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

#8

# Cat Tales

## Plan 9 from the Demon's Head

by Chris Dee

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# PLAN 9 FROM THE DEMON'S HEAD

"Mr Drake, prep stands for preparatory. Brentwood Academy is a preparatory institution. It is our function to prepare our students for the rigors of collegiate academia…"

Tim Drake couldn't help thinking if Ra's Al Ghul was somehow crossbred with the Penguin and Hugo Strange, the result still wouldn't be as pompous and affected as Mr. Offred.

"…As such, you are required to complete no fewer than six advanced placement credits your junior year, and nine your senior year, effectively allowing you to matriculate into any institution of higher learning as sophomores. I am not unaware that many of our young scholars view this process as an opportunity to 'party hardy' during their freshman year, however those of serious purpose take full measure of…

It went on and on. Not twelve hours ago, Tim was in danger of being drawn and quartered by coils of mutated ivy—this was worse.

"…Now then, about your essay…"

Finally.

"Mr Offred, all I meant was that 'Groupthink' has come up in all three of my advanced placement courses—History, Speech Communications, and Political Science—and I just thought…"

"If it has only happened once in 10,000 years of recorded history," Mr. Offred read from Tim's paper, "it doesn't belong in a textbook, and if it has they should find a new example."

"I just meant—"

"Mr Drake, Groupthink is a phenomenon when a team of highly accomplished and successful people dedicated to some high purpose, by the very virtue of their abilities and successes, create an atmosphere where no one will speak of perceived weaknesses in a planned course of action—or quite possibly, no one even recognizes those weaknesses. They will not see collectively what any one of them would see individually: that the plan is so ridiculously flawed as to be doomed from the beginning. The textbook example of this is the Bay of Pigs–"

"Yes sir, that's my point. It IS a textbook example. It's in all three of my textbooks, and I just thought it might be helpful if someone would give a different example–"

"The Kennedy administration saw itself as…"

It went on and on.

Mr. Offred repeated the facts of the Bay of Pigs invasion just as the textbooks had. Tim resigned himself to shutting off his brain and parroting these facts back, the gospel according to Harcourt-Brace and Mr. Offred, at the first opportunity to show he now understood. Until then, he'd console himself with thoughts of Ivy's mutant shrubbery

climbing through the window, wrapping round Mr. Offred's throat, and pulling him out the window by his necktie.

Selina stood in front of the 49th Street Newsstand with true sympathy in her heart: The Gotham Post, gutter tabloid extraordinaire, had found a new target. After her one-woman show exposed the outrageous lies they'd written about Catwoman, they moved on to this smear campaign against Black Canary. She was allegedly smitten with the Demon Head himself, Ra's Al Ghul. Today's cover pictured "the Cadaver" - as Selina always thought of him- carrying Canary off into the desert, like a Snidely Whiplash version of Valentino's Sheik.

The Post pretended to be a great advocate of female heroes: even running editorials and sidebars about *replacing* male heroes like Robin with female counterparts like Batgirl or Spoiler! But for all their politically correct posturing, the paper didn't really like the women of the superhero trade. They liked having tits on their front page, Selina reflected, but they missed no opportunity to humiliate and degrade these women whose stories they claimed to tell.

"Black Canary *IN LOVE* with Ra's Al Ghul. Oh please! Nobody's that blonde."

Then news vendor looked up at her comment, and Selina picked up a Vogue.

The only kernel of truth in the stories about her, she thought as she slid the magazine into her handbag, was that there actually was a thief called Catwoman operating in Gotham City. She couldn't help but wonder what, if anything, was the kernel of truth this preposterous Black Canary story.

Ra's al Ghul was having a bad day. "After a few centuries," he considered, "you develop a perspective mortals who live but a single lifetime can never know. You recognize a bad day when it's happening to you, and THIS is a BAD DAY."

He was in the Detective's city, he had been forced to submit himself to the tender mercies of a Gotham press agent, he had endured those horrible women and their papier-mâché window boxes, he had endured "BeBe" (a miniature poodle of foul disposition who sat on the room service cart eating his lunch), and he now had to endure this picture.

