



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

#35

Cat \equiv Tales

Go Rin No Sho



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
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GO RIN NO SHO

A BOOK OF FIVE RINGS: INTRODUCTION

From my youth, my heart has been inclined towards the Way of Strategy. I went from province to province, dueling with strategists of various schools, and not once did I fail to win, even though I had as many as sixty encounters. I am a warrior of Harima province. I have been many years training in the Way of Strategy, and now I think I will explain it in writing for the first time.

—Miyamoto Musashi, Go Rin No Sho

It's not that I distrust Selina.

It's more than a year since I realized how completely I do trust her. There was a cat-crime. A frame-up. Talia throwing a tantrum. But long before I learned who was behind it, I knew—absolutely knew—that Catwoman was not.

I never made a decision to trust her. It simply happened. So many years, so many encounters, so much shared time... We fought each other, sometimes passionately, sometimes more... I don't know... 'playfully' she would say. But I am not playful.

But we fought each other. And at times, we fought together. Shared time. Something grows between you. Whether good or bad, shared time creates an understanding. You come to know the essence of a person. The essence of Joker is madness. The essence of Superman is decency. The essence of Ra's al Ghul is pride. The essence of Catwoman is... impossible to put into a word. But it is warm and alive and it draws something rich and joyful from the act of living. There is nothing there to doubt, nothing to suspect, and nothing to question.

I don't distrust her. Catwoman was a criminal and an adversary, but I do not distrust her.

The dilemma is the woman, not the cat.

The first time Bruce Wayne was invited to the Knickerbocker Cotillion, Charles Ashton said he hoped I wouldn't bring some callgirl from that Mayflower Madame escort service, because it made Old Gotham Society into a tasteless joke. This year, Gladys Ashton-Larraby said she hoped Selina wouldn't wear those Manolo Blahnik shoes with a Judith Lieber bag, because that's all Hermoine would write about and the other ladies' outfits wouldn't get a mention.

So Catwoman really isn't the problem this time—unless you figure in that the evening bag is in the shape of a sleeping cat. I don't claim to be an expert on society columnists or women's fashions...

That's really not the point anyway. Whether Selina's celebrity from Cat Tales makes it more or less likely that a newspaper would write about her is NOT the point. The point is that it's a given that she'll be attending the party because Bruce Wayne is. The

point is that her outfit is what Gladys is worrying about, not what vulgar bimbo Wayne might foist on them this time. The point is...

The point is I've lost control.

With Selina at my side, Bruce Wayne is not perceived as a womanizing playboy.

I have to regain control of how they see me.

THE BOOK OF GROUND

It is difficult to realize the true Way through sword-fencing alone. Know the smallest things and the biggest things, the shallowest things and the deepest things. As if it were a straight road mapped out on the ground...

Selina glanced over the image on the computer screen, then looked up at Bruce.

"There are times you are downright strange."

His eyes narrowed critically. She had asked to see the fake Dear John letter that Harley Quinn sent in her effort to break them up. And he showed her.

"Harley wrote it, and it's supposed to be from you. How am I strange?"

"Harley sent it. But you... scanned it. You made a special file to keep it in. That's just weird."

"I didn't make a file; I had a file. I had to make one when I wrote the original for Jervis to send to Oswald, supposedly to be from Lark. I had to invent a new category. Before this—"

"This is you arguing that you're not downright strange?"

"Kitten, there is a way of looking at this where it's all your fault, you know. Before you came along, rogue correspondence was evidence. Dear Johns were for battling trumped up paternity suits. End of discussion. Rogue correspondence, sub-cat Fake Dear John letters NEVER would have come into my life before you."

"I tell you what," Selina smiled sweetly, "just as soon as you get to the part you think contradicts the premise that you're strange, you send up a flare."

Bruce felt a tug at the corner of his lip, but suppressed it. How she loved teasing him.

"At least there's a second document in that folder now," he grimaced without a twitch. "I hate folders with only one piece of paper in them... makes me think I went and misfiled something... waste of hard disk sectors..."

Selina stared. Then she turned her head slightly, a kitten puzzled by a telephone. "You're putting me on," she said at last.

"Impossible." Twitch. "I don't have a sense of humor."

She laughed. She had a wonderful laugh. And like any cat, once he took the initiative and started playing with her, she hopped into his lap and began redefining the game.

"Well, now that we're over courtesy of the tassel twit's machinations," she purred, "ever get together with an ex and do it for old times sake?"

"Actually, no. Can't say that I have."

"Good."

Bruce had intended to wait until he had a complete strategy mapped out before informing her of the Fop Initiative. But she was in such a good mood now. It was folly not to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Why, Miss Kyle, are you trying to seduce me?"

"Who, me?"

The wide-eyed innocent bit. What an impossible woman.

"Yes you," he grunted before the kiss.

“Who’s seducing who?” she gasped when they came up for air.
He switched off the computer screen with a twitchsmile.
“Not in front of the data?” she asked, giggly.
Perfect. She was in such a good mood. This would be much easier than expected.

OraCom: Channel 1—Nightwing

:: *Wing?* ::

:: *Hey, Gorgeous.*::

:: *I love you very much.* ::

:: *Uh oh.* ::

:: *No, no, no. Schmuck.* ::

:: *Whew, that’s better. You had me scared there, O. What happened?* ::

:: *I can’t just say ‘I love you’ and mean it?* ::

:: *Oh man, somebody’s in it deep. And if it’s not me...* ::

:: *There he goes, son of great detective, on the case...* ::

:: *...If it’s not me, it must be B. What’s he done now?* ::

There was an audible sigh into the microphone, then a slurping sound.

:: *I’m not quite sure. But something went down, he’s checking in every five minutes.* ::

:: *Checking in? Frequently? On a standard patrol?* ::

:: *Yeah! Totally bizarre, right? And there’s these weird pauses, like he’s waiting for something.* ::

:: *Chitchat.* ::

:: *Huh?* ::

:: *He wants chitchat. He thinks you know something. It’s an opening for you to relax and make small talk so he can find out.* ::

:: *‘Wingy, my love, ninety seconds of silence followed by a grumbly ‘Batman out’ is not making small talk.* ::

:: *It is with him. Would have thought you knew that by now. So what do you figure happened?* ::

:: *No idea. Anyway, have you seen the Gotham Post yet?* ::

:: *Yep! ‘Nightwing’s Flavor of the Month.’ I’ve been seen ‘swinging around with Tarantula.’ Go me!* ::

:: *You are now single.* ::

:: *Ha, ha. Look, it’s pretty slow out here tonight. What say I make one more pass for our silver Honda and call it a night?* ::

:: *Stop for some mint chocolate chip?* ::

:: *You got it, Beautiful. Nightwing out.* ::

OraCom: Channel 2—Batman

:: *Batman?* ::

:: *Here, Wing.* ::

:: *She hasn’t heard a thing.* ::

:: *Damn.* ::

:: *...* ::

:: *...* ::

:: I haven't either, Bruce. ::

:: ... ::

:: ... ::

:: Batman out. ::

From his position atop of the Wayne Tower, Batman could look east towards the Phase II construction of those Cromwell condos, halted until a more favorable economy sold off the last units of Phase I. He could look west to the Moxton Building. Old Man Moxton delaying the announcement of the Harriman merger until Luthor's reelection saber-rattling put defense stocks front and center. And if he jumped to that gargoye, snagging the pole with the MoMA banner for momentum and swung north, he would see fraternity kids from Hudson University laying traffic cones to force the left lane of car coming off the Beacon Avenue Bridge into their canning gauntlet.

It was all strategy. Some of it sound... and some what you'd expect from witless college kids that think they're clever. But it was still strategy. It was an attempt to foresee the entire journey before setting out, and planning ahead for what was expected down the path.

Just as the Book of Ground instructed.

The Book of Ground, first section of Go Rin No Sho, the Book of Five Rings, by the greatest samurai sword-fighter Miyamoto Musashi.

Musashi was a samurai who codified what it meant to be a warrior. He was a man who knew the word went beyond mere fighting ability, who knew the samurai must be both an individual combatant and a military commander. Knowing these were branches of the same tree, he set forth the principles of epic warfare and single combat in exactly the same way.

Batman considered Mushashi's Book of Five Rings a masterful textbook:

If you master the basic principles, when you freely beat one man, you beat any man in the world. The spirit of defeating one man is the same as for ten million... You will be able to beat men in fights, and to win with your eye. You will be able to conquer men with your body, and beat ten men with your spirit.

