



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

#20

Cat ≡ *Fables*

Knightlife



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
KNIGHTLIFE

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KNIGHTLIFE

Batman stood on the roof of Wayne Enterprises, just...standing. He hadn't fired the grappling hook, and he wasn't even seeing the magnificent cityscape before him. He was off his game tonight. And it was dangerous to proceed until he could nail down the reason.

"Off his game..." It's the kind of thing she would say. There was a time he would've been the first to object, "This isn't a game."

"It's a figure of speech, Stud," she answered in his mind's ear.

He tuned her out. Didn't need that voice in his head right now, not tonight when everything felt so strange.

It had been like this all night.

He'd gotten up at four, having decided last night this wasn't a day he would be making an appearance at Wayne Enterprises. Even if there was no Batman in the picture, he doubted he would return to WE this week for any reason. Not after that finance meeting. Talk about torture: six hours on arbitrage opportunities in the new millennium. He'd rather do six hours in that Hugo Strange contraption with the electrodes than ever see another arbitrager.

To keep up appearances, however, Bruce had rigged his laptop to send two e-mails, one at 10:30 and another at 2:15, to give the illusion that he was awake and active, somewhere, on company business. He checked to see that the e-mails went off as planned, then went down to the cave.

"Good afternoon, sir."

It would appear to anyone that Alfred just happened to be in the cave, having just finished cleaning... But Bruce knew his butler long ago devised a routine that placed him wherever he needed to be. There were no coincidences. In this case, Alfred had expected Bruce to be awake and coming into the cave about now, and so presented himself for this casual, "accidental" meeting. *Now, Bruce wondered, is this for my convenience or his? Is he here in case I need to ask him something, or does he have an agenda of his own?*

"Afternoon, Alfred. Any news?"

"Mrs. Ashton-Larraby called, sir. She hoped you would reconsider making an appearance at her benefit."

"No way. I sent a check."

"And she thanked you very much, sir, for your generosity. But she did mention that, while your monetary contributions are always welcome, your actual *presence* at these affairs can contribute a great deal more by attracting other donors not inclined to be so generous."

"Alfred, I can't stand that woman. I sent a big enough check so I don't have to go in person."

"As you say, sir. Would you care for a sandwich before you depart?"

"No."

Alfred knew perfectly well, Bruce reflected, jumping to the parallel bars, that he did not eat before a workout.

Alfred had also, Bruce surmised, done a bit of tactful paraphrasing of Mrs. Ashton-Larraby's invitation. "Attracting other donors not inclined to be so generous..." Yeah, right. It would have been more like "Can't you get him to come, Pennyworth, use your influence - and get him to bring *that Darling Selina*. They're such an adorable couple, we were *all* saying so at the wedding..."

Bruce could read people, and he knew since the wedding that his role in Gotham Society had been recast. To hostesses like Mrs. Ashton-Larraby he was no longer bait for the social climbers. He was to be entertainment, grist for the rumor mill.

Well—he dismounted the parallel bars in an effortless flip in which he grabbed a jumprope hanging loose from a suspension hook. He jumped rope rigorously until his heartrate doubled, then began a complex pattern of twists and spins—it wasn't as though there was anything new in Bruce Wayne being gossiped about. But talk about him now meant talk about her as well, and Selina's reaction to being talked about could be... extreme. And unpredictable. No one who saw Cat-Tales (least of all Bruce) could deny it, Selina Kyle's reaction to being gossiped about, pigeon-holed, slandered, or labeled was bound to be an event.

He threw the jumprope back onto its hook and began an adapted Tai Chi form, an exercise that encompassed meditation and mental discipline as much as physical precision and martial art... Cat-Tales, what an idea. What a woman. A newspaper prints some lies about her so she goes onstage and says *Look, I'm not in jail, I wear purple, and I'm a 38-D*. Unbelievable. The chuckle disrupted the slow extended exhale and Bruce had to start again.

The newspaper said she'd shot Gordon—so she made famous an obscure quote of Lex Luthor's calling him the most inept peace officer in the Western Hemisphere. "*I'm smart enough to come up with more creative and less lethal ways to strike at an enemy than shooting them.*" ...*Ain't that the truth. I could've told them that*, Bruce thought, reflexively shifting his weight as he would to defend against her favorite attack, again interrupting the Tai Chi cycle and again having to start over.

Of course she'd said other things on that stage, things she didn't have to, that invited as much gossip as the rest of her act dismissed—"*If I came up to you and said Hey, wild night of passion, no names and no strings, and I'll even bring the whip if you want—you'd say, what?*"

"Dear Penthouse" Bruce murmured the punchline aloud - instead of inhaling in a slow steady five count while he extended his left arm...

This was ridiculous. She'd done it again!

Another workout shot to hell. Thanks, Kitten, Bruce thought, not even bothering to start on the weights.

He decided to forego his ritual post-workout meditation at the stalactite and went instead to his workstation - to find the sandwich he'd refused, but that Alfred brought anyway. He pulled the status reports from the Batcomputer. At large: Crane, Dent, Nigma, Tetch

Scarecrow, Bruce thought, Possible, he's been quiet. Harvey... Doubt it. Something else on his mind lately. Eddie? Yeah, right. If he's got the energy after 'Aunt Maud.' Mad Hatter... Ditto.

Bruce punched up a new screen, events that were potential targets. Mrs. Ashton-Larraby's benefit was not listed. She'd be crushed. But it really wasn't much of a target. Maybe in Selina's day, for the diamonds some of those bluehairs might get out of the vault, but other than that... Selina. Yeah. Well anyway, better get out there...

He suited up, checked and double-checked his gear. This was the first time he experienced the strangely "off" feeling that had haunted him all night.

On the rooftop, thinking back, Batman realized it was a kind of déjà vu that had struck him in the costume vault—he was doublechecking the gear. It was the one thing he didn't have to teach Dick. Circus performers, he'd learned that night Dick first prepared to join him in the field as Robin, always, *always*, ALWAYS check their gear themselves. And Dick, Bruce knew, always checked a second and then a third time when he thought Batman wasn't looking. Always. And Bruce wouldn't have been much of a detective if he couldn't deduce what the boy thought each time: that last night with his parents - checking the gear - and not seeing it.

Dick! Of course, that was it! Batman couldn't pinpoint it before, but now he could see clearly: Dick and Barbara's wedding! Dick and Barbara's honeymoon! The OraCom was silent tonight for the first time in... god, how long? No open channel with an instant connection to Nightwing, Robin, and Batgirl. It felt like it used to be, Batman alone in the night. Alone with his mission,... and alone with his thoughts. No wonder he was thinking about her. She was the only one around in those days.

"Oh, is that it?" he imagined the amused purr, velvety like her skin, soft and round like the rest of her. Whether it was sinful promises if only he'd let her leave with that diamond, or "Morning, handsome, cream and sugar?" her voice still affected him like she'd "accidentally" pressed against him after a warm shower, wanting him to rub lotion on the places she couldn't reach—with that damned sly smile that said "Fine, cuff me, if it makes you feel like a man; is that a Stein lock? Gee, that'll take a whole forty seconds to pick. Forty seconds I'll never get back, what a triumph for crimefighting."

He sighed.

It was just Oracle being away.

That's what was behind this.

He fired the grappling line and traveled east towards the diamond district. He stopped for a mugger one side street off of Gotham Plaza. Gotham Plaza that was "now safe for tourists to walk through even after 10PM." The Mayor's much ballyhooed partnership with key family-friendly corporations that were pouring a bundle into renewing the city's theatre district. 99-percent of Gotham was exactly as it had always been, but there were these strange pockets of sanitized unreality, like an alternate universe. Gotham Plaza was one such pocket. Once overrun with porn theatres and street hustlers, it was now an open-air mall. Middle of the night and there were eleven year olds running around that weren't hookers.

This wasn't a *bad* thing, obviously, no one could say it wasn't an improvement, least of all Batman. But for any native Gothamite it was... peculiar.

It would have felt good to punch something, but the mugger, who'd found his victim a mere half-block from the plaza, was no hardened criminal. He was a disgusting weak-willed non-entity of a first-timer who was so petrified at having encountered Batman in his first attempt at a crime, that he swooned, pissed himself, cried, and then ran into the plaza and smack into Officer Ralph—whose nametag read: "Hi, My name is Officer Ralph, Welcome to Gotham City."

Batman just blinked, looking into the plaza, to see Officer Ralph arrest the mugger to the positive delight of onlookers, all elated to have seen an actual street crime in their visit to the big city.

"Are you hurt?" Batman asked the victim, perfunctorily, without turning to look at her.

"No," came the answer, and that would have ended the encounter, except the reply was interesting enough to warrant a look. It was so brief and to the point. Not tearful, not shaken, not rambling. Just "No."

Batman turned to look. It was a girl in perhaps her mid-twenties, nice-looking in an obvious, cocktail-waitress sort of way. She wore a tight T-shirt: Kit-Kats. It was a chain of perfectly ordinary restaurants that featured buxom waitresses in these tight shirts. There was one in Gotham Plaza. This girl was obviously the late shift, walking home after closing.

"Wouldn't you know it, I've worked there for years," she remarked. "Always walk home through the Plaza. It's supposed to be so scary, and I never once had a problem. The one night I take a side street, I get mugged."

Batman never indulged in crisis counseling. His mission was to bring justice to the scum that thought they could get away with it. But, just this once, something about the girl's self-deprecating humor - he offered to get her an escort home if she wished. She made a sound, expelling air through the side of her mouth, that apparently meant she didn't think that was necessary.

These guys were hopeless. The diamond district had always been a part of his regular patrol: it contained a large concentration of valuable jewels in a few short blocks. But other than the times Catwoman took an interest in some particular gem, this area was a chore. The criminals - well, just look at this lot, fussing with that alarm panel for half an hour! Selina would have been inside twenty minutes ago.

Not that he was proud of her criminal abilities or anything. It was just that: it's a short night and a big city—his time was valuable. It would be nice if these morons finished their breaking and entering so we could proceed from trespass with intent to felony burglary.

Ten minutes later—still with no end in sight—Batman ran out of patience. He placed a homing device in their van and another actually on their "lookout," and then moved on to another location, only a few blocks away, that warranted a check-in since he was in the neighborhood.

Poison Ivy's Greenhouse—Should have been empty since she was in Arkham, but there was a light on inside. Observing as best he could through the skylight, Batman

deduced it was a sunlamp of some kind, probably on a timer, something for the plants. False alarm, the place was deserted.

He continued south, into Chinatown. Those DEMON agents had set up a front in a curio shop: soapstone, cloisonné, erotic netsuke. As a cover operation, this place wouldn't fool a child. It obviously wasn't the kind of place that would be open at this time of night, and it obviously wasn't the kind of place that needed six employees. But there were always six. There was a new one tonight, and the short one that smoked was gone. This was the second change in personnel since Batman discovered this cell, but always, there were six.

Well, it might mean nothing. Even Ra's al Ghul had turnover. There was that messenger earlier this year... Omar. That was a thought. Omar now worked for the Daily Planet, but his girlfriend, Moira, was an employee of Wayne Enterprises Metropolis office. If Bruce Wayne had Moira transferred to Gotham City, Omar would surely follow. That could stir the waters. Would this group make contact with Omar? Would...

This was disgusting. How could he even think—it was the sort of thing Ra's might do—playing with people's lives. Batman did not use such methods. What was he thinking?

He decided to simply keep an eye on this operation and watch for future developments. It was possible they were simply to be Ra's Al Ghul's eyes and ears in Gotham. Batman moved on.

He was on his way to the Park—muggers within and flanked by museum row and scores of luxury condos on each side - when he saw the Redbird below. Robin and Spoiler. Batman had not realized the extent to which “Robin's” patrol had become “Robin and Spoiler's” patrol. They were together all the time now, by the look of things.... Not that there was anything wrong with that, Batman thought, it's simply not how he himself would ever choose to proceed.

“No,” Selina's voice stirred again in his imagination, “you'd prefer to go it alone, night after night, year after year, caught up in your obsessive-compulsive funk of justice and gloom.”

She lived on the park.

It was a little early to drop in, but, it was a quiet night.

If he told her he was thinking of old times, she would oblige readily enough. He could imagine the way the tips of her lips would tickle his ear, sending that familiar electric zing that felt like nervousness, excitement and needful all at once. It made his jaw automatically clamp shut...

No, damnit. He was not going to cut a patrol short for her. It hadn't come to that.

What was really eating him? Was it “Mrs. Wayne?”

There was a type of man, insecure and petty, that might have been offended. But Bruce was not insecure. He had been truly charmed by her meltdown at the sequence of events at the wedding that led to her being addressed as Mrs. Wayne. He'd seen her go off the deep end before, god knew, with far more provocation and to far deadlier effect. He hadn't been the least offended or insulted; he thought she was adorable. He

reined her in as gently and lovingly as he could: "Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible a concept, is it?" It took a little handling, but he finally got an admission that it was not. Well and good.

But now... Now...

It was not unlike the time he'd said "Let's accept our relationship for what it is." He'd said it and he'd meant it. It was only the next day he realized the words could well be taken to mean it was okay for her to be a criminal—and that was certainly not what he'd intended.

"Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible a concept, is it?" He said it, and he meant it. He wanted her to acknowledge that being his wife was hardly a fate worse than death and that her kneejerk panic attack—while adorable, and entertaining as hell - was perhaps out of place when it was, in fact, something they were moving towards... or had been moving towards... or might possibly be moving towards... that is why people date. And when it goes on as long this certainly had and starts developing into something deeper and warmer than...

He stopped and thought back, trying to replay his thoughts...

... and she was certainly becoming part of the family and... and...
... "his wife" ...it was when he thought to himself that he "wanted her to acknowledge that being *his wife*..."

This... might... be... what Selina had experienced at the words "Mrs. Wayne"...

"His wife."

Was he engaged?

Could she have taken that to mean...

"Let's accept our relationship for what it is." It didn't mean go right ahead and ransack Tiffany's. "Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible..." Could she have possibly thought? - No, of course not. She was drunk. She was a cute drunk too.

"Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible a concept, is it?"

She couldn't have possibly thought that meant "Let's set the date." Could she?

He fired a line and descended near the Redbird.

"Robin, Spoiler, There are a trio of pathetic burglars in the diamond district. This is the frequency of the homing beacon. Pick them up if and when they ever finish the job."

The Selina-avoidance that plagued him all night led Batman to forego Museum Row and the condos and check, instead, on this warehouse. It wasn't a regular part of his patrol, but he liked to look in on it every few months. He always thought it would be a perfect rogue hideout, but it never once occurred to any of them.

This warehouse was not "abandoned" but the goods stored there were used only one day a year, so activity was minimal. And any number of rogues would find something of interest for their themed décor. This warehouse was where the balloons were stored for the Thanksgiving Day parade.

A quick run-through confirmed that the building was, as always, unoccupied. No imagination at all. You'd think-

Batman's musings were cut short by the appearance of the Bat-Signal cutting through the night sky.

In the fifteen minutes it took to reach police headquarters, Batman reflected that he was going to meet the fourth new commissioner since Jim Gordon's retirement.

He hadn't understood the reference when Selina referred to "Murphy Brown's Secretary" and Tim had to explain—he was doing it again. *Kitten, get out of my head*, he ordered. *I'm trying to work.*

"I'm not stopping you, Babe," she said in his mind. "Go meet Commissioner Flavor of the Month. You know I'll still be here when you're done."

He remembered telling her about the appearance of the first new commissioner when he'd started dropping by her apartment after patrol. She'd rubbed his neck that night. It felt wonderful. And he found himself relaxing, telling her about his day:

"Answered the signal, and there's a new one."

"A new signal?"

"A new commissioner."

"Not Gordon's replacement."

"Replacing Gordon's replacement. Oh... Ooohh, that feels good."

"I'll bet. You're tense."

"This new one: He was wearing a nametag, can you believe it. It's like he knows he won't be around long enough for anyone to bother learning his name."

Landing on the roof, Batman returned himself to the present. Commissioner #4—Muskelli—might have some staying power. No nametag. And he had something to prove. Giacomo Muskelli had run the docks in the late 20s and built the smalltime operations into a formidable crime syndicate. It was not the largest operation of its kind, but it was the bloodiest. His great grand-nephew, Lawrence Muskelli, who now switched off the Bat-Signal, wanted to erase that blot on the family name. He was determined that the Muskelli name would again be famous in Gotham, for service and civic contribution.

The news he had for Batman tonight, however, was not likely to achieve that noble goal. There was a "suspicious occurrence" (an unusual expression, Batman thought) at a cheap motel by the expressway, something that would embarrass an important city councilman. They wanted him to look into it, intervene if necessary, but quietly—

Batman noted the pronoun: *They*. Whatever this was, it wasn't Muskelli's idea to call in Batman. He was embarrassed to be doing so.

Then Batman realized why as Muskelli explained further: If they sent in regular cops, then whatever it was (and it seemed like it was blackmail), those cops would learn about it and be in a position to... Plus, of course, there was the paper trail of their reports...

Batman squelched his impulse to smash the signal and curtly tell this political toady masquerading as a policeman not to fix it until he'd learned how to use it.

But he didn't. This was a first offense. Muskelli was new. It wasn't his fault he was the fourth commissioner Batman had had to break in.

"We don't do 'I was only following orders' here, Commissioner," Batman said tersely. "Not in my city, not on this roof. We don't do 'they' and 'following orders' and we don't do politics. This is politics."

Before Muskelli could respond, there was only empty night to respond to.

Batman had no intention of officially looking into this unsavory business, nor intervening at the behest of politicians. But he did intend to find out what was going on. Batman needed to know things. It was an integral part of his mission. And if what he found out was that a blackmailer was conducting his unspeakable business in Batman's city, there would be Justice. Not a political cover-up. Justice. There would be consequences and retribution for any doing wrong, and it would be delivered impartially regardless of any wrongdoer's seat of power. That's why Justice was always shown blindfolded.

The internal monologue stopped cold when Batman arrived at the LazySue Motel and saw Slam Bradley hiding out (if you could call that hiding)... in the stairwell, with a camera. Slam Bradley! That meant this was not "blackmail," this was, at worst, nothing more criminal than a philandering husband. For pity's sake, Muskelli wanted to send him after a bottomfeeder like Slam Bradley? Nobody Batman knew would associate with the likes of Slam Bradley! Nobody Batman *beat up* would associate with the likes of Slam Bradley! Matches Malone wouldn't bother giving his guy the finger on the expressway! This was beyond pathetic. Batman had a good mind to go back to the rooftop and smash that signal after all.

There was a night, Batman remembered, shortly after Bruce and Selina starting "slumming" at the Iceberg Lounge, when Bradley's name came up. Scarecrow—who seemed to have a deathwish where Selina was concerned—made some silly joke implying she was friendly with this guy, and she'd answered:

"Let's revisit the hierarchy of Gotham After Dark, shall we?"