He sat at the desk in the Royal Suite at the Gotham Imperial Hotel, surveying the same cover of the Gotham Post with the same look of distaste that Selina had—though for vastly different reasons. *THIS* was why the Fair One, his flaxen-haired goddess, refused his love: he was being portrayed as a monster, a diabolical villain! Look at that picture! He looked like the antagonists from the early moving pictures. How could anyone as fair and able as Black Canary not be repulsed by this impudent propaganda?

It was this image and the dozens that preceded it that caused him to hire the press agent, Ramona DeSlice… Ramona DeSlice. "Surely," Ra's thought, "even by the standards of American nomenclature, that cannot be a real name. No sentient being would name another living thing Ramona DeSlice…. Then again…" he looked at the poodle with disgust. His own darling daughter had wanted to call this canine curse "Brucie boy" and when he flatly refused, she tried "Beloved." When that was rejected, she began sneaking it treats and calling it "BeBe" until it refused to answer to any other

name. Perhaps it was fortunate she never succeeded seducing the Detective, or the mighty Ra's al Ghul might be saddled with an heir called the Belovelette.

Her mother was like that. Cloying. That's why he had to kill her.

But this new passion was another matter, it would not pale in a mere century. Invigorated by his last dip in the Lazarus Pit, he had the raging hormones of a 19-year old. His lieutenants claimed he was not thinking clearly, but they didn't understand—his mind was not clouded, it was exceptionally focused: Black Canary! Whatever it took, he would win her.

And if that meant he must come to the Detective's city and be photographed with a dog and appear on talk shows at the behest of a press agent, so be it. He would repair his demonic image and he would win the lady fair.

She had come into his life the very day he last emerged from the Pit. She was in his territory, asking questions of the peasants. He had her brought before him, and learned that her investigation had nothing to do with his operations. She was on the trail of Lin Phat, an Asian racketeer of no consequence. As her interests did not conflict with his, he invited her to stay and enjoy his hospitality, to at least dine with him before she left. This was the way of civilized beings, but the heroes never understood that. She bristled, as they all do, as if he'd insulted her. It was quite—*stirring*.

It had been decades since he'd felt this way. She was so unattainable, so disdainful. He tried all of his best bits, wrote her sonnets, promised her the world. Literally. Catherine the Great really went for that. But the Fair Canary, alas, called him…

*..:: a creepy megalomaniacal slime bucket ::..*

The words scrolled up on the OraCom's text screen. It was a relatively new channel, created for Batgirl's limited spoken vocabulary, but used more and more by the other heroines as a private IM where they could silently comment on, among other things, the men on the 'Com without their knowing. Barbara typed back:

*..::ROFL, c'mon dinah, let it out, what do you really think of him?::..*

The only response was the emoticon of a smiley face sticking out it's tongue. Barbara continued her teasing.

*..::you saw him on The View today didn't you? hocking his book?::..*

*..:: My Previous Lives and Loves—Gag Me! ::..*

*..::Introduction by Shirley McLane::..*

*..:: What was the thing making flowerboxes? ::..*

*..::They always do that, make the guests do some craft or cooking thing. Seriuosly Dinah, don't you feel just a LITTLE different now that you've seen him up to his elbows in papier-mâché?::..*

Nightwing read over Barbara's shoulder as she chatted with Black Canary, oblivious to his presence. He'd been taught to approach unseen and unheard, taught by the very best. Tonight he was going to put that skill to good use surprising Babs with a bouquet of roses, an order from her favorite takeout, and a small gold locket which Alfred recommended, Bruce confirmed, and Selina helped pick out, as an appropriate gift to

signal his intention to propose at some later date. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth to speak… when a new line of text appeared on the screen:

*..:: No, I still pretty much feel repulsed—you know he's not even talking roll in the hay, he wants MARRIAGE can you believe it, 'til death do us part with a guy that's 800 years old if he's a day and shows no sign of slowing down. ::..*

*..::It's that strict 12th century upbringing I expect.::..*

*..:: I think it's because the heir needs to be legitimate—WHY AM I DISCUSSING THIS? ::..*

*..::'cause he looked so adorable with that dog licking paste off his beard::..*

*..:: BARBARA THIS ISN'T FUNNY—WHY ARE YOU TURNING THIS INTO A JOKE::..*

*..:: Dinah! Chill! What ELSE am I supposed to do with it? It's too silly to take seriously—You and Ra's! It's a punch line. Besides, what with everybody assuming Dickey-the-Dick and I are a foregone conclusion, I've got to get my jollies from other people's love lives.::..*

Nightwing silently gathered up his flowers, takeout, and the jewelry box containing the locket, and left the apartment in crushed silence.

