the book. I knew the handwriting I would witness before I'd even unfurled it; as expected, it was deft, spidery, and elegant, the hand of a man accustomed to writing in languages dead to the rest of the world.

My dear Detective,

It has come to my attention that you have an unpleasant visitor in Gotham City. It seems we have an unprecedented occasion on our hands; it is very rarely that you and I share a single goal. It is, unfortunately, inevitable that you will suspect some scheme of treachery on my part, but you may rest assured I have my own reasons to wish to see Count Dracula humbled and destroyed. I will say only that I too was a student of the Scholomance, and that through shameful deceit, that vile gypsy half-breed stole from me the fruits of my labor and the rewards that were rightfully mine. He has made a fatal error in attempting his quaint, medieval ideas of conquest on Gotham City, this we both know, and the time has come for Dracula to blight the world no longer.

In the absence of my own hand to bear the stroke of divine vengeance into Dracula's heart, there is no other man who walks the world I would rather claimed the honor than you, Detective, my most worthy opponent. Indeed it is with still greater pleasure that I shall watch his primitive and childish games crumble to dust from afar, as he learns at last that this world no longer has a place for him.

To this end, I gift you the greatest assistance I may; the knowledge contained within this diary, which fell into my possession through the effort and sacrifice of elite DEMON agents who tracked it down at my behest during the Second World War. I trust you will not hesitate to use it as it must be used.

*Yours in glorious enmity,
Ra's Al Ghul.*

"This just gets better and better," I felt the Bat-gravel return full-force.

"You've got to be joking." Selina shook her head in near disbelief. "Ra's too? This Scholomance place is sounding more and more like a summer camp for crusty immortals. There's a hell of a story hiding here."

"If he was there, he could well be in league with Dracula." That *was* an unpleasant thought. "I don't trust him." I turned the book over in my hands, still yet to open it. Selina gave me a curious-kitty look and I passed her the letter; within moments of finishing it, she suddenly laughed.

"I do," she said, "He's telling the truth. Listen to him waffle on about how much of a pathetic backwards loser Dracula is in comparison to himself. When you and I *both* know Ra's hasn't exactly kept up with the times well either."

"Wounded pride?" It wasn't something I'd immediately have detected from the language. That was the difference between myself and Catwoman; I'd been scanning his wording for hints of potential deception, clues as to what he would have to gain

from aiding me strategically. Approaching it from a crimefighter's mindset, where she approached it as a woman. I'd been trying to read Ra's mind through his words; Selina looked straight at his heart.

"Exactly. This letter's dripping with it." She continued. "He's trying very hard to conceal the schoolboy tantrum behind eloquent words, but that only makes it come through even stronger. I mean, wow. Talk about holding a grudge – four hundred years later, and he's still so sore about it that he'd immediately jump to *helping you* as soon as Drac shows his face. And the language – 'vile, gypsy half-breed'? Ouch."

"Whatever Dracula did to him, it must have been humiliating."

"I wonder what it was." Selina carefully rolled up the scroll. "I bet if we found out, Ra's would never live it down."

"Sadly, we don't have time to look the gift horse in the mouth, no matter how much we might want to." And she knew I did. Any leverage on Ra's might prove to be a pivotal weapon against him the next time he chose to enact a scheme. For Selina, of course, it was a matter of having a trump card to knock his ego down a peg and prove to me again that he wasn't the deadly arch-nemesis I built him up to be. Impossible woman.

I must've drifted into thought, for a moment later I felt Selina's gaze on me, intensely. Curiosity had woken in her, and for a moment she seemed like a much younger woman, all twinkling green eyes and impish tweak to her lips that wasn't yet a smile.

"Well? What're you waiting for, handsome? Christmas?"

I grunted, and opened the book. It was squat, fat to the point of exploding, hand-written on time-yellowed pages; the design of the volume was Victorian and it must have once been an elegant hand-bound volume; but now it was crammed with sketches, schematics, newspaper clippings pinned hither and thither, a scrawl of firm but somewhat unusual English writing with numerous notes in German or Dutch scribbled into the margins. Fascinated, I thumbed quickly through and returned to first page, searching for the identity of the author. I was not to be disappointed.

January the First, the year of Our Lord Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Eight. Here begins the journal, and also the journey, of a fool young doctor of Amsterdam looking to awaken his brain over the seas. I hereby commence what I humbly hope to be a volume of some interest or to entertain not only its author, and thus hoping for my very good friends in England to read it when I next reach those so-white cliffs, I have undertaken to write in the English, of which I am nonetheless but a novice and not yet of the natural inflection. I shall hope you will forgive me some mistakes and informalities, Dear Reader, for life, of which this volume is composed, is full of them.

Yours in diligence,

Abraham Van Helsing.

Selina caught my expression, and we shared a look that said it all. Tonight, we would go hunting. Tonight the tide would turn.

CHAPTER 11: BLITZKRIEG

The church on the corner of Lang and Furst had once been one of Gotham's most well-kept architectural secrets: not as grandiose as the city's larger cathedrals, it nonetheless possessed a certain disturbingly gothic aesthetic. There always seemed to be one gargoyle too many crouching amid the gutters and balconies; the belltower tapered into a tower-top reminiscent of a slightly sagging wizard's hat and both inside and out, the lines of the building slanted at odd, nigh-Lovecraftian angles. Its stained glass windows spliced the standard theme of saints and angels with sometimes macabre images of America's murky colonial history. It was a quirky curiosity of a building that might have towered over the surroundings in the days when it was built, but had long since been buried in skyscrapers. Those had only loomed higher since No Man's Land, and the church, which had always attracted more tourists than parishioners, had been deconsecrated and abandoned due to structural damage from the quake. A local entrepreneur had attempted to buy it, to turn it into a theatre restaurant, but had met with outrage from the same Gotham historical societies who had lobbied, hard and successfully, to save the building from condemnation. Nonetheless, no restoration attempts had been made, and the front gates were now patched with warnings and No Entry signs.

It was from the balcony of the dusty belltower that Count Dracula surveyed the streets beyond like an emperor, fittingly, ruling from the lowest place rather than the highest.

"It is a quirk of history," he murmured, "that men will always build tallest that which they value the most. In ages past, the grandest structures were castles and fortresses, the citadels of kings and warlords, then the sumptuous pleasure-palaces of emperors. Yet even those were superseded in time by churches, mosques, temples, the houses of God and emblems of religion's might. And now they in turn have been overshadowed by these towering pillars of industry and commerce." A sweeping gesture to the glittering towers beyond, and Dracula laughed. "The works of Man reveal his changing heart."

"Phalluses."

Dracula turned, with an arched brow, to where Poison Ivy lounged in the shadows behind him, surrounded by a creeping mass of vines that were, even now, stripping the last few drops of blood from the sagging carcass of a stray dog that had been sleeping in the church.

"Pardon me?"

Ivy hissed again, waving her hand dismissively. "The works of *Man*. Every one of them a penis! You can't top Gotham for that! Just look out there! Rows and rows of ugly phallic monstrosities of cold concrete and glass, defiling what used to be pristine wilderness, *Mother Nature*, the *female* world. And all of them built by rich greedy fools

trying to hide their insecurities and erectile dysfunctions and one-up the competition by building the biggest, shiniest *prick* on the block.”

She gave another languid gesture and the vines flung the dog’s corpse aside, then lifted to her brow and wove themselves into a May Queen crown of leaves for their mistress; the vampire vines, however, were so twisted that it more strongly resembled a crown of thorns.

“...well said, Ms Isley.” Dracula kept up the urbane, inscrutable smile, at least until Ivy wasn’t looking and he could let the bemusement furrow his brow. He put the mask back up, and turned his attention to a new voice. It somehow managed to lilt *loudly*.

“Oh Red, you’re gonna drive Mistah D *nutso* talking about stuff like that all the time. And that’d be the last thing we need! Poor ol’ Mistah D getting dragged to the happy house. Why, they wouldn’t let him sleep in a cawffin at Arkham! He’d hafta get used to the crummy bunks, wouldn’tcha, Mistah D?” Harley slid from the shadows, still in 50’s screen goddess mode, which was apparently her interpretation of what a sexy vampire queen should be like. She hip-swayed over to Dracula and draped herself on the Count’s shoulder.

In answer, Dracula leaned out over the city, smiling quietly, reaching up to stroke Harley’s hair with the closest thing he was capable of to genuine affection.

“It is right for them to fear us, my child.” Dracula continued, eyes on the street below. “As the sheep fears the wolf, so it shall and should be. Once, only the brave or the mad would venture out of doors after dark for fear of we *nosferatu*. Now mine is the last of the ancient bloodlines left – all other vampires that remain are pathetic, dying strains devoid of all the power and terror we once had. There is no comparison between the proud line of Dracula and these ...mushroom-growths.”

He shook his head in disgust.

“Not to us to despair at the dark existence that is given us, not to us to grieve for the gentle life of the bleating lamb that we had before the baptism of death. Not to the *Draculesti*, not to my father, who answered his enemies with massacre and cruelty that terrified even the hard-hearted Turk and treacherous *boyar*, never again to sleep without the name of Dracula heavy upon his thoughts.” The Count bared his feral, wolf-like teeth, and sneered at the city beyond.

“We of the Dracul are beasts, we are devils, we are the grinning face of the Reaper. We come to offer temptation that cannot be resisted, power that cannot be denied, and eternal life within Death.”

He faced Ivy and Harley, the former watching him with shrewd, quiet scrutiny and the latter an expression of somewhat poorly-masked admiration. It was Ivy who laughed, however, nudging her friend with a bare shoulder.

“What do you know, Harle? The famous Count Dracula is certainly more eloquent than your average Gotham boy. I could almost grow to like him if he had, you know, *asked* before he bit my neck. You could use some lessons in how to treat a lady.” She narrowed her eyes, and part of her couldn’t believe she wasn’t springing on him to teach him a lesson in *pain* instead. Something – something that had not been there before the bite – was holding her back. “And you picked dangerous girls to toy with, Count. I hope you’re ready for us.”

In answer he only gave her a courteous, familial smile.

"I do not toy with you, my dear. I do not choose my heirs nor my allies at a whim. I studied you from afar long before I came to Gotham and sought you both as my Brides. For even alive, you are already predators who grip the world by the throat and make it beg to do your bidding. With the gift of Un-Death and the powers of darkness at your command, not only Gotham City but all the waking world will tremble. You are *Nosferatu* in spirit and thought already; soon, you shall be true queens of the night."

"And what about you?" Ivy asked, her eyes on the black-clad man. What remained of her free will screamed at her from within; the survival instinct of her animal brain, telling her that death by Dracula's hand, no matter the power it gave, would still be *dying*, her life and freedom irrevocably forfeited. Ivy's pride reeled at the concept of being slave to this *man* for all eternity; but now, so much of the vampire spell was upon her that they were distant voices shrieking futilely at a locked door. "What's your place in this?"

"The Un-Dead need a king." He replied, "After I was awakened in this century, I spent a decade scouring the lost and lonely places of the world for other *wampyri*, and found that my kind have changed greatly since my age. We have evolved with the times; these modern vampires do not fear the cross, nor need their native soil in which to sleep – they are no longer bound to superstition, for this cynical century has stripped it of its power. But there is a cost. The hungry spirits which raise them from death are weak, *diluted*, and do not control the husk but *share* it. Much of the living person's identity survives and so too its weaknesses. Doubt, uncertainty, attachment to those they had loved, moral repulsion at what they must do nightly to survive. Their minds are not the mind of a demon, but of a human, and ill-equipped for the existence of a vampire, and they soon sink into despair and self-loathing, or become mindless brute savages lurking in the back-woods of your great America."

"You're gonna take over then, and whip them into shape?" Harley piped in, leaning closer in breathless awe. She nearly tripped over.

The Count laughed, shaking his head and giving a grand, dismissive gesture. "Oh, child. Why would I want an army of simpering amateur thespians and thugs in black leather? No, my lady, my own blood is stronger, and bred of older, fiercer times. My offspring are to these ones as the great wolf to the timid house-dog. I shall use Gotham City as my nesting ground, for it is a city gripped in darkness and pain, and its people are hardy and strong of mind and will. The weak Un-Dead shall be culled; if they despair so of their dark un-life, then I shall grant their wish, and end it. My clan, with Gotham's greatest fiends as its generals, shall lead my strong children to conquest. The vampire race will at last have a king and a kingdom, and all in our path shall be ground into the bloodstained earth."

"..." Harley was, for once, speechless. When she finally found a word, it was "Wow."

"What about Batman?" Ivy asked, after consideration.

Dracula, she noted, was no fool. "The wolfhound in Bat's clothing. If he is even a thousandth of the man his reputation makes of him, he already knows why I am here and he is as we speak dismantling whatever he can of my schemes. As long as he is alive he will hinder us at every opportunity, and thus, he must be eliminated

immediately. I will not let him live to be another Van Helsing. But trust me, my dear Brides, events are already in motion that will see him destroyed from within."

Ivy gave one-sided smirk and lifted from her throne-of-vines, walking over to join them. She tilted her head to a disgusting sound she could hear from the rundown catacombs beneath the church; filtering up from so deep that only a vampire's ears could catch it.

"And what are our plans for tonight, Count?"

"To-night, the games begin-" Dracula began to reply, in a velvet purr of malice.

"-Tonight, we go to WAAARRR!" Harley interrupted him, cutting loose with a shrill, villainous cackle that, had she but known it sounded more like the Wicked Witch of the West than a sultry vampiress, she might not have been so proud of.

Dracula patiently waited it through, lifting something in his hand and tapping sharp-nailed fingers against the cover.

It was a box of cereal; Count Chocula's goofy grin mocked him from the cardboard.

"No. To-night, I feel the urge to update my wardrobe."

Harley and Ivy exchanged a glance and said, as one, "Kittlemeier's."

From below came sound of someone playing old ragtime showtunes, on a pipe organ, while laughing to raise the roof.

It was in Styria that I first encountered the legends and superstitions of those creatures known as 'wampyr', which in younger lands are known only from fairy-tale and the ribald fantasies of libertine poets. In the old countries, however, superstition is given life by faith, and for the local people, to stay after dark outside of doors, there are more to fear than him so-maligned Wolf, and to linger on an inauspicious night or to visit those moss-encrusted ruins of old castles and tombs unthinkable. Such things to these people are not the stuff of tale or rhyme but of grim and day-to-day reality; that is to say, they are by no definition a laughing matter...

The Bat-Clan, with one extra feline member, hit the streets at dusk like a squad of Marines dropping into a combat zone. After Batman's grim-faced briefing on the nature of their enemy, and the solemn handing out and arming up with such weapons as garlic-essence sprays, sonar bat-repellants and crucifix pendants, they fanned out into multiple, partnered teams. Nightwing and Robin, Catwoman and Batgirl, Batman on his own – but to work closely with Oracle from afar. All of them went forth with the knowledge that they faced the possibility of a new kind of nocturnal war.

The plague had, within the scant days of its coming, claimed eight lives. Doctors were at a loss to explain the mortality rate of what should have been an easily curable infection. Batman did not have to examine the bodies to know that the true cause of death would be massive loss of blood.

It is with great seriousness that I say here that the stories of such things are grounded in utmost truth, and that there are things of mystery upon this earth that defy the name of God, and are beholden to the Devil. Such a one is the vampire, and I have now experienced with my own eyes and my own heart the evil that walks in these old lands.

Nosferatu are, as I have been told and as I have observed, a kind of malevolent ghost, or akin to a ghost in that they are Un-Dead, a spirit that should sleep in the peace of God's green earth until Judgment Day, but instead lingers unquiet. Yet this creature be unique in that he is

trapped within the husk of his own dead corpse and cannot rest in the grave, but must rise from it nightly to steal the blood of his still-living relative as they sleep. He must do this to fuel his unholy not-life and to stave off the rot of Death that claim him long ago.

By Batman's calculations, Dracula may have created through cumulative nights more than a dozen vampires. Those who had died from the 'plague' were the prime suspects, and they would be, as Van Helsing's diary explained, fully-Undead and unable to be saved. But recent Missing Persons and unreported disappearances might account for more. Batman held onto the hope that, in trying to make such a large number of vampires in such a short time, the Count would leave many of his victims infected but alive, and thus able to be salvaged back to humanity – though Batman still did not know how to accomplish that without killing Dracula himself.

The At Large list weighed heavily on Batman's mind, for there was always the possibility that one or more of Gotham's rogues had crossed paths with Dracula, whether by accident or the Count's design, and become infected. To that end, Batgirl was to stake out the newly-rebuilt Iceberg, while Catwoman went inside and dug around – to find out if any prominent Rogues were MIA. This task would be difficult, as with Scarecrow's inevitable Halloween plotting and no party invite, any number of the shrewder Rogue population may have battened down in a secure lair as Riddler had been planning to.

As we have had room to observe, there are two kind of vampire in fact, though folklore often does not differentiate. The person who has been bitten by the vampire and infect by his poison, yet still live, may exhibit traits of the vampire as he slowly change to the second type. To him may be the strength and speed of the creature, and its hunger for blood, but it is not until he has passed to death and risen from it that he become true Un-Dead, and may then command the more curious powers that make his solid body as the form of a beast, or immaterial as mist and shadow. Once true dead-Un-Dead, the person's soul is truly lost, trapped in a cruel purgatory by the beast who wears his shape, and can only be released by the destruction of the corpse and banishment of the demon, the vampire spirit.

Cassandra Cain squatted against a familiar rooftop on a familiar stakeout point; the Iceberg Lounge, looking cleaner and newer since the incident she had unfortunately been a part of had burned it down. She watched Catwoman slink inside, one charming half-smile given to the bouncer as she passed him – he'd already been moving aside as soon as she approached. A tiny jolt of envy sprang upon her heart. Cass could've flitted past the man, an unseen shadow, or she could have walked up in full view and taken him down in a blaze of fists and feet. But she couldn't ever seem to walk, as Selina did by sultry, feline nature, the path of least resistance.

The stakeout. It was more important. Selina was inside; thermals showed Killer Croc at the bar, Mad Hatter at his table, a few DEMON thugs and King Snake engaged in a heated argument, by their body language. Another night, it might have warranted her attention. Tonight, it was more important to note where Selina Kyle was going.

Cass checked the list off in her head as more Rogues were identified. She knew them well, by body shape and size, even from an indistinct thermal image. She could hear their distinctive voices from the microphone Catwoman was wearing. Batman had

theorized a vampire might give off a different heat signature to a normal person – so far Cass had identified quite a few of the Iceberg crowd in their usual places, unaware or unafraid of the growing danger threatening Gotham. But no cold-bodied vampires were among them.

Cassandra, for her part, had reacted the least strongly to the news that Count Dracula was raising an army of vampires in the heart of Gotham City. She was unfamiliar with decades of pop culture and horror movies; to her, he was just a name, just an enemy, and this was just a mission. She was glad to have been partnered with Catwoman instead of with Robin or Nightwing, whose incredulous quips had not ceased since the briefing. The further away from them she was tonight, the better.

Inside, she noted, Joker and Scarecrow were absent; and the only women inside other than the Cat were Roxy Rocket, Penguin's hostesses, and a few groupies and henchwenches. No Ivy, no Harley Quinn. Selina was approaching a table, and Cass shuffled to another position on the rooftop, as a ceiling support was blocking the thermals; it was only when she identified Riddler's voice that she knew who Selina was talking to, but a moment later, the Cat had surreptitiously rubbed her wrist, and switched off the mic.

"What the hell you do?" Cass muttered under her breath.

"Riddle me this; when does the Cat wear a bell by choice?"

I gave Eddie a wry glare and slid my hand along my forearm, stretching just enough to flick the tiny mic-switch to off. Cass would've figured out who was in here and who wasn't by now, and I'd be doing Eddie a disservice to leave it on even after he'd noticed I was wired. Whatever else could be said about the Riddler, he knew his gadgets.

"You got me, Eddie. But what are you doing out of your bunker? It's nearly Pumpkin Time."

"Looking for *you*, Selina. You haven't been answering your phone."

I cursed. Between the mess of rooftops and sewers and long calls to Jason, I hadn't even checked my voicemail.

I shook my head, "Not here, let's go to a booth."

"Mine. I've de-bugged it." Riddler sniffed. "Oswald's been even more paranoid than usual since the rebuild. GOSH, EDAMAME WALL?"

He offered an arm, and we wandered casually to Eddie's corner, sliding into the plush, outrageously comfortable seats. I'd give Oswald this; stingy as he was on his presently-limited budget, the old bird had too much pride to skimp on creature comforts. I wriggled in delight, then settled in for business.

"You haven't answered my riddle, either."

"Listen, Eddie, it's not what it looks like. They're scanning the place to make sure D. hasn't gotten to anyone in here. It's in *all* our best interests to know who might put bite marks in our necks while we sleep."

Eddie snorted. "D. situation bad, I take it?"

"Really bad. 'Crow was working with D. at Danesti all along. He's spliced something into the wheat products that, long story short, is going to make anyone infected by the plague rats completely unafraid of hickies and give D.'s kids a free buffet."

"Sounds tasty. But come now, Selina, you'd best spill the IL SATED. You know I like my long stories long."

"I'll say it has to do with Toxoplasma, then, and let your brain fill in the blanks."

Riddler whistled. "Smart."

"Can I trust you to pass the relevant details, and the relevant details only, along to the rest of the crowd?"

He gave me an incredulous arch of the brows for that one. "You want me to warn everyone that D. is in town? I'd be laughed out of the 'Berg, Lina! They'll think I caught a noseful of fear gas a day early."

"I'm just giving you the medicine, you pick the spoonful of sugar, Eddie." I caught myself glancing back to the crowd, picking up as the evening ticked by. "...Can't see Pam."

"Pam or Harley. Laughing Boy's not in, so that might explain Harley's absence, but you know how Pam likes to, alas the tired cliché, rule the Penguin's roost and she left on amiable terms last time, so she's not sulking in her lairs."

"D.'s looking for Brides."

"Can't see Pammy as the marrying type, myself," Eddie paused to slurp a cocktail straw, "I'd pity D. if he tried. Talk about a homewrecker! Can you imagine an entire Transylvanian castle overgrown with vines and stinking of Lemon Pledge? Ugh."

I found myself smirking. The humor was appreciated; it wasn't what we needed right now, but it was appreciated.

I was about to speak again when a small squawk alerted me to Oswald Cobblepot's approach. It set off alarm bells right away; when the Penguin had something to say to Catwoman, he usually waddled over waving his arms and trumpeting suave salutations to the felicitous feline felon or something equally odious. This time he didn't say a word, just squawked to let us know he was coming and then settled down into Eddie's booth and glared at us both. I had to wonder if he'd somehow figured out about my wire...

"Not often that I see you in here anymore, Catwoman."

He meant 'Not often' as in 'not every night after a successful prowl, allowing me as a senior rogue of your own stature to fence your plunder, rather than letting nameless nobodies feather their nests at my expense-kwak'. We'd been over this before, several times. Oswald's constant complaining to anyone who would listen that Catwoman used out of town fences reinforced the impression that I was still stealing.

"Interesting that you two choose to come in, not even greet me, then huddle in a corner, disable my audio security and mutter into your cocktail glasses right as an outbreak of – wark! – *Black Plague* is keeping half of my clientele indoors."

"Implying something, Ozzie?" I narrowed eyes at him, and let my claws drum visibly on the tabletop. "I thought you'd have learned by now never to rub a cat's fur the wrong way, especially when she's trying to relax."

Penguin jabbed a shiny-gloved finger at me, then pinched his monocle in a scowl that ran between Eddie and I. He wasn't taking the intimidation tactics tonight, and that didn't bode well either. "You know what's going on. This is some ploy of Crane's, is it not? You can't – gwak – keep me out of the loop – and expect to continue to

patronize my bar. I want answers. He'll be banned for a *year* if his antics cost me any more customers!"

"Ozzie..." I began, but Eddie cleared his throat and sat up in Penguin's face -

"Customers like Joker, Harley and Ivy?! What do you call a birdbrain club owner that can't see the tip of his own nose?"

He shook his finger at Penguin and for a moment I thought he was going to *poke* him in the aforementioned beak.

"Listen, Oswald, you ODD PARTI IN GAOL, if we allow you into our confidence, you will have to keep it. Trust us, we're—Listen to me, I sound like Dent." He coughed "-Selina and I are not involved in any plot with Jonathan Crane, of all people. What do you take us for? We are trying to put a plug in this mess for everyone's sake. So if you're in, you're in on our side, and you're agreeing to help us, understood?"

Oswald chewed on his cigar filter, eyeing us shrewdly. Then he gave a wide grin, and a quacking chortle. "Very well, o perfidious purveyor of puzzles. Let's hear it."

Eddie looked at me, and took a deep breath.

While it is said that some become vampire by the accumulation of their earthly sins, others are created solely by death from the bite of another Nosferatu; thus this unholy curse may be spread unto even the innocent. This presents a dilemma of logic; if this creature has in his origin a religious aversion, as it has been seen, indeed a repulsion to all things sanctified and of Christ, why is it that he can pass damnation unto a hapless victim, that even the honest man, the faithful virgin, and the blameless child may become a blood-thirsting monster of Satan?

Nightwing and Robin were to perform a sweep of the hospitals and attempt to seal the rooms of the plague patients from entry by Dracula's offspring, unnoticed by the hospital staff. This was made harder by the sheer volume of patients; but made easier by the staff having clumped most of them together in the same wards, doing their best to isolate them lest plague-fleas spread to the other patients. Thirteen hospitals with garlic-smearing windows and tiny crucifixes hung over the doors later, the two found themselves at Gotham General, with no vampires in sight.

"You'd think we'd have caught at least one by now." Tim huffed, perched against the outer windowsill of an empty hospital room.

One sill over, Dick laughed. "You're excited? I thought you'd be scared."

"Kinda a bit of both." Tim admitted, shaking his head. "I mean, vampires – crazy people I can handle, we do that all the time. Even mutant plant monsters. I mean, that's weird as hell, but –"

"But there's something about the idea of a dead person up and running around biting people that feels really off, huh?"

"I'm not scared of the movies." Tim added defensively. "It's just...it's a bit different when it's *real*."

"I hear you, bro."

A few minutes passed in silence. Tim, fidgeting, broke it again, whispering across the chill air between them.

"I just kinda want to see one. You know. I mean, what do they look like? Do they have those scrunched-up foreheads, like on *Buffy*?"

"Doubt it. Sure we'll get the chance soon. Just keep a lookout for anything suspicious."

"What, like that?" Tim pointed, and Dick followed his finger to a bizarre shimmering in the air below. An arcane symbol etched itself across the alley wall behind their hospital; it was at an angle where nobody who *wasn't* perched on the hospital windowsill would be able to see. Six feet in diameter and smouldering, then the wall rippled like the surface of a pond, and through it stepped a tall man in a long coat.

"What the—" Dick stared, but it registered after a moment — "Ah. Jason Blood."

"The demonologist guy? What's he doing?"

"Demonologising, probably." They watched him step by the road, surveying the building like a construction foreman for a long moment before leaning down to pour something out of a small bag onto the sidewalk, drawing a line around the front façade. "It's best not to ask."

Tim felt a strange little shudder. He was watching a real wizard cast real magic right in front of him. "Glad he's on our side."

"Yeah, when his better half is in control at least."

Jason looked up, and spotted them; how he knew just where to look was anyone's guess. He was far away, but the two men were suddenly thrust into the experience of hearing the sorcerer's voice echoing around as if he were standing right in front of them.

:::That is an unfortunate truth, Mr Grayson. Mr Drake. I hope you won't be as upset as Etrigan was that I've been following your trail of garlic and crosses across Gotham:::

"Not at all," Dick replied, sharing a glance with Tim before returning his gaze to the distant man, wanting to make some clever quip about Ventriloquists and dummies but finding nothing springing to mind.

:::I've been augmenting your wards with some of my own, and filling in a few spots you may have missed. I've made an unpleasant discovery; Dracula's forces have been bedding down in different spots each night and are now gathered together and headed straight toward us:::

"Guess you'll get to see your vampire soon, Tim."

:::Chances are, you already have. Because when the fully-Undead vampires get here, their proximity will 'awaken' anyone inside this hospital who may already have been bitten over previous nights, and call them to... join the pack, so to speak:::

"What?" Tim and Dick exclaimed at once.

:::Gentlemen, I cannot claim the right to command you in battle as does Batman. But due to our current circumstances, I must solemnly request that you yield to my leadership for the moment. Will you accept:::

Both came to the swift conclusion that when a ravening pack of vampires is bearing down on you and immortal demon-hunting wizard offers to take charge of things, it's best to just say-

"Sure, you got it."

:::Thank you. Then it is your task to ensure that *none* of the patients inside leave this hospital, nor, should they become awakened to vampirism, attack anyone else. I do not need to tell you that nonlethal methods are preferable to subdue them. I shall do my best to hold the others out here and repel the invasion:::

They heard the rustling of the wind through the trees of the small park opposite the hospital pick up. In the dark they could see nothing coming, but there seemed to be movement in the foliage. Jason Blood turned back to face the road, standing in front of the hospital doors and staring out.

Eight people were suddenly standing across the road from him. They were dressed normally, but stood deadly-silent, too still to be alive. Not speaking, not moving, not breathing. Their faces were colorless and expressionless in the moonlight.

"Here we go." Tim whispered to Dick, and the two of them without another word pulled the hospital window open, slipped into the empty room beyond, and drew their Batarangs.

Within a few minutes, the hospital stakeout would become a siege.

It is my conclusion that the spirit inhabiting the vampire be not the soul of the original person, but instead a demon and servant of darkness that has stolen the corpse to wear, as a man wears a shroud of cloth to disguise him self true. Yet this hypothesis requires proof, and has its flaws, for in my attendance at many sites of vampire attack and of the ritual of vampire destruction I have attended, I have learned that the vampire exhibits curious familiarity with the memories of the deceased he appears to be.

Two-Face left the Iceberg in a grouchy mood; since his return to crime, he'd not had the opportunity to pull off anything truly spectacular, and once the Iceberg's triumphant re-welcoming had died down, everything had returned to business-as-usual.