Then she'd signed to him ~Batman—Top, Sidekicks and Junior Bats along with...~

Then she resumed aloud, "Senior rogues: Joker, Riddler, Two-Face, *Moi* and so on. Secondary Rogues: Roxy, Catman, along with senior sidekicks like Harley Quinn and... and Harley Quinn! Third rate rogues: ClueMaster, Mime, etc. Henchmen, Scum, Iceberg Lounge washroom attendant, the guy who runs into the 7-Eleven to buy Hugo Strange cigarettes, Slam Bradley."

Nothing ever rattled her. Make a joke, or claw its throat out. Or occasionally both.

By the time Batman returned to the city-proper, it was after 4:30 and the streets were deserted. There would be no more scum on which to take out his frustrations.... It hadn't been a satisfying night. A sympathetic ear and a good massage would have been welcome but, maybe it was the nostalgia, he bypassed Selina's terrace and returned home. Alone. As he would in the old days. Alone to his empty cave and the empty house above.

It wasn't late enough to go to bed. He needed to decompress, he told himself, after patrol. The truth was, he'd been thinking too much about it *-her-* it all night long, and if he wasn't utterly exhausted before trying to sleep, if there were any synapses still firing by the time his head hit that pillow, it wouldn't end.

He made the log entry for the night's patrol, read over the previous week's entries... He failed to note when he typed *sleep* instead of *steep*. He did notice when he typed "the waarehouse was closed closed."

He saved the file but didn't shut down. He skimmed the 1 a.m. auto-downloads. When the text started to swim, he increased the font size. When the monitor actually blurred, he knew he was finally ready.

He dragged himself to his bedroom and tossed his shirt onto a chair. He was so consumed with sleep, he didn't see that it landed on a mass of purple leather—a color and texture he was particularly alert to most of the time, even (especially) in a darkened room.

He pulled back the coverlet, sunk into the soft sheets, and adjusted his pillow. There was a soft, sleepy “Heeey” and the pillow was pulled from under him.

“Selina?”

“Mmm ...'bouttime... late tonight...got tired waiting... 'nd'ts cold...”

She pulled his arm around her like a blanket. Bruce hesitated a half-beat before letting his arm go limp around her, pressing his nose into the back of her neck - thereby reclaiming a third of the disputed pillow.

“G'night, kitten,” he murmured before drifting off.

“Night, knight,” she answered.

CHAPTER 2: MORNING

Bruce awoke to three very specific sounds:

– a distant shower,

– a female voice (morning, kitten), distant, muffled by both glass and wood (that would be behind the bathroom door, behind the shower door, talking to herself—strange girl),

– a cell phone ringing, the special ring he had tagged to Lucius Fox.

Knowing it must be important if Lucius would be calling him on cel, Bruce answered the beeping box without realizing...

“Morning, Lucius”

::Morning what? Lushy? Who is this?::

...this wasn't his phone.

“Bruce Wayne. Who is this?”

::Bruce? It's Harvey Dent::

A half-beat of alarm that Harvey was using Lucius's phone dissolved the moment Bruce looked at the small silver box in his hand. It was he who was using Selina's phone. She must have the same ring for Harvey that he used for Lucius.

::Um, Bruce, why are you answering Selina's phone?::

“She's in the shower,” Bruce answered without thinking.

There was a moment's silence on the other end of the line.

::Oh:: Another pause, then... ::well:: and another pause. And finally... ::Wait, maybe this is better. Could you come see us this afternoon? We need some expert advice about something::

Burning with curiosity as to what topic Harvey could possibly want 'expert advice' for *from Bruce Wayne*, Bruce agreed to the appointment. This agreement immediately scored a bonus for Batman: the location of Harvey Dent's new hideout in the old Flick Theatre.

He went to the cave to log this while Selina was still in the shower. Not that he was avoiding her or anything. He simply wanted to research this building and pull the original blueprints, just in case, as he would before entering any known rogue hideout if he had the luxury of time.

Logging in to the system, Bruce was immediately met by an alert. The analysis of last night's autodooldowns detected a pattern that, cross-referenced with the Rogues At Large list, generated a flag:

Three days before, Harold Morton, of the Morton Trust, cancelled all his appointments. He returned to work the next day. Yesterday, Charles Fitzwallace, of Fitzwallace Tech, cancelled his appearance at a panel discussion on emerging technologies. He and his wife were also a no-show at Mrs Ashton-Larraby's benefit, where Fitzwallace Tech had bought two tables. There was both a Morton Building and a Fitzwallace Lab at Hudson University, a favorite target of the Scarecrow.

It wasn't much, it wasn't anything yet, it was merely something to keep an eye on.

Bruce made a mental note of this information and went on to research the Flick Theatre...

Two hours later, standing in the lobby of the empty and derelict theatre, Bruce Wayne felt a fool. Harvey Dent himself was giving him a history of the edifice far more detailed than the public records had provided. Harvey told, with pride of ownership, how this building was once The Cathom, a vaudeville house, run by one Roddy McMurphy - who refused to sell out when the great impresarios began organizing theatres into touring circuits, who refused to acknowledge vaudeville was dying, and who refused to kowtow to the mob bosses then becoming a force in Gotham City. It was this last that proved to be the fatal mistake, and McMurphy was killed, accidentally or not, in the gang wars of 1935. His theatre fell into disuse, but was eventually purchased and converted into a lush movie house by Santo Valenz. Valenz passed the theatre on to his son and his wife, who made a decent living with it - but in the age of multiplexes and DVDs, the era of great movie palaces was over. Rather than borrow to convert the theatre to something more competitive, the Valenzes continued as an art house until their recent retirement to Florida. The move was financed, it now turned out, by the sale of the theatre to a mysterious holding company. The Valenzes assumed the company was fronting for a family-friendly SuperCorp that was known to be buying up strategic patches of Gotham real estate. This despite the fact, Harvey observed caustically, that the downtown location was anything but strategic. No, the mysterious holding company was a front for none other than "us," Harvey Dent and Two-Face.

Bruce started at the way Harvey so easily referred to Two-Face as a separate entity, as if they were business partners. There was a disquieting similarity to his own habit of referring to Bruce Wayne and Batman in the third person to people who knew they were one and the same.

The reason for Two-Face and Harvey's interest in the building, while not evident from the paperwork, was clear enough now that Bruce had seen the edifice. Giant concrete Comedy-Tragedy masks decorated the façade like gargoyles, and here in the lobby, the floor beneath the grand staircase was picked out with an elaborate mosaic of the same image: two masks, one laughing and one weeping.

As Selina would say: Poor Harvey.

When the pleasantries of viewing the new building were over, Harvey proceeded to the business of the visit with the directness of a lawyer with an agenda.

"Y'know, Bruce, the thing with you and Selina, we can't quite figure it out."

Join the club, was the thought concealed behind the business exec's poker face.

"I mean, we love the girl, we really do, but we do believe you're the first man ever whose face wasn't a scratching post within the first month of knowing her."

The neck muscles that supported Bruce's poker face tensed in a way Harvey did not notice, but Dick or Tim would have. He *had* been a scratching post on that first meeting. Harvey had no way of knowing it was as Batman and occurred years before was generally known, but still... he had been a scratching post within a month, indeed within an hour, of knowing her. Harvey went on with his musings.

"That's why when you picked up this morning and said 'in the shower' (heh, heh), we thought 'Hey, anybody who can go the distance with Hurricane Selina, might just have a plan.'"

"A plan?" Bruce asked meekly.

"We've gotten ourselves into an awkward situation with Pammy, er, Pamela. Isley. I mean, that's Poison Ivy. We, er, know each other slightly. Well, actually, we know each other quite well... in fact, uh, intimately, you might even say. And ah, well to be honest, um, it seems... *she* seems to have decided—and I don't know how this could have happened frankly—but she seems to have decided that we're a couple. Now, I have never thought of that woman as what you might call 'girlfriend material,' and god knows I never asked her on a date or anything. The only time I gave her anything but the back of my hand, it was a corsage at Christmas (and boy was that a bad idea). So I don't know how it is I now find myself on the hook to take care of her plants while she's up the river, but the point is, I AM. On the hook. I don't know how it happened, but here I am: the boyfriend, taking care of the plants. And the thing of it is, I seem to have accidentally, uh, killed her pet flytrap."

Each *er*, *ah*, *um* and *well* was in response to a stare Harvey had interpreted as civilian Bruce Wayne, ordinary guy and his old friend, shocked and horrified at the revelation that Harvey was intimately involved with a woman who had once seduced him for the purpose of killing him. Bruce's expression was indeed shocked horror, but not at the news that Two-Face and Ivy were lovers (*they deserve each other*, was Batman's response), but at that curious bit about "I don't know how this could have happened... I never asked her... I don't know how it is I now find myself on the hook... but here I am."

And before Bruce could begin to process his reaction to these utterly random phrases in Harvey's rant, they were pushed from his head by the glorious revelation that that flytrap was dead!

He hated that flytrap. As much as he hated anything in this world, he hated that damn oversized weed with its steel grip, its vine-like tentacles, and that nauseatingly sweet odor it put out when it had something struggling in those tentacles that it thought would be its next meal.

The flytrap was dead! Batman's disciplined reflexes held the poker face, barely. And Harvey went on to explain his predicament—as if explanations were necessary. He'd killed one of Ivy's plants, her babies, possibly her favorite. Bruce didn't know what he could say. Even Batman didn't even know what to say. He was looking at a dead man, that's really all there was to it.

"Maybe if I got her another one, replace it before she gets back."

"No," Bruce answered too quickly, then made up a reason, "She'd probably know the difference, and then on top of killing it, you tried to fool her." *Plus*, he thought, *give us some time to enjoy the new flytrap-free Gotham*.

"So, what do I do?" Harvey asked pitifully.

The phrase "move to Metropolis" hovered on Bruce's lips, but he knew he couldn't actually say that.

Batman smashed his utility belt onto its shelf in the costume vault with a force far from prudent for an object that contained explosives, gas pellets and capsules of unstable chemicals.

The first time Harvey contacted Bruce Wayne for a tête-à-tête about his seeing Selina, it had set off a Psychobat episode the likes of which were seldom seen outside of Hell Month. Today, contacted as some kind of expert in the romantic handling of the women of the rogues gallery, Bruce heard his voice dispensing advice he would be loathe to follow himself: "Talk to her, Harvey," he had said, "Tell her the truth." It was the Batman part of his psyche, the strategic thinker, who added "And do it now, while she's safely in Arkham and can be medicated if necessary."

Harvey's reaction had not been pleased.

"In Arkham. Yeah. Well. Harley Quinn was just sent up, you know. You know what happens when those two get together, it's bad for the men. They work each other up."

Bruce thought back to the foursome at the wedding: Selina, Harley, Lois and Dinah, and shuddered. The drinking buddies. Who knew what all was said? Well, Clark knew more than he was saying, but you couldn't make the Boy Scout talk.

They work each other up.

The words had hung in the air as once, on that earlier visit, *you're part of the family now* had hung in the air. The effect was similar: Psychobat.

Bruce was the ultimate embodiment of the principle: we teach best what we most need to learn. So far from taking his own advice and talking with Selina, calmly, rationally, and above all truthfully, he dealt with his uncertainties about her as he always had: by denying anything at all was going on and pouring himself into the Batman mindset with every fiber of his being.

And the first thing the Batman mindset had to offer in re the day's events was that Scarecrow was active. And there was a *Wayne building* at Hudson University, let's not forget that... The last thing he needed right now was to be blindsided by some lurking, unspoken fear. It was time to be proactive, a preemptory strike; get Scarecrow and her fear toxins off the table...

That led to tonight's campaign to locate and apprehend (read: beat the snot out of) one Jonathan Crane a.k.a. Scarecrow. *That* led to a series of none-too-satisfying interrogations of petrified snitches. And *THAT* led to a second-floor apartment above a pharmacy where he'd discovered... no Scarecrow. But he did set off that booby-trap like a rank amateur. Knowing a trap was likely, Batman had taken the precaution of wearing a gas mask... he hadn't figured on the blowdart. He felt the blow on his neck, like a wasp-sting, and knowing he had only seconds before his judgment and perceptions were worthless, he fumbled in his belt for the antidote. He popped it to his mouth, only to find his mouth still covered by the gas mask. The gunman stood before him and he stumbled back into the alley, tripping over their bodies, he fell backwards.

"Hey, careful there, Stud."

Catwoman's arm, strong and firm, materialized behind him, supporting him at the waist, keeping him from falling. The alley was gone, he was still in the apartment. No gunman, no nothing. Except her.

"What happened?" he asked, confused, drawn into those extraordinary pools of green. She drew a single claw down his cheek, following the seam where the mask met

is face, then continued down, slicing the mask at his throat. She continued to claw down his chest, the armor was no protection, then plunged its needlelike tip into his flesh without a word. He didn't react, didn't fight, didn't move. Blood was gushing from his face, from his throat, from his chest, and he stood there staring into her eyes.

"I'm mad at you," she said simply, licking the blood from her claw. "You didn't come to bed last night. I was bored."

"I'm sorry," he answered numbly.

Then she reached inside the now gaping hole in his chest, like a safe, and pulled out a string of pearls. She turned, lifting them to her throat.

"Help me with this clasp."

"Yes, Dear."

She walked away, out the door, without a word. He followed her onto the street—it was different somehow. Cleaner. Brighter. Safer. It was the middle of the night, but the gleaming streetlights lit it up like day. There were kids on rollerblades and bicycles, boy scouts helping seniors across the street, it was... *wrong*. It was all wrong.

"See, baby, Gotham doesn't need you anymore."

Catwoman standing behind him again, except when he turned, she wasn't in costume, and neither was he.

"I guess it never did," she said.

"What happened?" he asked again.

"That corporation bought up the whole thing. The whole city is theirs now, so it's all like Gotham Plaza: clean, efficient, sanitized for your protection. A postcard of a Gotham City that never was and always will be. Ironic, isn't it, all it took was corporate money. You had that. You had the solution all along. Like the Wizard of Oz. You just didn't think to use it. You'd rather dress up like a flying rat and beat people up. That's why Jason's dead; that's why a lot of people are dead. That's why Barbara was shot. Because you never thought to do this."

"No, no this isn't real. This is Disney World, this is Stepford. A couple blocks, sure, but the whole city like this? It isn't possible."

Selina laughed, mockingly, and turned into an alley that immediately went black as pitch, swallowing her up. He heard two gunshots in the nothingness, then nothing at all.

He awoke on the floor of that apartment, pulled the useless gas mask off his face and the blowdart from his neck. He stood on shaky legs and summoned the car.

This wasn't the first time a miscalculation with the Scarecrow led to one of those nightmare visions. It wasn't the first time an indulgence in being Psychobat led to a miscalculation.

But it was the last time Psychobat was going to appear because of the Selina situation, that much he vowed.

And Bruce Wayne should hit the showers as well, he wasn't doing so hot lately. No, it was time this matter was dealt with once and for all, and Batman was the man to do it.

CHAPTER 3: CATITAT

It wasn't my fault. Everyone says I blame myself when there's no cause to. Well, let's lay that theory to rest once and for all. This was not my fault, and I am saying so, out loud, in language so clear and plain it cannot be misunderstood: this was *NOT BATMAN'S FAULT*.

The fact is, between d'Annunzio's and society gossips and rogue gossips and the wedding, everybody—including Bruce and Selina—*everybody* lost sight of the fact that Selina Kyle did not hook up with *Bruce Wayne*. She fell for *Batman*. And it was high time he, I, started acting like it and took control of the situation.

That's not a judgment about the Bruce-method; it's just the way it is. Bruce Wayne was out of his league. Selina wasn't some bimbo; she was Catwoman. It takes Batman to handle her. We wanted—Christ, I sound like Two-Face—I wanted to find out just where this relationship was headed. Where did she think we were, and where did she think we were going. The situation required subtlety, ruthlessness, focus, discipline, and expertise in the art of interrogation, not to mention a knack for cat-handling.

The first objective was to tire her out. I decided a morning of shopping, a light lunch somewhere it was a chore—like Lalique's, and an afternoon at the museum should do the trick. The last part, I knew, would be tricky. Actually *taking Selina to a museum*, particularly *THAT* museum, there was no denying it was going to be tricky. But Batman has never been afraid of a challenge. The objective was tired feet, and sources were unanimous that the Gotham Metropolitan was absolutely guaranteed to produce tired feet.

The night before, I cut patrol short and kept her up late. It was hardly an unpleasant task. I knew I needed to get her up early the next morning without it seeming planned. I set the alarm on my phone, set the ringer to vibrate and hid it in the bed. When it went off, I thrashed around like I was having a nightmare and swung an arm onto her side of the bed—I hit cold sheet. My eyes popped open and I sat up.

"You're up early," she purred. God, that voice, no wonder Bruce was floundering. He never stood a chance.

She was already dressed, pulling boots over riding pants, a look that suggested her Catwoman costume ever so subtly (Bruce never stood a chance, I could see that now. I should have stepped in sooner.) The addition of a flannel shirt—my flannel shirt—while not remotely evocative of Catwoman, was still unspeakably sexy.

"*This is going to be harder than I thought,*" is what flashed through my head a split-second before remembering not to ever, ever use that word with her. The Catwoman in my mind didn't miss a beat: "*And how hard did you have in mind, Dark Knight.*"

I realized then that I was out of practice. I'd forgotten what it's like trying to deal with her while still ignoring her, ignoring what she does to me—and oh god, then she bent over to pick her costume off the floor. What a body. All I could think was "*Kitten, that was uncalled for.*"

I slapped the thought away. Calling her Kitten, even thinking of her as Kitten, was not the way to go about this. I needed to be as I used to be: lock it all out of my mind and do what needed to be done.

"I thought maybe go into the city today," I said casually, "shopping or something."

"Can't. I'm going for a drive. Upstate."

A snag. Already there was a snag. But upstate rang a bell. "Upstate" and her rustic outfit, I hazarded a guess: "That preserve, the... what's it called?"

"The Catitat."

"Right, you were going to show me that sometime."

I learned this from Glori Smyth. (I don't remember all the bimbos names, but Glori with an "i" Smyth with a "y," who could forget? The things I do for Gotham.) Where most girls subtly hint for an invitation, Glori went right past that and simply reminded you it had already been extended, whether it had or not. Selina had never actually said she'd show me her preserve, nor even told me its name. But she shrugged now, mission accomplished.

As I dressed, it occurred to me this was far better than my original plan. Spending the day together away from crowds and public places was a definite advantage, the preserve was sure to be physically taxing and, best of all, she's never more at ease than when she's with her cats. It was perfect. A day with them, a day with me, and then... it was perfect.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy the preserve. I'm not a great nature-lover as a rule (let us pause in remembrance of the lately-departed flytrap and cheer at the miserable weed's passing). But a day out of the city was pleasant enough.

There was a Siberian tiger, called Shimbala, that was—even for Siberian tigers—huge. I was glad I never had to deal with him as Batman. I said as much. And Selina stared at me like I'd said it in German.

"This animal has a three-acre wooded pen with a marsh and a spring-fed lake. You figure it's gonna drive into the city and rob a bank or something?"

