



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

#31

# Cat = Sales

*An Arkham Tale*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**AN ARKHAM TALE**



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## AN ARKHAM TALE

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It was not the Rogues nor Arkham staff that coined the term “Green Flu,” but rather, the employees of Gotham Temporary Services. The city’s largest temp service was well aware that the periodic demand for dozens of medical, security, clerical, custodial, and food service personnel at Arkham Asylum were associated with the tempers of a particular inmate, Poison Ivy. The regular Arkham staffers were loathe to be around Ivy when she became “moody,” and the surge in call-ins was dubbed Green Flu by the temporary workers brought in to replace them.

Laura Mertz was one such temp, and it fell to her to fill out the paperwork on the three new inmates: Harleen Quinzel, Geoffrey “Ditto” Watney, and Julio “Duo” Cumanez. She had been warned to stay alert, that other inmates liked to isolate new arrivals during processing and speak to them in areas where the psych staff could not observe, but that no such unsupervised interaction was permitted. But Laura was wholly occupied by the baffling admittance forms. Each new inmate had existing files from prior admissions and the cross-referencing in Quinn’s case alone was a bureaucrat’s nightmare.

So it was a simple matter for Patient #59-W170 (Wesker, Arnold; a.k.a. The Ventriloquist) to call Duo and Ditto to the tiny copy room behind the receiving office and brief them on life in the asylum in this new post-Joker/Harley-split era.

“Listen up, youz mugs!” It was the wooden dummy on Wesker’s knee that spoke and, like all henchmen meeting Scarface for the first time, Duo and Ditto looked at the Ventriloquist instead of the doll. “Look at meez when I talks to youz!” Scarface yelled, “Ignore this gozo. He is hired help, just likes youz twoz.”

“I-I-I’m awfully s-s-sorry, Mr. S-S-Scarface,” Wesker stuttered, “I sh-sh-should have explained that t-t-to them b-b-before.”

“SHUT UP, YOUZ! Now, weez gonna explain how things works here now, ‘cause there’s geen some changes. Gad trougles if you don’t knows what’s what. Get it?”

Duo and Ditto looked at each other and shrugged. They had adapted to Two-Face talking about himself in the plural, but once you worked out that when he said “We” and “Us” he meant himself, it was all pretty easy to follow. But this weird little guy? Between the stuttering and the gangster lingo and the fact that the doll couldn’t seem to say the letter B, a guy would be lucky to figure out one word in ten.

“Good,” Scarface took their shrug as agreement, “Tell ‘em Dummy.”

“W-W-Well, the first thing to know is that Mr. Joker is no longer confined to his special cell. Doctor Bartholomew felt that it was b-b-best, in light of recent events, that he be given the same p-p-privileges as all the others to visit the common room and—”

“Gullshit! What a load a crap! Dat’s not what happened. Joker yaks. Yak, yak, yak, yak, yak. He was drivin’ Dr. Gart nuts with the ‘yak-yak-yak, ha-ha-ha, yak-yak-yak.’ So Gart lets Joker go in the common room with all of us so he can talks our ears off instead.”

Ventriloquist nodded sadly to Duo and Ditto.

“Datz why dis whole place reeks of Lemon Pledge!” Scarface went on.

“P-P-Poison Ivy really d-d-doesn’t like Mr. Joker very much, does she, Mr. Scarface.”

When Patient #66-N341 (Nigma, Edward; a.k.a. The Riddler) saw Duo and Ditto enter the common room, he thought they had been overmedicated. Approaching the newcomers for a closer look, he soon realized their dazed manner and glassy expressions were not caused by lithium or peridol, but from listening to Wesker and Scarface for too long.

“You gotta pace yourself with those two,” he told them. “Ten minutes at a time, tops. Otherwise...” he pointed to his temple and made a twirling gesture “...you’ll s-start guilding death t-t-traps for Gatman.”

It might have been funny under normal circumstances, but in the henchmen’s present state, the wordplay was cruel. Duo cringed and whimpered while Ditto stiffened, eyes wide, and fell backwards.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! What’s with them?” Joker asked, the King of the Gotham City Rogues eager to meet the new subjects in his throne room.

Nigma ignored the question and looked longingly at the clock. His session with Bartholomew began at 11; surely the guard would arrive soon to escort him. “LURED FAD,” he thought, reflexively creating anagrams for “dreadful,” for a dreadful state of affairs it surely was. When one is so desperate for an hour’s escape from the common room that he actually looks forward to a therapy session with Dr. Bartholomew, LURED FAD didn’t begin to cover it.

Why had none of them realized the service Harley Quinn provided just by listening to Joker’s endless nattering? Joker: a name that produced no anagrams. It was Riddler’s private way of keeping his brilliant mind occupied to contend with the stresses of Arkham life, and the damnable chucklehead clown (“A BACKACHE WELCH LDL MOD NUN”) didn’t have the decency to have one usable anagram in his name. It gave Eddie a headache—which he didn’t dare mention since the last patient to complain of a headache, KGBeast, had been sedated for the last four days. And all for an innocent off-the-cuff remark that he didn’t relish walking through that cloud of Lemon Pledge hanging in the corridor.

The damn fool guards! They thought he was raving. Temps. Every time there was a Green Flu outbreak, they had to suffer temps. Issued noseplugs and no idea why, the idiots had no idea the whole place stunk of furniture polish. Poison Ivy’s pheromones always took on that scent when she was angry, and the prolonged exposure to Joker must have short-circuited her entire system. The corridor hadn’t smelled like that since Two-Face broke the news that he killed her pet flytrap.



Dr. Leland Bartholomew initialed the memo and placed it in his outbox with the wistful hope that Brian, the assistant Gotham Temporary Services had sent to fill in for Miss Vicens, might possibly place it in the correct file. Knowing that was a pipedream, he picked up the memo again and reread it. Quinn was back. Patient #76-Q18: Quinzel, Harleen. Age: 27. Hair: Blonde. Eyes: Blue. Height: 5' 3." Weight: 114 lbs. PhD in Psychology and Neurological Disorders, Gotham State University. Known relatives: None. Diagnosis: Delusional Psychotic.

