



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

#34

Cat Sales

An Iceberg Tale



The Iceberg Lounge
O.Cobblepot, Proprietor



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
AN ICEBERG TALE

CAT-TALES
AN ICEBERG TALE

By
Chris Dee

Edited by
David L.

COPYRIGHT © 2004 BY CHRIS DEE
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

BATMAN, CATWOMAN, GOTHAM CITY, ET AL
CREATED BY BOB KANE, PROPERTY OF DC
ENTERTAINMENT, USED WITHOUT PERMISSION

AN ICEBERG TALE

“What I want... is simple... Sly. God knows, it’s simple... I don’t want to hear any more about Catwoman. I don’t want to hear any more about Catwoman. I don’t want to hear *anything more* about Catwoman. OKAY? Is that so much to ask? For one night—no Lady Purple.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Blake,” Sly said evenly, sliding a gin martini across the bar. He hadn’t mentioned Catwoman, of course. Sly relied on tips to supplement his meager bartender’s salary. To earn tips you had to make the customers happy, and to do that at the Iceberg Lounge meant keeping track of who despised whom. You wouldn’t win any friends in this place by talking up Joker to Poison Ivy or Cluemaster to Riddler, and you were just asking for trouble if you brought up Catwoman in front of Tom Blake, the Catman. All Sly had done was ask what kind of garnish Blake wanted in his martini: an olive, lemon peel, or twist of pickled ginger. It wasn’t his fault that the ginger was kept on hand for Selina’s martinis, or that it was she who introduced this innovation. The Iceberg Lounge served both gin and vodka martinis this way, Sly was the bartender, Blake had ordered a martini, so it was his job to ask.

“Anybody should be able to see that,” Sly muttered to himself as he rang up the sale, “especially someone just released from Arkham with a clean bill of mental health.”

Catman took his drink from the bar and stalked angrily into the dining room.

“Do you know what to-morrow is, Kitty?” Jervis called, waving him back to a corner booth. “That’s what Alice asked the white kitten, or was it the black one, at the start of *Through the Looking Glass*. Well it’s no nevermind, white or black, since you’re all yellow and orange.”

“Must you blither?” Blake asked wearily, sitting down on the bench across from Mad Hatter.

“Oh beamish boy, drink your saucer of milk and tell me all the news. You’re fresh out of Arkham, are you not? Surely there are tales to tell from Dr. Jerry’s House-o-Fun.”

“Yes, I’m out of Arkham,” Blake grumbled, “and what’s practically the first thing I see when I get back to town? Ad for that new jewelers, Objects of Desire. Have you seen it? Big billboard right when you come off the bridge. Six diamond rings in different styles, big as life, and underneath just one word: Catworthy. How do you like that, hm? *Catworthy*.”

“And you’re assuming that doesn’t refer to you.”

“The word was purple.”

“Ah.”

Jervis sipped his drink. Blake sipped his.

“LEND A NORM MUG,” a new voice rang, “A Glenundromm, Sly my good man! A Glenundromm or, if you are in a puzzling mood, then LEND A NORM MUG.”

“Welcome back Mr. Nigma, it’s been quite a while since I’ve heard any of those anagrams of yours. And just as long since I’ve... had occasion to...” Sly was looking distractedly around the bar as he spoke, pausing longer and longer between words, as if he couldn’t find something. “...Um... I mean... it’s been a while since I’ve had occasion to pour that special... scotch of yours, sir. Let me just slip into the back for a minute and fetch a fresh bottle.”

The slightly confused manner became more determined as Sly walked to the hallway at the back of the bar. Edward Nigma was too busy receiving congratulations for his release to notice Sly turning not into the backroom but into the office.

“Mr. Cobblepot,” Sly sighed when he closed the door. “That Glenundromm is white vest, premium stuff. Couldn’t you have taken one of the lesser brands?”

“Quacakwa” came the answer. It was more of an answer than Sly was expecting. From the way Oswald was slumped on his desk, Sly had assumed his employer was passed out. Sly reached for the nearly empty bottle of Glenundromm, only to have Oswald clutch at it with another “quacakwakwa” the moment it moved.

“Okay, I’ll open a new bottle from downstairs—*this time*, Mr. Cobblepot, *this time*. But you can’t keep drinking up the special reserves, sir, you really can’t. I’ll put this on Mr. Nigma’s tab to cover our loss. ‘Mistake’ if he notices, but he won’t. Just released from Arkham, I doubt he’ll remember how much of the old bottle was left. But a lot of the regulars are getting out this week, Mr. Cobblepot, so their liquor can’t keep disappearing this way. You want to drink, drink the house brands—or Mr. Dent’s double-malt.”

“Quacakwa-kwa”

“Yeah, quacakwa-kwa,” Sly said sadly, closing the office door behind him.

“SLY!” All Sly had a chance to register before being thrown against the wall was a blur of red-black and the jingle of tassels.

“Um, gee, hi Miss Quinn.”

“Sly my FAVORITE Bar-guy! Give us a hug.”

“Quacakwa-kwa” Sly sputtered as the air was forced from his lungs, “Ms. Quinn, I can’t breathe.”

“Oh. Sorry there,” Harley released him and started brushing off his shirt, “Well I just wanted to say *Hiya!* ‘cause y’know I missed you so much, you and *everybody* here at the ‘Berg!”

Sly smiled the cautious and confused smile the Arkham orderlies often wore as he pointed Harley Quinn back to the bar. He said he’d be there in a minute to take her order and headed downstairs.

Harley stopped at every table she passed as she moved to the bar, smiling at some who were too far away to stop and chat with, waving at others, and blowing kisses to a chosen few.

“What’s with her?” Catman asked, noting that he and Jervis only rated a beauty-queen wave and not a kiss.

“Worried about slipping,” Jervis explained. “You know how it is: a couple splits, one stays in the mimsy borogoves, keeps the friends and the hangouts, and one disappears down the rabbit hole never to be seen again.”

“And Harley figures she’ll be the one to go? She gives parties and organizes karaoke nights and is cute as a button, whereas Joker is... Joker.”

"Speaking for myself, I would rather look at her grin than his," Jervis agreed. "But as Roxy is so fond of pointing out, Harley *is* only a sidekick. It's a topsy turvy world, Blake, but even so, who will risk offending Joker... Blake? Blake, are you listening to me?"

As sometimes happens with cats, Catman had become fascinated by a shiny object and was giving it, rather than his companion, his full attention.

"That... new groupie," he said at last, "is wearing... aluminum foil? Anyway, I disagree about Harley's prospects. Certainly Poison Ivy will want to keep her around no matter what—"

"Besides," announced a new voice... and Edward Nigma approached the table, "not everyone is intimidated by Joker."

"Stuff and nonsense," Jervis declared.

"Quite true," Blake confirmed, "You wanted the news from Arkham, well that's the news. A new power has risen to challenge the Clown Prince of Crime."

Jervis ogled, unbelievably. "Who?" he asked finally.

Blake and Nigma exchanged amused glances before answering in unison: "Hugo."

Jervis pulled out a pocketwatch and looked at it, then shook it. "No, that makes no sense at all. Hugo Strange? Topsy turvy world and all that, but the Queen of Hearts can and will say 'Off with their heads,' whereas all the Dormouse can do is get breadcrumbs in the butter. Unless that was the March Hare, because this is Thursday and we always have bread and butter with tea on Thursday—but Joker can kill you. Joker *will* kill you. So there's really no way it can be Hugo."

Catman stood and offered Nigma his chair with a formal nod: "Whatever that was he just said, it's more in your line than mine, Mr. Riddler. Enjoy your evening, gentlemen. I am going to find out why that new groupie is wearing silver foil."

Catman left and Riddler sat.

"It's true, Jervis. It started at Arkham. Hugo bribed a guard and built himself a little powerbase doing favors for the rest of us—getting us out of the common room when Joker was there, decent food, things like that. Then this Manikin came into the picture. You know what Hugo is like. He practically imprinted on her. He's in love. Or at least deeply obsessed."

"Strange is obsessed with Batman," Jervis objected.

"Strange *was* obsessed with Batman, now he has made the acquaintance of a woman-mannequin. A real actual moving breathing *living woman* AND she's a mannequin. Hugo's got no time for Batman."

Jervis stared into space for a moment as if performing some arduous calculations, then he nodded and Nigma continued.

"So Hugo's obsessed with this Manikin, but she strikes up a friendship with Harley when Harley falls out with Ivy, so then *Joker* starts paying attention to *Manikin* to annoy *Harley*. Joker and Hugo been squaring off ever since."

"Calloo callay," Jervis said in wonder, "Good dish, I say! And all this has been going on in Arkham and no one's told me?"

Eddie looked at him in disgust.

"What do you call a chin-wagging rumor hag?" Riddler asked with a twinkle.

Jervis wrinkled his brow.

"I don't know."

"Jervis."

One last attempt, and if it didn't work, Bruce knew he would have to admit defeat. One... last... desperate... twisting... stretch... and then— — —lunge-*ARGH!*

"DAMNIT!" he swore to the empty cave. That was it. Defeat. Lunge-and-dab wasn't going to work. Swallowing his anger, Bruce forced a calmer tone as he spoke into the intercom. "Alfred, I'm in the med facility. Would you come down here for a moment, please."

::Of course, sir::

Minutes later, Alfred was silently dabbing the cuts on Bruce's back. The silence stung more than the disinfectant. It was a bitter truth to face: being human. There were simply points on his body he could not physically reach—which meant living with an untreated injury or sucking up his pride and getting help.

"I don't know why I never rigged something up to let me reach back there. Some kind of articulated clamp on a handle."

"Impractical, sir," Alfred sniffed, "and unnecessary while I am at hand."

Bruce seethed. The usual price of Alfred's medical assistance was sarcasm. The lack of it in this particular instance might have puzzled another man, but not Bruce. To a detective, the explanation was all too clear: Batman injuries occurred at night. Alfred would be summoned to the cave at three or four in the morning. He would treat whatever gunshot or stab wound required his attention, and then see about repairing the damaged costume—all the while peppering the respectful reserve of a family servant with tersely ironic comments about the joys of crimefighting. Called to the cave, not by Batman but by Bruce, at eleven o'clock in the morning, Alfred must have known even before seeing the scratches that this was not a Bat-related incident. Not exactly.

It was... embarrassing. Bruce hated that he was going to explain how this happened, but if he didn't there was no telling what Alfred might think up on his own, and that was a damn sight more embarrassing.

"Selina doesn't like to have her morning workout interrupted," he began tentatively.

"Indeed, sir."

"It's not like it's Strategic Self-Mutating Defense Regimen 4 or anything, it's just Yoga and Boflex and some Tai Chi."

"As you say, sir." The disapproval in the words was palpable.

"Alfred, the fact is, I mean, to be blunt, Selina working out is a sight to see."

The butler coughed.

"...and the element of surprise is a very real consideration in physical contests... even if it weren't, Batman doesn't wait and 'make an appointment.'"

"I see, sir."

"Do you?"

"Quite sir. You inserted yourself into Miss Selina's morning routine without first ascertaining her views on the matter."

"It was spontaneous."

“Very good, sir. If I may make a suggestion, the next time *Batman* wishes to be spontaneous, it would be wise to do so in the protective garments designed for that purpose. Will there be anything else, sir?”

Technically, Sly’s job was finished once the last customer had departed and he’d closed out the register. But he knew if he left it at that, there would be rubber checks come payday—that is assuming there were any checks at all. So he headed back to Mr. Cobblepot’s office and lifted his unconscious employer off the night’s receipts. He retrieved the previous four nights’ receipts from the safe and made up the delinquent deposits. Then he dropped them in the night deposit box on the way home.

The next morning he called the payroll service he used for his Florida bar, Sly’s, and set them up to take over the Iceberg accounts. He checked the inventories, phoned two vendors and called the beer distributor to reschedule a missed delivery.

Then he considered the black ledger.

Sly was not naïve. He was well aware that the legitimate nightclub he worked for represented only... the tip of the Iceberg, so to speak. There was another business operating alongside this one, a shadow business, that for all he knew made up the bulk of Oswald Cobblepot’s operations. Sly certainly had no interest in becoming a crime boss and even if he did, he was sure he wouldn’t know how to go about it. But he was equally sure that side of Oswald’s business wouldn’t survive continued neglect any more than the club could. He didn’t know what happened when crooks and black marketeers didn’t get paid on time, but he knew instinctively the Iceberg was not the place to be if that occurred.

There was only one solution, Sly decided, fingering the edge of the ledger. He had to find someone to take over managing that part of the business just as he took over the Lounge.

Who? That was the question.

Batman stood over his workstation, a familiar mix of annoyance and amusement battling for dominance as he examined the small card wedged between the rows of letters on the keyboard—a slim border of leopard spots framing a flowing feminine script:

Now you can come and play.

Meow.

Impossible woman.

He tossed the card aside and sat down to work; she would have to wait. There was no time for games now. It had started.

Damn Ra’s al Ghul, this was really his doing. Ra’s pulling that recruiting stunt in Gotham City. It had irked him. The obscenity of it, the unmitigated gall. Ra’s al Ghul in his city. Batman was outraged and he had taken it out on the criminal element of Gotham however he could. That much was enormously satisfying—at the time. The majority of the rogues gallery found themselves hauled off to Arkham within a few short weeks.

It *was* satisfying at the time... but now came the consequences. Thanks to the Arkham fast track rehabilitation program, large numbers of criminals going *in* at the same time meant many being *released* at the same time. Riddler, Catman and Harley, all this week; Ivy, Joker and Hugo by the end of the month.

He had to be ready.

He ran his finger along the ridge of the card. "Sorry Kitten, some other time."

The one indisputable advantage to working at a place like the Iceberg, Sly reflected, was information. An ordinary Joe trying to find some underworld figure wouldn't know where to begin, but all Sly had to do was ask. He didn't even have to pay \$50 for the information like someone else might; he just brought Mr. Tetch a fresh Derby Fizz and a little slip of paper with the address was handed back. And because addresses in Chinatown were a little tricky, Mr. Tetch even drew a nice little map on the back of the cocktail napkin.

Getting in once he found the address was a little trickier than Sly would have thought. The man in the front of the little curio shop was awfully excitable. Sly thought he looked familiar—he remembered serving customers at the Iceberg that wore that same outfit—but when he greeted the man as he would anybody he knew from work, the guy got hysterical.

"Loyal to The Great One, F'Nos is loyal to Great One Demon Head, I F'Nos, I give dying breath to Demon Head and his ministers Gr'oriBr'di and Ulstarn, I do my duty. I no go to vile places of decadent city."

"HEY!" Sly yelled, offended, "That's my bar you're dissing."

"Don't mind him, Sly," a familiar voice teased from the doorway, "He's new. We haven't loosened him up yet." The former Iceberg bouncer, Greg Brady, turned to the DEMON underling, "F'Nos, nobody in the decadent city considers it disloyal to take your night off and go out somewhere instead of sitting on the edge of your bunk staring into space. One of the places you can go is the Iceberg Lounge, where this man will serve you the best damn martini in the city and listen to you bitch what an unfeeling hardass your boss is. Get it?"

He winked at F'Nos, who looked utterly confused. So Brady winked at Sly and added "—as long as you don't hit on Roxy Rocket."

Both men laughed, disappeared into the back room, and a half hour later, Sly shook hands with his new partner.

Nigma gave the true riddle a final proofread before unfolding the paper on which it was printed and refolding it to display a decoy question.

There was one thing to be said for a stint at Arkham, it always gave him time to devise new criminal conundrums. The downside was: it was an asylum. The meds, the crazies, it messed with your head. Whenever he was released, he had to go over every aspect of any capers planned there.

Satisfied that he had all the bases covered, he slid the folding paper puzzle carefully into its special green envelope, sealed it with a gold question mark, and set off to drop it at police headquarters.

He stopped a block shy of his destination when the sky above the building lit up.

“Drat it all,” he muttered, “Premature Bat-signal. Some upstart carrying on, taking up Batman’s attention, messing with my timetable.”

Knowing that officers were at that very moment on the roof waiting for Batman and would remain there until the caped menace had answered the signal, Riddler knew he would be unable to deliver his challenge tonight. He turned on his heel, flagged a cab and headed for the Iceberg.

Stymied for another night after a long stint at Arkham, he would have to take what consolation he could from a glass of Glenundromm and the puzzle of that new groupie wearing silver foil.

CHAPTER 2: LADY TINFOIL

During his recent stint at Arkham, Edward Nigma had had plenty of time to consider his standing in the Gotham Underworld. As Riddler, he had no pretensions to being “Batman’s Greatest Foe.” It simply wasn’t a distinction that interested him.

He was not a humble man; he knew his was the finest *intellect* among Batman’s many enemies. And he knew that, as Batman was essentially a detective and a thinker, that set Riddler apart from the other rogues, for his game with the Bat was entirely intellectual.

