



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

#39

Cat \equiv *Fables* *Polishing Silver*



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES

**POLISHING SILVER:
THE JOURNAL OF ALFRED
PENNYWORTH**

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By
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POLISHING SILVER: THE JOURNAL OF ALFRED PENNYWORTH

"It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days."

So begins my favorite novel, *Remains of the Day*, by Kazuo Ishiguro. I would be hard-pressed to say how many evenings I have spent reading and rereading this astonishing book in that hour between retiring to my room and turning out the light to sleep.

In the early days, I was reluctant to watch television at this hour in case Master Bruce returned home from his nocturnal activities and I failed to hear him for the noise. I soon realized how rarely he would be returning at a decent hour, and have since developed a certain sense for the ebb and flow of his nighttime schedule. So there really is, I suppose, no reason now to confine myself to such silent pursuits. I could watch television if I wished. Master Bruce has equipped my room with a fine set and Master Dick gave me a DVD player for Christmas last year, along with a somewhat curious selection of films I have never watched. I suppose I simply prefer to read.

And yet tonight I am putting aside the fictional journal of Mr. Stevens, butler of Darlington Hall, in order to begin a journal of my own.

I have just come from the cave, where I was pleased to collect only half a sandwich remaining on the snack tray. This marks the second night this week that Master Bruce has eaten the soup and at least a portion of the sandwich, and last night he even dined upstairs with Miss Selina. One cannot help but be encouraged.

While in the cave, I made my customary stop in the costume vault to collect Master Bruce's clothes for laundering and hang the kimono for him to change into on his return. My first action on entering the vault these days is always to sniff and ascertain if any hint of the odor has returned.

I should perhaps explain:

A short while ago, the master's partnership with Superman obliged him to travel to a nether dimension called Apokolips. They were victorious in so far as defeating that realm's overlord, Darkseid—due in large part to the master's own strategy and resolve. One could not help but feel proud of the accomplishment. Neither could one help noticing that the aura of that vile place had permeated the master's costume. In the end, it had to be burned.

One naturally did one's best to launder the garment before taking so drastic a step. In those few days before we determined the entire costume did, in fact, have to be replaced, the revolting stench, best likened to rotting eggs and gasoline, congealed in the close air of the costume vault. I have been battling it ever since.

Unlike the master's decisive routing of Darkseid, my own fight against the lingering stink of his realm has been a prolonged war of attrition. Tonight's careful sniff did

reveal a faint hint of the foul smell returning where the cape had hung. I went at once to the chemistry lab and poured a few tablespoons of a particular clear liquid into a small flat petri dish. I returned this to the costume vault to evaporate. By morning, no trace of the odor will remain...

When I remarked that I was beginning this journal, I should have more properly said I was resuming it, for this is the fourth I have kept in my life. I thought it a ludicrous practice in the beginning, telling one's thoughts to a sheet of paper as if conversing with another person. But it was assigned as an acting exercise, and one was not in a position to refuse.

I soon learned how mistaken I was to scoff. Something in the act of putting it all on paper, placing one's circumstances before an imaginary reader, led to surprising discoveries about one's life, one's loved ones, one's very soul.

If I may illustrate: You may have smiled, my imaginary reader, when I said my favorite book is *Remains of the Day*. If you knew this book, knew that its main character, Mr. Stevens, is a butler, then the preference might have struck you as an amusing vanity on my part. Anticipating this, I might now go on to tell you how Mr. Stevens is no ordinary butler. As he explains at some length, his was an idealistic generation, ambitious to make their mark on the world by serving gentlemen who were "furthering the progress of humanity." Professional success for such men had little to do with the wages they were paid, the size of the staff they managed, or the splendor of their employer's family name. It lay in practicing their skills for gentlemen who were working towards a better world. For Stevens that meant the MPs and Cabinet Ministers "in whose hands civilization had been entrusted." For myself, I am unable to read those passages without thinking of Master Bruce.

There is no question that the master's efforts as Batman have "furthered the progress of humanity." He has, through his association with the Justice League, saved the human race from extinction more than once. And yet, I believe it is the individual day-to-day efforts that gives him the most satisfaction; bettering the lives of individual citizens of Gotham, both through the work of the Wayne Foundation, and in making the city safer through his nightly patrols.