What a waste. She was one of them. Hardly the best and the brightest, but one of them. It was true that when she joined the Arkham staff straight out of college, it seemed like a stepping stone for her. She was in a hurry to treat the most dangerous criminal inmates, and her reason was not hard to guess: they were the most famous. After a year, she would depart, write a book, and be launched on a spectacular career as a celebrity psychologist.

Why not? Age: 27. Hair: Blonde. Eyes: Blue. 5' 3," 114 lbs. Why not opt for the glitz? Why not become a media personality? Why stay in this hellish fortress of madness with the crazies that just got crazier year after year—that kept coming back time after time. As fast as Arkham could release them, that cursed Batman sent them back, and always just a little loonier than they were before. Harleen would have to be as crazy then as she was now to prefer *this* to book tours and talk shows.

Bartholomew sighed. And now Harleen was back on his schedule. 4:00.

"Brian," he hit the intercom, "Move Patient J's appointment up to two o'clock, please. I don't want another incident with he and Ms. Quinn meeting each other in the waiting room."

::Um, this button? No, that button. Are you there?:: Brian fumbled hopelessly with the intercom controls until Bartholomew gave up and walked to the door.

"It's the yellow button labeled TALK," he instructed, "but that doesn't matter, because now I am standing right here. Please move Patient J's appointment to two o'clock."

"Um, how do I do that?"

The glamorous life of a celebrity psychologist flashed before Bartholomew's eyes as if it had been his own. Then he spoke:

"Press S. For Schedule."

"So then the octopus turns to him and says 'I'm trying to work out how I can get the pajamas off this thing so I can give it a good fucking!' HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Kill me," Scarface asked Patient #62-F114 (Frieze, Victor; a.k.a. Mr. Freeze), "Nice glast of freeze ray right between the eyes, then GLAM smash me inta freeze-dried toothpicks."

"Miss Isley," Nurse Chin began in that firm-but-compassionate tone they were all told to cultivate, "it's been two days in that straitjacket. It can't be very comfortable. If you give some sign you're willing to work with us, Dr. Bartholomew will order it

removed. And then, after another day in isolation, your social privileges will be reinstated. You can return to the common room."

Patient #73-I126 (Isley, Pamela; a.k.a. Poison Ivy) heaved and made a sickly retching noise.

"Okay, be that way if you want to, Miss Isley, but Ms. Quinn is back in residence. I thought, you two being such pals, you'd like to see her."

"Harley is back?" Ivy asked with uncharacteristic timidity.

"Yes, she arrived last night. And she'll be back in the common room after the requisite 48-hour observation period. That'll be just in time for your isolation to be up if you start behaving now and get that jacket removed today. Deal?"

The woman who considered herself a goddess, Mother Nature incarnate and Gaia's chosen vessel of life-giving green, sulked like a sophomore in detention. Then she nodded reluctantly.

"Good girl. I'll let the doctor know at once."

Riddler had no pretensions of being "Batman's Greatest Foe" like the Joker or Ra's al Ghul. It was not a distinction that interested him. If it had been, he could well have made an argument for it: Batman was, first and foremost, a detective and a thinker. Riddler was the most formidable mind among Batman's enemies and the one for whom the battle was purely intellectual.

Edward Nigma was not conscious of that thought as he sat in the rec room, playing solitaire with a deck of homemade playing cards. These had been pasted together with pictures torn from magazines, all the regular cards having been confiscated when they were found to exacerbate Joker. No, Nigma's thoughts were not on Batman at all, but on a new puzzle. A puzzle that drew on his own deductive abilities to be solved: the puzzle of Hugo Strange.

There had undoubtedly been a shift since Hugo Strange's arrival at the asylum, a shift in power—or if not "power," per se, a shift in the suck-up wind.

It began with the rumors: more new arrivals were headed for the high security wing. It wasn't *that* uncommon, there were always comings and goings at Arkham. But these newcomers followed so close upon the last, it did cause murmurings. Something must have the Bat worked up. It happened outside of Hell Month, certainly. Criminals seldom knew why, and speculation ranged from Ra's al Ghul to training a new Robin. The reasons didn't really matter, the result was the same: Batman was worked up and there would be hard times ahead for however long it lasted. Still, speculating gave the villains some sense of control.

An *illusion* of control, Nigma reflected, for the reality was that two new inmates had joined them only days after Harley, Duo and Ditto arrived. Neither had made it to the common room yet. In the former case, the reason was well known: Tom Blake, (Patient #62-B047, a.k.a. the Catman), had balked when he hit the main corridor into the high security wing—that smell, those pheromones, mightn't such a concentration in the air damage the magicks in his costume? And for that simple comment, they doubled his meds and scheduled him for back-to-back sessions of aversion and dissociative therapy.

Why the second new inmate never came to the common room was more of a mystery, and one Riddler planned to solve. He had at least deduced the inmate's identity. It wasn't a difficult riddle to solve:

Question: What Arkhamite had recently made a habit of "welcoming" new arrivals with lengthy briefings on the goings on at the asylum? Answer: Ventriloquist.

Question: What annoying offshoot of Ventriloquist had gone utterly silent since the mystery inmate's arrival? Answer: Scarface.

Question: Who, despite being a joke figure among civilized rogues, had a passable track record as a hypnotist, at least to the extent that he could probably get inside Wester's head to shut off Scarface if sufficiently provoked? Answer: Hugo Strange.

The new inmate, Nigma felt certain, was Hugo Strange. But for some reason, Hugo was not being subjected to the common room and Joker's limited repertoire of "Variations on the Octopus Joke" interspersed with "101 things to do with a dead flytrap."

Why? That was the real puzzle. Why?