As an intellectual, Nigma had no interest in labels like “Batman’s Greatest Foe.” Joker and Hugo could battle it out for the peons to think of them in such terms. But for Riddler, it was enough that *he* knew—and that the only other mind on his level, Batman, knew also. What was it Shakespeare said: Play to those who get it. Don’t dumb it down “to split the ears of the groundlings.”

“DRONING SLUG, Sly, DRONING SLUG.”

“Come again, Mr. Nigma?”

“Groundlings. The lowest common denominator. Mindless rabble.”

Sly slowed his methodical wiping of the bar. There were times when a bartender’s role was drink-pourer and times when it was sympathetic-listener. This clearly was one of the latter.

“Rabble still messing with your riddles, Mr. Nigma?” he asked, sliding a cocktail napkin into place in front of his customer.

“Let’s put it this way,” Eddie replied, removing the napkin and setting a folded paper in its place, “you can set my drink on that.”

Sly looked down at the carefully folded puzzle, then up at Nigma.

“It’ll get wet, sir. It’ll get ruined.”

“Precisely. Four nights I have tried to deliver that brilliant bit of braintease to the bat, and on each and every occasion, I was stymied by premature Bat-Signal! That damn bat-flashlight keeps going off before I get to police headquarters, and now it’s too late. My coveted quarry will be off to Metropolis in an hour.”

Sly looked sympathetic, for everyone knew the Riddler’s code demanded that he announce an intended crime beforehand with some kind of puzzling clue.

“You couldn’t have maybe delivered your clue some other way?” Sly remarked.

Nigma glared.

“Why should I? Why should I, The Riddler, Prince of Puzzlers, adapt *my* methods because some...” he raised his voice meaningfully so others in the bar could hear “because some no-account upstart is monopolizing the Bat’s attention!”

Bruce took the pad of gauze doused with disinfectant, stretched and dabbed at the wound on the back of his thigh, and winced in pain. It wasn’t quite as awkward to reach as the last injuries on his back, but it hurt more to try.

Resignedly he touched the intercom. "I'm in the med facility. Would you come down here for a moment, please."

:: *Me? You want me to come down?* ::

"Yes Kitten, please."

:: *Okay, be right there.* ::

His lip twitched at the surprise in her voice. It was unusual for him to ask her. But he didn't need Alfred's attitude right now, literally adding insult to injury. For cat-scratches, yes, he would call Alfred, but not for Zogger punctures. Selina would at least understand the need for intense physical outlet after a revelation like this.

He shook his head as he waited. Four days. Those clues had been coming for four days—boxes of them, left at the Bat-Signal, sometimes two deliveries in one night—rubber chickens, whoopee cushions, smiley stickers. It was all too clear who was behind it: Joker. Not even released yet, and he was somehow arranging to have these clues left at the Bat-Signal. Clues to what, that was the question: what fiendish horror was the twisted freak planning now? The sheer number of objects seemed to indicate it was something big. It was going to be bad. Very bad. Unless Batman worked out what the monster was planning before the killing started.

For four days he'd wracked his brains—joke gum, silly putty, super soakers, gummy bears—what did it mean? He'd considered the objects individually and in combinations, what came in what box. There was no pattern. He'd wracked his brains—there *was* no pattern. The only common thread seemed to be Joker himself. What did it mean? What was it all pointing to?

That is the question that had consumed him for four days. His patrol interrupted twice a night by another box of Jokeresque bric-a-brac that made no more sense than the last. *What was it all pointing to?* That is the question he had been eating, sleeping and breathing for four days, and when he finally learned the answer... it was a blow. It was a blow that required Zogger.

Alfred would never understand that. Selina just might.

Catman stalked into the Iceberg bar as an enraged lion might charge a herd of gazelle just to watch the lesser beasts scatter and scurry.

When, so far from scurrying, the lesser beasts failed to acknowledge his arrival in any way, he stalked with equal menace towards the jukebox. A marathon of "Stray Cat Strut" would teach them to ignore the arrival of the King of Cats.

Bruce lay on his stomach, propped on his elbows while Selina treated the wound on the back of his thigh. He winced, not from the sting of disinfectant or even from the tremors of laughter that caused Selina to push the gauze into his wound with a little more force than necessary. It was the mirth itself that stung:

"Harley?" Selina gasped, "Harley Quinn? With the tassels and the Marilyn Monroe squeak. Harley QUINN did this?"

"Strategic Self-Mutating..."

"Zogger. I know, Zogger stuck the hole in your leg, small wonder with how hyped up you've been. I was just thinking to myself that if you didn't calm down soon it'd be

time to bait you 'til you popped. And now you're telling me *Harley Quinn* beat me to it?"

"She didn't bait me, I didn't pop."

"You popped."

He glared a glare of quiet menace—a glare meant to impress upon glib criminals the gravity of their situation.

"Batman does not—"

"You popped like an unforked potato in the microwave."

He sighed. It was too much for one day. First that note, then Zogger, and now Selina having her fun treating him like Catwoman's yarn toy.

"I have been working on this for four days," he said firmly, his voice plummeting into Batman's deepest gravel. "I thought I knew what I was dealing with. Boxes of clues, boxes of Joker stuff."

"And instead you find out it's not 'Joker stuff' but *Joker's stuff*."

"That woman is insane. Okay they split up; it's about time she came to her senses on that score. She's free; he's not; so she's moving him out of the Hacienda. Where another kind of girlfriend with a grudge might throw the guy's things into a dumpster, Harley comes up with the novel idea of *giving it to Batman*."

As before, Selina began trembling with barely stifled laughter, agitating his leg with the gauze.

"I think you've got the wound cleaned out well enough, Kitten," he noted. "I can bandage it myself. If you want, you can read the note she left. It's on the table."

He meant it as a dismissal, to get her to stop poking him with her laughing dabs. But instead of being dismissed, Selina put a finger under his chin and turned his head to face her, smiling into his eyes.

"Soon," she said, "Not quite done yet." Then she leaned in and kissed him, ran fingers through his hair, and gave a happy sigh. "Now we're done." She winked and clip clipped off to his workstation, and then picked up the note. Bruce watched as her eyes moved over the paper and saw her start to chuckle again. For the first time since finding that outrageous document in the last box of 'clues,' Bruce felt a tickle at the corner of his lip.

All of Gotham had assumed Harley Quinn's obsession with Joker was a byproduct of their love affair, and if the one ended, the other would too. Everyone assumed that—even Joker.

Bruce permitted the tickle to tug again at his lip.

They were wrong. Quinn was just as Joker-obsessed as ever. But she no longer loved him.

♪ *Get a shoe thrown at me from a mean old man,
Get my dinner from a garbage can.* ♪

The distant sounds of "Stray Cat Strut" bled into the office from the Iceberg jukebox. Sly and Greg Brady sat on opposite sides of Oswald's desk, reviewing the account ledgers for their individual ends of the business. Greg stopped, not for the first time, and searched around the desk and then the filing cabinet.

“Mr. Cobblepot is a big name in the biz and all that,” Greg said finally, “but he really doesn’t seem to have been very organized. He must have kept a lot of details in his head.”

Sly raised an eyebrow. He respected Oswald up to a point, but he thought Greg was inclined to give their boss too much credit. If something was misfiled or wasn’t written down, Sly assumed it was laziness or a mistake. Greg was inclined to think it was part of a master plan.

“You’re starting to sound like one of those groupies,” Sly observed. “Oh speaking of groupies, that lady in tinfoil—talked to her earlier. You’ll never guess. That outfit of hers, it isn’t meant to be a tribute to anybody. She’s not a groupie, she just wanted in and didn’t know the clientele well enough to do something appropriate.”

“You’re shittin’ me! Why’d she want to come here if she doesn’t know who’s who and what’s what?”

Sly grinned. “Scouting. She’s a television producer, a reality show, scouting locations.”

“You’re shittin’ me!”

“No lie. Her name’s Lori Leeberg. She’s with that makeover show, *Fab!*, five gay guys, each week they take a straight man, fix up his hair, apartment, wardrobe, teach him to cook, whole deal. And it’s always to prime him for some big event. Well...” Sly looked around theatrically, although they were the only two people in the room, “Dr. Strange wants to get on the show.”

Greg’s eyes looked as big as saucers as he asked “Hugo Strange?”

Sly nodded. “Dr. Hugo Strange, yes! He wants on the show—to get fixed up so he can go on a date with that Manikin chick. Remember her? She was in a while back, would order a Diet Coke with lemon and nurse it all night. Well anyway, if Dr. Strange gets on the show, that will be the big event. A date with Manikin. Here! At the Iceberg! What great exposure for us, huh?”

Greg looked thoughtful.

“It will draw attention to the ‘Berg as a center for criminal activity too.”

Sly gave him a look. “The big sign ‘O.Cobblepot, Proprietor’ in ice blue neon over the front door kinda has that covered, man.”

“Fair point.”

“It’s one of those best-kept-secrets-because-everybody-knows deals,” Sly offered.

Greg nodded.

“But the thing is,” Sly cautioned, “we can’t tell anybody about this. Lady at table six wants to wear tinfoil, we don’t know anything about why.”

“You got it.”

The music outside went silent, then started up again.

♪ *Black and orange stray cats sitting on a fence,*

Ain’t got enough dough to pay the rent. ♪

In the main room, the crowd groaned as “Stray Cat Strut” played for the fourth time. Tom Blake ignored them. His last visit to the Iceberg, he had set off to investigate the groupie in silver foil. He struck out, getting nothing more than a name, Lori Leeberg, and a phone number that turned out to be MovieFone.

As was his custom, when the man struck out, the cat struck back. He hit that “Catworthy” jewelers, and did the Bat even bother to show? No. A Gotham jewelry

store dares proclaim its wares “Catworthy.” Was it not a foregone conclusion the great feline of the underworld—the criminal king of cats—would respond? So where was Batman, hm? Where the hell was Batman? What criminal also-ran could possibly take precedence over his staking out the Catworthy jewelers to challenge the great Catman to single combat?

The song on the jukebox ended, and before Blake could move to insert another quarter, a blast of freeze ray encased the mechanism in a block of ice.

Blake spun with feline swiftness towards the direction the blast came from—In a corner booth, Tetch and Nigma sat with Victor Frieze. Tetch was holding the freeze gun, pivoting the tip so it now pointed, not at the jukebox, but at Blake himself. All three were looking at him, Tetch pointing the gun, Frieze shaking his head “no” and Nigma wagging a warning index finger.

Blake drew himself up with great dignity, and addressed the room at large:

“A merchant in the business of peddling precious gems takes out an advertisement where all who cross the 9th Street Bridge cannot help but see it. They put up a giant picture of diamond rings with the word CATWORTHY in letters six-feet high. I went there. I saw these gems. I found them Catworthy, just as advertised. I took them! I, the Catman, took the Catworthy jewels! And where, I ask you, Gotham City, where was Batman?”

The whole of the Iceberg Bar and Dining Room stared at Tom Blake. He looked around at them for a full second before building to a dramatic crescendo:

“WHAT DOES A CAT HAVE TO DO TO GET NOTICED BY THE BAT IN THIS TOWN?!?”

Dead silence fell over the room as everyone mentally wrote their own punchline.

Catman looked around again, hissed, and stalked towards the door.

“You’re all des-picccable,” Nigma quipped.

Jervis shook his head. “That’s the duck. What does the cat say?”

“I thought it was Sylvester,” Frieze put in.

“It is Sylvester,” Eddie insisted, “but Daffy says it too.”

While Nigma, Hatter and Frieze argued, the woman in tin foil slipped her cell phone from its holster. “Bradley? Lori. Tell the crew we’re a go. This place is going to make GREAT TELEVISION.”

Dear Batman,

Harley wrote, then chewed the tip of her pen thoughtfully.

These Yanni CDs really should be the last of Mr. J.’s stuff. I know I said that with the last 2 boxes, but then I found some more things I thought you might like to know about. And then I remembered the notebook. Whenever Mr. J. got an idea, he let me write it down for posterity. And also because he forgets. The ones in red ink are the crime ideas. And the ones in green are

She paused, wondering if household was one word or two.

She scratched her head with the pen.

She petted Slobberpuss.

Tipping Batman to some of Mr. J.’s crime ideas was her best idea so far, but it still seemed kind of... she sighed... dull.

“Gave that no-account clown the best years of my life,” she told Slobberpuss, scratching the hyena’s fur with the pen. “Best years of my life. Why I was goin’ places, I was gonna be a celebrity psychiatrist soon as I wrote my book. I’ll teach that no-good green-hair creepo to take the best years of a promising young future celebrity psychiatrist and toss her away. I’ll teach him good, Slobberpuss, I really will. I gotta find something better than this tho, ya know what I mean? Something ta really wipe that big grin off his face. Something to—oooh! Idea! Idea! I got an idea!”

To celebrate, Harley stood and skipped to the kitchen, returning with jerky treats for the hyenas and a chocolate cupcake for herself.

“Brucie!” she announced, “That’s what I’ll do. I can get to Mr. J through his good buddy Brucie! Now, what to do, what to do. Kill him?”

She looked down at the hyenas, who looked back up at her, expecting more jerky.

“Nah, I guess not—or MAYBE—OH, I KNOW! Catty! Yes, that’s it. Hee hee. Hee, hee, hee, heeeee-YEAH! That’s what I’ll do! What if I was to break up Bruce Wayne and Catty! Oh, that’d be perfect. That’d drive Puddin’ crazy, cause he was so happy when Brucie got her away from—oh, THAT’S even better! Hee hee. Hee, hee, hee, hee-YES! I’ll split up Bruce Wayne and Selina and get Catwoman back together with Batman!”

CHAPTER 3: HUGO, HONEY, 1967 CALLED. THEY WANT THEIR GLASSES BACK.

I kicked off my shoes at the end of the clock passageway. There's a clip-clip that would echo through the cave if I didn't. Usually I don't mind, but right now I didn't want him to hear me coming.

It's an exercise, one of several to keep me sharp since I curtailed the more felonious aspects of Catwoman's activities. Often when I prowl now, I'll break into the executive offices at Wayne Enterprise and borrow a pen from Bruce's desk. Sometimes I'll stalk Robin or Nightwing as they patrol without letting them see me. And even though I prefer the Impressionists in Bruce's collection to those at Gotham Museum, I've resumed my weekly visits there—except now I go after hours.

As far as I know, Batman is unaware of my training routines. But that doesn't mean I can't include him at times like this just for fun.

I thought he'd be needing some fun about now. When he was studying Joker-clues (or what we *thought* were Joker-clues), that was one thing. I understand his priorities there and I respect them. It was like this not long after we started—Ra's al Ghul came to town, DefCon4 was declared, and he started canceling dates. It's part of The Life. It's a cost of doing business: long stints of concentrated cave time, intensive battitude, and no sign of Bruce.

Joker is bad business; nobody can deny that. He was about to be released from Arkham and Batman had to be ready.

But then it turned out the Joker-clues were nothing of the sort. It was all Harley being a vindictive ex, giving away his stuff, and doing it so it would hurt. You'd think he'd be relieved. You'd think it would be good news: there was not, in fact, a horrific Joker-escapade being announced that Batman was powerless to figure out.

But instead of being relieved, he'd gone absolutely batty over the whole thing. He was pissed because he wasted days deciphering clues that weren't clues. And what was worse, he now had a notebook full of Joker-targets and he hadn't anticipated a single one. He was more pissed about that than anything—because none of the stuff in Harley's notebook was on his list. All his theories about the clues-that-weren't-clues, he hadn't anticipated a single one of these targets.

Since the arrival of that notebook, he'd spent all his time at the workstation, entering the targets into the Batcomputer, cross-referencing with all of the search routines and databases. This was not high-priority crimefighting in my opinion. It was battitude—typical, tightass, obsessive, overcompensating battitude. Like in the old days: He'd let me get close, he'd play along with the flirting, he'd let his fingers dance up my back, he'd let my fingers linger on the insignia... and then he'd have to do the whole grunt-growl-push away-no, you're a thief, unclean-unclean routine.

That's all this was: hours at the workstation just because he hadn't predicted any of the targets in Harley's notebook. It was obsessive, it was ridiculous, and I was putting a stop to it. He needed some fun.

Sly looked carefully at the new arrival—masks were the norm for the Iceberg crowd, but face painting was not unheard of. This girl—in a pair of furry tan-colored cat ears, with her face painted in tiger stripes, feline noseleather, and whiskers—had a more elaborate look than the typical groupie. But there was something beyond that, something unusual. What it was clicked into place when she placed her order:

“A Diet Sprite, please,” she squeaked, “with a tequila chaser.”

“Ms. Quinn?”

“Shhh, I’m here incognito.”

Sly poured the drinks with a shrug.

“Whatever you say, Ma’am. One Diet Sprite, one tequila. What you chase with what is up to you.”