Except that tonight, Selina Kyle, one of Harvey's closest remaining friends, had come into the 'Berg, walked right past him and gone straight to Edward Nigma without so much as a 'hi'.

Was she still smarting from that double-bladed knife in the arm?

In the old days, a few injuries between friends – and fellow crooks – were par for the course, no hard feelings. Something had changed, recently, and he couldn't put his finger on it. Regardless, the Iceberg was suddenly not the place Harvey *or* Two-Face wanted to be, and they'd left without so much as a coin-toss to decide if they should've.

"Hiya there, Twofers."

He would have recognized Harley Quinn's voice from half a mile away while blindfolded. Short of, say, Lucille Ball, or maybe Fran Drescher, there was no other voice like it. But when he saw her, he had to double-doubletake.

"Nice dress." Two-Face growled, pulling up his side of Harvey's shocked expression in a wicked grin. "Little ...looser than your usual, but we can't complain about the neckline." They checked. "Or the legs."

"Maybe I just felt the winds of change, blowin' across me." Harley breathed in her best Marilyn, looking around for an appropriate grill vent to stand over. Unfortunately, her slinky red dress was too tight around the legs for the desired effect. She decided on the Veronica Lake approach, brushed her hair over one eye and swayed out of the shadows to imaginary saxophone music. "Little early for a handsome glass-and-two-halves like you to be leavin' the bar, ain't it Harv?"

"Maybe we're lookin' for an after-party," he replied warily. In one half of his brain, about two dozen Two-Face fantasies long forgotten suddenly sprang back to life; in the other, Harvey Dent was watching the shadows for signs of her maniacal, grinning boyfriend, and trying to read her like he'd read a hostile witness for signs that she might be about to make him the butt of one of the Happy Couple's pranks.

"Party for two..." She eyed him up and down, about as subtle as a speeding Mack Truck with a dead guy behind the wheel and a brick on the accelerator. "...or can we make it three?" A sultry wink.

"Long as it isn't *four*." Normally he'd find the even number a lot more palatable. But while Two-Face was a horn-dog, he wasn't stupid. Harley Quinn, out of makeup, dolled up like a gangster's moll, hitting on him like a femme fatale on a deadbeat P.I in a bad dime-bin noir novel, and no sign of the Joker? It set off alarm bells on both sides of the mind.

"Naw." She winked at them both again and took his hand. "I promise, our little secret. Just between the two of you and little ol' me." She glanced to a back-alley leading away from the Iceberg, away from prying, drunken Rogue-eyes...

Harvey resisted. Everything about this screamed 'giant neon sign reading DANGER' to him. Two-Face, laughing, barked in his mind that he'd always wanted to '*bone the Joker's broad right under his pointy nose*' and he could take whatever the clown tried to dish out. It'd be worth it. There was only one way to settle this.

Harley grinned sweetly as the coin flashed and fell.

Scarred up. She tugged his arm again and he followed her into the alleyway.

A soundless shadow flitted after them.

His first prey are inevitably the family and loved ones of the person who has become the nosferatu. He performs his nightly ritual exactly the same way each time, without fail; the only variable is the victim, but until he has exhausted and slain his current prey, the vampire will not move on to another, thus creating a pattern of victims in a village succumbing to the mysterious illness, resembling consumption or another wasting infection, one by one.

Mr Kittlemeier dusted off his palms, scrutinizing the 12-gauge, pump-action parasol lying on his desk. For 'personal defense' and 'sports-shooting, kwak', Herr Cobblepot had said, but both of them knew it was a formality. The repairs would be simple enough – it wasn't like the days when that particular client was an *active* criminal mastermind and he had to regularly pluck a smoldering batarang he had also made out of various parasols and such. A pity in a way; Herr Cobblepot had always paid extremely well.

Kittlemeier tisked, and glanced at his clock. His evening's next appointment would be arriving within minutes. A newcomer, though the referrals had been clear. He did not yet know the new client, nor his order, but he trusted the stranger knew enough from his referrers to abide by Mr Kittlemeier's rules right away.

He moved to the front room, leaving the umbrella on his workbench. He glanced at the clock – precisely on time. The fellow had better not keep him waiting.

"Herr Kittlemeier." The voice made him jump; he saw the tall silhouette a half-second later. The man in black had already been there when he came in.

Adjusting his glasses and clearing his throat, the old man looked up at his new client. "Yes, yes, you are being on time, it is gud, gud. Shall we to business? I have a very busy schedule, you understand, very busy." He didn't, tonight, but it was good business practice to *always* be busy whether one truly was or not.

The man smiled, and then spoke – in excellent, if old-fashioned German. "It is an honor, mein Herr, to make your acquaintance. I trust that my request will be easily within your abilities. Here are the designs, to be crafted exactly as specified."

He gave a courteous bow, and passed Kittlemeier a set of sketches; the famed gadgeteer darted his eyes about them for a moment before looking up at his guest, with one brow perked.

"Begging your pardon, but for something so simple, could you not have gone to a tailor?" Kittlemeier glanced at the designs again, and held back a snort. He was almost insulted. "Or even to a Halloween costume shop..."

A thin smile from the stranger. "No, my good friend. Your special touch is absolutely required for this task, and your services came very highly recommended." The man leaned closer, and Kittlemeier noticed the sharp nails on his folded fingers. "I will accept no lesser substitute."

Kittlemeier sighed, and opened his ledger, flicking through the pages to record the new commission. "Very well. Under what name should I be placing this order, hmm?"

"I should think that you already know."

Kittlemeier furrowed his brows, and began to speak again – when he caught himself staring at the polished silver tray that habitually rested next to the bell. He would often surreptitiously watch the expressions of his clients in it as he pretended to fussily ignore them.

But all he could see where the man should have been was an empty doorframe. He cast no reflection whatsoever.

"Mein Gott..." Kittlemeier whispered. "It's *you*."

"I shall return at dusk to-morrow." Dracula replied, touching his fingers to his brow graciously. "Good night, my dear friend, and good luck."

Then he was gone, and Kittlemeier was left with the blueprints clutched in trembling hands.

He mopped his brow, shook his head, and returned to the workshop.

The psychology of such a creature is startling. Everything is inverted in the mind of the vampire; that which was loved becomes hated, day becomes as night and night as day. It is bound to these cycles and habits, unbreakably, not simply the oft-discussed need to sleep in its own grave-earth, but also its hunting territories, its movement patterns. If trapped the creature will – indeed, it must – pursue the most immediate and direct means of escape, and thus despite all of its dark powers it may be outwitted and destroyed by mortal men.

Halfway across Gotham, Batman lowered the night-scope binoculars and narrowed his eyes at the sign he had just read. *Schroedinger's Antiques* hung above the boarded-up door to a dilapidated shopfront. Just another condemned building the overworked Gotham urban-renewal board had forgotten to bring down; it had been out of business for years. It was his first lead in the hunt for Dracula's earth-boxes, and he'd stumbled on it by complete chance.

After a fruitless early evening, he had returned to an old patrol route on a hunch, and found a small pile of dark soil, very different to the familiar brown Gotham clay, spilled on the sidewalk near the antique store's former loading zone. A quick comparison to the soil sample he had taken from the docks confirmed the match and a visit to a snitch who lived three blocks away told him that a two-bit black market courier named Left-Hand Luke had delivered a small industrial crate via a pickup truck to the rear of the abandoned antiques store, something the snitch had thought odd since the place had been condemned for at least eight years.

He knew Luke well. He was a former Penguin contractor, someone you called when you wanted goods transported quietly and untraceably, and FedEx just wasn't going to cut it. He also knew that as good as he was at covering up any papertrail the moving of goods might generate, Luke was not a hardened criminal, and he'd squeal like a leaky tap for the Batman. But that would come later.

He entered the antique store, and it took him less than five minutes to find the box. It had been dragged across the floor by Luke's deft left hand. The marks left by the size of the box and the dusty environment were easy enough for Batman to follow to the concealed trapdoor. Below, he found the box, in a cramped basement filled with a stale, nauseous grave-stench that did not belong there.

Clearly, Dracula had been using this lair.

As he pried open the lid, he was not surprised to find that Count Dracula had not resorted to the usual assortment of spring-loaded poisoned needles or hair-trigger explosives a native Gotham rogue might seal a box with.

He was, however, confronted with an instant, squeaking, writhing mass of black plague rats, pouring out of the box - and then out of every crevice in the basement, filling it up with chittering bodies.

A puff of irritant spray drove them squealing away; but Batman suspected Dracula would soon know that the first of his soil-hotels had been found.

Good. It was exactly what Batman wanted.

He gave a tiny smirk not even the rats would see, and began to dismantle and consecrate the lair, exactly as Van Helsing's diary had suggested. There were aspects of the ritual he would be unable to complete, as he was not exactly an ordained priest...

But it would be enough. One down, twenty three to go.

These all suggest that it has not the mental faculties of a living man of sound and full mind. It may imitate the speech and action of the person it had been, but inside it has only the primitive mentality of an animal. Such mimicry is no indication of intellect. It is as that of the dog or the parrot, copying what it has received - in this case from the memories imprinted in the dead brain of its host - it lives in the past, just as a ghost which haunts the same place, incapable of new or original thought.

"One down!" Robin shouted, quickly hogtying the man - the vampire - he had just paralyzed with a garlic-essence-laced tranquilizer dart. He hoped the tensile rope, designed to hold the likes of Killer Croc, would hold. "How many to go?"

"You tell me bro!" Nightwing ducked a clumsy but savage swipe from a woman who had only moments ago been confined to a hospital bed. She gave a hiss, twisted

her face into a nightmarish sneer and leapt vertically upward, clinging to the ceiling like a lizard for a few moments before the dart thudded into her shoulder and she fell at Nightwing's feet. "This wing's clear, secure it, I'm heading onward." And he was running down the corridor to the next ward.

"Roger!" Tim, breathing hard, glanced back to the ward. Sweat ran down his face. These things were *fast*, even the newly-awakened ones, and while they were wild combatants and no match for trained martial artists like Robin and Nightwing, they'd fast learned that the vampires hit like a freight train and it was preferable *never* to let them land a blow. It'd taken them a lot more effort to get a clear shot to bring two of the 'awakened' within the hospital down than it would have to K.O a room full of Joker mooks. He wondered how Mr Blood was faring outside.

The other plague sufferers in the ward looked terrified, and Tim tried his best to reassure the frightened patients. But what the hell was he supposed to say?

"Listen," he began, after tying up the second vampire. "Just stay in your beds, we've got this handled, whatever you do just stay calm and do *not* attempt to leave the hospit-NO!"

One man, eyes wide with terror, had flung open one of the windows, breaking the cross that Tim had fastened to the outside pane, and was struggling to climb out.

The moment he crossed the threshold, before Tim could reach him, something snaked out of nowhere and wrapped around his midsection, like a black, thorn-encrusted tentacle. He gave a horrified shriek and was yanked out the window into the dark.

"Everyone down-oof!" Tim barely had the time to shout that and ready his batarang before a mass of writhing tendrils burst in through the window, splayed out over the hospital beds like some kind of demented spiderweb, and trapped the screaming patients beneath them. One of them hooked Tim around the ankle and flung him down the corridor Dick had run into.

He slid across the floor, dazed, looking up to see a slinky, silhouetted figure borne in through the window on a mass of thorn-encrusted – vines – endowed with snapping, toothy jaws. He saw the gleam of her red eyes a moment before he heard the familiar, sultry voice, echoing with new and terrifying malice.

"Hello, little bird..." Poison Ivy smiled with sharpened canines, and the scent of dark, ripe roses filled the room – musky, sweet and tainted with death. "...is that your heart I hear pounding?"

"Oh crap." Tim whispered.

It is thusly in this, not in its vulnerability to artifacts of faith or of superstition, that the vampire's greatest weakness lies, for it has been deprived of the greatest gift of God to His child, Mankind, that which does not lie in the power of the Devil to give; the vampire has no free will.

Harley ran her finger up Two-Face's lapel and watched him through half-lidded eyes.

"Poor Harv..." She murmured. "Yanno, I never could figure out how someone with two people in his head could seem so lonely...but now I'm all on my lonesome too, I understand. They don't really appreciate you."

Harvey's hand twitched for the coin, feeling a sense of unease rising as surely as something else might be if Harley continued to press against him like this. She was wearing a subtler perfume than usual, and it invaded his nostrils and teased at his senses; Two-Face's instincts were taking over in response, and Dent feared soon there'd be nothing he could do to stop Darth Duality from charging recklessly into a very ill-advised affair. He had to pull his trump card, and fast.

"Harley-" He started, gripping her wrists - "What's Pam gonna think if we do this?"

Harley stopped, and looked up at him with large, doe-like eyes. "Red doesn't appreciate you either, poor, poor Harvey. She shouldn't let you go. If it'd been me, I would never have. I'm loyal...I always try to make things fun...I always tried to...I never asked anything of him....cept a little affection...I never..."

She broke down, abruptly, into tears and buried her face in his collar, sobbing and blowing her nose on his lapel - Two-Face grunted in disgust, but Harvey's softer sensibilities took pause.

"There there, Quinn." He patted her back awkwardly, stroking her hair like she was an overgrown kitten in a mood. "It's all right, Joker's not here, we're here, we won't hurt you." *Unless it comes up scarred, or you turn out to like it rough.* Shut up, Face.

"Oh Harv!" She bawled, clinging to him, "You're always such a good friend..." *What? When did we get to be 'close'?* "-Friends - whatever - you don't deserve to be treated badly..."

"Look." It was weird enough that Harvey's patience lapsed, and Two-Face finally got his two cents in - "Enough with the small talk, are we gonna do it, or not?"

The tears ceased instantly, and she smiled up at him and started crawling up his chest. "Sure thing, hot stuff. Just lemme...kiss...that handsome...face."

She tilted his head until the scarred side was facing her, pandering to Two-Face's ego, turning him on by paying him attention instead of the side that still looked like Apollo Dent. She let him tilt his head back, ran her hand over his throat, and found the jugular with her fingertips in the guise of caressing him.

Just like Mistah D. said. Even under the thick scar-tissue, it pulsed with life.

"Just a little kiss." She crept hungrily closer, and he never saw the look -

Until something flew out of the dark, collided with Harley's flank, and sent her crashing to the sidewalk.

"HEY-" Two-Face snarled.

The black shape dropped to the pavement beside him. "Face, go. Get away now."

Batgirl found a double-barrelled pistol pointed at her head. Heavily customised, she noted, and well-manufactured. "You better have a damn good explanation for this, Bat-brat, or it's scarred I blow your head off, unscarred I beat you to a pulp for interrupting us."

Cass didn't look at him.

She looked at Harley, watching as the girl flicked herself up onto all fours and sank into a crouch, baring long white fangs between pretty lips twisted in rage.

"There explanation."

Two-Face stared blankly.

Harley's face scrunched into a red-eyed expression of demoniac fury, and she let out a thwarted, reptilian hiss - then promptly blinked, clapped her hand over her mouth, and let out an "EEP!" The fury lapsed into an expression of shock.

Harley Quinn backpedalled, wide-eyed, still covering her mouth with one hand, hit the alley wall, and scuttled *up* the wall, backwards, vanishing over the edge of the rooftop.

"*What the hell was that?!*" Two-Face demanded of Cass, his gun-hand trembling.

"Dunno. Maybe she surprised she make sound like electrocuted snake. You welcome, too, by the way."

"I repeat." Harvey snarled, glaring between Batgirl and the place where Harley Quinn had just been standing. "What the *HELL* is wrong with Quinn and how the hell did she just climb a four storey building backwards with her bare hands!?"

Cassandra lifted her hand, calmly took hold of the barrels of the gun, and pushed it down, looking Harvey in the eye. Then she shrugged.

"There new bad guy in town. Name Dracula." She turned to walk away, then added over her shoulder. "He probably get Ivy too. It all Scarecrow's fault. Thought you should know."

A grapnel shot into the fire-escape far above, and she was gone.

Two-Face stood there for a long time, trying to compute recent events with a mind already starting to throb from Oswald's finest Double Malts.

"Harley hitting on us...Harley with fangs going for our neck...Harley and ...Pam and...Dracula?"

He lifted the gun, and discharged both barrels into the wall nearest. It cleared his head.

Tonight, he was gonna get a damn good sleep, because tomorrow was gonna be a *very* long Halloween. For Scarecrow.

CHAPTER 12: UNHALLOWED EVE

Dawn came, its light falling muted and watery over the grounds of Wayne Manor. The Batmobile's headlights cut through the morning fog as it slid soundlessly down the road and through the familiar waterfall entrance to the Cave, and disgorged its black-cloaked master. It had been a long night, but Batman didn't have time to be weary.

Long years of living this nocturnal lifestyle had conditioned him to be as alert at this hour as he was in the midnight alleys of Gotham City. He strode across the cave floor with his cape drawn up about his hunkered shoulders, the very image of brooding conviction.

A cape, while originally of course simply an excellent way to keep rain off oneself before the advent of the umbrella, took on a new meaning in the theatre, where it was traditionally a piece of costume that also served a useful purpose as a prop. A flourish of the cape could conceal a surprise, or make a disappearance by simple stage trapdoor seem mysterious and magical. It is for this reason that it became symbolic of stage magicians and theatrical villains such as the Phantom of the Opera.

Dracula-the-literary-character first earned his famous cape in early stage performances; Bela Lugosi himself first made his acquaintance with Dracula on stage, long before there was a camera recording his performance. It formed yet another of the myriad of strange, ironic links between Batman and the deadly new enemy he found himself facing.

A flourish of the cape, to conceal movement, to embellish a simple disappearance. To make miraculous what was mundane. Batman used these same techniques against his enemies every night.

Smoke and mirrors.

There was still work to be done. He had destroyed multiple of Dracula's lairs last night, but there were more. He had taken just enough to get the Count's attention. Just enough to let him know that he had a pursuer on his tail just as dogged and unrelenting as Abraham Van Helsing. Just enough to let him know that his time in Gotham now had a limit. Given a few more nights at that rate of attrition, he would have nowhere left to sleep and recover his powers, and he would once again be forced to return to Transylvania and abandon his attempt at conquest.

It was Van Helsing's plan, the plan that had defeated Dracula before, but was not Batman's ultimate plan. He had taken from Dracula just enough to make the connection, make him impatient, and give Batman the window he needed.

Smoke and mirrors.

His night had been a success; but it had not come without a cost. Oracle had lost contact with Tim and Dick shortly after a call had confirmed the hospital was under attack. By the time Batman had the chance to divert his course he had found only

flashing lights, police tape, and mass confusion as to what had happened there. No sign of his team or of their opponents. It did not bode well.

Selina had just arrived and changed out of costume; she met him in the Batcave, Alfred lingering to gift a tray of coffee before vanishing upstairs and leaving them to their war council.

He went first. "No contact from Robin or Nightwing. Batgirl is searching for them. She also mentioned that your mission was successful."

Selina chuckled, though it was a humorless one given the absence of the Robins – "Thanks to Harley Quinn, Bride of Dracula. It would have been a long, uphill battle convincing them that Dracula was real if she hadn't conveniently shown up and flashed her fangs at Two-Face." Batman nodded. "Then the Rogues are now fully aware of him."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean they consider him any worse than you or would sign on to help. We like dealing with our own issues in the..." She stopped, seeing his deadpan expression, and returned it with one of her own. "Ah. They are going to sign on to help, they just don't know it, right?"

He didn't answer. But she knew the nigh-imperceptible twitch she thought she had seen below the cowl was not her imagination.

"Our enemy is a man of many skills."

Dracula slid the chesspiece across the ancient wooden board.

"He is the world's greatest detective, and one of the finest minds of this age, perhaps of any age. He is an excellent warrior, able to contend with the most powerful enemies despite - or perhaps, because of - his fundamental humanity. And he is a master of the technology that now rules this world of lights and electricity. But his greatest power is his determination. This is a man who will not be defeated; not while his heart beats with the iron will of a conqueror. He will not stop until he has found his foes, bested them, and restored order to his city. A thousand times a thousand times he will come again, relentless, until his enemies fear the merest mention of his name." Dracula smiled. "I am well familiar with this manner of man. Yet, how does one begin to fight such a one as this?"

"Well, there was this one time," Harley thought about it for a moment. "We had this tank full of piranha – but Mistah J couldn't get them to smile, see, so -"

"By playing his weaknesses." Ivy whispered, running her fingertips over the table, watching the Count with a mixture of seductive promise and derisive hatred. "By stripping away all the illusions he's built around himself. After all, I can green him and bend him to my will." She smiled. "I've done it more than once. Under all of that prowess and reputation, he's flesh and blood, fears and desires...it's the Bat, the symbol, which makes him so powerful. Without that, the only thing left of him is the man." She brushed her manicured nail against a now-pointed canine. "And I know how to handle a man."

"Well-spoken, my lady." Dracula replied. "And you are very close to the strategy we will need. However, a man such as this has very few weaknesses, and those he does have, he knows all too well. He guards them closely and with sleepless vigilance. It is there that he expects to be assailed, and he is prepared."

"Your point?"

"A master strategist knows when to play his enemy's weakness, and when to play against his strength."

"What's that supposed ta mean, Mistah D?"

Dracula chuckled quietly, and leaned over the table, seeming for an odd moment to take the air of an amiable teacher explaining something to his class. "My friends, when facing a foe like this, it is not enough to cover one's tracks. This is where so many among your community have made their fatal errors. You cannot hide what you are doing from the Bat-man. He will search every available path until he finds you. He will solve the impossible riddle, he will infiltrate the impenetrable fortress, he will escape the inescapable trap. If he finds the slightest thread he will pull and pull at it until all of your plans are unravelled. He has fought all of you again and again, and he knows you. Everything about you. He knows you better than a man knows his wife, his brother, or his son. This is his strength, and this is where we must be more clever than he. We must give him what he wants - what he expects - a trail of breadcrumbs that leads simply to another trail of breadcrumbs. We must feed him and feed him until he wastes all of his great thought pursuing shadow after shadow and is too fattened from his mental gluttony, too exhausted to continue."

"Overwhelm him?"

"As you said, my dear." Dracula inclined his head to Ivy, courteously. "He is but a man. Even you see only the myth, the invincible warrior of the night, even when it is proven to you that he breathes...he bleeds...as any other man. But he is a man. A man no matter how skilled or mysterious can be only in one place at one time. A man must eat, must have a place to sleep, and he too must have things that he loves and cherishes."

"Nobody knows who he is, Count." Ivy shook her head. "Nobody knows anything about him! That's always been our biggest problem."

"Truly? Do you truly know nothing of him?" The vampire watched the two of them shrewdly. "Have you thought about what you do know? He is intelligent, evidently highly-educated, and he has learned many techniques of battle from all over the world, so he is likely well-travelled. He appears with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of weapons, vehicles, devices...even in this age of technology, such things are not inexpensive. This man must have vast wealth and a wide network of connections in order to accrue such things. But none of these is the greatest clue to his identity. That clue lies in his heart."

Gotham Rogues, by the nature of their varied insanities, are generally somewhat narcissistic, and Dracula could see from the blank expressions of the two that they were in new territory. Had they truly never thought to get into their enemy's mind before?

"This man fights with courage and conviction." The Count continued, "This is not a lonely or a desperate man. This is not a half-mad bandit operating from some squalid lair in the slums of Gotham. To fight for so long with no-one to support him would have broken him, but he is not alone. There are others who believe in his dream enough to fight side by side with him every night. No, a man of such power is never alone. This man is a prince, a voivode, and a prince must have a castle. Must have

servants, vassals, lovers..." He slid the White Queen to take a pawn. "Perhaps even a princess."

"Pfff, everyone knows Bats has a thing going with Catty." Harley threw in. "And she ain't no princess!"

"Had." Ivy amended. "Don't forget, she's living with Bruce Wayne now."

Dracula flicked his eyes to Poison Ivy, suddenly very interested, but said nothing, letting her continue on her own steam.

Continue she did. "I can say that I understand her reasoning there. Wayne's a rich, vacuous idiot. Handsome, but clearly an inferior specimen to Batman. Still, he lives in a huge manor out in the middle of nowhere with nobody but his butler and a couple of adopted orphans. And he's stupid enough that she could slip anything past him. That's an arrangement ideal for a thief, if there ever was one."

Dracula rested his clasped hands to his lips, and stayed silent.

"Hey, Red, remember Hugo's stupid theory that Bruce Wayne was Batman? HAHHAHA! I can't believe he tried to pitch that one to Twofers, Pengy an' my Puddin'..."

"If only they'd taken that opportunity to aerate each other," Ivy mourned "the Iceberg would be a more bearable watering hole."

Harley pouted, but before she could say anything more, Dracula calmly planted his hands on the table and stood.

"There has been a minor change of plans." Dracula said, "Tonight, we shall be attending the Wayne Foundation..."

"...Halloween Charity Masquerade, sir, the one that Bruce Wayne is absolutely required to attend."

I love Alfred like a dignified-but-cuddly grandpa who spoils a girl with all her favorite treats whenever she stays over, but sometimes he has the absolute worst timing. We were in the cave, waiting for contact from Batgirl, and trying without much success to pretend we weren't worried about Dick and Tim. Denial by mutual agreement used to be a lot easier when it was just... anyway, that's when Alfred came like the messenger in a Greek tragedy, with the delightful news that we had to go to a party.

Batman hung his head, leaning over the Batcomputer, and you could just feel Psychobat clenching his fist until the knuckles cracked.

"Who was responsible for scheduling this, Alfred? You know Halloween is one of the dates that must be kept clear of any Bruce Wayne appearances or—"

"Yes, sir, I am well aware of those dates prone to Scarecrow and Joker activity for which you wish Bruce Wayne's schedule to remain free of public appearances, leaving Batman free to act. Mr. Fox too is aware of your preferences, although he is, of course, unaware of the reason why. Mr. Fox and I share the same regrettable weakness, however, in that there is a limit to the number of rooms we can be in at one time. Mr. Fox was absent from Gotham, if you recall, to make the deal with Fukuda Technological Industries in Tokyo on your behalf, when the scheduling for the ball was arranged by the Foundation."

Lifting his head, Batman turned with the scowl that always answered those bizarrely respectful scoldings.

"Alfred, there is a vampire lord loose in my city building an army of blood-drinking undead monsters out of innocent civilians and my most dangerous enemies. He's unleashed a mind-altering contagion to help him do it, and in case the seriousness of all that had somehow escaped me, I've got Jason Blood and Ra's al Ghul pushing themselves in to impress it on me. You know how important Foundation events are to me, but you can't be seriously expecting me to put this mission on hold to attend one."

"Yes!" I yelled. I hadn't meant to bring it up just then, but Bruce had worked up such a head of steam, I guess I caught his excitement and blurted it out.

"Bruce, we have to go to the ball, you and me. It's not putting off the mission, it's getting it off the drawing board and onto the launch pad."

"What?"

"Think about it. Halloween. What happens if we go to the ball?"

Bruce is a smart man. I knew he saw the whole thing right there, cause-and-effect, all the dominoes falling, beginning, middle and end. I knew I didn't have to explain the what, but I would have to sell him on the why. And he was about to give me a place to start, with one of those growling, non-negotiable, I'm-Batman declarations:

"No."

Like clockwork.

"Bruce, you've been chasing Dracula all over the city and he hasn't shown his face once since he and Scarecrow messed with you at the lab. It'll take time we don't have to hunt down the rest of his dirt boxes, time he spends biting more people, right? This is a shortcut through all of that, why waste it? If everyone knows I'm going to be at that party—"

"I am not using you as bait for this monster!"

"Damn straight, I would never let you use me as bait. That's why this is my plan, not yours. I'm using me as bait."

His eyes went square, and I knew Bruce was starting to get the picture even if Psychobat hadn't accepted the reality yet: He wasn't going to win this one. He's the stubborn man I know, and stubborn will get a sponge Eddie sent me from the Keys removed from his bathroom shower. But it won't make Catwoman return a Picasso, and he was starting to see that's the woman he was up against. I wasn't going to back down.

"Look, dispensing with the false modesty that is just not becoming to cats, we know he wants Catwoman. Let's stop dancing around it and start using it. He wants me, and Scarecrow wants to try something at Halloween. A grand masquerade ball hosted by Bruce Wayne, with me standing at your side dripping all that dangerous beauty that apparently makes undead hearts go pitter-pat, that is going to be a spot-on irresistible target for the pair of them. Yes?"

He scowled, but I let the pause hold as if I expected an answer, and then I went on as if I'd got one.

"Yes. So let's work it! Look, for all Dracula knows, Catwoman is just Bruce Wayne's girlfriend. I should have no idea he exists, let alone that he's after me. And he has no

idea who you are, so you can keep an eye on the party and me without either of them knowing Batman is even in the room."

"There's a flaw in your logic, Kitten. You wouldn't be the only one in danger. I would also be putting all of Bruce Wayne's guests at risk. There is no way to guarantee everyone's safety, and I absolutely will not risk that."

It took me a minute to process everything he said after "Kitten". I expected an objection, but I wasn't ready for the endearment. I had thought all the objections would come from Psychobat, but Psychobat does not call me Kitten.

"Bruce, don't take this the wrong way," I said finally, "But your guests are kind of in danger no matter what. I mean, the party itself is a target whether we're there or not. Those people are a hell of a lot safer with you there in the room, instead of wandering the city chasing shadows while Gotham's wealthiest citizens are all in one place, dancing around, drinking easily-poisoned punch and wearing convenient fang-concealing masks."

There was one of those leaden density shifts that had Alfred quietly coughing and withdrawing without a word. Batman said nothing either. I had him. There was just one more thing to say. Something he knew as well as everything that had been said so far, but he needed to hear it from someone else.

"And even if none of that were true," I said quietly. "If there was no party or if was somehow possible to cancel it, they'd still be in danger just living in Gotham. The only way to end that is to end Dracula. If we can do it sooner rather than later..."

A growl. His hands vanished under the cape so I wouldn't see his fists clench. I knew that under the cowl, his brows would be furrowed with angry, roiling thought. But thought was thought. Batman's thoughts inevitably turned into action, and action was what we needed.