## CHAPTER 2: DR. JERRY'S HOUSE-O-FUN

Edward Nigma finished carving a question mark into the brown object on his dinner tray. He set the plastic fork down at its place, like an artist finished with a favorite brush, and surveyed his masterpiece critically. He could normally delight in the cache of an unanswered question represented by that symbol, but not in this particular case. For this question mark was not used to seal an envelope holding a taunting clue for Batman, nor did it crow triumph at a crime scene, silently asking what became of the empty safe's contents. No, its meaning here on his dinner tray was all too depressingly clear: It asked *What is this thing?*

Riddler's best guess was some sort of artificial meat... oatmeal? or wheat bran?? marinated in... steak sauce??? and sculpted into... rissoles????

With each new question mark, he grew more depressed. The worst legacy of Josiah Arkham, Nigma reflected, was not the asylum that bore his name, but these godawful "Victory Recipes" the kitchens still served. Oatmeal rissoles and potato substitute might be just the thing if U-boats are blockading the British isles and your meat ration won't stretch to Thursday, but in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Gotham City, they seemed a little out of place.

Nigma knew he had to exercise his mind if he was to stay sane until his release, and rather than try to deduce the evening's mystery meat, he turned his mind back to the Hugo Strange puzzle. He'd confirmed that Strange was the second new arrival during the session with Dr. Bartholomew:

"Say Doc," he had asked, "What happens when there gets to be more psychiatrists among the inmates than on the staff?"

"Most amusing, Edward. Now can we get started?"

"I'm just sayin', Doc, Harley and Hugo admitted in one week. Your colleagues are dropping like flies. Maybe time to tune up your own noggin just to be on the safe side?"

"Thank you, Edward, I appreciate your concern. But this hour is to be spent on *your* noggin. Suppose you tell me what's been happening since we spoke on Monday..."

And there it was. No denials or feigned confusion. Hugo Strange *was* back in residence, and Bart didn't act like it was any secret. So why wasn't he in the common room?

Nigma paced as he asked himself the unanswerable question: How to find out? How to find out? "FOOD UNHIT TWO." In frustration he started generating anagrams: "FOUND HOOT WIT." "WHOD INFO TOUT."

He stopped and cocked his head, looking back at the question mark on his dinner tray: "Who would info tout?" he asked the block of mystery meat.

Leland Bartholomew knew positive reinforcement was vital to the learning process. And his temporary assistant HAD succeeded in pulling and indexing the notes for all fast-track rehabilitation sessions for Patient #68-C240 (Crane, Jonathan; a.k.a The

Scarecrow). The only problem was that Bartholomew had asked for Julio Cumanez (Patient #68-C340, a.k.a. "Duo"). But Bartholomew didn't have the heart to send them back. It was practically the first task Brian had completed on his own without interrupting to ask a dozen obvious questions. It would do no harm, Bartholomew decided, to review Crane's file.

*Crane's obsession with fear as a tool of behavior modification.*

*Spent first four sessions trying to take control of dialogue. Seeks to modify doctor's behavior by inducing "fear" or doubt of the process of psychotherapy: Plants suggestion that Arkham doctors are as crazy as the inmates, if insanity consists of repeating unsuccessful action expecting different results. Just as "the rogues" (subculture jargon for costumed criminals) go out time and again to try and defeat Batman, so too the doctors try time and again to rehabilitate the rogues.*

*Patient is clearly delusional, prescribe Haldol for delusional trance; Tranquilizers to calm after entering frenzied state.*

*Patient cites drug therapy as proof "The doctors all Fear I am right."*

The next morning at 11:15, a full fifteen minutes after Nurse Chin would be on duty in the infirmary, Edward Nigma complained of a *very mild* headache. He carefully stressed that it was surely caused by the awkward angle at which he'd rested his neck during his session with Dr. Bartholomew that morning, so foolish of him not to realize at the time, but he was so engrossed on the good doctor's insights. Again, he stressed, that was a *very mild* and *muscular* pain, and that surely the simple old-fashioned remedy of aspirin (as opposed to the 900 mgs of lithium that was their first response to anything that moved) was all that was needed.

While this tactic did not, in fact, get him whacked with 900 mgs of lithium, neither did it get him taken to the infirmary. Regrettably, Eddie realized what he would have to do in order to obtain a face-to-face with the informative Nurse Chin.

Patient #62-B047 (Blake, Thomas; a.k.a. Catman) was sufficiently recovered from his marathon therapy to join them in the common room. Nigma strolled over to him and sat down. But instead of probing for news of the outside as he normally would from a recent arrival, Eddie let out a low whistle.

"Quite a shiner," he observed, pointing to Blake's black eye. "Batman, of course."

"Of course. A hunter such as I can only be taken by a predator of equal skill, no mere sidekicks can hope to—"

"Heh, okay, if you say so."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, everybody knows the Bat only wails on you 'cause of the cat thing. He's expecting Catwoman at those crimes, Blake, don't you know that? Then when you show up instead, he's pissed. Hence the punching bag treatment."

"That's a lie," Blake seethed dangerously.

"Not a bit. Why everybody knows Selina has first pick of any cat loot that comes to town, and you get to make do with her leftovers, so it's only natural Batman would assume—"

The punch landed on Nigma's left cheekbone, which wouldn't have been his first choice as it would make a challenge of chewing tonight's mystery meat. But it succeeded in getting him into the infirmary with unfettered access to Nurse Chin.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA. Now stop me if you've heard this. A guy goes into a bar with an octopus... Croc, Croc, you in there? Anybody ho-ome?"

"Croc here."

"You're just staring into space, buddy. What's up?"

"Anger management."

"Whoa, big words there, Crockers. So why the staring into space?"

"Croc visualize happy place. Croc visualize not tearing arms off clown when clown tell joke. Croc think about swamp. Croc not think about halls of Arkham wet with blood of Croc's enemies."

"Eh, okay then. I'll be over here. Check please!"