Harley took her drinks to a corner booth near her quarry, sat down without appearing to notice him in any way, and then began a jerky motion with her wrist underneath her chin. She paused occasionally to sip her drink and spy on the next table.

“What is she doing?” Tom Blake asked finally.

“Trying to get your attention, you silly ass,” Nigma replied.

“My attention?”

“Tiger stripes, cat ears, she’s not here for me. And I’d assume that thing with the chin is meant to be licking a paw.”

Catman looked at the girl in disbelief, then back at Riddler.

“Well that’s just great. That is just what we need around here. Another goddamn cat-broad trying to steal the show. THE LITTERBOX IS CLOSED, SWEETIEPIE!” he said loudly.

“Blake, you’re an ass,” Eddie whispered harshly, “she’s here for you, you stupid schmuck. She’s trying to get picked up.”

Blake looked back at Harley, who was again performing the bizarre wrist-jerk. He looked back at Eddie.

“That looks nothing like licking a paw.”

“So she’s a bad mime. She’s cute. She’s here. She’s *dressed like a cat*. What’s your problem, man?”

Blake picked up his drink, grumbling, and walked to the other table as if performing some odious duty to pacify a tiresome friend.

Nigma shook his head. “Cats. The eternal riddle.”

Catwoman had not lost her touch. The trademark stealth was in tact. I doubted whether even the bats overhead could sense my approach as I snuck up behind the chair of Bruce’s workstation and—spin-splat-ouch—found myself lying flat on very hard cavefloor.

“Explain to me,” the deep voice asked calmly, “why when I interrupt your workout it’s a problem, and I get scratched up, but you get to come down here anytime you want and...”

“Pffft.”

“That’s not an answer.” He sounded grim, but offered a hand to help me up.

“It’s not the same thing,” I said, dusting myself off.

"No, it's not. You were just working out; I'm *working*."

"I was working out and you *pounced* on me."

He grabbed my wrist and pointed to a fresh scar on the back of my hand.

"Whiskers gets away with it."

Can you believe that? "Whiskers gets away with it." I gave him the look—the special rooftop look meant for Whateverman whenever the hero-addled brain fails to comprehend something basic. It isn't meant to seem condescending, but if it does, what can you do. Sometimes with heroes you have to go back to basics:

"Whiskers is a *cat*. Sometimes when I start the yoga, he'll take my getting down on the floor and laying in relaxation pose to mean *playtime*—"

"And he gets away with it," Bruce declared.

Typical, stubborn, obsessive and missing the point—and when he does it with that damn half-twitch at the corner of his lip, it's all I can do to keep from kissing him.

"He gets swatted away, same as you did. Only difference is, he doesn't sulk afterwards."

Grunt.

Damn, I love that man.

"He doesn't get even, either," I pointed out. "So, do we have an ETA on when you'll be done with that stupid notebook?"

"Six hours ago. I finished with it last night."

"Then what have you been—"

"This." He pointed to workstation 3. "The auto-downloads picked up mention of it from a memo on one of the corporate intranets, and then the shooting permit filed with the city confirmed it."

I looked where he was pointing and saw a half-dozen video feeds flickering on the cluster of monitors.

"What is it?"

"A reality show. A reality show on which Hugo Strange will be appearing."

Selina's brow furrowed, she swallowed, then looked up at Bruce, confusion etched on every feature.

"I have a feeling I don't want to hear this," she said carefully. "Just about anything to do with Hugo tends to make me queasy."

"I visited their camera truck last night, setting this up. It will allow me to monitor all of their raw footage as they're taping. If there's anything of concern..."

"Oh," Selina broke in, suddenly getting it, "Not the Bruce-Wayne-is-Batman theory again."

Bruce noted, with some amusement, that she spoke of it with the same weary-dismissive contempt that all rogues did. That she knew it was true—that she was actually standing next to him *in the Batcave* as she said it—made no difference whatsoever. It was Hugo, and therefore a laughable embarrassment to all roguekind.

"...if there's anything of concern," he continued as if he hadn't been interrupted, "I can zap it."

"Won't that look suspicious?"

"No, it'll look like the cameras experienced a momentary atmospheric anomaly that corrupted the sound record. I perfected this technique last year when the JLA considered that reality show nonsense."

"Ah."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I love it when you go all bad-ass technophile."

Bruce's fingers paused for a split second, and then continued their continual movement over the dials and keyboard. Selina spoke again.

"So has there been anything 'of concern' to zap?"

"No," he twitched.

Selina looked at the screen that read

... ..:: feed off **FAB!** remote crew-1 camera-1 ::... ..

The camera shot showed the interior of a van, as five well-groomed men circulated a dossier.

"Okay, our subject this week is Dr. Hugo Strange: Supervillain."

"Supervillain, well that explains the beard."

"Right, always remember: when you go evil, stop shaving."

Selina blinked at the monitors.

"This isn't for real."

"It's real."

"Maybe I should start watching more television."

Harley stood before the mirror in the Iceberg Women's Room, fretfully combing her hair. She had made an error. She'd greeted Gina, the washroom attendant, by name—forgetting that she was supposed to be a newcomer to the Iceberg who wouldn't know who Gina was.

Harley bit her lip.

Well, her time here was almost up anyway. She'd gotten what she needed from Tom Blake. Now she just needed to pop upstairs to Oswald's flat above the club, her first foray as a cat-woman cat-burglar, and then she could leave and it wouldn't matter if Gina let the cat out of the bag about the new cat-groupie.

"Bye-ah Gina, I mean, Meow," Harley said cheerily.

Out in the dining room, she stopped to say goodnight to Catman:

"It was such a thrill meeting you, Mistah C, I can't tell you. Now I gotta give this sidekick idea some thought, 'cause I don't know if it's quite my style. But if I decide to help you out stealin' these famous relics from the Catacombs, then I will get in touch. Where did you say your lair was again?"

Blake regarded the girl as if she wasn't very bright, and repeated patiently: "Beneath the Safari Club, hidden entrance in the Tiger's Paw Room behind the armoire."

"Thanks Tommy, I mean, Meow."

I cocked my head and looked at the video screen. It was an exterior shot where the van pulled to a stop and the **FAB!** team ran out and knocked feverishly on a heavy

wooden door. The door swung open, and there was Hugo Strange, standing agape as **FAB!** swarmed over his apartment like a Ralph Lauren SWAT team.

"Ugh, Hugo, sweetheart. 1967 called, they want their glasses back. Wonderful invention, Dearie, they're called 'contacts.' Say it slowly with me: 'con-tacts.'"

"This room is just stupid. Plastic ferns? What's the idea here: 'I want to set off my purple leopard print chair with a little touch of green without having a living plant around?'"

I think I blacked out for a second at that. Purple leopard. And Hugo. Just the idea—shudder.

"Don't look," Bruce advised, "it could get much worse."

I remembered that he had been inside Hugo's place as Batman, although I'd never heard the circumstances or even if this was the same apartment.

"Trust me," he repeated, "Don't look."

"What's with this floor anyway? Those tiles are kind of... what would you call that? Off-beige."

"The throw-pillows look like Doug Henning's T-shirts..."

"Even shopping malls in the square states don't use those recessed overhead lights anymore, do they?"

"Now Hugo, about your personal couture. First thing we're going to do is lose this Freud Gone Wrong beard and then we'll fix up the wardrobe. So, you're a criminal mastermind and all that. Sounds exciting. To each his own, I always say. So, how to do you generally dress for that?"

All sound stopped from the video feed and I opened my eyes to see why. Hugo wasn't saying anything. I looked at Bruce, who had the same faintly horrified look on his face.

I looked back to the screen and Hugo still hadn't come up with an answer. He might be standing there still if one of the others on the **Fab!** crew hadn't burst in from a side door. He slammed it shut behind him and leaned back against it like maybe the Mummy was chasing him.

*"Do **not** go into the bathroom."*

Greg Brady fitted a 10x loop into his eye and examined the gems laid out on Oswald's desk.

"Very nice," he remarked, looking up at Tom Blake.

"They are more than nice," Blake declared, "They are *Cat-worthy*."

"Um, yeah, okay." Greg tossed a thick envelope onto the desk. Blake opened it and began counting a thick wad of bills.

"There's less catnip here than we agreed."

"It's exactly what was agreed on, minus your outstanding bar tab. I spoke to my partner—"

"SLY!"

"—and he agreed that when a tab gets into four figures we need to draw a line."

"SLY!" Blake called again, opening the office door and screaming into the bar, "SLY! Come in here! My tab cannot possibly be..." He quieted once Sly entered the room

and closed the door behind him. “There is fourteen hundred dollars missing from this envelope!”

“\$1468, Mr. Blake,” Sly said evenly.

Blake looked from Sly to Greg and back to Sly.

“Fourteen hundred sixty... how on EARTH is that possible.”

“You tore up Miss Ivy’s special wood-free table, Mr. Blake. That polymer stuff is very expensive to get fixed.”

“She made comparisons between myself as the Lord of All Felines and that flea-bitten hellcat.”

“I don’t care, Mr. Blake. Miss Selina has claws too, but she doesn’t go scratching up the place. Your tab with the Iceberg-S was \$1468, and so we took it out of your payoff from Iceberg-G. If that’s all you guys need me for, I’ll be back at the bar. Stop by for a beer on your way out, Mr. Blake. On the house.”

In his living quarters above the nightclub, Oswald Cobblepot squinted at the empty beer bottles. He counted and there were 9, then he counted again and there were 10, and then he counted a third time and there were 9 again.

But he distinctly remembered bringing 4 bottles each time he’d made a trip to the refrigerator. So there should be 8 bottles or else 12. But 9 was wrong. 9 wasn’t divisible by 4. If he brought 4, and then brought another 4...

He looked up, thinking he heard a noise. He thought he saw a shapely womanish shadow—with cat ears. “Kwaka-kwa” he burped...

“Kwaka-kwa”—the noise made Harley freeze in her tracks. She had finally found the document she came for, but now if Oswald was awake, how would she ever get out without being seen?

Or maybe she could be seen? Oswald was certainly drunk—Harley thought back, trying to remember her classes on the psychological effects of inebriation—if he was drunk *enough*, she could pull this off.

She stepped confidently out from the shadows and walked right up to where he was sitting. “Hiya, Ozzy,” she chirped in her regular Harley voice, “You look like someten the cat dragged in. Hee, hee, meow, hee. Oh, and look at all this mess. Don’t worry, Ozzy, I’ll clean it all up for ya.”

She picked up an empty beer bottle and the remote control, pointed the beer bottle at the TV and discreetly pushed the button on the remote.

“There, something for ya ta watch for a while. Love them soap operas. Bye now!”

She skipped out of the room, and a moment later, Oswald heard the click of the door closing behind her.

It’s not that I wanted to go see Harley. Harley’s not what you’d call a friend. She’s never been what *I’d* call a friend, and that was before her stunt with the Bat-Signal put Bruce into such a state.

That was the thing: her stunt *had* put Bruce into a state, and now she called wanting to talk. I didn’t want to listen to her whining about ‘Puddin’, but it did occur to me that this was the inside track with her and Joker. I always considered Joker & Harley

to be a sicko tango that I didn't need to know about. But that was before the fallout started setting off the Bat-Signal every five minutes.

So I went to meet her as requested. I would have liked to stay and watch the *Fab!* crew shave off Hugo's "Freud Gone Wrong" beard, but as Bruce pointed out, we were just seeing raw feeds anyway, and the best bits would certainly be edited into the final show.

So I went. I couldn't imagine why she wanted to meet at the Safari Club, but with Harley, it's always a mistake to assume there's a reason.

Riddler was ecstatic. His tangram clue may have gone to waste, but this new puzzle was foolproof. Tied to the Roman Calendar, it would let him open up a hitherto unexplored universe of cluing conundrums to taunt his great adversary. The Roman numerals themselves, using letters to express numbers, would enable him to hide the numbers within the very words of a riddle—or even to construct anagrams around them!

And the Roman practice of identifying a day by its distance from another, four days prior to the Ides of March, meant that he could leave a properly constructed clue for Batman *days* before his planned crime, when no last minute foolishness from some upstart nobody could interfere.

It would be a magnificent triumph, his greatest ever, perhaps.

"CATAMARAN FOLD HERN ERROR HUH," Riddler confided to Sly as he signed his tab and stood to leave, "CATAMARAN HERDER FLU HORN RHO, Sly, CATAMARAN HURDLE HERR FOR HON—Hurrah for the Roman Calendar!"

Sly caught the eye of the doorman and made a turning motion with his thumb and index finger. The doorman nodded. He would take Nigma's keys and call him a cab.

Batman was annoyed when the alert interrupted his monitoring of the *Fab!* video feeds soon after Selina left. The live feeds would be easier to zap if Hugo alluded to any of his Batman theories. Now Bruce would have to let the feeds backlog, sift through them when he got back, note the timestamp of any items of concern, go back to the production bungalow and deal with the individual tapes.

But it couldn't be helped, there was a crime in Gotham.

He flicked a control to shrink the video feeds to a minimized window and typed in a code to display the alert at this workstation. The automated monitoring routines threw up a map of the city indicating a crime connected to one of his themed enemies. A yellow circle was superimposed on the map with a zoom in on Hudson U. Campus. Beneath it were the words:

University Archeological Museum:

Artifacts from 1st Century Catacombs... valued at \$130,000

Catman. Damn him. First that "Catworthy" stunt and now this.

His annoyance with Catman grew steadily as he drove to the museum. It was only when he reached the crime scene that he began to reassess the situation. There were clues, too many and too easy. First he found an artificial vibrissa—an animal

whisker—lying by the empty display case. This was white with a black stripe, indicating it was from a striped animal, a large striped animal—like a tiger. But this wasn't a real tiger's whisker. It was plastic fiber, the kind of detail they might add to an animatronics figure or stuffed simulacra.

There were perhaps a dozen exhibits and theme restaurants around Gotham that might have such fake tigers. And that's where the second clue came in, to narrow it down for him. The museum was closed for the night and the custodians had already left. All the trash cans were empty, except for one by the elevator. It was the old-fashioned kind with an ashtray on the top, even though this was a non-smoking building. In the circular tray meant to be filled with sand was a balled up paper napkin. "The Safari Club," it said.

One clue too many.

Either this was the work of a very sloppy copycat, or else it was a trap.

There was no sign of Harley at the Safari Club, just a message asking me to wait in the Tiger's Paw Room. The room was what I imagine the *Fab!* guys would call "Early Tarzan Nightmare." A lot of wicker, rattan, and leather. Animal print carpets, pillows, and throws. The tables were glass tops supported by figures of cheetahs, zebra and elephants. And, oh yes, there was a tiger—stuffed.

There was a leopard print chaise longue—not purple, thank god for small favors—and right in front of it on the cheetah table was an ice bucket chilling a bottle of champagne, a portable CD player from which Harry Connick Jr. softly crooned, and another note from Harley saying 'whatever happens' I should 'go with the flow.'

I was starting to think I'd have to have *that talk* with the tassel twit before the night was over, when the sixth sense went haywire right before I heard the voice:

"Selina?"

Not the voice I was expecting, obviously.

"What are you doing here—Never mind. Go. Now. This is a trap."

Yep, it sure was, Handsome. But not the kind you were thinking, I'm sure.

My wheels were spinning like mad trying to work it out. What was the demented little twit up to? Throwing me and Batman together like it's prom night?

"Selina, I don't know what Catman is up to, but if he's gunning for you too..."

I tuned him out. ...champagne (domestic, but make allowances for Harley) ...soft music... ...animal skins (again, making allowances)...

There was no mystery what she was up to.

...Batman...

There was no mystery what she was expecting to happen.

...go with the flow...

And there was no question she was around somewhere watching.

I eyed Batman meaningfully; I gave a guttural growl and licked my lips. Here I was just thinking how he needed some fun.

~~Trust me,~~ I signed, stretching up to reach him.

Just as our lips met, there was a muffled squeal from behind the armoire. Through the kiss, I felt his lip twitch—he understood.

CHAPTER 4: PROFILING, BODYWRAP, AND POP ART

At Arkham Asylum, just like anywhere on planet Earth, certain people annoy each other. The mental health professionals take pains to keep these individuals separated whenever possible, particularly when one of them is Joker. Once an inmate is released, of course, they are, by definition, safe to rejoin society. That means they get to endure bureaucracy like everyone else.

The final step in release processing was signing for their personal belongings, and the clerk did not care if Joker was in line behind Poison Ivy. She didn't care that Ivy hated Joker or that the air outside her window had begun smelling of lemons because Joker passed the time singing "100 bats chained to the wall." All the clerk cared about was that Pamela Isley examine each and every one of the personal articles that were taken from her when she was brought in, initial the inventory sheet, initial the pink copy, initial the receipt, sign on the dotted line, and then sign again on the little blue card indicating she had received her copy.