The Book of Five Rings was not widely studied like Sun Tzu's Art of War or Machiavelli's Prince. It did not offer simple maxims easily adapted to modern business or politics. It divided itself into the five elements of Zen philosophy: Ground, Water, Fire, Wind and Void—and quite often the author had to stretch, or outright cheat, to make what he wanted to say fit those prescribed headings.

But for one who took the time to study the book as Batman had, who absorbed its principles and tested them—not just in the context of sword-fighting but in other martial arts, in business case studies, and in daily life, and who found them equally sound wherever they were applied—the Five Rings had much to teach. Batman knew this. It was a tested principle.

As often as he had studied the thin volume, he always found new insights in light of his most recent battles.

And the most fundamental of its teachings is that the Way of Strategy must dominate all aspects of life. Strategy is your first and constant thought. Whatever

happens and whatever you do must be weighed against it. "When you have attained the Way of Strategy, there will be not one thing that you cannot understand, and you will see the Way in everything."

It was a concept Bruce had embraced in living his life as Batman. He ate certain foods at lunch to obtain an energy boost hours later during patrol. When he bought the Porsche, he got a red 944 instead of the black 911 he preferred, because it seemed more the clichéd image of a sports car the idiot-fop would buy.

The camouflage of the Fop had to be restored. She must see that; Selina wasn't stupid. Bruce Wayne had to be perceived as an idle fool so that no one could suspect he was Batman. Now that he had a permanent girlfriend, the womanizing playboy was gone. He had to dial up other aspects of the act to compensate.

"So you're buying a Lamborghini, a yacht, and a new plane?" she had asked when he told her.

"Yes," he graveled.

"And you want to christen all the new toys with a bit of globetrotting."

"Yes."

"Sounds great! Meow in fact."

He grunted. And that was that. Until hours later when he was ready for patrol and found Catwoman waiting for him at the Batmobile.

"Hang on a second," she began without any hint that she'd returned to the earlier conversation. "Are we talking about a real someplace warm and exotic, or 'Bruce Wayne is in Tahiti' when you're really down here defragging your hard drive?"

"Tahiti," he answered grimly. "I'm not leaving Gotham unprotected for a month or more."

"And I'm supposed to have gone with you? That means what? I can't show my face in public? I'm stuck here under house arrest until you decide we've imaginary globetrotted enough? No way, Stud. Kitty gotta prowl."

"So don't come," he turned on her, anxious to get out of the cave and begin patrol. "Bruce Wayne is away and you decided to stay here. That might be even better, in fact. Spark some gossip. The Wayne yacht is in St. Thomas and Selina Kyle is still in Gotham, do the math."

She hissed.

"Effectively making a fool of me in as blatant and public a manner as possible. I don't think so. Let's hear Plan B."

"There is no Plan B. That IS Plan B. Plan A is you come with me like I said in the first place. It's not like it makes any difference, when we'll both be here the entire time."

"The difference is you can still go out at night. I can't. Fairly common knowledge I'm Catwoman, you know."

"Selina, you must have laid low before now. After the Manteca affair, there was no sign of you for a month. Where were you then?"

"Martha's Vineyard."

He grunted one of those 'I rest my case' grunts, which Selina correctly interpreted as "See, I'm right but I'm too big of a man to jump up and down and scream 'I told you so.'"

"I was in Martha's Vineyard the REGULAR way, where you put your ass on a plane and actually GO to Martha's Vineyard!"

"We'll talk about this when I get back."

"Nothing to talk about, Handsome. You need to go back to the drawing board on this one. I don't like being ordered around. I am not hiding out in my own home on your say so, and I am not going to put up with a bunch of imaginary bimbae..."

"Bimbae?" he twitched in spite of himself.

"I mean it, Bruce," she said seriously, "you need to come up with something else. I thought you had all kinds of alternative plans ready at a moment's notice once there was an obvious failure like this."

"An obvious failure? Kitten, just because you don't like it... The plan is sound. We're doing it. Come or don't come. Your choice, I'm not ordering you either way."

"That is not a choice at all, and you damn well know it."

"We'll talk about it when I get back."

We'll talk about it when I get back. What he'd said when he asked her to move in in the first place... Blurted it, not asked. It was the Anniversary, and he was emotional. He wanted her to be there for him and didn't want it to be a conversation... Maybe he hadn't thought through every consequence beforehand.

The Way of Strategy was supposed to be the first and last consideration at all times.

Could he honestly say he had done this where Selina was concerned? Could he honestly say he had mapped out this journey before setting out?

THE BOOK OF WATER

Water adopts the shape of its container. Your spirit is like water, sometimes a trickle, sometimes a wild sea. You must absorb the Way of the Sword into yourself so it is always in harmony with your spirit. Your spirit, like the water, must take the shape of its container: the Way and Life of the Sword. It is necessary to maintain the combat stance in everyday life and to make your everyday stance your combat stance.

You must work on this.

“Training must go beyond the mat and become a way of life, Wayne-san. Every aspect of life becomes part of the training.”

“Hai, Sensei.”

“When you walk, sit, kneel, or lie down to sleep, you must feel your balance always. When you enter a room, you must feel its energy and you will know if it is empty or no. If you do this, if you open yourself up and extend Ki, even though the room is pitch black, even though those within may be silent as ninja, you will sense their presence. You understand?”

“Hai, Sensei.”

“We will see. Today we do Free Battles. The true battle is not with your opponent; it is between body, mind and spirit. You will have trouble with this. You are young. You are rich. You are American. For you, life is soft. Body will not like pain and mind will not like discipline. Tonight, after Free Battles, your body will ache and your mind will decide it has better things to think about than feeling your balance as you move. You will come to me and say you are leaving my dojo.”

“No, Sensei.”

“You contradict your teacher, Wayne-san?”

“Respectfully, Sensei. I know my heart. I will stay.”

“You are soft, Wayne-san. You will not maintain the discipline.”

“I will, Sensei.”

“Meow.”

Bruce started, a violent spasm snapping his neck forward as his eyes shot open. He blinked, looking around... utterly confused for a moment...

...the air smelled dry and processed...

...He lay stretched out on a white leather sofa... across a carpeted aisle, a small burl wood table inlaid with the letters WE and two deep chairs that matched the sofa... Wayne One. He was on the airplane. He must have fallen asleep. Checking his watch, he calculated that he'd slept for at least an hour. They would be landing soon.

Bruce massaged his brow, then rose and walked to the kitchenette. He took a bottle of chilled spring water, wet a handkerchief and toweled off his face. He drank the water in a series of urgent gulps and dropped the empty bottle into the trashcan—then he looked down at it. A bottle of spring water. That really wasn't the kind of impression he liked to leave the cleanup crew. So he retrieved the bottle from the trash, refilled it with water from the sink, and returned it to the mini-fridge. There he took out a bottle of champagne, opened it, and poured it down the sink. He dropped that bottle into the trashcan and returned to his seat with a satisfied grunt.

:: We're beginning our descent into Fort Lauderdale, Mr. Wayne, :: Captain Leffinger announced over the intercom. :: You'll want to buckle up. It's a sunny 75-degrees, and the marina just radioed in to report knee-high surf with a moderate chop and sea surface temperature of 73-degrees. If I may say, Mr. Wayne, it looks like an ideal day to be buying a yacht, sir. ::

Bruce twitched his lip at the intercom. Maintaining the idle playboy image might be a tiresome chore at times, taking valuable hours away from Gotham and the Mission, but the glamour of these excursions did delight employees like Captain Leffinger.

Philipos, the yacht broker, had sent a helicopter to deliver Bruce from the airport to the marina, and Leffinger was chatting with the chopper pilot. Bruce gave them a few minutes to converse before setting out. While he waited, he presented them with his best daytime-Fop, bored with all the glamorous perks showered on him by a fawning merchant class. But behind the mask of a jaded playboy, the inner man wondered what he was doing here alone.

There was no reason to bring Selina along, certainly. The Playboy had always been a solo act. And since she wasn't supporting the Fop Initiative, there was no point in including her on a trip like this which was really just to acquire props for a piece of theatre, after all.

What could she contribute if she was here? Other than a bit of company on the plane, that is. Why should she have any input on the yacht he purchased if she wasn't going to come along on whatever excursions he took with it? Selina never understood the necessity of the Fop, that was the problem. She didn't give him a hard time when he went into Idle Rich Boy-mode, not exactly, but the air of disapproval was enough. That damned connection of theirs, he knew well enough what she thought. To have brought her along on this trip to procure new "toys" for the Fop, the plane ride down might have been okay, but the trip back would be murder.