Every evening between one and two in the morning the Batcave computers downloaded massive amounts of information from police blotters, newspapers, corporate and government networks, and then ran the data through a complex series of filtering and sorting routines designed to tag the information Batman might require.

It immediately alerted Bruce when a foreign dignitary reserved the top four floors of the Gotham Imperial Hotel. It took very little investigation to determine that the dignitary was Ra's Al Ghul. Despite Selina's assertion that the demon was a "flyweight, a hairdo, and a bush league schmuck" who owed his stature as a world-class villain to Batman "taking everybody to DefCon4 just because an Al Ghul comes to town," Batman did, essentially, take everybody to DefCon4.

He could not deduce what his nemesis was doing here in person. He had his agents, he had his daughter—he didn't need to give up the home field advantage leaving his compound this way. So why did he do it?

One aspect of "DefCon4" was a subroutine that monitored the closed-captioning on every television station and alerted him if a broadcast contained certain keywords. At 10:15 in the morning, the subroutine went haywire, it was almost as if dozens of keywords were being flagged at the same time.

Punching in a code directing the computer to display the broadcast on the largest view screen, Batman gasped as the larger than life face of Ra's Al Ghul loomed over the cave.

He was…

He was…

…on a talk show?

Ra's was on a talk show. He was talking about some book he was writing—about past lives? He was… This was… This wasn't right.

Batman couldn't help but wonder if some cosmic justice wasn't avenging Joker for the episode at the Iceberg Lounge.

Ra's Al Ghul was IN GOTHAM CITY, appearing on a WOMEN'S TALK SHOW, promoting *A BOOK?*

The theories Dick and Tim had put forth about his cooking raced through Bruce's mind:

**alternate universe!**

*"Here's a sonnet I was able to recall, under regression hypnosis of course, from a previous incarnation in 15th Century Florence, when I was a humble soldier enamored of a noblewoman. It is entitled simply: To Canary…"*

**shape shifter!**

*"Oh, Star, isn't that beautiful? I wish men today wrote things like that."*

*"Girlfriend, most men wouldn't even admit to writin' that in a previous life if you ask me,"*

*"I can't help wondering if she said yes."*

**robot!**

*"You stick around, Rozzie, 'cause after this commercial break we're going to make flower boxes to bright up those windows!"*

*(under playoff music) "It's pronounced 'RAYsh.'"*

"The old man's brain is caught in his zipper."

Ubu would never have said such a thing. Ra's Al Ghul's former lieutenant-cum-bodyguard had been indoctrinated from birth, raised to serve his master without question or comment.

Draco, the new man, was a disappointment. He was respectful enough in Ra's presence, but spoke in an unseemly way with the captain of the guard, whose room was, of course, bugged.

Making a mental note to have Draco dispatched when they returned to the compound (for it would not do to dispose of bodies in the Detective's city), Ra's switched on the television and searched for the appearance he'd taped the previous day with Regis and some other woman. He could never remember all their names.

Not realizing the 36 in the television listing corresponded to channel 8 on the actual set, Ra's naively turned the dial to 36. He watched the first three hours of SoapNet's marathon of classic soap opera storylines, the greatest criminal mind of this or any generation sitting resolutely through highlights of "Luke and Laura's Summer on the Run" as he waited patiently for his segment with Regis. As the hours passed, he was able to deduce that a secret agent, a ne'er-do-well thief, and a blonde were all searching for a man-made diamond called Ice Princess. The thief and the blonde were obviously lovers, and the whole thing was a disgusting example of decadent Western culture… until the appearance of an enigmatic Greek. The fellow had some kind of secret underground installation from whence he planned—this was intriguing—from whence he planned to build a massive weather machine capable of producing "carbonic snow" that could freeze the entire world!