I do, you see, appreciate the need for a Batman in the world. I simply wish it did not have to be Master Bruce that chose to take on that role. Much as I understand the master's drive and desire, I do—particularly at this time of night—hate that Master Bruce feels the need to put himself in the situations he does. Of course, talking Master Bruce out of being Batman is an impossibility; that much has been evident for many years. So one does whatever is necessary to aid and provide for him however one can.

Is it really so surprising then, that I am more inclined to reread this one book in the evenings, rather than watch a musical about Eva Peron?

As I said, I made my customary stop in the costume vault a short while ago and collected the clothes Master Bruce had removed before changing into the Batsuit. I was somewhat amused to see he had again worn the new sweater. Like the kimono, the sweater is a gift from Miss Selina, a cotton argyle, light blue and navy. Master Bruce

admits it is not entirely his style, but one gathers Miss Selina is quite enthusiastic about the colour. In fact, while one would not wish to open oneself up to accusations of eavesdropping, the truth is that one did happen to overhear remarks to the effect that the intense blue of the garment brought out the master's eyes.

I saw that the master's gi was also laid aside for laundering. I inspected it carefully and was pleased to note that, while it was markedly wet with perspiration, there were no bloodstains or punctures in the fabric. Whatever workout Master Bruce had engaged in before setting out this evening, it had not, evidently, involved the menacing contraption Masters Dick and Timothy refer to as "Zogger." Of all the times the young gentlemen (and I include Master Bruce most of all in this group) have had cause to call upon my training as a medic, the one instance where I am tempted to throw up my hands and let them bleed is when their wounds are, essentially, self-inflicted by means of this Zogger. Master Bruce is adamant that this kind of aggressively violent training is necessary for defensive moves to become instinctive. Still, as Miss Selina has observed, it is ironic that of all the persons of her acquaintance designing deathtraps to harm him, the one putting in the most hours and devising the most destructive appliance is Master Bruce himself.

In any case, having attended to my final duties for the day with respect to the cave, I returned to the manor by way of the elevator that opens into the butler's pantry off the kitchen. This room is not, strictly speaking, a pantry in the sense of a storeroom for foodstuffs. It is the office from which the head of the domestic staff has organized the affairs of Wayne Manor since the house was built. When that head domestic is the housekeeper, the room is often called a parlor; when a butler, it is the pantry.

I have always found it prudent to take a few minutes here at the end of each day to prepare for the next. It is my custom to enjoy a cup of hot milk as I do so, and Miss Selina's little companion Nutmeg has become a regular guest for this ritual. When the elevator door opened, there she was, waiting. She was actually sitting on the laptop I use to organize various housekeeping matters, sitting on it with her head cocked to the side in that rather inquisitive way, as if she were puzzled what could have kept me from such an important assignation.

"Good evening, Miss Nutmeg," I greeted her. "Have you come to keep me company or have you come to beg some milk?"

Some may feel it is silly to converse this way with a cat, but I was obliged to pick the creature up from where she had settled herself in order to start the laptop, and it seemed only polite to acknowledge her in some way before depositing her on the floor. While the laptop powered up, I heated the milk.

In my little friend's honour, I have taken to sprinkling my nightcap with nutmeg (the spice) rather than cinnamon, as was my habit previously. This may strike you as a peculiar kind of joke, but the cat herself seems not insensible to the compliment. And as we are the only two parties in the kitchen at this hour, I really don't see that it is anyone else's concern so long as we are both pleased with it.

When I returned to the pantry, the laptop had completed its routine, accessing Master Bruce's schedule and e-mail from Wayne Enterprises. I noted two appointments listed for the following day: a budget meeting before eleven o'clock—which he would normally cancel out of, were it not taking place right before a board

meeting for the Foundation, which he would never skip. I mentally doffed my cap to Mr. Fox, for that inspired bit of scheduling could not be an accident. I took the appropriate sheet from the looseleaf calendar and wrote these appointments out in longhand.

This schedule, along with any pertinent e-mail, and the morning newspapers, I would place next to Master Bruce's plate at breakfast. A meeting Master Bruce would actually be attending at Wayne Enterprises meant a full breakfast served in the dining room. I've found the extra effort useful in getting him fully awake quickly at an early hour.