The clerk furthermore did not care that this was a criminal waste of paper.

Joker cared. He cared that Pammy's declaration of principles about the waste of paper tied up the line and by the time he reached the front door—yep—he had missed the bus back to town.

HAHAHAHAHAHA! But so had she! And that meant fun times ahead.

"So PAMMY! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA Looks like we're hoofing it all the way back to Gotham. Unless you want to share a cab."

"You are festering pustule on the buttocks of Mother Earth."

"So no cab-share?"

She ignored him.

"Ooooh-Lemon. The guys really go for that, don't they?"

"No man can resist me."

Joker raised an eyebrow.

"No man whose body has not been polluted with chemical toxins past the point where..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Point is, Pammy, you can get a ride back to town and I can't. You know, the 'profiling': green hair-white skin-keep driving. So what do you say? Let me ride with you, please, pretty please, pretty please with sunflower seeds."

"Why would-"

"Why would you help me out when you hate my guts? Because if you don't, any cab that stops for you will be HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA-ECH-SPLAT and no ride for you. Savvy?"

"Oh alright, but I'll only take you over the bridge. I will not have your foul being polluting the beauty of my park."

"Oh, like I really want to tiptoe through the crabgrass."

"Now Hugo, this is what we call a body wrap to detoxify your skin and fat cells before we get to the tanning booth. It's an herbal blend of alfalfa leaf, chickweed powder, yarrow, cornsilk, garlic powder, hawthorn berries and kelp..."

Bruce grunted at the video feeds. There had been no indiscretions to zap. Hugo seemed to be going along with the program. So far, at least. But Bruce would continue to monitor, just in case Hugo decided to use the television show as a platform to air his Batman theory.

If he didn't, if Hugo really had moved beyond his Batman obsession, that was certainly good news. But Bruce was reluctant to believe it. Tim said it was because he was allergic to optimism. (Just the kind of thing he was used to hearing from Tim lately; that boy was getting more and more like Dick every day.) He *did* distrust the kind of naïve confidence certain associates in the League espoused, that cockeyed certainty that everything worked out for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

Deluded romantics. That's what superpowers led to.

Science, on the other hand, science was the superpower of ordinary men and women. Men and women with working minds. Men and women who could not rely on super strength, speed, or magic to survive, who turned instead to the world around them. *Observing* the world around them—seeing what *was*, not what they wanted to be, that was the scientist's way.

And for observing obsession, one couldn't do better than Harley Quinn.

Harley's insane fixation on the Joker had not diminished when they broke up as a couple. He still drove her every thought and action. Bruce wasn't sure how Batman and Catwoman fit into the picture, but somehow they did. The demented pixie was playing matchmaker. And even though he had played along at the time, he fully intended to work out what she was up to and why.

He *did* play along at the time.

He let Selina pull him in. As always. Damn. It was dangerous, and he really shouldn't have allowed it. With Quinn watching. It was no time to be playful. Why did he always let her...

The thought was interrupted by an alert... Bruce paused the video of Hugo Strange getting his back waxed and transferred the alert to the workstation where he sat.

"Now what," he muttered, "cat clues pointing to a candlelit supper at d'Annunzio's?"

But it was no crime in Gotham this time. Bruce found himself looking at the surveillance cameras from, literally, his own back yard. He cursed obscenely. There was Harley Quinn at the north perimeter of the manor grounds, tripping the alpha alarm, then the beta, then the delta, then the delta-2s that Selina added—then the motion sensor in the bush.

Bruce rolled his eyes. The bush sensor was put there for his neighbor's dogs. And Quinn tripped it. He was watching the most blissfully incompetent trespasser in the 320-year history of Wayne Manor.

Ivy longed for the quiet peace of her lair in Riverside Park. It was smaller than her niche in Robinson Park, but it was quieter. Robinson Park had too many people trudging through it. People. What a nuisance people were. After a stint in Arkham,

she liked to isolate herself from as many of the two-legged animals as possible and commune solely with her beloved plants.

This she would do as soon as she could be free of the park workers.

Perhaps technically the landscapers were not as bad as other humans. At least they spent their days caring for plantlife, even if they only did it for money. But after a spell at Arkham followed by a cab ride with Joker, Ivy wanted only peace. Plant peace. People-free plant peace.

But that was never possible when returning to a park lair after any sort of absence, for always the human pests grew bold while she was away. Always they had to be cut back and weeded out when she returned.

This time there were three signs, a bench and a garbage can to be removed. A simple spritz of the new landscape crew was sufficient to get that done. But they were slow. How she wished they would hurry up and finish so she could be alone with her babies. Unfortunately, every time she tried to hurry them, they stopped altogether to give her their full attention. They would revel in the sound of her voice, look at her longingly, and then dawdle even worse than before trying to maintain visual contact as they worked.

Perhaps a quick trip to the Iceberg was in order. There was no people-free plant peace to be had there, but there would be ice-cold cosmopolitans to pass the time until her new lair was ready.

Walking to the front door to fetch the mail, Alfred reminded himself sharply that he was, after all, an employee at Wayne Manor. If Master Bruce came into the butler's pantry asking for the mail almost two hours before it was usually delivered, it was Alfred's job to go check. He did so with the air of one humoring his employer—right up until he opened the mailbox and saw two envelopes left there.

He handled them carefully, for they did not bear the usual postmarks of regular U.S. mail.

"Begging your pardon, sir," Alfred said calmly handing over the letters, "I recognize that it is not quite my place to advise an expert such as yourself in matters of this kind. But the unusual delivery time and absence of a return address or—"

"Yes I know, Alfred," Bruce answered crisply. "I know who they're from, I saw them being delivered... Harley Quinn," he said thoughtfully, examining the larger of the two envelopes. Satisfied that it held no booby traps, he opened it with a swift stroke of the letter opener. A slip of paper fluttered out with the words:

From a friend,

Thought you should know.

Bruce scowled and slid several thick sheets out of the envelope. Photographs.

Alfred coughed.

"If that will be all, sir, I have some, er, dusting to attend to."

Bruce nodded. When Alfred was gone, Bruce massaged the bridge of his nose and looked again through the photos. There they were: Batman. Catwoman. Kissing. Passionately. Like the now-famous Gotham Post cover, except here it wasn't Photoshop. Here her costume was right. Here it had really happened. WHAT was

Quinn up to? Setting up Batman and Catwoman in order to send photos to Bruce Wayne?

He remembered the second envelope. In his haste, he took none of the precautions he had opening the first. Fortunately there was no explosion or cloud of SmileX. A far different kind of poison oozed from this envelope:

Dear Bruce... This is so difficult to say... It's not like we promised each other anything... always cherish our time together...

He knew these phrases. The Dear John letter—the Dear John letter he'd written for OSWALD! She... even for Harley, this was *insane*... she copied Oswald's Dear John letter to send to Bruce Wayne?

His wheels turned—a solution presented itself—and an unstable mix of rage and disbelief churned in his gut... as the thought solidified, the disbelief waned and the rage intensified: hooking up Catwoman with Batman to break up Selina and Bruce Wayne? *THAT* is what Quinn was doing?!

Ever since Joker turned her to crime and insanity, Batman wondered if Harley Quinn was suicidal. This seemed to settle it: Just about the only thing deadlier, he would wager, than meddling in Batman's private life would be messing with Selina's.

Edward Nigma hated admitting it, but facts were facts. There was no such thing as an intelligent man with a hangover. He might have been the smartest rogue in Gotham yesterday; he might be again tomorrow. But right now his head hurt and that's really all there was to it.

He sat staring at the wall in front of him as if he was still at Arkham and medicated out of his mind.

It was too much trouble to try and make coffee. The sound of the grinder alone. If only he had a Query... or an Echo... ...or Doris. Doris refused to be a criminal sidekick, but she made wonderful coffee.

He had had an idea too. Roman something. Days of the week or... numerals? There was probably a bottle of aspirin somewhere.

If he could find it.

Which would mean getting up.

"Howdie Miss Isley, nice to see you again. The usual?"

"Thank you, Sly."

"I'll bring it to your regular table."

"It's fixed then?"

"Yes ma'am, just last week. Got it all fixed up in time for your return."

Ivy smiled regally. For one not enslaved by her pheromones, Sly really was a very thoughtful and attentive creature. Then her expression faded into a disapproving frown.

"Still using paper napkins, I see. One day, I must do something about that."

Bruce knocked at the door of Selina's suite.

"It's open," a strained voice panted from the exercise room in the back. She was working out again.

"I don't care; I'm still knocking," he answered grimly, "You've made it quite clear that interrupting the workout leads to claws, and you'll want to save them for this."

She paused midway through a backbend.

"Oh?"

Bruce was startled at the menace packed into the single word. When they bantered on rooftops, her tone was more playful. Since then, when they argued, even if she was really angry, she was seldom... dangerous.

"What has the little tassel twit done now?" Selina asked with a calm slow-building fury.

Bruce stared. How did she know?

"C'mon, hot stuff, let's have it. After that thing last night, Harry Connick Jr. and the domestic bubbly, she didn't do that just to see the look on your face—although it was priceless, God knows. There has to be a second act. What'd she pull now?"

She seemed just hot enough that Bruce thought it wise to step back from the way he'd begun the conversation. And he switched to Batman's voice knowing that, although it unnerved most people, Selina found it sexy.

"Let's just say I wouldn't have been so reluctant to play along last night if I'd known you were breaking up with that dud Wayne."

It worked. The statement was just enigmatic enough. The murderous look shifted into a puzzled one—temporarily. The key to a temper like Catwoman's, he had learned, was to give her time to adjust to whatever development was setting her off.

He gave a sad nod. "Yep. At least you tried to let him down easy with that goodbye letter. It's too bad the photos came at the same time, because after seeing what went on in that catlair, I doubt he'll be in the mood to listen to any—"

He was interrupted by a familiar hiss.

"If you really don't want me taking this out on you, start making sense."

Bruce showed her the contents of his morning mail.

"Selina, I knew you'd be upset by this, but we don't have time to waste on temper. The situation exists, we've got to knuckle down and deal with it."

"Oh, agreed," she said happily, "I'm going to deal by using her face as a scratching post. What's your plan?"

"Selina."

"Yank that silly bell off the tassel and shove it up her—"

"Selina."

"Don't give me that Father Knows Best / tsk-tsk /talk the loony off the ledge tone—"

"Selina, please."

"So FAR up her butt!"

Exasperated, he shot his hands out in a swift Ryotedori wrist grab, countering her expected TENCHINAGE response with a smooth turning lead that ended with her pinned firmly, back against his chest.

"Feel better getting that out of your system, Kitten?"

A hiss was the only answer, so he tightened his grip.

"Selina, there really isn't time for this."

She paused. "I don't see why not; is the clock ticking on something?"

"Joker released from Arkham two hours ago."

He felt her body relax within the pin, like a deflated balloon. "Shit. So that's what this is about."

"Of course. With Harley, it's always about Joker, one way or another. It took me a minute to work it out at first. Way to make Puddin' unhappy? Strike at his good buddy Brucie."

She turned within his arms and looked at him, but not tenderly.

"Eww."

"What?"

"We talked about that."

"What?"

"No getting inside their heads. It's creepy."

"It's important to know how the enemy thinks."

"It's a turnoff."

His lip twitched. "One more reason to get him back in Arkham quickly."

When Sly brought her drink, Ivy insisted he join her at her table... just for a few moments... to talk a bit... get caught up.

She wasn't used to this. Cajoling.

For his part, Sly was looking around uncomfortably. He didn't sit down with customers. He would chat for hours with anyone who sat at the bar, but to sit with patrons, that was Mr. Cobblepot's prerogative.

Of course... Sly *was* running the place now.

He sat.

They argued the whole way down to the cave.

"I am not treading on your sacred right to go all batty on Joker matters—"

"I do wish you would drop that expression. It is not 'going batty' to prepare a—"

"Whatever. Point is, Harley is screwing with ME, and I *don't* let that pass, and I *don't* let the boyfriend handle it—"

"Selina—"

"—AND I don't stand quietly in the background while the—AAAIIEEEEE!"

A scream such as had never been heard in the Batcave before echoed through the caverns, causing the bats to shriek, squawk and shudder several seconds after it ceased.

"WHAT! WHAT IS IT?" Bruce yelled.

Selina just stood, wide-eyed, staring at the Workstation 3 monitors with a look of frozen horror.

After a moment, she raised a finger and half-pointed. Bruce had already turned in the direction she was staring. His eyes registered the horror just as Selina found strength to manage a hoarse whisper:

"Purple mannequin."

On the screen, the *FAB!* decorator was showing Hugo Strange what they had made of his apartment in his absence.

"...this amazing artwork we found stashed away in the garage. Now this is clearly an important sculpture by one of Gotham's most challenging artists. A piece like that, you've got to show off. You don't want to hide this away, so see how we've made it the focal point of the room."

"Oh god," Bruce groaned.

There, in the center of Hugo Strange's exquisitely redecorated living room, sat a contorted mannequin dressed in a Catwoman costume.

A sharp intake of breath and Selina recovered from the initial shock.

"I take it Quinn is out of the basement," Bruce observed dryly.

Hostile green eyes glared at him.

"Did you know about this?" the tigress snarled.

Harley was indeed out of the basement—and Bruce thought it best to clarify that it was *Hugo* and not *Batman* that would be taking her place.

"I've seen the mannequin. She wasn't dressed that way at the time," he answered.

Selina stormed off to the costume vault but Bruce lagged behind, pretending to make an adjustment at the workstation. He too wanted to change into costume, but just this once he would wait and allow her to go first. Batman's survival instinct would never permit his telling Selina, but he considered the catsuit an improvement. When he had seen Hugo's mannequin in person, she wore a camisole, garter belt, silk stockings—and a Batman cowl.

"That's it!" Riddler proclaimed happily. "The Roman Calendar, that was my grand idea. Using the Roman Calendar!"

His smile faded as he looked around the empty lair, realizing he was speaking aloud and there was no one to hear.

"Oh well," he grumbled to the Scrabble tiles laid out on the kitchen table. "If there's no one to hear, there's also no one to think I'm strange for talking to myself, is there? The comforting paradox of living alone. Now where was I?"

Yes, the calendar, that was it. The Scrabble tiles would do well for clues, for each day was represented by a series of letters. He hadn't thought of that part last night!

"Aren't I clever," he smiled at the tiles.

"Now then, in the Roman Calendar there were specific days set aside to shop, to do business, to go to court, and to conduct various religious rites. All of my crimes..." he said, searching for a specific tile "...will take place on days that were designated *dies nefasti*, which meant no legal action could take place. Ha, ha, ha. Some irony, eh, Dark Knight! And the *dies nefasti* were indicated by the letter N, so where are the Ns, I'll need a lot of those..."

"Miss Isley, are you okay?"

"Oh my, OOH, oh, ha, ha, my," Poison Ivy gasped with her hand on her chest, "perfectly alright, Sly, thank you for your concern."

"You were laughing like Mr. Joker!"

She sighed.

"I know. I apologize. But it was funny."

"I've never seen you laugh before, ma'am," Sly said cautiously.

The slightest whiff of lemon tinged the air.

"It is true, I do not often indulge in rocking laughter like some kind of slobbering hyena," she said defensively, "but that does not mean I'm not capable..."

"No, of course not, ma'am," Sly enthused quickly, protective of the customer's goodwill and future tips, "I didn't mean it like that, honest. I think you have a very nice laugh."

Ivy paused, looking at Sly curiously, as if he started speaking a foreign language she'd never heard before.

"You do?"

"Yes, of course, Miss Isley. A *very* nice laugh. And a pretty smile too. You should do that more often."

The lemon tinge evaporated, replaced with the faintest hint of orange.

"Now Hugo, you're looking good, your apartment looks good, you know how to make the crème brûlée for the special dessert when you bring your date back here at the end of the evening. That just leaves the date itself. So we thought we would take you out to this Iceberg Lounge for a dry run, go over the menu, the wines, and work out some special touches for you to make sure this is an unforgettable evening."

CHAPTER 5: FAB!

Batman steeled himself. He had endured more brutal interrogations than this, from craftier foes.

“Bruce... please, darling... I know you know...”

Far more savage interrogations...

“I know you were scrutinizing that *FAB!* video when they drove up to Hugo’s place...”

Rigorous mind probes by unspeakably cunning alien technology...

“I know you caught details you could use to pinpoint his location...”

Ruthless...

“Please tell me.”

The interrogations and mind probes never went quite this far, however. Selina in the catsuit—Catwoman without the mask—an ungloved fingertip tracing down the ear of the bat emblem on his chest, across the arc of the head and then over the other ear.

“I may have paid attention to the feed, but that doesn’t mean I have house number, street and intersection...”

A lie. The Gotham Cathedral spire visible over the roof was the clincher. It was Featherbed Ave, mid-block, and the edge of the 5 was visible just outside the doorframe. So mid-500 block, probably 532 to 538.