It sounded silly when she said it like that, so I explained—and I realize now that was a mistake—I explained my reasoning: this was *her* tiger and perhaps *she* might have used it as a weapon against me. I still don't understand what was so objectionable about that statement. But I'm a little piqued that the core of the objection was entirely about the *TIGER*. It had nothing to do with not wanting to see *my* flesh torn to ribbons by nine hundred pounds of nature's most efficient killing machine. It was all about: wild cats aren't attack dogs, they hunt for food, they don't kill for a biscuit, and why would anyone bring one into a city anyway where there's no space for it to run, besides which these were pets and not weapons...

I held my tongue about Ivy's flytrap and Joker's hyenas. This wasn't about winning an argument; this was about setting a tone. Today, I needed to blur the line between Bruce and Batman. Too much talk of the rogues would be counter-productive.

There were four lions, two African and two Barbary, and six leopards, all but invisible in their various corners of the preserve, but we focused binoculars on them all the same. There wasn't much to see. Nocturnal animals sleep during the day. That's

what they were doing. It was like a stakeout, without the possibility of anything interesting happening.

Then came the “small wildcats.” There were several lynx, which acted almost like dogs the way they jumped up on us, pranced, played, and generally reveled in the attention they were receiving. (That observation, I need hardly add, was almost as unpopular as the one about the tiger.)

There was a pair of servals that wanted nothing to do with us. Then there was a family of caracals that possibly wanted to make up for the servals and restore our faith in feline hospitality. It had been a warm day. There was a kind of bench from a fallen tree. We sat. The largest caracal hopped up next to me and began licking the sweat from my hair. Selina was charmed by this: it’s grooming, it’s what he would do for another cat. (And I thought the *museum* would be weird!)

Then came the real object of the visit: the ocelot. Its name was Nirvana, and the way I was introduced, I got the idea that I was expected to make a good impression—or else. I’ve never been in the position of having to meet “the family.” It just never came up. With debutantes, I already knew their families and they knew me. With bimbos, I never let it go on long enough. And as for Talia...

But I suspect what I experienced being “presented” to Nirvana is what it feels like to meet the future in-laws. There’s this sense of “this is the one I’ve told you about” hanging over your head like a neon sign.

And the cat didn’t seem to like me. It growled.

“Put your hand out,” Selina said, “so she can sniff you.”

And I did it. I felt like an idiot, but I let the growling ocelot sniff my hand.

I could have offered to drive back to the city, but didn’t—better to make her keep those boots on a little longer. When we reached her apartment, I expected her to kick them off first thing. When she didn’t immediately, I improvised, removing my own shoes and rubbing my ankles as though they ached. The suggestion was enough; she decided to “get comfortable.” She returned a few minutes later in a cool looking cotton dress, short, no stockings and no shoes. Purrfect. She curled next to me on the sofa, and I continued rubbing my leg.

“That terrain up there takes a toll on the ankles,” she remarked sympathetically. (*Gotcha!*)

“Aw,” I said, pretending to think she meant her own feet hurt, “Poor kitten,” and drew her leg into my lap. After rubbing for just a moment, I said “Wait, better idea. Hold that thought,” and disappeared into her bedroom. When I returned, I popped a soothing CD into her machine, and lit some candles. “Get comfortable,” I said, dimming the lights and returning to her room. I found what I was looking for... scented, too... lavender.

“Close your eyes,” I said.

“Why?” she asked, smiling.

“Just close your eyes. It’s a surprise. No peeking.”

I rubbed a little of the lavender-scented massage oil into my fingertips and started behind her left knee. She cooed. Down the thighs then, kneading them, in long strokes, in line parallel to the muscles.

"That feels wonderful," she said.

"Don't talk."

I went behind the other knee, making small, brisk circles... Then the thighs again in those long firm strokes... I felt the tension start to ease out of the leg muscles.

"You've got great hands."

"Shh. No talking."

I moved up her sides, working very, very slowly. By the time I reached her shoulders, I was stroking in time to her breathing. By the time I finished on her neck, she'd adapted her breathing to match me.

"I learned this in a temple..." I mentioned casually, stroking up her jawline. "...in the East..." at her temples now, little circles, "...done correctly, it clears the mind..." little circles, little circles, "...eases tension..."

"...ts very r'laxing" she murmured. I could tell from her voice that we were almost there. I did her neck again, then return to the temples. Little circles, little circles.

"Selina?"

"mm?"

"I want to ask you something."

She sighed.

The moment was here. I opened my mouth and... realized I had absolutely no idea what to say. What exactly was it I wanted to know?

Where do you see us going?

I knew that. Her answer would be: I don't know. She doesn't like thinking about these things any more than I do.

It was too general. Something more specific...

The night of the wedding, what happened, what do you think happened? Mrs. Wayne... not so terrible... what do you think was said there? What WAS said?

There were a thousand questions tied up in there, and at the same time, there wasn't even one.

What exactly was it I wanted to know?

I was mad at Bruce more than anything. I had done my part: here we were. The moment had arrived. Was it too much to have the question ready? Was it too much to have this thought through?

The Bruce part of me (and if I don't want to sound like Two-Face, I must finally admit it isn't "Bruce Wayne" but "the Bruce part of me") pointed out that Batman took over, sending everyone else to the showers, so if the finger of blame was going to be pointed...

But it wasn't my fault.

I bent and kissed her neck. She sighed again, and those gorgeous eyes fluttered open.

"You give a great massage," she said, smiling up at me.

"You deserve it," I told her, feeling like a heel. "It was very nice of you to show me the preserve."

If she knew what I'd done, or thought about doing, she'd kill me. Hack me into bite size pieces and feed me to Shimbala. I'd deserve it too. I know what her cats mean to her. That preserve, it's her special place, and I used it against her.

The Catwoman in my head was strangely silent. I would have preferred accusations. Frankly, I would have preferred claws.

"Of course you would," the imaginary Selina noted. "You're great as an enemy. It's only as a friend, an ally, or a lover that you suck."

"Now that's not fair."

"You want the *whole list* of friends you've screwed over in ways that you'd never dream of attacking Joker or Two-Face? Or will just the *top 10* suffice?"

"I'm not having this conversation."

"Course not. That's why you're trying to make this *all about me*."

"I just want to know what you're thinking."

"THEN ASK ME, YOU STUPID SCHMUCK!"

Ask me, you stupid schmuck. That's what the Selina in my head was saying while the real one was in my arms, kissing me. Her soft, strong hands caressed my back, pulling me in closer, and I was hearing *Ask me, you stupid schmuck*.

It's just possible Joker is right. It's just possible I'm crazier than any of them.

AAAAAARRRRRGH.

I've woken to a kick in the stomach before. Every time it happens, you swear this time is the worst ever, but of course the reality is "this time" is always worse because it's happening *now*... Nevertheless, this time was definitely the worst.

"GET OUT!"

It took me a moment to get my bearings... I was in Selina's room.

"NOW, GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE NOW!"

In Selina's bed.

"GET OUT!"

And she was... quite extraordinarily pissed.

"What happened?" I asked, then the still aching stomach seemed to lurch and I realized what it must have been: I talked in my sleep. I must have said something about—oh god. She'd turned away from me, but I could tell that she was crying—oh god, oh god. I tried to get out of the bed, my leg tangled in the damn sheet and my foot hit the floor with some force. There was a sickly sounding yeowlp and I prayed that lump under my foot was a furry slipper and not a dead cat.

As I ran to Selina, I caught just a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. It was split down the center. Like Two-Face. I'd killed her cat. Oh god.

She was still turned away from me. I put my hand on her shoulders... "Don't touch me," she sobbed. I turned her towards me only to find myself looking at Scarecrow's triumphant grin...

AAAAAARRRRRGH!

I sat up in the bed... Selina next to me... She gave the disgusted glare of someone who'd been woken at 3 a.m. by your screaming.

"Nightmare," I said sheepishly.

She nodded.

"5:00 already?" she asked sleepily, and rolled over.

"No," I answered, "this was a different one."

"Sir."

(The disapproval Alfred can pack into a single syllable is frightening, truly frightening.)

"I came across these objects while cleaning the master bath."

He deposited three small, metallic pellets onto the desk. Each was embossed with a bat silhouette inside a small oval. I made no comment.

"They appear to be yours, sir."

"Yes, Alfred."

What did he expect, an explanation?

"They appear to be recording devices, sir."

"Yes, Alfred."

I wasn't explaining. I didn't have to explain, and I was not going to.

"Might I ask, sir, why you are endeavoring to bug your own bathroom?"

"No, Alfred, you may not."

"I see, sir. Then I must regretfully give my notice."

"WHAT?"

"My notice, sir. I am resigning my position in your employ."

"Alfred, this is insane. You can't leave."

"Sir, I have endeavored to overlook the emergence of various garments and behaviors above stairs that would, prior to Ms. Kyle's arrival, most certainly have been confined to below stairs. I have done this, sir, because, in my profession, what occurs within the confines of a gentleman's bedroom is guarded with as much confidentiality as what occurs, in this household, *-cough-* below stairs. Do you take my meaning, sir?"

"Alfred, really."

"I shall take that as a 'yes,' sir, and continue. While there has never before been cause for discretion about that aspect of your private life, sir, I have, I believe, demonstrated a discretion about other matters far beyond that which ordinary servants are ever called upon to exhibit."

"Alfred, you know you're part of the family, please don't keep calling yourself a servant that wa—"

"As I was saying, sir, I should have thought I had exhibited a discretion at least equal to that of ordinary servants who are trusted to maintain the secrets of their employers' bedrooms. In short, I thought I had proven myself loyal and trustworthy. But as you evidently feel that whatever it is you and Ms. Kyle do with these bat-shaped objects must be hidden from my eyes—"

"OH, FOR GOD'S SAKE, ALFRED, STOP IT. My God, what are you thinking? Look, she talks to herself in the mirror, okay? And in the shower. And I thought if I could listen in, maybe I could find out what the hell is going on in her head."

"I see, sir."

"You understand? It's not—God, I can't believe I have to say this—they're not props for some weird... whatever it was you were implying before."

"I understand, sir."

"So you see, it wasn't that I didn't trust you and was hiding those things behind the mirror and in the shower. They were simply... placed there."

"I understand, sir."

"Thank God. So you're not leaving."

"No, sir."

"Good."

"I would venture to point out, sir..."

Here it comes.

"... that this episode would have been far less painful for you, sir, if you had simply told me what was going on at once."

"Yes, Alfred, I see that now."

"Do you, sir?"

Shit.

"Yes, Alfred, I get the message. And if I'd just go to Selina and ask her directly, that would be a lot less painful as well."

"What a profoundly insightful observation, sir."

CHAPTER 4: CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS

When Selina shared her bizarre philosophy with respect to the Rogues: that there was a statute of limitations on a particular level of offence, after which she forgave such misdemeanors as Mad Hatter using her as a pawn in a robbery or Hugo Strange trying to drive Edward Nigma mad by implanting 76 *Trombones* into his head, Bruce thought this philosophy was, at the very least, odd.

But he was forced to reconsider this view, strolling into his office in the Wayne Tower a mere five days after the arbitrage meeting. They had gone on for six hours about arbitrage opportunities in the new millennium. It was ridiculously optimistic to come back so soon. And yet, here he was, prepared to forgive and forget. One couldn't hold a grudge about that kind of thing forever, or the economy would shut down.

There was a new girl outside Lucius's office. Discreet inquiries revealed that her name was Bonnie and she was a temp helping Lucius's senior assistant, Gale.

Bruce docked his laptop into the network and downloaded his schedule. He recalled that there was an unexplained pattern of events involving donors to Hudson University, a favorite Scarecrow target, that he himself was such a donor, and that any deviation from business as usual was suspect... He reminded himself that paranoia about the business of daily living was a far more dangerous habit than any artificial fear the Scarecrow could chemically trigger.

He reminded himself that healthy skepticism was not the same thing as paranoia. He reminded himself that, given his station in life and the nature of his nighttime activities, 99 percent of the time, his paranoia was well justified. He reminded himself of the 'fridge magnet: Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

An hour later, Bonnie entered his office with a floppy disk from Mr. Fox: the second quarter projections, she said. Bruce appeared flustered, juggling his laptop, day runner, and a file folder, so he held the latter open for her to place the disk inside it. Then he hurried out the door, making an offhand comment about being late for an early lunch that would run long.

An hour after that, he was in the Batcave, dismantling the disk with gloved hands. He found the drug in a coating that would cause it to be absorbed directly into the skin. It wasn't the standard fear toxin but one meant to trigger a specific phobia. He couldn't be certain which particular fear it was to produce, but agoraphobia was a reasonable guess. The previous victims had all cancelled their appointments and refused to leave their homes.

That would be his assumption when Scarecrow made contact for the shakedown. If he was wrong, he'd bluff. Biochemistry wasn't an exact science, after all, and the human mind was a highly individual thing. There was no telling for certain how any given individual might react to a given stimulus...

At that moment, the Batcomputer's monitoring system pinged an alert, and Batman was forced to reconsider that hypothesis.

Harvey Dent, a.k.a. Two-Face, was on route from the limited infirmary facilities at Arkham Asylum to the Gotham General Emergency Room.

“My God, she killed him,” was Batman’s thought as he skimmed the information he already knew: Dent was not currently incarcerated at Arkham but was apparently there as a visitor... Batman’s eye raced down the page to the advisory to the receiving ER: Would require a complete transfusion ... stabilize before surgery (surgery!)... removal of... fragments... baked clay... like a flower pot... from his ... Ouch.

Bruce knew if he was to successfully bait the Scarecrow into showing his hand, he had to appear terrified of the world. It would not do to be seen in public. But he was not willing to postpone this talk with Selina. So he called and asked her to come to the house. He asked her to bring sesame noodles from Little Saigon. It was code for staying in to talk, and he knew she knew that—but he rather hoped she would take it literally and bring the noodles. Alfred had not brought him lunch, had not made the usual offer of a sandwich before his workout, and even after Bruce announced he was in for the night, i.e. would not be patrolling as Batman (always music to Alfred’s ears), there were no discernable signs that a dinner of any kind was being prepared.

Bruce knew whatever passive-aggressive statement the butler was making, he would still bring anything Bruce specifically asked for. But asking would be admitting defeat, and that was not something Bruce was prepared to do. Not tonight. Not on both fronts at once.

She looked beautiful as she entered the study. It was a new dress. She didn’t think he noticed things like that, and it amused him to let her think that. She thought being a detective meant observing one kind of detail specifically, “useful” details about footprints and cigarette ash. It didn’t. It meant noticing everything, and drawing what conclusions you could. In this case: it was the third new outfit in six weeks, each had a short skirt. She had finally noticed, he liked legs.

But he wouldn’t compliment the dress, wouldn’t smile, not even a twitch. Instead he spoke of his second observation.

“No noodles?”

“I did bring noodles,” Selina answered, confused, “Alfred took them when he let me in.”

“Hell,” Bruce grumbled.

Selina smiled like she didn’t get the joke but around here that was nothing new. Bruce decided to forego explanations and go straight to the heart of the matter:

“Selina, I asked you over tonight because I want to say something and then ask something. And it’s going to come out confused, because I haven’t thought this through. It seems like when I plan ahead—protocols, etc.—it’s not working out so well, and when I’ve just blurted it out without meaning to is when I get it right. So, do you mind if I just talk and it maybe doesn’t make a lot of sense?”

“Okay, if only for the novelty. Go ahead.”

“It seems like every time we move forward, it’s because of me. I know that’s not fair; as soon as I heard the words come out of my mouth just now, I knew it wasn’t fair. You’ve changed your whole life for me and put up with weddings and 67 shades of white and Hell Month and... me.”

"Well, I love you, so that counterbalances a lot."

He looked at her, stunned. She'd said it so casually - and so frankly - it was... unexpected.

"I know," she went on, realizing what had caused his silence. "You said it first. I'm not good at that part. I'm learning, but I'm just not."

"It's nice, actually," Bruce mentioned, "I like that. It *means* something when you say it, it's not like..." he trailed off before finishing, but she knew what he meant: not like "Beloved."

"You're on a roll, don't spoil it by making that comparison, okay."

"Okay," he said, but the 'roll' was broken and he had no idea how to continue. Fortunately she was ready to start talking now.

"The thing is, I'm not completely comfortable with you these days," she was saying.

"Because of 'Mrs. Wayne?'"

"No, it's not that. It's... How long were we at it, before?"

"Eight years, four months, nine days," Bruce said instantly.

She stared.

"That's scary."

"I made the numbers up."

"No, you didn't."

"No, I didn't," he admitted.

She bit her lip; this next part would be tricky...

"I came on to you—a lot."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Don't help me."

"Yes, dear."

She glared, then continued.

"The thing is, it got a little routine, didn't it? I'd make an offer, you'd say no. And after enough repetitions of that, it sort of became an open invitation. I mean, over time, the offers became *broader*... And then all of a sudden, everything's changed. Sometimes I just feel like there's this huge backlog of 'come hithers' and I feel like: 'You know, I said that, and I meant it, but I never really meant it to imply all these other things that might be seen to go with it and—'"

"You can stop right there," Bruce cut in, "I understand. *Believe me*, I understand." This was going so much better than he could have hoped, he risked one of the prepared questions: "Selina, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Where do you see us going?"

"I don't know. I don't like thinking about those things."

"God, I love you," he laughed, "I knew, I absolutely *knew* that's what you were going to say. I didn't trust it though. I didn't trust what I knew, and I should have. I know you so well. Sometimes it's like you're a part of me, it's—"

"STOP. Okay, who are you and what did you do with Bruce?"

He stared, not understanding.

"Way too many words," she explained.

"Ah. Well, I guess... this has been building up for a while."

"Since the wedding?"

"How'd you know?"

"Just a hunch."

He pulled his hands through his hair.

"It's like: Okay there was a wedding. 'And now for my next trick...' Like there's this expectation in the air, everybody thinks the next logical step is—"

"Wasn't it you who told me they/normal people will never understand us and we can never make sense of it using their standards?"

"That wasn't me; it was Batman."

"You really need to embrace the concept of first-person singular. You know that, right?"

"I'm trying, I'm not good at it."

"Besides, if you want to split those hairs, it wasn't Batman, it was you. You hadn't been Batman with me for some time before that night." He was staring again, not understanding, so again she explained, "You stopped being Batman with me long before you took the mask off. You did know that, didn't you?"

"I didn't. I never thought about it. I've actually been thinking, well, how you didn't start dating Bruce Wayne. You got involved with Batman and I've been riding on his coattails..."

It was her turn to stare.

"You're got it worse than Harvey," she noted.

"That realization has also been on my mind lately, and it's not a comforting thought."

"Harvey has a problem. He needs a 12-step program or something to separate him from his coin. That or Nutmeg. But you're not like that, baby; you're just you. You really should unclench a little and just *BE YOU*."

"I tried that. Didn't turn out so good. Now Alfred's mad at me."