I would still bring him and Miss Selina a tray, of course, when I went to wake them. That is the customary shield butlers and valets have always armed themselves with when entering the bedroom, opening the blinds, and ruthlessly forcing wakefulness on an employer we know has been drinking, consorting, or, in this case, swinging around town in a cape only a few hours earlier. But on mornings like the one to come, I would not bring coffee, pastries, or newspapers on that tray. Only orange juice for the master and a mineral water with lime for Miss Selina. For the rest, they knew they would have to dress and come down to the dining room.

There the master would find this sheet with his schedule, along with his newspapers and any pertinent letters—such as the e-mail I printed out for him. It indicated a delivery of “research materials” from WayneTech would be made to the private airfield at four the following afternoon.

I should explain this:

A few nights ago, the Batmobile was vandalized, perhaps by the Joker himself, perhaps by that sad creature, Harley Quinn, that dotes on him. The damage was largely cosmetic, but Master Bruce does not believe in wasting an opportunity. Since the primary vehicle must be taken out of general use and worked on anyway, he wishes to install a few upgrades. It is my belief that he views this as a form of punishment: Even if the vandals will never know of it, it is because of their actions that he will be equipped with a better weapon to use against them.

We requisitioned the materials to bring about these improvements through WayneTech via the “private airfield,” one of the many secrets of the Batman trade. As far as WayneTech is concerned, this code phrase means that Bruce Wayne just saw a report in a trade magazine about the Sultan of Oman's new state-of-the-art private jet and he simply must keep up with the Joneses—or the Al Saids, as the case may be. At four o'clock tomorrow, the requisitioned parts would be delivered to his private hanger and from thence, he, Master Dick or Master Tim would pick them up for transport to the cave.

With Master Bruce out of the house, it was unlikely that Miss Selina would wish anything formal in the way of lunch. I therefore wrote out only a dinner menu to lay at her place at the breakfast table. Tomorrow is to be a “family dinner,” meaning Master Dick and Ms Barbara are invited. We shall see. The couple has not, sadly, accepted this weekly invitation as regularly as they had in the months before their marriage. Perhaps the inclusion of Master Dick's favorite pork chops on the menu will improve matters. I shall certainly suggest that Miss Selina mention it when she calls tomorrow to confirm their attendance.

The matter of these suggestions to Miss Selina is, of course, somewhat delicate. She is the mistress of the manor in every sense but one: she is not Mrs. Wayne. In this day, that is not so very uncommon. If it were merely that Master Bruce and Miss Selina chose to live together without officially becoming man and wife, that would present no difficulty to any domestic professional worthy of the name. The delicacy arises from the lengthy and extravagant history of denial, from both parties, as to the true nature of their relationship as Batman and Catwoman. I saw it first hand in so far as Master Bruce was concerned. From literally the night of their first meeting. I shall never forget his expression as he described “the cat burglar”—her voice, her costume—the way he seemed to replay the encounters in his mind as he spoke of them. The details he chose to speak aloud and those he clearly omitted. It was all quite transparent.

It was not for some years, of course, that I learned Miss Selina was equally stubbornly deluded. I confess to a certain sympathy with her compatriots, criminals though they may be. For it seems that if they made any allusion to the situation that was so clear to us all, she responded with claws. The master merely scowled.

It is not, I should make clear, that I have any fear of Miss Selina donning claws and attacking me for placing a menu next to her place at breakfast. I have merely noticed in recent weeks that, despite the enormous changes in the substance of their relationship, the superficial denial of old seems to have returned in a new and unexpected form: They are married, after all, in every way that matters. The difficulty is that they appear not to have noticed. And one is somewhat wary, given the history, of bringing that fact to their attention.

One would like to encourage, to be sure, some step that would make it all official. But the fear of upsetting the delicate balance, spooking one or both into some panicked ill-considered withdrawal, is very real. Hence my reluctance to proceed in the matter of the decorating.

Again, I should probably explain:

Wayne Manor has a total of twenty-five bedrooms. That is to say, there are five three-room suites, each consisting of a main bedroom and two adjoining spaces that can be used as a boudoir, sitting room, nursery or servant’s room, as well as ten individual guest rooms. As you might expect, very few of these are in use at any given time. If it were left at that, decades might pass while a given room remained unchanged and unoccupied. The advent of a houseparty might discover the wallpaper yellowing, the hangings mildewed, and the ancient bed linens crumbling to dust. The common practice to avoid such an occurrence is simply to cycle through the rooms, redecorating one or two each year, so that even the least used quarters will never become egregiously out of date.