"My first is traded for fair ladies' pert curves. My second, a backwards train. Without my last, there would be no butchers, bakers, or candlestick makers..." Nurse Chin listened to this riddling prattle with an expression of tolerant patience, until Nigma reached the last part, "...and my whole? My whole answers at 212-555-6719. Extension 12."

Chin grew pale hearing the phone number of the Gotham Tattler, the tabloid that supplemented her meager Arkham wages buying information on incarcerated rogues.

"Now Nurse Chin, I don't especially care if you sell the occasional bit of gossip, true or false, to some scandal rag. But then I'm a lot more open-minded than most about that sort of thing. So it's probably much healthier for you if we keep this as our little secret. And in exchange, a little tittle for me not to tattle, eh? How would that be? All I want to know is: why has Hugo Strange not been sent to the common room since he was admitted?"

"I've got a bone to pick with you, Bartholomew!"

"Why Pamela, no plant metaphors? That *is* an improvement."

"If you think so, you're as ignorant as you are shortsighted, little man. Bone meal is an excellent fertilizer. I want to talk about Harley."

"This hour is reserved to talk about *you*, Pamela. You know that. And even if it wasn't, you know I couldn't discuss the other patients..."

"Root rot! You know I know what's best for her: get her away from Joker. Tell me that's not what it says in all your reports."

Bartholomew looked at his raving patient with a look of calm and impassive disapproval. He would not be drawn into validating her outburst or confirming her assertions—however right they were. Harley Quinn's file did read: *Phase 1: Break obsession with Joker, Phase 2: achieve realization of enabler co-dependent tendencies, Phase 3: turn focus from crime and train patient to reenter society and live an independent life.*

“Pamela, the interest you take in your friend’s recovery is admirable, but if you would focus just a little of that energy to embracing your own rehabilitation—”

“You have manure for brains, Bartholomew...”

The doctor’s passive expression never wavered and he made a note without looking down at his pad. Isley was, despite her psychosis, smart, educated, insightful, and dignified—until someone disagreed with her. Then she transformed into a violently irrational harpy.

“...Harley is supposed to be kept away from Joker. Now that you’ve gone and let him into the common room—and don’t think we’re not onto the reason why: because you don’t want to listen to him any more than we do, and you figure he’ll get it out of his system that way. But he’s in the common room now, and *Harley* will be coming in the common room, too. They’ll be *together*, don’t you get it! You’ve got to do something about this or, so help me, I’ll...”

Bartholomew tuned it out. More threats, he was used to it. But Poison Ivy had already inflicted her worst. The garden view his office was supposed to enjoy was completely obliterated by an opaque moss coating the window, and he could no longer drive his car to work. No matter where he parked, vines would coil into his tail pipe and gas tank, and by the end of the day, he had to get it towed to Max’s Garage, pay \$75 to have it cleaned out, and suffer Max’s gaffaws.

As much as Catman resented being upstaged by Selina, as much as Catwoman resented pussy jokes, as much as Poison Ivy resented Gina the Iceberg washroom attendant validating Hugo Strange’s neanderthal ideas about women, as much as Harley Quinn resented that damn octopus joke, Edward Nigma couldn’t abide people confusing jokes with riddles.

Jokes, whether involving musically amorous octopi or not, had no logic. They were frivolous stories meant to set up the punchline. They were told to get a laugh—or in the case of the octopus, a pained groan. But riddles were an art form, the work of one mind that expressed itself by challenging another, a contest between brains that took pleasure in the intellectual stimulation. One did not *laugh* at a riddle. And while Nigma was as inclined to express merriment as the next man, he did *not* cackle like the Joker.

If he laughed a little louder and longer than usual at the Hugo Strange situation, that’s only because it was damn funny. There was no need, surely, to strap him down this way like he was some hysteric in a madhouse. At least they didn’t sedate him—which meant, as long as he remained calm and collected, he would most likely be let up by dinnertime. And *tonight* he was looking forward to dinnertime.

Because Saul Vics, a ten-year man at Arkham, had house payments. How could any sane man not laugh at that? Hugo Strange was the new ass to kiss at Arkham, and tonight Riddler would enjoy a good dinner because *Saul Vics had house payments!*

Vics was a guard, not especially brutal, but not especially bright either. He had grown accustomed to a tidy little side income from admitting Joker and Harley Quinn to the little copy room behind the offices. Since the big split, those bribes had dried up, and Vics, hard up for cash, had gone about quietly advertising his services. Hugo Strange was the first to notice and immediately put Vics on retainer. Now he didn’t



have to go to the common room and suffer Joker's prattle, plus his own cell was now equipped with comfortable furniture, a portable DVD player, and best of all—through Vics—he could order takeout!

Anyone lucky enough to obtain an invitation from Hugo would—after tipping Vics \$25—be escorted to Strange's cell instead of the common room to partake of stir-fry, barbecue, or deep-dish pizza.

For the bargain price of \$49.95, Nurse Chin agreed to take Hugo a note from Nigma asking for an invitation.

Hugo Strange was pleased to invite a record four guests to his cell that evening. Riddler had requested an invitation—a sign, surely, that Hugo was at last beginning to receive the respect he deserved from the senior rogues.

Catman, naturally. Although the straitjacket he had been placed in since the altercation with Nigma meant he couldn't eat pizza. But he must still be invited, for Catman had a fixation on the Batman that rivaled Hugo's own. And since Hugo was destined to one day learn all there was to know about the Bat, transcending to become Batman himself, it was only fitting that *Hugo Strange: future Batman* understand his most obsessed foes like Blake.

The third guest was Jonathan Crane. Scarecrow had finally been captured (by Black Canary this time, if the rumormill was to be believed). The news pleased Hugo greatly. Crane was hardly a friend. Despite countless hours spent huddled together at the unpopular table at the Iceberg, Jonathan was stubbornly disrespectful of Hugo's unique position in the Gotham underworld. He seemed to view humiliating taunts as some kind of conversational ritual. Now that Hugo was in a position of power, for only he could deliver an inmate (or not) from the common room and oatmeal rissoles, he longed to exercise that power on Crane: You sit in my cell, eat my pizza and play my Trivial Pursuit Freudian Edition, you will listen to my Bruce Wayne-is-Batman Theory.