Ra's watched in fascinated awe as Mikkos Cassadine, with a psychopathic gleam in his eye, told how he would "force global leaders to yield to my will! The entire world will live by my rule. I will be in supreme command!"

It was brilliant! It was inspired!

Why was he wasting his time with press agents, publishers, and dogs? His lieutenants were right! He had lost focus! He had to escalate his plan to take over the world and FORCE Black Canary to love him…

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GROUPTHINK: or WHEN SMART PEOPLE DO DUMB THINGS
by Timothy Drake

*When an honors student is forced to forego independent thought and mindlessly regurgitate paragraphs from a textbook…* <DELETE>

*When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a student to rewrite a damn fine paper to humor a moron in order to get a passing grade…* <DELETE>

Sigh.

*The Kenedy Administration saw itself as…*

"Two Ns in Kennedy, Bro."

Tim jumped at the interruption, but was glad for it.

"Dick, hey, you shouldn't sneak up like that. You're spending more time in Gotham than in Bludhaven these days, aren't you?"

Dick smiled uncomfortably.

"Yeah, I guess. Been seeing a lot of Barb- well anyway, that's about to change."

"Not complaining. It's better when you're around. What's up, you look like your dog died?

Dick said nothing.

"Di-ick, what's wrong, Bro?"

Dick said nothing.

"That's a fine impersonation of Bruce. Now what's happening?"

"Never mind. It's nothing. Things with Barbara took a turn, I guess."

Tim laughed uncharitably. "Like sands through the hour glass."

"It's not funny, Tim." Dick sounded unusually upset, considering 'things with Barbara' were always taking one turn or another. "If you must know I went over to propose, well not *propose* exactly, but to lay the groundwork. Sort of set things in motion for her to encourage or—"

"And she didn't encourage."

"Never even got that far. She… …Babs has got a real nasty streak, you ever notice that?"

Tim thought all of the bat family had a bit of a nasty streak, but he didn't say so. Instead, he tried to look sympathetic to make up for the soap opera crack.

"And I didn't do anything to bring it on, either," Dick went on petulantly. "Just standing there, and she flattened me for no reason."

"You talk to Bruce?"

Tim didn't want to be rude, but he had a paper to write. And he didn't have any advice to offer anyway.

"He's preoccupied. Ra's Al Ghul,"

Tim sniggered.

"You catch him on The View? 'A Sonnet: To Canary. *Tweet Tweet sings the songbird…*'"

Dick smiled sadly. Funny as it was, he didn't feel like poking fun at another aching heart, even Ra's Al Ghul's. But he played along.

"My favorite part was, *Speak fair my fair one, oh flaxen-haired goddess of song.*"

Tim roared at this. Quotations from the putrid bilge the Demon crowd considered love poetry would clearly be an in-joke among the bat-clan for some time.

"It's like I said, man, Days of Our Lives. Gotham's become a soap opera."

"No, for that we'd need spies from the World Security Bureau running around with plans for weather machines and diamonds hiding secret formulas."

It was Tim's turn to say nothing.

"I watched a little in college." Dick explained sheepishly.

"Weather machines? With Secret formulas?"

"That was before my time actually, but it's a very famous story—girl in the student union told me about it—see there was this big diamond called the Ice Princess that one of the Quartermains used in a sculpture, and in the base was a secret formula to make this artificial snow…"

"ANYWAY," Tim cut him off with some asperity, "if Bruce is busy, how about taking your Barbara problems to Selina. She's a woman."

"You noticed that too, huh."

"Go away, let me write my paper. Bother other people."

As Tim turned back to his computer, the news alert pinged, and he saw a headline that meteorologist Dan Waynard was missing.

"How about that," Tim thought as he continued with his paper, "a missing weatherman. Speak of the devil…"

The poodle BeBe began licking paste from Ra's Al Ghul's goatee for the 63rd time when the image on the great cluster of monitors froze and began moving backwards.

"I don't care what you say, Bat-o-my-heart, you have not watched that tape 63 times out of professional dedication."

"I have to find out what it means."