The thought had occurred to me that, as Miss Selina is now de facto mistress of the house, it would be most appropriate for her to take over this task. It might, in and of itself, give either her or Master Bruce the crucial nudge in terms of realizing her true place in the household. And at the very least it would relieve me of a duty for which I have always felt myself ill suited. Consider the Rose Bedroom, so named not for the dominant colour of its walls but for the floral pattern on the carpet, curtains, bed hangings and coverlet. It was this room where Master Bruce deposited “the bimbos” (as he was apt to call his dates in the days of the playboy pose) once they had drunk

enough champagne and nodded off, freeing him to pursue his regular evening activities. Given the room's true function, I thought the rose motif was pleasingly feminine. But the reaction from the ladies who have seen it—from the aforementioned bimbos to Ms. Barbara and Miss Selina in later years—has been more or less consistent: "too much pink."

So as I say, I would be most pleased to have Miss Selina take this duty off my hands. If she were successful, as there is no reason to believe she would not be, one might speak to Master Bruce about having her turn an eye to the penthouse in the Wayne Tower and then perhaps the manor's south drawing room. It is, I think you will concede, an excellent plan. It is only, as I said, that history of denial and the marked tendency to overreact when their denials are challenged, that have caused me to refrain putting the plan into action.

Having completed my preparations for the coming day, I patted Miss Nutmeg on her head and switched off the light in the pantry. I proceeded upstairs to my room, intending only the briefest detour at the top of the stairs, to check Master Bruce's closet. You will appreciate, surely, that Wayne Manor keeps different hours than most households. If a shirt needs to be pressed or shoes shined for the master's upcoming meeting, I would prefer to attend to such matters now, rather than discovering them when laying out his clothes in the morning. Remaining awake for an extra hour is certainly no great hardship for me. Indeed, one prefers to be awake and available as late as one is able, should Masters Bruce or Tim return early to the cave and require attention.

Naturally, knowing the house to be empty apart from myself and the cats, I did not knock at the master's bedroom door. You will appreciate my surprise on opening it to find the room occupied after all.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Selina," I quickly apologized. "I didn't realize you had returned from your... eh."

"It's okay, Alfred," she said. "You can call it a prowl."

"No, miss, I don't believe I could use such an expression," I told her. "In any case, I was unaware you had returned. May I bring you anything?"

"No thank you, Alfred."

There was something about the way she said it...

Miss Selina, I should explain, is a creature of remarkable temperament. She exudes a liveliness and energy that hints at playful good humor when she is pleasantly disposed, and fiery wrath when she is angered. Anyone pretending the slightest understanding of Master Bruce cannot help but recognize she is his perfect match. Whether playful or annoyed, her zestful spirit suits his ponderous, sometimes dour, intensity. That sparkling energy was missing from her now. What might pass for fatigue in another woman seemed, from her, downright despondent. One felt compelled to linger about the room for a time, just in case one's confidence might be sought.

"Alfred," she began finally, "Did you know one of the cave bats dropped dead this afternoon?"

I told her I was not aware of the incident, but that it was not an uncommon occurrence.

“That’s what Bruce said. Still, it fell down right smack onto his workstation—while he was sitting there. Doesn’t seem quite human to be not even slightly freaked by it. Don’t you think?”

“You are disposed to see this as an ill omen, miss?”

“No, not really,” she admitted. “I don’t really believe in that stuff. But I asked him to stay home tonight anyway. To humor me. He said no, naturally. You wouldn’t think it was so much to ask after all this time, would you Alfred? When have I asked anything from him? Since this whole thing started, when have I asked one blessed thing that compromises the sacred ‘mission’—And you know what he said? The Tipu Tigers; Can you believe that? It’s not the same thing! Asking to leave with gold Indian tiger heads encrusted with rubies—which he knew damn well I was only three-quarters serious about anyway—is not the same thing as asking him to not go out tonight because I’m a little freaked out about goddamn dead bats falling from the ceiling.”