That was his thought as the chopper speeded him to the marina, as he shook hands mechanically with Philipos, and as he toured the *Dahlia*, a 240-foot luxury cruiser said to be the 21st century equivalent of William Randolph Hearst's famous party boat *The Oneida*. Twelve feet longer than Donald Trump's *Princess*, two more staterooms than the *Ari Onassis Christina*, the *Dahlia* was a floating mansion. It was a vulgar cliché. It was exactly the image of a billionaire's mega-yacht he had led Philipos to believe he wanted.

But as he toured the vessel, Bruce's eye kept flickering to a smaller, sleeker craft he'd spotted when the chopper touched down. On a whim, he asked Philipos about it.

"A motor yacht? I thought you wanted... er, well, that is a very fine boat. A Pershing, 88-footer, four staterooms, galley, salon, all first class, Mr. Wayne. But... I thought you wanted something more—"

—Pointlessly vulgar, Bruce thought. That is what he'd steered Philipos into showing him. That is what he wanted, wasn't it? A floating monstrosity with a crew of twenty that would broadcast his presence in all the jet set playgrounds. Announce it, but deny mere hotel guests so much as a glimpse of the notorious playboy. "Who is that?" they would murmur from their rented beach cabanas that seemed so prestigious minutes

before and now seemed plebian hovels. "Bruce Wayne. American. Filthy rich and such a snob."

The Pershing could never serve that purpose.

Philipos continued showing off the outrageous luxuries of the Dahlia's master suite. "Large bedroom... a king-size bed covered in fine Venetian linens, as you see... custom made furniture, all from Milan... wall lights are Baccarat crystal, walk-in closets..."

The Pershing was a vessel for impromptu jaunts down the coast. A weekend getaway, just him and Selina, no need to pretend he didn't know how to navigate. It was tempting.

"...off the bedroom, look at this, Mr. Wayne, nothing like this on ordinary yachts. A wood-paneled study with an onyx fireplace, leather furniture and handmade Austrian lamps... A writing desk, silver-embossed stationery..."

The Pershing wouldn't need any crew at all. With just the two of them, there would be nothing to hide. He could install a few utilities, like an OraCom console. He wouldn't be cut off from Gotham; they really could take a few days now and then when it was quiet...

"...and in the bathroom, double sinks and a bathtub with six-head shower, LeFroy Brooks fittings complement the Carrara marble finishes..."

"I want to see the Pershing," Bruce said abruptly. Then, startled by the unfoppish directness of his tone, he quickly added "What's she called?"

"Whatever you want," Philipos answered with a shrug.

La Gatta Mobile. An in-joke, harkening back to that first date on the opera house roof. It had more style than naming the boat Selina or Cat-something.

Bruce looked out the window of Wayne One at the deep blue of the ocean below.

La Gatta Mobile, or maybe just Verdi. Either would make a good name. IF he got the smaller boat instead of the Dahlia.

In one respect, La Gatta was the smarter choice. Batman had the satellite cave in midtown Gotham, the Batmobile was essentially a rolling Batcave, but the BatBoat just got him from A to B. If Bruce Wayne were to buy himself a simple, completely private motor yacht that needed no crew... that would be loaded with all the technical luxuries anyway, state of the art media center with satellite and internet just like Wayne One had, he would be providing Batman with a sea-worthy, portable cave. And La Gatta would be just large enough that her "lifeboat" could actually convert into a BatBoat to get him back to Gotham in a hurry—or even convert to a mini ultralight BatWing!

Bribery now, Psychobat sneered in his head. It's come to this? Bruce Wayne trying to bribe Batman?

But he wasn't really. A little quid pro quo between Bruce and Batman was not unprecedented. When Bruce Wayne bought a new Porsche, the Batmobile would be due for a few upgrades in the next six months or so. And there were sure to be some new gadgets inspired by the tech features that came with either yacht.

Besides, all he was really doing was thinking through the options. There were valid points to be made in favor of La Gatta over the Dahlia. They weren't any less valid because he happened to like the idea.

Ok, maybe he had gone down there for the Fop boat and changed the plan midstream. So what? It was his money, after all. Wasn't it his choice to spend three million on the boat he wanted instead of thirty on the one he didn't?

No.

Not if the choice put other considerations above the Mission; that was not something he could ever allow to happen. "The Way of the Kitten" was not going to start overriding a sound strategy Batman arrived at after careful study—

Although...

This would mean real, non-imaginary getaways that Selina could come along on, getting them out of the current Plan A/B quandary Batman's strategy had dropped them into... It would set them on a better course without his losing face...

Bruce helped himself to another bottle of spring water, but instead of returning to his seat, he paced up and down the aisle of the passenger cabin.

The Pershing-88, the Gatta, was not the biggest or most luxurious vessel ever built, but it was the fastest boat on the market to still be considered a yacht. The Ashton-Larrabys of the world all knew that Selina had given Bruce Wayne a taste for danger and excitement. The Gatta could work, in that respect, without damaging the Fop persona: He was trying to impress Selina. What better way than to join speed, thrills, and wealth in an ultra-sporty motoryacht?

It was rather sporty... All those sweeping curves and rigid angles, it looked a little too "Batty" for Psychobat's liking. It looked like a BatBoat—at least, in Batman's eyes, it was starting to look too much like a BatBoat.

The front wall of the Wayne One passenger cabin contained a grid of four video screens that could display any combination of movies and satellite programming, high-speed internet, video conferencing, the feed from a miniature camera embedded in the nose of the plane, or could blow up any one of those options over all four screens.

Bruce had elected this last option for an emergency conference with Lucius. An environmental impact report was released on the Foundation's new housing project, and Mayor Hill had called with a list of concerns. While Lucius read back the bullet points they'd hammered out in response to each issue, Bruce distanced his mind from the conversation and seemed to see the scene from outside his body, as an objective third-party observer:

A busy, able executive and philanthropist—who happened to be dressed casually in polo shirt and khakis because he was traveling on personal business—conducting a meeting where and when it was necessary.

Hardly a Fop playing with overpriced tech toys he didn't understand. Hardly an idiot Fop playing with toys he only bought because he was too dim to find imaginative ways to show off.

Hardly a worthless idle dilettante that couldn't even think up new ways to waste all that money.

He'd done it before. Bruce Wayne had tempered the playboy act before, when he took over management of Wayne Enterprises. The secret was important, but not more important than the tens of thousands of jobs tied to WE. Not more important than rent and food on the table for tens of thousands of families. Not more important than millions of dollars helping to drive Gotham's economy, and the research and products meant to enrich people's lives.

To be CEO of a billion-dollar, multi-national corporation, there was a limit to how stupid he could allow himself to be.

He had learned to walk a careful line: The Fop would appear at a nightclub opening with an especially photogenic bimbo, usually a model. It would make the papers, and the next morning he would indulge in a some brainless banter with a new secretary. He would greet a new client with a glib remark that, after all, might have been a joke, you could never tell with a guy like Wayne. Such minor performances went a long way. Then he was free to get the job done.

Like water, he had adapted himself to the shape of his surroundings so serious business leaders could know they were dealing with a strong and stable company, one with vision and leadership. Yes, one heard stories about Bruce Wayne and no doubt most of them were true. But based on what they saw with their own eyes, individual executives knew they could close a deal with Wayne Enterprises without fear the place would collapse into a heap of incompetence before the week's end.

He had done it before.

If feckless stupidity was negotiable for the sake of Wayne Enterprises, why not a sporty motor yacht for the sake of...

...there's the rub. For the sake of what exactly? For the sake of making it a little easier with Selina? She was the reason he had to do this in the first place. She was the reason the playboy act had foundered.

He had wanted more Selina in his life.

There was no way to reconcile that with any aspect of the Mission. He simply wanted it for himself. He liked being with her. She made him happy. It had nothing to do with the Mission, and he wanted it anyway. He went after it, he got it, and now... somehow... that want was breeding new desires that had absolutely nothing to do with Batman.

It was infecting other parts of his life, parts that—like the Fop's yacht—were tied intrinsically to the Mission. Batman's camouflage. He was letting thoughts of Selina cloud his judgment about Batman's camouflage.

It had gone too far.

He had gone too far.