*It means that ratty little dog doesn't know better than to kiss up to a cadaver,* Selina thought but didn't say. *Or maybe he got dipped one time too many and the pit finally ate his brain.*

DefCon4 meant their date was cancelled again, and Selina had come to the manor to spend some time together. She accepted that, just as there were hours of less-than-glamorous footwork planning a robbery that might lead to an intense three minute confrontation with Batman, there was a great deal of busywork on this side of the crime game as well. Nevertheless, it didn't take a strategic genius to realize—rewinding and replaying that videotape over and over—the demon, the hosts and the dog were going to do exactly what they'd done the last 62 times.

He was enjoying this. He would never admit it, but the sight of his great enemy—the mighty, the inscrutable, the unspeakably full-of-himself Ra's Al Ghul—being asked inane questions by silly women, harassed by an idiot dog, and grinning like a morning show dolt who enjoyed it, was being replayed over and over for entertainment value, not for crimefighting insight.

"It's 'cause of Black Canary."

Both Bruce and Selina tried to hide their surprise as Dick spoke. When did he sneak in anyway?

"You're spending more time here than in Bludhaven these days," Bruce growled. As always, he made it sound like an accusation.

"I overheard her and Barbara talking," Dick said as if Bruce hadn't spoken. "Ra's is trying to impress Black Canary."

Bruce considered this possibility, then dismissed it.

"Ra's is obsessive, he's consumed with his quest to take over the world. Guy like that doesn't compromise the mission for love."

Selina had one foot up on the worktable, using a batarang to scrape dried cave-slime off her heel.

"Yes, Dear," she purred.

"Selina, have you got a minute," Dick asked pointedly, "I need a woman's perspective on something."

She looked up quizzically and Bruce put in, "Barbara again."

Dick hadn't thought Bruce was paying attention during his previous visit. When would he learn: Bruce/Batman was always paying attention.

"Yes," Dick answered defensively "Me and Barbara *again*. And I want a woman's opinion because you and Tim are both useless, okay."

Dick told his story for a third time and on this last repetition, he began to see he was overreacting. What had Babs actually done? He didn't like being referred to as "Dickey-the-Dick," but it was probably said affectionately… The bit about the two of them being a "foregone conclusion" was unfortunate when he was effectively there to propose, but she didn't know he was there to propose—she didn't know he was there at all! He concluded his story with a conciliatory:

"I realize I'm being hypersensitive, but I don't know, maybe… maybe it's cause I'm not really ready for this. It's a big step. Don't you guys think it's a big step? I mean, Barbara and I have been… in a certain *place*, doing things a certain *way*, for a long time now. It's familiar. It's comfortable."

"Familiar and comfortable," Selina remarked, "There's a description that's always a turn on, romantically speaking."

"Oh come on, you know what I mean. The relationship's about to change, and I'm wiggin'."

Dick looked at Selina—Selina looked at Dick.

Dick looked at Bruce—Bruce looked at Dick.

"COME ON, GUYS, if *you two* don't get it then what's the point?—Don't tell me you don't miss those times—"

Dick looked at Selina—Selina looked at Dick.

Dick looked at Bruce—Bruce looked at Dick.

Bruce and Selina looked at each other. Then Bruce spoke, in a deadpan monotone:

"That's not your necklace."

"Great detective," came the instantaneous, but equally bored reply.

"You've gone to far this time; I'm taking you down."

"Ooh, you're so HOT when you say that."

Dick turned to leave as the bored dialogue turned to bored narration.

"Here comes the whip."

"Here comes the batarang."

"Grab the whip."

"Reel me in."

On the way out he glanced at the desk and there was another news item: An R & D lab was reporting the theft of manmade industrial diamonds, and satellite equipment. Weather + Diamond + Satellite = …Ice Princess. It couldn't be.

"Don't let go of the handle."

"I don't mind getting close."

"Grab the wrists."

"Flare the claws."

It couldn't be.

"Kiss me."

"Act surprised."

It was a soap opera.

"Slip in the tongue."

"Pull away."

"Judgmental jackass."

"Amoral bitch."

"HEY, if you two are done with Masterpiece Theatre," Dick called over his shoulder, "come look at this. I know what Ra's Al Ghul is up to, and you're absolutely not going to believe it."