I confess I was left at something of a loss by this impassioned confession. The despondency that had piqued my concern had given way in a few seconds to Miss Selina’s usual vigor. I had, of course, seen that vigor directed at the master before and from a standpoint less-than-wholly-sympathetic. What’s more, the spirit of her complaint was one I could relate to. The jeopardy in which the master constantly places himself is an ongoing burden to those who care about him. I said as much to Miss Selina—then, without meaning to, I heard myself adding:

“Of course, it is a minor burden in his eyes, I am sure, compared to that he takes on himself. But then, in his case, it is his own choice to assume that burden, whereas we are merely stuck with the consequences of his decision.”

“He can be a selfish bastard that way, can’t he,” Miss Selina mused resentfully. “You know, it was my choice once. I’m an independent-minded cat. I wanted to do as I pleased, and if that meant stealing, that meant stealing. I certainly didn’t have to stop to make his life any easier. But I wanted more than the gold and ruby tiger heads, I wanted him too. I wanted to be the kind of person he could respect, I guess, or... anyway, I was stuck. The things I wanted weren’t compatible and something had to give. It was my choice—and if I’d gone the other way then, he would have been the one stuck with it, wouldn’t he. Wanting me, but not wanting the conflict of interest being involved with a criminal, and not a damn thing he could do about it, because of the choice I made.”

“Indeed, miss.”

“I’m sorry, Alfred. I shouldn’t be going on this way at you. I’m upset.”

“I can see that, miss.”

“Would have it been so much for him to take one night off to please me? Am I not entitled to even that much?”

The words were telling. Miss Selina’s preoccupation with her Independence is legendary. “It’s a cat thing” seems to be the accepted phrase amongst Master Bruce and the young gentlemen. For her, the reality that another person’s choices could affect her life and her happiness is a monumental admission. More telling still was that word “entitled”: was she not entitled to a say in a decision regarding Master Bruce’s

welfare? She allowed that his feelings were a consideration when she made such decisions—was it not reasonable for her to expect the same from him?

In short, I found the whole outburst so illuminating that I have just broken off my writing of this entry in order to go back and speak to her. I am pleased to say I have secured her agreement to assist me in decorating those two guest rooms.

CHAPTER 2: TEA AND SHAKESPEARE

This is, as I have mentioned, the fourth journal I have kept in my life. The first was undertaken, somewhat reluctantly, on the instruction of Mr. Bilkin at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. It was, I believe, a token assignment on Mr. Bilkin's part, a grudging nod towards the "American Method," which is an offshoot of the Stanislavski "System." These "inside out" schools of acting stressed the performer's internal journey to discover the emotional mechanisms of a character. They vary greatly from the "outside in" approach favored at RADA. I recall Mr. Bilkin going on at some length about the absurd exercises then in vogue among American actors to build "sense memories": accessing complex emotions from the subconscious by concentrating on the sights, sounds, tastes, or smells associated with them.

Today I am unable to scoff at the notion of sense memory, for this morning, the squeak of the back wheel on an old teacart has evoked the late Mrs. Wayne in my recollections with greater vibrancy than I would have thought possible. It was, you see, the late Mrs. Wayne who first came up with the idea of using the teacart to collect all of the drawing room silver for polishing.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

My duties for Master Bruce are naturally quite different than they were for the late Dr. and Mrs. Wayne. They are different, indeed, than they would be for any other household in the world. In the normal course of events at Wayne Manor, I remove only one piece of silver at a time from the dining room, morning room, or drawing room. I clean and polish it at my leisure, and then return it to its place the next day. In this way, I can cycle through the treasures of Wayne Manor in about six weeks time without neglecting my other duties.

Today's circumstances, of course, are far from "the normal course of events."

It was Mr. Marshall, the butler at Charleville House, who is said to have first recognized the importance of silver in our profession. No other object, he observed, "comes under such intimate scrutiny from outsiders as does silver during a meal, and as such, it serves as a public index of the house's standards."

In the normal course of events, such "standards" are not a great priority at Wayne Manor, but as I said, the occasion before us is far from normal. It is vital at such times to give one's best, not merely for the sake of the household's appearance to outsiders, but out of respect for the young lady. I therefore wheeled the old teacart in from the storeroom and loaded it up with all the silver ornaments and serving pieces, so they can all be cleaned and polished at once.