Nurse Chin had to wait until Nigma was taken back to his cell before she dared risk a phone call. Once she was alone, she wasted no time.

:: *Gotham Tattler*. ::

"Extension 12, please."

:: *Baker*. ::

"Hi, it's Chin. What's the going rate for a love triangle?"

:: *Depends on who and how much draw they have*. ::

"Catman and Riddler came to blows over Catwoman."

:: *No sale, not buying Catwoman*. ::

"But the Post—"

:: *I know, I know, the Post got its highest circulation in forever with that Batman-Catwoman picture. I've been in Times Square; I saw the billboard. So did everybody else, and they're all trying to copy it*. ::

"But Stu, this is primo stuff. Catwoman is a draw..."

*:: Only if you know what you're doing, gorgeous, and the knockoffs don't. They don't have the stuff. You can't just reproduce the Post's picture, add some adolescent psychobabble, and think anybody but the cosmically retarded will buy it. ::*

*"Who do you think reads the Tattler, Stu?"*

*:: Who do you think signs my paycheck, Chin? ::*

*"What about using the Catman-Riddler fight without going into the reasons, then? That should be worth something, shouldn't it?"*

*:: I can give you a C-note for that. ::*

*"A C-note! Baker, you're killing me."*

*:: You know what pays the bills, Chin: Get me some dirt or get me a diet. 'Riddle me Thin' was the best issue we've had this year. ::*

There's always a price.

A EARACHE SPELT IS WRY.

A CLEARWATER YES HIPS...

No, anagrams notwithstanding: There is always a price. That's all there was to it.

Sure, the pizza was good. Deep-dish. Metropolis style. Pepperoni & sausage or veggie. Tangy sauce, just the right amount, not too spicy, not too sweet. And the cheese, pure heaven.

But having to listen to Hugo's Bruce Wayne theory again: Eddie had to admit it wasn't a vast improvement over the octopus joke.

Correction, he thought, having to listen to Hugo's Bruce Wayne theories. The years of contemptuous disbelief from his fellow rogues had taken their toll: for it was no longer simply "Bruce Wayne" in the new model; that was merely his Terran name. On his native world, he would have been called Mnd-rph-nmahss-hs, which we Earthlings can't really pronounce, but as close as we can come, it would sound like Mann der Fliegen-Maus, don't you see, Man of the Flying Mouse!

Still, Eddie ate pizza and sat quiet. It's not like Hugo was ever playing with a full deck, so it couldn't be called a tragic waste. And it was better if he got it out of his system here, in private, than if he went off like that at the Iceberg. Joker had taken a liking to Bruce Wayne, nobody knew why, and so far Strange had been lucky. Thanks to the clown's gnat-like attention span, he seemed to have forgotten Hugo's famous theory. He certainly never put it together that his good buddy 'Brucie' was the butt of the slur. It would not be wise for Hugo to remind him, but Hugo was so bat-crazed, it seemed unlikely he was aware of the danger.

"And of course an alien would explain the signal as well. It isn't merely to call him; it lights the sky in such a way that we can't see the star of his homeworld."

"Gotcha. And it explains the pointy ears, too. You going to eat that last slice?"

"What I would like to know," Tom Blake said testily, "is why I am the one in a straitjacket."

"Because you hit me," Eddie replied, taunting him with the last slice of veggie pizza.

"Desist in your infantile banter and untie me, Nigma. For I have news that I shall only impart if I am pacified."

Hugo's ears perked up and he forgot his rambling theories in pursuit of the Holy Grail "news." Since his arrival, he had been amusing himself manipulating Blake...

His feverish manner melted into the oozing rationality of the evil psychiatrist. "Now, Herr Blake, you are a guest here. And guests are expected to sing for their supper."

"I haven't had any supper," Blake answered petulantly.

"Give him the last slice, Edward. You see, Blake, we are all friends here. You are tied up and cannot eat, so Herr Nigma will feed you. And in return, you will tell us whatever you learned from the orderlies when they put you in that straitjacket, yes? That is when you found out this 'news,' is it not?"

Blake nodded. "Very well. But only because it's deep dish. There's something afoot on the outside. Reports are vague, but a new villain challenges the Bat. And should she fail, her joining us here at Uncle Jerry's House-o-Fun will be of particular interest to one now among us."



## CHAPTER 3: NOW WHAT?

After her outburst in Dr. Bartholomew's office, Poison Ivy found herself in isolation for an additional day. This time, at least, there was no straitjacket. But there were also no common room privileges. Ivy was glad not to have to suffer Joker's vile presence, but she was disappointed she wouldn't be able to see Harley. And knowing Harley would be in there with Joker, that was very much a fright.

"C'mon Quinn, no dawdling. Get your ass in gear."

Harley practically snarled at her tormenter. She had spent the entire walk from her cell trying to connect with "Dadi," the new guard assigned to escort her. She tried to make the woman understand: She was a little skittish about going to the common room and seeing Mistah J again. She and Mistah J were two lips that made but a single grin, two hearts that beat as one—until that damn octopus came between them! Didn't Dadi ever have a love like that? Maybe in high school? Maybe there was some special guy, we'll call him Pete. And what if Pete threw Dadi over on the big senior ski trip, threw her over for some cheap cheerleader, Helen, then what? Huh? Then after the ski trip, she has to go back to school, back into the cafeteria, and see Pete again and face all her friends. Wouldn't her stomach wrench up? Wouldn't she feel all sickly and short of breath? Well wouldn't she?

Nuthin.

Not an iota of empathy. Harley felt herself being shoved through the doorway into the hostile crosscurrents of the common room without a moment to prepare herself.