"Alfred will forgive you. He loves you." She paused and let the full meaning sink in before going on, "And you haven't been doing *that* badly; you made a hit with Nirvana."

"She growled at me."

"She growls at everybody. She has no purr, so she growls. Jeez, I would have thought if there was anybody I wouldn't have to explain *that* to..."

"She growls instead of purring," Bruce smiled.

"Yes."

"That's a strange little creature."

"Certainly judged by the standards of *normal* people with their *normal* little purring pussycats, it would never make sense."

"They'll never understand?"

"They'll never understand."

"But she liked me?"

"She liked you."

"Uh, how can you tell?"

"I know her very well," Selina pronounced significantly, "We go back a long way. We understand each other."

Another man may not have followed, but Bruce understood subtext.

"Ah," he nodded. "My mind wasn't where it should have been when we were up there, but she seemed like a very special cat. I feel fortunate to have gotten to know her."

In the distance, the phone rang. Sensing they were about to be interrupted, Bruce changed the subject.

"Oh, news. Harvey killed Ivy's flytrap."

"Sweet Bast, she'll kill him!" Selina sputtered.

"She tried, actually."

"Already? But she's still in Arkham. How did she find out? How did she get to him?"

"I think he went up there and told her."

"In person? Where'd he get a boneheaded idea like that?"

"Err—"

"Excuse me, sir," Alfred interrupted, "the call you were expecting, the caller stressed that no matter how reluctant you were to come to the phone, I should urge you to take the call."

"Thank you, Alfred. Now go back and tell them I'm too terrified to come to the phone, and he'll insist you bring the phone to me."

"Indeed, sir."

Alfred left.

"Scarecrow," Bruce explained.

"That would have been my guess," Selina answered with a smile.

"Want to come along?"

She considered a minute, then nodded.

"Okay. I still owe him one for the Slam Bradley crack."

Catwoman and Batman were hidden at the rendezvous point two hours before Scarecrow had instructed Bruce Wayne to arrive. He said this was to avoid suspicion, but Catwoman didn't see the logic:

"It's still Batman showing up at a rendezvous only Bruce Wayne knew about. I don't get it. How is that not suspicious?"

Batman chafed at this. No one questioned his methods. It was not suspicious because he said so. He knew how to do this without being second-guessed by women in leather.

"Just explain how you're supposed to have found out about this?" she was asking.

"I'm Batman," he answered. The declaration would have silenced Nightwing, Robin, Canary—any of them. Catwoman, on the other hand, was, predictably, unimpressed. He reluctantly offered a rationale: "You could have told me."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You were actually *there in the room* when the call came," he reminded her.

"Okay," she said (in her humoring-the-Joker voice, which he did not appreciate). "That's how I know. Why would I tell *you*?"

He crossed his arms in the "I'm Batman" pose.

She wondered how he managed to cram all that ego into that tiny cowl night after night.

"Look," she said firmly, "if Scarecrow messes with my boyfriend, I'm going to introduce him to the five-finger threshing machine, not farm it out to dial-a-bat."

"You'd come out here by yourself."

"Hell, yes!"

"This is how you go about things: flighty, impulsive, no plan, just take matters into your own hands and not give it a moment's thought."

"This isn't a bullion vault, it's Crane! How much of a plan do I need: Insert claw and pull!"

"Scarecrow is *DANGEROUS*, Selina!"

"Crossing 59th Street at rush hour is dangerous, Handsome; Scarecrow is a 98-pound weakling covered in *straw*!"

"Go home. Now. I can't have this. You're impossible. You're a loose cannon. And you're going to get yourself killed."

"If I go home, Stud, I will call Scarecrow and *tell him* he's walking into a trap!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Like hell I wouldn't. And then he'll invite himself over to thank me in person—and I'll let him! You know why? Because *I'm* the one that should have first crack at kicking his ass anyway! It's *my boyfriend* he's fucking with!"

Batman's lip twitched uncontrollably.

"And I'm the one who's worse than Harvey, huh?" She fought the smile for about ten seconds before it won. Then Batman spoke again: "You should embrace the concept of second-person singular."

"Shut up."

"I hear there's a 12-step program."

"Shut. Up."

"Yes, Dear."

The next day Bruce was already awake when Alfred brought in the breakfast tray.

"Morning, Alfred," he said, unfolding the neatly pressed Gotham Times. The headline offered few details about the Scarecrow's capture—which was understandable. It wasn't much of a story: drugging and extorting money from three businessmen was obviously not the ultimate goal. It was working capital. All those chemicals were expensive. Whatever Scarecrow's final scheme was would never be known—until he tried again. It never ended. Night after night and things never got any better.

"Cream, no sugar, Miss?" Alfred asked.

"Thanks, Alfred," a silky voice purred.

Well, maybe a few things got better—occasionally.

The paper made no mention of the cat-scratches. But Bruce knew it would raise eyebrows at Arkham. The prisoner was delivered in Bat-cuffs with numerous whip lacerations and claw marks. They wouldn't have seen anything like it since Hugo Strange—revenge for Eddie. *76 Trombones*.

It's one of the rules. Never mention that book. No pussy jokes. And don't mess with Selina Kyle's friends.

A telephone rang. Instinctively, Bruce answered it:

"Morning, Lucius"

::-click-::

Five minutes later, it happened again. This time, Selina reached across him and took her phone from the bedside table.

"Hey, Harvey," she chirped into the phone, "Hm?... No, we use the same ring... Yeah, I heard. Gotham General? Room 203... Well, you can't have everything."

Bruce listened, fascinated, as Selina covered the receiver and whispered "*Doesn't like his room number.*"

"Mhm. Mhm. Lifetime. Well, that would suck."

She covered the receiver again, this time to spare him the giggle. "*Candy strippers hear him talking to himself and won't come into his room. TV is stuck on the Lifetime Channel. Eddie refuses to stop by the hideout and bring him anything. Once burned...*" "No, I'm listening. I am. Mhm. Mhm. Yes, he's here—Hello? Hello? Harvey?"

A few minutes, later the phone rang yet again. After answering, Selina listened for a moment, gave Bruce a parting glance and left the room. He heard a few indistinct murmurs then "HE WHAT?"

Bruce knew what that was about even before Selina stormed back into the bedroom.

"You are a sick and twisted excuse for a human being, you know that? YOU SENT HIM FLOWERS!"

"A get-well bouquet. I thought it was cute."

CHAPTER 5: POSTCARDS

The postcard depicted a bronze statue of Michael, the avenging angel. His sword raised insuring protection of a quaint village in the Italian countryside. The flipside read: *Hey Tim, look what I'm NOT sending Bruce. Italy's fantastic. Barbara's fantastic. Life is fantastic. Get married, Bro. It's the only life.* –Dick

The postcard depicted a deceptively modern-looking skyline, until one saw the towers of San Gimignano were 13th Century stone structures. The flipside read: *Buon giorno, Selina, look what I'm NOT sending Bruce. The Gotham of Tuscany. You know what the view is from the top of that tall one: olive trees!* –Dick

The postcard depicted a haughty fashion model wearing a minidress of lime green and purple vinyl and four-inch platforms, licking an Italian ice balanced on her own shoulder in the middle of a busy intersection in downtown Milan. The flipside read: *Ciao Papa Gordon, look what I'm NOT sending Bruce. Imagine being a playboy in a city where nobody finds this shocking.* –Dick

The postcard depicted a magnificent table set with prosciutto and melon, risotto, thick loaves of Italian bread dusted with flour, and a towering tiramisu. The flipside read: *Hey, Alfred, look what I'm NOT sending Bruce. Would I do that to your kitchen? Just think of the havoc he'd wreak cutting the melons.* –Dick

The postcard depicted a gondola-view of St. Marks Square. Beneath the caption reading: Grand Canal, Venice were the words: *Bruce, Having wonderful time. Glad you're not here. :)* –Dick

Tim closed his laptop without sending the e-mail he'd written. He was a little rattled, it was true. But this was not an emergency or anything like it; it was just a scare—a silly, stupid, nothing scare. And that did not justify interrupting Dick and Barbara on their honeymoon.

He thought about telling Bruce. But Bruce would never understand. At best, he'd think Tim was asking advice, like this was a problem he couldn't handle. And it wasn't. It was just the stupid kind of thing that happens sometimes, and it rattled him, and he would like to purge it by telling someone who would understand and laugh. Bruce would not laugh. Anything to do with secret identities, Bruce would not find funny. Worst case scenario: Bruce would think Tim coming to him was a shot, a passive-aggressive shot, from when Batman told Spoiler about Robin.

Tim headed for the cave, figuring this was the time to try the solution to pent-up emotion advocated by everyone else in the bat-family: a good, exhaustive workout. Selina was already in the gym when he arrived, balanced against a stalagmite, engaging in some kind of stretching exercise that was -for a red-blooded teenager -spectacular to watch. He cleared his throat before he got into ten kinds of trouble.

"Hey, there," she said, sitting up but continuing to stretch this way and that.

"Hey. Thought I'd work out some," Tim explained. "I thought Bruce said you never use the equipment down here."

"I don't. He's offered it a few times. It's not me. Too weird."

"But, eh..."

"It's too hot to workout at my place. 96-degrees today. Nice thing about down here. constant temperature."

"Ah." It occurred to Tim that Selina had both a secret identity and a sense of humor. He took a chance. "Can I talk to you about something?" he asked.

She nodded, and while Selina continued to stretch Tim told his story.

The young scholars at Brentwood Academy were expected to spend the summer before their senior year engaged in some activity to beef up their college applications the following term. An internship was customary, an internship at a certain level and inside a certain type of company, an internship that spoke of connections students from an institution like Brentwood were expected to have. His friend and classmate, Randy-quad—and here he had to stop and explain Randy-quad was Randolph Larraby IV, son of Randolph Larraby III (obviously) and Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. Selina looked at him blankly, and again Tim had to explain: the woman from the wedding trying to pass off citrine earrings as canary diamonds... Selina nodded. Tim nodded. That was Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. She was an Ashton. Newport Ashtons, crashing snobs, but no money left. Married to Randolph Larraby of Larraby Chemicals. Again, Selina nodded; she did know them. She had heard the story during the endless round of Christmas parties, mercifully punctuated with silent editorial comments from Bruce in their secret sign language:

The biggest fight the Ashton-Larrabys ever had, it was known throughout Gotham High Society, was at the birth of the boy Tim now referred to as Randy-quad. *~And when they say 'fight,'~* Bruce editorialized, *~they mean A FIGHT. Don't think a polite little rooftop tussle, think the social register equivalent of gas grenades, missile launchers, and scrambling F-16s off the USS Saratoga.~*

The former Miss Gladys Ashton, of the Newport Ashtons, was not willing to give up so illustrious a name, so she hyphenated. Her son too, she felt, should hyphenate. He was half an Ashton, after all. He should be Randolph Ashton-Larraby. *~Getting the theme,~* Bruce put in, *~Ashton. It's the logo. Like question marks or umbrellas, gotta feature it prominently at each and every appearance lest, God forbid, some smalltime Flash villain gets the credit.~*

Randolph-cubed didn't agree. If their son hyphenated, he would not be Randolph IV. What was the point of having offspring if you couldn't number them like movie sequels. *Bruce had made no editorial comment there. What more was there to say?*

Obviously, Randolph-cubed had won, for his son was Randy-quad. It was to be his only win in twenty-odd years of marriage. *~She planned it that way, tosses it up to him every time they disagree. Like Clock King's vendetta with the Mayor. She just will not let it go.~*

All this was backstory. Randolph Larraby IV or Randy-quad was a classmate of Tim's, and "sentenced" (as Tim put it) to intern at Larraby Chemicals over the summer. Working at the old man's company—Hell. On. Earth. Tim was facing the same situation, as his father seemed to automatically assume Tim would intern at Drake Industries. Tim didn't like the idea. "The Boss's son," who needed that? His name was literally on the letterhead. His name was literally on the building! It'd be

like going to work each day with a sign hanging round his neck saying "Make way for The Boss's Son."

Selina laughed.

"So what does Bruce say?"

Tim's brow furrowed.

"I haven't told him about it. This has nothing to do with the Robin part of my life. This is life-life. Bruce doesn't care about that."

"He might surprise you, Tim. He does at least know what it is to have your name on the building."

Tim shook his head, "I appreciate you're trying to help, Selina, but that's not what I need right now. My stepmom wanted to help, and she totally creeped me out. You know what she said? She said if that's how I felt, meaning being Tim Drake at Drake Industries, that I should use an assumed name: get myself a secret identity!"

Selina laughed again and Tim realized that's exactly what he wanted. Somebody, anybody, to grin and reassure him that his instinct to laugh it off was okay.

"Thanks, Selina. Hey, do me a favor, don't tell Bruce about this ok?"

"Okay," Selina lied.

That night at dinner, Selina took her first tentative steps into territory where she was surprisingly inexperienced for a woman her age: exercising her influence with "the boyfriend." As Catwoman, it's fair to say her effect on Batman had been considerable, if difficult to define: she tempted him, she dared him, she infuriated him, she intrigued him, she tormented him, and she excited him. Since the 'whatever it was' with Batman developed into a romance with Bruce, they'd experimented and sometimes played with the roles of a more traditional couple. But she'd never seriously attempted anything like this.

"I want to ask you something. And your kneejerk is going to be no. But I want you to hold off on that and ask yourself why, because there is really no good reason not to say yes."

The look was one she recognized. It was, most definitely, Batman: *I know this is a trap, let's see what you're up to.*

She took a deep breath and dove in. As she would with Batman, she'd begin by throwing him off balance. Give him something 180-degrees off what he was expecting:

"Do you have any idea how much you all take Tim for granted? He is the nicest and most well-adjusted of the whole crazy bunch of you—except for Alfred," she added hastily. Then she saw it was unnecessary. Alfred had vanished from the dining room exactly as silently as Batman dematerialized from rooftops. Selina continued.

"When has he ever said no, hm? Somebody needs to pick up the minister? Ask Tim. Somebody stakeout the Falconi warehouse? Send Robin. It's the inevitable fate of the nice guy: the overflowing inbox. But does he ever complain? And don't say Spoiler; that was an extreme case. And on top of all that, he's doing the adolescence thing, which is no easy ride. You should have seen him this afternoon trying not to look at my tits."

Bruce stared, openmouthed. This was *NOT* what he was expecting. Selina took advantage of the stunned silence and went on:

"He needs something from you right now, and he's so used to being the footnote around here that it doesn't even occur to him to ask for it."

"What?" In one syllable, it was difficult to tell if it was Bruce or Batman that cut in.

"He needs a summer internship away from his father's company, and I want you to give him one at Wayne Enterprises."

"WHAT? NO!"

"What did I just say about that kneejerk no?"

Bruce stopped. It *was* his instinct to say no to anything he didn't initiate and work out the reason after. There was a reason, of course there was... There must be a reason... Well, Batman and Robin... It made a link with Bruce and Tim that could be connected to Batman and Robin.

As if she could read his thought, Selina said, "Tim is the son of a major industrialist, and he *does* know Bruce Wayne, CEO of Wayne Enterprises. Were it not for Batman and Robin, either Tim or Jack Drake could be asking this. Were it not for Batman and Robin, would there be *any reason* to say no?"

There should be, and Bruce was sure it would come to him...

When it hadn't by the end of early patrol, he radioed the Redbird: "Wayne Tower. Meet me in ten minutes." He hadn't thought to specify *alone* and was relieved when Spoiler didn't tag along.

"Good night?" he asked by way of a greeting.

"Not bad. A dealer. Couple toughs in the park. Nothing special."

"Good."

There was a pause. Then Batman spoke again, gruffer than usual.

"School night. Should you still be out?"

"I've got it under control." Robin was confused, he couldn't tell where this was leading, but it was starting to feel like being called to the principal's office.

"You're able to balance a full day's school work and a full night of..." he gestured towards the city below.

"I've got it under control, Batman."

"Good. You can take a week off after your final exams, then you report to Lucius. 9 am sharp."

Robin's mouth dropped open, just as Tim's once had when Bruce made scrambled eggs.

"You'll spend two weeks in each division, low level clerical stuff. Keep your eyes open and stay out of the way. One day a week, you'll shadow me or Lucius, or else sit in on the executive training pool. Clear?" When the boy gave no answer, he added a no-nonsense, "Unless that's a problem."

The tone shocked Robin out of his trance and he stammered. "Yes. NO! I mean: yes, it's clear, and no, not a problem."

"Good."

He turned, drawing the grappling gun from his belt, clearly preparing to leave.

"Um, Batman?"

He turned back.

"Thanks."

There might have been a grunt lost in the firing of the grappling hook and the *swolsh* of cape in the high winds.

Dr. Leland Bartholomew, Senior Case Psychiatrist at Arkham, couldn't believe how a day that started out so well could so rapidly become a living hell. He had never credited the Joker's delusional rationalizations that he and other stylized personalities of Gotham "had a bad day once." It was the kind of self-justifying rationales sociopathic psychotics like Joker were apt to create, but it held no merit. Or so Dr. Bartholomew thought until today.

He'd been offered a full-professorship at Hudson University: tenure-track, speaking engagements, access to funding, and plenty of time to work on his book. He wasn't seriously considering it; he was a healer, not an academic. But he'd allowed word to reach the Arkham administrators, and was rewarded with a most gratifying expression of their desire to keep him: 30-percent raise in salary, a new title, and a corner office. Today was his very first in this new office. He'd spent his first session sneaking peeks out the window, enjoying the new view of the courtyard and garden.

It had started out to be such a good day.

Then Pamela Isley's session began. Bartholomew would have thought the woman who called herself Poison Ivy, and whose core psychosis focused on plants, would appreciate the gardenview. But all she would do was rant and rave about the transfer. After her attack on Harvey Dent, Isley had been transferred from her regular cell into the high security wing, limiting her contact with her best friend among her fellow inmates, Harley Quinn, and forcing her to interact with the only other occupant of the high security wing, the Joker. Isley evidently did not get along with Joker, nor he with her, for according to the morning rants, Joker was amusing himself with his imitation of her dying flytrap "crying out as its poor little plant insides fried in the heat of that sunlamp."

Lunch with the Executive Director in his private dining room would have been a treat, signifying as it did, the special value the administration placed on Bartholomew's services and their appreciation at his decision to stay. Except the Director served a Chef's Salad and, as he munched, Bartholomew kept hearing Pamela Isley's imitation of Joker's imitation of her dying plant.

After lunch, any residual pleasure was ruined as his digestion was subjected to Harley Quinn in his next appointment. Separated from "her goodest buddy Red" (a.k.a. Poison Ivy, a.k.a. Pamela Isley), she wallowed in vocal self pity for most of the session, alternating from tears to tantrums with bewildering speed.

The mix-up (*if that's what it was*) after Quinn's appointment was inexcusable, and Bartholomew promised himself that there would be a full investigation. If it turned out the orderly had deliberately brought Joker for his session early so he could run into Harley in the outer office, Bartholomew would see to it that people were fired!