The cart, as I indicated, was the late Mrs. Wayne's innovation. In her day, the polishing of silver was, as you would expect, one of my gravest duties as butler. Every Tuesday, I would scrupulously clean and polish the three tea sets, the punch bowl, soup tureen, chafing dishes, and the various trays, salvers, baskets, center pieces, candlesticks and other ornaments. This necessitated a goodly number of trips back and forth between the upstairs rooms and the kitchen. Mrs. Wayne said it was ridiculous to

be making such an effort when I could just load up the cart to transport it all to “Pug’s Pantry” in a single trip.

I should perhaps explain that “Pug’s Pantry” was Mrs. Wayne’s particular appellation for the butler’s pantry off the kitchen. Mrs. Wayne, like Master Bruce, was born into a household with servants. When she was very young, she sometimes heard the staff speak of “Pug’s Parlor” when they meant the housekeeper’s room. She had thought, understandably, that meant the housekeeper’s name was Pug.

It was, in fact, an old Victorian term from the days when “upper servants” who ran the house (the housekeeper, butler, valet, and lady’s maid) kept a certain distance from the housemaids and footmen. They ate separately, in the housekeeper’s room, or else met there to walk in procession to the servant’s hall for dinner. The lower servants, as one might imagine, would look askance at these pretensions, and among themselves they spoke of the room as Pug’s Parlor and the procession as Pug’s Parade.

Mrs. Wayne—young Martha Van Geisen, rather, as she was then—knew none of this, of course. That way of life was long dead before she was even born. But the terms had stuck, at least among the Van Geisens. The housekeeper, a Mrs. Wenforth, could not help but be charmed at little Martha calling her Pug and encouraged her to continue. A bond formed between her and the little girl... Perhaps those not brought up with servants can ever understand the ties that may form between a family servant and the children of the house. I know Mr. Kent has particular difficulty comprehending my role with respect to Master Bruce... Nevertheless, the bond did form, and if Mrs. Wenforth had not been of an age to retire, I have no doubt she would have been installed at Wayne Manor upon Martha Van Geisen’s marriage to Master Thomas.

I had the pleasure of having Mrs. Wenforth to tea twice in those weeks leading up to the marriage, and it was on one of these occasions that I heard the story of “Pug’s Parlor.” Knowing that history, I naturally took it as a great mark of acceptance the day Mrs. Wayne applied the term, in a roundabout way, to myself. She had run out of postage stamps in the morning room and asked, with that wry good humour of hers, if I had any “tucked away in that Pug’s pantry of mine off the kitchen.” She had been with us about a year at the time, still very much a young bride in terms of her running of the house. The young can be so terribly unsure of themselves. It’s only natural; they have no true experience to fall back upon after all. The danger of their overcompensating for that deficiency—I sometimes wonder if Master Bruce realizes.

I have little occasion to use the teacart these days. Indeed, I had quite forgotten the squeak and warble of that back wheel. I remember my great concern the first time this occurred that it might scratch the parquet floor.

Of course Master Bruce realizes the danger. Master Jason’s costume, preserved in the cave, serves as a daily reminder to us all.

As I say, I had quite forgotten the squeak, but on hearing it again today I could not help be reminded of the late Mrs. Wayne.

With respect to Master Jason’s costume in the cave, one is forced, distasteful and ghoulish though it may be, to wonder what Master Bruce will do now. One costume preserved in such a way is a memorial; two, it could be argued, is a graveyard.

These sense memories, as I explained, oblige one to uncover associations one may make between certain emotional and sensory experiences. There is a particular brand of cream soda I purchased in the weeks after Master Dick came to reside at the manor, before his preferences became known to me. This was, of course, immediately after the tragic passing of his parents. To this day, I still link the smell and taste of that beverage with a heavy sense of helpless melancholy.

I did not, of course, have the honour to know John and Mary Grayson. My own pain of that period derived from seeing a young boy's grief—along with that of Master Bruce, whose anguish at seeing his own heartache and loss mirrored in that innocent young lad cannot be adequately conveyed in words.

In the tragic case of Miss Stephanie, one's position is somewhat different. I was privileged to know the young woman, albeit slightly. It is impossible not to be aggrieved at the loss of one so young and so lovely. It is impossible not to feel bewildered, and even somewhat angry, that such a one should be taken in such a way. That her fate resulted, so irrefutably, from her own recklessness is surely the most dreadful aspect of the whole grisly event.