"Oh yeah," she called back, "I can see why Pete threw you over, Dadi, you're a real cold fish. And nobody likes fish! Nobody. 'Cause they're all slimy and they stink like the ocean and... and... AND MY FIRST JOB WITH MISTAH J WAS AT THE FISHERY!!!"

Harley's wailing cries reverberated off the bare walls of the common room, making the occupants pause a moment, glance in her direction, and then all returned to their various activities.

Harley was put out. Anxious as she had been about what her reception might be on returning from her misadventure with Two-Face, she wasn't prepared for this. No one was pointedly ignoring her; but no one was paying attention to her either. She quickly saw the reason: Fresh meat.

The name rogues were all huddled around a new figure, one Harley couldn't quite make out over Frieze and Wesker's backs.

"Who's the new one?" she asked aloud. Although no one had come to greet her, she clearly felt a presence to her left side, someone standing near enough to have heard, so she expected an answer. Getting none, Harley turned to face her rude companion and repeated: "I SAID who's the new—oh."

Harley's anger subsided when she saw who it was she was standing next to: the troubled creature known only as The Mime. Disdaining noise, The Mime made a

career of stealing noise-making things in the hopes of making the world a quieter place. She also refused to speak, so it wasn't surprising that Harley's question received no reply.

"Any idea who that new person is?" Harley asked again slowly, now supplementing her words with an improvised and meaningless sign language, although the girl could hear perfectly well.

In answer, The Mime struck a pose, hands on waist, hips thrust out, and batted her eyes. Then she struck another, hands on knees, with a sexy pout. Then another still, hands behind her head, tossing her hair back and forth, an exaggerated look of carefree abandon frozen on her face. Then it all stopped. The Mime pointed back at the new arrival, a blank look overtook her features, and she stiffened. She turned and walked away with the rigid mechanical movements of a robot.

"Oooo-kayfine," Harley chirped to no one in particular.

"Hiya, Miss Quinn," a shy voice ventured.

At last, someone had noticed her. Turning to see who it was, Harley was embarrassed not to recognize him.

"Um, hi... there," she began, safely. For the life of her, she couldn't remember—was this Duo or Ditto?

"You look awfully pretty today, Miss Quinn."

"Huh? I do? Well uh... thanks?" The silence was uncomfortable, so Harley added, "So do you." More silence. "You know anything about Miss Popular over there, the new one everybody is fussing over?" She hadn't really expected him to know, it was just something to say. Surprisingly Duo (or maybe it was Ditto) did have an answer.

"A SUPERMODEL!" Harley Quinn paced impatiently in Dr. Bartholomew's outer office, and his temporary assistant Brian was starting to get scared. "That's what we've got to compete with now! A six foot salad-eating coat hanger with legs mustn't-eat-carbs-or-I'll-balloon-up-to-a-size-four giraffe is in there monopolizin' my Puddin' AND I NEED TO SEE MY PSYCHIATRIST!"

"I... I... I'm sorry, Miss," Brian stammered. "One of the morning sessions ran a little long."

"Ran a little long," Harley sniffed, "Fucking amateurs. Fifty minute session, ten minutes to organize the notes, top of the hour, it's MY TURN TO GET IN THERE!"

She continued to pace. Brian felt his neck tense as he returned to his typing. How that woman unnerved him. She might seem like a quirky good time girl from a distance, but not to one who had scheduled her appointment. That morning Brian had, following the directions on the stained and dog-eared instruction sheet, scrolled through the In-Residence list to the Qs, clicked on Quinn, Ctrl-Shift S to import her into Bartholomew's schedule, then dragged the name down to the open 2 PM slot. The moment he released the mouse, a line of little colored icons appeared next to her name. Warning flags that Brian had no idea how to decipher. He counted fourteen of them, which is all there was room for on the line. And here she was, pacing back and forth, clearly upset about something and no one else handy to take it out on besides him.

Fortunately, just as Brian was preparing to leave to pursue a career sculpting Bonsai trees, Bartholomew's door opened and admitted Quinn to his office.

In a quiet corner of the common room, the four members of “Club Hugo” whispered in conspiratorial tones. Although their invitations to Hugo Strange’s cell meant they could have avoided the common room if they wished, the rumors about the new arrival were too tantalizing to ignore. They had to be confirmed, and none would believe the truth if they hadn’t seen it with their own eyes. Now that they had, a frightful decision had to be made.

“Somebody has to tell Strange,” Blake insisted.

“No,” Crane countered, “As soon as he finds out, I fear there will be no more invitations—not for us.”

Nigma nodded. “Right. Invitations for her, yes! Not for us. No more pizza, no more stirfry...”

“In my opinion,” Blake decreed grandly, “that is small.”

“Let’s put it to a vote,” Nigma said, “All those in favor of telling Hugo the new inmate is a mannequin say ‘Aye.’” Blake and Frieze both raised their hands. “Opposed?” He and Crane raised their hands.

“Deadlock,” Victor noted.

“Do a Dent,” Crane said.

A coin flip later it was decided. That night, Hugo would have to be told.

“Her name is Miranda. She was a fashion model. She worked for Glass, Klein, and Hoston.” Eddie paused and took a bite of what he was sure would be his last taste of barbecue for a very long time.

“At first, modeling is all she could do,” Blake took up the tale—which Eddie found annoying, “German by birth, she didn’t speak that much English when she first came here. But she learned, and once she became proficient, she started to pursue an acting career.”

“Until the explosion,” Frieze said with an air that bespoke the bleak inevitability of Greek tragedy, “The fire ravaged her face and skin, forcing her into a protective mechanical suit.”

Nigma cleared his throat. He could not prevent this pointless exercise, but he could certainly stop them dwelling on the details of that suit of gold-plated polymer, articulated with servo-motors. The suit which absolutely guaranteed the self-styled Manikin would be supplanting Batman as Hugo’s grand obsession—and supplanting them on Hugo’s guest list.