There was no way he could just cut Selina out of his life like some malignant cancer but... what choice did he have? What choice did he really have? If he couldn't get himself under control, get himself refocused on the Mission in spite of her—

:: Well, Bruce, when you lay it out that way, the decision makes itself. ::

He blinked up at the video screens. Lucius was shuffling his papers with a satisfied grin.

:: I'm sure the Mayor will be very relieved by this. Gotham's welfare first, and all that. ::

"Yes, of course, Lucius," Bruce answered in a daze, "Gotham has to come first."

THE BOOK OF FIRE

This book is about fighting. The spirit of fire is fierce, whether the fire be small or big; and so it is with battles... It is difficult for large numbers of men to change position. An individual can easily change his mind, so his movements are difficult to predict...

"100.7, miss. I do wish you would let me call Dr. Thompkins."

"No way, Alfred. I can get plenty of rest and drink lots of liquids on my own."

Alfred pursed his lips and glared in stern disapproval. Selina didn't appear to notice and Alfred recalled, with new sympathy, the many years Master Bruce had returned to the cave speechless with frustration because of an unrepentant cat burglar.

"Very well, miss," he sighed, in the manner of a family servant used to picking his battles, "I will acquiesce to your wishes for now. But if your fever reaches 101, I shall call Dr. Thompkins, with your permission or without it."

Selina attempted a hiss, which disintegrated into a series of weak coughs, followed by a wince.

"Not fair," she grimaced, rearranging her aching legs under sheets that felt clammy with sweat, "No fair taking advantage, just because I'm too achy to banter back."

"On the contrary, Miss Selina," Alfred replied coolly, "If I were in any way inclined to 'banter,' I would have mentioned that you picked a most unfortunate time to forego Western medicine and become a Christian Scientist."

Not wanting to repeat the hiss-coughing fit, Selina could only manage the hostile scowl of a cat cornered in an art gallery with a sack full of Miros. Alfred ignored her glare as deftly as she had ignored his and continued collecting the empty glasses from the bedside table.

Bruce returned home from the airport with a new sense of urgency. The Mission. The Mission was all. The Mission came first. The only way to save the life he had built with Selina was to make sure it would never interfere with what really mattered. In reestablishing his priorities, in reestablishing Batman at the heart and soul of all he did, he could rest easy, knowing the light Selina brought into his life in no way jeopardized the Mission that was his life.

He bypassed the manor entirely and went straight to the cave. After a short workout, he logged into his workstation and began setting up patrol routes for the next few nights, plotting out stopping points based on recent activity and potential targets tied to the At-large list. He transferred these new routes to the Batmobile and OraCom, then went to the costume vault to change.

When he reemerged, he noticed it—or the lack of it. Alfred hadn't left the inevitable sandwich at his workstation. No ham and turkey staring up at him like an accusation. Was it possible his butler finally understood? Perhaps progress was being made after all. Since Selina moved in, Bruce did take his meals in the manor more often. Maybe that was all it took to make Alfred see that if he was hungry, he would sit down to dinner like anyone else.

Good.

It was about time.

He grunted at the empty space where no ham and turkey on asiago loaf with lettuce and Dijon that he didn't ask for and didn't want sat waiting for him to eat it anyway.

Patrol was invigorating. First the mugger outside Robinson Park turned out to be a junkie more than willing to point him to a dealer in order to avoid a prolonged beating. The dealer was just as eager to point him to a crack lab, although in his case Batman curtailed the beating with a brutal roundhouse that probably dislocated the dealer's jaw and definitely rendered him unconscious. The scum in the crack lab were not given the option to escape any part of the beating. Batman knew he could analyze the coca paste to determine their supplier—or rather, to confirm their supplier. He was already certain what he would find, and that could wait until after patrol.

The last hours before returning to the cave he spent hunting Garfield Lynns, the pyromaniac known as Firefly. It was 14 days since Lynns was released from prison in Keystone City. And Lynns rarely went more than 9 days without torching something. 16 days was the record. Batman was not certain if Lynns had returned to Gotham, but if he had, he would not be allowed to use any part of Batman's City to fuel his sick lust to make things burn. At least Firefly's pathology made him predictable: he favored buildings that would burn a certain way, level by level. Parking garages were his favorite, the Guggenheim Museum was a likely target for its spiral structure, and there were certain office complexes with the right configuration. A quick survey of these turned up nothing suspicious... until he reached the I-Mark Plaza. And there he was: Firefly, attaching thermal detonators on the roof... something new. Batman felt a nauseous rage building as he worked it out: remote detonators on the roof to set off... What? Explosives obviously, but where? Down on the base columns. Damnably clever. Once the fire reached the detonators and hit a certain temperature, the bombs would detonate, blowing out the main supports, causing the building to collapse in on itself. The predictable foe had become just that much less predictable. And Batman expressed his dissatisfaction vehemently on Garfield Lynns's jaw, ribs, throat, and solar plexus.

He returned to the cave and quickly typed up the log entries. Then he took the coca paste from the crack den into the lab. As expected, the paste had been made dissolving the leaves of the South American shrub *Erythroxylon coca*, not in a mixture of baking soda and kerosene like most suppliers used, but in a unique mixture of bromide and petroleum solvent—The Miami Turk's signature. Up until now, the Turk was smart enough to avoid Gotham City. But crackdowns in Bludhaven, Philadelphia, Buffalo and Hartford had been cutting into his cash flow. Batman had wondered if desperation might lead the Turk to this fatal mistake: moving his filthy business into Gotham.

Batman smiled down at the mortar and pestle, Petrie dish, and microscope slides on the worktable. It was not an amused twitch-smile or a warm playboy grin; it was a long, slow smile of deep and quiet menace. There was a principle, long-remembered from his studies. The Book of Five Rings, the chapter on battle tactics, called the Book of Fire: To hit the enemy "In One Timing" means when you have closed with the enemy to hit him as quickly and directly as possible without moving your body or unsettling your spirit... That is exactly what Batman had planned for The Miami Turk if he dared enter Gotham.

He opened a secured landline to Keystone City. In the 17 rings it took a sleepy voice to answer, Batman reconsidered and re-rejected the JLA Comlink. Those channels were too often monitored, and if he wanted to put up with questions, he could ask Clark or J'onn. Clark would want to investigate the Turk himself before acting, unless Batman submitted to the 2,000 questions necessary to reassure The Boy Scout he was doing the right thing. J'onn would at least postpone the questions until after the job was done—once Bruce explained the time factor. A time factor that shouldn't need explaining, a factor that should be perfectly obvious to anybody that knew him. Batman hated "farming out" a job like this. He preferred handling such matters personally—as witnessed by the discreet alert beeping in the corner of the computer screen indicating a new inmate (one Lynns, Garfield) admitted to the Arkham infirmary. But in a case like The Miami Turk, it was more important that the response be immediate. The Turk brought his filth into Gotham City and BAM, the steel jaws clamped shut on his ass. Now, not three months from now when he made another run, and not letting him back into the city, even to get his ass kicked.

No, Batman needed it to happen now, with lightening speed. Someone with ties enough to law enforcement to be familiar with the Turk. Someone who could handle the situation quickly and discreetly, but still publicly enough for word to get around. And most of all, someone who would answer Batman's summons with little more than a "Sir, yes, sir."

:: H-Hello? :: a groggy voice warbled on the other end of the phone.

Police ties, willingness to help out and speed...

"Flash," Batman growled, "Got a job for you."

Feeling a warm and intense satisfaction at a job well done, Batman entered the costume vault. As expected, the mere fact that Batman called him to collaborate on a case perked up Wally West's ears. He had read enough Fed bulletins on the Turk to need no more info than the scumbag's last known coordinates. And, just so the Turk was absolutely aware which was the fatal mistake that led to his downfall, Flash was quite clear about the message he was to deliver before ending The Miami Turk for good: "Batman sends his regards." Just as the Book of Fire instructed, it was quick, it was direct, and he didn't even have to stir from his chair.

Yes, a job well done. Batman removed the cowl, cape, utility belt, chest plate and leggings, and then reached for the kimono.

This was just as it should be. No thought of her all night. Just him, alone with his Mission. And now, after patrol and a job well done, the kimono—Selina's gift—so he didn't have to change back into Bruce Wayne's shirt and slacks just to go up to bed. Purrfect.

At the end of the clock passageway, he considered a stop in the kitchen. But he was too tired. Morning would come soon enough and he'd grab a bite. He climbed the stairs wearily, running an absent finger over the kimono, black and slate gray woven in a tight herringbone pattern with black piping. His mind wandered back to another climb up these stairs after a late patrol.