The whole staff seemed to buy into Joker and Harley's assertions that this destructive sado-polar co-obsessive liaison was a romance!

Bartholomew had just made the note: “her goodest buddy’—hard to believe Harleen Quinzel has a PhD” and was about to underline the word “tantrums” and add “hard to believe she’s 28,” when the patient’s voice rang out in his outer office:

“PUDDIN!”

There was a crash.

Bartholomew opened his door, expecting to see the madman had put Harley’s head through a wall. Instead, he saw a very different picture: Harley had hopped up and fastened herself onto the Joker, her legs straddling him at the hips, arms around his head with an ear in each hand, holding his face in place for what Bartholomew believed the young people call “a liplock.” The crash was apparently caused by the force of her lunge knocking Joker against the wall.

Bartholomew stared. The Joker was, hands down, the most disturbed and disturbing patient in Arkham—but the sight of the homicidal maniac pinned against a wall by an amorous blonde!

“Ha...Ha...Harl...” Joker managed between breaths, “Not in front of the medical staff.”

“But, Puddin,” she insisted, “I *MIIIIISSSED* you so!” then made a sound like “moi-moi-moi” and planted stage kisses all over his face.

That tenure at Hudson University was looking better all the time.

Joker turned to the orderly, looking embarrassed: “She gets excited.” Then he turned to Bartholomew, looking menacing: “What’re you looking at?”

The orderly pried Harley off Joker, and he took advantage of his newfound ability to use his arms, no longer pinned to the wall, to swat at her head.

“That’s for getting caught. If you had taken care of Ivy’s plants, she wouldn’t have made Harvey do it and wouldn’t be moved into MY WING...” He got no further before the orderly pulled Harley out the door, bawling, and Bartholomew ushered Joker into his office. Joker transitioned seamlessly from yelling at Harley to complaining to Bartholomew. “Can’t you do something about this, Old Sport? There are ferns growing in all the windows now. She’s not supposed to have plants, but they grow up right into the windows. Hey, if a flytrap screams in the greenhouse and nobody hears it, does it make a sound?”

CHAPTER 6: ARRIVALS

Nethal entered the United States like most DEMON agents: as cargo. The crate provided for him to hide himself was not sent to a bonded warehouse to await customs inspection like the other crates, for the label it bore, marked “TOMIC: May not be opened outside the presence of ARGUL-licensed technician” was discolored and emitted a faint odor. Whatever was in there causing that smell and discoloring that label, the dockworkers were not going to touch it.

At nightfall, Nethal emerged from the crate. He remembered to take the aerosol can labeled “new car smell” with him but to leave the rest of the crate’s contents untouched.

He made his way to the Chinatown address on foot and steeled himself for the presentation to his new master, Ulstarn. It was common knowledge among the followers of Ra’s Al Ghul that a posting to Gotham City was a punishment, and Ulstarn was the reason. They said he ate his mother. They said he would have his father burned at the stake if the mighty one, Ra’s Al Ghul, wished a blaze to light his cigarette. They said he was bitten by a snake once—and it died. Such stories could not be true, Nethal assured himself. But the telling of them said much about the kind of man Ra’s Al Ghul would entrust with his operations in the heart of his enemy’s city.

It was known that a posting to Gotham City was a punishment. And Nethal was, indeed, being punished. He had given a hungry man food against his master’s interests. It was right that he should suffer. Omal was one of The Mighty One’s food tasters. It was decreed that no food pass his lips outside what he ate from the master’s table. For it was important that any poison be absorbed quickly into his system and dispatch him in time for the master to save himself.

The food taster, Omal, smoked cigarettes—which was permitted. He decided to quit—which was also permitted. Such was the munificent freedom Ra’s Al Ghul granted to his loyal servants. In quitting smoking, Omal became struck with strange appetites he described as ‘the munchies’ and begged Nethal to share his bowl of fried noodles. Nethal did so. He was reported, and was now sentenced to six months’ penance in Gotham City.

Joker paced his cell like a tiger at feeding time.

Dr. Bartholomew’s investigation had him pissed. Investigation! Who did he think he was, the scum-lapping headshrinker. Joker was King Madman at Arkham and everyone was supposed to know that. If he chose to have his staff bring him to session early in order to score a few minutes alone with Harley, that was surely no one’s business but his own—and surely not of interest to the hired help.

But more troubling than the investigation itself was the information it brought to Joker’s attention. For as Bartholomew questioned staff and inmates alike, news that hadn’t made it to the high security wing was now reaching Joker’s ears:

Bruce Wayne sent a get well bouquet to Two-Face while he was laid up with Poison Ivy damage! HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! It was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. God how he loved that man! What a sense of humor!

Scarecrow had got his ass kicked for attacking Wayne. Well and good. The nerve. Attacking poor Brucie with fear toxins. What an idea! Attacking that wonderful man who took Catty away from Bats!

And then the blow had fallen: Scarecrow was brought in *with cat scratches—and in Bat cuffs*. She went back to the Bat! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO. It couldn't be. It mustn't be. She and Brucie must have had a quarrel or something and the sniveling fatman moved in. The bastard. The lowlife bastard. The rabid lowlife winged rat!

This was Joker's opinion, and he didn't shirk from saying so. For that, Harley threw Koolaid in his face! Harley said she was sick of hearing his ranting about Selina leaving Bruce Wayne. Why Joker didn't care that much if *she* came or went. Well of course he doesn't, she should know that by now!

And Bartholomew was no help. Joker had tried to explain in this morning's session: This was a crisis! He wasn't being selfish, he was thinking, as any king should, about his people. What about the other rogues? They were all so fond of Brucie! Now they would all have to choose sides. It was so unfair. A Broken Home! Who will get the children!

This must not be. He simply could not stand by and watch Brucie, that wonderful man, lose Catty to Batman. He would put on his thinking cap and find a way to get them back together. He had to think of some way to make Brucie more appealing. The guy had so little going for him. Not much of a smile... Joker briefly considered a how a little SmileX gas could improve that. But alas, Catty simply did not appreciate the manly charisma of a JokerGrin. He'd tried, pre-Harley. Nothing. If she didn't go for the original on Joker's own delectable puss, what chance did a stiff like Brucie have with a chemically induced knock-off.

Not that Brucie was the problem here. Catty was. Just look at what she goes for—tall, dark and dour. She goes for Batsy, for pity's sake! How do you reason with a woman like that?

Hey, that was an idea - get her to think Bruce Wayne is Batman!

heh?

Heh heh.

HAHAHA.

HAHAHAHHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAA!

HAHAHAHHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaa...No.

Ridiculous.

He was starting to sound like Hugo Strange.

He'd been in Arkham too long.

Time to leave.

Two hours later, Joker sat in a Starbucks near the HA-HAcienda East, cuffs stained with blood and cappuccino.

"Now, where was I?" he asked the twitching body of the night clerk. "Oh yes, Hugo Strange, that's right. At one time, Strange actually thought Brucie was Batman. Maybe Selina could be convinced of it too—women aren't very bright, after all."

Nethal had presented himself at the White Tiger curio shop in Chinatown. He met his companions in service in this dreaded city and found them surprisingly tolerant of the sin which led to his posting here. Ulstarn had required a blood oath of unquestioning loyalty to himself no less than as would be yielded to the Demon's Head himself. He cut deep, as was proper, high on the forearm, and Nethal found the wound difficult to bandage himself. His new companions assisted him, then took him "out drinking." They told him the tales of their own transgressions, similar to his own: serious but not so serious as to warrant death.

They told him there were those in this city who believed fantastic propaganda about The Demon's Head. They thought raising one's eyes to the Great One would elicit a death sentence, that to speak out of turn meant one would be ordered to slit one's throat with one's own blade. They told him a man could live well, among such people, if one let these impressions remain.

"This is not sound," Nethal objected, "to kill one's followers for no cause, the master is not so foolish. We are not worthy to live if we displease, it is true, but we pledge our lives, we are trained, we serve. To exterminate us for no reason..."

"You don't have to recite that 'not worthy' stuff here, Nethal, not unless The Ulcer is listening."

"The Ulcer?"

"Ulstarn. If he's not around you can talk like a man. Of course old man Ra's isn't going to off you for looking at him funny. It'd take twenty years to breed a replacement and then he'd have to train him—that's another five years. The old man's not stupid."

"The old man?"

"Ra's. Don't worry about it, you'll catch on. Here's all you got to know: We got a good thing here. Just keep your head down, do your work, and steer clear of the Bat."

"The Bat... not," Nethal lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper, "He Whose Name Must Not Be Spoken."

"Batman!" his companions chanted in a loud voice, raising their mugs.

"You're not in the compound now, you're in Gotham City. It's okay to say it here."

"But the master..."

"Look. We all know we're supposedly here because this city is the center of western commerce, headquarters to a hundred corporations, and 'The Detective's' presence has no effect whatsoever on our operations, no special measures are taken, yadda yadda yadda. But c'mon, you think he'd send a walking hemorrhoid like Ulstarn here for any possible reason except..."

"But, but, Master Ulstarn is The Mighty One's most trusted lieutenant, entrusted to run his affairs in the heart of the enemy's own—"

"No. Look kid, to hear Ulcer tell it, he's a trusted lieutenant, 'more highly esteemed even than the late bodyguard Ubu, for while Ubu protected the master's person, Ulstarn runs operations in the enemy's stronghold,' etc. etc. The truth is, 'Master Ulstarn' is a toxic personality and Old Man Ra's doesn't *want* him waiting outside the shower to hand him a towel. He wants him half a world away making Batman's life a living hell. Except Batman's not around, so he makes *our* lives hell. Get it?"

"I don't understand."

"You will. And you're buying the next round."

Dick tipped the cabbie an extra fifty, ostensibly for carrying the luggage up to the apartment, but in reality because he sensed the strained silence from the airport was more uncomfortable for the stranger than it was for him and Barbara.

The quarrel began during the First Class pre-flight beverage service, and continued for nine hours and however many thousand miles. When they couldn't speak frankly, they typed on her laptop and slid it back and forth.

Nine hours and however many thousand miles later, he still couldn't believe it. How could she just assume—without so much as a word's discussion—that he would leave Bludhaven! How could she just assume he'd leave his job, his cover job *and* his real job, his apartment, and his city and relocate to Gotham. She told him about her *RASPBERRIES OR STRAWBERRIES* quandary for the *FRUIT CUPS* at the reception! (Didn't care about his input, mind you, but she at least told him the plan) But *WHERE THEY WERE GOING TO LIVE*, THAT was supposed to be so universally understood she didn't think to mention it!

"Your apartment," she told him, "is not wheelchair friendly." "Nor," she typed on the laptop, "is it equipped to house several million dollars worth of computer hardware with trace-proof shielding."

"But it's my city," he insisted.

Then she got nasty. Nightwing was not as big a deal as Oracle. JLA and her Birds of Prey operation outranked the Titans. Gotham outranked Bludhaven. Plus, her Daddy was the old commissioner, so if he wanted to augment the real work (the *real* work!) with being a street cop...

She was worse than Bruce! She was, this was... unreal!

Dick threw the last bag onto the sofa. It was a softside duffel and it hit a plump overstuffed cushion, but it was still enough noise to warrant a look from Barbara.

"I'm going for a walk," he said simply.

Okay, yes, one of them did have to relocate. And there were several valid points in favor of it not being Barbara and not being Oracle. But to just assume, without bothering to discuss it!

If he went along with this—and by the time the elevator reached street level he realized he would be going along with it—there would be conditions:

1. He would not abandon Bludhaven. He could reverse the "Family Dinner" plan: one night in Bludhaven, the rest of the time in Gotham. No arguments, no guilt, no talk of divided loyalties. It would be thus, and anyone who didn't like it could talk to the batarang.

2. He would not become a cop in Gotham. 2a) His father-in-law was the former police commissioner, that was unacceptable. 2b) Batman would consider Officer Grayson his own private mole. 2c) Joining the force was necessary in Bludhaven because of the nature of the city's corruption. Gotham was a different proposition. It was a corporate center, an arts capital, a publishing center, a fashion mecca, home to a dozen embassies. It was the hub of a hundred subcultures and self-contained microcosms... It would take more than a beat cop's connections to get inside it.

3. He would not become an Agent of the Bat. Gotham was all those things he'd said, and one thing more: it was Batman's city. When he left, it was because he needed to break away, to be his own man. If he came back, Bruce (and especially Batman) needed to accept that he was his own man.

Yeah, right. What were the chances of pulling that one off?

But what was the alternative?

Dick blinked. Lost in thought, he'd been wandering the streets aimlessly, or so he thought. But looking at a bench in a parklet-courtyard across the way... *THAT WAS TIM!* Dick's "aimless" wandering had taken him straight to the courtyard outside the Wayne Building. Was that a sign or something? The old subconscious trying to tell him something? Gotham was all those things he'd said "and one thing more," yes, all true. But it was still *one thing more* after that: it was home. Gotham City was still home.

Filing that sticky thought away for later, Dick walked up to the oblivious Tim and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Buon giorno, Signore Tim! Come stai?"

CHAPTER 7: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

"BRO!" Tim jumped up and hugged him. "You're back! I forgot you were home today. But what're you doing here? Shouldn't you be jet lagged or something?"

"Probably," Dick answered, "With the hours we keep, what's the difference?"

"Yeah, I guess," Tim laughed. "So, you're back."

Dick smiled but didn't say anything. Tim pressed on.

"Was there... Selina said at the wedding your old college buds were planning something. So, was there a prank?"

Dick laughed. "God, I forgot what the rumor mill was like in this town. YES. Stevo found out we spent the wedding night at the bridal suite in the Carlyle..."

"And?" Tim prompted.

"Sleigh bells in the box spring."

Tim cackled.

"Yes, HA HA HA like laughing boy says. Now that you've got a scoop before all the other old hens, you gotta give back. What have I missed?"

"Nothing that entertaining. There's Bruce & Selina's latest spat: seems she referred to the shrimp arrabbiata at d'Annunzio's as 'better than sex' and he decided to take it personally."

"He tends to take metaphors literally."

"Dick, c'mon, you tell me. You were there when they used to be, well y'know, like they used to be. Batman and Catwoman. Surely worse things were said than that."

"No comment."

"Oh, C'MON!"

"Tim, I can't. I'm sworn to secrecy."

"BRO, you can't hold out here, Robin to Robin, what went down?"

"Bruce said sooner or later you would ask about this, and if I said anything but 'no comment,' there would be retribution."

"He's bluffing."

"We were in the trophy room when he said it. He was holding Selina's first cat-o-nine tails and my old Robin shorts. I'm not taking the chance."

"If you don't tell me, I won't give you the 411 on what happened with Poison Ivy and Two-Face."

"Flytrap e morte. Already heard."

"Nuts."

"I am married to Oracle, buddy."

"Unbelievable."

"Dinah emailed her."

Tim looked thoughtful. "Yeah... What you said before about the rumor mill, can I bounce something off you? I don't know if I'm imagining things, and I don't want to take it to Bruce if it's something dumb."

Dick nodded, becoming serious, and Tim continued.

"Well, a bunch of us from Brentwood are starting internships, and the guys from my study group decided to get together like it was any other school project, compare notes 'n stuff."

Dick chuckled, and Tim became defensive.

"Okay, mostly we just eat pizza and shoot the breeze, but we do talk about the work a little, and I just... I started to notice... and I don't even know what I'm talking about, but it seems like... patterns. Information is circulating somehow, little items showing up in weird places, echoes and variations on things that shouldn't be where they are... it seem wrong somehow. Does that make sense?"

"I'm not sure. I never did the big business thing."

"Don't think business, think real work, instinct. Like before you enter a crook's hideout, if it feels wrong, you want to work out why before you step through the door and trip something."

"Can you give me an example?" Dick asked.

"You know we had a Scarecrow episode a couple weeks back, right? Three CEOs were struck with fear toxin. They cancelled their appointments for a day or two and then, having paid off Crane for an antidote, they all went back to business as usual. As far as the Scarecrow end of it goes, it looked like straight extortion: hit the rich man and make him pay up to get his life back. But totally independent of the Scarecrow angle, when these guys went missing, their businesses each took a hit in the market: Chief Executive disappeared, nobody knew what was up, investors don't like uncertainty, they sold off stock, prices dropped. That wasn't something the Scarecrow did, it was a natural domino effect. When the CEOs showed up for work next day, their stock came back to where it was before. With me so far?"

Dick nodded.

"Ok," Tim went on "Now here's the thing: some of the guys my friends have been working for, they made money on those stock drops. They 'sold short,' that's when you basically borrow shares you don't own and sell them at today's prices. You have to buy tomorrow to repay whoever you borrowed from. If the price goes up between today and tomorrow, you lose out. You might have to buy at \$27 an item you sold for \$22. But if the price goes down, you make out."

"You buy back at \$22 an item you sold for \$27," Dick said, showing he understood.

"Right. And in this case, it's almost like they knew in advance these guys would go missing and their stock would fall."

"That's insider trading, isn't it?"

"Yeah, to say the least. It's insider trading if you use publicly traded stock to profit from private information not available to the full market. But Dick, we're not talking about the settlement of some lawsuit or somebody getting a government contract as the private information. We're talking about advance knowledge of Scarecrow targets. And the really creepy thing is that these guys went short when the target was Harold Morton of the Morton Trust and when it was Charles Fitzwallace at Fitzwallace Tech, but NOT when it was Bruce Wayne and Wayne Enterprises."

Dick shook his head, not quite following. "Look Tim, I'm a cop and I'm not quite keeping up with the high finance end of this, but it sounds like you're saying somebody got wind of what the Scarecrow was up to and SOLD information that these

“Ra’s al Ghul,” Harley said, dipping her McNugget in Diet Pepsi.

“That’s it. He thinks he’s Batsy’s greatest foe, after all (the nerve). Now, if he were to ever seriously threaten Batman, I would have to step in, killing Batman clearly being my prerogative as Batman’s Big Baddy, right? So if the presumptuous hairdo wants to think he’s the big bad in Batdom, then he would have to come through and make this rescue of poor Brucie.”

“I’m confused,” Harley wailed. But Joker ignored her.

“Daddy has a plan,” he announced, “deathtrap for Brucie at the Ace Chemical Plant and have Rabid Ra’s set up to rescue him.”

“But Puddin, how will this convince Catty that Bruce Wayne is Batman?”

“WERE YOU NOT LISTENING?!” Joker roared, smashing a plastic tray over her head. “BATMAN is to blame for my distinctive pallor. My avenging myself by offing Brucie at the Ace Plant in the very vat where Bats made me go kerplop-gurgle-gurgle means Brucie is Batman!”

If her head wasn’t throbbing from being walloped with a plastic tray, Harley would have known better than to point out that she wasn’t listening because she wasn’t there when he explained it the first time. As it was, the throbbing in her head was soon forgotten due to a harder tray-thwap on her bottom.

If Ra’s al Ghul had a sense of humor, he would have laughed.

If he had an iota of empathy for his fellow beings, he might have felt pity.