An assault on Ra's Al Ghul's headquarters, even if it was a luxury hotel in the heart of Gotham instead of a high-security compound in the middle of the desert, was not a

casual undertaking. The whole of "Team Bat" were on-site, except for Catwoman. She had provided some additional information about the Gotham Imperial not noted on the blueprints. She set out with the rest. But a few blocks before reaching the target, she told them to go on without her, she would meet up with them inside. She waited for the party to continue east and disappear on the horizon before she turned and headed south.

Meanwhile, Barbara was brewing her first pot of tea for the evening, a ritual she often observed before logging on as Oracle. Her mind was full of possibilities for monitoring the battle ahead with Ra's—she had the frequencies of the Imperial's private security, and all the area precincts and—CAT! The sight was so incongruous it stopped her in her tracks. She nearly tossed the tray—teapot, cup and all. Catwoman was seated at her workstation with her feet perched neatly on the monitor.

"You knew he was here."

It wasn't a question or an accusation; it was a statement.

"No comment," Barbara said crisply.

"The batboys aren't as silent and invisible as they like to think—not with us at least."

"No comment."

"Barbara. If I can tell, you can."

"OKAY, ALRIGHT, I KNEW… I … smelled the flowers."

"Richard thinks he overreacted because he's nervous as hell about the relationship changing," the use of the proper name instead of the nickname was conspicuous and it startled Barbara into considering the words more fully. "What do you think?" Catwoman asked. This time it was a challenge, and Barbara felt compelled to come up with some sort of reply.

"I think… I think change can be a scary thing."

Catwoman nodded. She could relate. Her own behavior had been none too courageous when the situation with Batman began to develop beyond what it had been forever. But Batman was, well, he was Batman—this was Dick they were talking about.

"Change can be scary," Barbara repeated.

"But Dick isn't scary."

Barbara smiled at that, then giggled, then laughed openly.

"No, Dickey's a teddy bear."

Catwoman gave a pleased "my work is done here" smile, took a cookie off the tea tray, and prepared to leave and rejoin the others. But Barbara went on:

"I guess I just panicked at the thought of becoming stale and predictable."

*What a pair!* Selina thought. It wasn't two hours since Dick called their current rut comfortable and familiar, and now the other half of the sketch was fretting that moving on would make them dull and boring. She asked Barbara to fetch a second cup for the tea—this was going to take a while.

Draco, 120th Demon guard to be dispatched, hit the floor with rather more force than the previous 119. Batman was exasperated, and making a point. He addressed his

nemesis across the room as he smashed heads and kicked butts, moving ever closer to his target.

"Ra's," <crack>

"Man-to-Man," <crunch>

"This isn't going to work." <kick, block, punch>

"It didn't work for Mikkos Cassadine and it's not going to work for you! Let the captives go home! Get out of my town! And I WON'T tell Black Canary you got your diabolical master plan from General Hospital!"

"So that was it? He caved?" Selina was wrapping Bruce's broken ribs as, in an adjacent niche of the cave medical facility, Alfred tended to Dick and Tim's minor injuries.

"He caved," Bruce pronounced with satisfaction—and then saw to his surprise, he was expected to say more. Alfred never wanted to hear this stuff. He swabbed, disinfected, bandaged and taped in disapproving silence. Selina was disappointed to have missed all the action and wanted to know every detail.

"He couldn't lose face in front of his 'most radiant paragon of transcendent inamorata,'" Bruce explained.

Then he winced as attempts to stifle her laughter caused Selina to tug the end of the bandage.

"Let me get this straight, he doesn't want her to know he's getting ideas from Luke & Laura, because that would be *embarrassing*—but he'll say 'radiant paragon of…' how did it go?"

Bruce refused to smile but he allowed his mouth a half-twitch as he said "I'm grateful now to have gotten off with a simple 'beloved.' Time was I didn't think it could get worse than that, but evidently it can."

The jerk Selina gave the bandage on 'beloved' might or might not have been another attempt to suppress laughter. To be safe, Bruce touched her cheek and said:

"Just promise me you'll never refer to me as your 'cherished vessel of rapturous bliss.'"

"Pumpkin, I swear, to me you'll always be 'judgmental jackass.'"