It was early in their relationship, not long after he'd revealed his identity. They'd slept together, of course, most often at her place, but occasionally at his. But that night was very different. It wasn't bedding down for the night after sex. He was coming home from patrol, as he had so often, to a dark, still house. He had hired her to help improve Wayne Enterprises security. She'd been working mostly from a laptop in his study. It got late, it was a long drive back to her place in the city, and he did have those 25 spare bedrooms. Alfred set her up in the Chinese Room, and Bruce had gone out on patrol. When he returned, just as he climbed these stairs, he'd had the oddest feeling at the sudden realization: She was there... Selina... Catwoman... was sleeping under his roof. She was in the Chinese room, right across the hall from his bedroom, at that very moment. He didn't have to retire to a lonely cold bed and conjure memories of a fantasy cat. She was right there. He could knock on the door, he could go inside, he could touch. It was early enough in their relationship that that part was still new. He was allowed to touch. Catwoman—Selina—was right there for him to touch.

At that moment, the Bruce of the present had reached his own bedroom and realized with a start that right there Selina was not.

He stared stupidly at the empty bed for a moment, and then turned, looking around the room as if trying to confirm that he was still in the present. His fingers touched the silk of the kimono again. Yes, the present. Selina's gift. From Tokyo. So where was she?

"Alfred!" Bruce called, stepping out into the hall, heedless of the hour.

Fortunately the manservant was already up, albeit dressed informally in a bathrobe, and hastened from a doorway at the far end of the hall near his own room.

"Oh good evening, sir," Alfred began in a hushed tone as soon as he was close enough, "I see that you are back. I trust you had a satisfactory evening, sir."

"Alfred, what's going on? Where's Selina?"

"I regret, sir, that Miss Selina is unwell. She is experiencing a fever. A touch of the flu, perhaps, or a mild virus. We thought it best for her comfort and your own well-being, seeing that she might be contagious, if we moved her out of your bedroom."

Bruce gave a mild sigh of relief, and mentally kicked Batman for not remembering the first rule of detection: the simplest explanations are always the most likely.

"So she's in her own suite for the duration?" he asked.

"No, sir. There is no longer a bed in those rooms since she moved in her own furniture. I have put her in the Rose Room."

"The Rose Room!" Bruce hissed in an indignant whisper, "You put her in the Rose Bedroom. Alfred, that's the Bimbo Room, what are you thinking?"

Alfred raised a disapproving eyebrow. And Bruce glared a hostile bat-glare.

At 4:15 a.m., Bruce stormed into the kitchen gripped in a complex jumble of emotions he would be hard-pressed to describe. He opened the refrigerator door as if to surprise a criminal cabal planning some kind of uprising. He took out the ham, turkey, lettuce and mustard as if he was rousting suspects. He laid out the asiago loaf and paused before slicing, as if the bread knife were a threat meant to terrify a reluctant stoolie into talking.

Then he massaged his brow, feeling like a man utterly out of control, and calmly finished making himself the sandwich he should have eaten nine hours earlier.

He turned back to the refrigerator suddenly, as if remembering something, opened it again and took out a half-bottle of dry white Bordeaux. He poured, sipped, and looked thoughtfully at the glass, remembering:

“Once I took a girl to Maison de Pierre, world-famous for their wine cellar...”

The roof of the opera house, at the very beginning... His ‘first date’ with Selina... a picnic basket and a bottle of Bordeaux it took him forever to open. Catwoman was not like other women. Catwoman he could talk to about the way things were.

“Once I took a girl to Maison de Pierre, world-famous for their wine cellar. I was patrolling later, so I didn’t drink. She noticed, didn’t say anything, just filed it away. When she got around to breaking up with me, she included in the laundry list of my faults my dishonesty in never telling her I was a recovering alcoholic.”

She laughed. She saw it at once, the ironic absurdity of it all. She was like him, she knew what it was to have a part of you they can never see. She understood. For the first time in his life, he found himself able to speak honestly, as he was, on a date with a woman. And she laughed, and she smiled, and she kissed him. She smiled at him, at the man he really was.

How could Alfred put her in the Bimbo Room like it was nothing, like it was a mere household expedient?

Bruce Wayne rarely had sex with the bimbos. In the early days, the occasional torn muscle or random bruise was easily explained: “That new ADA Harvey Dent plays a mean game of squash.” But Bruce was no fool. He knew he had only a limited time in which to establish the playboy persona before his body amassed too many scars to pass as a mere “rabid sports nut.”

There are other arts besides karate and meditation taught in the Far East. A few tricks from here and there made Bruce seem an inventive and far more experienced lover than he truly was, and soon there was tittering at all the debutante balls about Bruce Wayne’s “skills.” That was really all it took. After that, no self-respecting debutante, divorcee or actress/model/whatever was going to admit going on a date with THE Bruce Wayne and not getting “the W treatment.” He became a legend with astonishingly little effort on his part.

Maintaining the reputation couldn’t have been simpler. A little too much champagne in front of a warm fire or in a steamy hot tub resulted in a very sleepy date, one that could be carried upstairs, placed in the bed and left for morning. The Rose Room was chosen because it was closest to Alfred’s own room, where he would notice if any sleeping beauty woke in the night and wandered. It was also farthest from Bruce’s room, where they would be least likely to hear anything when he returned from patrol. In the morning, Bambi, Greta or Daphne would be greeted by a rather distinguished butler. He would apologize that Mr. Wayne had to run off on business, give her a full breakfast, and call her a taxi—or if she were a socialite of sufficient standing, Alfred would chauffeur her home in one of Mr. Wayne’s many fine automobiles. Again, the Fop’s reputation took care of the rest.

And that was the bedroom where Alfred installed Selina. Where he put Selina! It was outrageous. How could Alfred, of all people, be so callous and thoughtless?

Selina had changed everything. She changed his life. She made him happy. How could he toss her into the Rose Room like some bimbo? Like she was a prop only here for him to manipulate for the sake of a smokescreen?

THE BOOK OF AIR

In my doctrine, I dislike a preconceived, narrow spirit... You must know the Ways that others are taught, so I have written about other traditions of strategy in this, the Wind Book.

The air was still heavy and damp from the rain. It made the traffic louder. The most scientific corner of Batman's mind supplied the reason reflexively, although the rest of him didn't really care: sound waves travel more efficiently through solids. Air molecules weighed down by high humidity, like now, are thicker. Ergo, the traffic noise, rising off the street with the heat of the day and the exhaust of the evening rush hour, was louder... So what?

He cast a line, snaring a gargoyle on the face of a West Side apartment building, and leapt into a rush of that damp rain-laden air. His body slashed through the wind, perfectly balanced, perfectly controlled, until an effortless shake freed the line from the gargoyle as he dropped to a two-foot perch overlooking Riverside Drive.

He quickly identified the apartment that was the object of tonight's surveillance and trained infrared lenses on Ruth Levy's window. Because of a universal law that plagued him whenever he wanted to dismiss thoughts of Selina, Ruth Levy had a cat. The scruffy-looking black Persian sat just inside the window, watching pigeons, while her mistress watched TV in bed. Batman grumbled that a dog would at least offer her some protection, but then he reminded himself that Ruth Levy had no idea she was in danger. How could she know that a carved tablet unearthed on the other side of the world made her the target of religious extremists?

The so-called Vayu Tablet was found by an archaeological dig at Belur. It was thought to be a fragment of a four part treatise on health by ancient Hindu holy men. If authenticated, it would be a find of enormous significance to archaeology, but of even greater import to India's Hindus. The region's Muslim population found that upsetting enough. Extremists had already made the tablet the object of a holy war within India's borders. Thinking to protect the priceless relic, the scientists had shipped the Vayu Tablet to America for authentication. A blue-ribbon panel had been assembled, including prominent experts from Gotham's museums and universities. One of these was Dr. Mark Levy, Professor Emeritus of Archaeology, Hudson University; Curator of Asian Antiquities, Gotham Museum of Art; loving father of Ruth Ann Levy, 710 Riverside Drive Apt 6B... and oh yes, a member of Temple Beth El. That an American Jew was involved in the authentication of a relic that would galvanize their Hindu enemies ignited a new, unprecedented hatred within a particular sect of extremists.