As it was, as there was no advantage in either laughing at the Joker or pitying him, the Demon’s Head was merely surprised. Surprise was still quite an achievement; you had to give the insane clown credit for that much. After a few centuries, Ra’s thought himself jaded. He believed he’d seen it all. That this 21st Century psychotic could come up with something so insanely twisted as to cause surprise was an achievement.

He wanted ... this pitiful non-entity of a chemically-mutated psychopath wanted the great Ra’s al Ghul to dispatch a rescue party to Gotham City to save the Detective—no to save Bruce Wayne—from a death trap in order to convince a woman that Wayne was Batman? It was monstrous. That this demented individual was allowed to live was a sad testament to the failings of Western government, of the Detective’s methods, and of the need for global order that DEMON rule would bring.

The Joker was a sad, sad case indeed.

But the information he so artlessly dropped in the Demon’s lap might prove useful. Information was the currency of power. Money was inconsequential, Americans never understood that. These tiny men, these so-called leaders of the corporate world, did not begin to understand: It was all about power, not money; it was not necessary to own if one controlled those who did.

With his new network brokering information in Gotham City, Ra’s was securing control over anyone and anything with power. Those he tipped on the stock fluctuations of Morton Trust and Fitzwallace Tech paid well for the information, and they assumed that was his motive in selling it. Money. The fools. What need had Ra’s al Ghul of their meaningless totems of wealth? The buyers of his information were now indebted to him. They had engaged in insider trading. He knew. They were now

in his power. Their corporations and all they owned were his to control if and how he wished. It was a start.

He had been concentrating on corporations thus far, as the paltry information they considered valuable was so easy to obtain. He had not thought to traffic in information of a criminal nature, apart from that one Scarecrow episode, and that was only because the targets were CEOs. But this information falling into his lap, without his lifting a finger... He would be foolish indeed if he did not ponder the possibilities...

If the potential buyer were anyone other than the Detective, he would proceed without question: Look at this valuable stream of information I can open up for you if only you serve me.

That approach would not, obviously, work with the Detective, not put in those terms. But what if... what if the information came anonymously, from "a friend." Perhaps another type of Oracle emerging, no hint of reciprocal favors owed, not at this time... Ra's al Ghul's skin warmed and his breathing quickened as he thought through the next logical step in the sequence: If the "friend" later got into trouble, the heroes he helped would rally to defend him. It could be managed. The Detective's own circle could be controlled this way. He would finally be able to call the Detective into his service whenever he wished!

"NalFoy!" Ra's called to his new lieutenant, "open a channel to Gotham City. Tell Ulstarn to establish the new man, Nethal, in separate quarters at once. He must not be seen to have any connection to the Chinatown operations. He will take orders from me and no other. He will receive these orders directly from my lips."

CHAPTER 8: TWISTS AND TURNS

Whiskers eyed Dick Grayson with all the malice of a cat whose favorite cushion is being bent out of shape by an inconsiderate two-foot. This particular two-foot had done it before, squashed the favorite cushion, but at least then he did so smelling of cavern and cut grass. Now he smelled like wet paint and plaster. Whiskers delicate nose twitched at the grim realization that by the time two-foot pillow-squasher left, the favorite cushion too would smell like wet paint.

And did two-foot Selina-cat do anything to discourage this? No, she'd lifted Whiskers into her lap where he could get a good look at the desecration, she stroked his fur consolingly, but she did not stop it. Indeed, she seemed to be thinking. There was a very particular kind of thinking whenever she picked him up and stroked his fur this way. It usually meant the purple leather would be removed from under the bed for a time.

Nutmeg would be upset about that. But Whiskers didn't care so much. Under the bed was Nutmeg's war room. Whiskers's domain was the terrace, the planter Bat-Bruce disturbed when he was two-foot in boots, *and that cushion*.

"I can't pay you anything approaching what Bruce did for the Wayne Enterprises job," Dick said. "In fact, with all the start-up costs, Selina, I don't know if I can pay you anything at all, for a while at least."

"That's okay, Dick," she answered, "your credit's good. You're starting up a new business, high ticket private investigation and security; that's hardware, contacts, office space. You think I don't appreciate what you must be shelling out to get this off the ground in a city like Gotham? And I know you won't take money from Bruce, so you must be doing it on loans. I completely understand what you must be going through. What I don't understand is why you want me?"

"You're the best."

"Where exactly did you guys get the idea that I respond to flattery, tell me that? No, never mind, tell me this instead: why don't you ask *your wife*? I mean, Richard, if it was security for a physical plant as well as the computer system, you'd be right. I am the best. But just the computers, Dick, you're *married* to the best. You've got Oracle waking up next to you every morning. You don't think she can't find the holes in your system better than Catwoman?"

"You cracked Bruce's system. Barbara never did that."

"I doubt she's tried. Look, I'm not complaining that you can't pay me up front because money is tight. I am simply asking: if money *is* so tight, why don't you use the better no-cost solution right at your fingertips?"

Dick sighed. This wasn't the first time he'd tried to maneuver Selina around a conversation and failed. One last-ditch attempt to change the subject:

"What if, instead of owing you a fee, I made you a partner. How would that be?"

“Reowrl,” Whiskers spat aggressively as Selina—or rather, as Catwoman—tugged the fur at the back of his neck. It was so clearly a response to Dick’s statement, it was almost as if Catwoman herself had reowled, challenging him. In an instant, her whole manner was different: firm, focused, and no-nonsense.

“Richard, I don’t work for people who try and jerk me making the offer,” the voice took him right back to that rooftop when he was ten years old. This wasn’t Bruce’s girlfriend Selina anymore; this was Catwoman, and she was losing patience. “Why—won’t—you—ask—Barbara?”

“For the same reason I won’t take money from Bruce,” Dick answered honestly, “I don’t want to be indebted—to either of them—not on this. If it was a partnership, her and me against the world, I would. But Selina, this is her town almost as much as Bruce’s. And I want to establish my own presence here without a handout from either of them. Okay?”

She eyed him, appraisingly.

“There’s more you’re not telling me,” she said finally, “Don’t bother denying it, Richard, I can see there is. And if it was just the two of us, Dick and Selina, talking, I’d say I won’t ask because it’s none of my business. But it’s not just the two of us. You are hiring Catwoman. In fact, you offered a partnership—and that means it *is* my business, whatever you’re not saying. If it involves Batman, if it involves Oracle, if it involves Nightwing even. So ‘fess up, kiddo. What’s the rest of the story?”

Dick looked up at her, looked down at the cat, down at his own lap, then back up at her. It wasn’t exactly like Barbara or Bruce: *Tell me because I say so*. Selina did at least give a better reason than ‘because I say so.’ With her, it was a legitimate proposition, quid pro quo: If you want Catwoman’s help, there will have to be full disclosure. He made himself comfortable in the chair—destroying Whiskers’s hopes that the cushion would ever recover—and began a more detailed explanation...

He’d lucked out in virtually his first week back in Gotham, when a small committee from Barbara’s condo association called to welcome him to the building. One of them, Brian Everwood, was a city councilman. He stayed after the others had left. Everwood was well-informed about Bludhaven, its civic issues, its law enforcement woes, and he even referenced details of Dick’s own achievements on the Bludhaven Force that could only be the result of genuine interest - or research. After more than an hour of fascinating conversation, Everwood asked, point blank, if Dick would be joining the Gotham Police Force. On learning he wouldn’t (“too much baggage, Barbara’s father being the ex-commissioner and all”) Everwood had smiled, handed Dick his card, and invited him to lunch at the Barrister’s Club. As Bruce Wayne’s son, Dick was no stranger to the corridors of power. The private clubs & the executive suites did not dazzle him as they might an ordinary street cop looking for a new line of work. But Dick was not insensible to the fact that Everwood was trying to impress him, and that attention was both unexpected and gratifying.

“Of course, Gotham City,” Everwood (please, call me Brian!) enthused, “is a very different proposition than a metrop like Bludhaven. The corporate presence here, the wealth it represents, it’s staggering. Look at WishStar. Why, they’ve accomplished more in a year, restoring buildings and cleaning up Gotham Plaza, than City Hall could in a decade. And as for Batman—”

"It's just cosmetic, Brian," Dick felt compelled to point out, "Gotham Plaza, all the crime is still there, and all the sleaze. It's just moved a few blocks to the left."

"I know that Dick, may I call you Dick? I'm not naïve, Dick. But the patches of a clean Gotham that have been created are good for the city. Tourists feel safe—in fact, tourists are safe. Don't you realize what that means? Why, the boon that creates, not just in the dollars they bring in but the boost for the city's image! They go home and tell people it's a good place. You can't put a price tag on that, on what WishStar has given us."

Selina looked curiously at Dick, who paused in his story.

"Could we possibly fast forward past the paid advertisement for WishStar, 'a family-friendly SuperCorp with a heart as big as their bank account,' and get on with your new line of work?"

Dick looked embarrassed and summarized the rest of the lunch: Councilman Everwood suggested the need for savvy, informed, well-connected security and investigation services to serve the growing corporate presence in Gotham. Consultants like Foster & Forsythe had their niche, and so did low-level investigators like Slam Bradley...

Dick paused to enjoy Selina's reaction. He'd dropped that name specifically, knowing her distaste for that particular PI, who she described (rightly enough) as a bottomfeeder. But the fact was, Everwood too had used Bradley as an example of the kind of investigator whose outdated methods and underclass trappings did not fit the needs of the new Gotham and her emerging corporate clients.

It seemed the perfect answer to a question Dick had only started to ask himself: his place, his day-job, and Nightwing's inside track in Gotham City.

The very next night, Nightwing had found Nathan. Nathan was a snitch, but not an ordinary snitch. A good snitch. A very good snitch. He knew the penny ante stuff they all did, the mob and the street gangs, but he knew uptown too: not just that some museum exhibit might make an interesting target for this criminal or that one, but what corporate sponsors were underwriting the exhibit, who carried the insurance, and so on. He even had Iceberg gossip: Sly finally got his dream date with Roxy Rocket; the disillusionment was swift and painful...

"You're kidding!" Selina interrupted, Catwoman's down-to-business mask dissolving in an instant into the reveling-in-gossip face. "I hadn't heard a word about that."

Dick failed to supply more details, but smiled, as if dangling bait. "Then I guess my informant's as good as I think he is," he grinned.

"He have any more to offer besides gossip of either the Iceberg or Wall Street Journal variety?" Selina asked, the business face returning.

"History," Dick said. "Did you know Larraby Chemicals main factory was the old Ace Chemical Plant where Joker had his... accident?"

Selina shook her head. "It was a long time ago," she said.

"Yeah. It's way before my time. But I remember asking Bruce about it once. We were on a case, and I thought it'd be a likely Joker target."

Selina waved him off. "I do know this one, from the clown's own mouth," she sighed. "Joker doesn't blame the physical plant. He blames Batman. He blames his

astrologer—dead now, by the way. And also he blames Mr. Whipple.” Dick looked blank, so Selina explained, “from the Charmin ads.”

Dick rolled his eyes. Then finished his story.

“So anyway, I was in this quandary about what to do with myself being back in Gotham, and within two days, all the pieces fell into place: Brian Everwood, Nathan, Grayson Associates. Actually, my first thought was Grayson & Grayson, but Barbara’s been so difficult about anything work related. I finally worked it out, I think: See, with the Titans, I led *a team*. And before that, I was Bruce’s *partner*. For all his dictatorial personality, Batman is part of a team: in the JLA, and he led the Outsiders, and he leads ‘Team Bat’ for lack of a better word.

Barbara’s never done that. She’s more of a dispatcher. She’s traffic control: go here now. And she’s triage: This is the priority, take care of this one, then that one, then that. She doesn’t know what it is to lead; she directs. And it seems like, since we’ve been back, whenever our personal relationship bled onto Oracle turf, that aspect of her character emerged. Well Selina, I can deal with that in the field. As Nightwing, it’s a total asset to me. But if Grayson Associates is going to be *my* business and part of *Nightwing’s* operations here, then I’m going to be calling the shots. I’m not going to have ‘the wife’ ordering me around like the hired help.... So now you know. That’s why I came to you. That’s why I want you handling this—for money or a share of the operation—and not her.”

“Okay,” Selina agreed. “I don’t believe I’m doing this, but I’ll just get rusty if I don’t keep my hand in, I guess. When do I start?”

“As soon as you want,” Dick said, handing her a business card, which Whiskers promptly snatched from his hand. “I settled into the office at that address yesterday,” Dick said, watching Whiskers chew his business card into a small, wet wad, “paint’ll be dry tomorrow. Meantime, you can log in from here with...the access codes I had written on the back of that card—does that cat not like me or something?”

“I swear,” Selina laughed, retrieving the card and trying to see if the ink on the back was still legible, “you’re worse than Bruce.”

“I swear,” Selina sighed quietly, twiddling her fork in her salad, “You’re worse than Dick.”

It had been going on for four courses. There had been six DEMON agents at some curio shop in Chinatown; now there were five.

Through the soup: were six, now five. Why?

“He killed one,” Selina guessed. “Now about this new job I’ve been offered...” “In the past,” Bruce bulldozed over her, ruining her plan to tease him with her news, “if he killed one, a new one came in and replaced him. So why not this time?”

And through the fish: men are cycled in and out, but there are always six. What happened to the last one that he wasn’t replaced?

“Weren’t you going to tell me about the meeting with Tim?” Selina asked, trying to change the subject. “He was onto something about Scarecrow—those CEOs?” “It doesn’t make sense. Even Ra’s al Ghul has turnover, but in the past, when he’s lost

a man, he's always replaced him. They came and went, the faces changed, the short one left, the goatee came in - but there were *always six*."

With the roast: "Look, I know you didn't have henchman, but imagine you did. If you always had six, why suddenly change to five?" She started to speak but he cut her off: "And it can't be to cut costs; funds are never an issue with Ra's." "Because I used to be psychotically obsessive, but now I got therapy," she answered tensely. "I don't know."

"Neither do I," Bruce growled, "That's what bothers me."

And now with the salad: Bruce took six grapes from the centerpiece, arranged them in a row above his plate, took one away, and stared at the empty space. *And this*, Selina couldn't help but reflect, *is the crimefighting genius that kept me from the VanDeegan Emeralds?*

"Couldn't Ra's just change his mind?" she speculated.

"To my knowledge, he's never changed his mind in 1200 years. Why start now?"

Dessert would have been more of the same if Dick hadn't arrived, eager for Grayson Associates to make its first intelligence contribution to the crime-fighting crusade in Gotham.

"A lead already?" Bruce and Selina asked in unison.

Dick did a doubletake.

"It is so creepy when you guys do that," he said.

"Must be an emergency if it couldn't wait for patrol," Bruce said, checking his watch. They'd be in the city in costume within the hour. If it couldn't wait that long, he wondered why Dick did didn't simply telephone.

"Not an emergency, exactly," Dick said, unable to hide his intense excitement, "I didn't bring it to Batman or to the cave, because this lead concerns Bruce Wayne." Finally! Finally, Dick's hour had come. He was finally measuring up to, and possibly even surpassing, Bruce. "Seems the Joker wants to kill you. At the old Ace factory."

"WHAT?" Selina reacted first, and louder, "WHY?"

"Never ask 'why' with Joker," Bruce said calmly.

"But Jack adores you," she objected, "which is a big, creepy *WHY* all by itself, by the way. Now, all of a sudden he wants you dead, and no *WHY*? Six grapes down to five, and we were obsessing on why through four courses."

Dick looked back and forth like it was a tennis match.

"Ra's is predictable," Bruce explained carefully, "Joker is insane. You can't predict what he'll do or why."

"It looks like Dick can," Selina observed. Dick beamed as she turned to him and asked, "Where'd you say this is going down?"

"The old Ace plant. Now Larraby Chemicals," Dick answered proudly. "My contact supplied blueprints."

"Already got 'em," Bruce said dismissively.

"Old plans," Dick shot back, producing a long documents tube, "not since the renovations when Larraby took over."

Bruce growled.

Batman stood on the roof of the former Ace Chemical Plant, watching the paddy wagon taking Harley Quinn back to Arkham disappear into the stream of traffic. The ambulance was still being loaded. There was the stretcher carrying Joker...cuffs stained with blood and Green Dye #4.

The OraCom buzzed in his earpiece under the cowl, and he heard Oracle's patient, but insistent, request for confirmation of the police chatter she was picking up: Joker and Harley apprehended. No civilian casualties. Minimal property damage, but fire trucks dispatched to sign off before the plant could reopen. All those chemicals—it could have been serious.

Batman didn't respond.

Yes, it could have been serious. Joker wanting to kill Bruce Wayne at the Ace Factory? Insane. Insanity was a given with the Joker, but still. In the privacy of his own mind he voiced the "Why" he would not with Dick and Selina. Then he reprimanded himself just as he had them. There was no "Why" with Joker. In a week, the madman wouldn't know himself.

::BOSS! REPORT IN, WOULD YOU?:: Oracle's answer-me-now tone. It was one sound, Clark once confided, that made the Man-of-Steel jolt.

::: Here, Oracle. Report confirmed. Joker's in custody. Quinn's in custody. Situation contained. No casualties:::

:::Mind telling me why you didn't answer the first two times I asked then?:: The relief in her anger was palpable. Of course, Batman kicked himself, "no civilian casualties" could have meant anything. With Joker, she would naturally assume the worst.

:::Preoccupied::: he answered, in the terse I'm-Batman/Don't-Question tone that silenced everyone but Selina.

Then he thought the better of it. Barbara was pissed because he'd scared her.

:::I was preoccupied,::: he explained, *:::going over the battle, Oracle, I didn't hear you. It was almost too easy. The heads-up from Dick, the blueprints, they hadn't had time to set the Bruce Wayne trap, let alone prepare for unexpected company from Batman:::*

:: Well, good deal. Calling it a night, then? :: Oracle answered simply.

Some things she still viewed with Batgirl simplicity. Battle lost or battle won. It was too early to "call it a night."

Besides, Batman couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something. A link in a chain that wasn't a chain. Or a piece that didn't fit the puzzle because the puzzle, not the piece, was wrong... Disgusted at the thought he sounded like Riddler, Batman slapped the OraCom control.

:: Yeah, boss? ::

Maybe what he needed, Batman decided, was to get back to basics. An old-fashioned scrap and scratch might be just the thing. Clear his mind, and let him think this through.

::: Is Selina on the channel ? ::: he asked abruptly.

:: Not tonight. She's doing a job for Dick. ::

::: You mean, for Nightwing?:::

:: I mean what I said. You wouldn't hear of her coming along to the chemical plant, so Dick has her casing this big corporate complex. Revamping their security and Grayson Associates is putting in a bid:::

:::She's not on the channel when I need her because she's DOING A JOB FOR DICK!:::

:: Hey, Bossman, stand down. Change the tone and maybe I won't tell her you had a hissy that she wasn't at your beck 'n call after you left her out on the Joker bust. ::

This was outrageous. What had gotten into the girl? "Change the tone and maybe I won't tell her you had a hissy?" That was a very different thing from getting a little testy because he'd missed a check-in.