"I'm going after Batgirl, and I am going to find Robin and Nightwing. Before we act on this Plan." He thrust a finger at me "I want to know what's happened to my team. Understood? While I'm out, I want you and Alfred to procure these materials." He whirled impressively on the Batcomputer and tapped out, with equally impressive typing speed, a list of what would have been befuddling technical jargon to anyone who wasn't as intimately familiar as the both of us were with high-tech security systems.

Victory. But now was not the time for gloating.

"Sure thing, handsome," I said neutrally as he passed me the list, already ticking off suppliers both legit and black-market in my head. He then stalked off to the Batmobile without another word. I watched him get in the car, fire it up and fly off.

Alone with the bats, I felt a sudden wave of dizziness hit me. The stress and long hours of this case must have been wearing on me as much as they were on Bruce. With my shoulders aching like I'd been swinging from rooftops all night in a lead cape, I felt I owed myself a nice hot bath and that new lavender shampoo. After making the calls for Bruce, I promised myself just that. Stretching, I gave Walapang a little glare as I dodged a falling glob of guano and made for the stairs.

Dracula had led Bruce and I on a frustrating chase. I admit it, I was curious. The Cat in me wanted to see him face to face, see what kind of man he really was and what we were up against. That was a small addendum to the plan I hadn't told Bruce about. I

was looking forward to meeting Dracula – so I could claw the hell out of him for screwing with Gotham, with my city, my Rogues, my Robins, and my Bruce.

Vlad the Impaler Junior needed an update in pain, and as serious as the situation was, I was starting to really look forward to giving him one.

Batgirl dropped over the edge of the balcony with a silence that a tabi-shod ninja would envy and readied her weaponry. Trailing the vampires across the city had been a pleasant challenge. The undead creatures moved supernaturally fast and quiet and left very little evidence of their passage, but she had followed what there was to the ancient church on the corner of Lang and Furst.

She sensed something was wrong as soon as she touched the balcony - a lingering heat in the tiles beneath her feet; a faint acrid smell in the air. Smoke, and where there's smoke...

It was too risky to open the balcony doors in case of backdraft; but if there was any chance of Dracula or his offspring being inside she could not risk calling the fire department and possibly putting the firefighters on their menu.

It took her one minute and forty eight seconds to find another way in.

At first there was little sign of fire; no recent structural damage, just the forlorn faces of dust-caked saints watching her from where the quake had tossed them in pieces to the floor. She passed the nave, the rotted pews, and climbed toward the belltower, whose balcony she had first attempted.

It was in one of the upper chambers of the tower that she found the room. It may once have contained a spectacular stained-glass window, but most of the glass had been shattered by the quake and replaced with plain security glass by the initial, half-hearted attempts to repair the church. Moonlight crept visibly through the smoke-thickened air; here was where the fire had burned.

But it had not been lit to burn down the church. It was far too localized for that.

After testing the air in the room to discern that the smoke was not enough to warrant wearing her gas mask, Cass entered and found six iron poles whose sharpened points nearly brushed the ceiling. Each was encrusted with charcoal and grime, and each was adorned with a reeking lump of something that Cassandra was quick to identify as a partial, charred skeleton.

Six bodies, all burned beyond recognition. Four had crumbled almost completely to ash and lay in piles on the floor; of the remaining two only one still held its shape enough to be recognizable as a former human being. There were no ropes or wires holding them to the poles; with an uncomfortable jolt Cass realized that the bodies had not been strapped to the poles, per se...

She did not have the physical repulsion to the thought that others may have, but it brought back unpleasant memories of her father. She fought them back down as she rounded the corpses, noting that the fire, while apparently possessing heat intense enough to warm the very stones of the balcony floor above this one, had spread no further than a tight ring around the poles, despite the close proximity of motheaten curtains and dusty wooden furniture to ignite.

While she was pondering what kind of flammable chemical would behave this way, she moved to the front of the least-defaced body, preparing to secure the teeth so that Batman could check the dental records and find out who this person was and why he or she had been ki-

Except the teeth, inexplicably, were just as brittle as the rest of the body, and as soon as she touched them the entire corpse collapsed into flakes of fine grey ash. But not before she had seen that the canines on the corpse, like the other, were elongated to a daggerlike point.

Vampires.

Dracula was killing his own kind.

It explained the unusual burn pattern, and the brittle nature of the corpses. They had been positioned facing east, in a chamber with windows that would catch the rays of sunrise.

According to the diary, as Batman had briefed his team, sunlight was not fatal to Dracula and his brood. But other strains of vampire did not share the specific powers of his bloodline. Batgirl realized with a jolt that these vampires must belong to a rival clan, which meant that unless he had lured them to the city from elsewhere, there must have been vampires in Gotham before Dracula arrived.

She commed it in to Batman.

::...it's not possible. I would have known:::

:::But -:::

:::*I would have known*:::

:::Sure. That not problem though. What Dracula doing?:::

::: Territorial. Like an old lion. He's cleaning house to make way for his own bloodline to take over. Those vampires are probably the heads of rival bloodlines he's kidnapped and brought here. Which means his plans extend beyond Gotham.....:

:::Orders?:::

:::Stay where you are. I'm already on the way. We'll rendezvous and I'll examine the remaining body myself. B. out:::

Cass didn't like the faint chastisement for having destroyed the evidence in his voice. She had followed procedure, how was she to have known? Sighing as she put down the com, Cassandra turned to the remaining corpse.

"This totally your fault. Jerk-face."

However, in the silence that came with the absence of the com's voice and her own, Cass felt a prickle at the nape of her neck. Something was wrong. Creeping toward the rear of the room, batarang ready, she saw two silhouettes crouched in the dark that she had somehow missed before, moving -

As her eyes adjusted, they widened in shock.

"Tim?"

Tim, Tim and ...Selina. Twined in each other's arms, kissing passionately. She backed away, blinking, and Tim raised his head, flushed cheeks glowing.

"Sorry, Cass. I guess I just needed someone who knows what she's doing. You know, like a teacher..."

Selina joined him in a mocking chuckle. Pulling her Tim against that perfect, curvy body that she knew how to use as Cass never could. "Nothing personal, little girl, you just weren't up to the job. It's not where your talents are. You should stick to..."

"No-" Cass blinked back tears, feeling every muscle in her body tense with rage and confusion.

"...what you're good at." Another voice. Her father's. She whirled to find him bearing down on her, eyes hard. "What I raised you to do. You think Batman can teach you better than I could? He's as big a coward as you are. What a waste of power...what a waste of effort...what a waste of a daughter."

"NO!" She flung a vicious roundhouse kick to his head – he shouldn't be here – Tim shouldn't be here – not with Selina – she would never – he would never – something was horribly wrong. Her kick didn't connect and she couldn't think why. She just had to get away, had to get out -

She sprinted for the door, but it was already slamming, and locked the moment her weight struck it.

David Cain was laughing at her, his laughter mingling with Tim's and Selina's. Her eyes stung as she saw Batman join them, standing beside Cain, laughing with him. He didn't need to say a word to express why he was there – her training at his hands had been a trick, a lie, a dupe planned by her father to build up her hopes, just to break her last will to resist -

Cass shook her head hard and squeezed her eyes shut, fighting it, focusing on her training to bring her breath and heartbeat under control. Only then did her sharp hearing picked up an almost inaudible hiss. Looking down, she saw faint wisps of vapour crawling up through the wide cracks in the stone floor. Not smoke.

Gas. Odorless and almost invisible.

Scarecrow.

She would need a fireaxe to break through the thick, aged wood and the space was too close for a grenade. Cursing, she reached to slip on her breather, fully aware that it was already too late, and spun a batarang through the illusory Batman, but it simply rebounded off the 'replacement' window.

Plexiglass. Not from the quake repairs, either. She was trapped.

Something collided with her back and she whirled, striking on instinct, connecting with something but feeling it spring away in the dark. From the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of a gruesome, stitched-burlap mask and wisps of decaying straw protruding from a tattered wide-brim hat.

The fear in her turned to fury. She'd make that scrawny bastard pay. She chased him as he floated away, flying, even as the room elongated like a shot from a Hitchcock film. She couldn't seem to catch him. He disappeared into the darkness near the ceiling, and she felt air at her back, dodging as Scarecrow reappeared behind her, swinging a sickle at her, laughing hideously. With a harsh cry Cassandra struck, so hard she tore his head clean off and hurled it to the floor.

But it didn't stop him. Another laughing Scarecrow sprang up to her left, and she plunged her foot through his thin chest with frightening ease. He split to pieces, and Cassandra paused, breathing heavily, staring at the sundered remains.

Dummies stuffed with straw. Swinging from the ceiling supports on hangman's ropes.

She could see a small recording device protruding from the 'neck' of the one she had decapitated, Scarecrow's laughter echoing out of it. Then, it spoke.

:::Hush little baby, don't say a word...mama's gonna bury your mockingbird...:::

Cassandra ignored it – all of it – turning back to the door, collecting her thoughts. Maybe if she planted a smaller detonator at the hinges...she just had to cross the dark expanse of the room. It was less than fifty feet, but the darkness seethed with unseen terrors and her limbs were so tensed and coiled, she couldn't move. The distance seemed insurmountable.

She closed her eyes for a moment, steeled herself and pushed forward. Ignore the vision of her father, his skin melting away into a laughing skull. Ignore the dismembered Scarecrow-dolls, screaming on the floor, with dead birds squeezing out of their mask-sockets like ugly tears.

Not real. Not real. Not real. Ignore the fake Tim and Selina, merging into a two-headed monster. Ignore the wisps of fear gas rising from the floor, coalescing into four pale men with grinning, razor smiles-

The first one clotheslined her as she attempted to walk past him, hurling her against the wall with a jolt of very real pain. It drew her focus sharply to the new figures, now advancing on her with teeth bared like angry, rabid dogs.

No, she thought, don't ignore those.

Cassandra narrowed her eyes and flipped to her feet. Her hands fumbled for the com but she couldn't find it even though she knew where it should be. Seizing control of her mind-altered state as best she could, Cass finally found the com and shouted ::B, BACKUP NOW!:: Just as the first vampire snarled and lunged at her, and she was forced to dodge slashing talons protruding from once-human fingers.

She flattened against the wall, ducked under another swipe and kicked the vampire in the ribs. It fell back from the impact but registered no pain, and immediately came back after her even as the second one circled and lunged from the right.

Clumsy but fast, frighteningly fast, and while she could see four in front of her, there were more that only appeared in the corners of her eyes, disappearing when she looked for them. It was the fear gas, no question. She had to find a moment – had to get away – to inject herself with Batman's cure – but the vampires were all over her. Talons slashed her shoulder. She caught one's arm and hurled it over herself.

Judo worked; no matter how strong they were, they seemed to weigh less than a normal person. If she'd been lucid she might've put that down to a living human body being 75% water and most of that blood. She pinned the vampire she had thrown and viciously dislocated its shoulder.

No scream of pain. Nothing.

Flashing fangs, hateful, snarling faces. No pain. She fell back as they came at her. Too fast, right there every time she dodged. No pain. No feelings. No humanity. The toxin, the unnatural aura of the undead creatures and the primal, animal panic of being trapped by them wore away at Batman's training, at her inhibitions, at everything she had fought so hard to learn...

Somehow one got behind her and iron-strong arms wrapped around her body. She could see its gleaming fangs bared and its jaws open wide right behind her ear. Another one came in from the front, going for her throat like a starving wolf.

They're dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. DEAD THINGS! DIE!

Panic rose. Instinct overruled reason. Training that had been hammered into her in her formative years took command and she slipped her arms free enough to grab the

vampire in front of her by the shirt and tug it forward, slamming its forehead into the head of the vampire behind her. As both reeled back, she reversed the batarang in her hand.

What happened next was a blur. A white-hot, screaming fury overtook her and she was dimly aware of her body performing motions she had not used since her early years.

It was so fast. So easy. She barely had time to feel the batarang's point pierce the first vampire's chest before she was thrusting it into the second. As the first went down a surge of overwhelming relief shot through her - overwhelming freedom. She swung and stabbed and struck with lethal, vicious speed and berserker abandon, at every ghost in the corner of her eyes-

A vast black shadow swept up in front of her and she stabbed furiously at it; it countered her, darting back, dancing around her. Taunting her. With a wild shriek she pursued it. She was vaguely conscious of a sound it was making, pounding loudly in her ears. Crescent kick, right hook, block, elbow strike - it matched her patterns move for move. Again that sound! She had to kill it, cut it down, make it go awa-

"CASSANDRA!"

"DIE DIE DIE DEAD THING DIE!" It caught her wrist and knocked the batarang away; deprived of her weapon, she kicked it hard in the chest; as its other hand caught her foot she twisted and roundhoused it in the face. But it wasn't down long; as she turned to run it was in front of her, fighting her again -

"CASSANDRA!"

She had to kill it, had to kill it, had to get awa-

"BATGIRL!"

The haze cleared suddenly from her head. Her eyes focused on the silhouette before her; the familiar, pointed ears of the cowl. The familiar strength in the arm blocking hers.

Batman faced her, breathing hard. "Cass. Calm down. I'm here. It's okay."

She blinked in confusion, for a moment completely unable to process where she was or what she was doing. Then she saw the light from the open doorway behind him; the door lay on the floor, its hinges blown. The gas was clearing.

She looked down and around herself.

Four rapidly-decomposing vampires, strewn about her, limbs twisted and broken. A bloody batarang on the floor. The look in Bruce's eyes told the rest.

"I-I-I..."

"Cass..."

She collapsed against Bruce's shoulder, sobbing. He wrapped her up in the cape, awkwardly stroking her hair. She felt the sting of the needle as he injected fear-gas antitoxin in her upper arm, and led her out of the room.

He paused at the Batmobile, watching her climb in. There must've been something in her expression that warranted it.

"It's okay."

But she knew it wasn't.

“Don’t you dare blame her for this, Bruce.”

It was spoken softly and without any trace of her usual sass, but it surprised me anyway. I turned from Cassandra, asleep in the Batcave’s medical wing, to Selina beside me. She was giving me a serious, warning look.

“She’s dangerous.” I meant no malice toward Cass. I wasn’t angry with her. But what had happened was far beyond serious. It jeopardized – everything. Why couldn’t Selina see that “Cain’s training was embedded further into her psyche than I could have imagined. With her skills, if this happened again...if she turned those capabilities on living people -”

“Bruce, she’s a teenaged girl. She was locked in a room with four undead monsters trying to kill her, armed only with a batarang and poisoned by hallucinogenic fear gas. And she *won*. You should be proud of her.”

“She didn’t win, Selina, she killed them.”

“Then you should damn well be glad they died and she lived.”

It hit me like a sucker-punch to the stomach.

It was a low blow and she knew it. She knew deep down I wasn’t thinking about my code against killing. I was feeling enormous relief that Cassandra was lying here safely recovering. Even as I was troubled by what she had done, I was fighting off terror at what might have...

I couldn’t lie to myself. I was thinking about Jason Todd and Stephanie Brown.

“If it had been anyone else, you know it wouldn’t have ended this way. We got lucky, Bruce.”

I still didn’t reply, but I knew she was right. If it had been Dick or Tim in the same situation, their chances of survival would have been slim. They are both excellent and well-trained crimefighters, but the capacity to survive hand to hand combat with four meta-level opponents at once, in that situation, required abilities as lethal as Cassandra Cain’s. She had lived because she had killed, and I would never be able to forget it.

“It was deliberate.” I finally found the gravel spilling out, walking away from Cass and sitting at the computer, analyzing the trap. “From the moment she entered that room she was in the gauntlet. There would be no time to use her gadgets or nonlethal techniques once they attacked. The only way to survive was to kill those vampires. They used the fear gas to ‘encourage’ her to do just that.”

The trap combined Scarecrow’s fear-toxin tricks and deathtrap experience with a chess-master psychological strategy I was beginning to attribute to Dracula. They had clearly worked together to design a trap with two possible outcomes – either the victim would be killed by the four vampires, or they would cross the line I refused to cross.

I knew from Selina’s expression that she knew why that sent a cold crawl into my spine.

That trap had been meant for me.

Into the awkward silence came a bleeping Oracom.

::::B, it’s ‘Wing:::

Relief flooded into me and I seized the com at my belt. In that moment, I knew what it felt like to be a father. I felt the overwhelming need to see Dick with my own eyes, to know he was safe, and the desire to tell him so.

“Nightwing, report.” Graveled out instead.

Sometimes, I hate Batman more than anyone will ever know.

...I'm safe, I'm with Jason Blood...: But something in his voice had the hairs at the back of my neck prickling. I went dead silent, listening as he continued, his words hurried and jumbled.

I'm safe, he had said.

...He turned into ...yeah...something mean and yellow and did some kind of magic pulse that drove the vamps off. But it fried my Oracom. Just fixed it now. I'm sorry...:

"What's your status now?"

Dick faded into static. I growled at the com. "Nightwing, what is your current status?"

...Ivy...when they retreated...she grabbed...there were vines everywhere, I couldn't get there in-...:

The lead heartbeat between those words and the next caught in my throat.

...B, they've got Tim...:

The white noise from the damaged com and the squeal of my fingers crushing the one in my hand were the only sounds. Selina's face was pale and expressionless in the corner of my eye.

...I don't...know where they took him. Jason and I chased them but we lost the trail. They just vanished. Even with his magic we couldn't...they could be anywhere, B...:

I slipped off the cowl and ran my hands over my face. I knew what I had to do.

"Stay with Blood and follow his orders." I could barely believe I was saying it, but I had to admit that by Jason Blood's side was the safest place to be right now. "Keep me informed as to your position and status."

...B, I'm -...:

"NO ARGUMENT." It came out with a ferocity that jolted me even as I said it. It squashed the 'my own man' retort I knew would be on Dick's lips. Had he picked up on my voice cracking the way I knew Selina had?

"No argument, Dick." We used codenames on the com. We always used codenames on the com. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself this time, no matter the risk. I had to let him know I was speaking to him not as Batman, but as – "Please. Just trust me and stay with Jason. He will need your help. This...this is something I-"

A glimpse of the other face in the room forced me to amend that, "-something Selina and I have to do ourselves."

...Roger...: he said quietly, and hung up the com.

Her hand came to my shoulder. "We'd better get ready for the ball."

Closing my eyes, I nodded once. She slid her arms around me from behind and held me tightly. We knew each other's thoughts without speaking them.

There was no going back from here.

Halloween.

Gotham celebrated it in muted fashion. No gaudy parades and trick-or-treat here; not in Gotham city, not in a city where wearing a costume carried entirely different and entirely more dangerous connotations. Oh, they'd done it for a while; Gotham used to have a Halloween gala like any other big American city, a parade ending in a concert in Riverside Park.

All those teeming thousands in their home-made or shop-bought monsters and devils and witches, so few of them aware that from where he had stood, they had so quaintly echoed the wild Bacchanalian rites of old...

The partygoers had already done half of his work for him, dressing up like that. Scarecrow had simply hijacked the suppliers of fog machines for the concert's visual effects, and very soon those laughable costumes had produced a very different reaction in the crowd.

It had been a Halloween scream to make those old-time Maenads chortle. Gotham didn't have Halloween parades anymore.

Jonathan Crane ruminated on this as he stood on the bridge over Gotham harbour, waiting for his sign.

A flock of black bats swept westward overhead; he knew they were not the Gotham variety. Nor were they the hated Caped Crusader's pets.

Crane smiled. His time had finally come.

CHAPTER 13: MASQUERADE

Halloween in Gotham had been a muted affair for years now, deemed too dangerous in the light of the maniacs running around in the city to celebrate with large, public festivities - not since that concert parade when Scarecrow had poisoned half the crowd through the fog machines and induced a panicked riot. Partygoers had fled in terror from the horrors and demons that were really just Uncle Bob in red paint with a cardboard trident and Little Molly from down the street in a plastic goblin mask. Ironically, his efforts to inject actual primal terror into Halloween had been the primary contributor to the City's decision to tone down the festivities, effectively killing the holiday in the eyes of Gothamites.

But a holiday spirit was a hard thing to keep dead, and Halloween wanted out of its crypt, badly. So it became a private affair, celebrated indoors with friends, booze and horror movies. Costumes became optional, and tended to theme themselves around the city's criminal celebrities; it was more common in Gotham to see a Mr Freeze or Catwoman at a Halloween party than a witch or a werewolf.

Notably, however, it was considered poor taste to dress as a scarecrow of any kind. Or a clown, for that matter...

That left the only big Halloween events for those too rich and bored to care if a costumed psychopath hijacked their evening to provide extracurricular entertainment. It somehow slipped under the radar of the Wigglesworths and Muffingtons that Rogues, no matter how colourful, were dangerous master criminals who spent a good deal of their time - with the exception of a particular kitty - either behind bars in the hardest prisons on this coast or twitching in padded cells in Arkham. The fact that a few of them, like the Joker, were amoral mass-murderers who'd killed more people than some terminal diseases also seemed to bounce off the illusory shield of wealth and status that protected the High Society crowd in their own minds.

Thus, the Wayne Foundation Halloween Masquerade Ball.

As I watched Bruce drive, with his eyes fixed on the road as if he could simply stare the venue into coming closer, I wondered if I should remind him that he had originally set up the annual Ball for similar reasons to the ones I'd brought up in the cave.

Bruce Wayne always hosted the Ball, because he knew full well that if he didn't have a big shindig for the rich and famous to flock to on Halloween, someone would. Better to have them all under his watchful eye in the ballroom of a five-star hotel he owned with security systems he had put in place than congregated at some swanky nightclub or private residence, where it would be so easy to slip fear toxin into the punch or pump Smilex through the ventilation system.

The timing of the event was calculated; it was held within a day or two of Halloween, but never on the 31st itself. For the partygoers, that was a mild inconvenience at best; they'd get their Halloween fix regardless, and Bruce made sure they were too hungover come Halloween morning to keep partying in the evening. But

he knew to the obsessive mind of a Rogue, 'a day before Halloween' or 'the day after Halloween' would never do for a crime spree; it had to be on the exact date or never.

Bruce also held the Ball at a different venue every year, cycling between Wayne-owned hotels and surreptitiously revamping the security every time to thwart anyone planning an attack in advance. The location of the Ball for the year was mailed out only a day before the event in a sealed envelope to an exclusive shortlist; the guests, of course, thought it was just a game to add mystery to the event.

Once the entire guest list had arrived, security guards would close the hotel and the Ball would begin. No one was allowed in or out until the closing speech, usually given by Lucius Fox, a more eloquent public speaker than 'Fop' Wayne. What seemed to be a hidden show of extravagance for the eyes of Gotham's elite only was in fact an iron-strong cocoon protecting them from the Night. Bruce knew the way Rogues thought; they wouldn't attack some suburban house party for no reason, but they might target a gathering of the *crème-de-la-crème* simply because it'd make the news, and as Bruce Wayne, Batman was uniquely poised to thwart them. That all revenue raised went straight to the Foundation's good work was simply his way of killing two birds with one stone.

The security and secrecy of the Halloween Ball had so far prevented any successful Rogue attacks, but this year, Bruce had been too distracted chasing the Count to organize it as he always did. Well-meaning but clueless, the Foundation had arranged the hotel and sent out the invitations, and someone had thought it a novel idea to hold the event, for once, exactly on Halloween. They had also chosen to theme it as a gothic Masquerade.

Add me in a slinky dress, and it was the perfect trap for Dracula.

But I could tell from Bruce's expression that the idea did not sit well with him. I knew he'd been buying time to make an excuse for me not to go right up until Dick's call. But now, with Cass out of action and Tim's life in danger, there was no time and no choice. We had to bring Dracula out of hiding, take him down, and save Tim, and we had to do it all tonight.

Getting dressed for the ball had been weird as hell. I'd never known that slipping into a silk dress and applying perfume could feel so much like a 'lock 'n load' scene from a bad commando movie. Watching Bruce slip on his tie felt like I was watching Batman suit up for a mission; Heck, I felt like I was Batman suiting up for a mission. Putting on Catwoman had never been associated with this kind of cold, purposeful intensity. It'd followed us into the car, squashing all conversation. But there was no way I was going to a freaking party like this. We had to loosen up or Drac would see through us like a glass-bottomed boat.

I tried to break the silence.

"Bruce."

No reply.

"Hey, honey. Eyes this way a second."

A glare. It jolted me for a moment before I realized he wasn't scowling at me, he simply hadn't changed the stare he'd been using on the road. He still said nothing.

"I know this sucks. I know it isn't the best plan and we don't have time to make another, but don't forget to smile." A beat. I bounced it off him again – "Because we're

going to a ball, Bruce. You need to put Tim out of your mind for a few moments and at least pretend--

Those go on last." Pure Batman gravel. The person sitting next to me was barely a shell of Bruce Wayne, CEO of Wayne Enterprises. My mind's eye kept conjuring an imaginary cape and cowl around him and it was making my stomach turn somersaults.

"Huh?"

"Smiles. They go on last." It took me another moment to realize he was talking about a facial expression as if it were a piece of equipment to be activated before entering the fray. It made me flash back to how intense he'd been when Steph died. It made me thank God I hadn't been around for Jason. "Do you have your piece?"

"Yeah". I did. My left earring hid a tiny Oracom; it was a fairly obvious place for one, by Rogue standards, but we figured the Count wouldn't be so modernized as to pick it up. We hoped.

"Take mine." Bruce passed me a larger com from the glove box. "And call this number. It's a secure line."

I blinked. "Who am I calling? The League? I thought you didn't want them involved."

"Not the League. A friend."

"Got something planned?" It perked me up. Even at a tense moment like this, damn him, he knew how to throw me a ball of string.

"No. Just a contingency." He flicked his eyes to me and back to the road. "If Dracula slips us tonight..." He shook his head. "Would you mind making the call?" It was unexpected courteous tone amid all the commanding gravel. It piqued my interest even further.

"Sure thing, handsome." Burning with curiosity, I glanced up to see the shadow of the hotel drawing closer. Taking a deep breath, I punched the number.

James Turnbull thumbed down the list and rubbed his aching temples. Figuring out which Rolls Royce Ms. C. Muffington would be bringing to the Halloween ball this year would not be half as challenging as anticipating whose she would go home in, and that made things awkward for the valets at the Royal Birmingham Hotel when it came to what to do with the vehicles that remained in the parking zone in the morning.

James, 'Jimmy T.' to his friends, was a strong proponent of organization. The last time the ball had been hosted at the R.B, three years ago, Bruce Wayne himself had passed a memo down the chain of command to make sure the guest list was checked and doublechecked, the vehicles secured, and any uninvited guests turned away at the door. Wayne had the reputation of being a rich kid playboy who had more money and free time to play with it than he had sense or restraint, but his wealth and position and the fact that he owned the hotel made his word law as far as Jimmy was concerned.

Besides, Wayne Enterprises was always in the black despite Mr. Wayne's layabout rep, actively donating huge sums of money to charity, scientific research and urban development. Jimmy knew this. He read the Wall Street journal every day. The way Jimmy figured it, Wayne must have some kind of head for business behind it all, and Jimmy liked his job. Mr. Wayne was known as an easygoing, reasonable employer.

If only his circle of friends were quite so amiable. He had just spent half an hour listening to an irate Gladys Ashton-Larraby complain about her seating to the receptionist at the front desk; clearly they were unaware of her status and her position at the table absolutely must be closer to the host and the main stage. Her husband had managed to calm her down slightly but Jimmy could still hear the occasional sharp word.

He cringed. Sally, the receptionist, was patient and a darling and Jimmy was half-sure he was in love with her. She really didn't deserve a Gladys-browbeating for what was ultimately the Foundation chairwoman's mistake. If Mr. Wayne had been here to organize the event in person, Jimmy knew, none of this would've happened.

He now found himself faced with Penelope and Angela Vraag, who had helpfully worn colour-coded masks and costumes to make telling them apart easier. It hadn't worked; it only meant Jimmy didn't have their faces as a reference point. He resorted to politely addressing them as "Ms. Vraag, Ms. Vraag," and leading both of them and their dates to the ballroom, before returning to his post to await the arrival of the last unchecked names on the guest list.

"Oh, Jimmy, won't you take these?" Bunny Wigglesworth, glittering head to toe with sequins and toting a porcelain half-mask plumed with peacock feathers, dangled her car keys in Jimmy's face. He'd have been flattered if he'd thought she had actually remembered his name; unfortunately, his nametag was clearly visible and he knew that woman's tactics all too well, "-and tell me, has darling Claudia arrived yet?"

Apparently, Bunny and Claudia Muffington had recently started a competition to be the most fashionably late to each society event; a complication that made Jimmy's job at a closed-guest-list event like this that much more of a pain. He was thus somewhat delighted to inform Ms. Wigglesworth that 'darling Claudia' had misread the time on the invitation and arrived half an hour early, and to look for the Swan Princess dancing with the Phantom of the Opera by the punch bowl.

Bunny's eyes glittered victoriously, and she giggled over the arm of her – is that fourth or fifth husband now? – all the way to the ballroom.

Which left two names unchecked, surprisingly late; Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle. Jimmy had to admit he was a little nervous. Mr. Wayne he knew, but Ms. Kyle had not been with him the last time and everyone knew who she was. He made a note not to make any kind of badly-timed cat puns. This would be Jimmy's first face to face encounter with a notorious Gotham criminal. He was nervous, scared, excited. Now if only they would show up...

"Evening, Jimmy." Mr. Wayne, right on cue, "Happy Halloween. How's the guest list coming?"

Jimmy felt his back tense; not because Wayne was particularly scary, nor even the knowledge he was about to come face to face with Catwoman; but he hadn't heard either of them approach, and Jimmy was an attentive fellow, usually very hard to sneak up on...

"All here, Mr Wayne, sir." He managed to get out, thumbing through the couple of pages and trying to keep his eyes off the stunning brunette at Mr Wayne's side. She noticed his look and smiled warmly at him.

Jimmy fumbled with the pen. He hadn't really known what to expect; a sneer, or at least someone who looked hardened and dangerous, maybe. He hadn't expected gorgeous.