“No? My great detective couldn’t work it out from some little detail?”

But there was no way he could tell her that.

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

Not when she was in this mood.

She bit her lip. Pouty. Completely out of character. She would stop at nothing right now.

“Then what will?”

“Considering what I *know* you have in mind? Very little.”

Naughty grin. DAMN HER.

“Ooh, that sounds like a challenge.”

The DEMON minion F’Nos had asked around. He found that it was all as he had been told: In the decadent city, it was not considered disloyal to go out seeking diversion on his evening off instead of sitting on his bunk and meditating on his duty. It was considered “normal” to go out. It would help him blend in.

The best place to go was obviously that favored by his master Gr’oriBr’di, the revered head of all DEMON operations in this hostile outpost of Gotham City. Gr’oriBr’di said he must go to the Iceberg Lounge, partake of a martini, and not hit on Roxy Rocket.

F’Nos understood this last instruction and was proud of his cleverness. American bars, he knew, were equipped with mechanical bulls upon which the warriors who gathered there would test their manliness and skill, trying to stay atop the mechanical

beast as it bucked and shimmied. Roxy Rocket, he surmised, was a similar test of manhood upon which the warriors of the Iceberg Lounge demonstrated their fighting skills. It was obviously a great honor to test one's mettle against Roxy Rocket, and it would give offense to the Iceberg Warriors for a newcomer to take on this great challenge without first proving oneself through lesser trials. F'Nos wondered what these preliminary tests might entail, but he was confident that his DEMON training was equal to the task.

He was confident until he reached the canopy at the Iceberg's front entrance and found himself surrounded by five men of curious appearance and manner, who walked excitedly in a circle around him, looking him up and down and commenting on his apparel.

"Now that is slimming... sort of a body stocking underneath?"

"Snaps for you, dearie."

"Like we told Hugo, it's the accessories that make the outfit."

"See how that big square collar matches the belt and the gloves—a touch of color, with restraint."

Flustered, F'Nos hurried past them into the building only to find himself surrounded once more...

"Watch the cord, Mac!"

"Duct it!"

"LIGHTING! Why aren't those wires taped down yet?"

"Busy hanging lamps here!"

"Tripods! Comin' through."

"Oomph, watch where you're going, pal. These are expensive cameras we're setting up."

F'Nos backed away from the cluster of burly technicians and bewildering electronics, this time to collide with... Salvation.

"Gr'oriBr'di! Most esteemed master, Gr'oriBr'di!"

F'Nos's face lit up as he recognized one of the trio he had backed into. Then he remembered his station and bowed obsequiously.

"Whoa, no, no, none of that," Gr'oriBr'di ordered, pulling F'Nos to his feet. "Glad you made it, buddy. You remember Sly..."

The man next to Gr'oriBr'di, the one who had come to the Chinatown headquarters, gave a friendly nod, and F'Nos answered with an uncertain half-bow.

"...And this is Lori Leeberg." Gr'oriBr'di indicated a trim, petite woman in a blue, skirted suit. "She produces the show these guys are setting up for."

F'Nos had no idea what 'producing' meant, but he could see the men working with the equipment were minions and this woman was supervising them, so he bowed low as he would to any overseer and waited for leave to rise. Lori had extended her hand when, instead of shaking it, this strange man bent in half and stood staring at her shoes. She looked to Greg Brady in confusion, and when he only shrugged, she patted F'Nos on the head.

"Thank you, F'Nos," Brady said, "Just go to the bar and wait for a second. These guys will be done setting up in a few minutes and Sly will be right over."

He pointed the strange man towards the bar and returned to Lori's side. "They will be done soon, won't they? I mean, kinda blocking traffic here, and people are starting to arrive for the night..."

As he spoke, Catman stumbled in, nearly as flustered as F'Nos had been. Luckily, he sidestepped the tech crew.

"There is a cadre of paisley pushers out there!" he announced to the room at large. Then, seeing the unusual activity, he hurried around the technicians to the tiny group of familiar faces. "Sly, my dear fellow, there is a cluster of highly opinionated men in hair gel outside the door to this establishment. They made many snide comments about my cape."

Sly looked to Lori and Greg with an I-told-you-so grin.

"That's the cast of *FAB!*, Mr. Blake. They're going to be filming here tonight."

"Taping," Lori corrected.

"Right, sorry. All this TV jargon is new to me. They'll be taping here tonight and tomorrow, and then the show will be broadcast—when did you say, Miss Leeberg?"

Catman had been looking at the woman since she first spoke.

"In a few weeks," she answered, "once it's edited down with the other segments."

"I know you," Blake remarked. "You were in here before. FOIL! You were the silver foil girl—she was the silver foil girl!" He pointed with excited indignation, repeating the accusation to Greg and Sly, and then looked back to her with a disapproving glance at the dull blue of her tailored suit. "The foil was better."

The hostess Raven looked theatrically down at her seating chart, although it was already determined where the group before her would be seated. *FAB!* The cast of *FAB!*—two of them anyway—Jai and Ted!!!—were right here IN PERSON. Raven adored the show, taking pains to tape any episode she had to miss because of her job at the Iceberg.

And here they were—Jai and Ted—standing right before her podium, waiting to be seated! She smiled up at them and led their party through the dining room to the large round table strategically placed before the video cameras. The *FAB!* culture and food experts took their seats on either side of Hugo Strange.

It *was* Hugo Strange, Raven knew that. But it was touch and go if she would have recognized him if she hadn't been fully briefed before the group arrived. In her mind, Raven imagined how the transformation might be described on the show...

In place of the coke bottle glasses were slim tinted lenses in chic wire frames that rested lower on the nose and covered only the bottom two-thirds of the eye. The beard was replaced with only the faintest layer of stubble, perhaps a day's growth that suggested a sophisticated but rugged casualness and framed the face to make him appear less jowly. The suit was new too, a deep wine-colored shirt with a two-tone maroon tie in a checkerboard pattern, topped with a textured sports coat, also wine-colored, but a touch lighter.

Raven was not one to flirt with customers, least of all a drooling mouth breather like Strange. But it was for television, it was for *FAB!* If she complimented him, that might get on the air (and it *was* the least icky he'd ever looked).

"Looking very dapper tonight, Dr. Strange," she offered, handing around the menus.

He looked up at her over the tops of the glasses, a wild flash in his eyes, and he opened his mouth to speak—then he stopped as if remembering something, glanced to the man at his left, the one at his right, and finally he looked back up at Raven.

"Thank you, my dear," he said simply, then looked again at his companions as if expecting a biscuit.

"Now then, Hugo," his culture guru began, "when you sit down with your lady, it's best to let her have a minute to look over the menu herself, but if she hesitates, you want to be able to suggest a specialty or two. So let's call over a waiter and ask what this place is known for."

"Riddle me this!" a loud voice rang out from the doorway.

Strange winced. "You're about to see what the Iceberg is known for."

"What is the absolute worst thing you could run into in the course of a crime spree?"

"Batman," Tom Blake answered.

Riddler shook his head no.

"Batman and Robin," Scarecrow said.

Again Riddler shook his head.

"Batman and Superman?" Mad Hatter guessed.

Riddler looked around at them slowly, his shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"You all think inside the box," he grumbled sadly and started for the bar.

"WELL?" Catman bellowed, "Let's have the answer already. What is the absolute worst thing you could run into in the course of a crime spree?"

"Your ex," Nigma said flatly.

Hugo's food guru tried to resume their conversation:

"Now before we get to the wine list, what about a cocktail? I see martinis are a specialty here... "

"Your ex!" Jervis exclaimed, eager to get the full story, "Would that be Query the first, Query the second, Echo, that short one with the bandana or—"

"Doris."

About half the room offered faint murmurs of sympathy while the other half glanced furtively at the jukebox. Catman spoke for the latter group.

"NO COUNTRY MUSIC!" he roared.

"WHY? Don't want to sully the memory of the Stray Cat Strut marathon?" Riddler yelled back. "And what are the Stray Cats but rockabilly? Hm? Answer me that. And how far is that from country? That's what we want to know, Tom! Answer that one!"

"Martini!" the *Fab!* duo called out, "can we get a couple martinis over here?!"

"When I have woman issues, I handle it as a villain should," Blake maintained, "in the field, striking a blow in the name of Feline Criminality!"

"Yeah, right. 'CATWORTHY jewels!' That meant Selina, you pretentious ass. And your *woman issues* were striking out with a bimbo in tinfoil—"

"That purple hellcat is not—"

"—and not recognizing that the kitty-chick groupie was here for you—"

"—some sort of monopoly on cat crimes just because she's got a big rack—"

"—whereas Doris I ACTUALLY LOVED!"

Much of the room went quiet after Nigma's outburst, so that the conversation at the *FAB!* table could be clearly heard...

“...not a fiasco, but an opportunity. If something like this were to occur tomorrow night, it’s an opening to say ‘Ah yes, Catwoman. I have a very important piece of Catwoman-inspired artwork in my apartment. Perhaps we can go back there after dinner and I’ll show it to you.’”

Beneath his sunless tan, Hugo blanched.

“*Et tu, Hugo,*” Catman said simply.

Hugo Strange sat alone at the large table under the television cameras—alone as far as he was concerned. Poison Ivy’s plant companions now occupied the seats on either side of him. They were basking in the warmth of the television lights, she said.

Hmph.

Poison Ivy. A manic antho-hylo-botanophilic with obsessive narcissistic overtones, control issues and goddess delusions indicative of acute egomania.

And he sat there with her pets.

His *Fab!* advisors had abandoned him. They sat at opposite ends of the bar, consoling Riddler and Catman respectively, while Hugo sat before television cameras playing with a swizzle stick.

“Doris was special,” Eddie was explaining to the food expert, Ted. “A mind like that, never too tired for a brainteaser, that’s hard to come by. Did the Times crossword in ink...”

“The Blake men were always big game hunters,” Blake was telling Jai, the culture expert. “That’s out of vogue today, but I tried running a photo safari. Still plenty dangerous, right? Harsh jungle, hot sun, lots of 600 pound wild things...”

“...So Games Magazine had this contest, big promotion, with a pyramid of gold bars as the grand prize. A prize of gold bars for solving their supposedly unsolvable puzzle, you see. And these gold bricks are on display in their lobby...”

“...there is just no challenge in taking pictures of rhinos and lions instead of shooting them, so I undertook to become the ultimate predator. Mine is the thrill of the hunt with the ultimate adversary, the Batman...”

Jai tried—for the fourth time—to plug a gallery he knew in SoHo that featured safari photography. He stole a glance at his colleague, similarly trapped at the far end of the bar.

“...so I attack the offices, and there she is. My Doris! She works there now! She actually made up some of the puzzles in this promotion...”

“...can’t upstage her. *She’s* the cat-villain everybody knows. *She’s* in with the old guard, Riddler and Penguin and Two-Face, and I’m just some guy in a funny mask. ME! With my enchanted cloak, fashioned from the fabled Fabric of Ka, imbued with the mythic nine lives of a cat!”

Jai nodded... slowly... sipped his martini ... and didn’t say a word.

“...she says ‘anti-social criminal behavior is *so unnecessary*, Edward. If you set your mind to it, I’m sure you could win the grand prize legitimately’...”

“...and when I scored the White Jade Cat from the Xing Gallery, police never came after me, Batman never came after me. All assumed Catwoman had taken it!”

"...and to think I always wanted her to see me in the field. I really shine out there. I am in my element. King of Conundrums! The Prince of Puzzlers..."

"Oh, I get it, like a drag name!" Ted exclaimed. Then he glanced furtively at the cameras. They were too far from the mics for any of this to be picked up, or that *bon mot* would have surely made the promo for the episode.

"...so I said 'Purple? What's with purple? There aren't any purple cats!' ... And what does the flea-bitten she-witch have to say to that? She looks *good* in it. She wears what she pleases, and it pleases her to wear purple because (see above) she looks good in it. And this rabble cheered. These people sitting here right now let loose and cheered her on. THERE ARE NO PURPLE CATS, PEOPLE! And that's when they stopped inviting me to parties."

"...went in prepared to confront Batman, Robin, Nightwing, any of them. Even that Azrael disaster would be preferable to this..."

"...when I found the solution: MASCULINE cat-crimes. The priceless remains of a Saber-Tooth Tiger at the historical society..."

"...there are 8-million people in this city. Certainly the law of large numbers says the chance of running into DORIS at the scene of a crime should be all but impossible..."

"...that's when my ideas petered out. There just aren't that many cat-objects out there that are decidedly macho..."

"Right, right," Jai exclaimed, "Not a big call for bobcat testicle sculptures... Well, not in the U.S. anyway." Then he looked longingly at the cameras trained across the room, just as Ted had, and sighed in despair that none of this priceless conversation could possibly be picked up by the cameras or microphones.

"...probably seeing that guy that had the desk by the door, the one with all the crossword puzzles tacked up—with the thick hair and... What is Blake saying down there?"

"...with masculine appeal so as to never again be confused with the flea-bitten..."

"OH FOR GOD'S SAKE BLAKE! You wandered around here for a month muttering 'masculine catstuff, masculine catstuff' until Oswald asked you to leave because you were bothering the other customers. WHICH YOU WERE! Then YOU said there was only one particular customer who was bothered, and it was disgraceful the way we all kowtowed to the flea-bitten she-cat, and that's when Dent hit you."

Hugo Strange turned to the plant on his left. "A puzzle fetishist and a porphyrophobic ailurophile with a vestment fixation have hijacked my makeover."

His complaint was interrupted by a ruckus in the entranceway, followed by the sound of an insane cackle growing closer.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Hugo turned to the plant on his right. "Oh, like it can get worse."

"Hahaha... ha. Ha. Yes, boys and girls, The Joker has come among you once more. But wait! Hold off on the cheers of welcome, for once you hear what's happened to me, HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA—*you'll weep*. But first, SLY! Sly, my good man, a beer and a crowbar, if you please, HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Taking a hint from the wild pointing from the dark haired hostess, Jai and Ted hid themselves behind the ornate screen behind her podium once the mad clown made his entrance.

"This is outrageous," they complained in stage whispers, "it's becoming the Catman and Riddler show! Or it would be if they'd been close enough to the microphones."

"But you've got a few minutes at the table," Raven insisted, "remember, when you arrived, telling him about the menu. And I said how nice he looked. You can use that."

They looked at her and then at each other. They didn't look happy.

"Well," Ted whined, "I guess we could. But snaps for the couture doesn't do us any good. If we use that clip, it will just set Carson off, you know. It'll be all about the clothes and the beard and nothing else."

Raven bit her lip. The clothing expert, Carson, was certainly the funniest and most colorful of the *Fab!* crew...

"We can still salvage it," Jai said, "we just go back out there, take our seats like none of it ever happened, and say 'so Hugo, if you were on your date now, wouldn't this be a splendid opportunity to talk about the local color and...'"

"You can't go back out there," Raven interrupted. "You don't understand, Joker is here now. Don't you get it. JOKER is the CARSON of the Iceberg set."

"Sly, oh Sly? Where is Sly—WHAT HO! Come away from that hothouse harlot, my lad, you don't know where she's been. Bring Uncle Joker a good sturdy beer and a nice frothy crowbar."

"Excuse me, Miss Isley. Duty calls." Sly stood, but Poison Ivy reached out, placing a proprietary hand on his arm. "I told you, call me Pamela. And there's no need to jump just because the Lord High Jester starts barking orders."

"It kind of is my job, ma'am."

Ivy bit her lip as Sly left for the bar. Oswald had made it quite clear that if she ever unleashed her more irresistible wiles on his bartender, lifetime banishment from the Iceberg would only be the beginning of her troubles. The birdman did little more than strut—or waddle—around his nightclub for the last few years, but still, the Penguin was once a force to be reckoned with. There was really no telling how much trouble he could be if he decided to be trouble. It was better to let Sly go on about his business, even if, at the moment, that meant listening to whatever had Joker worked up now.

"...And it was locked! The Hacienda was LOCKED. I never lock the door. Who would dare break in? HAHAHAHAHAAAAA!"

Unfortunately, that meant everybody else had to listen too, for Joker did not seem to have a volume control.

"HAHAHAHA-SO. It takes me fifteen minutes to get in the door, and then I realize, HAHAHAAAAA, I can break a window. So I go back outside, break a window and finally I'm home. Or I think I'm home, but you know what? ... I say *do you know what, Sly?*"

"What, Mr. Joker?"

“It was pink! Somebody came into the Hacienda East, put a lock on the door, and made the whole place pink! So I went to the Hacienda West—another lock on the door! And now I’m starting to get concerned. There is some kind of serial lock-installer loose in the city with a truckload of pink shit. What’s the world coming too, I ask you. So I go to get my goody bag, because sooner or later I’m going to find this guy—and my goody bag is gone! No acid-spray flower, no 50,000 volt hand buzzer, no lead-plated rubber chicken!”