And yet, much as one may be saddened by Miss Stephanie's loss, one is far more stricken by the effect it must have on those who remain: Master Timothy and Miss Cassie, who knew her best; Master Bruce, who must undertake a share of guilt for any and all in his circle; Master Dick, who has, more than any other, I believe, many unresolved pangs about Master Jason's terrible fate... And even Miss Selina, whose dilemma I did not begin to glean until this afternoon.

The funeral proper is naturally the realm of the Brown family. Those who were so fortunate as to know Miss Stephanie as Spoiler are unable to attend. To do so would not only compromise their identities, it would conceivably intrude upon the grief of her blood family, such as it is.

Recognizing the need for Miss Stephanie's other family, the "Bat Family" as it were, to pay their respects, Master Bruce had the prescience to arrange a private memorial service here at the manor. One originally expected this gathering to be confined to the immediate Gotham circle: Master Tim and Miss Cassie, Master Dick and Ms. Barbara, Mr. Valley, possibly the Misses Lance and Bertinelli. In the hour before lunch, the guest list swelled unexpectedly as several persons from the Titans, Outsiders, and the former Young Justice announced their readiness to attend. To my knowledge, none of Superboy, Kid Flash, Wonder Girl, Arrowette or Arsenal were well-acquainted with Spoiler, but I gather their wish is to offer support and condolence to Master Timothy. The architect of this exceptional gesture is, I am quite sure, Mr. Kent, who telephoned immediately after lunch to say that he too planned to attend.

This brought the total expected to fifteen or possibly sixteen if his RSVP included Ms. Lane, too many to comfortably fit into the morning room. I therefore approached Miss Selina with a new plan, to lay out a light buffet in the south drawing room following the formal observance, and to learn her choice of which tea service should be used. I got only a sentence into my request when I noticed her aspect was far from what one might call receptive. She seemed, indeed, quite weighed down by some private burden, so much so that I was not sure she had even heard my question. I began to fear

I might have misjudged her attachment to Miss Stephanie, that I might be troubling her with what were, essentially, domestic trivialities at a time of genuine grief.

"You seem distraught, miss," I began with a new tack, "Might I bring you some tea?"

She looked up at me as if quite bewildered at my words. There truly is something feline about the lady at such moments.

"Out of curiosity, Alfred, what's the thing with tea? I know you mean well. I know it's supposed to help. I just don't get why."

Her bewildered tone altered over the next few words and that vigor I have already spoken of began to assert itself:

"Tim is the nicest... sanest... most genuine... *sweetest* human being to put on a cape, and his girl is dead. Bruce is—eating himself up already. This is the first *real one* I've been here for, Alfred. When Jason died, and what happened with Bane, it was all—Bane was a different hell for me, but I certainly wasn't there for *him*. Now this happens—poor Stephanie, that poor—*stupid* kid—I don't know what to do, for either of them. I just know I'm not going to be good at this. And now we've got a houseful of heroes coming, and I'm supposed to serve them tea! Alfred, please, you're a butler and you're English, and... please, just explain to me, how for the love of God is tea supposed to help?"

I began to understand her dilemma.

"I expect it might be sense memories, miss," I told her. "If you would follow me, please, I shall explain."

For all the "Impossible Woman"s uttered by the master, I have, in my own experience, found Miss Selina to be an infinitely reasonable creature. She followed to the kitchen as I had bid and watched while I demonstrated the Pennyworth secrets for brewing the perfect pot of tea. While I did so, I revealed another secret.

"I fear I sometimes lose sight, Miss Selina, of your other nature. Despite the several times I have now seen you in costume, I have only seen you in *Catwoman-mode*, if I may so phrase it, on that one occasion when Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn invaded the Foundation Gala here at the manor. You will observe that the teapot must be primed with boiling water before we begin. No other method of heating it beforehand will produce the proper effect."

"I had forgotten that night," she answered. "My god, that seems a long time ago. That wasn't really cat-mode, though. It was... I don't know. Pam—that's Ivy—wrangled me into an intervention with Harley, I remember. Didn't work, of course." She sighed, then seemed to dismiss the thought and went on in a matter-of-fact tone. "Check, boiling water in the pot."

I smiled. She was an apt pupil, if nothing else. I reproduce the rest of our conversation as well as I can recall it. I was, of course, occupied from this point on preparing the tea.