...:What complex is she casing?:... Batman asked through clenched teeth.

::I'm not at liberty to say,:: came the unbelievable reply ::Guess you'll have to use those detective skills we've heard so much of. Oracle out.::

Batman stared at the OraCom control in disbelief. But the mystery of Oracle's mood swings would have to wait. To pursue it now would be to let her distract him from finding Selina—and on the off chance that that's exactly what it was supposed to do - "estrogen solidarity" and all that - he wasn't going to let them get away with it.

The initial attempt to break into Grayson Associates' computer system met with a brazenly personal message:

You CAN'T be serious. We haven't been online for 48 hours and you're already scratching at the backdoor? If you ask Dick nicely, he might just tell you what you want to know. Or you could ask me. You could try to kiss it out of me like you used to, or maybe...

He didn't read further. He realized what she'd done. The relay from the Batcomputer to the Batmobile used a unique data pulse that prevented anyone from tracing the signal in either direction. She was using that pulse as an identifying signature to block login and send back this saucy little taunt. That meant however he was going to break into this network—and he *would* break into this network—it couldn't be from a Batcave workstation or the Batmobile field unit. Damn her.

Well, he thought, *Come at it from the other side then*: If Catwoman was approaching this like any other job, she'd investigate before going to the site in costume. He let himself into her apartment and examined her personal computer. As he skimmed the day's browser history, he felt Whiskers sniffing his boots expectantly.

"Sorry, fella," he offered, patting the cat's head although his eyes never left the computer screen, "unexpected visit tonight. I'll bring you some next time."

There it was—in the history. In the last two days, Selina had visited the websites of WishStar, Chantal Klee and KeeNeCo. The latter two were, respectively, the architect and contractor that renovated WishStar's midtown complex, taken over from a failing publishing empire.

Batman lifted the cat onto the desk and chucked his chin. "Don't tell her how I found out," he instructed, "testosterone solidarity."

CHAPTER 9: ROOFTOP GAMES

There she was.

Catwoman was perched on the observation deck of the Sony Building, facing the WishStar complex. When he found her, she was on the Drake Building next door. He'd watched, mesmerized, as she'd circled WishStar from each adjacent rooftop, first taking pictures with a digital camera, then measurements of some other kind with a gadget he didn't recognize, and then—the best part—she'd lie on her stomach and make notes on a palm pilot.

The rational part of Batman's mind knew it was a different world from the last time he'd seen her like this: Catwoman, on a rooftop, coolly assessing a target. The rational part of his mind knew more than a year had passed. His rational mind knew she was no longer a criminal; she was his lover. The lips that chewed the end of the palm stylus were the very lips that had pronounced d'Annunzio's shrimp *arrabbiata* "better than sex." The hair that blew so wildly in the high wind so far above the city would smell of a tea rose shampoo that sat on a little shelf in his own shower. His rational mind knew that the wisp of dark purple only barely visible in the moonlight was the very arm that would yank the pillow from under his head if he got to bed too late.

His rational mind, however, had no say when the rest of him was watching Catwoman.

The rest of him was in a time warp: Catwoman. His enemy. So beautiful. So dangerous. So forbidden... He made a mental note to check the security cameras for each one of these buildings before he left. This was valuable footage. Look at her—casing a target—he could study her studying it from a dozen angles. Watching her work, watching her plan...

Point of Order, the rational mind intervened.

Just look at her move. Just look at her not move...

A-hem, the rational mind tried again. *She's no longer a criminal. And if I want to know what it is she's doing over there, I don't need to study tapes, I can just ask her.*

...those legs, that ass...

I get to pinch it anytime I want. It's Selina. And this is not a productive use of my time.

...this one is catvid-perfect...

Before the rational mind could make a rebuttal, he saw the lithe purple form stretch, stand, then move in his direction. How perfect was this, she'd seen enough and was finally ready to take on the target itself: the WishStar roof, where he happened to be standing.

Batman merged deeper into the shadows, pulling his cape taut so its movement couldn't give him away. He held his breath as she went to work on a firehose feederduct not three feet away.

"Nice night for a stroll," he graveled, thinking to continue 'most people do it at streetlevel' but was unable to because of the scream. Her shocked jump-scream-spin set off instinct and muscle memory so that - before he could even think - he had her wrists

in one hand, the other clamped over her mouth and his body was pushing into hers, trapping it against the coil of firehoses.

They stayed that way for a long moment, lost in the past.

His rational mind realized this was a moment to make up for a dozen wrong calls, a hundred missed opportunities. The hand on her mouth he should move behind her neck, pull her face into his and crush that delicious mouth with his own.

But his rational mind still had no say where Catwoman was involved, and the rest of him—still caught in the time warp - waited wordlessly while her look of wide-eyed shock softened into amused recognition. Then he released her mouth for the inevitable proposition...

"I can't play tonight; I'm working."

The time warp shattered. Did she say...? This was insane. Even for her, even for them, this was insane! She was *WORKING*?!? He's Batman! And she couldn't/wouldn't/refused to, er, play because she was *WORKING* trying to break into... Even for her that was simply fucked in the head: when Batman interrupts you in the middle of a break in, you don't get to shoo him away because it's not a good time!

He held on to the wrists a little tighter. She hated that, when he took her wrists. It was the ultimate expression of his chief advantage, his size and his strength compared to hers. It always brought about some expression of her advantage, it always brought about the come-ons. He held one wrist in each hand now, and pushed in closer pressing her against the coils with his body.

"You're working?" he rasped in a hoarse voice that would have been dangerous with anyone else, but with her, like this, had other connotations.

Her lips parted, the tongue flicking moist and soft against the teeth as she began to speak. And the words that came were right out of the time-warp... "I don't have time for your games right now, this is serious." ... except, that wasn't her line, it was his.

Granted, she said it better. Crisp and light and apologetic. Not ponderous and self-important, not heavy with unspoken and unspeakable desire and regret. Simple, casual, sophisticated: *No time now, Dear; run along and bother other criminals*. It was so totally unexpected, it had virtually the same effect as that first rooftop kiss, stunning him into such a state of awed confusion while she wriggled out from under him and disappeared into the night.

...

She had already made it into the CEO's private office when he caught up with her. Safe open, she had removed a stack of floppy disks and was sifting through them on the desktop.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he exclaimed—in marked contrast to the more traditional, Batmanesque opening on the roof.

She didn't answer. Eyes glued to the monitor, she waved him over with a finger.

A gloved hand blocked the monitor as she was trying to read.

"You can't do this..." he began, then stopped when he saw that she seemed to be staring straight through his hand. He looked down, following her gaze. Then moved slowly behind her chair and started reading over her shoulder.

"How did you find this," he murmured, barely audible.

"Dick's idea. He figured the *coup de grace* on the proposal to revamp their security was to mention how many other bids they'd received and from whom."

But the document she was reading: "Security Bids—Eyes Only," was not a listing of the bidders. It was an internal memo. It said the CH contact BE... ("That's City Hall contact Brian Everwood," Selina whispered) ...specifically instructed WishStar to award Grayson Associates the contract, regardless of who put in the lowest bid. In return, it gave a timeline in which BE would have a particular block rezoned, enabling WishStar to have specific properties classified abandoned and take them over for revitalization while the current owner would be unable to respond.

"You recognize the address?" Batman asked.

She shook her head.

"Flick Theatre," he said tersely, "Two-Face's new hideout. How does some guy at City Hall even know Harvey Dent bought that place, let alone that he would be unable to block this rezoning because..."

"...Because he's flat on his back in the hospital with Ivy injuries," Catwoman completed the thought. "And why is this guy so keen to help Dick?"

"And why are there five agents in Chinatown when there were always six before?"

"OH. COME. ON!" Catwoman sat back in the chair, arms folded in disbelief.

Batman shook his head.

"This isn't the first mix of big business and rogue business that's come up lately, is it: First the Scarecrow and those CEOs, then Dick's informant just happening to supply the blueprints from Larraby Chemicals to foil the Joker's plan, and now this. Remember Tim's theory that whoever knew the Scarecrow targets knew he'd fail against Bruce Wayne. Why? Maybe because..." he stopped, then signaled in their secret sign language: "Let's get out of here."

"This room isn't bugged," Catwoman said out loud. "That's one of the first things I checked."

"I want to be sure. I'm going to double-check the security closet in this building. You get the tapes for the surrounding ones."

She stared.

"The rooftop cameras," he clarified. "That was quite a show you put on."

She stared again.

"Zero residual presence. C'mon, snap to." And with that he slapped her upper thigh. "Meet me on top of the Wayne Building in an hour."

An hour later, Batman picked up almost exactly where he'd left off.

"Tim was right. There is an underground information network, consolidating control of Gotham piece by piece. Whoever knew the Scarecrow targets knew he'd fail against Bruce Wayne. Why? Because he knows Bruce Wayne is Batman."

"That does narrow the field," Catwoman conceded.

"It's not Hugo Strange. It's not YOU. That only leaves..."

"The Cadaver."

Batman permitted himself a lip-twitch and nodded.

"So...what happens next?" she asked.

"Now that we know?" he answered, "We set a trap of our own."

"I just know I'm going to hate where this is going."

The lip-twitch tugged a little harder on each word that followed, ending in a genuine smile.

“A woman. In Metropolis. Not who you think... Her name is Moira.”

CHAPTER 10: KNIGHT'S PAWN TO KING 6

In his years of service as a humble messenger to the Demon's Head, Omar had had occasion to enter Ra's Al Ghul's palatial compound in Nepal four times. He'd entered the castle in Moldova once and the castle in Shanghai once. On those occasions, he'd kept his eyes lowered on his own feet as he came and went from The Presence, for it was not his place to notice the possessions of his betters. As Omar delivered his message, he would and stare directly in front of him, facing respectfully in the direction of his master without presuming to look at the Great One's most illustrious features. Once, in doing so, he chanced to glance at the Great One's table, for Ra's Al Ghul was seated for a meal when Omar was obliged to bring him the news: the original Batman had returned to Gotham City and retaken his mantel from the pretender dubbed AzBat. No one knew if this announcement would please or not, and Omar had knelt should the Mighty One wish to cut his throat for bringing unwelcome news. Kneeling before the seated Ra's Al Ghul, Omar could not help but notice the plates of food sitting mere inches from of his face, and even on that extraordinary occasion he had not seen—on the very table of Ra's Al Ghul—delicacies such as were placed before him now.

"Specialite della casa," Giovanni d'Annunzio purred, *"Gamberoni - Gulf Shrimp—very large, sautéed in extra virgin olive oil and herbs de provence, with a spicy arrabbiata sauce, served on a bed of lemon pepper angelhair pasta..."*

"Here it comes," Bruce Wayne said quietly to Omar, counting down with his fingers: 3..2..1..

"It's better than sex," Selina confided to Moira with a wink.

"Darling," Bruce said theatrically, once the orders were taken and Giovanni was done sucking up, "I did ask you here tonight so Moira, the Wayne Enterprises employee from Metropolis who I so desperately want to transfer to the headquarters here in Gotham, could see that I have a nice, normal girlfriend. So she and her boyfriend Omar can see that those rumors about me being the Don Juan of the Western World aren't true."

"What's your point, Dear?" Selina asked with equal theatricality.

"Only that perhaps allusions to your unusual relationship with the shrimp arrabbiata isn't going to allay her fears about what she's getting into in moving to Gotham City."

Everyone laughed at this. Selina crunched the end of the bread stick and changed the subject:

"So, Moira, is it true you used to work for the demonspawn? I mean, er, Talia al Ghul or whatever she's calling herself these days."

"Head," Omar said flatly, "Talia Head."

Everyone except Moira chewed, as though they had thought of something to say but decided against it.

"Yes," Moira answered finally, "it was as Miss Head's secretary at LexCorp that I developed the 'working for difficult people' philosophy that Mr. Wayne hired me to

bring to W. E. - not that the management at Wayne Enterprises is especially difficult to work for," she corrected quickly, for she didn't wish to give offense. "I certainly couldn't imagine any of the Wayne Enterprises suits throwing a coffee pot into a Dell 9000 just because of some items in the newspaper."

Selina's eyes locked with Bruce's, glowing with amusement, as she asked, "Really?"

"If after what you've seen today, you'd like to meet with an apartment broker," Bruce began, hoping against hope to derail the train of Selina's inquiries. But he was outmaneuvered. Selina stood, saying something about the powder room; Moira stood. *Estrogen solidarity*, Bruce thought bitterly as the two of them disappeared down a damask wallpapered hallway.

Bruce allowed the executive façade to give way to the Fop façade as he turned to Omar with a world-weary smile.

"By the time they get back, whatever Moira knows about Talia, Selina will know about Talia."

"She doesn't know so much as she thinks," Omar said, surprising Bruce with an equally worldly voice. "Throwing the pots of coffee into the calculating machine, it is nothing. At the compound, in my old life, there was warning: if you are alone with the Great One's daughter and she starts to, how you say in English, 'froth'—run! It is only way. Do not wait to be dismissed - just run! One time, she send entire squad into Hong Kong, suicide mission because of..." Omar lowered his voice dramatically "'he whose name must not be spoken' did not come with other Justice League heroes to assault on compound."

Bruce was almost too stunned to realize this was the perfect introduction of the subject he'd wondered how to broach. Omar continued:

"And this 'sexual harassment' of which Miss Moira and the other Secret-Aries speak, this fear of chasing around the water cooler, it is nothing. In compound, if you were, how you say, 'not too bad to look at,' and 'he whose name must not be spoken' turned down the Great One's daughter..." Omar made a shuddering gesture.

A lifetime spent honing the acting skills necessary to maintain a dual identity enabled Batman to hear these astounding revelations of life inside the DEMON Camp while maintaining Bruce's most guilelessly foppish exterior.

"Oh, that reminds me," he blithered like a well-meaning dimwit, "he who's name... I mean, er, Batman sent you a note."

He fished the sealed envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Omar just as the women returned and the shrimp arrived.

There had been some debate as to whether Bruce or Selina should deliver the note. It was true Omar already knew of her connection to Batman from when he'd rescued her from Ra's clutches, and in so doing helped Omar defect. But it was also true that Omar knew Bruce Wayne had arranged the job with the Daily Planet that Batman had promised. One connection was as good as another.

The delivery of the note should have been the last order of business for Batman that evening, and he tried to slip back into Bruce mode for the remainder of the dinner. Bruce mode was so much better for dealing with Giovanni d'Annunzio. Tonight's stunt from Gotham's premier snob was a new dessert. He was waiting, Giovanni had said, for Bruce and Selina's return to introduce the new confection. He wanted to name it after her.

Bruce identified Giovanni's strategy just as Batman would Ra's Al Ghul's: he was hoping for another magnificently colorful description of the dessert from Selina, *a la* "better than sex." Not the sort of thing you could put on a menu, but the sort of thing Giovanni would delight in passing on to other patrons, an amusing little aside, delivered with that delightful continental *savoir faire*.

Back in Selina's apartment, Bruce spoke with the same air of exasperated disapproval once reserved for the vault at Sotheby's. "I can't believe you actually did it. I don't know why I should be surprised, it's not like it's out of character or anything. In fact, it's so totally, typically, the kind of thing you would do..."

"I don't believe we are going to have this conversation again. What goes on in your head: I've said this forty-six times and got no response, but hey, let's go for lucky forty-seven!"

And then, just like the vault at Sotheby's, she short-circuited his ability to argue, pressing against him, whispering sinful pleasures: "It was a peach, stuffed with amaretto cream, served on a pomegranate reduction drizzled in Belgian chocolate... It's a perfectly good word, it's a perfectly good metaphor, and it was a perfectly *orgasmic* dessert."

Unlike the vault, Bruce was not rendered mute and immobile by her performance. He ran his fingers through her dark hair, cocking her head back. Her lips parted with a soft gasp, and he bent over them, declaring in Batman's firmest gravel: "Those breathy little pants are mine. Remember that..." His free hand moved playfully up the front of her body, coming to rest on her collarbone. "...the next time you want to give some pastry chef credit for..."

That was as far as he got, for Selina wasn't rendered immobile either.

When conversation resumed about twenty minutes later, Selina brought up a subject that had been puzzling her since he first mentioned Omar and Moira.

"I could have sworn you said you weren't going to bring Moira to Gotham on Wayne Enterprises business just to get Omar here, that you'd considered the idea and rejected it, that it was a cheap manipulative stunt playing with people's lives that way, the sort of thing Ra's might do, but totally beneath you."

Bruce blinked.

"One," he said crisply, "That was before. Then it was five agents instead of six in Chinatown. Now he's messing with Dick. I'm not about to let him get away with that. Two: it's not playing with their lives if I really do want Moira's program coming out of the Gotham headquarters and not the Metropolis office. I would've brought her here at the beginning if she'd let me, but it took some time to convince her the job was legit. Three—"

"How many parts are there?"

"Four. Part Three: I'm not forcing Omar to go under cover or anything, I just want to pick his brain a little. That's why I asked him to meet Batman tomorrow while you and Moira looked at apartments. I'm just *asking* for *help*. Exactly what you, Dick, Alfred, Clark, and everybody else are always on me to do."

"Me? How did I get on that list?"

"Four—"

"Have you always been this anal-retentive?"

"Four—"

"You'd think I would've noticed before now."

"Four: with Ra's, it's always a game of chess. Omar is the one piece I have that Ra's doesn't even know is on the board."

"I mean, to layout your argument with a table of contents and footnotes..."

"In other words, I've made my point and, rather than admit you've lost a round, you want to change the subject."

"Growl."

"Well, it won't work, Kitten. Unless you admit I'm right, I won't tell you what Omar said while you and Moira were powdering."

"I can't believe I missed anything good. According to Moira, Omar is pretty naïve about some things."

"According to Omar, Moira is pretty naïve..."

Their eyes met.

"Interesting paradox there."

"I'll say."

"Strange couple."

"Very."

For a man like Ra's Al Ghul, *too much loyalty* or *excessive devotion* should have been impossible concepts. But his Gotham lieutenant, Ulstarn, was beginning to push the envelope.

It wasn't that things were going poorly in Gotham City. On the contrary, The Upstart, that son of performing gypsies who the detective would make his heir instead of breeding with his own beloved Talia, was responding exactly as expected. Nightwing, it was known, had a history of trying to prove himself, to prove himself to the Detective and to prove himself as good as the Detective. He had never run an operation of his own in Gotham City. The situation Ra's had placed before him, through his agents Brian Everwood and Nethal, was a scratch precisely where the boy itched. It had just the right mixture of appeals to his vanity and his insecurity. Everwood planted the suggestion to start this *-snort-* security agency and, at virtually the same moment, Nethal established himself as an invaluable source of information. Blinded by the chance of erecting his own banner in his mentor's city, of being connected to the corridors of power and to sources of information about the Gotham Underworld even the Detective and that annoying Oracle could not match, the headstrong fool never dreamt that DEMON was the source of the information he was passing on to the Detective. Or that, now that the information pipeline was established, Ra's could feed the Detective any information he wished, maneuvering him and his minions to do whatever he pleased.