Knowing it was futile, he nevertheless tried to downplay the mannequin angle and talk up her less attractive qualities: “She is pathologically convinced one of the designers who ‘used her beauty’ placed a bomb in her car to prevent her leaving them for the acting career. She killed two of them, put the third in the hospital. Batman caught up with her when she tried to polish him off. The end. Could I have another biscuit?”

“She... is a mannequin?” Hugo asked in reverent awe.

“No, she’s a walking eating disorder that kills people, Hugo. You don’t want any part of this, trust me.”

"I don't know, Edward," Blake cut in, "her legs do go all the way down to the floor. Reowrl."

"I would very much like to meet her," Hugo declared, "If I put a little table in that corner, we could have a candlelit supper."

Eddie shot looks of death at Blake and Frieze for their votes. He couldn't rightly blame the coin, but he made a mental note to punch Two-Face in the mouth at the first opportunity.

Bartholomew looked at the thick coating of moss on his window as if he could see through it to the garden beyond. Victor Frieze was droning on and on, and the doctor felt guilty for tuning him out. In many ways, Frieze was his most promising patient, aware of his obsessions with his wife and avenging the accident that trapped her in cryogenic suspension and him in a sub-zero vacuum suit. But if Frieze was the most promising patient, and perhaps the one most open to working through his psychosis, he was also—by far—the most depressing individual one could be forced to spend an hour listening to. And a session with him was a dreadful way to start a new day. When Miss Vicens returned to work, he would have to tell her to tag Frieze for afternoon appointments only.

Again, Bartholomew looked at the window and tried to think which of his many patients would make the more agreeable first appointment. Certainly not Joker, cackling, ranting, erratic, and pathologically homicidal. Not Nigma, always trying to outsmart him. Or Crane, forever trying to maneuver and manipulate. Dent, perhaps. Half the time, a session with Harvey Dent was an hour of dead silence, for he flipped the coin at the start of each meeting, and if it came up "scarred," he would sit in the chair and speak not a word. Of course Harley Quinn had good days as well. As did Pamela Isley. But all three were erratic. And for the first session of the day, one preferred a patient that was consistently manageable. Roxy Rocket, he decided, was the best choice. A Type-T thrill seeker and danger fetishist, Roxanne Sutton was least encumbered by the dementia, delusions, obsessions, compulsions, and behavioral schisms of the typical Arkham inmate. Yes, when Miss Vicens returned, Bartholomew decided, he really must tell her to make Roxy his first appointment of the day whenever she was in residence.

Meanwhile, Victor Frieze continued his pained progression towards... whatever he was progressing towards. The arrival of Manikin, similarly confined to a special suit because of an accident and similarly consumed with revenge, clearly had a profound effect on him. He hadn't stopped talking about it since the session began.

"And how does that make you feel?" Bartholomew asked automatically, returning his attention to the window.

It must be nice for a Type-T like Roxy, to throw caution to the wind and not give a damn. He might try it himself, if he were younger. Skydiving maybe. Or Bungee jumping. Maybe even a costume. Heh. Wouldn't that be something? After all these years listening to the villains prattle, he could probably make quite a splash if he tried his hand at it. What would he call himself? THE HEADSHRINKER! Heh, heh. Oh my, wouldn't that rock the Alumni Newsletter. Dr. Leland Bartholomew, MD, DCP, PhD, Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, lurking in the



shrubbery outside Arkham, trying to set the crazies loose before they could be admitted.

Nurse Chin arranged the Post-It notes on her blotter: "Bring me dirt or bring me a diet," her contact at the Tattler said. It was easier said than done. In the infirmary, she could only view the end-results of whatever happened. Figuring out the cause could be all but impossible. And in this case, she couldn't even work out the order in which the dominoes fell.

Dr. Bartholomew restoring Poison Ivy's social privileges certainly could have started it. So Chin took the green Post-It with Ivy's name and moved it to the far left...

The first thing Poison Ivy saw on entering the common room was, just as she feared, Harley prancing around like a performing seal trying to get Joker's attention and him ignoring her ("What is that noise? Did someone speak?") like the sadistic brute he was.

All his attention was focused on a new woman, tall, in a plastic suit that covered even her face. This, Ivy knew through the grapevine, was Manikin.

"Well that's what you did wrong, Cutiepie," Joker addressed her in a sticky patronizing tone, "Never save the best kill for last. Now you wanted to off three people. Some might say that is a little pushy for a first timer, but I say No! The girl has fire in her belly. I can admire that. But remember," he shook a finger at her as if she'd forgotten catechism, "killing sprees require a schedule. Make a list. Check it twice. You want to make sure they're dead, you have to off 'em before the coppers can put the EverReadys in that oversize flashlight and call in Batsy. How is Batsy by the way? Still breathing?"

The woman once known as Miranda, who could now only think of herself as Manikin, looked at Joker in disgust. She stood, pronounced "Ex- cuse- me" in her distinct, mechanized delivery, and then walked away. She approached the new face in the room, Poison Ivy, whom she had not seen before.

Nurse Chin moved the yellow Manikin Post-It next to the green one. Manikin and Ivy seemed to have bonded at first. From the conversations Chin herself had had with Pamela Isley, she could guess the topic on which they connected so quickly.

"Men suck," Ivy declared.

Miranda agreed, and retold the story of her maiming at the hands of the very designers who had profited from her beauty, then destroyed it.

But if Ivy was by herself by that time, thought Chin, and Harley Quinn was in the common room, then the Two-Face news must have come first. Chin carefully picked

up the Ivy and Manikin Post-Its and moved them together to the right. Then she took the pink Harley/Duo Post-It, and placed it in front of the others.

“Harley,” Pamela asked when her friend stopped lapping up Joker’s scorn long enough to greet her, “what do you know about those new fellows, the ones in the corner. They look like henchmen.”

“They are,” Harley confirmed with a happy nod.