Wayne was dressed in a slick, ultra-expensive black dinner suit, of course, though he wasn't wearing a mask of any kind; maybe nobody had told him it was going to be a masquerade, since they seem to have organized it without his knowledge this year; Jimmy noted he was wearing a tie patterned with goofy-looking pumpkin faces, the kind of touch a rich idiot with no day job would find thunderously appropriate.

But she was wearing a floor-length satin evening gown in rich, dark violet, almost black, slit up one long bare leg and tall heels that made an intimidatingly sexy click on the hotel floor. She hadn't gone for the gothic masquerade look at all, unlike the rest of the crowd he'd let in, half of whom were near asphyxiating in their faux-eighteenth-century ballroom dresses. And she wasn't wearing or carrying a masque; Jimmy didn't know if he'd expected her to be wearing some kind of panther or jaguar mask, but he did note she was wearing a hairpin, conspicuous by her ear and failing to hold back her wild raven tresses at all, in the shape of a cat. If he hadn't known who she was already, that would've been his only hint.

Wayne seemed oblivious to the amount of attention the valet was paying to his date, flicking a breathmint in the air and catching it in his mouth. Ms. Kyle, however, didn't skip a beat, and flashed Jimmy a small wink. "Better doublecheck." She said as the two moved on to the ballroom – "Just to be sure."

Jimmy T. swallowed, glanced after them, and caught a humbling scowl from Sally at reception.

What a night. Jimmy would be glad to see the end of it; he turned to doublecheck the list and send security the go-ahead to close everything up, and nearly bumped into a tall man, accompanied by two stunning women he was sure he had seen somewhere before.

"Good evening."

Jimmy looked up at the newcomer. "I'm sorry, sir. May I have your name?"

"V. Lucarda. Party of three."

"I'm sorry, sir, but your name's not on the—"

He coughed slightly, catching a strange, heavy perfume in the air. Glancing up, his eyes caught those of the woman on the man's left arm, the lovely redhead; through the mask, her eyes were startlingly intense, and he found himself unable to pull his gaze away.

"Perhaps you should look again." the man suggested, and Jimmy did so, his eyes swimming. He was sure he could make out the name Lucarda on the list. Where did that headache come from? The names on the list were blurring in and out, but he was sure he could see 'Lucarda', right there under Mr Wayne's. How had he missed it before?

He then remembered, vaguely, a V. Lucarda from the party three years ago. European, from the accent, old money, maybe a banker or the heir to some old aristocratic house. Was that right? Jimmy couldn't quite place it, but the sense of *deja-vu* was strong. Yes, he'd surely seen this man there.

"Right, Mr Lucarda. Go right on in."

"Thank you, my dear friend."

Ball gowns swished and twirled; champagne glasses clinked, and laughter tinkled and bubbled – sometimes screeched – from the hubbub of conversation that surrounded the rich and senseless of Gotham City.

After the opening speech by Lucius, and Bruce fumbling with the mic to declare the Wayne Foundation Halloween Charity Ball commenced, Bruce and Selina gave a turn of the floor, earning a few envious glances from the bimbos congregated around the edge of the room like vultures around a Serengeti watering hole waiting for some poor buck to get mired in the mud. Their eyes quietly scanned the room as they turned, but neither could see any sign of an uninvited guest. Though the masks made it hard to tell who was who, Bruce and Selina were both masters of reading body language and it wasn't hard to pick the familiar crowd.

After the song, Selina broke away, as was planned, brushing Bruce's arm affectionately as she hip-swayed across the room to lean languidly on the bar and order another glass of fine red. This gave Claudia Muffington the window to pounce, again, as was planned, leaving him occupied and distracted while Selina lounged boredly at the bar, waiting to catch the tender's attention.

"Look at them," came a voice, not as planned, as an uncharacteristically somber Richard Flay - dressed as Louis XVI - appeared next to her, shaking his head, "a little sad isn't it?" He took a sip of sherry and gave her a wry smile. "I hadn't really thought of it quite this way until now, but something about the mood and the dress code really made it leap to my mind."

"Hmm? What's that?" Selina turned to rest her elbows on the bar and lean back on it, crossing her legs and eyeing the room full of puffy skirts and lace and painted masks.

"Gotham's aristocracy," he coughed quietly, "at least, that's what we're all pretending to be. A family that goes back a few generations, or has roots in the Old World, and enough money to afford a few yachts and mansions and we're considering ourselves royalty." Another sip. "But we're the only ones playing this game. Do you think any of the punters even know who Bunny Wigglesworth is, let alone care who she's married this week? Your darling Bruce gets a few mentions in the paper, and his name's on a lot of buildings, but come on, Selina."

"Richard, honey, it's way too early in the night for that kind of talk. Just what have you been drinking?" She pulled his glass over, jokingly peering into it, and he laughed.

"Oh, don't mind my waxing philosophical. My point is, there isn't a single person in this room who'd have more pull with the public than, say, Angelina Jolie or Steven Spielberg if they walked in here. Or even, God help us, Fifty Cent. We in Gotham's upper-crust might have more money and certainly more taste-" he sniffed "-but the only society we're important to is our own. You don't see us in the tabloids or the gossip rags. Nobody cares. Celebrity, that's the real modern aristocracy. Pop singers, rappers and movie stars...even those of a, if you'll pardon me, criminal bent." He eyed her knowingly, taking another sip. "Catwoman, for example, or Two-Face or the Joker. Everyone knows who they are. The public loves to hate them. Every time one of the Rogue's Gallery pulls a crime and the headlines start rolling, the whole city stops to stare in train-wreck fascination and pretends to be outraged. But they're lapping it up. Like Paris Hilton's latest publicity stunt, except with more police tape and arrest warrants. Amazing, isn't it?"

"It has its downsides," she made a face, wondering what he was trying to get at. He had to know she was thinking of the Post debacle right away.

Richard finished the sherry and twirled the glass deftly between his fingers, and got to the point. "Did you hear they're making a Batman movie? There's darling irony there, don't you agree?"

Selina had to give Richard this; he had bigger balls than any straight man she'd ever met who wasn't wearing a cape and pointy-eared cowl.

Which had to make her wonder about Batman.

"Pardon me again, dear," said Richard, offering his arm, "Shall we?"

Her fortune in luring Dracula seemingly thwarted, Selina cast a quick glance over her shoulder before acquiescing with a lopsided smile and a hand slid to his arm.

Jonathan Crane drew in a slow, deep breath behind the horrid burlap mask that obscured his features. He fought to keep a less-than-terrifying spring from his step that might have drawn unfortunate comparisons with a certain other scarecrow. But he couldn't help thinking, himself, that he was nearing the end of the Yellow Brick Road.

And leading the legions of Fear along it in his wake. He glanced down at the artifice in his hand.

Otis Flanagan, the Ratcatcher, was a rare visitor to Arkham Asylum. Like the Penguin, he had been profiled by psychologists as at worst eccentric, and more often wound up at Blackgate, but on rare occasions, his eccentricity was judged worthy of study and the staff of Arkham Asylum had brought him into their premises.

The last time had been around seven months ago, when Batman had caught him trying to lead his rats to ruin a restaurant chain run by an old high school bully. Blockmates, he and the Scarecrow had begun a sort of camaraderie, built upon a shared love of things that others found repulsive.

At this point, Jonathan Crane was already working for Mr. Volkoslak of Danesti Pharmaceuticals.

Otis Flanagan had been pleased to finally have a human who understood his fascination with the shadowy lives of Gotham's vermin population. Crane had lured him, little by little, with teasing hints that his own next scheme might involve a rodent element, and little by little Flanagan, his interest piqued, had revealed his own secrets – how his power to control rats was a combination of his deep knowledge of the animals' behavioral patterns, certain sounds and chemical odors he produced to steer them where he wished, and an almost supernatural affinity he was at a loss to explain.

Crane had explained that he, as a psychologist, was interested in the possible existence of psychic fields; the idea that a person's brain might produce electromagnetic or electrochemical signals unknown to science that might affect other living things on hitherto unexpected levels. Once both men had been released by Arkham, Crane had magnanimously invited Otis to take part in his experiment and see if there really was a psychic explanation for his power over rats.

The Ratcatcher had agreed.

The result was the object that now rested in Crane's spindly grip; a device that mimicked the unusual 'pulse' emanating from the brain of Otis Flanagan. A device that

was also a remote control for the network of 'rat lures' he had planted all over the city, triggering a release of chemicals and subsonic sounds in strategic control nodes all over Gotham, hidden in its warehouses, its sewers...

To add a final layer of power to the device in his hand, Count Dracula had cast his black magic upon it, enchanting it with something of his own power over verminous animals and amplifying its effects exponentially.

Magic and technology mingled within this innocuous little box. It looked laughable, like an expanded joystick for a child's remote controlled car. None would know the power it held; though it was not as effective as either Ratcatcher's or Count Dracula's command over rats on its own, combined with the control nodes and the modified toxoplasma spreading through Gotham city's rodent population, making them docile, fearless, completely submissive to the pulses he sent...

Jonathan Crane, with the touch of a button, could control every rat in the city.

And like a demonic Pied Piper, he would lead them, tonight, to swarm out of the sewers, the warehouses, the dumpsters and the alleys, a horde of black-furred minions to carry the deadly plague fleas out into Gotham's streets – and into Gotham's homes. When Dracula's army of vampires was at last unleashed, they would find the citizens of Gotham City placidly waiting to be prey.

No-one can be everywhere at once, the Count had said, Not even the Bat-man.

Let the Count finish Batman and his squad of bat-fools. He, Jonathan Crane, the Scarecrow, had already won. But the touch of a button, and the invasion would begin...

He strode to the edge of the rooftop, looking out at the threshold of the ultimate Halloween, a night of terrors unending, and the beginning of an age of darkness for Gotham City, in which he, the Scarecrow, had been promised to rule...

The laugh started as a wheezy, asthmatic whisper in his thin chest and bubbled up until it broke from his lips and howled into the still night.

"My Lord and Master," he cried, "Your kingdom welcomes you! *Let the Nightmare unending be unleashed upon these sniveling maggots! Let their throats bleed raw from screams of horror! Let the devastation of Gotham commence!*"

His arms spread, Jonathan laughed and laughed and laughed-

A gunshot rang out; Crane's laugh became a shriek as the device tore from his hand. He watched the precious controller and his dreams of conquest fly from his grip, soar through the air, and shatter into a million pieces on the street far below.

For a long moment he simply stared after it, slumping, his breath stolen by the numbing tide of disbelief. Then he turned, and followed the gunsmoke to a twin-barreled pistol pointed at his head and a slick black-and-white two toned suit that only served to draw attention to the mangled ruin of its wearer's visage.

"Hey, Jonny boy," rasped Two-Face.

"DENT?!" Crane howled, "What have you *done?!'*"

"Rained on your Halloween parade, evidently," said Oswald Cobblepot, stepping up beside Harvey Dent, clad head to toe in his finest Penguin regalia right up to the top hat. He paused to blow a swirl of smoke from one of his long filtered cigarettes, then lifted his umbrella and pointed it at Crane with a menacing, ballistic click - "I would advise against any sudden moves, Dr Crane."

"You-you-Cobblepot!-Dent!" said Scarecrow, his voice trembling with outrage, "You've ruined it! Ruined everything! All my plans, all my dreams! You backstabbing TRAITORS!"

"Hardly," said Two-Face.

"Indeed," said Oswald, and his cold, serious tone and lack of quacking would have jarred – to anyone who had never met the Penguin at his deadliest, "Traitors, are we? A rather slanderous accusation. "

"And a little 'O, HAIL CRYPTIC', don't you think, Scarecrow?" said the Riddler, joining them to face Scarecrow - resplendent in a deep emerald suit, bowler hat and question tie in place, leaning on his cane, "All things considered."

"You cannot comprehend what you have done--"

"Sure we can," said Two-Face, "See, we just paid a little visit to the hospital, to see Otis Flanagan. He's recovering well, by the way."

Crane hitched a sharp breath.

"Mr. Flanagan was most pleased to see a few familiar faces," added the Penguin, adjusting the aim of his umbrella as if pleasantly imagining the trajectory of the bullet, "Especially former business partners. He was an excellent and useful contact at Blackgate Penitentiary..."

"And since you betrayed him and left him to die," said the Riddler, "He was only too happy to fill us in on everything he knew about your 'plan'," he rapped the cane against his shoulder, "Catwoman deserves the credit for sniffing out this Dracula debacle first. Once we knew about your experiment with Otis the rest was easy to piece together," he tapped his temple lightly instead, smirking, "No challenge for a mind like mine."

Jonathan Crane faced the three of them, looking between them like a cornered dog with Animal Control closing in.

"Why?" he whined.

"A question," said Nigma, "that I think *we* should be asking *YOU*."

"You sold us out, 'Renfield'," said Two-Face.

"You sold out Gotham City," said Penguin, "To a foreign *interloper*."

"More to the point," Riddler added, "You sold out the entire human species to an *undead monster*. Tell me, were we going to have a say in this new Gotham of yours, or were you lining the Iceberg crowd up to be on your new Master's menu?"

"I bet you led him right to Pam and Harley, didn't you?" Two-Face growled, with a dash of an outraged Harvey Dent, and his fingertip teasing the trigger like a lover's tongue, "Harv and I happen to be in agreement this time; if this coin comes down, you're not going to like *either* option, Crane."

"I...I..." Crane wrung his long hands, then his shoulders tensed and he curled his fingers into claws, "I was moments away. A button press away...Gotham City would have been mine, a new age ushered in – You fools can never understand my vision – You can kill me if you like, it will only prove you to be cowards – That's right! COWARDS! You're afraid – Afraid of me, afraid of the future, afraid of yourselves--"

Two-Face shared a glance with Riddler. Penguin simply rolled his eyes, nearly losing his monocle in the process.

"-It is FEAR that drives you, as it drives Batman. Ha!" Crane spat, "Batman! You only pay lip service to being his enemies! In thwarting me, you have only done his work for him, you imbeciles – why don't you sign up for some red and yellow tights while you're at it? You're just like him – JUST like him – driven by cowardice and fear to protect the status quo, when you KNOW Gotham is sick, and must be cured!"

"Jonathan," said Nigma, rubbing his temples, "are you quite done?"

"YOU HAVE BETRAYED EVERYTHING WE STAND FOR!" Scarecrow shrieked, bunching his thin shoulders.

"I think he's mistaking us for Joker," said Two-Face.

"A fatal error, Dr Crane," said the Penguin, regarding his esteemed-gwak-fellow-criminals, "I cannot speak for these generous gentlemen, but for my humble self the status quo suits rather well. Gotham City is, like any comfortably-sized burg, an ecosystem. It has its hawks, its sparrows," he eyed Crane with a twitch of his lip, "and its carrion-crows. As unfortunate as it may seem, a certain chiropteran is a part of this macrocosm, as are we, and he *is* useful in keeping the -kwak-competition on their toes."

"Vampires, however, are a few chiropterans too many," said Nigma.

"Agreed," Penguin said, "Gotham has no place for this Dracula. It is *our* turf, and we will not be challenged here."

"We're in this game for our own reasons, Crane," said Two-Face, "not to destroy Gotham to make way for some idiot 'vision'. If that's your game, it's over."

Crane stiffened, straightened, and gathered his dignity, "Do what you will with me, then. If I die here, it proves you *fear me* too much to let me live. I'll win."

"Oh, shut up, you great hammy queen," said Riddler, "We're not going to kill you."

"What?"

Two-Face released his thumb from the hammer of his pistol and grinned, then graveled in his best – rather impressive – Batman impression "*Crane. You're going back to Arkham!*"

"-and so is Otis Flanagan," added Penguin, smirking, "as his condition has stabilized, but his mental state is nonetheless rather – frayed - he'll be transferred within the day."

Scarecrow stared between them, and then laughed, shrilly, "You cannot be serious. Do you think *I* am afraid of *The RATCATCHER?*"

"Not at all," said Riddler, "From what he said, he's really just looking forward to catching up with an old friend."

"One who was kind enough to send him correspondence in the hospital. Flowers and a letter, delivered in a bright blue top hat."

Scarecrow fell silent.

"Aw, how sweet," said Two-Face, "A bromance in the making. Scarred, I puke, unscarred, Harv pukes. 'Scuse us."

"The Mad Hatter," Scarecrow mumbled.

"Yes indeed," said Nigma, cheerfully, "Otis was so touched by the flowers he poured his little ratty heart out to Jervis in reply. And you know how Jervis is. By the time you get back to Arkham *every inmate there* will know exactly what a great big sellout you are."

"I hear they're preparing an extra-special welcoming party," said Two-Face, "All for you."

"Harvey and I are checking ourselves in," Riddler added, grinning ear to ear "Just to watch the show. How about you, Ozzie?"

"No..." whispered Scarecrow.

"Hmm," said the Penguin, musing, "For once I regret not possessing the ...personal history with Arkham that you fine gentlemen share, but I *have* been feeling rather down lately. Possibly a relapse into the-gwak-depression lingering from the loss of my dear old nest at the hands of the bat-brats."

"Feelings of failure, inadequacy?" Riddler mimicked a concerned Dr. Bart.

"Deep-seated uncertainty, Doctor," Penguin mourned.

"Lustful fantasies about your mother dressed as a Christmas turkey?" added Two-Face.

Penguin deadpanned, "Don't push it, Dent." He circled Crane with surprising speed for his weight and jabbed him in the small of the back with his umbrella, "This crow's wings are clipped. Gentlemen, let us escort him thither."

"No...No..." Crane moaned, getting louder and louder, "No!"

As Cobblepot and Nigma grabbed his arms and began to drag him away from the roof, he flailed and kicked and burst into a full, banshee wail – "MASTER!! I HAVE FAILED YOU! FORGIVE ME AND COME TO MY AID! MAAASTERRRRRRRRRRRR!"

Apollo Dent's right hook cut him off.

"Trick or Treat, Jonny boy," said Two-Face.

On the third *ocho* with Richard, I saw it; the flash of black and red amidst the crowd, and then *him*, stock-still among the tottering partygoers, staring at me. Hungry wolf-eyes burned through the sockets of a porcelain cherub masque in a tasteful, old-world Venetian design.

My heart started pounding. For another woman it might have been off the yummy scale, but I, Catwoman, non-complex and dressed in purple spandex, know exactly what it feels like to have men trying to peel you with their eyes. With most, it's just amusing – they have no idea who they're messing with – with Batman, it's *delicious*, but even when he was chasing me as his criminal target, there was a deep undercurrent of, I don't know, respect? Rooftops, we were two predators dueling over disputed territory, fierce and deadly and free. *Rowr*. Even now, when he looks at me like that, it makes my knees weak.

This look was different. This look was starving, cold and invasive. For the first time in my life I knew what the innocent little ingénue feels when she's cornered by the handsome lothario in the garden at midnight and has nowhere to run, except that I *wasn't* an innocent little ingénue. I was old enough and smart enough to know what men who look at women like that want to do to them, and it both clenched my stomach and set the Cat's hackles bristling. *Woof*.

So far, Drac had not impressed me.

As the song segued into another and Richard twirled me gracefully away, a cold hand caught mine and I saw those eyes again from inches away. It hurts to say it, but for a moment there, I forgot who I was, and I really did freeze like a rabbit.

"A dance," he purred, accent like Lugosi on sex-appeal-steroids, "with the most beautiful woman in the room, it is not a small thing to ask. May I?"

"Selina?" Richard asked quietly, sensing the sudden change in mood.

"Go on, Richard," I replied to him, squeezing his hand that still held mine, "I'll take it from here. And thank you, honey."

"Don't mention it," said Richard, and the concerned look on his face is all I remember before the crowds engulfed him and I was alone, dancing with Count Dracula.

CHAPTER 14: DANCE OF ILLUSIONS

The eyes, windows of the soul, are where the vampire make his bid to take the mind, and control the mind.

Just the phrase to keep in mind when Count Dracula Himself cuts in on your dance partner in the middle of the party whose sole purpose was for you to offer yourself up as vamp bait.

Eye contact is his window to steal his victim's will.

Good advice to be sure. My brain conjuring Van Helsing's voice out of the written words of his diary Dutch accent and all, however, added an unnecessary veneer of melodrama to the proceedings in this kitty's opinion. With the band segueing to Cole Porter's "I've Got Some Unfinished Business With You" just as Dracula puts his hand around my waist, there was drama enough.

"It has been a long path to this moment, Ms. Kyle," he said, and lifted his masque away, smiling at me. I got a quick glimpse of his face – sharp, angular features, clean-shaven, would have been quite nice looking if not for the coils of black hair slicked back from a widow's peak. Was he serious?

"It has," I said, meeting his gracious tone with an equally gracious, but slightly more matter-of-fact one of my own.

He danced well enough—certainly expected considering—but his lead was eerily light. He was steering us away from the center of the dance floor where Richard had left us, towards the north corner.

"You dance very well, Count," I offered.

"And you give the small talk very well," he replied. "Shall I remark on the number of couples, perhaps? Or the merits of the orchestra?"

As we moved effortlessly through the other couples, I looked off to one side, searching the crowd as if only half-interested in what he was saying – to needle his ego as much as to avoid meeting that snake-stare.

I felt Bruce, knew he wouldn't have taken his attention off me for a second, but I couldn't see him. When I ran out of crowd, I turned my eyes back to Dracula. I could have focused on his chin, but there had been too many verbal duels like this with Batman when that chiseled chin was his most prominent feature and I didn't relish the thought of making unconscious comparisons. So I let my eyes flicker lower to his throat—And I got a shock.

He'd dressed for the occasion. High-collared cape, black with red lining, velvet and satin, sleek, black waistcoat with embroidered crimson cuffs and lapels right out of the 1600s. I'd taken it all in peripherally when he first approached me and Richard to cut in. Now I saw detail: the lacy sleeves, the ruff at his throat pinned with a blood-red

ruby brooch that made my Cat-instincts tingle. It was the epitome of everything 'Dracula', the distilled essence of the legend the books and movies and theatre and video games had given us...

But it wasn't.

It wasn't an outfit he'd dragged out of his closet in some medieval castle in the Old Country in case this adventure in Gotham gave him an occasion to wear it, nor was it some cheap costume from a Halloween dress up supply. It was new, brand new, and I recognized the handiwork: the same deft, meticulous craftsmanship that I knew from Eddie's wardrobe, from Bruce's, and my own.

Kittlemeier!

Once the implications sunk in, it floored me.

"Do I have your attention now, Ms. Kyle?" Dracula said pleasantly.

"Undivided," I said, looking at the ruby at his throat, "What do you want?"

"An answer," he said softly, and what little of his expression I dared see showed calm, contemplation, "Tell me, my dear, what do I mean to you?"

What an interesting thing for the King of all Vampires to care about. I clamped down on that little thought—as well as the echoes of the Kittlemeier revelation. This was a ballroom after all. This was a dance...

"You?" I asked—more to play into the rhythm of the conversation than because I needed the clarification.

"Dracula," he said—on the down beat, his left foot forward as mine bent back.

"Capes and bats?" I said with a smile.

An uncomfortable association, but given my known ties to Batman, an association that should please him.

"Old horror movies perhaps..." as we neared the edge of the dance floor and he turned me back to drift back towards the center. "Fine gothic castles, thick with atmosphere... the mood dark and foreboding... dominated by something powerful... lurking... unknown..." Do I know how to push a man's buttons or what? "Women in bodices," I purred. I could tell I was getting to him. That feather lead at the small of my back got just a touch firmer, but only on the turns. And I was timing my words for the turns, playing off the music. "Those flowing Victorian nightgowns... lacy and virginal white..." It was the answer he was expecting, but I think he wasn't prepared for the details or the little charge added by my voice - or the purr. I doubted his blushing medieval damsels and proper Victorian maidens purred. I swore I'd sparked a hunger in his smile, and I wasn't sure I liked it, but since when have cats been the type when to stop when they know they should?

"The Dracula of fiction is a metaphor," I said breathily. "The old fears of the night in a world moving on into daylight, a modern world overturning one ancient scourge after another... And of course sex... 'Victorian prigs fight nosferatu with modern marvels like the wire recorder and shorthand,' that is not a tale that endures for a century... The hook is sex, Vlad... The hook has always been sex... Those Victorian men thought they had the world at their feet with all that enlightened Western thinking..." I stopped and laughed with amused pity. "Except the one thing that scared them senseless was women. Women's sexuality, it terrified them. That's why they tried to put it in a box, and whenever it got out, they demonized it... Hence, the

enduring lure of Dracula, a horror story... Visiting all of your women in their beds and freeing them from their corsets..."

The song ended and another began, which was lucky because the break in the music made me pause as well. I had gotten a little carried away. Men who are men in name only, afraid of women and afraid of sex, demonizing and demeaning that which frightens them, it's a hot button and I get carried away. Miller's hatchet job on me would have been next, and that's not what this conversation was meant to be about. The new song: 'Slow Sinks the Sun', set the perfect tone.

"You have grasped that much, certainly," said the Count, "the fear of the civilized man that within every proper and goodly maiden lurks a starving creature, ruled by powerful lusts. Perhaps," here, he smiled, "he fears not only this sensual monster that is Woman, but he fears himself for wanting her, and being too weak to hold her attention."

"That's where you come in?"

"Yes. To the Victorians, that was Dracula. A man, a foreigner, of the corrupt, licentious, ancient world that was Old Europe. The same world these pious men with their theories and their prayers and their inhibitions had been fighting to remove themselves from since the fall of Rome. To have the ghost of that world walk among them and steal their chaste virgins from their beds and turn them into Dionysian harlots, thirsting for Christian blood..."

"So more than sex," I said, staring through him, beginning to understand, "You were a symbol of everything their world was trying to cast off. You were a kind of...Victorian Antichrist?"

"To that age, yes," he said, "And that is no doubt why Van Helsing's tale has endured so long and so well. He thought himself cunning when told it to Mr. Stoker, no doubt to spread the knowledge of how to destroy nosferatu without earning himself a cell in Bedlam House. But now we come to an age of exploration and hedonism. This is an age that embraces everything the Victorians loathed or politely buried."

"So you want to know what Dracula means now."

"Precisely."

Once again we began to sway to the music, and the extent that I could tilt my head up to meet Dracula's without looking into his eyes, I did so as I asked:

"What do you want to mean to me?"

"Everything, my dear," his lips tweaked in a dry smile. "Everything."

Gag.

He knew I wasn't going to meet his eyes; he knew it was out of fear. And the bastard liked it.

"That spot's taken. Sorry."

"When I awoke from my last death," he said (as if I hadn't spoken at all. Typical.) "It was to an empty ruin of my House and the ashes of my Brides. A century of plans and preparations undone by one scheming Dutchman and his little band of murderers, and everything I had held close destroyed."

"That's a sad story, Count," I said, noncommittal, neither mocking nor sincere—like I always do. One scheming Dutchman, one interfering alien, one wretched fishman, speedster, amazon, cyborg, mutant, telepath, or masked vigilante stuck his nose in and

all my beautiful plans were overturned. This part of the conversation was not new. But I did wonder what he was getting at.

"We Nosferatu are creatures of habit, dear lady," he continued, "Much like cats. This irreversible change to what had been my world was unforgivable."

I blanched at the comparison, and it only deepened his smile.

"So you wouldn't stay in Romania and you wouldn't attempt London again," I said, "You waited, and watched, and built up your strength, until history gave you a place that suited you."

"Correct," said Dracula, "And in coming to Gotham City, I faced the unforeseen surprise of discovering that I was already here. Thanks to Mr. Stoker, indeed, through irony thanks to Van Helsing himself, I am omnipresent throughout the world. And therein lies my question, dear Lady. This Dracula, this creature of cape and coffin, of page and screen - who is he?"

I took a half-step back and he stepped to follow it, twisting around me, turning it into part of the dance. We twirled and stepped and counterstepped.

"I already gave you that answer," I said—realizing he had sidestepped my question in a way I'd often done with Batman. I'd asked what he wanted to be in my eyes, and instead, he told me why he wanted to know what I thought of him.

"You offered up phrases of literary criticism," he said, matching me move for move, even without the eye contact. "But not, I think, what you yourself think of me."

"Since you want to be 'everything,' you want to know how far you've got to go?" I teased playfully.

Dracula chuckled, "No. Because this is an age of identity crafted by the Self, no longer passed down in blood. Drăculea, Son of the Dragon, inherited from my father's father. That name meant something so very different then. While I have slept in death, it has been given a new meaning. This is what I wish to understand."

The ballroom floor began to feel uncomfortably like a rooftop; this dance had been a sparring match, now it became something more. There was always more going on between me and Batman than what was said, and even what was done as we fought. And there was a point in each confrontation where that unspoken something tipped. Which way determined the outcome of that particular night...

"That does explain the question," I admitted. "But why ask it of me? Eight million people in the naked city, why ask me?"

He smiled, "You are Catwoman."

"Meow," I answered. It seemed apt, but that's not why I said it. I said it because I knew. There, suddenly, those three simple words, "You are Catwoman," I knew.

I knew why Kittlemeier. I knew why the black cape with the red lining and the ruby and the slicked back hair. I knew everything:

It was the themed persona he didn't understand—Vlad was 'The Impaler' in his day, but he didn't run around in a bright red suit with an iron spike in a circle displayed on his chest. Catwoman, Batman, Two-Face, Riddler, we were all identities, symbols. We represented something in the public mind that might or might not match up what the real living person. The stuff F. Miller had concocted about Catwoman said more about him than it did me, and what it said wasn't good. To a lesser extent, it was the same for Batman and Superman, Two-Face and Joker - hell, Bruce and Jack had just dealt with the addition of bat-nipples and lipstick to their respective ensembles. Creative

license was everywhere. Every couple years, there was a new version on the newsstand, a version that reflected the hopes and fears of the moment more than Bruce or Clark or Harvey. Or Dracula. Vlad had suddenly discovered he was in this club and had no idea how he got there or what it all meant. And at his age, he didn't like not knowing as much as these young'uns around him.