This pleasant thought was interrupted by the chiming of the clock. It had just turned eight o'clock in Gotham. That meant within seconds the door would open and...

“My Master, the unworthy agent in Gotham begs to make his report via the satellite hookup.”

Ra’s Al Ghul winced. Ulstarn ran a tight ship; that was why he was sent to run the Gotham City operation in the first place. Ra’s had seldom encountered a man of such potential: fiercely loyal, disciplined to the point of mania, and so rabidly unpleasant to be around that the very possibility of working under him was universally understood to be a punishment. Genghis Khan, Hannibal, that Colonel in Napoleon’s army, and Ulstarn, Ra’s filed them together in his mind.

Ulstarn’s intense need to prove his loyalty had, up until now, been manageable—especially since Ra’s had the brainstorm of stationing him on the far side of the world in the Detective’s City. He reported in regularly, sent some tribute or other with every full moon, and that was that. Granted, the so-called delicacies from America were seldom to The Demon Head’s taste, but such was the price of being Ra’s Al Ghul. The tribute of underlings was not to be discouraged simply because it was revolting.

Yes, Ulstarn’s posting to Gotham was an ideal arrangement, until recently. But since Nethal was transferred out of the Chinatown base and established in a private residence, operating as an independent agent in Gotham City, Ulstarn’s mania had gone into hyperdrive. He was reporting in every few hours, always wishing to speak to the Demon’s Head himself no matter how inconsequential his report, always begging to sign off with the loyalty oath—in the long form.

It was a tantrum, that’s what it was, and Ra’s Al Ghul was not going to rescind an order or reconsider a strategic decision to accommodate the fragile ego of a lieutenant, no matter how rabidly loyal.

Resignedly, Ra’s al Ghul tapped a button, opening the channel to Gotham.

:: Great One, your lowliest and most humble servant begs to report: situation unchanged.::

Like that was news, Ra’s thought. It had only been three hours since his last report.

“Very good, Ulstarn,” Ra’s sighed.

:: My Master honors my most unworthy report with his attention, Sire. Your servant begs to be allowed to sign off with the oath of loyalty....::

“Very well,” Ra’s sighed again.

And it began, the long form. As Ulstarn’s voice droned, Ra’s face assumed a mask of patronizing attention, while thoughts returned to his private contemplation... Where was he? Ah yes, success in Gotham! The headstrong fools! They who’ve not lived but a single lifetime - Child’s play to anticipate their every thought and move...

Batman clung to the shadows in the little alley behind a novelty store in a rundown neighborhood near Chinatown. Omar entered the alley at the precise hour requested in the note, punctual to the minute, nearly to the second—not surprising in a former DEMON agent, Batman supposed.

Stepping silently from the concealing darkness, Batman was disappointed to see Omar start for only a split second before recognizing him and then breaking into a bright smile. This was Omar’s only failing as far as the Dark Knight was concerned:

he simply didn't catch on that Batman was to be feared. That's what criminals did. Or if they were too far gone to fear him, like Ra's or Joker, they at least hated him.

But to Omar, Batman was not the avenging arm of Justice, nor even Ra's al Ghul's great enemy. To Omar, Batman was The American, his ticket back to basketball, movies, and a girl called Moira.

"Come with me," Batman grveled in a voice meant to unnerve. Omar followed, unperturbed and wholly accommodating. A short while later, he looked through the nightscope Batman handed him.

"Those are agents of Ra's Al Ghul," Batman said flatly.

"Yes," Omar confirmed. "The one near the window is Ishmael, the one who sits in the back is Ulstarn. I don't know the others."

Omar handed the scope back, and Batman eyed him appraisingly. Omar responded to the silence as expected, he filled it.

"Ulstarn is legend among the followers of the Demon. He who is entrusted to run the master's affairs in the Detec- in Gotham City. It is very great honor. He is very great man. Everybody says."

Batman applied a little more silence, but this time it had no effect. Sometimes a direct question was called for: "So Gotham is a plum assignment? These men are Ra's best?"

"No," Omar answered hesitantly, "For Ulstarn, Gotham City is 'plum,' is great honor. But for others, posting here is not being sent to Gotham City; it is being sent to work for Ulstarn. They are being punished."

Batman considered this useful insight: Ulstarn was "great man...everybody says" but they didn't want to work for him. Hmm.

As Omar continued to speak, Batman was able to form a clear picture of the man: If even half of what Omar said was true, Ra's had made the biggest blunder in their long war. In sending this total shit of a human being to run his Gotham operation, Ra's had exposed his jugular. Someone that unpleasant was so because they were afraid. Afraid and paranoid! And fear was a weakness that could be exploited.

There were six agents, now there are five; if it bothered Batman, it must be *KILLING* Ulstarn.

"There were originally six agents here," Batman said to Omar, "Now there's only five. Why might that be?"

"If there were six, there still are six," Omar said simply.

"No," Batman insisted, thinking perhaps there was a language problem, "Count them, 1-2-3-4-5. There are only five men down there."

Omar shook his head. "If the Great One decide Gotham City is six-man job, there are six men here, not five and not seven. Maybe you don't see him. He is still there."

Batman stood, stretching his legs from the uncomfortable rooftop-surveillance squat.

"If there were six, there still are six," he repeated, thinking out loud. "But one has been moved elsewhere, away from the intensely insecure Ulstarn. If I'm a raving paranoid, don't I assume its about me- don't I think everything anybody does is about me?"

Omar blinked. The conversational English learned at DEMON was sufficient for a messenger, obtaining accommodations and transportation in Metropolis. Since meeting Moira he'd added to his vocabulary with respect to food, basketball, movies,

and portions of the female anatomy. But “intensely insecure...raving paranoid” was beyond him.

“In tents of the insect cures?” he asked.

Batman’s lip twitched slightly at his mistake, then said: “You’re moving to Gotham City?”

Omar nodded.

“I can have someone arrange a job for you here just as I did in Metropolis. There’s only one thing I’ll ask in return—this is something even simpler than last time.”

Omar said goodnight to Batman, walked out into the street, past the curio shop, slowed just a halfstep as he saw Ishmael through the window, and waved. Then he went back to the motel.

He could not know, though Batman would have predicted, that this simple action led Ulstarn to question Ishmael no fewer than four times: twice before the 5 a.m. report to Ra’s, once before the 8 a.m., and once again after.

“My Lord,” Ishmael repeated each time Ulstarn asked, “I only know the man slightly, to say hello if we pass in the hallway. He is a courier.”

After another four assurances that the courier, Omar, was neither a close friend of Ishmael’s, nor had they ever worked together on a mission nor shared quarters nor any other link Ulstarn could think to specifically ask about, the unlucky Ishmael was sent off to find the man anyway for a “casual, accidental meeting.”

Ishmael was far less convincing than Omar had been in appearing surprised at the *purely coincidental meeting*, but Omar let this pass. He reacted exactly as Batman had instructed—by answering or not any inquiry he wished with the guileless and unvarnished truth.

“He is in Gotham with his girlfriend Moira, who is moving here from Metropolis for her job? And this story checks out?” Ulstarn asked for the ninth time since hearing Ishmael’s report.

“Yes, My Lord.”

“And he said nothing else?”

“You ordered it to be a friendly conversation only, My Lord; he said nothing else of consequence. And I could hardly ask for more and maintain a tone appropriate to—”

“What do you mean, ‘nothing else of consequence?’ What else *did* he say?”

“He recommended I go see Star Wars Episode 2, My Lord.”

“What?”

“In my evening off, he suggested I see a cinematic entertainment: Star Wars, Episode 2, Attack of the Clones. He said it was most diverting.”

“YOU DON’T HAVE AN EVENING OFF!” Ulstarn bellowed, and Ishmael lowered his head until his chin touched his chest.

“I did not think it appropriate to reveal that, My Lord.”

Ulstarn was worried. He had viewed Episode 2: Attack of the Clones fourteen times and could not detect any hidden message this Omar might be trying to pass to his men.

He now began to worry the movie itself was the trap. It didn't contain a message—it was a way to get him out of the curio shop. To go see it, he had to leave the men alone. That was almost as bad as letting them leave the shop. How he hated not knowing where they were. He should have put a stop to that 'night off' business long before Nethal's transfer. Why it was madness, letting them go anywhere. They could be doing anything; they could be talking to anyone. At least now their free hours were spent in his presence. They could still talk to each other if they wished, for he was no tyrant. But it was better still if they spent their free time listening to him. Yes, far better that he be able to fill their ears and their minds with stories of glorious battles past, shouting down any thought but their loyalty to DEMON and the Demon Head's appointed lieutenants. And now he'd left them alone - again.

He called each man into his private quarters and questioned them about what they had done in his absence. He was not pleased with their answers, as none used the exact phrasing he wished to hear.

He began questioning again, but only got through the second man when he gave up. This was not satisfying. They were not spontaneously saying what he wanted them to say.

He thought about some sort of team-building activity: Get them all tattooed, or perhaps branded.

Enraged, Ulstarn assigned each man fourteen hours of busywork to occupy his time while he went out. Then Ulstarn stalked out of the shop again. He was going to confront the architect of his downfall, that miserable Nethal! Who was that miserable non-entity who no sooner took the loyalty oath pledging himself to Ulstarn before getting transferred to be his own one-man operation! Who was this vermin that the Master would give him orders directly! Ra's al Ghul's decisions could not be questioned, but this worthless cockroach certainly could.

He was going to confront Nethal, and this monstrous plot against his sovereignty in Gotham would be exposed—Nethal's downfall would be an example to the next ten generations of DEMON underlings to know their place and serve the lieutenants as they would Ra's al Ghul himself!

So fully did this pleasing thought fill Ulstarn's imagination, he failed to take the most elementary precautions for a DEMON agent operating in Gotham. Not that it would have made any difference. The caped figure following on the rooftops was silent, invisible, and undetectable whether his quarry was paying attention or not.

CHAPTER 11: ENDGAME

Batman stood on the roof of Wayne Enterprises. He hadn't fired the grappling hook. He wasn't even seeing the magnificent cityscape before him. He simply stood. And he stared. And he tried to work out how he had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

He had won. It was that simple. The information network was shut down. The mole was discovered. A host of corrupt politicians and executives were forced to resign. Checkmate, Ra's. It was over and Batman had won.

So why did victory taste like ashes?

From Ra's al Ghul's point of view the Endgame would have played out like this: Ulstarn failed to report in... Hmm. Nethal failed to report in... Oh-Oh. He'd initiate contact with Gotham then. The Chinatown base failed to respond... He'd call his puppets at City Hall, at WishStar, at Larraby Chemicals. No one would take his call. Then they'd hear the first news releases: Resignations. Everwood. Johanson. Brownley. Wickershaw. Feldman. One by one, all his puppets. And finally... Selina's touch... the crate. Nethal shipped back to his masters in the same container that smuggled him in.

He had won. Batman had won.... So why did it taste like ashes?

Once they'd learned about the webcam, it was easy. Once they learned the underground network distributed their information through a website, it all became so easy.

It was an ingenious plan, typical of Ra's: A website for a seemingly innocent neighborhood association... Gotham's Chinatown, how picturesque... with a webcam trained on a random storefront, the curio shop... The arrangement of the merchandise in the window was a code. Subscribers to Ra's service were told how to decipher it: Display of a certain Noh mask meant the Gotham Stock Exchange, another was Who's Who, another the front page of the Gotham Times.... Next to the masks, the number of figurines directed the viewer to a specific page, name, or column... Prices, sale signs, everything displayed in the window had a meaning. It was brilliant. And it could be accessed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, from anywhere. It was *BRILLIANT*... as long as no one knew what it was.

Once they'd learned it was a website, it all became simple. Oracle hacked their server and implanted a virus that sent her the IP of any computer visiting three times in one week. It was thought this was necessary to avoid tagging casual visitors—as it happened, there were no casual visitors to this site.

Within a week they had a complete list of Ra's buyers. Bruce Wayne spent a day making sure the SuperCorps could survive the resignations before Batman spent the night delivering his ultimatum. By the time the D.A. opened the bulging envelope with a blazing bat insignia, she had fourteen voicemails from people listed inside it—all begging to cut a deal.

It was a victory. It was a total victory. So why did it taste like ashes?

The first thought was to go through Jack Drake. Drake Industries was almost as big as Wayne Enterprises, and its founder was perfectly credible as a potential buyer of Ra's information. Except since Ra's knew Bruce Wayne's secret, there was a better than even chance he knew Tim's. So Jack Drake was tainted. But the discussion brought Tim into the loop, and Tim had the solution. It was he, after all, who first identified the underground network. And he did it when the people some of his friends interned for had information they shouldn't logically have. One of those friends was Randy-Quad, working for his father...

"Randolph Larraby III, or as he likes to be thought of around the office, God Almighty," Tim quipped.

Bruce could've kicked himself - the plans from Larraby Chemicals! It was under his nose almost from the beginning. Dick's "contact," Nathan, supplied blueprints of the old Ace plant from Larraby Chemicals.

And Bruce just happened to have an invitation to another of Mrs. Ashton-Larraby's benefits sitting on his desk.

"What! Were all the good diseases taken?" Selina muttered when told they had to go to a fundraiser for Periodontal and Craniofacial Research.

"I will admit it's not one of the most pressing problems in the world," Bruce hedged.

"It's gum disease," she interrupted.

"Pretend she's a rogue who's M.O. is stupid parties and humor her, okay?"

"I will humor split personalities with a fate complex, photosynthetically-crazed ex-botanists, and even a masochist-enabler in tassels taking time out from her obsession with Psycho Clown to run off to Paris with my old boyfriend! But I will not humor that social climbing blue-hair trying to pass off citrines as canary diamonds at a benefit for gum disease!"

She relented of course. When Bruce's powers of persuasion were exhausted, Batman took over—and Batman, Selina would be the first to admit, didn't fight fair.

"I don't know how I let you talk me into this," she muttered as they entered the stuffy ballroom.

"Yes, you do," Bruce insisted through a frozen receiving-line smile, making his point with a playful, well-placed, pinch that make her squeak as she reached her hostess's hand.

"HEEY-lllo, Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. Hello. So good to see you again."

Bruce then greeted Mrs. Ashton-Larraby and the two began chatting like the two biggest airheads on the social register, while Selina moved on to Mr. Larraby - Randolph Larraby III, who, like every other time she'd met him, seemed wholly incapable of making eye contact. He would greet her, chat about the weather, the theatre, the stock market, the traffic problems created by the new Gotham Plaza, Bruce's new plane, a line of software Wayne Enterprises was launching, and his own upcoming cruise to Alaska...all without once raising his eyes above her cleavage.

"You're gonna pay for that one, Lover," Selina assured Bruce at the first opportunity, referring to the pinch.

"Take your best shot, Kitten," he answered, "then *I'll take mine*. Meantime, let's do what we came for."

A short while later, Selina separated herself from the party and wandered onto the terrace. She appeared to contemplate the cityscape until—predictably—Randolph Larraby trotted out to follow her.

“I’ll bet Bruce doesn’t have a view like that,” he began, “Wayne Manor is, what, all the way out in Bristol.”

Having pointed across the river towards Bristol, Larraby’s hand should have returned to its side, but it came to rest instead on Selina’s shoulder.

“You know what else Bruce doesn’t have?” Selina said sweetly. “A wife.”

She slipped away, leaving Larraby alone on the terrace—or so he thought. But as he turned to rejoin the party, he found his way blocked by a huge mass of black.

“You’re buying dirty information,” Batman growled. “You’ll tell me. You’ll tell me everything you know about this network. Or there’ll be consequences... for you, for your business, your personal fortune, your position in society - not to mention your health.”

Larraby spilled. The whole thing: about the Chinatown shop, the webcam, how the information was distributed.

A total victory.

So why did it feel so much like defeat?

Ulstarn, Ra’s al Ghul’s neurotic mess of a lieutenant. He’d reacted exactly as Batman expected. Already paranoid about the sixth man removed from his charge, he’d imagined his rival’s scheming in the most trivial occurrences. It took only the lightest touch to set him off. When his obsessive fears boiled over, Ulstarn went to confront his antagonist. Batman followed him straight to Nethal... the missing sixth man was located at last.

Batman had feared he might have to step in if he was to benefit from the discovery: he didn’t want Ulstarn killing this guy. Fortunately, like most paranoids, Ulstarn was cowardly and passive-aggressive. He didn’t have the gumption to strike at his rival in any meaningful way. He only played games with the lights, killing the power, and broke a window, probably by tossing a rock with some poorly worded threats.

It ended. Ulstarn left. And Batman was free to follow Nethal.

And follow he did. Followed him straight to Nightwing. Batman’s heart broke as he lurked over a dark alley and listened. Nethal was Nathan, Dick’s wonderful new source. Grayson Associates’s ace in the hole was an agent of Ra’s al Ghul.

The next day when Bruce told him, Dick’s reaction was just as predictable as Ulstarn’s:

“I don’t believe you’re doing this! Christ, Bruce, this is so *TYPICAL* of you! You never give me any credit! I’m doing well, I’m making a name for myself in your precious city, so it just has to be a setup, is that it? From Ra’s al Ghul, no less!”

“Ra’s is very subtle, Dick; he’s a master manipulator. I’m not surprised you didn’t see what was happening.”

“Oh, please. Not only is it a foregone conclusion that any success I have must be a sham, *you’re not surprised!* Dick is a mark, but that’s to be expected, is that it?”

Bruce was losing patience. Other than actually using the phrase “let me be my own man,” Dick was completely reverting to behaviors that...

“Why can’t you accept that I’m my own man now? WHY?”

“Dick! Enough.” This was the breaking point. It was time for economy of language. *Make him* understand. “This is a setback. You’re disappointed. Lashing out at me won’t change the facts: You’re being used, Richard. You’re being used, and you won’t see it.”

It hurt. Like all the bat-family, Dick responded to hurt in one way: he quickly fashioned the deadliest weapon he could from whatever was handy and hurled it with brutal efficiency to cause maximum damage.

“You’re being used and you won’t see it,” he mused, “Gee, Bruce, where have we heard *THIS* tune before in relation to the DEMON crowd?”

Batman’s fiercest stare was the only answer.

“You can leave now,” Dick said in tones that left no doubt how little he cared about Batman’s ocular modes of expression.

“There is a line even you shouldn’t cross,” Batman’s voice graveled.

“You crossed a line when you walked in here, Bruce. It’s six feet behind you. You can cross it again on your way out.”

Batman stood on the roof of Wayne Enterprises... He hadn’t fired the grappling hook... He wasn’t even seeing the cityscape before him. It had played out perfectly. Ulstarn led to Nethal, Nethal to Larraby, Larraby gave them the webcam, the webcam gave them the client list, the network was shut down, corrupt execs removed, and Ra’s even had his nose tweaked in the inauspicious return of Nethal. A total victory. But it tasted like defeat.