Joker picked up his drink and walked with it into the dining room, directing his complaints to the room at large.

“So I went to Circus Burger, because by this time I’m having a bit of a day, and there’s nothing else to do when you’re having a day but to order some fries from a big clown head, then take the big clown head with you, find a guy in a paper hat, and bash, bash, bash away with the clown head until the paper hat is all squashed flat, and then eat your fries. HAHAAHAHAHAAA. But the clown head is gone. I get up to the window and THE CLOWN HEAD IS GONE. Just a little black squawk box. You can’t bash, bash, bash paper hat guy with a little black squawk box. IT ISN’T DONE.”

“Where was Harley?” Ivy asked testily. That sick clown had a tendency to take out his bad days on his girlfriend. Harley and Ivy were not on friendly terms at the moment—and they weren’t going to be unless and until Harley explained what she was doing on a crime spree with Two-Face. But even if they weren’t friendly right now, they were still friends. And Ivy would repeat her question until she got an answer. “Where was Harley during all of this?”

“Who?” he asked with exaggerated confusion.

The plants on either side of Hugo got up from their chairs and repositioned themselves near Joker in order to strike if necessary.

“So anyway,” Joker tried his best to ignore his new escorts and went on explaining his troubles, “So now I’m getting kinda frustrated, and I want to let off some steam. So you know that Gotham T-shirt place in Times Square with all the bat stuff for the tourists, you know that big sign they have with the great big BAT in the oval just LOOMING over the store. I figured what that needed was a big ol’ red smiley face painted on it, and I just knew somebody in the store would bleed red, right? I get there, and there’s a great big picture of ME in the window: ‘Celebrating 365 Days without a Joker-related incident!’ And these tourists came up asking to take my picture standing in front of the window-picture and the sign. So now I can’t go after them or it’ll be a year until they can put up the sign again. So I went to Smiling Pete’s Auto Dealership to have some fun. With a name like Smiling Pete’s, you know they’ve got to be a fun crowd. So I figure: Joker—that’s me—take yourself down to Smiling Pete’s, mow ‘em all down, and let Chaplin sort ‘em out. I get there, and it’s now THRIFTY Pete’s. I look up at the sign, and Pete’s not smiling! He’s squeezing a nickel—and he’s not even happy about it! And the Laughing Buddha is now Peking Gardens. And the Grinning Gremlin is now Twenlowe Brothers Limited. AND THAT’S NOT FUNNY!”

One of the animated plants standing next to him mimed holding its stomach and rocking with laughter.

Joker looked at it wickedly for a moment, then at Ivy, and then back at the plant. He lunged at it, intent on ripping it to shreds, and it ran behind Hugo’s table. Joker moved

to run round the table to the left—the plant did likewise so they remained exactly opposite each other. The Joker moved right, the plant moved right. Fake left-run right. Fake right-scurry under. Move by move, the plant evaded capture and Joker became more and more enraged.

Finally, the mad clown picked up a chair in frustration and smashed it against the table, breaking it into several large pieces. He gripped the largest piece and swung it terribly.

“NOW we got us a party. Why is there never a Robin around when you need one?... BLAKE! You’re in orange and yellow, get over here! HAHHAHAHA HAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Nigma, who had been watching the proceedings like a floorshow, finally spoke up. “Time to test the nine lives theory, puddycat?”

Selina bent down with excruciating slowness and dragged her lips over the insignia on Batman’s chest. There was a grunt... followed by a deep-throated purr.

“I do love that sound,” she murmured, “that ‘I’m not entirely certain what you’re up to but I’m not stopping you any time soon’ grunt.”

A different rumble sounded, haughtier, disapproving. “You’re naming the grunts now?”

“Only that one,” she laughed, her hands drifting around his waist. He tensed for a split second until he felt them settle on his back, clear of the utility belt. “It’s not all the grunts, just that one. I’ve called it that for quite a long time. Since the Julian Rubies. Remember?”

“How could I forget?”

“You had fun that night, admit it.”

“Fun? Fun is not a word I normally associate with patrols or interventions—”

“Fun isn’t a word anybody associates with patrols or interventions...” she remarked, then switched to a sultry whisper that puffed hot breath onto his lower cheek, “but we were talking about the Julian Rubies—and you had fun.”

“As I recall, you didn’t get what you wanted *that* night either,” he twitched.

She ignored the taunt and focused on the non-denial.

“It could be even more fun now... the mask can come off, no pointy ears in the way.”

She pinged an ear of the cowl playfully.

“I see,” he said gruffly, “You think that a little playful seduction is all it’s going to take to get me to reveal the information you want... if I even had the information to give?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Well, if that’s the case...” With inhuman speed, he wrapped his arms around her waist, lifted her to a sitting position on the ledge next to the console, and stepped in close—too close. Leaning down, his lips brushing against the base of her neck, he slid one hand across her lower back while the other glided upward to tangle in her hair. “...Why don’t you let me handle Strange and you can take care of Quinn.”

Selina said nothing... for a long moment, the skin of her throat tingled where the hot breathy whisper had warmed it. Her pulse pounded and her heart raced—but no less so her mind raced for a reason, any reason, to reject this outrageous proposal. He was finally playing back—which, okay, was *new* and she couldn't honestly say it was a bad thing. On the contrary, that tingle and the voice and the fingers were... *NOT a bad thing*. But he couldn't win. Not on the first try, no way. She'd suffered a hundred rebuffs like this, or a thousand. No way he was going to pull this off on the first try. Her brain simply had to come up with a reason to reject this—without getting nasty. Definitely didn't want to discourage his doing it again. Some reason—amusing playful reason—damn, it was hard to think with all the blood rushing...

"You don't have claws," she said finally.

It sounded better in her head. Hugo's crime obviously required sharp bits of...

The hand behind her back fell away, and Batman quickly pulled three batarangs out of his belt, one between each finger—then he slowly dragged them up her back.

"No, but I have the next best thing..." he grveled.

"Well," she said thoughtfully, enjoying the feel of the cold metal as he played along her spine, "maybe you actually *could* remove his colon with one of those things... but even so..." she sighed finally, "You're not me."

He would understand that. He had to. Ultimately, it came down to that: the perverted atrocity was *a crime against Catwoman* and *Catwoman* had to handle it.

"You're not me, Handsome," she repeated, "So no." She lunged forward, momentarily sucking on his lower lip, then released it. "The game was fun while it lasted though." Then she spoke airily, gathering her gloves, cowl and whip as if to depart. "Well, if you're not going to help me hit his apartment while he's out, I'll just have to go to the Iceberg and nail him there."

She waited while he mulled it over, reading his thought: private evisceration vs. public pounding.

"Selina, they're still filming. Chances are there's cameras, production crew and assistants all over that house... granted, some of those brownstones on the 500 block of Featherbed Avenue have rear entrances but—"

"Featherbed, 500 block, look for the camera crews, got it." She threw her arms around his neck spouting a sincere "Thank you, My Dark Knight, my dearest love" before pressing a wet kiss onto his open mouth. "You really are the best."

He grunted as she started to leave. "Selina, wait..."

He paused.

His lip twitched.

"Whatever you're planning... get rid of that damn mannequin."

CHAPTER 6: HA-HA-HAPPY HOUR

"Come on now, Blakeypoo, bring that nice fresh cape over here. Uncle Joker's in the mood to bash some orange and yellow, and there doesn't seem to be a Robin around."

"Comrades, DEFEND ME!" Catman wailed, diving for cover.

He dove first behind Mad Hatter, who stepped nimbly aside, then behind Mr. Freeze, who sidestepped just as swiftly. Finally, Catman ran behind F'Nos, seated at the bar. F'Nos swiveled on his barstool to face the man scrunching behind him. Catman turned, F'Nos swiveled, Catman turned again, F'Nos swiveled again, making a complete circle. After a second full revolution, F'Nos decided he didn't like this game and took out his saber, pointing it at his antagonist's throat. Catman crawled on all fours to find a barstool with a more cooperative patron to hide behind.

"That's what we really need around here," Joker complained loudly to no one in particular. "A supply of Robins to take out our frustrations. Oswald! Oh, Ozzy! Can't we get some... where is he?"

Joker looked around the room, searching for Oswald, and seemed to notice the cameras for the first time.

"Now what have we here?" He put his eye up to the nearest camera lens. "Helloooo, anybody hooome in there?"

"Ahem," Sly cleared his throat distinctly, "Mr. Joker, I'm very sorry, sir, but we can't have this. We cannot have you beating up the other patrons on national television. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Joker paused knocking on the front of the cameras and turned towards the incomprehensible words. There was Sly, looking unhappy. And Giggles right next to him, arms crossed, unhappier still.

"Now look, boys," Joker began reasonably, "I can take a joke as well as the next guy, I really can. Not nice to be playing jokes when I've told you all about pink haciendas and smiling Pete not smiling, but hey, not everybody is as nice as me. Nevertheless..." He swung his weapon viciously, taking out one of the tripods. "...I've got a crowbar here and I want to let off some steam—"

F'Nos, seeing Gr'oriBr'di engaged in a showdown, ran forward with his saber drawn, positioning himself between his master and the threat.

"Hey look," Joker pointed his stick, "One of those Ra's Aluminum Ghuls. You want a piece of me, Flyboy?"

"Mr. Joker, that isn't a crowbar, it's a broken chair, and it's coming out of the security deposit—"

"You should replace it with the non-wooden kind, like my table," a cool voice decreed from her recently repaired polymer booth.

Sly looked to the heavens for patience. "Not now, Miss Isley, please. Got a situation here."

"I must insist," Ivy declared, "No man can refuse me and it is a perfect time to establish a new policy—" As she spoke, her plants positioned themselves on either side of Sly and Greg. The larger one extended a tendril and took a belligerent poke at

the Joker, while the other arranged its leaves to mimic the crossed-arms position with which the two men faced the stupefied clown.

“NOT FUNNY!” Joker screamed. “But I’ll show you what is funny, HAHAAHAHAHA!”

Killer Croc stepped forward into the middle of the gathering. “No Ha-Ha at Sly. Sly go away, Hugo tend bar. Croc no like Hugo tending bar. Clown no Ha-Ha at Sly.”

Joker looked with hatred from Croc, to Sly, to the plant, to Sly, to Hugo Strange in the back flipping him off, to F’Nos, to the other plant, to Greg, and back to Sly.

“You’ll all be sorry,” he moped to the extent his permanent smile would permit. “You can’t keep a clown down. And you can’t get down off an elephant. You get down off a duck. HAHAAHAHA. Down off a duck, I gotta remember that. Anyway, as God as mah witness, I’ll find what’s become of my joybuzzer and rubber chicken, and when I do, as Bob is my witness, I’ll never see Gumby again.”

...: OraCom Channel 4: Batmobile ...

:: Boss, I’m still monitoring that video feed like you asked. Joker has left the Iceberg. Repeat, Joker has left the Iceberg. ::

“Damn it.”

Batman’s foot hit the gas pedal, in frustration more than desire to accelerate the car. Frustration—and guilt. He should have anticipated this. Harley’s notebook had listed every offhand crime idea Joker’s sick mind had spouted over the course of a year. Batman naturally informed the businesses that were potential targets, suggesting strategies wherever he could as to how they might protect themselves.

Why hadn’t he foreseen this? What did he expect to happen? Blocked at every turn, Joker was sure to go off some way or other. Batman should have found a way to track him from the moment he left Arkham.

Again his foot hit the gas and again the surge of the Batmobile’s powerful engine seemed an outlet for Batman’s guilt, rage, and dread.

It was pointless now to continue at top speed to the Iceberg. Joker would be long gone by the time he got there. All that would remain would be to count up the bodies. The denizens of the Iceberg Lounge were criminals; most were his deadliest enemies. But he was not eager to see what Joker had done to them.

“O?”

:: Here, Boss. ::

“Body count?”

:: Um. ...Zero. He just... left. ::

“He LEFT?”

:: Affirmative. ::

“Impossible. Joker would never slink away.”

:: Boss, it’s on tape. You can see it. I don’t have sound; I still can’t get past those damn anti-bugging measures Cobblepot uses. But it’s there, plain as day. There was what looked like a standoff with Sly and Brady and the plants. A DEMON op and Croc got involved, and Joker made some kind of a speech, shook his fists and left. ::

“Acknowledged. Batman out.”

Since his indoctrination of the Cult of Ra's al Ghul, F'Nos had never been guilty of cowardice. He was an Ajax second level of the DEMON's League of Assassins. He did not flee combat. He did not flee danger of any kind. His life was sworn to the Great One and it would be an honor to lose it in service to his liege or any of the DEMON's appointed overlords, such as Gr'oriBr'di.

F'Nos would never flee combat or danger.

He did flee **FAB!**

F'Nos had come to understand, in the course of his evening at the Iceberg Lounge, that the men who surrounded him when he first neared the building were minions of a cult called **FAB!** just as he himself was of DEMON.

He realized that his behavior at the door must have given great offense, and he watched carefully when two of them came into the bar and sought an opportunity to introduce himself and explain his earlier rudeness. Indeed, he was rehearsing what he would say—

*Fellow warriors, I am F'Nos, my saber pledged to Ra's Al Ghul since the year of the second Blood Moon. I know not of your calling to **FAB!**, but pray that we might commune as brother soldiers until such time as the aims of our masters might conflict and we meet in glorious battle.*

—when the episode with the mad clown compelled him to put such thoughts aside and engage his sword in defense of Gr'oriBr'di.

When the menacing clown had left, F'Nos found himself the center of much attention. Many who saw the event wished to buy him a drink, and Gr'oriBr'di gave him leave to accept their hospitality.

F'Nos was at the bar surrounded by these admirers when saw the cowardly warriors of **FAB!** creeping out from their hiding place. They had hid themselves! He was outraged and denounced them. But they took his pointing and calling their names to be some kind of invitation and joined the crowded circle at the bar. Here they renewed their interest in his apparel, and even expanded it to include his saber!

He fled.

While there could be no excuse for cowardice, F'Nos assured himself as he left the building that there was no shame in departing a nightclub. As if the Fates themselves would confirm this view, he was immediately rewarded with an important bit of enemy intelligence. The miscreant clown that threatened his master was still in the area. He was ascending the stairs in the rear of the building, and F'Nos watched suspiciously as he knocked on the door of some apartment over the club and was admitted.

Treachery! The clown was hatching some plot against the Iceberg, and F'Nos drew the saber that the **FAB!** cultists declared “pointy but practical” and swore on its blade to safeguard his master Gr'oriBr'di's interests no less than he would Ra's al Ghul himself!

...: OraCom Channel 4: Batmobile ...:

"O?"

:: Yeah, Boss? ::

"Joker's heading on leaving the Iceberg?"

:: Can't tell from the vid feeds, it's all inside cameras. All I could see is he went out the door.

::

"Damn it. Alright, call in Robin, 'Wing... Batgirl... everybody, get them all. Draw a net around the Iceberg. Monitor each direction for Joker sightings... Do NOT approach. Just let me know if you see or hear anything. It's Joker and he's agitated. No telling what he'll do."

:: Roger, Boss. All except Nightwing. He's got a 2-11 at the river. I'll send him to backup R as soon as he's clear. ::

"Quack-a-kwa? That's all you've got to say for yourself? Ozzy, I am appalled. I am shocked. I am shocked and appalled. I offer you the greatest honor any villain could hope for, a team up with ME! HAHAHAHAAHAAA. And what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Quack-akwa-kwa..."

Joker was not so insane that he didn't recognize a stinking drunk when he saw one. And he'd watched enough television to know that the way to deal with stinking drunks is to stick them in a cold shower and make them drink coffee.

A half-hour later, he discovered, to his dismay, that the shower and coffee routine doesn't sober them up; it wakes them up. Now he had a wide-awake drunk on his hands.

"KWAK-KWAK-KWAK! Outragemush! Abslootly outrageimous! Couple Evita Perons on my hands. KWAK-KWAK! Taking over my club, *All About Eve*. KWAK! KWAK! KWAK!!!"

"An old fashioned team-up, Ozzy. That's what's called for. Joker and Penguin, together again."

Oswald squinted at him strangely. "Oh contraire. We were never together. -hic- Unless you count that time it looked like I was killedydead and -hic- somehow half of Gotham got the idea you did it and you-ulgh-hic-gulgh had to clear yrself. That is the closest, -hic- we ever came to working together. -kwak-belch-"

"It's the SPIRIT OF THE THING, Man!" Joker argued. "The Old Guard reclaiming all that is HAHAHAHAAHAAA in Gotham from these young whippersnappers with their newfangled ideas about not beating Catman to death on television."

"KWAK-KWAK-KWAK!"

"Whatever."