Oracle had picked up CIA and Interpol speculation that the terrorists were planning an assassination. Batman knew better. If the blow had already fallen, if the tablet was proven authentic and they were powerless to do anything but watch their enemies' triumph, then these sick, thwarted men might seek to punish what they were powerless to prevent. But they weren't that powerless—not yet. By kidnapping Levy's daughter, they could force him to sabotage the findings, perhaps even destroy the tablet.

So Ruth Levy was under bat-surveillance until the authentication was completed and the tablet safely out of Gotham. Unfortunately, that surveillance now included a cat that noticed a more interesting sight outside its window than pigeons. It seemed to be staring directly at Batman.

What was it about cats? Why did they always have to insert themselves into your field of vision when you needed to focus elsewhere? Not that the little nuisance was interfering with his stakeout. He could see the apartment, the front and rear entrances, the fire escape, street out front and the alley behind. The problem with any surveillance job like this wasn't staying focused; it was boredom. Hours and hours alone in his head instead of patrolling. Impossible for the mind not to wander to... topics... that were on his mind during the day. And now when his mind did start to wander, there was going to be a little feline face looking up at him with that curious intensity they all seemed to have.

Like Whiskers and Nutmeg, when he moved the bed from the Blue Room into Selina's suite.

Quite unnecessary, Alfred had said, and the cats had stared at him like an intruder.

But Selina? Selina's reaction surprised him: She gave a weak little smile and put her arms around his neck, rested her head against his chest, and let him carry her back to her own rooms without a word of complaint. On the contrary, "happy purr" and "my dark knight" were her only comments.

He'd been expecting to put his foot down, as he did with everybody once they started challenging his judgment on something. "Quite unnecessary, sir" from Alfred—who was perfectly aware why the Rose Room had connotations that made it inappropriate for Selina's sickroom. And angry glares from her cats. But from Selina herself: "Happy purr." It made him wonder what she was up to. Easy acceptance of what he wanted? Impossible woman.

The reason he gave was plausible enough: she would be more comfortable in her own room, surrounded by her own things. Selina seemed to sense too that moving the bed gave him something physical to do, which was his preferred method of dealing with anything.

"Better than the get-well bouquet you sent Harvey, anyway," she teased when he set her down in the bed. How she loved teasing him. Even from a sickbed, while she arranged her tissues, aspirin and water glass on the bedside table, she managed to take a little swipe with a free claw. If she ever found out about the Bimbo Room, he shuddered to think what her reaction might be. From an ordinary woman, there might be retroactive jealousy, disapproval, or bizarrely irrational hurt feelings. But with Selina, that all seemed too pat. Her response would be more feline, surely, strangely amused, a new world opening up of ways to needle him. Impossible woman.

Was he ever a crimefighter to her, he wondered suddenly? A dangerous threat to her freedom and criminal activities? Or had he always been kitty's yarn toy? He looked involuntarily to the cat in the window for an answer. Still amber eyes studied him curiously.

Dissatisfied with this wordless tête-à-tête, he fired a line to make a quick pass through the two-block area surrounding Ruth Levy's building. Checking the line with a reflexive tug, he swung effortlessly into the abyss, defying the weight and pull of gravity, his mass cutting the air like a blade. Muscle memory and unthinking reflexes

parted his knees, tipped his head back and pulled his legs open for speed. It was what circus acrobats called 'Cowboying,' according to Dick, because cowboys rode with their legs apart. At the two-block mark, Batman paused on the post office roof to survey the neighborhood from the new vantage point. Satisfied, he returned to his original position opposite the apartment, opposite the window... and opposite the cat.

The little creature stared, just as before, as if this return was wholly expected.

"So how was Florida," Selina asked finally, once she had settled herself in the new bed. "Did the Fop buy himself something suitably tacky?"

She was mocking him. They all had their opinions about his habit of referring to Bruce Wayne in the third person when he meant the role of Bruce Wayne rather than his true self. He considered it a useful discipline, but everyone else chose to look at it as a peculiar quirk. But only Selina dared make fun of it to his face.

"You're feeling better," he noted.

"Evading the question? Whatever you bought must be an absolute horror."

He explained about the Dahlia's master suite: the walk-in closet, the Baccarat sconces and the onyx fireplace. Selina listened with an odd expression, like she was trying to tune in a different frequency. When he finished, she didn't speak and her expression never wavered. It was like she was waiting for something.

"What about the other one," she said at last.

"What other one?"

Her face shifted into a look he recognized, the look that always followed "You're a thief."

"The other boat."

"I never said anything about another—"

"Look, I'm way too achy, sweating, chills, sore throat, feverish for the rooftop denial routine right now. Just tell me about the other one that you want and don't want to admit to wanting."

He glared.

She reached for her water glass.

He grunted.

She took an aspirin.

He shifted his weight, telegraphing the 'this ends now' rooftop ultimatum.

She coughed feebly.

...

He told her about the Gatta. "Salon on the upper deck, teak floors, cherry wood bar and cabinets, complete dinette, a barbecue, large sun pad fore of the hangar. Oh, and the state rooms, upholstered leather mostly. Big galley, of course. An entertainment system with all the bells and whistles..."

He didn't believe what he was hearing himself say. He was gushing about the Gatta like one of those eager young management trainees, so thrilled to be meeting the head of the company. It was suddenly quite glaringly obvious: he not only wanted the Gatta, he had already decided to buy her.

"We could take real trip. Up to the Vineyard maybe. Just you, me, and a picnic basket—on the fastest yacht in the fleet."

She laughed at that. Then coughed and shoed him from her room, saying her fever must be higher than she thought, she was delirious, she thought she heard him use the word "fun."

Impossible woman.

:: Boss? ::

The incongruous voice from the OraCom pulled Batman from the memory.

"Go ahead, O."

:: I've been analyzing the security tapes from Gotham International Airport like you asked. I might have something for you. 4 PM this afternoon, there was a group of four men getting the courtesy shuttle to Biffy's Car Rental. One is a 7-point match on a suspected terrorist from the FBI database. So I went into the Biffy system and checked the credit cards used between 4 and 6 o'clock. One is stolen; one is suspiciously new, issued only last week. ::

"And?"

::The stolen number has been used four times already. DVD Player, a guitar, car stereo, hubcaps. Not our guys.::

"And the other card?"

:: Paydirt. It's been used twice. A Pakistani restaurant and a fleabag motel, both by the interstate. ::

"Good work, O. Address?"

:: Transmitting it now. But I've already sent BC to cover that end; she was in the neighborhood. What you want to know is they rented a green Chevy Lumina from Biffy. GS License plate Z41C-245. ::

Batman grunted.

:: You're welcome. Oracle out. ::

Batman stretched his legs with another pass around the neighborhood before returning to his post. The cat had repositioned on a chest of drawers. It was reclined comfortably, but still focused on his position outside the window.

So... the decision was made. He was buying the Gatta. Bruce Wayne was no more a shallow, womanizing Fop than he had been before, and now he'd bought a boat for little trips up the coast with his girlfriend. None of which made it any less likely that Bruce Wayne was Batman. It didn't make it any more likely, but that wasn't the point. The whole exercise was for naught. He hadn't made an inch of headway on regaining control of Bruce Wayne's image. He just had a new boat.

For a split second, the thought of buying both boats flickered in his mind... only to be canceled out by the emergence of a new consideration: PsychoBruce. The man who ran a billion dollar global corporation was putting his foot down. He was not going to waste any more time on this. The decision was made. He was buying the Gatta. Second-guessing, third-guessing, and fiftieth-guessing a fait accompli was a misuse of time, effort, and brainpower. He was a busy man not about to squander those resources. What's next?

Next.

Next.

Next.

Next... unless the Chevy Lumina appeared, there was really nothing to do at the moment but work out if the Gatta could be parlayed into a public exhibition of

Foppism. He would reactivate his membership at the Yacht Club, certainly... Then he could throw a big party to celebrate the new boat... Get drunk and make a spectacle of himself. Maybe he couldn't arrive with twin bimbos in sailor suits and then depart with two different women. Maybe he couldn't chase the waitresses around, making them call him "Commodore Wayne." But he could certainly confuse starboard and port, trip over a dock line, and fall on his face.

He noticed the little cat across the way seemed more hostile than it had a minute before. It was not difficult to read the word "Jackass" in its stare.

Okay, so Selina didn't like the Fop act. Neither did Alfred. Neither did Tim. Nobody actually liked the Fop. Even Bruce himself occasionally felt like punching him in the mouth—

...