In a way, I really was the best person he could have come to. Those years at the Sorbonne, I had the perspective to tell him a moniker like 'Drăculea', a dragon signet ring and a coat of arms were not so different from a themed identity. It was bound up in traditions of heraldry and medieval thinking that were centuries away from the way we lived now, and that's why he couldn't see it. But the core idea was the same. And the way it all came to mean something very different because of some jerkoff you never met writing a complete fiction to allay his pathetic and well-deserved insecurities... Yeah, I could have explained quite a lot to the good Count.

"What? You want to be one of us?"

"I already am, it seems," said Dracula, "without my knowledge and against my will. Now, I must decide what to do about this other Dracula; to mock him, to embrace him, or to destroy him."

I laughed in his face. It was almost absurd enough for Joker. The Count had come to the table in the middle of someone else's game, sat down, played his hand, and then asked to be explained the rules.

"Oh, poor you. Count Dracula, slave to his own PR? Here you almost had me thinking you were something new; but you're already halfway to being Ra's Al Ghul."

He stopped in mid-twirl. The pause gave me time to re-register just how dead his hand was in mine – and how strong. I've judo-flipped Killer Croc when he got too friendly. I've gone toe to toe with Batman. I've finessed my way around Supeman and Wonder Woman. I know what strong is and I know how to handle it—when it's quantifiable. Tangible. Strength with muscles and tendons behind it. Dancing with Dracula, that's another animal entirely. I've tangled with undead before—of a sort. There was a mummy whose arms and legs had no business moving, seeing he'd been dead for 40 centuries. It wasn't the same. He was chasing me and swinging at me. We weren't dancing.

But Dracula, with that cold, unbreathing body pushing and pulling me with perfect rhythm and exacting control, I couldn't judge for a moment just how strong he was or wasn't. If he grabbed a hold of me I'd have better luck wrestling a marble statue. I was completely within his power.

Until I said the words 'Ra's Al Ghul', that is.

"Ah," he said.

You don't come out of fights against Batman and Superman without recognizing those openings when you find one.

"So let me ask you a question, Count," I smiled, my most charming, feline smile as I raced through that opening before he recovered himself, "We both know you didn't come tonight just to talk about yourself. I've shown you mine now, you show me yours. Count Vlad Drăculea, son of the dragon, et cetera, et cetera, what am I to you?"

"Woman," said the Count, without skipping a beat, "in all that she is and must be; demure, playful, seductive. Powerful and untamable," he tugged on my arm –

forceless, but it pulled me to him before I could react, and then the cold arms were around me, and the eyes – the damn eyes! – looking right into mine before I could close them, “To allow such a precious divinity to grow old, to wither and fade and lose her fire and at last to die, would be a greater sin...” I froze in that stare and the white fingers touched my cheek, “...than any condemned by God.”

In the back of my paralyzed mind, fighting to free myself from the eyes, I felt Bruce’s storm of pain and fury building from afar, and I felt within myself something tugging and wriggling in response to the Count’s touch that was derailed by yet another revelation.

“You will, and must, be mine,” said Dracula.

Dracula was a collector.

I was a thief and not a petty one. I knew the mentality well: diamonds, Impressionists, Meissen porcelain, Etruscan antiquities, Bakara rugs, Fabergé eggs.... “Each the finest of its kind.” That fetish for seeking out the perfect specimen and claiming it. Possessing it. This man collected people. He collected women. He froze them in time with his vampire kiss and kept them preserved for eternity, as beautiful as a butterfly pinned in a glass case.

And he considered me a prize worth risking it all for.

“Oh, hell,” was all I could say before it happened.

All plunged into darkness, and chaos exploded in the room.

Cassandra stirred to the quiet, rhythmic blip of the infirmary machines monitoring her vital signs. With a groan, she pushed herself up. Everything ached, but as her memories of where she had been and what she had done returned, her heart ached most of all.

“What I do?” she murmured, shaking her head in protest.

She didn’t want those memories.

“Miss Cassandra,” came Alfred’s voice, and he approached the infirmary doors, giving a cursory scan of the readouts before turning to her with a stern set to his brow, “Please lie back down. You have been under considerable duress, and Master Bruce wishes you to stay resting until you have made a full recovery.”

“B out there,” she muttered, “Where Dick, where Tim?”

“Master Dick is with Mr. Blood,” said Alfred, and fell silent.

“Tim?” Cass asked.

Alfred put down the tray he had been carrying, lined with small medical bottles and bandages. Without speaking more he checked the scratches the vampires had left on her. Claws had raked her but their fangs had thankfully not. He dutifully cleaned and dressed them; Cass clenched her teeth, but it was not from the pain. Pain was an old friend.

Fear was an unwelcome guest.

“Tim?”

“Please lie down, Miss Cassandra. It will do you no good.”

“Where Tim?” she insisted.

Alfred sighed. “Sit down,” he said, but the stern grandfatherly tone had left his voice. Left it soft and sad and very old.

Numb, already knowing what was coming, she sat.

I knew what had happened the moment it went dark. There was a chorus of gasps and little screams, half-terrified, half-delighted; the partygoers clearly thought a Halloween game was afoot. But the excitement receded and the fear grew as a kind of rumbling sound slithered through the dark, on the periphery of the room, all around...

To my relief, I couldn't see Dracula's eyes anymore, but I felt his cold grip on me and knew he still had me. I struggled, twisted, tried to initiate a few good judo moves, but he wouldn't budge. He was like a damned marble statue nailed to the floor.

Somehow, they'd cut the power. Cut the power?! It was the very first thing any Rogue would do. Bruce had contingencies for this built into every place he owned. Where was the auxiliary power? Why wasn't it kicking in? And what the hell was that sound?

I was answered by a sound I did know.

"HAAAAA HA HA HA HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!!!"

I swear, Jack has the most irritating sense of timing in the cosmos.

I gave a snarl – my kind, unladylike maybe but feline to the core – and made another attempt to slip the Count. This time, his fingers released me, though I couldn't be sure it wasn't on purpose, and I could feel him hunting me in the dark. Now I could see his eyes – two shiny crimson discs, glowing between the globs of black that must have been people moving about and blocking them briefly.

All of my senses sprang to high alert. Bruce. I had to find Bruce. If he wasn't already in the thick of it he'd be suiting up in record time. We had tried to trap Dracula – and he had sprung a trap on us. I was deeply, deeply aware of the danger of him, amplified a thousand times by the darkness. I felt his eyes boring into me. I didn't dare meet his gaze directly but I didn't dare face away. As long as I could see them, I knew where he was -

"-HAAA HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAH-"

God damnit, why was the clown here now!?

I turned, and the lights came back on – dim and flickering – and I found myself inches away from the Joker's grinning mug.

This is enough of an unpleasant prospect to be faced with when you're chilling out at the Iceberg.

"Hii-i-iiiiiii there, Catty-pie," A hungry rattle in his voice that wasn't there before. A metallic stink on his breath, "Sorry I didn't RSVP, but someone forgot to send our invites."

When you're facing the Joker, and he has fangs, it's a hell of a lot worse.

"Hi Jack," I said warily, trying not to back away from him, "You're looking...sharp."

I don't know how it slipped out. It was just – a train wreck kind of moment - right there – yes, right there, glistening in his mouth. Sharp. It's hard not to notice the Joker's grin, especially at this proximity. He's a thin guy, and that charming smile takes up most of his face. But now it was a face full of steak knives. The canines were the longest, but they weren't the only ones; every tooth in his mouth, flecked with blood, tapered to a razor point.

It was as if vampirism had latched onto the evil bubbling up inside Joker and dragged it all up and painted it all over him. I felt sick to see it. He didn't look even remotely human anymore. His eyes bulged and blazed red. His skin was already white as death but now it had a kind of waxy quality to it that made it even more corpse-like. The delicate veins around his temples stuck out like a spiderweb. And the hair – wasn't green anymore – he'd stained it a dark, carnal red, and judging from the smell, not with dye.

It's amazing how little details like this stick with you.

"SHARP?!" Joker howled, "HA HA HA HA HA! GOOD one Catty!" He clapped me on the shoulder, and pain shot through me at the strength he wasn't controlling. Then he wheeled – snarled at the partygoers – even the stupidest amongst them shrank back in terror when they realized it wasn't a mask. "Hell-o my – HAHAHA- tasties," Joker said, licking his teeth, his tongue long as a lizard's, "You-hehhh-all smell deeeel-hhahahahaha-ectable this evening-huhhhh. Especially those – eheh eheh! - among you whohhhhahahaha - just pissed yourselves! What a bouquet!! AHAHAHA – I feel FANGTASTIC! – I hereby dub myself COUNT JOCULA – Whatcha think of that one Catty-haaahhh?? – from jocular, get it?? Rhymes with Dracula and JUGULAR too – aaah it's a work in progress – ahahahaha - AAAHAHAHAHAHAHA-AHAH-hhhuhhhhhh-"

There was something wrong with his laugh, wronger than usual. It boiled up out of him, rasping and wheezing, breaking his words. As it took him completely he half-slumped to his knees and his whole body shook. It was the only thing preventing him from leaping among the partygoers and ripping them apart, I realized, but it wasn't a pretty sight, because I'd seen those tremors before...

"Jesus, Jack, did you Smilex yourself!?"

"I JUST WANTED TO SEE WHAT IT FELT LIKE!"

I backed away, temporarily forgetting all about Bruce, Dracula, the partygoers, and the fact that I'd just registered the slithering sound from earlier had something to do with the huge, thorny vines as thick as tree trunks breaking through the walls and circling the edges of the room like angry snakes. Ivy was here, which meant Harley was here, which meant Harley must have vamped Joker and they were all in on this together, but none of that mattered because Jack had once again managed to demonstrate that just when you fool yourself into thinking you know Joker, he'll pull something out of his ass that you didn't think even he would be crazy enough to do.

"Hahahahahaah-WHAT A RUSH!" said Joker, "I snorted enough to kill EVERY PANSY IN THIS ROOM – but with my resistance n-not quuuuuuute enough to kill ME – ahahaha just in case something happens to Ol' D, natch, but I-I-I-I thought it was tooo hahahahaha interesting a joke not to go the whole hog on SOMEONE ELSE-"

I searched the crowd, and there was Dracula, smiling implacably, and there was a voluptuous girl in a red velvet dress stalking like a cat around the perimeter. I didn't recognise her hairdo or her clothes, but I knew her for Harley from the grin, and that meant the redhead circling in the other direction was Pam. The maenad getup was a dead giveaway.

On a good day, I can take metas. I could probably take Joker or Harley or Pam on their own, because even vamped, I know their tricks. Drac was an unknown quantity but I was confident I could take him, if he was on his own. All of them at once – I was

screwed, and they knew it. They circled me like a vicious new pride readying to take an old lioness from her territory.

Bruce, get your ass down here NOW.

"And you thought this would be a good idea..." I said to Joker, amiably enough, waving a shaking hand as casually as I could, "...why, again?"

"BECAUSE," said Joker, "I like this jive, kitty-cat. You...you have noooo idea what this feels like. What you're missing."

"Uhhh-huh," said I, eyes searching the tangle of vines that blocked the exits, the screaming rich folks hiding behind tables. Any time now, stud.

"That's right, kitty-Catty-bumpkins," said Harley, swaying closer to me, laying her arm on the shoulder Jack hadn't deadened. Her skin was cold. She was as white as usual, but not wearing any makeup, "Think about it...Gotham's greatest female felons, ruling the night, forever, together," she gave a romantic sigh, "C'mon, sis, join the club!"

"You always were a stubborn one, Cat," said Ivy, alabaster at last, from my left, and I felt her breath tickle my ear. I smelled cinnamon – and blood. She was pulling the 'queen of darkness' vibe off a lot better now than she used to, and I didn't like it, but I stayed where I was – better them getting cozy with me than the goddamned Joker.

"Right," I said, flicking eyes between the two, the hyperventilating Joker, and the still-silent Count, "Listen, girls, I'm afraid I never really bought into your whole pseudo...faux girl band...Thelma-and-Louise-meets-t.A.T.u-on-a-bad-acid-trip...gig. Not that there's anything wrong with that, mind you, it's just not my style." I undraped Harley's arm from my neck like a handler carefully removing a python – it was about as cold and strong as one – and gave them as gracious a smile as I could as I backed away, "And cats are all about style."

"Awwww, Catty," pouted Harley, "But it's so amazing. You really have to."

"You really...have to", said Ivy, unblinking, snake-staring, with eyes that were just like his.

"As you can see," said Dracula at last, smiling, spreading his arms, the black and red cape rippling with the movement, "It would be best for you to accept our offer, my dear."

"I'll pass," I said, cursing in the back of my head – exits, plenty of exits, and all of them blocked by her goddamned vines – "Looks like you got a third Bride anyway. Jack always was a bit of a queen, isn't that right, Jack? So you don't need me anyway...I'll just be on my way. Be sure to try the punch."

"SCREW THE PUNCH!" Joker said, and hunkered into a crouch on the floor, shaking like a crack addict, "I need blood. Blood. Blood. BLOOD!"

"Blood?!" cried Claudia Muffington, clinging to her date's arm, "But I gave at the office!"

I groaned.

Joker grinned at her, "Don't be greedy, baby, you're talking pints, I'm talking gallons!" With that, he leapt onto one of the tables amid a gasp of horror from the crowd. He laughed, and as that charming HAHAHAHAHAHAH filled the air, I was blessed with a horrible gut wrenching sensation, because he wasn't alone.

HA – HA HA – HA HA hA HA HAHA HAHAHA aHAHAH AHAHAHA!

It echoed from the walls. It echoed from the cracks spreading in them as Ivy's vine monsters tore through the plasterwork.

And it echoed from the throats of the figures materializing out of threads of mist creeping in through the cracks. Figures wrapped in hospital gowns, their bodies shaking and trembling and spasming with Smilex of a dosage that should have killed them a dozen times over.

If they weren't already dead.

"HAPPY HALLOWEEN, SOUP TINS," boomed Joker, "YOU'RE AAAALL ON THE MENU!!"

CHAPTER 15: PROOF OF BLOOD

Sweating in his suit, staring down into the room through the grill of an air vent barely large enough to fit his skinny body into, James Turnbull had never before been so deeply aware of his heartbeat. It thundered, thudded, pounded like a drum, and he prayed to whatever God was listening that nobody would hear it.

Below, two women in lavish masquerade outfits and a grinning clown with razors for teeth were circling another beautiful woman like a pack of wolves. This would have been alarming enough, but Jimmy recognized the women he'd let in with 'V. Lucarda' – recognized Lucarda himself, standing off to one side with his arms folded and a cold smirk on his face that certainly wasn't shared by the terrified partygoers around him. Jimmy noticed the man's black and red cape with the high collar and something about the word 'Lucarda' swam around in his head – but he was too shell-shocked to let it sink in.

And there were horrible wooden tentacle root things breaking through the walls; he'd crawled into the vent to escape them when they burst through the foyer and up the elevator shafts. He didn't know where Sally from Reception was. He didn't know where Mr. Wayne was, or where anyone else was, or what on earth was happening, but he was also fairly sure the demon clown, who was most definitely *not* on the guest list, was the Joker. Worse, he knew the woman; Selina Kyle, Bruce Wayne's gorgeous date. *Catwoman*.

Jimmy T. was not a heroic man. But he knew a life or death situation when he saw it. Something deep down inside him screamed *don't just watch and you can't let this happen!*

The rest of him had not the faintest, foggiest idea of what to do, but when he heard the Joker shout "YOU'RE ALL ON THE MENU!" and saw the giggling nightmare zombies lurching into the room, he knew he had to do *something* and the first step in *something* was getting out of the air duct.

Jimmy backpedaled furiously, huffing, puffing, panting, and hung his legs over the lip of the opening and finding himself, in an uncharacteristically religious mood, praying to God again that there weren't any giggling zombies or carnivorous plant snakes in the kitchen he was about to slide back out into.

Then something grabbed his legs and yanked him powerfully out of the vent. Jimmy screamed, flailed, and found himself set down and something huge and black looming before him.

"James Turnbull," rasped a voice like Satan himself.

"Jesus Christ!" shrieked Jimmy, hands up to protect his face.

"Not exactly," said the Voice, and Jimmy stopped and stared as the nightmare shadow settled into the silhouette of a black cowl with pointed ears.

"Batman?" Jimmy said.

"Do you know the location of the manual pull station for the sprinkler system?"

"W-what?"

"Do you know where it is?"

"Y-yeah..." Jimmy swallowed, trying to control his breathing. His gaze flicked behind Batman, seeing an older gentleman standing there, looking equally terrified – a man whose high black collar did not conceal the flash of white at his throat.

The bishop, Jimmy realised, blinking. Well, with the Church's connections to charity, he *had* been on the guest list.

"Yes," said Jimmy again, more confidently, "All staff do, it's a deluge system, unusual for a hotel, but Mr. Wayne insist-"

"Go there. In two minutes and eighteen seconds, when you feel this beep," Jimmy felt Batman press something into his hand, a small, black electronic device. "Pull the lever."

"Y-yes sir," Jimmy said.

Batman nodded to the old man in the black and white collar, who smiled at Jimmy nervously and then hurried to follow Batman as he strode to the kitchen's door.

"Wait, where are you going?"

Batman growled over his shoulder, "Water main."

"Everybody behind me NOW!"

It had come out of her lips with the furor of a thunderclap and cut through their terror, and the sight of the whip uncoiling from its hiding place – what did they hide in their hiding place – what did they *think* a girl kept in her handbag? – quickly clued in the partygoers who didn't know Selina Kyle that this woman was not just another of their number.

She sprang in front of them, between victims and vampires, lashed the whip in a wide arc above her head, and stung Harley in the cheek with it, sending her back with a shriek, while kicking a table into the first of the giggling undead things leaping at her.

Ivy circled from one side, and Selina slashed the whip across the room and drove her back, hissing, beside her new Master.

He was still smiling implacably. *Bastard*.

Jesus – Bruce – HERE – NOW!

It went on and on like a mantra in her head. She had no time for other thoughts. Drac and the Bride-bitches hung back, and Joker was still busy laughing his hideous ass off, but the giggling vampires came at her like maddened bullfrogs. Behind her someone shrieked and she whipped a vampire that had slipped past her around the neck, pulling it off – Wigglesworth? – and flinging it into one of its cohorts. Someone back there got smart enough to start overturning tables and barricading behind them – wineglasses were hurled. Good. She had some support, inane though it was.

One of the Joker-vampires got close and she smelled its stinking blood-breath and saw its wild, bloodshot eyes before her fist cracked up under its jaw and sent it back. *Shitshitshit!* She had garlic and silver nitrate spray in her handbag; they weren't giving her a chance to get to it. She kept moving, leapt over another table, shoved a vampire's head through one of the speakers, they kept coming –

One raked elongated fingernails for her face – she blocked, shoved it back, smashed a chair over its head, flipped the second that lunged in its place, but another came at

her from one side. She saw its jaws snapping, its wolf-like teeth. There was no time to defend.

And a flash of black interceded, slammed the thing in the face, kicked it in the chest and sent it howling with mad laughter away. A black shape; but not Bruce. Smaller, leaner, lither.

"Batgirl!"

"Don't tell B!" Cass said, "Brought backup!" and she was into the fray, tearing into Joker's SmileX'd vampires with a barely controlled fury. Knowing what she'd just been through, Selina's heart clenched.

God, what a kid, she thought.

"Hi C," said a familiar voice, and there was Nightwing, bearing another of the things to the ground and stabbing it in the carotid with a garlic injector, "Nice dress!"

"You were supposed to stay with Jason!"

"I did!"

A flash of bright light drove the vampires back, and Jason Blood stepped in front of the cowering partygoers with one hand blazing with light and the other gripping an ancient longsword.

"Nightwing, get the people out of here," he said, "I cannot risk Etrigan with innocents present."

"Right-o," Nightwing fell back, guarding the guests, "Ladies, a little cover?"

But even as they stepped in to flank and defend him, Dracula's voice thundered across the room –

"Jason Blood..."

"Ah, Count," Jason said calmly, "It has been a while."

Hands shaking, Jimmy T. huddled in the dark, right by the switch, listening to the turmoil above. He felt like a coward, down here hiding in the basement with his hand on a switch when people up top were fighting, maybe dying.

Batman gave you a mission, he thought, *if you were ever a man, James Turnbull, you need to be one now. Don't screw up.*

Forty eight seconds had never felt like a lifetime before.

I'll never forget the look on Dracula's face the moment he saw Jason Blood. He dissolved in one instant from that charming, icy smirk to something that belonged carved on a cathedral gargoyle. His game face made Joker's look like a pouting cherub.

He roared something in what I assume was whatever the hell they spoke in 15th century Wallachia, and Joker snarled, "Our turn!" and leapt off his perch. Then he blurred in and out of my vision, and he was all over Nightwing slashing and pummeling and cackling, while what I could only describe as a geyser of dead vampire strangler vines burst up under Jason, and Ivy stormed straight at him while he twirled and hacked and sliced through them with that sword.

Harley hissed like an electrocuted lizard and off she went after Batgirl, and that left me with about a hundred terrified partygoers, a dozen or so hysterically-laughing puppet vampires – and Count-Freaking-Dracula.

I'd had better nights.

I was in the middle of holding off the SmileX-vamps when Dracula flipped his cape up around himself and dissolved out of view; I saw a flutter of bat wings and he was suddenly right on top of me, chuckling through his dagger grin. I leapt back and cracked him right in the face with the whip.

A thin line opened across his cheek, but not a drop of blood came out.

"A whip?" he murmured, "Memories..."

He caught the second lash in his left hand and yanked me off my feet, right into his arms.

Clutched in Jimmy T's grip like it held all the hope in the world, the little black beeper suddenly did exactly what it was designed for.

Feeling the tremors vibrate through his grip, Jimmy sucked in a gasp, squeezed his eyes shut, and without another thought yanked the lever on the wall.

It was all over in a heartbeat. Dracula had me, his minions were getting the better of my allies, and he was so close I could feel the cold radiating from his skin. I grappled his throat, tried to push the white fangs back, thought of all the ways I could have taken him were he a man whose vital organs still mattered.

"One kiss..." he purred, and his eyes locked to mine. I felt a dizzy spell grip my mind, a cloud of black at the edges of my vision, sweeping away my strength, my will to resist, and I felt again, something wriggling at the back of my brain. Responding to him.

Something that he hadn't planted there tonight. Something that had already *been* there.

A little wriggling thing, a little nagging voice that made me get changed away from Bruce, made me wear my turtleneck sweater at breakfast, made me turn away when I put my earrings in, made me brush my hair a certain way...ever since the night...the sewer...since before we put the defenses up at Wayne Manor...

His fingers brushed my hair back from my throat, and I felt them fingering two little holes right up below my ear I hadn't even known were there.

Oh my god.

"It will not be our first, my Bride. Nor our last."

I couldn't move, couldn't fight, couldn't scream. I lay limp as a doll in his arms while everything that was *me* spat and hissed and clawed to be free, to fight him, to *kill* him...

And then came another hiss, and salvation from above.

It started raining holy water.

Batman hurtled into the room like a thunderbolt from Zeus. He saw his clan and allies down there, fighting; Batgirl, Nightwing, Jason Blood. He would have *words* with

all of them later; for now, their presence was a greater relief than Psychobat would ever have admitted.

The partygoers were barricaded behind the bar and a series of tables, which afforded little protection from the screaming, howling vampires – SmileX symptoms – even if he cured their vampirism, they were already well beyond brain-death.

Joker, you *bastard*.

He fell among them in a blazing whirl of fists and feet and batarangs and garlic darts. As the holy water hit them, sprinkling down in an unrelenting torrent, they screamed and hissed and fled him, smoldering holes burned in their flesh. Ivy's demonic vines hissed and thrashed and curled on themselves like angry snakes, as well. He clove his way through, toward Selina, toward Dracula – he saw Batgirl punching Harley again and again, saw Jason Blood locked in a sword duel with Ivy and her vines – and he saw Joker, mouth filled with fangs, throttling Nightwing against an overturned table, at the exact moment Joker saw him.

“Batsy!” he cried, his eyes lighting up and his grin taking on a sickeningly happy turn, “Hiii!”

His skin hissed and sizzled in the holy rain like the other vampires’ – but he didn’t care. He dropped Nightwing and leapt with a smooth, animal grace over the table, bounding on all fours.

“*JOKER!*” Batman snarled, enraged as much at the threat Joker posed to Dick, to his family, to innocent people, as he was by the fact that Joker was *blocking him from Selina*.

He hit the clown like a derailed train – and Joker hit back. Bruce sprawled, rolled, felt the floor crack as Joker’s talons went through it, narrowly missing him. The clown howled with laughter.

“Whoop! Didn’t see that coming, didja?” and even as Batman brought his fists up in a defensive block, Joker grabbed him by the cape and hurled him across the room. But as Batman fell, Joker was already there, moving in a blur, grappling him and slamming his head into a table.

“How’s it feel Batsy?” *WHACK* “Now YOU’RE the punching bag!” *WHAM* “AHAHAHAHAH!!!” *WHACK* “Glove’s on the other fist - HAHAHAHAHAH!”

Batman gritted his teeth, twisted out of Joker’s grip, hit him, once, twice, a quick maneuver that would have taken down anyone who wasn’t *this* Joker. Ignoring the searing agony of the holy water, Joker sprang into Batman and struck him again and again, too fast to see.

“Ahahahahahahaha-” Joker shoved Batman to the floor, pinning his arms, “For the *FIRST* time ever, GUESS WHAT?!” Joker leaned close, licking blood from Batman’s split lip with a long, reptile tongue, “-I’m *stronger* – faster – *better* than *YOU!*”

“...brain...” Batman spat.

“WHAT?! Brains?! I’m a freaking vampire, Bats, not a zombie! BLOOD! DUHH. Don’t you *watch* horror movies?”

“Still...same...brain...”

“Ehh?”

Batman gave a bloody twitch of a grin, hit a button on his gauntlet, and sprayed concentrated silver nitrate and garlic right in Joker’s face. The clown released him with

a shriek and Batman kicked him backward. As Joker released him, he leapt toward Selina and Dracula.

The Count looked up from where he was bending over Selina's neck and a twisted expression of fury knotted his features. He threw his cape about their bodies just as Bruce closed within striking distance – and he was suddenly a cloud of black bats, slapping Bruce in the face, lifting Selina's body up and out through the crack in the upper wall where the vines had broken through...

"Go, we'll hold them!" cried Jason Blood, as an enraged Ivy, her lovely face a mess of tiny scars from the holy water, lunged for him.

But Batman was already gone.

He found us on the roof, Dracula and me. I don't know what he was expecting; I guess to find the Count with his fangs buried in my neck. But instead there I was, hunkered down, hackles raised, an *extremely* unhappy kitty, with my little bottle of garlic mace aimed straight at Dracula, who was in the process of disdainfully wiping the same off his cheek.

Batman came over the rooftop beside me with a look on his face like he'd just marched out of Hell to drag Dracula back there.

"She has an extraordinary will," the Count commented as Bruce joined us, "Very few have the power to break free of my command."

"NO GAMES," Batman thundered, "WHERE IS ROBIN?"

"Very few," said the Count, smiling, with a courteous tip of his head to me, "And fewer still who can resist me once I have already tasted their blood."

I didn't need to look. I felt Bruce's blood freeze in his veins. He didn't say anything; he just *looked* at me, and what could I do?

I lifted my hair away from my neck and let him see the bite.

"The night of the sewer," I said, without emotion, "I didn't know either."

I can't describe the look on his face. There wasn't one. He just turned back to Dracula and spoke to him in a quiet gravel.

"What do you want?"

Except I knew Bruce well enough to know that it wasn't gravel anymore; it was a mountain creaking before an earthquake. It was the snow shifting before an avalanche. I knew what would be going on behind the blank line of his mouth, the even beat of his heart, and I felt *my* blood freeze.

"To exist," said Dracula, "To be, and that is all. Unfortunately, the terms of *my* existence are somewhat incompatible with the terms of yours," he smiled thinly, "I am not, in truth, any more incurable than your Joker. But for him, you hold the illusion of hope. For me, hope is neither possible, nor desired. I am dead to all the world, and as I am, therefore, *I feed*. To defeat me, you must destroy me."

"Where is he?" Bruce asked, again, in that voice of terrifying calm. I didn't know if even Dracula knew what manner of hell he was about to unleash on himself.

"Batman..." I said, warningly. Drac had it coming, but I wasn't sure what level of collateral we'd be talking and we needed to save Tim. Bruce was oozing intensity, and I knew all of his shades; there was *Catwoman*, *put that down* intensity, there was *can't find my goddamned socks Alfred* intensity. There was Hell Month intensity and jealous

boyfriend intensity and *Ra's Al Ghul's in town* intensity and *Joker's loose and he's gassed an orphanage* intensity and they were all different.

And this was a particular breed I had seen before, the kind he only fell into when something terrible had happened to someone he loved. I wasn't scared of him – I never have been and I never will be – but I knew where the darkness in him was coming from. It was brushing too close to the time DEMON ran me through, to when he lost Jason, and Steph, and I was scared for what this might do to him.

"Where is he is hardly the question, dear friend," said Dracula, and gestured. Two of his vampires – not Joker gigglers, I noticed – spider-crawled over the edge of the balcony and dropped two figures in behind Dracula. One was a terrified blonde girl, mid teens at best, still in her pajamas and probably snatched from her bed.

The other was Tim. And he was horribly, horribly wrong. He sprang up on all fours when they put him down and snapped his head around to look at us. His eyes reflected the light as he turned, and his teeth glittered sharp and feral.

"No..." I whispered.

Bruce betrayed no movement, no sound, no expression, but I knew every muscle in his body had drawn taut as a piano wire and saw him speed toward a brink he couldn't come back from.

Tim sniffed the air like a dog, saw the girl, and snarled. He leapt toward her as she screamed, and Bruce leapt toward him – and they both stopped as Dracula lifted a hand. Tim shrank back, and the Count locked eyes and wills with Batman.

"No closer, my friend. Only my will holds him back," said Dracula.

"I swear to you," Batman said quietly, "If you've turned him..."

He didn't need to finish the sentence with some dire threat. The silence implied terror in store for the Count even Bruce's impressive vocabulary didn't have words for.