Roxy Rocket arrived at the Iceberg, still in the throes of an adrenaline high from a thrillingly dangerous Nightwing chase. She approached the bar, face flushed, and laid out a bit of wet fabric torn from the vigilante's costume.

"Lay my drink on there, Sly," she called. "Torn from the beast as he jumped onto my rocket from the bridge, if you can believe it. Almost tanked in the river. WOHHOO what a rush!"

"Roxy, my dear," Riddler said sweetly, "Dragons are known to be very fond of riddles, so answer me this: Who will be impressed by your ripping a bit of cloth from an iguana when we are toasting a bona-fide dragon slayer in our midst?"

Roxy's flush of excitement glowed redder into a flush of anger.

"Figures," she huffed, "Like the time I do a record-setting two mile freefall skydive into a ring of fire, and by the time the picture comes out, some glory hound has done 2.5 into a churning lava pit. So what flavor of the month upstaged me this time?"

"Here you go, Roxy. Long Island Iced Tea with extra Coke and triple sec, just like you like it."

"Him," Nigma pointed. "TO SLY, everybody!"

"TO SLY!" the room intoned.

Roxy blinked.

"Sly?"

"TO SLY!" the crowd repeated.

"Let's see it again," Batman ordered.

Oracle's fingers skimmed over a key and the footage of the Joker-Sly confrontation replayed on the largest monitor of her workstation. Once the situation at the Iceberg had defused on its own, there was no need for Batman to go there. He'd come here to view the vid feed and deduce what he could.

"Tell me again why I couldn't just send this file to the Batmobile?"

"Bigger screen here," Batman growled absently, eyes never leaving the monitor, "I need to see detail. Especially without sound... Run it again."

Barbara sighed and set up the vid-file to loop.

"That should hold you for a while," she said turning to wheel towards the kitchen.

"Am I keeping you from something?" Batman asked, noting the sigh.

"Yeah," Barbara joked, "Got a hot date coming by soon. Nice guy, comes in through the window."

Batman's lip twitched—not at Barbara's remark but at the tape: Ivy's plant poking Joker in the chest. He watched the confrontation twice more before Barbara returned to her place with a fresh cup of tea.

"Actually," she admitted, "you are sort of keeping me from a project. There are two more sets of vid feeds on this node. One is a van interior and the other is a residential apartment—"

"I know," Batman interrupted, freezing the frame and enlarging the image of the DEMON agent.

"Oh, you knew." Barbara deflated. "Well, you only gave me the keycodes for this one and I found the others on my own. I was keeping an eye on them just in case, but then about half an hour ago, I lost the signal from the apartment."

Batman suppressed the lip-twitch in a grunt.

"Not a surprise. Don't worry about that."

Selina, obviously, he surmised. But there was no need to go into that with Oracle. He looked back at the screen. Joker's mouth was too far from the camera to read his lips effectively, and the sword blocked Sly's face for much of the confrontation. Whatever went down, there were no clues here as to what it meant or what might happen next.

By now, there were three different accounts of what had happened between Joker and Sly. The groupies and the gawkers all focused on Ivy's plants, for that was the kind of local color they braved the dangers of the Iceberg in order to see. The henchmen's stories all centered around F'Nos, the fierce DEMON minion who had raced to Greg Brady's side "like the fat hobbit running in to save Frodo." The rogue accounts all dwelt on Joker's humiliated exit. But the one aspect that intrigued Roxy remained constant through the many versions: Sly. Sly had stood up to Joker; Sly remained and Joker was gone.

She looked around for her hero. The new big bad of Gotham was Sly, her Sly! Her one and only bartender beau. Roxy's eyes danced with excitement as she scanned the room for the man of her dreams when... they narrowed. Sly, her Sly, the man of her dreams, her bartender beau was sitting in Poison Ivy's corner booth with the garden slut crawling over him like some kind of vine!

As Roxy marched through the bar towards the main dining room, there were murmurs that caused Tom Blake to start from his barstool and look around furtively. When he realized the whispers about a "catfight" had nothing to do with him, he slumped back down in contemplation of his highball.

"Scuse me," she began, tapping not Ivy but Sly on the shoulder as a means to get both their attention. "I realize we're supposed to make allowances because you're a plant and all, and you don't get how this whole thing works with normal men and women getting together, instead of, say, some slime mold from the Malaria islands. But I say 'Hey, if she's gonna hang out with humans, then somebody should clue her in. Otherwise she's just going to keep making an ass of herself, over and over, time after time, man after man—after man.' So here's the truth, Pammy, direct from me to you: a healthy red-blooded guy will grab at anything once, particularly if it's rubbing up and down on him like a three-dollar whore. That's not true love, it's not even grooving on your lemon scented beauty. It's just what they do. Reminds them of—Excuse me—"

A wisteria had come up behind her and Roxy paused to swing it into a headlock.

"—As I was saying, they're not overcome by your beauty or anything. It just reminds them of all those daydreams they had about the naked gal in the magazines when they were fourteen, locked in the bathroom, beating off to Daddy's Playboys. It's got nothing to do with you. To go the distance with—oh, let's say a guy like Sly here—you gotta have something more than bare skin and a set of knockers going for you. You need to connect with him as a person—which is gonna be real fuckin' hard to do after I twist your head off and stick it on my tailpipe!"

...: **OraCom Channel 4: Batmobile** ...

:: *Oh my dear lord.* ::

"Oracle? What kind of report is that?"

:: *Um, sorry, Boss. Distraction. What's your ETA getting back to the Iceberg?* ::

"Six minutes. Has he been spotted?"

:: *No. There's— It's—* ::

"Oracle, report."

:: *It wouldn't be a good time for you to show up at the Iceberg, Boss. Something weird's happening.* ::

Batman seethed. Joker on the loose and now Oracle unable to furnish a concise coherent report.

"What exactly is happening?"

:: *Without sound, I'd have to say it's—OH, OUCH!* ::

"O! WHAT IS IT?!"

:: *That's gotta hurt... I mean, er, it's... I'm speculating because there's still no audio, you understand...* ::

"Spit it out, Barbara, what the hell is going on?"

:: *Roxy. Ivy. I think the technical term is... a catfight.* ::

Tom Blake leaned in the doorway between the bar and dining room with his arms crossed.

"When I scratched up that table, they charged me \$1400," he remarked drolly as Ivy tried digging her nails into her own wood-free table to prevent being pulled off by her hair.

"Stupid herb-rinse bitch," Roxy wailed as wisteria tendrils clawed at her arms, trying to pull her off Ivy's hair. "Just getting back at me for Harvey, don't think I don't know!"

Sly merely remained at the table, cradling his head in his hands. The better part of valor forbade trying to explain to either woman that he was merely being friendly to Ivy... the better part of hotel-restaurant management forbade running from the fracas like a prudent man. And the better part of Iceberg survival strategy forbade drawing any more attention to himself than could be helped as...

"Not going to back down for a butch fichus tree."

"AIEEEEE! MY BABIES!"

...as the cause of the current disturbance.

"See, a little jet fuel, a match. No problem."

Riddler, Ted and Jai from the **FAB!** cast all joined Catman in the doorway and watched silently for a few moments.

"Can't put a fire out with alcohol, Pammy," Riddler called out.

"Ooh, too late," Ted winced.

"...and those vines better stay outta my face too, because they make damn good rope to tie some uppity bitch to the tailpipe and go for a joyride..."

Riddler, Ted and Jai parted calmly to allow the ignited fichus tree to run through them into the bar, the hallway beyond, and finally the men's room.

"MY CAPE!" Catman screamed. "That FLAMING THING singed my cape!"

"I resent that," Jai said coolly.

"Well, it was on fire," Ted conceded.

Yelling was heard from the men's room and the door burst open; billows of smoke poured out. Through the haze, Mad Hatter emerged.

"Will you walk a little faster?" he called excitedly, "said a whiting to a snail. There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on my tail."

Riddler, Ted, Jai and Catman all looked at him, then behind him at the thin trail of smoke leading from his tailcoat back to the men's room.

"Now see, doesn't that have more style than saying *that flaming thing* singed me."

"What's that smell?" Ted asked, crinkling his nose.

"Lemon pledge," Blake, Nigma, and Tetch answered in unison.

CHAPTER 7: LAST CALL

There are something like 90 cars in Gotham City for every on-street parking space. Double parking and blocked bike-lanes are a way of life—during the day. After dark, however, though cheap metered parking is just as scarce, few Gothamites will risk clogging a traffic lane by double parking. They certainly don't do it on Fifth Avenue, near the big jewelry stores, nor in the diamond district, museum row, or near the upscale parkfront condos. They don't do it near Crime Alley, either. Or in the Bowery. Or Hell's Kitchen. What these high crime areas and privileged neighborhoods have in common is an increased likelihood that the Batmobile could make an appearance. Garage parking might be pricey, but not as pricey as replacing a Lexus squashed into a sheetmetal fortune cookie by a vigilante on a hot pursuit.

It might be assumed that the situation is more acute in the blocks surrounding the Iceberg Lounge. The Batmobile, Redbird, and other vehicles associated with vigilantes are spotted in this area more frequently than in any other part of town. But double parking is never an issue there because it isn't necessary. There is always a ready supply of available curbside parking. The Iceberg clientele are too notorious for anyone to risk taking the last space. What if Joker came by and couldn't find a place to park? Or that big green one, what is he called? Crocodile Hunter? No Crocodile Killer? Whatever. It isn't *that* far to the 11th street lot and it's a nice night for a walk.

That was Bruno Giani's reasoning as he fastened The Club to his steering wheel, locked his car, fed quarters into the kiosk and collected his timestamp. He didn't know this neighborhood at all. Cara, his girlfriend of a week and a half, lived here. But he'd never picked her up at home when they went out. They always met someplace midtown, near her work or his. But tonight she wanted to make him dinner, so he had to venture into this strange neighborhood to find her apartment.

He felt bad for whining about it. It was a nice gesture, he supposed, although it seemed a little soon for her to be cooking for him. But his promotion demanded a celebration, she said. He was on-air talent now, as VJ for a new music station. The months spent cramming music trivia had paid off, and he even got a new hairstyle for his on-air debut. The haircut and dye streak seemed a lot trendier midtown near the studio than it did here in the dark streets of who-knew-where-this-was by Cara's apartment. He felt conspicuous. Green hair made one conspicuous, and that would be okay elsewhere, but not knowing the neighborhood, he might look less sure of himself as he walked along. Conspicuous and uncertain was a bad combination. Knowing it was folly to walk on the street like a lost victim, Bruno twined his car keys between his fingers, making an especially brutal fist with the tips of metal protruding from the knuckles. It was an elementary precaution for walking several blocks after dark in an unfamiliar neighborhood, and it gave him confidence. It gave him confidence right up until the whoosh—

There was a strange whooshing sound and Bruno looked up just in time to see a blur of colored cape vanish amidst the fire escapes.

"Whoa," was all he could say.

He walked on excitedly. He had just experienced a close encounter of sorts, and his qualms about the too-soon-cooking-date were forgotten in his eagerness to share the news with Cara: he had seen one of the actual costumed crimefighters of Gotham City!

At the cross street, he stopped short as a slick red cycle eased silently and slowly through the intersection... just as it crossed his path the masked rider turned and eyed him carefully.

"Whoa," Bruno repeated.

"Oracle," Robin spoke into his mouthpiece before the Redbird sped away down the street, "Spoiler and I both made visual contact. It is *not* Joker. Confirmed. Guy has green hair but it is *not* Joker."

More excited than ever to find Cara's apartment and tell of his spectacular sighting of TWO costumed night people, Bruno became careless. He missed the little Indian grocery where Cara said to turn. He missed it and wound up too far West. He turned around as inconspicuously as he could and started back the other way, blocking out all irrelevant details in his determination to spot the Indian grocery on the corner. He was so intent on looking for the landmark that he very nearly walked into the—CLOWN GIRL! THE FAMOUS ONE, FROM THE NEWS THAT GOES WITH THE JOKER! HARLEY QUINN! He nearly walked into the actual Harley—

"Whoa," he mouthed.

Harley ignored the strange man on the street and continued on to the Iceberg front entrance. At the canopy, she stopped and checked her list:

Bring romance to the belfry -Check

Get piccy of cat-bat smoochy-smoochy -Check

Send it to Brucie -Check

Get Dear John letter from Ozzy -Check

Change name, send to Brucie -Check

Get a funnel cake -Check

Clean powdered sugar off costume -Check

Return to Iceberg, Rub Puddin's nose in it

Get a manicure

"So far so good," she announced happily, folding her list and returning it to her pocket before nodding to the doorman. He opened the door for her but reeled backwards. Before Harley could enter, she too was forced backward by a pungent cloud of lemon.

"Three dollar whore, huh?" an angry voice roared inside.

"Uh oh," Harley squeaked, wrinkling up her nose.

"Try saying that again with my foot on your throat, eh, you trampAARRGH!" "Three -lgh- Dollar -Oulgh- WhoeeeeeeeeEEE!" "She bit me!"

"Red?" Harley's eyes bulged as Poison Ivy appeared briefly in the doorway then was yanked away.

"Harl?" was heard in the distance. Then Poison Ivy and Roxy Rocket together crossed the hall past the entranceway. Ivy, holding Roxy's arms twisted tightly behind her back, seemed momentarily in control—except that her head was being pulled

downward at an odd angle by a chunk of hair Roxy clutched in one of her pinned hands. "Harley, it is you," Ivy repeated, sounding pleased before erupting into a series of Ow-ow-ow-ow-ows.

"Hiya, Red," her friend answered with an uncertain wave. "Good ta see ya again. You look... busy."

"Oh not really," Ivy answered casually, though she winced in pain as Roxy tugged on the hair. "Just taking Roxy here outside for a little talk about what would really happen if one of my climbing Clematis were to come into contact with her tailpipe."

"Chummy with the sidekicks too," Roxy spat, "oh yeah, queenie big shot with the sidekick, but no respect for an equal!"

Bruno was lost; that's all there was to it. It was hard to get lost in a city laid out on a square grid with numbered streets and avenues. But he kept passing the same mailbox-tattoo parlor-subway entrance-deli, and he was never finding the Indian grocery. It was running into those famous costumed types all at once that did it. It messed with his head. But he couldn't stop and ask directions, he just couldn't. Directions to an Indian grocery? He'd get laughed at or beaten up, but either way, he'd never get to Cara's before the dinner was cold.

"Whoa," Bruno whispered. At the crosswalk, what looked like the road company of Kismet was crossing the street: Two-dozen men in some kind of matching oriental outfits with... sabers drawn?

It was a long shot, Bruno knew, but if he followed them, they *might* just lead him to the Indian grocery.

Harley felt funny sitting at the bar with Catman and Riddler, while effectively ignoring the ongoing tussling, scraping, and sometimes screaming going on between Red and Roxy.

She felt funny, but she did it anyway. As Eddie pointed out: a catfight—no offense, Blake—was a catfight. The guys were all enjoying the show and there was a lot of money riding on the outcome. If she stuck her tassels in and interfered, she would be liable for all the ruined wagers. Eddie also reminded her about the Poison Oak the last time she got involved in the Pammy-Harvey situation. (Blake started to say something at that point, but Eddie shushed him.)

Harley sipped her drink. It didn't matter much anyway. Puddin' wasn't here to rub his nose in the breakup of Brucie and Catty. She could wait, of course. She could wait *forever* to make her Puddin' suffer—and he would suffer. He would suffer long and hard, she would see to that. The way he tossed her aside after all she had done for him. He would pay. He would pay in spades. Bat-shaped spades, if there were such things. For every moment of misery she suffered, he was going to eat batarangs. The day of reckoning was coming that would wipe that grin off his face but good—him and anybody else that laughed at that stupid octopus joke. She would wait as long as it took. And if she was going to wait as long as it took, she couldn't get mixed up in a barroom brawl.

She would just watch.

...She finished her drink in a dramatic gulp...

And while she waited and watched, another drink would be nice.

Harley looked around. "Where's Sly?"

"Probably hiding on the floor," Blake muttered.

"Shhh," Eddie cautioned.

"On the floor trying to get *underneath* the floor."

"I don't get it," Harley squeaked.

"Not to worry," Eddie assured her. "What is a less cruel rose defender? A KINDER THORN! Another drink, that is. Oh, TED!"

A man Harley had never seen before appeared on the other side of the bar.

"You rang. Ah, a new arrival." He looked at her, seeming pleased.

"Harley," Eddie introduced her formally, "This is Ted, from *Fab!* Ted, this is Harley, from Arkham."

"And what are you drinking, Harley from Arkham?" Ted asked gamely.

"Diet sprite."

Ted's face froze into a mask of shock, horror and disappointment that seemed vaguely familiar.

"With a tequila chaser?" she squeaked, trying to soften the blow.

Ted shook his head and turned away, and Harley realized why the look was familiar. It was the what-a-waste expression Batman gave her early on when she first got together with—

"HAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAA!"