Where was that van? Batman looked to the apartment building with a sneer of absolute hatred, a taste of adrenaline and coiled tension filling his mouth. He tugged the bottom of his glove absently, flexing his fingers into a fist. He fired a line to the arm of a streetlight and plunged into the empty air once more. He twisted his body at the bottom of the swing to reset his trajectory, eye-marking his next target, and pulled up to land atop a dry cleaner's billboard.

He regarded Ruth Levy's window from this new angle and waited impatiently for any sign of the Lumina.

Maybe.

Maybe it was time to readdress the Fop.

The public persona was crucial for keeping the secret. Bruce Wayne and Batman had to be established as two radically distinct beings that could not possibly share any common ground. Batman was smart. Bruce was an imbecile—except when he needed not to be for the sake of Wayne Enterprises. Batman was selfless and courageous, devoting himself to protecting his city. Bruce was superficial, spoiled, shallow and selfish—except when he needed not to be for the sake of the Wayne Foundation.

Perhaps that was the answer. He certainly had to compensate for Selina in some way. Bruce Wayne in a lasting, stable relationship? There had to be an offset. The Foundation might just be the key.

A hint of green appeared six streets away. Batman trained his digital scope on it and adjusted the magnification, confirming the license plate of a green Chevy Lumina.

At last.

He tugged the edge of the glove once more, this time in anticipation, and thoughtfully massaged the right knuckles with the left fingertips.

On 64th street, leading away from Gotham General Hospital, there is a uniform line of buildings approximately the same height: a parking garage, a convent, an annex of the University Medical Center, and a beauty salon. It made a perfect avenue for Batman to "pace" ...back and forth... the upper deck of the garage to the convent to the roof of the annex to the salon... back to the annex, back to the convent, back to the garage to glare again at the hospital where Yawar Kashani would be taken into custody as soon as he was out of surgery.

The place was swarming with pencil pushers by now. The Feds had beaten the GCPD by almost twenty minutes, which disappointed Batman more than a little. They did have the advantage over the local police: the Feds had suspected these terrorists were active in Gotham, even if they were mistaken about their intent. So they'd been watching, apparently, just like Oracle had been, for any kind of official blip: and when the two terrorists Batman apprehended, Raqim Bandari and Yaquin Ali, were booked at the 12th precinct, federal agents stepped in at once, taking the case out of local hands. The third man, now in surgery, would disappear just as swiftly into the bureaucratic vacuum. Leaving only the unknown fourth still out there, the only hope of any more leads.

Batman swung again out as far as the convent but came to a halt on the roof of the annex to greet a waiting visitor.

"Something wrong?" he graveled, annoyed at the interruption.

Nightwing laughed.

"Do you have any idea how silly this looks on a GPS grid? This little blip pacing back and forth over a quarter block."

Batman's eyes darkened into savage, narrow slits.

"I don't allow Oracle to track me."

Nightwing shrugged.

"Busted, eh. Well it would look silly on Oracle's grid, but actually I just saw from the roof of the Kinko's over there. It looks silly from there, too."

"You think this is funny? This thing was bungled, 'Wing. One of them is still out there and we've lost him. One is in emergency—"

"You didn't put him there, Bruce. He ran straight into an oncoming car."

Again Batman flexed his fingers into a fist, this time grinding it into his open hand. So that's what 'Wing was doing here. A suspect brought in by Batman was undergoing emergency surgery, so Oracle dispatched Nightwing to 'humor and handle him' through the guilts. He wasn't even hiding it. He gave no feeble excuse about being in the area anyway or following a perp. He was watching from the Kinko's.

Nightwing went on. "Remember what you used to say every night before we pulled out of the cave: 'Expect the unexpected.' The guy ran in front of a car. There was no way you could plan for that. It's one of those things."

Batman looked at him levelly. "This isn't about guilt. So the next time your wife gets it into her head to check up on me and sends you in to—"

"Yeah. Fine. We were concerned; we're terrible people."

"Nightwing—"

"Bruce! We were concerned. Deal with it! You were gruntier than usual. It wasn't normal gruntiness, it wasn't trouble-with-Selina gruntiness, it was something new. Then this guy shows up in the ER, and we were concerned!"

Batman gave a curt grunt, which made Nightwing chuckle. Caught being 'gruntier than usual' and unable to dismiss the issue effectively without grunting even more, Batman returned to an earlier part of the conversation:

"I did say 'Expect the unexpected.' I also taught you 'your strategy is of no account if when called on to fight—"

"—in a confined space you want to use the long sword. Yeah, I know, the Book of the Rings. Bruce, that's sword-fighting from like 500 years ago!"

“The principles are sound. If you rely so much on one weapon, one way of doing things, then what happens when the circumstances change? When conditions no longer favor doing it the way you always have... you’re screwed.”

Nightwing said nothing at first. He looked at the batline his mentor had used to swing from the convent.

“If you can’t adapt, then yeah, I guess you’re screwed. I should be getting home. Babs will be waiting up.”

Batman watched his former partner swing off the roof, cutting the damp rain-laden air, balanced and controlled, just as he himself had done. The pointed mention of going home to Barbara hung in the air while the figure swung roof to roof, smaller and smaller, to finally disappear into the cityscape.

“If you can’t adapt, then yeah, I guess you’re screwed.”

THE BOOK OF VOID

People in this world look at things mistakenly and think that what they do not understand must be the void. This is not the true void. It is bewilderment.

Cold.

There was cold.

And black.

A sour taste.

A bizarre sticky concoction smeared on his face.

Morning dew and dried blood.

Maybe his own. Maybe not.

Which was worse?

Batman's eyes opened as waterless slits, swollen, bloodshot, and stinging with the shock of early daylight. Through a jackhammer pounding in his brain, he realized he had no idea where he was.

Outdoors. Hard. Stink of damp concrete. An alley.

Batman rolled painfully onto his stomach and rose to his knees, only to be doubled over, his gut wrenching so tight with dry heaves that he nearly passed out.

As soon as he was able, he croaked a single word "Car" into the communicator and sunk back into a torpor of aching, burning, and nausea. What seemed like hours later, the quiet hum of the Batmobile pulled him back to awareness, and he hauled the mass of his aching body into the car.

"Home," he managed weakly.

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*Until you realize the true Way, you may think that things are correct and in order. However, if we look at things objectively, from the viewpoint of laws of the world, we see various doctrines departing from the true Way.*

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Hours later, Bruce lay in bed, staring at a stark ceiling. He had only the dimmest recollection of returning to the cave, changing in the vault, and climbing the stairs to his room.

There had been a moment in the vault, hanging up the cape—a moment where he had it pieced together—a punk that turned out to be not a lone assailant but a lookout for a street gang. Jumped from behind, a taser, then a brick. The details of such fights blurred into a thousand others... but he beat them back... then beat them down... hard. Then the alleyway... He had stumbled back to where he thought the Batmobile was... realized it wasn't there... and collapsed. He was able to recall all of that in the vault, for that one split second, but found he couldn't hold the thought and still work his arm to hang up the cape. That moment's switch in focus to coordinate eye, hand, cape, and hook had dissolved the fragile thread of memories into another confused blur.

Only slightly sharper was the memory of Alfred in the hallway when he got home. A dismayed “My word” that Bruce wasn’t meant to hear concealed in a hurried “Very pleased to see you home, sir. Your bed is turned down, and I shall of course not disturb you until you ring.”

The only perfectly clear memory he had was Selina.

Alfred’s voice, a dismayed “My word”... And then Selina emerging from her suite, looking so pale and so tired, and holding Nutmeg.

“Good. You’re home.”

Bruce assumed he’d nodded, turned into his room, and collapsed onto the bed. He honestly couldn’t remember. That one moment was so startlingly vivid, but the rest was all vague, dim and wispy fragments lost in a whirlpool of ache and nausea.

Any other man would surely begin to doubt himself. Any other man or woman, waking up god knows where coated in god knows what, would surely take at least a few minutes to reconsider their vocation. If crimefighting meant mornings like this, was it really what they wanted to be doing with their lives?

Bruce had no such doubts. His only thought was that a hot shower might revive him. He got up, walked to the bathroom, and turned on the water... Then he turned... slowly... to a sight his peripheral vision had registered... in the mirror. He saw a reflection of a man he didn’t recognize. He wasn’t sure who it was, but it certainly wasn’t Bruce Wayne. Bruce Wayne’s skin wasn’t gray. Bruce Wayne didn’t let his cheeks grow stubble like that. Bruce Wayne didn’t have bags the size of a thumb under his swollen, bloodshot eyes. Bruce Wayne didn’t have a mouth that hung limply open, cheeks and lips sagging like a wet sock on a curtain rod.