Dracula wasn't intimidated. It wasn't hard to imagine him as his father Vlad, overseeing the kind of obscene tortures that would make his name a byword for medieval cruelty through the centuries. "He is not true Un-dead yet. But I think you will find it were better that he was."

"What did you do to him?" I said, saving Bruce the trouble, circling, looking for an opening – if I could use my whip, if I could give Bruce a means to get past Dracula and get to Tim before he pounced on the girl, we might have a chance...

To do what then, I didn't have a clue.

"He has taken a concentrated dose of your Scare-Crow's poison; terror enough to shut down his mind and allow raw instinct to consume him. As the Jester's little pets below have shown," Dracula lowered his hand, still pointing it in Tim's direction, and the boy hunkered away from the girl, "the vampire kiss can seal a mind in such a state indefinitely."

"Oh God help me..." the girl whispered, "I don't – this can't be real..."

"Destroy me," said Dracula, "And my curse ends. He will become mortal again...and in that instant, his mind will shatter, and he will die," his eyes narrowed lazily, and with a flick of his wrist, Tim was released, snarling and snapping at the girl again – another gesture reined him in like a pit bull on a leash, "Or if I so choose it, he will kill."

“Robin...” Batman said. He was in control, but his corner of the rooftop seemed darker by the second, “Fight it, Robin. *Fight it. Fight him.*”

Tim looked at him again, and there was nothing in his eyes. Nothing of Tim at all. Less of him than there had been of the people who’d been the dead cackling vampires below.

“Make your choice,” said Dracula. He smiled.

Something snapped. Not in Batman. In me.

I saw Jason Todd’s gravestone; I saw the graves of Bruce’s parents. I saw Steph as I’d known her; I saw Steph’s funeral. I saw the loss weighing down on his shoulders, poisoning him, and all those kids he’d tried to give a home and a thing to fight for, and it just *went*.

I heard the wild scream from my throat and felt the whip unfurl and in the tiny moment of lucidity I had before I made a suicidal mistake, I changed the target of my lash from Dracula to Tim Drake and coiled it around his neck.

Even the Count hadn’t expected that, and as his face snapped into its devil snarl and he wheeled just as Batman flew straight at him. Bat and vampire clashed together and I couldn’t see what was happening amid the flying capes and claws and fists and fangs. I saw Tim go for the girl the moment Drac’s control of him slipped, and I saw his vampire minions lunge to help their master.

But I still had my whip, and I still had my garlic spray, and I still had Tim. I yanked him back, at the same time as I dashed to intercept one of the vampires and mist it in the eyes. When it recoiled, I gave it a good hard kick over the balcony rail and over it went, and down. No conflict of conscience for me; I knew a fall wouldn’t kill the thing.

The other one came at me, and I shouted at the girl to run for it, and run she did. Tim went back to his feet and went after her, and nearly tore the whip out of my grasp while I grappled with the second vampire. The monster was clumsy, but ludicrously strong; I gave it the butt of the whip to chew on, and open-palmed it hard in the chest. No pain reaction; expected, but it knocked the vampire back for the moment I needed to let it get momentum. When it charged me, I ducked and flipped it over my back. Over the balcony railing it went, to join its friend peeling itself out of the tarmac far, far below.

That left Tim. I’d lost hold of my whip, but the girl had made it to the rooftop door and was trying to hold it closed. While Bruce was still dealing with the King of All Vampires and barely holding him off behind me, I had to somehow stop Tim Drake from peeling the door off its hinges and guzzling on cheerleader soda pop.

I snatched up my whip and gave him a crack across the shoulders to get his attention; the inward wince I’d never have had tussling with a Robin in the old days didn’t last long as he turned back to me with that awful feral face and came at me. He went into moves I knew from fighting Robins and their trainer, but they were instinctive, used without awareness, and it put me at the advantage despite his sudden boost in speed and strength. The kid was suddenly hitting like a drug-crazed streetfighter on a murder spree, not a Robin. None of the precision and restraint I’m used to from the Bat-family, who aren’t fighting to kill. I had to adapt quickly, duck, block his talons – *Tim has talons* – and give him one right in the face that I knew I’d regret if this ended well, and worse if it didn’t...

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Batman still going at it with the Count, and Dracula's fighting style was something to behold. Batman was quick as a panther, and he had all those skills in all those obscure martial arts from across the world that Drac had no contact with; but from what I dared see, the old bastard had tricks up his sleeves that hadn't been seen in six hundred years. We have this weird impression that because the warriors of medieval Europe didn't have kung fu, their guys didn't know how to kill a man with their bare hands – Dracula was crushing *that* notion. He had this mix of aloof, military grace and sudden, utterly brutal strikes going that made me glad I was fighting Tim. And he was flicking and whirling and slashing with his cape like it was a weapon unto itself, and I was fairly sure Kittlemeier hadn't built *that* into it.

I couldn't tell which way it would go; Batman was using every trick in his book to keep the vampire from landing a decisive hit. I had to make mine quick. "Sorry Tim," I hissed under my breath as the kid hit me, putting claw marks across my arm, and in return I gave him a face full of garlic.

I glanced back over my shoulder just in time to see Dracula come out of one of his bat clouds with Batman hoisted up by the throat and his other hand drawn back for a killing blow. I whipped around his wrist and yanked with everything I had, and he turned and looked at me, and right at that moment Tim lunged for my unprotected back, and the rooftop door flew open...

Time stopped. No, really, it *stopped*, at least for Tim Drake. He was frozen in midair with his jaws wide open and his hands outstretched to grab me, and it looked like Dracula was frozen the same way; except he sort of blurred out of it, leaving an after-image where he had been, and dissolved back into existence from a thread of moonlight.

Jason Blood stood in the doorway with the pajama girl fleeing down the stairwell behind him; he was chanting a rhyme about lulling time itself to sleep, but I didn't bother to take note of the words. Dracula had somehow slipped Jason's spell, and he was looking up at us with an enraged expression.

It gave Bruce the chance he needed to pull free, but Dracula flattened him with a backhand and stepped back to the edge of the roof, cutting a winged shadow against the sky and looming over us all.

"Fools," hissed the Count, "Do you think you can set your will against *mine*? Behold, your deadliest foes are in my thrall..."

I felt a click at my ear. And a gun barrel pressed to my temple. And the corner of my eye was full of Jack's pretty new steak-knife grin.

Dracula smiled in triumph.

"Hey, Catty, remember that joke I told you that time? The one about, ahh..." Joker twitched, looking between frozen Tim, chanting Jason, Batman back on his feet and his hand going for his belt... "Was it the harpsichord player and the contortionist?"

"Not sure which one you mean, Jack. Can you remind me later?"

"Put the gun *down*, Joker," Batman growled.

Joker ignored him and pouted at me, "Hehhehhh hehhh – how'd it go? The one with the sailor and the Swedish milkmaid – no – the one about the rabbi and the four midget drag queens – hehhh – Aw, sod it. Here's the punchline!"

I opened my mouth, there was a click, whistle and a thunk, and the Count sprouted a stick from the left side of his chest.

I blinked, and saw Joker pointing his gun right at Dracula, and his lips folded down to a sour smirk.

"Impossible..." Dracula whispered, staring at the wooden shaft protruding from his heart. The BANG flag unfurled audibly in the silence.

"Was a gas while it lasted," said the Joker, "But I'm nobody's hench. Commitment issues, yanno?"

As the rest of us stood and stared, Dracula clamped his hands around the BANG-flag and gave a garbled snarl of hate.

"You really thought," Joker continued, "You could control MY mind? THIS mind?" He spat on the rooftop. "You don't *deserve* this town, grandpa."

Dracula's face locked in his look of outrage and something whispered out of him. Just like that, he toppled backwards off the roof, falling apart as he did. We saw the edge of his cape flapping as he went over and flakes of ash falling after him.

Below, there was a tremendous shrieking howl from multiple throats that faded away to nothing. I felt movement, and by the time I'd turned my head, Joker was gone, and Bruce and Jason were by Tim's side.

"What did you *do* to him, Jason?" Bruce growled.

"I've taken him out of time," Jason said, "And I cannot hold that long. Time is ...complex, and its will to do what it does is overwhelmingly powerful. Work fast."

My heart drummed in my ears. Bruce and I shared a look that said we both knew even if we could flush the toxin and loosen its stranglehold on his nervous system, it might be too late. We'd both seen his eyes.

But we gave him the antitoxin anyway. And when we'd done all we could, Jason, looking whiter than a vampire himself, let time slip back into its natural flow, and sank back exhausted.

Tim fell, and Bruce caught him in his arms and held him tight as his body spasmed and jerked and twitched. When he fell still, Bruce lay him down on the rooftop and checked his vital signs.

The wind seemed suddenly colder.

Nightwing and Batgirl joined us on the roof. Their voices, explaining that Harley, Ivy and the giggling vampires had a simultaneous freakout and fled the scene in unison, sounded distant and flat. We were all focused on Tim, waiting to see if his eyes would open, and when they did, if he'd be in there at all...

There was a flutter. He coughed, hard, and gave a little groan and put his arm up over his face.

"Where'zis?" Tim mumbled, and I think I heard my whole damn world breathe out.

"Rooftop," Bruce said gently, and the gravel – well, it was there – but he was controlling it so well I was almost startled, "Don't speak. You don't have to think about it. It's over."

"Whassover?"

Jason pursed his lips and looked at me, and he knew I was thinking *Tim should be dead or crazy, how is this possible?*

I wasn't about to question a miracle.

"Dracula," growled Bruce, "He's gone. Whatever he did to you, whatever you saw, Robin, it's over..."

"Dun remember," Tim coughed again, and smiled up at us, lingering longest on Cass. I wondered if, under her blank Batgirl mask, she was looking the same way at him.

Batman frowned beneath the cowl.

"You don't...remember anything?"

"Mmmrm," Tim shook his head, "Ivy...needle...bit me...thought of...training. No mind. No mind, so I dun remember...an'thing," and his eyes fluttered closed. We had another little heart-in-throat moment before it clicked he was sleeping like a baby.

"No mind..." Batman shook his head. Twitch of his lip. He looked up at me. "No mind. Zen meditation."

I'd gotten it right before he said that. And I knew why that feral thing that'd been trying to claw me limb from limb wasn't Tim; why he'd looked at me and I hadn't seen or sensed Tim in there at all.

"He wasn't in there," said Batman, echoing my thought, "He knew they'd injected him with Scarecrow toxin and he went straight to Zen meditation."

"He shut his conscious mind off," I finished, "All that was responding was his animal instinct. He wasn't aware of any of it at all..."

I confess, I teared up. We'd thought we'd lost the kid and then he goes and proves why he deserves to be Robin.

"His training," Batman said, trying to hide his beaming pride in his protégé behind a typical Bat-sowl.

It didn't work. I grinned ear to ear at him, "*Your* training, handsome."

Batman's twitch faded. He glanced back at the edge of the rooftop, then stood up and faced his crew.

"It isn't over," he said, "We still need to apprehend the Joker, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn, and find out what became of the remaining vampires."

"If Dracula's really dead," Jason said softly, "They won't last long without him. His curse is tied to his unlife, as it were. Any of the true-undead he's made will be dead by now, and there's nothing we can do about that. The living will have returned to normal, such as 'normal' might be for your Rogues."

I shook my head, imagining Jack's self-inflicted SmileX fit tonight. I doubted it'd kill him, but that'd be hell in the morning. I wondered if he'd think it was worth it.

Bruce had his hackles raised, though. I could tell he didn't like the way Jason had said that. Dracula was dead, and the Joker had killed him; he'd taken the moral dilemma out of our hands, and I was thankful to the cackling jackass for that. But it wouldn't sit well with Bruce. The crisis had been averted by a cold-blooded murderer committing cold-blooded murder. Bruce, I knew, would count it as a moral defeat.

Frankly, this kitty was too relieved to be bothered by the moral implications. Dracula was out of the picture, the party had *not* been turned into a slaughterhouse, and Tim was safe and back with us. Good enough for me.

When we spied on the foyer to check that everyone was safe, so that Bruce could make a bewildered Bruce Wayne appearance amid the crowd and secure his alibi, I

noticed they'd somehow nominated the valet that ushered us in as the hero of the day and were thronging him with cheers and applause.

I also noted the 'hero of the day' was too busy locking lips with the pretty receptionist to care.

"Did that guy have something to do with your holy water sprinkler trick, Batman?" I purred in Bruce's ear as he slipped out of the cape and cowl a few minutes later.

He gave me a little glare, and a twitch, "Let's just say I think Mr. Turnbull is in line for a raise."

Good enough for me.

Zogger.

A few hours later, and I was showered, robed, and ready to curl up with Bruce and let this whole hell of a night breathe through us and out of us, and...

Grunt. Punch. Backflip. Zogger.

The junior Bats were out with Jason Blood, tying up the remaining loose ends of Dracula's scheme. Batman and I were going to hook up with Oracle and supervise the search from the Cave.

So far, they hadn't needed us. I was hoping to take the chance to try to ease the stress of, well, a pitched battle with Count Dracula.

Instead, we come home from fighting vampires, Tim goes to the infirmary to rest up, Alfred makes us coffee, we get the all-clear reports from our field team, and Batman grunts at me, suits up again and goes to duke it out with Zogger. Amazing.

"We need to talk, stud."

Grunt. Punch. Block. Kick.

"You can relax for five seconds, you know."

Batarang. Rolling dodge. Roundhouse kick. Grunt.

"Bruce, it's over. He's dead. It's done. You can at *least* take the suit off. There's coffee getting cold that you *do* have time to drink with me."

Bruce emerged, all burning eyes and bristling tension in a cape and cowl. I'd have given him a meow if the mood wasn't already blown.

"C'mon, handsome," I said, sliding arms around him, "Tell me what's wrong."

"You know."

"I know Joker swinging in to save the day like some grinning Deus ex Machina isn't anybody's idea of perfect resolution, and I know how you feel about killing. But in this case, he was already dead, and at least you didn't have to face the choice—"

"="Verdana" size="2">"No?"

He slipped free of me and went to the Batcomputer. He sat down, scrolled through a few files, and ignored me.

I hopped up on the adjacent bench, put one bare leg across his view of the screen and sipped my coffee. He gave me a Look. I gave him a Wink.

"Out with it," I said, "Or I'll have to do this all night. And if my leg cramps, I'll be one cross kitty."

Bruce chuckled, but it died halfway out.

"He bit you."

Ah. So that was it.

"Not a big deal," I said, "And not as suave as he's supposed to be. You'd think a supposed 'great seducer' would have at least let a girl know he was there--"

Bruce growled.

"Bruce, it's no big deal," He just *couldn't* be comparing this to the time I was stabbed. Could he?

He sat and smoldered and said not a word.

"C'mon, you're serious? These little pinpricks? I've lost more blood fighting *you*."

Bruce slammed his fist against the computer table and the keyboard jumped, my coffee jumped, and I jumped.

"*He was in my house*," he snarled, and there was all that black smoldering Bat-rage again, "You were sleeping in my bed, *in my arms* and *he came in and took you* and *I didn't even know*."

Oh, shit. I guess I should've seen it coming, but I had never thought Bruce – *Batman* – would be the one to take it there.

"I'm sorry," he said, deflating, when he saw the look on my face, "I failed you, Selina. But never again. Never again will I let *anyone* do that to you."

Okay, I'd been bitten, infected. It wasn't a pleasant idea, joining Dracula's undead brood and being trapped in an eternal afterlife of hunting human beings and drinking their blood. It was a pretty horrifying notion, and only a fool would let Dracula's sales pitch of 'being beautiful forever' blind them to that. But we deal with the possibility of horrifying consequences to a misstep on a daily basis around here. Every swing off a gargoyle, every landing in an alley, things can always end badly. It's all part of the life we lead. If this was a different flavor of bad ending looming if we failed, I hadn't had time to dwell on it and neither had Bruce. And now Drac was dead, which meant I was cured, and there wasn't any *point* in dwelling on it.

But from the weird way Bruce was edging around me, gently, while barely restraining his outrage – he was treating it as a violation verging on rape. It took me a while to get it and when I did, I shook my head.

"Oh, no no no, Bruce. Honey," I wrapped my arms about him and kissed his cheek, "I'm fine. Don't think of it that way. Shh. Not what happened. If it was anything like that I'd be a lot more upset, trust me. Look, Victorian prudes, tooth penetrates flesh, it was a big deal to them. They freaked out over the sight of an *ankle*. Now, today, it's just not... it's not sexual. It's just annoying. Like Krypto pawing my hair."

He tensed, searched my eyes. I wasn't sure what he was expecting to find there; did he think I was holding it in, putting on a brave face for him? But after a moment I saw him break away and realized he was searching himself as much as me.

"That isn't it..." he said, "This...it's just...this is our home, Selina. Every step out that door, every breath we take, we face danger. I know you can handle it. So can I. But this...is the one place you and I are safe. *Were* safe. And he just came right in."

"Oh, Bruce," I said again. I got it. The very few times Rogues had broken into the Manor, it had been bad enough, but they'd been here for Billionaire Bruce Wayne, targeting the carefully-constructed and very well-defended persona Bruce had created for the public.

This was something more intimate; by coming into our home and attacking me in our bed, Dracula hadn't violated *me* as much as he'd violated *us* at our most vulnerable, and everything that stood for. And that wasn't all that was bothering him.

"I almost lost you," he said, "to something worse than death. If he'd..."

Turned me, he didn't say. And he was right. The dilemma of what to do about Dracula would have been a thousand times worse if he had permanently turned me, or Tim, or any of us. Jason and Stephanie were dead, but they were at peace in their graves. I winced at the thought of Bruce having to face them as monsters who killed and feasted on people.

"...What would I do?" he shook his head, "If it had come to that, I don't know what I would do."

The times when Batman was completely at a loss for what to do in any given scenario, I could basically count on one hand, and most of them had been my doing.

"Let it go," I told him, "It's all over and done with now. We're all safe, and you'll clean up the mess with the plague and catch the rest of them by tomorrow."

"He was in my house," Bruce repeated.

"-before we put up the anti-vampire defenses," I added, "We had no way of knowing he'd come here."

"What if we did?" he said, "What if he followed me home after our confrontation at Danesti? What if he *knew*?"

"That Bruce Wayne is Batman? Then we'd be neck-deep in crud, Bruce, but he's dead-again, so it's not a problem now. Let it go."

I tried to give his shoulders a rub, but I'd have been better off massaging a girder. I sighed and let him go. I couldn't be angry with him. He wasn't going to let it go, because he was Batman. The very existence of vampires that could infiltrate Wayne Manor, that could potentially turn members of his team into undead monsters, target the woman he loved and turn *her* into an undead monster, was unacceptable. He'd stay down here, smoldering over it, and by the morning there'd be dozens of new protocols. I couldn't be angry. This was who Batman was, and Batman was the reason a whole lot of people were still alive tonight.

But *I* was going to get some sleep. I would have stayed, just to keep him company, but I could see how even looking at me was reminding him of what had happened. He needed time to come to grips with it by himself. So I kissed him and took my coffee and slipped away.

"Don't take down the garlic," he said as I reached the elevator.

"Bruce."

He shot me another look. This one masked a very rare and very human fear. And I wasn't going to let it beat him. I didn't want to be flippant. I didn't want to be dismissive when he was hurting. But I just couldn't let him give into that fear.

"Honey," I said, "I like Italian food as much as the next girl, but I just had a shower with that nice lavender shampoo, and I have no intention of waking up in a room that smells like the pantry at Capriccio's. If you want to come up, I'll be waiting."

As I left him down there, brooding away, I saw him turn from the computer and start flicking through Van Helsing's diary.

Alone, in the cave, fighting my feelings about what had happened to Selina right here in my own house, in my own bed, I went through Van Helsing's diary, looking for something I'd missed, some clue as to how it had happened.

We had no way of knowing, she'd said.

But that wasn't it. Dracula had been *in Wayne Manor*. In my house. A private residence. My information was sketchy on the boundaries of these mystical superstitious rules he was forced to abide by, but I assumed he had to have been invited in by a resident of the household. Just where the 'private residence' began and where it ended was vague. Windows? The lawn? The front gate? The front door?

If he had come seeking Catwoman, knowing her only as Bruce Wayne's girlfriend, he would have been limited to only the obvious entrances. And he would have to be invited in.

This meant that either he had met and hypnotized her earlier, and she had invited him in, or Alfred had. Neither possibility was likely, but I would have to speak to Alfred about it regardless. The possibility that the monster had mind-controlled Alfred into letting him in was chilling enough. Dracula was not the only enemy I had with the power to control someone's mind. I would need to adjust half a dozen existing protocols and add a few more to take this scenario into account.

But *how* had he gotten in?

Once the vampire has gained himself access to a residence, Van Helsing's diary read, He may come and he may go as he will, and only the methods I have described may seal him out, and only if applied very thoroughly to every conceivable entrance.

A crawl ran up my spine.

The Oracom beeped.

::B, this is O. Nightwing's reported in::

"Speak freely, Oracle."

::He's at the morgue. They've brought in what's left of Dracula::

"Describe it to me."

"Miss Selina," Alfred said as he passed me in the corridor, "You are looking quite well. Will Master Bruce be requiring anything before he retires this eve?"

"Thanks for the coffee, Alfred." And the lie, I almost added. I didn't look quite well, I looked the way I felt—as though a truck had hit me, stopped, backed over me a few times, and then brought Bruce over to have a look. The shower had eased the muscle pain, sure, and relaxed me, but it hadn't eased what all this had done to Bruce. I wasn't going to be looking or feeling "quite well" for quite a while yet.

"I think Bruce will be busy down in the Cave for tonight," I said. I could tell by the look in his eye that he knew what I meant: Brooding with an intensity to bend light. I was sorry to burden him. I know Alfred hates leaving him in that condition as much as I do. You feel so helpless, knowing there's no way to take that weight for him. "Might as well turn in and get an early one," I added pointlessly.

"Ah," he said quietly, "I expect the situation was not quite resolved to his liking, then."

“No,” I admitted, “But he’ll be okay. He just needs a little Bat-time to make sense of it all,” I patted his shoulder affectionately, “Go to bed, Alfred. And Happy Halloween.”

“As much as such a thing can be had in Gotham,” said Alfred, “A Happy Halloween to you as well, Miss Selina.”

“Water.”

::In the lungs, yes. The forensics guy was puzzled as hell, because the body looked fresh when they brought it in but it’s decaying rapidly now, just falling apart for no reason, and it seems it was biologically dead long before it hit the pavement. Which I guess was to be expected, considering. But that’s not the weird part, B::

There was something coiling in my gut. An instinct. A warning.

“Cause of death?”

::That’s where it stops making sense::

“Cause of death.”

::Drowning::

I gave her silence.

::That’s what the report says, B. The lungs are full of seawater and all other symptoms are consistent with recent drowning::

“Send the report to the Batcomputer. I want everything they have. Fingerprints, DNA samples.”

::Batman?::

“Stand by, Oracle.”

I switched off the com and waited thundering moments for the data to arrive. When it had, I muttered “Computer, compare incoming data to obituaries, missing persons. Drownings, recent.”

::Confirmed:: it replied.

As my software went to work, I opened the diary, ferociously scanning the pages for something, anything I might have overlooked, some clue to break through the sense of sick unease in my stomach and tell me the scenario falling into place in my head was wrong.

Please, God, let it be wrong.

My fingers froze as I found it.

An oft-forgotten power of the master vampire is his command over his true-undead children. This bond is permanent and cannot be broken by either party. Though the child-vampire become more independent as he age, and the bond grow weaker, he never able to resist the direct command of his undead-maker, nor turn against him.

I fought the wave of bile. We had been duped. I had been duped.

Furthermore, if the master vampire is old and strong, and the child still newly-made, the master may project his will and his powers through the bond – to the extent of possession. The master vampire will become the child, for a time, and the young vampire become as his puppet...

::Match located. Plogojowitz, Piotr::

I looked up, into a face staring back at him from a missing persons file from an incident dated October 27th, location; Gotham Harbor. The face of a second-generation Serbian immigrant working as a quarantine officer, presumed drowned when a derelict

ship sank shortly after the removal of its cargo. A face with high cheekbones, coils of black hair, and deep-set, penetrating eyes.

The face of the man at the ball in the black and red cape.

“No,” I heard myself whisper, and then the crawl in my spine and the rustle of velvet movement made me look up.

Up, into the bats gathered on the ceiling of the Cave. Up, into thousands of animals for whom the Cave and by extension the manor itself was *home*, who flew freely into and out of my sanctuary through the one entrance no garlic and holy wafers could ever seal.

Their eyes shone red in the dim light. There were more than there should have been.

I went for my batarang, and the Cave exploded into cacophony. They poured down on me in a pillar of beating wings and snapping teeth and I felt myself stumbling, pushed back, lifted by unseen hands, and the last thing I saw before he hurled me into one of the Cave’s bottomless crevasses was Dracula’s white face, his true face, smiling.

CHAPTER 16: DARK KNIGHT TOCCATA

I dreamed of something rumbling, booming in the distance. Deep, resonant, bouncing around behind my ears and filling my chest with its vibrations. It seemed to echo out into the whole world. I'd gone to sleep with silk sheets caressing my bare skin in a warm bed that only faintly smelled of garlic, but as I flitted in and out of consciousness I became aware of disconcerting sensations; a damp, stony scent, and cold nibbling at my cheeks and nose, and a familiar presence tight against my skin, covering me head to toe...

My catsuit. I was wearing it, and I had no idea why, or how, and I couldn't remember changing. And the tickle against my skin was the wind, but I had gone to bed with the windows closed against the cold autumn air. The smell in my nostrils was rain. And the sound in my ears was the sound of thunder.

As it boomed again, I snapped awake, to see a narrow silhouette standing with its back to me, framed like an Expressionist shadow against a vast night sky cut by frequent veins of lightning. Hands clasped behind his back, turning his head alertly to each new crack of thunder like he was having a conversation with the storm.

A tall thin man dressed in all in black.

"...Dracula," I whispered before I caught myself, and he turned to look at me over his shoulder. I saw the points of his ears, the long flowing black hair drawn back, and his face – sharp, predatory, a goatee framing too-red lips.

People say they can see the cat in me. Something about the way I move, the shape of my eyes, the way I smile. This man was a wolf, in all the old, cruel, Red Riding Hood senses of the word. It was in the edges of his face, in the white points of his teeth just visible past his lips, in the mirror-like eyes that caught the red in the lightning and didn't let it go.

It was the same wolf I'd felt buried in the man I had danced with a few hours ago. But it wasn't the same man's face. I hoped I was dreaming; it seemed too surreal, to wake up to this, after everything we'd been through. *How?*

"Did you enjoy my masquerade?" he asked, and I grimaced; somehow hearing his voice broke the dream and brought me to stark reality.

"Is that what you call it, Count?" He was real and I was here, in my cat suit, on the roof of the Wayne building, sitting on an incongruous chair at an incongruous dining table that didn't belong in the middle of Bruce's private helipad, "Because given the choice I'd have taken a date with Hugo Strange over...*this.*"

He smiled at me, and without a word he glided forward and his spidery fingers produced a bottle of fine vintage red from out of nowhere and poured into a crystal goblet on the table.

I watched the red liquid slosh into the glass with a sick feeling in my stomach.

"You must forgive that I do not join you..." he began, mockingly.

“...But you never drink wine,” I cut him off, trying not to let him see me thinking over all the ways I could get off this rooftop. Then something hit me.

“So why are there two glasses?”

Dracula chuckled, “This,” he tapped the second glass with a *ping* like a distant church bell, “Is not for me.”

Then he turned without further explanation and stared back out into the storm, expectantly. I heard him whispering under his breath, saw his fingers shifting in sinuous, careful motions, and I realized he really *was* communing with the storm, guiding it, commanding it. The swollen grey clouds stretched to the horizon in every direction, but they were knotted thickest and blackest right above our heads.

I mulled over the fact that he was obviously waiting for Batman. That meant I was bait. Despite a heavy lethargy, I felt my fingers flare the claws a little at that thought. Bait. *Bait*. It was one thing if I chose to put myself in that position as I had at the ball, but I was *nobody's* fainting damsel. Nobody's. Undead bloodsucker or not, mind control abilities or not, already had his fucking teeth in my neck and tasted my corpuscles or not, Catwoman is not someone you position helplessly on in a tower window of the Gothic castle, standing silently in that flowing white nightie to draw the strapping arch nemesis into your lair. No sir, you bring Catwoman into the equation, you get *CATWOMAN*. Not some empty vessel.

The Count knew that. He had to know, too, that this was a declaration of war, but he'd risked it anyway, and I couldn't see the reasoning behind it. If it was Eddie, I'd be looking for logic. Asserting his intelligence, proving he was smarter, and therefore the better man. If it was Joker, then random and chaotic—if we were lucky—and trying to make a point if we weren't. Trying to prove one of his insane 'social theories', or whatever. But Dracula, Dracula was about something else, and I didn't know him well enough to figure out what it was.

I'd have loved to unravel him with my silence, the way we cats usually do when someone makes the mistake of letting us be scenery. There's a lot to see when they think you're not looking. But Dracula brought me here, he wasn't going to simply forget I was there, drop his guard and allow me to read his game. I needed another approach—which was just as well. Passive and silent didn't fit my mood. Cats also know when a ball of yarn needs a little pawing to make that first end of thread show itself.

“So, Vlad,” I prompted, fidgeting in my chair. I was not restrained physically, but I felt heavy and lethargic, *weighed down* somehow, and I knew I wasn't drugged. The bastard was doing it with his mind, as expected. I'd have to play the best hand I could.

“I'm guessing that was you at the ball, but not *you*, so I guess you dressed some minion up and mind controlled him and had Joker shoot him and drop him off a rooftop...”

“Correct.”

“And since you're still here, they're all still... vamped, if that's the word. It was all a charade.” I shook my head, “Robin, the Rogues, the attack on the ball... all a sick joke from beginning to end?” A beat passed, and I gave him a defiant little smirk, “It's a little Rube Goldberg for a fifteenth-century warlord, don't you think? If you wanted to get to me, or to Batman, you had some good shots, I'll admit. But... then you just went

theatrical. Made it overcomplicated, like they always do. Now, whether you know it or not, you're screwed. My question is, *why?*"

Dracula laughed quietly and lowered his hands, and the storm seemed to settle with them.