"—Puddin'!"

Lost in her memories, Harley ran across the room to greet her Mistah J before remembering they were finished and she hated him with the fire of a thousand suns.

"UNHAND ME YOU HA-HA HARLOT!" Joker wailed, swatting her away with... a parasol?

"Kwak, kwak, kwak!" Oswald objected, waddling in after Joker. "Watch how you handle that thing. It's a machine gun, not a baseball bat. Kwak, kwak, kwak."

"That is Mr. Puddin' to you, madam," Joker told Harley. "And while we're at it, you stepped on my purple suede shoes. Don't."

"Oh, hiya, Ozzy," Harley said sweetly, picking herself off the floor and ignoring Joker. "I din't see ya there, I was so surprised to see Puddin'."

"Do you mind, I was threatening you, Missy," Joker put in.

"Oswald no longer, Ms. Quinn. You will address me as Penguin, if you please, for I am The Penguin once more. QUAKK-kwak-kwak. Now then, your outburst has rather marred our entrance, but as it is done, allow me to confer with my colleague before we address you and the other hostages."

"Hostages?" Harley squeaked.

"Quite."

"Colleague? Oh right, that's me. Heh. HAHAHAHAHAA!"

"Quite."

The doorman was too overcome by the Lemon Pledge-scented pheromone cloud to intervene, or even notice, when the Roxy-Ivy fight sprawled out the door towards the parking lot.

He found himself fascinated by a small flyer pasted to the side of a streetlight: **Frustrated at work? Quit your Job! Network Marketing is the answer...**

The doorman was even less able to react when Joker and Penguin entered, brandishing parasols.

Network marketing meant Amway, didn't it? Whatever that was.

By the time F'Nos arrived with what looked like a platoon of DEMON assassins, the doorman was past caring and let them surround the building without interference.

"Loyal Iceberg patrons," Penguin announced in a firm clear voice, "I realize that you are all more accustomed to taking hostages than becoming hostages. Nevertheless, I must insist you all move slowly and calmly into the bar where we may..."

The hostage-taking was momentarily interrupted when Joker tried to nudge an uncooperative henchman into the bar area by shooting him, only to have his machinegun parasol jam. He swung it like a crowbar, aiming for the henchman's head, but hitting the tablerim when the man dodged.

"You will be paying for both that table and the ruined parasol," Penguin assured him sternly.

"It doesn't work!" Joker complained. "I want my lead-lined rubber chicken. I want my joy buzzer! I want my banana peels! Weapons that work, damnit. HAHAHAA!"

"Noted," Penguin said calmly, "but you don't have any of those at the moment. And we have these, even if they haven't been used in a while. So kindly..."

"Awww, can't find your joy buzzer or banana peels, Puddin'? Poor guy. Sniff, sniff. They make daiquiris here, y'know. Maybe Sly has some bananas behind the bar."

Penguin had started to respond to Harley's taunts with a pained "Ms. Quinn, really..."—until she mentioned Sly. "SLY! Where is that traitorous bird with the traitorous feathers of... betrayal."

Joker stared at him.

"The traitorous feathers of betrayal? Oh Ozzy, you really haven't done this for a while. HAHAHAHAAHAHAHAHA!"

He swung the parasol at Harley's head, this time chipping the wall when she ducked.

"STOP DOING THAT!" Penguin roared. "Either fire the thing properly or—"

"—or what? Suffer the traitorous feathers of betrayal? HAHAHAHAHA!"

Penguin sighed a sigh of great dignity, as if collecting himself. Then he turned his back on Joker and addressed Harley directly.

"As I was saying, Ms. Quinn, my business is with Sly. Once I have settled matters with him, the rest of you may go."

"And my business," Joker piped up, "is with that snot-nosed fern. Where is that uppity piece of weed, hm?"

He swung the parasol again with more force than before, spinning himself around in a full circle.

"The weed is dead, Joker," Greg piped up. As the former henchman Giggles, he was able to word the news in a way he knew his old boss would appreciate: "Very dead. You always said that was the best kind. Ha-ha. Yes?"

"Y-yes," Joker seemed perturbed. –He didn't care that Giggles hadn't been so friendly on his last visit, he was quite used to the rest of the world being irrational, unpredictable and downright insane. He was perturbed because he had it in his head to beat up this vegetable, and now it looked like someone had gone and done it for him. "Who... killed it?" he asked.

"Roxy Rocket. Doused it with lighter fluid and set it on fire."

Joker let out a low whistle. "Impressive," he said.

"IMPRESSIVE!" Harley wailed. "To have a salad barbecue??? I captured Batman! I broke you out of Arkham! I infiltrated the GCPD for you! I ate FISH!!!"

When Harley was forced to stop for breath, Oswald cleared his throat, then fired his weapon into the ceiling... He winced as bits of the faux-ice façade sprinkled down on the dining room... but at least now he had everybody's attention.

"As I was saying: Sly. Where is he?"

"I believe he's hiding in the men's room," Ted offered helpfully from behind the bar.

"Hiding?" Oswald asked, confused. He turned to Joker, "You told me he was the big bad. You told me he'd taken over. Am I to understand that the greatest, most fearsome power to rise in the Gotham Underworld, so terrible as to be able to unseat the Emperor Penguin himself, is *hiding in the men's toilet.*"

"Y-yes," said the other *Fab!* representative Jai, who suddenly appeared at Oswald's side, "but he's not hiding from you. I don't actually know who you are."

"I don't know who you are either," Oswald said calmly, then pointed the tip of his parasol at Jai's nose, "From whom is my disloyal bartender hiding?"

"Someone called Roxy."

Joker and Penguin turned to each other slowly.

"Roxy again?" Penguin asked.

"I've teamed up with the wrong badass," Joker cried, running out the door. "ROXY! ROXY!!!"

After a moment's strained silence, he entered the room again, more slowly and backwards. In front of him were the tips of two DEMON swords—attached to DEMON arms—attached to DEMON minions—followed by more DEMON minions.

"WOOHOO!" Harley cheered, "Look at you guys! Cut him up, DEMON-guys, cut him up good. That'll teach him to go laughing at his own stupid joke, 'cause nobody else will. You know why you gotta laugh at it yourself, Puddin'? 'Cause it's *not funny*. It sucks. It's stupid and it sucks. And the only ones stupid enough to pretend it doesn't suck are the henchman that only laugh cause you pay'em to. Like YOU, Giggles! You laughed at that stupid thing. Well the day of reckoning is coming, Buddy!"

Harley drew back and landed a spectacular punch on Greg Brady's jaw.

His head bobbed back slightly, and he blinked in shock.

"And THAT goes for the rest of you too!" Harley went on, railing at the room, "Don't think I haven't noticed. I see. I see who of you laughs at that joke, and come the revolution, you're gonna be the first ones against the wall, ya hear me?"

The Batmobile screeched to a halt outside the Iceberg. Batman knew, in such a hostile environment, he had little chance of beating answers out of anyone. But he had to try something. The dragnet had failed to spot Joker. If he waited for the madman to resurface on his own, there was no telling—

Before he could complete the thought, the madman *did* resurface on his own. He came barreling out of the Iceberg, along with Penguin...

"BATMOBILE!" Joker screamed, seeing the car, "SALVATION!"

Before Batman could react, Joker and Penguin were cowering behind the closed car as the Iceberg doors burst open again and a mob of DEMON minions surged after them... Harley Quinn followed, yelling something about fates that would be too good for the rotten skunk clown and anybody fool enough to stand beside him!

Batman didn't hesitate. His mission was Justice, and while he sometimes wondered what true Justice would be for a sociopath like Joker, he was sure it was not being cut into hyena kibble by a mob of DEMON minions. Batman revved the powerful Batmobile engine, forcing everyone, DEMONS and Rogues alike, to step back from the car. Then he opened the door, shot a death glare at the minions, another at Harley, and finally turned his attention to Joker and Penguin, still cringing behind him.

"Problem, gentlemen?" he graveled.

The commotion brought Ivy and Roxy out from the alley...

Both women were tattered and Ivy's arm hung at an angle nature never intended.

Roxy limped, but when she saw a circle of unquestionable danger in the form of 20+ men with drawn sabers closing in with menace at something at the center, she was quick to change her one thwarted antagonist for the thrill of twenty well-armed playmates. She dashed into the center of the circle, pointing the tailpipe of her dismantled rocket at the drawn swords, placing herself between the mob and whatever they were going after.

"EVERYBODY STAY BACK," she snarled. For a full second, there was no reaction whatsoever, then from behind, she felt a tap on the shoulder. She turned towards it to see—

"Heh. Hi, Batman."

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" came the sick cackle from further behind her. And then, a smoother voice: "I told you she was a feisty one, kwak-kwak."

Roxy sighed and backed away from Batman, Joker and Penguin, into the half-circle of minions.

"Brave for girl," a minion noted.

"Bite me," Roxy answered.

"Fellow warrior," the head minion came forward and introduced himself with a formal bow, "I am F'Nos, my saber pledged to Ra's Al Ghul since the year of the second Blood Moon. I pray that we might commune as brother soldiers... or... as... (His eyes riveted on her chest) ...as soldiers... until such time as the aims of our masters might conflict and we meet in glorious battle."

"O-kay," Roxy said in the same way she'd deflect a come-on at the bar. "I'm Roxy and my rocket is pretty much spoken for so—"

“Roxy? ...Rocket?” he blanched. He had been given one and only one order by his esteemed master Gr’oriBr’di in conjunction with a night at the Iceberg. *Do not engage Roxy Rocket.*

“Yeah, Roxy Rocket. Easy to remember. Anyway, my rocket is pretty much pledged to my own enjoyment so I—”

“Must go,” F’Nos stammered, terrified, “Must go now.”

He ran—he ran down the street, around the fire hydrant, the news box, the taxi stand, around the corner, and all the way back to Chinatown. Batman had readied a batarang, but opted not to throw when all the other minions took off after their leader, all seemingly fleeing for their lives.

Batman, Joker and Penguin all looked at Roxy.

She shrugged.

“What did I say?”

Batman stretched his shoulders, trying to ease his discomfort, and returned his attention to the log entry. He’d been sitting too long. He turned his neck right and left and again returned to the log. It was a complicated entry, from two weeks before, the night of the Joker-Penguin incident outside the Iceberg. Harley was involved, and Roxy, and DEMON agents. Ivy was spotted outside. And he knew from the video feeds that Riddler, Catman, Strange and others had been present inside. The cross-references were a nightmare, and now he had to enter updates.

Joker, Penguin and Harley had all been sent up to Arkham that night, Joker and Penguin for attacking the nightclub and Harley because she wanted to ride in the van and scream at Puddin’. But now...

Harley had been held for observation, then released.

And Penguin! Somehow Penguin, as the Iceberg proprietor, persuaded the authorities that he was a victim of the attack and not an instigator.

Batman glared at the words on the screen with a disgusted nausea churning in his gut. The fools. How could anybody be that stupid? How was it possible anyone so naïve, gullible and stupid could even survive from day to day, let alone be entrusted to *make decisions* that affected the welfare of his city?

It was obscene. He slammed his fist on the desk and stood, pacing to the rear of the cave near the Zogger controls, then back to the workstation.

He gave the log the same death glare he’d given Greg Brady that night after Joker, Penguin and Harley were sent on their way. It was too easy, picking the villains off the ground and shoving them into the van for Arkham. Far too easy. So he’d ventured into the Iceberg for a “conversation” with Brady and Sly. They’d been lucky this time, and he planned to impress that upon them. Oswald Cobblepot was a dangerous man to cross... Except he never got to deliver that message directly because Sly was already in hiding (and not from Oswald, if Brady was to be believed). Batman pushed for details, naturally, but all he could get from Brady were variations on “Back off, can’t you see the guy has suffered enough?”

More frustrated than before, Batman had stalked out of the nightclub and relieved his aggravation by rounding up fourteen of the DEMON agents. Those from the Gotham cells, he shipped back to Ra’s personally. Those from nearby Bludhaven, he

turned over for formal deportation. A new headache for Ra's, and in these times, there was no telling what might finally put DEMON on the government's radar.

He had just begun opening a channel to the INS system to check on the deportations when two independent alarms sounded to remind him the *Fab!* episode with Hugo Strange was about to air. The first alarm pinged discreetly in the corner of his computer screen. The other clip-clipped down the stairs from the clock passage, across the floor of the cave, and finally fell silent behind his chair. Soft arms settled around his neck.

"Fifteen minutes, Handsome. Better get a move on."

"All ready," he grunted, ignoring the smell of vanilla lavender scented skin and the fingers massaging his shoulders. "I'm pulling the broadcast feed, the satellite feed, control room feeds, and there's an EMP beam loaded up at the Watchtower aimed directly at the satellite, if need be—"

"No, I don't think so," Selina purred, placing a determined hand over the monitor before easing herself into his lap. "I was thinking more like: get changed, come upstairs, TV room, chips and dip. Dick, Barbara and Tim are already here."

"We're talking about my identity here, Selina. I needn't remind you that *you* would be in just as much danger if the world found out..." He paused. "This *is* Hugo Strange we're talking about."

"Exactly. Besides, you've been over every bit of raw footage as they taped it, right? So it's not like the final edit can have anything in it that will surprise you."

"That naughty grin of yours says otherwise."

Her eyes danced but she admitted nothing.

"Come upstairs. Eat some chips. Dip them. Be a person."

Because he had seen all the raw footage, Bruce was able to maintain a grim poker face...

...that Freud Gone Wrong beard... Dick roared with laughter; Bruce remained grim. 1967 called, they want their glasses back... Tim snorted; Bruce remained grim. Somewhere in Minnesota, an encyclopedia salesman is missing his sport coat... Barbara gasped for air between guffaws, and Bruce remained grim.

Selina wasn't grim, but she was silent. Bruce eyed her occasionally. She sat there, nibbling a potato chip, her mouth curled into the subtlest of cat smiles. He knew the look. She was waiting for something...

The greatest detective in the world still needs a certain critical mass of information in order to draw valid conclusions. Batman knew enough to infer *WHEN* in the broadcast the something would occur, but the *WHAT*... knowing Selina, the what could be anything...

On the screen, Hugo was returning home after his beard shaving, herbal wrap and shopping spree, to be met at the door by the *FAB!* decorator and see how they had redesigned his home.

"Now let's see your new living room..."

Reflexively, Bruce leaned forward in his chair, the jaw clenching just a bit tighter, the poker face hardening into a colder, stonier stare.

"...this amazing artwork we found stashed away in the garage. Now this is clearly an important sculpture by one of Gotham's most challenging artists. A piece like that, you've got to show off. You don't want to hide this away, so see how we've made it the focal point of the room."

As one: Dick, Tim and Barbara all turned from the image on the television towards Bruce's chair. They turned because of a noise, a rare noise, some would have thought an impossible noise: Bruce was laughing.

They looked back at the screen and back at Bruce. It wasn't a bellylaugh or anything, but... mouth open, kind of curled upward on the ends like a smile, and rhythmic puffy-grunts... yeah, that was a laugh.

They looked back at the television again, and back at Bruce again. On the screen, the audio was exactly what he had heard on the raw feeds. But the visuals: the cut-ins of the purple-clad mannequin had been replaced with shots of the same mannequin dressed in a Harley Quinn costume.

"Nicely done, Kitten."

"Meow."

Dick, Tim and Barbara looked back at the screen.

"Anybody want to clue us in?" Tim asked, knowing nobody would.

"They'll be watching this at the Iceberg," Bruce noted.

"Definitely," Selina agreed.

"Harley will be humiliated."

"I would think so. Yes."

"She'll probably do something unspeakable to Hugo."

"Good chance, Yep."

The room grew quiet, and everyone returned their attention to the television. Predictably, the edited-down version omitted the entire prep-visit to the Iceberg and went straight to Hugo and Manikin's date the next day. As always, the *Fab!* team was shown watching footage of their protégé in action and commenting on his performance. But in this case, the protégé was upstaged. From the moment the couple entered the nightclub, it became the star of the show, and all of the witty *Fab!* commentary focused on the Iceberg itself...

-Raven, the hostess: Just look at her snapping out those menus. Snaps for you, Dearie. There is a woman that knows what's what.

-Sly, the bartender: Now that is a martini! And if you ask me, that fellow has a secret. I'll just bet it has to do with that gal in the back, too, in the Amelia Earhart getup, just look at her checking out his ass.

-Greg, the bouncer: My but that is a well-muscled man. Just look at how he pulled apart those two squabbling in the back...

-And the Barflies: The orange cape and the green question marks? See, that's why you should never get into a slapfight with someone if your colors clash. You look like some kind of nautical signal flags: changing course to starboard, diver below, pair trawling in progress...

Pair trawling?... It's an expression... Oh look, Amelia Earhart has Orange Cape in a headlock...