The wraith before him blurred and faded as the mirror coated with steam from the shower. The hot water did revive him a little, enough to recall the events of the night more clearly. The gang, the fight, he beat them. Then the alley. No Batmobile. Alfred’s voice, a dismayed “My word” that Bruce wasn’t meant to hear. And then Selina emerging from her suite, looking so pale and so tired, and holding Nutmeg.

“Good. You’re home.”

What was it about that moment that struck him?

He toweled off, wrapped himself in a thick terry robe, and collapsed again onto the bed—thinking, for some reason, about Walt Whitman.

That was the thing about mornings like this: when the thoughts started coming back, there was no telling what crazy associations they might bring with them. It would have delighted the monks he had studied with in Tibet. The holy men would fast and meditate for days seeking a blank nothingness; they thought that inner void would bring revelation. Bruce never bought it. He knew there was value in exhaustion. He knew it was necessary to break down the body and drain the mind for the breathing and martial arts moves to become instinct. There was no time in a life or death fight to rely on conscious strategy. It had to be embedded into the deepest animal core; it had to become reflex. That is undoubtedly what the ancestors of those monks knew, and they concocted that elaborate philosophy to achieve it. But to expect true insight? “Glimpsing the no-thing and opening the mind-flower in a moment of Satori?” No. That is where the Western Man in Bruce balked. That is where the Scientist rebelled. A bad morning like this was simply part of the package. It went with being Batman. There were upsides and downsides to the life he had chosen. This

was a downside. Waking up in the occasional alleyway, unsure of how he got there. Getting home in a haze. Alfred's voice, a dismayed "My word" that Bruce wasn't meant to hear. And then Selina emerging from her suite, looking so pale and so tired, and holding Nutmeg.

"Good. You're home."

He knew his perceptions were dulled from the strain of the night, but that one word—coming from her—seemed to hang in the hallway between them like the cloying sweet of cut grass in the heat of heavy summer air.

Home.

O quick mettle, rich blood, impulse, and love! Good and evil! O all dear to me!

O dear to me my birth-things—All moving things, and the trees where I was born—the grains, plants, rivers;

Walt Whitman. From Leaves of Grass. The one called Longing for Home.

O my heart! O tender and fierce pangs—

He had wanted more Selina in his life. He wanted her here, at Wayne Manor, living in his house; he wanted to come home at night knowing she was there waiting in the bed.

It was the anniversary of his parents' murder. It was a difficult time for him. Even those that cared for him called the days leading up to it Hell Month. Even friends like Lucius pulled away. Even family like Dick. Even Alfred.

O longings irrepensible! O I will go back to old Tennessee, and never wander more!

He wanted her here. He wanted to come back from that patrol, from the ritual visit to that cursed alley, and know she was there, in his house, in that room, accepting him as he was, loving him for the man he really was. He wanted... home.

"I am not hiding out in my own home"

He'd been so caught up in their argument he hadn't even heard it.

"Nothing to talk about, Handsome. You need to go back to the drawing board on this one. I don't like being ordered around. I am not hiding out in my own home on your say so, and I am not going to put up with a bunch of imaginary bimbae..."

She had called the manor her home. The cave, her home. His house, his cave... Selina called them home.

And he hadn't even heard it.

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*Polish the twofold spirit of heart and mind, and sharpen the twofold gaze of perception and sight. When your spirit is not in the least clouded, when the clouds of bewilderment clear away, there is the true void.*

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Bruce got up, dressed, and crossed the hall to Selina's suite. She wasn't there, but Nutmeg deigned to sniff his fingertips and rubbed her head against his hand. Whiskers was in his usual spot in the portrait gallery, looking down onto the Great Hall, but when he saw Bruce, the cat came to the top of the landing and followed him down the stairs. At the foot of the stairs, Bruce slowed and watched his feline escort.

Predictably, the cat took the lead, heading towards the morning room. There, as expected, Bruce found Selina.

"It still works. The little furball led me right to you," he noted.

Selina looked up, ignoring the allusion to bat-chases past, and made an observation of her own.

"You look like hell."

"Thanks for noticing," he grumbled sarcastically. "I'm better than I was an hour ago; I'll be better an hour from now. I figure I'll give my head that much longer to clear, then catch up on the log entry..." He trailed off. This wasn't what he came to talk about. And there was no way to smoothly transition from log entries that wouldn't write themselves to—

"Decided on a boat yet?"

His lip twitched as the transition became unnecessary.

"It's more complicated than that," he said.

"I see. So there's going to be confirmation hearings or something?"

The twitch tugged harder on his lip, threatening a full smile.

"I'm getting the Gatta; you're right, she's the one I want."

"Well now. Those are some new words for you. Did you just learn them?"

Bruce ignored this. Impossible woman! Not that he expected her to make it easier for him, but she could at least refrain from making it harder. Meanwhile, the demented little furball had hopped into her lap and was purring up at him like his admission about wanting the Gatta was a victory for all catkind.

"I'm going to pass on the Lamborghini and the new plane. No phantom trips. When we're both feeling better, when Gotham is quiet enough, we'll take the Gatta out for a day or two."

"It sounds wonderful," Selina said quietly. Then, after a pause, she added "What aren't you telling me?"

Bruce said nothing at first, then spoke with a mild strain.

"There's no point in a new car. Bruce Wayne would have to have the cutting edge: the fastest, sleekest, most powerful sports car made. And there's a new Bugatti coming out that's far too similar to the Batmobile for Bruce Wayne to even consider buying it."

"Bruce, what aren't you telling me?"

"And a new plane is just, well, between Wayne One, the Cessna, the Batwing and the two jets owned by Wayne Enterprises— What do I want with another airplane anyway? It's not... like..."

"Bruce." Her voice was impossibly gentle, the lengthy pause even more so. "What is it you're trying to say?"

"I can't have both you and the playboy cover, Selina."

She looked up at him evenly. It was obvious from the discussion of the Gatta, but he would say the obvious anyway "And I can't give you up. So the playboy is... over. And now... I'm not sure... where that leaves me."

"Ah. Well, reinventing a bit of the public persona isn't exactly fun. But it's not like it was forced on you by some no-talent bottom feeders trying to make a name for themselves by pissing all over your reputation, to the extent that you had to mount an actual goddamn stage show just to set the record straight. Or, for that matter, it's not like you've got to make wholesale changes to your masked life, up to and including

scrapping the longest unbroken winning streak since the advent of killjoys in capes, finding yourself plopped into the middle of a readymade family (yellow ruffles). Not to mention, it's not like living with you is exactly a day at the beach. So what was your problem again, Bruce?"

The word "pussywhipped" hovered on his lips, but the self-preservation instincts honed over a thousand patrols held it back.

"The problem is that 'Bruce Wayne's life' and my life have always been two entirely different things. If they're going to be sharing more common ground, I'm not sure what the ramifications of that might be."

"So what? Feel your way as you go."

"I don't do that. I plan the journey before I set out."

"Dull."

"Prudent."

"Control freak."

"Cautious."

"Bruce, you're the best there is. You're the most staggeringly brilliant mind of your generation. Are you seriously telling me that Gladys Ashton-Larraby is going to throw you a curve you can't handle?"

"That's not the point."

"Let's make it the point. Because I really do think, and I've thought for quite a long time, that the obsessive control thing is beneath you. That's for those other guys, the mediocrities, that are afraid and they should be. Because they know—down deep, they know—that they're not good enough to handle whatever comes along. They want to control everyone and everything around them, because they don't trust themselves. They can't improvise. They can't deal with what might happen on its own. They don't have the stuff. Bruce, that's not you. That is so not you. You can handle anything."

Bruce felt his chest push slightly outward, an involuntary response. The woman he loved looking up into his eyes, telling him he was wonderful, and his chest swelled. He took a step closer, placing a gentle arm around her neck, and pulled her in, leaned down himself until their lips were touching.

A kiss.

Deep and penetrating.

The primal man was aware he just agreed to something.

The civilized man had no idea what.

Whatever it was, he would find out soon enough.

Whatever it was, he would deal with it.

In the moment.

As he was.

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*In the void is virtue and not evil. Wisdom has existence, principle has existence, The Way has existence. Spirit is nothingness.*  
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