"To show that I too can play your game," he said, "And win."

He walked over to me, and I felt the lead heaviness leaving my body, and to my horror, as he lifted his hand, I found myself rising out of my seat to meet him, like a puppet on a string.

"And then to teach you a different game," he murmured.

"I don't...understand."

"At the ball, I told you I wanted to know what to do with the Dracula your world has imagined. Tonight, I have created and destroyed him for you. Were you pleased?"

"I *was*," I said, but it came out as a shaky whisper. I couldn't move my arms and legs, couldn't reach for my whip, couldn't do anything but fall into those cold emotionless eyes...and the feeling of helplessness knotted my gut, "Now, not so much."

"I am what remains," he purred, "And as I have remade myself, so I shall remake your world into one to welcome Dracula with open arms."

"That's it? World conquest?" It was getting harder and harder to speak, to think. A kind of cold numbness spread through me, dulling everything else, "The tried-and-true? That's all?"

"Not all, dear lady," he said, and touched my cheek. His fingers were cold, the flesh of a corpse, and up close he smelled like rain on ancient stone and damp grave earth and a faint rusty bitterness. Blood. Death. A shudder went through me. "Not all," he said again, and his fingers slid under my cowl and pushed it back from my neck.

I couldn't say anything. I felt his lips on my brows, my cheeks, on my own lips, then on my throat. My head tipped back against my will and the cold points prickled and then burst into pain. I fought just to get the gasp out; my mind was thrashing and flailing and screaming but my body lay limp as a doe in the jaws of a wolf, and I *hated* every moment of it because I *knew* what he was doing to me, and I hated it even more when I felt the tingle of blood loss spread along my limbs and caught my body relaxing, responding to him. The pain in my throat receded and I felt – cold. The coldness grew until I thought it would devour all of me.

Then, Dracula let me go.

I sucked in a breath and went to my knees, catching myself with my hands on the damp tarmac. The Count had turned away again, but he ran his hand through my hair in an affectionate, far-too-familiar way that made me want to retch.

"Get it over with," I said through clenched teeth, "I know you're going to so just...just do it."

"You misjudge me, my lady," he said, turning back to me with a devil's victorious smile. I saw him lick my blood off his teeth in an almost-feline way that made it even worse. "This..." he stroked my cheek and tipped my face up to look at him, "Is not for me."

"It doesn't matter what game you're playing," I hissed at him, trying not to let the shudder I felt at that awful corpse-touch show, "It's already over."

"Yes," said Dracula, "It is."

Then his ear perked, and I heard a soft rustle I'd learned to anticipate on many other rooftops, in countless museum vaults and alleyways and gallery halls. I felt the air shift in his direction the way it does when *he* arrives.

Dracula gestured. I felt my body sink beneath that heavy leaden control again, and I saw beyond Drac's shoulder, the pointy-eared silhouette of Batman standing on the edge of the rooftop looking like a gargoyle spat out of Hell.

Dracula turned to meet him.

"Welcome, Mr. Wayne," he said.

Batman said nothing. I'd thought him intense when Tim was in danger but this – he was a singularity. There was a black pit of pain and anger deep down in him that had opened with two gunshots in an alley and fuelled the wrath the criminals feared. He had battled it, used it, controlled it, made it serve him instead of commanding him and he'd turned it into a weapon for good. But those rare times when I saw him like this, I saw into that pit and I saw what he was holding back and my heart broke for him.

"Some wine?" Dracula said, gesturing to the bottle and glass behind him.

Batman's fist creaked in response.

"As expected," said the Count, "Then, shall we to business?"

"I have no business with you," said Batman, "And you have no business with my city, or with Catwoman. *Let. Her. Go.*"

"I'm afraid that is impossible, my friend." Dracula said softly, "For both of you are now bound to me. I have supped of her blood twice now, and once of yours."

I saw Batman's haggard eyes and I knew he was aware of it. Drac had bit him. He must have come into the Manor, somehow, bitten Bruce and then taken me from my bed to lure him here. I felt my knuckles stretching my gloves.

The Count did not smile as he continued, "Each of you carries the sentence of death and undeath in your veins. Its only cure is my destruction."

"Not your game," said Batman, "You could have killed us both, or made us completely undead, but you didn't."

"Yes."

"And Robin is no longer a vampire," Batman growled, "So Plogojowitz bit him at your command to throw us off your scent when you killed him. Ivy, Joker, and Quinn are still infected, but you haven't turned any of them permanently either..."

"Yes," Dracula repeated.

I was angry. Hurting. Hurting more that he was hurting Bruce. I cut to the chase; "*What the hell do you want with us?*"

Dracula smiled faintly. I felt the power that had been pinning me down lift me up, drag me toward Batman, and then release me. I tottered, gained my bearings with the grace natural to a cat, and in a flash my whip was out and slashing the air for Dracula's face. Even with his speed he didn't see it coming and it sliced a wicked gash across his forehead.

I saw the surprise in his eyes and caught an admiring mirth in his chuckle. I hissed at him.

"Well-played, my lady," he said.

"Can't say the same for you," I said, stepping beside Batman and giving him a little glance that said we were in this, together, to whatever end, "You're done everything

possible to piss off the most dangerous costumed couple on the planet. Are you aware of that fact?"

"Indeed," said Dracula, bowing cordially to the both of us, "And I apologize for the discourtesy. I would have preferred not to have...*infected* you," Dracula said, as though our choice of wording amused him to no end, "But I had no illusions that you would come to me of your own free will. It was necessary to give you some incentive to accept my offer."

"Offer?" snarled Batman, "You invaded my city, murdered its citizens, spread a contagion, infected my enemies and my allies with your *disease*. The only *offer* I will hear from you is your unconditional surrender."

Dracula raised a hand passively, "Hear me..."

"No," I snapped, "not really inclined." And even *I* was surprised at how cold my voice came out, "You made a lot of mistakes coming here, but sinking your fangs into *my neck*, that was the worst. There's no going back for you. If you think we're going to listen to you when you expect me to become your 'Bride'..."

"Far from it, my dear lady. You were never to be my Bride," said Dracula, smiling at Batman, "You are to be his."

"..."

It fell into place, piece by piece. The ball, the costume, the wine, my cat suit, the Rogues, the Robins, even the dead vampires Cass had found at the church. It all began to make sense, and when I saw it all, I felt sick to the stomach.

"You can't be serious..." I said, looking between Batman and the Count.

Dracula gave the ghost of a smile, walking toward the edge of the roof, with all of Batman's rage—louder and blacker and stronger than the storm—following him. Then he turned his white face to the giant Wayne emblem on the tower pinnacle just above where we stood.

"A man always builds highest what he values most," said Dracula, "Tell me, my friend, what did your father wish to honor when he built this grand castle and named it for himself?"

Batman said nothing and I squirmed inside because he was heaping more fuel on his own pyre and he just...wouldn't...stop. Bringing Bruce's *parents* up was about the worst he could possibly-

"Not arrogance," the Count continued, when Batman didn't speak, "No, from any other man perhaps, but not from Thomas Wayne. I have much read of him. A great man. A man of peace. He used his name so that the name of his beloved family would become a symbol for his people to rally behind, did he not?"

"Hope," said Batman, finally, "He wanted to give them hope."

"How like the father is the son," Dracula said, shaking his head, "I know well this beating heart," He tapped his lifeless chest, "For my father, whom you call Vlad Tepes, sacrificed everything he had and everything he was for Wallachia, as did his father before him. *That* is what makes a prince! A *voivode* is not his throne, nor his castle, nor his armies, nor his titles. He is the land. His blood is its blood. And the blood is the life."

He turned with a sweep of his arm to the glittering carpet of Gotham beyond us...and his smirk was gone. Replaced by something I almost thought was sincerity.

"You are *voivode* here, Bruce Wayne. Gotham is your kingdom. No other could defend it with such passion and conviction. Even if I overthrew you, killed you, took it from you, it would never be mine as it is yours."

"Then leave," said Batman.

"I intend to," said Dracula, "When I have enthroned you and your queen as the vampire lords of Gotham."

Batman fell silent and looked at me. God, the darkness in him; it was this gaping wound that wouldn't close. Dracula hadn't made it, hadn't even come close, but he'd reopened it and rubbed salt in it and he was dancing right on the edge of it. Unleashing that beast had toppled supervillains a hundred times stronger than the Count, had brought down forces that had the whole JLA against the ropes. Dracula was many things but I couldn't see him as suicidal. He *had* to know...was he just too arrogant to care?

"Bad move, Count," I said simply.

"I'll give you," Batman said quietly, "One more *why*. Then I finish this."

"The darkening of the world is inevitable," said Dracula, "And I am but a part of it. You can struggle against the tide for a lifetime, perhaps. But already your mortal bodies grow weary...you have put them through the kind of punishment that would kill a lesser man, a lesser woman, a thousand times over. And the price of Time is steep..."

"Stop right there," I said, "We get the immortality speech from Ra's... a lot. And it's crap. It was crap the first time and crap the thousandth time. If it's all you've got, save it."

"Ra's al Ghul is a fool who thinks you fear death, as he does." Dracula chuckled, "I know better. It is not death you fear. It is what will happen to your city after you are gone."

"You are more like him than you think," Batman said quietly. I couldn't read his expression.

Dracula reached down and dipped his fingertip in the untasted wine. He rubbed the red smear between his fingers and looked back at us.

"When the time comes for Batman," he addressed Batman directly, "When he can no longer do as he must, what then, my friend? Will you force one of your young princelings into your cowl and cape? Would you have another shoulder the burden? *This* burden?"

Batman stood like a mountain in a tsunami and bore it in silence. He'd let Dracula beat on him and I couldn't predict whether he'd shrug it off, give it the quiet smolder of slow but infinite hate, or if he was about to go supernova. I readied my whip to give the Count another one, just to shut him up.

"Vlad, you *really* might want to stop there--"

"You alone are Batman," he said, his eyes snake-like, hypnotic, fixed on Batman's own. I suddenly knew why Batman hadn't moved; the bastard had mind-controlled him when he released me, "And only you can be. Gotham City will die with its dark knight. It is as inevitable as the dying of the sun."

Mind-controlled *him* when he released *me*.

I stepped to block his line of sight and cracked my whip again, "I'm *warning* you..."

Mind-controlled him when he *released* me.

"You will deny me, of course," slow, stalking steps circled us. We were the prey. I tried to whip him again but he was ready this time; he blurred to one side without skipping a step and kept coming toward us. *Crack. Crack.* He blurred away each time and *kept talking*. His stare never left Batman, "...so I have taken the choice from you. Now you must break the rule that is your heartbeat, and destroy me..."

"ENOUGH!" I roared, and went for him. Dracula blocked my arm, and I felt a fire go through me that defied my fatigue, my blood loss, everything. My claws slashed his coat. My boots cracked against his cheek. He went back, but he was still speaking, relentless, his voice like a demon's chant in our ears. But I couldn't shake that thought: he'd let me go when he took control of Batman. So his control wasn't absolute or unlimited; with subjects as strong-willed as the two of us, he could only keep one of us under his thumb at a time...

And that wouldn't be enough.

Then he open-palmed me in the gut and I felt the rooftop hit my back and I saw stars shooting in the corners of my vision.

"Destroy me," Dracula whispered, "And return to your rotting husks, bound for the grave. Or become as I am, blood of my blood, for it is the final bite that seals the bond of vampire and child. If you do not slay me here, you will die, and rise again as my slaves. That is no fate for a *voivode* and his princess. To the man who embodies the rule of Justice and Order for Gotham as Vlad Tepes did for Wallachia, I offer another choice. Take it from each other, and you shall be equals, my children."

I fought to my feet, but the thing he'd left in my blood was awake, writhing, gnawing at the inside of me, and I was fighting myself as much as him...because I knew what the hunger in me was hungering *for*.

"Consummate here your wedding of the blood," Dracula said, "and rule the Gotham night for all eternity."

"NO!" I snarled at him, and with a cruel smile he turned again on Batman, and stalked lazily toward him with hand outstretched.

"Take what I have given you. Your vilest enemies heel like dogs at my command. But I have left the final kiss for you, so that they will be yours, and bound to your will. Think! They who preyed upon your city shall become the agents of your Purpose. You will have the city of peace your father dreamed of. And the price, for its people, but a small monthly tribute of blood. And I shall leave you to your kingdom, for there is much more for me to do, my friend. Very much more."

His clawed hand stretched toward Batman, and I saw him leaning, pulled like a marionette, slowly, slowly, to take it.

"What say you?" said Dracula.

I fought the vampire's control enough to take a step, then another. I looked up just in time to see it.

Batman's hand fell, and he laughed.

Bruce Wayne doesn't laugh often. He's a serious guy. I don't think even Alfred had heard him laugh much before...well, us. Now, he laughs. Still not often, but he does. It's a gorgeous laugh, understated, but warm and real and full of *him*. I've also heard Bruce Wayne laughing out of Batman's mask, on very rare occasions, and when *that* happens, it's creepy as hell, because it doesn't belong there.

But this wasn't Bruce laughing. This was Batman laughing. Batman laughing is rarer still and *terrifying*. Joker heard it once and couldn't raise a chortle of his own for *weeks*.

"I say," said Batman, "That I've heard that joke before."

Dracula's fingers curled and his eyes went glacial. And I saw something almost as scary as Batman laughing; I saw Dracula's rage. The wrath of a will that had conquered Death itself. Irresistible force, meet immovable object.

With me in the middle. Right where I belonged. From there, I could tip the scales.

Meow.

"You shall find a key difference between myself and Ra's Al Ghul, my friend," the Count said, "I make an offer only once."

His talons shot for Batman's throat; but the black cape flicked and Batman's hand came back up. Dracula recoiled with a kind of harsh barking sound like a whipped dog and I saw a glint of metal in Batman's grip.

A crucifix. It seemed to grow larger and larger in my vision. For me it held only the association with Christianity a not very religious 21st Century girl would bring to it; but for the piece of Dracula he had left in my blood, it burned like the sun. It hurt to look at.

"*Put that down!*" Dracula snarled. His command went through me and I saw Batman's hand shaking – smoking through his gloves – but his willpower held. He took a step forward. Dracula took a step back.

"It isn't the wielder's faith, is it Count?" he said, "It's the symbol itself. The shape. It triggers something buried deep down in your psyche by a mortal lifetime of conditioning. A psychosomatic response." A step forward. A step back. Dracula's face was twisted like a beast, but he couldn't look directly at the cross. "I bet the modern vampires you despise aren't affected at all. It's you, and your bloodline, because it was drilled into your father when he was alive and you took his memories."

Dracula's eyes went narrow and his lips twitched up over his teeth.

"A man always builds highest what he values most," Batman quoted like it was an incantation. "What was the highest point in every village you ever saw as a living man? What made every peasant genuflect and cross themselves?"

"I *command* you," Dracula said, with one of his imperious gestures, pointing a claw out into the glittering void of Gotham, "Throw it away!"

Batman stopped, wrestling with himself and with the Count's compulsion, but he did not budge.

"No matter what you do," he continued, "You can't break it. Your undead curse has frozen it into you, like the garlic and the running water and all the other limitations you can never escape."

"Throw. It. Away." Dracula thundered again. I saw Batman's arm shift to the left and then back. He was fighting it, and I was fighting it. I saw my whip where it had fallen from my hand when Drac hit me. I couldn't get closer to Batman because of the cross, but I *could* do something...

"Free will," Batman said, looking Dracula straight in the eye. Challenging him. "Van Helsing was right. You don't have it. You think yourself so much smarter and better than them, but all your powers, all your schemes, all your plans...it's all to feed the Thirst, isn't it?"

He thrust the cross in Dracula's face, and the Count bared his dagger teeth.

"Same dog," said Batman, and he smiled, "Longer leash."

I picked up my whip and crept toward Dracula's back while he and Batman were locked in their battle of wills, but as I raised my hand to strike I saw a cunning gleam in the Count's eyes, and he turned his attention from Batman to me. I felt his will crash down on me like an avalanche. My whipping arm shifted direction against my will, lashed out, and tore the crucifix from Batman's hand. As it spun away into the night and vanished, I saw Dracula's face melt back into its devil smile.

"A crucifix?" he said, "I expected more."

Then his face went cold and he glanced at me. His voice whispered two sharp words into my mind, into my soul – *Kill him*.

The shadow he had planted in me woke up screaming, twisting my thoughts and feelings. All the love I felt for Bruce, the passion, the intensity of my emotions diverted until I hated everything about him; his voice, his body, his smell, everything. All I could think about was my claws tearing his throat and his hot blood splashing on my tongue. I was on him in a heartbeat and he was defending himself and I completely lost control. My limbs were moving, beating him savagely with all my years of combat training against all *his* years while Dracula played us like a chessboard for one. I heard myself snarl and felt fangs in my mouth, and I saw red eyes flashing in Batman's cowl, and white knives glittering in *his* mouth, and I knew Dracula had won.

Dracula stalked around us, controlling us against each other, whispering words into our minds. He stoked the fire of our emotions, but he had bitten me twice and his power over me was stronger. Inside myself I grappled with the vampire thing, fought it, kicked it, bit it, screamed *NO* into its face and demanded it get the hell out of me. But I couldn't stop myself from tearing into Batman, and he was only half-resisting.

For all I knew him, and for all he knew me, there were parts of us that had always been holding back. We'd hurt each other on those rooftops, in those alleys. But no matter how many bruises we gave each other, it had always been a sparring match. We'd never, ever, been fighting to maim, to kill. I didn't even really know *how* to kill, because Catwoman never has – and while Batman doesn't kill because it's a nigh-religious edict he has placed on himself, Catwoman doesn't kill because I'm not a murderous psycho. *Now*, against my will, I was fighting just like one. But something of Batman was still in control of his body, and he could not use the same force against me.

He faltered. I felt my claws tear into his chest and felt him go down beneath me. He was on the edge of the rooftop, his head and shoulders hanging out into dizzying space, and I had him pinned.

Behind me, I heard Dracula's voice.

"Now you see that there is nothing you have that I cannot take from you."

Batman turned his head, stared down, down. His eyes met mine. Then he grabbed me, twisted beneath me, and threw me off the roof.

The difference between leaping off a skyscraper and falling off one is indescribable to anyone who has not experienced both. I'm here to tell you, one is exhilarating, the other is...not.

Somewhere on the way down my flailing claws caught rope and wood and I found myself swinging wildly from a window-washer's platform, hundreds of feet above the

bleating horns and growling engines and hissing rain of the street. The rope creaked and the wind howled around my ears.

God damn you, Bruce, I thought, knowing he'd seen it and thrown me off trusting I'd catch myself, *WARN a girl next time*.

A noteworthy thing about cats; a cat will turn up its nose at a plate of food it was meowing plaintively for a moment earlier. A cat will demand to be let out of a house only to want back in five minutes later. Give a cat what it seems to be asking for and you're as likely as not to discover it's already changed its mind.

But give a cat an *opportunity* at your own peril. We don't waste those.

As I came over the edge of the rooftop, I saw Dracula and Batman circling each other like a pair of alpha predators preparing to duel over territory. The Count evidently thought he had the upper hand; but he was smart enough to know Batman had plenty of tricks up his sleeve he might pull if his enemy went for a quick kill. He was stalking him slowly, taunting, trying to tease him into revealing his hand, and it was his caution, I realized, more than his overconfidence, that would give us a chance.

Drac, like Eddie, was too smart for his own good. He was so fixated on Batman, preparing for anything he might pull, he wasn't paying attention anywhere else, and once more, he'd counted me out of the game.

Big mistake. Another. Big. Mistake.

Dracula suddenly chuckled in the back of his throat and blurred forward, his body breaking into a cloud of bats briefly as it did; Batman went into a defensive stance but the bats flapped *around* him and coalesced into Dracula behind his back. A blinding strike of his claws sent Batman tumbling, and by the time he was on his feet the Count was there again.

"You cannot tell me," he taunted, "That the great Batman is helpless without a humble crucifix? What is next, a silver stake? A sprig of wolfsbane?"

Batman gritted his teeth and his hand went to his belt. A glass canister slipped out of its protective casing and flew straight for Dracula's face, but the vampire caught it in his hand. He grimaced at the clear liquid sloshing around within.

"Holy water? Hmph. I shall not ask how you acquired this," With a contemptuous flick of his wrist he tossed it aside, and it smashed against the concrete not far from where I hid, "It is twice the sin to steal from the House of God. Is that truly all you have?"

I saw that little twitch come to the corner of Batman's mouth.

"No."

Dracula's smile returned, "Of course. The Batman would not be limited to such clumsy superstitions. Do me the courtesy, dear friend, of telling me what manner of defeat you intended for me, since you would under no circumstance allow me to be destroyed."

I saw the glint of victory in his eyes. He'd forced Batman to pull his trump card, as the Count would see it, and was now stalling, calling his bluff. He'd have known Batman would turn to technology rather than faith or folklore for a weapon, but Dracula's inexperience with modern tech would mean his only way to learn what he

was up against was to *ask* his enemy to explain it to him. Amazingly, Batman seemed to be playing along.

He straightened, and his hands went to his sides. Near the belt, but not pulling anything from it; letting Dracula eye his potential arsenal without knowing which he would go for.

"The key is your vulnerability to sunlight," Batman said quietly, "Since it reduces your powers without destroying you. I thought that if I could build some kind of containment chamber I could confine you, like a cell for a mortal criminal."

"Criminal," Dracula laughed, "So that is what you think of me. How novel. Continue."

Batman narrowed his eyes, circling the vampire as Dracula circled him, "Of course, I didn't have time to build it, so I thought about what I might already have in existence that could be used against you."

"Truly, you must have great resources at your disposal, my friend."

"I also have a friend. Meta-human, like you," Batman said, "Superhuman strength, speed, nigh invulnerability. In a way he's your polar opposite. The sun is the source of his power."

"Perhaps one day I shall meet this man," said the Count, "I would relish the opportunity."

Batman gave a little twitch. He didn't flick his eyes to me, but I knew he had just become aware of my presence, and that was my cue to move. My eyes went to the shattered holy water bomb; I saw that part of the curved glass remained intact, and still held liquid.

My whip on its own couldn't hurt Dracula, and he knew it. Good.

I crept out of my hiding spot behind the air conditioner vent, picked up the broken piece of glass, and poured the holy water over my whip.

"I doubt that," said Batman, continuing his verbal duel with the Count. Each was stalling, now, measuring the other's strength, waiting for that moment of weakness, that window for the fatal strike, "I already had a system of orbital satellites set up for his benefit. Should an enemy find a way to drain his strength, I could use the satellite network to bounce condensed beams of solar energy from any position around the Earth and aim a beam of concentrated sunlight straight at him."

I saw that tiny pause in Dracula's padding footsteps. That little hint of doubt that didn't make it to his inscrutable smile. He narrowed his eyes, and looked up into the storm clouds above his head. He laughed quietly.

"It would need to be a truly powerful light, and a great deal of heat, to cut through my storm."

"I figured you might use your weather powers to even the odds," Batman said, "And I realized I would need to heavily modify the satellite above Gotham in order to weaponise it."

"Even you with all your wealth and science could not have arranged an expedition to space in such a short time," said the Count, "You're bluffing."

Batman lifted up a small black controller with a flashing red light on it.

Dracula's smile faded.

"Fascinating," said Dracula, "Give it to me."

Batman's shoulders tensed. I saw his fingers twitching over the device, then his feet dragged forward one after another. Dracula had been concentrating on him for some time and didn't need to split his attention between the two of us; Batman couldn't resist. His footsteps went closer, closer, and his hand stretched out...

Dracula calmly took the controller from him and held it up to crush it into powder in his grip -

And this time, I didn't miss.

I whipped Dracula in the back, and his spine arched and a snarl went up out of his throat as my lash opened his coat and left a smoking line along his body. My second lash hit his wrist, and the precious controller went flying. He rounded on me, and I felt his rage bearing down on me like a tidal wave. But it gave Batman the chance to go for the controller. Drac saw it, too, but I wrapped the whip around his neck and yanked him toward me.

During our dance, I'd thought how I couldn't tell strong he actually was. As if some part of me knew this moment was coming. Now that it was here, it didn't matter. That poisoned whisper—Kill him—those nightmare moments where the love I feel for Bruce couldn't hold back what this monster put inside me...it broke through now. I felt it surging through my arms and fingers as I twisted that whip around his throat. If it was Superman himself trying to stop me at that moment, we would have had a fair fight, and for two—four—five steps backwards, Dracula's balance was Kitty's bitch.

Batman's fingers closed on the controller just as Dracula threw off my whip and slashed at me with his talons. I rolled away from him and came up with a wicked grin.

"Gotcha," I said, as Batman came up with the controller in his hand.

"Do not mock me with your baubles," the Count sneered at us both, "It is not possible. You've had no time, no chance!"

"You're right, I haven't," said Batman, "But my friend can fly in space."

He pressed the button. Dracula snapped his head up to the heavens above him just in time to see the clouds part in a wall of steam, as a beam of searing light shore through them and struck the Count full in the face.

The howl that went up from him was something completely inhuman—and very, very satisfying. I don't know what Batman had expected – what I had expected – to see his powers drain, to see him reduced to a mortal state where he might be subdued, captured like anyone else – but what we got was much worse.

The storm clouds around the sunbeam went black and pulled in on themselves like an injured snake. Lightning slashed down and scorched the flanks of the Wayne building. While Batman and I shielded our eyes from the sudden light, there was a horrifying roar, a smoky smell—that gave way to a nauseating stench of fur and leather burning. Then something that *used* to be Dracula staggered out of the light. I saw the shadow of gigantic bat wings, a muscular shape twice the height of a man – a face that would give Manbat nightmares – then the huge claws seized Batman and the monster took off with him.

I barely had time to react. My whip went around the thing's ankle and then we were flying – all three of us – Dracula's huge wings beating above me – I could see his flesh was burned, half-sizzled away by the sunlight in some places, and he had Batman clutched up in front of his face, fighting to get free. We were hundreds of meters above the city, all I had to hold onto was a whip and it was slipping in my fingers. My legs

swung in space, and the drag was too strong for me to pull them into a better angle. When I looked down, all I saw was a blur of familiar streets and rooftops scrolling past. We were moving out into the older part of the city, and the Count was climbing in altitude -

I swung forward and grabbed his leg. Claws kicked near my face. I hung on for dear life and used my weight as best I could to pull him down.

It seemed to work, and I saw the street growing larger, and then Dracula kicked me in the chest and I fell through the rain. I saw a grisly, spiky profile – a cathedral – my whip uncoiled in a frantic strike – and I found myself clinging to a gargoyle, my body swinging hard against the cold granite wall of a church.

Gritting my teeth, I climbed over onto the sloping roof, dislodged my whip, and saw the huge shadow of Dracula's demonic form looming up high in the air. He still had Batman, and I saw him swat something out of Batman's hand. It clattered on the rooftop near me.

His grapnel.

Dracula turned and looked down at me between wingbeats. His awful face shifted into a sadist's smile, and he kept looking at me as he lifted his claws and shredded Batman's cape to ribbons. Then he flew higher above the church and lifted Batman up and I saw what he was going to do.

I don't know what I was thinking. All I could see in my mind was Bruce's body broken and bloody amid the jagged spikes of the cathedral towers. My hand went to the grapnel and as Dracula wheeled higher and prepared to throw Batman to his death, my only thought was to get him *back down here*. I shot the grapnel, heard it whistle, felt the distant thunk as it pierced Drac's body. His shriek went above the thunder.

I didn't have time to brace myself. I knew he'd yank me off the roof, I wasn't heavy or strong enough to hold him. In desperation I tied the grapnel around the gargoyle behind me and ran – ran as if Bruce's life depended on it, which it did – ran to catch him as he punched Dracula in the face and slipped out of his grip.

He was falling. Falling, and I was *too slow* to catch him. No grapnel, no cape glider, nothing but a human body plummeting through empty air. My whip went out, and around his torso as he plunged past the sheer wall of the cathedral.

His weight hit me like a ton of bricks. I fell forward, on my stomach, sliding across the cathedral roof. I hit the gutter and chunks of stone went flying past me and then I just...stopped.

I didn't know if I had him or I didn't. My world was a haze of pain and cold and wet. I looked down and saw a black shape dangling from my whip, and my heart lurched.

Then the shape swung toward the wall and its foot caught a ledge, and Batman was climbing up beside me, a strong arm around my shoulders, breathing hard. I saw his blood on the roof-tiles, mingling with the rain.

Our eyes met, then broke away as we heard an echoing scream, and saw Dracula, still tethered, flapping around in the sky like a giant paper kite spat out of Hell. He was berserk. I'd had a thought since that first hellish screech from the light beam, but now I saw it clearly; wounded animal. There is nothing more dangerous. There is nothing more deadly. He fought like the monster he was, slashing his wings and talons in all

directions, trying to break free, but those ziplines of Batman's can hold an industrial load. We saw his raw strength rocking the gargoyle he was tethered to - a gargoyle that, irony of ironies, was placed there to protect the holy place from evil.

"We have to cut the line!" Batman hissed, trying to push himself up, but as I put my arm around him to help him, a fork of lightning sliced through the heavens and went through Dracula - and went through the steel grapnel line and earthed through the gargoyle.

Dracula burst into flames. I felt my teeth go on edge as the gargoyle he was tied to cracked and fell and yanked the bat-monster down with it. Dracula fell like a blazing meteorite right into the highest spires of the church we stood on, the church on the corner of Lang and Furst, into them and through them. The gargoyle crashed through the main roof and Dracula plummeted after it. All we saw was his big black wings going down and a plume of dust and debris and smoke going up.

Battered, bruised, barely able to stand, we limped to the edge of the opening and stared down into the wreckage.

Far below, spread across the front pews and altar of the cathedral, Dracula's demon-bat body lay broken, twisted, and smoldering. He was still moving, but there were bits of wood and iron sticking out of him everywhere, and I grimaced as I saw he'd landed on the big iron crucifix behind the altar.