“Why are henchmen in here with us instead of at Blackgate?”

“Well, don’t spread this around, Red,” she whispered, “‘cause I wouldn’t want to cause them any trouble, but they’re a little crazy.” Pam waited patiently, having found that where Harley is concerned, silence often brought more logical explanations than asking questions. “They say they’re twins,” Harley explained.

Pam regarded the two men critically. One was tall, early 20s, and Hispanic. The other was 30ish, a pale redhead, and short. “I see,” she said calmly, “Harvey’s, I presume.”

“Yep. Duo and Ditto. But I can never remember which is which.”

“The young one seems to have a crush. He’s been watching you all day.”

“Oh I don’t think so, Red. He just makes a point of being nice so I know there’s no hard feelings from when I shot him, accidental like, when we were practicing for the big stickup.”

Nurse Chin stuck several more Post-Its next to Ivy’s... The revelation about Harley Quinn and Two-Face working together had somehow triggered Patient Blake, now in Bed 4, and KGBeast, now in Bed 1, to complain of violent nausea—associated, they claim, with the smell of Lemon Pledge.

It was also somehow connected to Patient Nigma, now in Bed 3...

When Miranda finished her sad tale of the depraved jealousy of men leading to her fiery transformation into Manikin, it was Ivy’s turn to respond. Respond she did:

“PEOPLE—That’s the big mistake—getting involved with PEOPLE! PLANTS make the best friends! You make one or two little exceptions—especially two—and this is what happens. Do you think IVAN would have done something like this? Go running off on a crime spree with the Orchids?—and if he DID, do you think he would have left the Orchids to get pinched along with the Climbing Clematis and the Rhododendrons? And what about the Orchids, anyway—going running off with their best friend’s ex! Is that friendly? Is that civilized behavior! Why the little ingrate deserves to get pinched with the henchmen and the sprouts!”

It was all a little too weird for Miranda. She left Ivy with that same flat, mechanical nod she’d given Joker and went to sit instead with Harley Quinn. Positioned as far as possible from both Joker and Ivy, Harley seemed to Miranda to be the most sensible person in the room.

Ivy’s outburst, however, triggered some kind of fit in Nigma:

“Unbelievable. A BULB EEL VINE. A BEVEL NUB LEI, even. You are unbelievable! KGBeast was sedated for days just for speaking up about the Lemon Pledge thing. Blake was shock-therapied halfway to a coma! Why do you get to rant and nothing happens to you, huh??? Explain that? You rant about IVAN—he’s a dead vegetable! Irresistible? Lady, Blake is out in the hall right now vomiting! How’s that for irresistible, huh? He’s on his way to the infirmary ‘cause of 3 days of aversion therapy and Lemon Pledge!”

The Mime covered her ears as the guards dragged Nigma from the room screaming anagrams for “Green Flu.”

When the noise subsided, Harley’s voice was heard distinctly in the sudden silence...

“...Ra’s al Ghul, he’s a real party poop. And he looks like that guy from the ad that isn’t getting enough fiber. Anyways, he sent this messenger guy to Twofers, but he didn’t want to go, so I went instead...”

Nurse Chin gave up. She collected all the Post-Its, stuck them together, held them suspended over the trash can, then opened her fingers with a flourish, letting them drop with a thud. She could concoct theories for Ivy and Harley, for Blake, KGBeast, and Nigma. But she couldn’t, for the life of her, imagine how Joker, Hugo Strange and The Manikin fit in.

Joker was intrigued. Harley, his little Harley, who he himself turned from the dreary hum drum of sanity to the mad thrills of an Arkham inmate, had met with Ra’s al Guhl and blew her nose on his lapels. It would’ve been better if she pantsed him, but it was a nice start.

He badly wanted to hear more of the story, but didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of taking an interest. Since she was talking to Manikin, Joker decided he too would talk to Manikin—that would bring him close enough to listen without actually acknowledging Harley’s existence.

He just reached Miranda’s side when the guard delivered a note.

“Invited- to- dinner-,” Manikin read in her mechanical drone, “who- is- this- Hugo- Strange- ?”

“Yuckers,” Harley sang out, “Hugo is a creepo.”

Joker was incensed. Hugo Strange was back in Arkham? Why wasn’t he in the throne room? What did he mean by sending little notes for Joker’s own subjects to meet him for dinner?

“Creepo does not begin to cover it. He is HAHAHAHAHAAAAAAA a psychiatrist. Ha-Ha-Hannibal Lector without the charming bedside manner HAHAHAHAAAA.”

“What’s wrong with psychiatrists!” Harley demanded.

“Well for ONE THING,” Joker screamed, “they have NO APPRECIATION of CLASSIC COMEDY! They clutter up the fridge with their girly SlimFast bars and frozen yogurt, they bring the nitrous oxide canisters instead of the SmileX and get

Krystal burgers instead of White Castle! They sing like a chipmunk in a food processor!!! And they don't even pants The Cadaver when they get the chance!!!!"

Joker sat outside Dr. Bartholomew's office, sulking to the extent that his permanently affixed grin would allow. His right arm was extended languidly, a single index finger pointing down to hold a book open for Bartholomew's assistant, Brian.

"They sedated me," he slurred at the office temp, "tranquilizer dart in the tush, like some rhino on the Discovery channel..."

Brian compared the bonsai tree on his desk to the one pictured in the book and snipped an errant growth.

"...jussfer telling it like it is about psychiatrists and their... tassles 'n' chipmunk singing Slimfast... no justice... no appreciation of comedy either. Octopus goes into a bar ta play the bagpipes and... no... the bat-pipes go into the bar to screw the octopus... neh... how does that go?"

The intercom buzzed:

::Brian, type up a memo that as Patient J will no longer have social privileges in the common room, it seems likely the difficulties with Miss Isley will soon subside. I'll be driving my car to work again Monday, so the owner of that Honda Civic needs to vacate my parking space.::

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