It was stuck right through his heart.

Dracula looked up at us, and his wings shriveled and his body started shrinking back to normal even as it fell in on itself. His face went from young to old to ancient and was barely able to break out a final, bitter laugh as it stared at us.

"Well..." he called through the rain and ruin, "...played..."

Then he collapsed in on himself and crumbled into dust and brittle bones, and I felt the wriggling monster in my veins die with him. It whispered out of me and was gone, and I reached up to finger my throat and found the holes there gone, too. Batman and I slumped on the rooftop for what felt like aching hours of silence before we finally clambered down the broken beams to where he'd fallen.

Batman looked at what was left, and said nothing. I felt my stomach in my throat, staring at the vague lump of dust and ash in the shape of a man, staring at Batman's grim, solemn expression.

Don't do this, Bruce, I felt the cold spread through me, Please don't do this. Please don't do this. Please, please, please don't do this. He was going to kill you! I had to do something to hold him down. I wasn't trying to kill him, it didn't even cross my mind, I couldn't possibly have predicted it would end like this!

Did he see it that way? Did I see it that way? Had I crossed a line with him that I could never go back over?

Outside, we heard the mournful song of - not wolves. Dogs. A howl went up from every dog in the neighborhood, in unison. We stood and stared in silence. At each other, at Dracula's remains. Above us, the storm clouds cleared, and I saw the light of dawn spilling down through the hole in the ceiling, filtering through the stained glass windows.

"He destroyed himself," Batman said quietly.

I looked up at him.

"This," he gestured, at the broken roof, the bent iron cross in the middle of the ash pile, the cracked remains of the gargoyle embedded in the floor, and I knew he meant all of it – the lightning, the gargoyle, the cross. I wasn't responsible for that. I had no power to have made it all happen in just that way. I saw clearly, then, that it wasn't me, in truth or in his eyes, and the relief nearly broke me in two.

"An impossible sequence of events," he said, "Yet it happened."

"Act of God?" I blew out a sigh, ran my hand through my soggy hair, "Almost like...nature turned against him."

"He wasn't a part of it anymore," said Batman, shaking his head, "He doesn't belong in this world. He could only press his control on it for so long before it rebelled."

"Well said," came a voice, and Jason Blood strode into the church behind us, a frown cut across his face as he saw the pile of dust, "And accurate enough. Probably more than you know."

"Jason," I acknowledged him with a nod. I'd have loved to hit him with a catty remark, but nothing sprang to mind.

"You're late," said Batman.

"I came as fast as I could," Jason said, with a dry little smile. "I'm not psychic, you know."

Batman glared at him.

Jason looked at me, saw my arched eyebrow, and sighed, "I had my suspicions that he might pull an eleventh-hour stunt like this, but it took the unpleasant revelation that Joker, Harley and Ivy were still vampires to confirm it. They ambushed us, and by the time we drove them off, your team couldn't reach you on the com. While they tracked the vampires, I followed the signature of Dracula's weather magic. Though the, ah, signal flare you let off atop Wayne Tower was the biggest clue."

"You knew he wasn't dead!" I shouted at him, "And you didn't tell us!"

"I *suspected*. I didn't know for certain that wasn't him on the hotel rooftop. I haven't seen the man in four hundred years and he's been known to change his appearance before," he countered, "I expected you would have drawn the same conclusion."

"It doesn't matter now," said Batman, turning away, "He's dead. It's over."

"Well," said Jason, "In a manner. Look."

Batman stopped, and I stopped. I squinted and leaned forward in the dim light of the church.

Jason was right. Dracula's ashes were moving, ever-so-slightly, particles of dust drawing together, swirling around, slowly condensing. It's absurd, but my first thought was *he's like the god-damned T-1000, only...dustier*.

"Oh for god's sake," I said.

"Dracula never really dies," Jason said. "Destroying his body releases his victims and renders him incapacitated, but... Evil always seems to find a way back. The how and why of it, even I am not sure of," Jason shook his head, "But if I had to hazard a guess, I would say that his will to exist is stronger even than Death itself. A remarkable being."

"Your 'remarkable being' is about to pull himself back together and kill us all," I pointed out, "Don't suppose you've got a Hoover in your bat-belt, handsome?"

Jason chuckled, "No need. You have done the hardest part, and for that I cannot thank you enough. But I will take it from here."

He leaned down and placed an ornate silver urn on the floor of the church, and as we watched he sprinkled a white powder that might have been salt around it in a complex circle, chanting as he did.

He opened the urn, and we saw a layer of dark soil within. Then he straightened, and began a rhyme; we heard an echo of Etrigan in his voice.

*"Restless spirit, risen dust,
Quell your dark and wicked lust,
Rest here within this earthen womb.
Lie quiet in this silver tomb."*

There was a whisper like the sigh of a ghost and Dracula's remains lifted from the floor in flakes and specks, swirling around as if caught in a wind. While we watched, the dust poured into the urn like a genie back into its bottle, every last particle, until not so much as a speck remained on the floor – only the shadow of giant bat wings burned into the stone of the church. All that Dracula had been went into the urn, and when it was done, Jason carefully replaced the lid and chanted a spell of sealing.

"There," he said when it was over, and picked the urn up, "That should keep him out of the world's hair for quite some time."

"What will you do with him?" Batman asked, and I detected a hint of incoming Psychobat. I hoped Jason would choose his words carefully.

"In my centuries," Jason said, "there have been many artifacts I've come across whose magic is too powerful to be defused or destroyed, but too dangerous to allow to remain loose in the world. I have something of a vault of them, and I believe there is a place for Count Dracula there."

"Is it secure?"

"Bullshit!" I said. "Do you have any idea how many 'secure' vaults within five minutes of here I can be in and out of by sunrise? I say we have Spitecurl drop it into the sun, then when he's feeling up to pulling himself together and getting his ash out of the jar, he'll be in for one hell of a surprise."

The pair of them exchanged looks like I was an Arkham case, but before I could remember the wattage of the sun to reiterate my point, Jason cleared his throat and said he was ready to "take his leave" because even in a deconsecrated church, Etrigan was giving him a headache.

"Jason," Batman said, "Is my team safe?"

"They called me just before I arrived here," Jason said, "They captured Harley and Ivy; Joker, alas, eluded them. They've reconnoitered at your cave. Everyone's fine. Nightwing, Batgirl, Robin, Oracle," he smiled, "Alfred has something of a hypnosis hangover, but he'll be fine too."

Batman nodded slightly. His eyes held the 'thank you' he would never give voice to, and Jason bowed his head in return.

It was all too somber. I knew the moment called for me to lighten the mood, say something carefree and feline about the bath and massage I craved and how Bruce was honor-bound to give it to me since he'd gone and thrown me off a skyscraper... But I couldn't feel it. I just couldn't. Too much had happened that I hadn't had a chance to process.

“Let’s go home,” I heard, whispered just outside my ear, and felt the tattered cape wrap around me like velvet wings.

I pursed my lips, glancing back at the shadow of Dracula on the stones.

“Deal,” I said.

EPILOGUE

Jason Blood listened to the staccato of his own footsteps on the slimy stones leading to the Vault. The only other sounds were the rush and roar of the cold grey waves of Scottish seas at his back.

Here, on this tiny island, the ruins of an ancient Pictish standing circle lay buried, undisturbed and unknown to archaeology. The power of their timeless runes of protection were undimmed and unbroken, however, the work of tribal sorcerers from an era when much of mankind had shared a primal bond with the elements themselves. It was the perfect place to seal away those artifacts too dangerous for the mortal world to hold. A hundred generations of their descendants had returned here, strengthening the wards, augmenting them with new knowledge and new power, until their guardianship had at last passed to Jason of the Blood.

His coat was torn and scorched and stained with blood today. It had been a bitter battle with the demented cult bent on summoning Yamata-no-Orochi and unleashing the monster on modern Japan – but he and his allies had been successful in retrieving the sword of the hero-god Susanoo who slew the god-dragon in antiquity. Until the cult was defeated and the sacred weapon could be safely returned to Japan, it had been entrusted to Jason's care. It was an act of immense trust on the part of both the Shinto priests and the Japanese imperial family, and Jason had no intention of letting them down. Here, in the Vault, on the far side of the world, the cult would never find it...

Jason stopped cold as the first whispers of magic reached him, telling him the wards had been breached. They should have warned him instantaneously from across the world, but something had dampened their call –

Jason readied his magical defenses, whispering under his breath as he crossed the threshold. He cursed Etrigan, who seemed to find the entire thing tremendously amusing.

The salt circle on the floor in the first antechamber was undisturbed, but he found lodestones positioned in strategic places around the vault, weakening the wards and blocking their communication with Jason. The physical traps had been deftly disabled with no sign of any of them having been triggered.

His footsteps quickened, to the tempo of Etrigan's laughter in the back of his mind. He passed layer after layer of wards. Some untouched, some deactivated, some defused. Lead powder blocking a crystalline sensor. More lodestones, precisely arranged in a geometric pattern to divert the ley lines converging on the vault and redirect their energies. Springs of wild ash. Holy wafers. A vial of water from the River Ganges inserted into a particular spot...it went on and on.

Whoever had done this had meticulously taken apart his defenses, each with its corresponding counter-element, almost exactly as Jason himself would have done. Chillingly efficient. Worse, Jason began to notice that there were no residual signs of spellcasting whatsoever. Whoever had done this had not used any conventional magic,

but rather played rock-paper-scissors with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of rare magic-dampening artifacts.

The cult? Jason wondered, eyes narrow, mounting the stairs and passing two more layers of wards that would have teleported any other supernatural intruder to the bottom of the sea – but had not been triggered. *It cannot be. They had no way to know. And they would not have made it this far...*

But there were so many things of immense value in the vault that the list of those who might try to break in was nearly endless. Dark wizards, devil worshipers, necromancers, faerie queens of the Unseelie Court, demons of Hell...

Whoever has managed to do this must be powerful. Powerful beyond reckoning...

He whispered a spell to search for a life-force and found one thrumming in the direction of a sealed and warded part of the Vault. He knew what lay there, and what the stakes were. As he rounded the corner, ready to do battle with the very worst spawn of Hell....

...he found Catwoman, leaning on an ornate – and empty – chest, and drumming her claws on the silver urn containing the ashes of Count Dracula.

“Hi, I’m Selina from Bad Kitty Security, Inc,” she said, off his incredulous stare, “I’d like to talk to you about upgrading your system. Looks like you need it. Meow.”

“How did he react?”

She’d sauntered right into my cave with that got-the-canary look, toting a mysterious duffel bag, and had the audacity to look *surprised* when I asked her. Then she assumed her rooftop routine: her hip cocking to the side ever so slightly, the little turn giving me an eyeful of her profile... Whenever I caught up with her after the goods were in her loot sack but before she could get off the property, this was the reaction... Then a move towards me, not threatening but subtly predatory, that sly smile as she sauntered across the roof—or today across the cave—her whole body alive with movement. Then, at last, those playful, defiant, impossibly green eyes would flicker up into mine, the lips would part, and some bit of teasing felinity would come purring out...

“I’m sure I have no idea who you’re talking about.”

I gave her a faint, grim smile. “Jason Blood.”

“You knew,” she smiled, her voice soft, just above a whisper. I couldn’t decide if she was pleased or acknowledging the checkmate. I opted for the former and deflected it with a grunt.

“I suspected,” I said, turning back to my work. *Five Riddler crimes in the last month. Her ‘friend Eddie’ was testing my patience, and off she goes doing this. Well. “I knew you weren’t satisfied with his explanation of his secure facility to contain Dracula. I know you’ve been stewing over it for the past six months since it happened.”*

It being one of those episodes, the kind we didn’t like to refer to in too much detail. Not only the circumstances of Dracula’s coming to Gotham, what he had done here, and the troubling aspects of his final downfall, but also the mess he had left behind: the Plague, the modified toxoplasma bacillus, and one other form of residue...

“No, I wasn’t satisfied,” Selina said, “Neither were you. I would have told you what I was doing if you’d asked, but...”

She had nightmares she wouldn't talk about. For three nights in a row. Then I saw that gimlet look in her eye and I knew she'd found a solution. Catwoman being Catwoman, I guessed it was a form of 'theft therapy,' and I was glad. I had a great deal to do cleaning up the rest of Dracula's mess. People had died, and I had to pull all my resources into action to clean both the Plague and the modified toxoplasma bacillus out of the Gotham population. My contacts in the JLA had proved extremely useful, but the most unexpected ally in the fight against the plague had been Otis Flanegan, the Ratcatcher.

Soon after his release from Arkham, I investigated reports that he had stolen samples of antibiotics from several veterinary hospitals, and found that he had been working in secret the whole time on a rodent vaccine that would make biting any treated rodent fatal to plague fleas. Otis had taken on the task of curing the plague at its source – the rats – and with a few donations of certain chemicals and research from an anonymous source, in a few months the plague outbreak was over. There were still traces remaining, cases that popped up here and there, but the plague faded from the media frenzy it had been to something that was just accepted as the cases dwindled.

Which left only the aftermath closer to home: Selina, and my own concerns about Jason's "secure vault."

"You're right, I wasn't satisfied," I said, "But you haven't answered my question. How did Blood react?"

"He was pissed at first, as expected," she said, "But unlike *some*, Jason's a gentleman. He admitted it was more important to address the flaws his setup than to 'blame the messenger,' and he agreed to let me... improve things. I start on Monday. It's in Scotland, by the way. You won't mind if I take the jet this time, right?"

"I'm surprised you waited this long."

She pouted slightly at me, running her claw over my chest insignia as she used to back on those rooftops so many lifetimes ago.

"Take Batman's plane to a heist? No way. But now that it's no longer a Catwoman break-in and I'm just doing a favor for a friend—"

"I meant I'm surprised you waited this long to break into the vault."

"Jason doesn't exactly have a Phoenix 9000 or a Diebold, stud. I had to do some serious research. Haven't dealt with magic protections since the Aztec jaguar cult back in the day." She purred and stretched, distracting me from Riddler's file so much I sighed and closed it, giving her my full attention. "Powders and crystals and runes, I'd forgotten what a headache it is looking up all that crap. But at least this time I had your Mr. Gerard ID to bid on artifacts in all those collector's auctions. Thanks for letting me use him, by the way."

I couldn't keep the twitch from my lips. She wouldn't borrow 'Batman's plane' for her heist, but she had no qualms using the shield identities I'd sent up to acquire items at auction without revealing Bruce Wayne as the buyer.

Selina grinned, "So, you going to ask me about where the flaws in his defenses were, or do I get to make you guess?"

"Go ahead."

"Oh, you're no fun," she said, tapping her claw on my insignia and pawing at my shoulders, "Well to start with, Jason's *good*, at what *he* does. If I had been any kind of

evil warlock or whatever trying to break in using magic, I'd have had to be Merlin himself to make it past the first few wards. And if I were a demon or whatever else – forget it. He had wards built in that, going from my research, would have blasted me back to Hell before I knew what hit me.”

“But.”

“But...” She shook her head, “The best at what *he* does is not the best at what *I* do. Just like the security firms that stake everything on motion sensors in the floor, like that doesn't mean I'll just have to work out a way to come in through ceiling. Jason apparently never conceived of a regular non-magical human who isn't under any kind of mind control sauntering in of her own free will and disabling his stuff. Dark wizards? Sure, got that covered. Demons, extradimensional demigods? No problem. Cat burglar? I waltzed right in. I could have been picking through his Assyrian sacrificial urns before I'd even hit the first decently locked door.”

I snorted, “He could use some lessons from the JLA. We've had to deal with magical *and* technological threats, including unforeseen alien tech, since we formed the team, so we've learned to be ready for anything.”

She gave that dismissive little laugh she always gives when the League is mentioned.

“Thanks mostly to you,” she said, “Who designed the security systems for the Watchtower, again?”

I twitched, “Back to Jason.”

“I convinced him that his magical stuff wasn't enough,” she said “There were physical traps as well, sure. Some scary Indiana-Jones type things he probably should tone down if he's ever working late there and decides to order pizza. But even those wouldn't stop a determined pro of even half my caliber. And a good seventy percent of the magical wards only work on *magical beings*, or on wizards trying to use *magic* to get past them, instead of, you know, feet.”

Her tone was still playful, but I felt a surge of anger blotting out any enjoyment of her ‘theft therapy.’

“You're saying all it would take was one of these demon cults wising up and hiring a high-level professional instead of trying to break in by exclusively supernatural means?”

“Bingo,” she said, with a sweet smile, “But not for long. Stand down, Dark Knight. Kitty's on the job.”

“That doesn't explain why you were gone so long.”

“Well, honey, Edinburgh's *gorgeous* this time of year.” She strolled back over to my desk, tisking at the amount of Nigma-related notes I had scattered around, “And so's Kyoto,” she added casually.

“You detoured to *Japan*?”

“Well,” she said, “Jason felt grateful to me for pointing out the flaws in his security, so he let me tag along on his mission.”

I narrowed my eyes, “What mission?”

She waved a claw, “Some kooky Babylonian snake cult trying to steal the imperial regalia of Japan and resurrect an eight-headed immortal dragon-serpent-monster... thing.”

I glared at her.

"What?" She blew me a kiss, "It was *fun*. Our Japanese partner was a blast to work with. I haven't seen a pro like that since I still worked with Sensei and I very much doubt I'll see her like again."

"Why would that be?"

"Mm..."

"Out with it."

"I don't know if I should tell you."

"Selina."

"You're not going to believe me."

"Selina." I said, "I'm Batman."

She sighed, "Alright, I get your point. Well, we were going along assuming she was *just* the head of a secretive order of shrine maidens trained in shinobi arts by Tengu mountain-spirits in antiquity."

"Just," I caught the sarcasm even as I said it.

"Turns out the real shrine maiden had died thirty years ago and our contact was a disguised Shinto goddess."

"..."

"Amaterasu herself, no less."

"..."

"Suffice to say the cultists got a little more sun-tanned than they expected," she said, casually, "Really, don't mess with someone's divinely-given imperial regalia, lesson of the day."

"You're serious."

"Do I look like I'm joking? And I'll have you know that *some* people's deities are a *lot* better mannered than others," she grimaced, "Janus and Hel could take *lessons* from Amaterasu. She's a real lady. *And* she has a sense of humor."

"..."

"I told her to pass my number on to Bast if she ever needs a cat burglar," Selina said cheerfully, "And she *winked* at me."

"Winked at you."

"Mm-hm."

"A goddess winked at you."

"Clear as day," she said, "Well, naturally, because she's a ...sun...goddess...yeah. So. Bottom line, cult thwarted, regalia returned, Jason grateful for my help, vault to get an upgrade, Count Suck-face still safely napping on the mantelpiece, *and...*"

She reached into the duffel bag and withdrew an elegant but extraordinarily old-fashioned Japanese sword. From the style I was guessing it dated to the Kamakura period at the youngest. She slid the blade partway out; it was the most exquisite workmanship I had ever seen.

"A little souvenir," she said, "A thank-you, she said, to *Nekohime* and *Komori-no-kishi*. That's us, by the way."

"Is that..."

"A replica. The real thing's back in the Imperial Family's custody, of course." She paused, "Jason got a magical ukiyo-e brush. He seemed stoked with that."

"Impossible woman," I said.

"Little something for *your* treasure vault," she said, kissing me, and laying the sword reverently on the table, "And happy birthday. Pre-emptively."

"Good work, Catwoman," I said quietly, when I meant *thank you, Selina*. I saw from her little smirk that she knew it.

"Mm. Don't mention it. Looks like we got our happy ending," she said, wrapping an arm about me, "Except for one loose end."

I frowned, "Yes. The...*movie*."

"Premiering this week. *How* is that possible? It was only *shooting* six months ago--"

"As it turns out they shot most of it over seas, before they came here. Post production was already underway. The scenes Joker and I stumbled into were reshoots . Last-minute... Meant to be discreetly captured on cell phones, leaked to the net and generate buzz."

"Hoo boy."

"And it doesn't just premiere this week," I growled, "It premieres *tonight*."

As I leaned over and pulled up the at-large list on the computer, Selina groaned.

"Oh hell," she said, "Guess I'm going to have to postpone your other early birthday present. You're going to be working late."

Right there, at the top of the at large list, the cursor sat blinking next to the word *Joker*.

"HA-HA-HA-hoo-hoo-hahahaha-hooo-who - *CRUNCH* - hoo hoo - aaahhh - uhuhuh ehehe haaaaa - *CRUNCH* - AHAHAHAHHAHAHA HAAA HAAA HARRR HROOOM-WAHH HOHOHOO-mmm - *CRUNCH CRUNCH*"

The cinema sat empty. Popcorn spilled over seats, drinks left in their holders. The credits of *Batman: Knight of Shadows* scrolled down the black ending screen to the pulse of ominous orchestral music, but only one figure was there to hear it, aside from the terrified cinema staffer up in the projection room who'd been instructed to *keep it rolling* while everyone else fled in terror when they realized the fellow in Seat 13-A who started cackling his head off around the third act *wasn't* a cosplaying fan.

The cinema's only occupant squatted on one of the seats with his feet up and his arms full of about six buckets of super-sized popcorn, each which he was grabbing handfuls from at random and stuffing them in his perpetually grinning mouth in between laughter, occasionally spitting white chunks of popcorn out as he came across another particularly amusing name in the credits.

Then, suddenly, there were two shadows in the rows.

"*Joker*."

"Ooohhhhhh hiii Batsy!" said Joker, "Oh man, you missed the best part! I'd just barbecued Harvey's face and then - then hahaha they think I was responsible for that, what a hoot - then there were these two boats, see, and I'd taped up the hostages and switched them with my goons, and I had a bunch of Dobermans and a crowbar, and in you came like--"

"I saw it."

"What, already?"

"Demo reel."

"You swine!" Joker grumbled, slurping from a vat-sized Coca Cola, "HOO!! AHAHAHA! – GAFFER - REGINALD POOT- POOT! WHAT A NAME!! Hey wait, I REMEMBER that guy! I think I tied him up with his own tape on the way in, remember? WHAT A GAFF THAT WAS!! Hahahahaha. Oh and there's the Best Boy, Freddy Ferbles! Good old Freddy. What's a 'Best Boy' do on set anyway, Batsy? Sounds a little dirty if you ask me, just like 'Boy Wonder'. Ewwwww. FILTHY PERVERSIONS I say! If they do that with the 'Best Boy' what do they do with the WORST Boy? Yikes!"

"Joker," Batman grveled again, patiently, "The movie's over. Are you satisfied?"

"Oh hell yes!" chortled Joker, "I had *so* much screen time! So much material! They should have called it 'JOKER: KNAVE IN PURPLE'! Granted, the LOOK was all wrong, like some unwashed hobo bum version of myself – in makeup! Aahaha. You and I know I have better hygiene," Joker sniffed, "But huzzah, what a performance! If I don't get an Oscar for *that* one, I'll be forced to paint the Red Carpet a *proper shade*, eh Bats, get my drift? That Joker was *fantabulous!*" Joker stopped ranting for a moment and pouted, "Pity they didn't go with the Bat-nipples though. I *will* be recommending that for the sequel. *BUT!* I *will* forgive them, because they put me in a nurse outfit!"

"It'd look better on Harley," said Batman.

"Well, true," said Joker, "Though I look spiffing in her pink teddy. The rest of her wardrobe, though – ugh - a *teency bit* tight around the nether regions, if you catch my drift."

"..."

"What?" said Joker.

Batman just shook his head, as the last of the credits rolled.

"It's time to go." Batman said, "You've had your fun, Joker. You're going back to Arkham."

"Aw, Batsy," Joker said, fluttering his eyelashes, "Offering me a ride home after our movie date, you *shouldn't* have."

Batman stood up, grabbed the Joker's shoulders and turned him around. The bat-cuffs snapped shut around his wrists.

"You know seeing this movie," Joker continued, as if being apprehended was not a concern at all, "Reminds me of that big mess six months ago when we paid our little visit to the production..."

"Save it," growled Batman, tugging his captive toward the aisle.

"Nostalgic, really," Joker sniffed, "And wasn't THAT a fun Halloween we had after? HA HA HA – DRECKU-BLAH in GOTHAM, who'd'a thunk it? And let me tell you, being a vampire was rather fun. Blah ah ahhh! You know I've had this song stuck in my head since then - Ooh oohh can we play it on the Bat-iPod on the way back? PUHLEEEEEEZE?!"

"No."

"I bet you can't guess what it is. I betcha can't. I betcha can't guess it-"

"Bauhaus," sighed Batman, "*Bela Lugosi's Dead.*"

The Joker drooped, "Am I *that* predictable?"

"Yes."

Joker pouted, and glanced back at the movie screen as the credits rolled, and clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“Poor old Count,” he said, “Never could handle his own fame. Not like us, Eh Batsy? It’s funny how we ended up here, isn’t it?” Joker’s voice suddenly shifted, deepened, his accent mutating, becoming heavier, more breathy and nasally.

“You and me, up there on the silver screen,” Joker licked his lips, “Changes us, makes us fantasy, keeps them all blind to the reality of it all. You see, everything about us appeals to their inner thirst for chaos...”

Batman stopped dragging him toward the exit and glowered as he picked up the shift in accent and tone. He was mimicking the movie version, word-perfectly.

It didn’t bode well for what *else* of the film’s ideas he might try to mimic. Batman made a mental note to get hold of the script – and since the movie hadn’t killed off its Joker character, the shooting script for the next sequel in advance.

“Nice try,” said Batman, “but that isn’t your voice.”

“Ohhhoh, no, no see, this month it is,” Joker said gleefully without losing the impression.

Batman shook his head. He had little time for Joker’s nonsensical rants, but the clown seemed passive and introspective, which was rare, and the lack of violence with which this encounter had proceeded had him cautious, looking for any information Joker might let slip - “If it keeps you out of trouble.”

“Let me tell you a little joke,” Joker said, dropping the accent, “Here it is: *BATMAN: KNIGHT OF SHADOWS*,” Joker said, gesturing at the screen as best he could in the cuffs, “Tickets sold out in advance. Talk of Oscars. *They love us!* All the police tape, all the property damage, all the body bags you fight so hard to keep empty, and they can’t get enough of it. They might call us freaks but they’re really lapping it up.”

“Depraved crimes like yours,” Batman replied, narrowing his eyes, “Always make headlines. It’s unfortunate but unavoidable.”

“It’s *natural*, Bats! I mean Ted Bundy and O.J Simpson cause a media circus? PLEASE. Even the most worthless Z-list costumed clown in Gotham has a *zillion* times their charm. By the time you get up to the likes of *me*, there’s no contest.”

Batman remained silent, but he had to admit the madman had a troubling point. The larger-than-life personas of costumed rogues and crimefighters were perfectly suited to the mass media. There were tabloids like the Post and even more legitimate newspapers that made most of their money printing the wild and lurid tales of Gotham’s costumed underbelly, to say nothing of television, books, and the internet...

And now there was a movie.

“No wonder Hollywood came calling,” Joker chortled, “We’re putting them out of a job. Hoo-haha.”

“Are you finished?”

“Not quite,” said Joker, pointing his bound hands at Batman and wiggling his finger, “You see,” he dropped back into his Ledger impersonation, and Batman inwardly winced, “there’s a point I’m trying to make, here! The public loves a good villain; look at Dracula. You know he’s been played on stage and screen more times than *any other character in history*? If *you* hadn’t done a Buffy Van Belmont on him he’d be *PRESIDENT* by now. The rest of us?” Joker laughed, “Let’s not be naïve. If we weren’t so entertaining, we’d all be dead. Y’think the insanity plea is *really* what’s kept me from Death Row? The cops and judges would *all* love to see me and Harv and Jonny Crane – hahaha he’s *still* munching bugs and whining about being betrayed, hilarious – where

was I? – oh, the ‘guardians of peace and order’ all want to see us sizzle in a chair. And the shrinks and lawyers – HA HA HA – Oh *they* love us, as long as we’re bringing in their paychecks, giving them materials for bestsellers – You know that’s what Harley was trying to do to me, right? Guess she got a little too into character-”

“You mentioned a point,” Batman said patiently.

“I’M GETTING TO IT!” Joker shouted, “The point is, Batman, we’re celebrities. You, me, all of us. That’s what keeps us tolerated. We bring a little excitement to these people’s tawdry dreary worthless lives. Without *us* Gotham would be so dull, everyone would move to Metropolis. Or worse, New Jersey. *Ha.*”

“You call that a point?”

Joker turned his head to find Batman suddenly behind him. A gloved hand prodded him in the back and pushed him toward the exit of the cinema, and down the old hall lined with flashy new movie posters. It hindered his ranting only a little.

“No,” Joker said, “I call *this* a point; the moment we ceased being entertaining, not a single person in this city would care if every last Rogue was pushing up daisies. Nobody but you, Batman.” He licked his teeth, and his grin slowly spread from ear to ear. “Everyone knows we’re a lost cause. You’re the only loony bat-shit enough to think we can be *saved.*”

Sirens wailed right outside the cinema building, and the Joker strolled onward, whistling the movie’s theme, suddenly aware that the shadowy figure was no longer at his back.

His smile faded. “Batman?” He frowned, “Batman, you had better have been goddamned *listening*, I put *effort* into that lecture! I *rehearsed!*”

Joker shouldered the cinema doors open – staring into a row of police cars, flashing red and blue lights, and the barrels of a dozen police firearms pointed at him.

Joker heard a chilling chuckle from somewhere above him.

“I’m listening. And I look forward to proving you wrong,” said Batman’s voice.

“You really think you *can*, Batman?”

“Yes.”

“Oooh, like how?”

“To start with, Dracula isn’t the most filmed character.”

“We have you surrounded, Joker,” one of the cops called, “Put your hands above your head.”

“WHAT!?” Joker shouted, completely ignoring the police, “Bullshit! If he isn’t, who is?”

“Sherlock Holmes,” said Batman.

Joker didn’t bother replying. He knew Batman was gone. Turning to face the officers charging up the steps to arrest him, he blew out a sigh, shook popcorn from his cuffed sleeves and stuffed it into his mouth.

“Next time,” he said, “I’ll wait for the DVD.”