"It's funny you mentioned that time," she said musingly, "In a way, the 'intervention' with Harley is part of Bruce's problem right now. He went to all that trouble to get her off the book idea, but he didn't see what was going on with Stephanie. Says he should have. Well, you know what he's like: 'the buck stops here.'"

"Is that all you believe it to be, miss; the root of the master's guilt?"

"I don't know. The *guilt part*, maybe, but... Alfred, the things he was talking about right before it happened—hope, happy endings, if it would be better or worse

tomorrow—it scares me. It’s like he was a hair’s breadth, a cat’s whisker even, of giving up on it... giving up on us. And now... just look what’s happened.”

“Now we add one scoop of Darjeeling for each cup of tea, but here is where the Pennyworth method differs from others. You will have heard the formula: one spoonful per person and ‘one for the pot’—our ‘one for the pot’ will not be Darjeeling but a rich smoky tea called Lapsang Souchong. Just smell this delicious essence.”

“Oh great, life’s on the brink of total ruin, but hey, I can make one hell of a cup of tea.”

“If there are more than four cups being brewed, you may wish to use a four-to-one ratio rather than the strict ‘one for the pot’ formula.”

“So that’ll be my claim to fame, eh? One day when the Titans are all grown up into the new JLA: Oh yes, that cat-broad that was shacking up with Batman for a while there before he gave up and tossed her away, remember her? Not bad with a whip, and boy could she make good tea.”

“Now we let it steep for four minutes, no less. That is the invariable error on the Continent, pouring too soon produces a pale weak infusion.”

“ALFRED!”

“Yes, miss?”

“The worst happened. A bat dropped dead and landed right smack on his keyboard. Stephanie got killed after Tim dumped her because he decided they had no future together. ‘Tomorrow’ turned out a lot worse than yesterday. That’s where *Hope* got him, Alfred. He... What if he gives up?”

“Then you shall have to enlighten him, won’t you, miss? Milk or lemon?”

“What?”

“Miss Selina, you have over the past minutes—as in the past months, and indeed, in all the years of your association with him—demonstrated an understanding of Master Bruce, his aspirations, his desires and his demons, that would be the envy of his closest colleagues, who believe they know him better than anybody. It is quite impossible to credit your fear that you ‘will not be good at this,’ for there is clearly no one in his life better suited to comfort him in tragedy, rejoice with him in triumph, and keep him from being alone in the days and nights in between. If he should ‘give up hope,’ I have no doubt you would manage the situation with the same sublime felinity you have used to such advantage in the past. Now drink your tea, young woman, and the next time you enjoy, or even sniff, this particular brew, I dare say you will understand how it helps.”

Her expression underwent a curious change as I spoke, from despair to contentment to shock.

“You mean all this was to get me to sign off on the drawing room and the Georgian tea set?”

I smiled.

“As you say, miss.”

“Alfred, there are times when there is just a little bit of the scheming bat in you.”

“Thank you, miss.”

There was a curious epilogue to that conversation with Miss Selina.

I don't know if you yourself are in the habit of pausing before entering a room where persons are already conversing. I can vouch that it is a common practice among many domestic professionals, in order to avoid interrupting at an inopportune moment. I had paused in this way at the door to Master Bruce's study a short while after Miss Selina had departed the kitchen, and there I chanced to overhear the master unburdening himself on the very matter she had alluded to, the efforts he had undertaken to save Ms. Quinn.

"Harley. All that trouble to make Harley wake up to the danger she was putting herself in. When all the time it was Stephanie. I should have seen it. I should have known she wasn't up to this. I should have done more to keep her out of that damn costume."

"Bruce. I don't want to say this, and I really don't want to have to say this to you *now*. But you've got a guilt thing and it's really not appropriate right now. This one is Tim's. If anybody gets to deal with this by—by wrapping themselves up in a shitload of blame and culpability, it's Tim's option. You should just *not*."

I knocked then, before the master could reply, and delivered my message. There was a telephone call from former commissioner Gordon. It could have properly been taken by either Master Bruce or Miss Selina, and there commenced an exchange of looks between them, evidently discussing which of them it was to be.

"Fine, I'll go," Miss Selina said finally.

It was not the first time I had witnessed this phenomenon. The master once remarked how his relationship with Catwoman existed for so many years on an unspoken level. This strange mutual understanding of the other's thoughts and feelings, while hardly constant or infallible, appears to be the result. Master Bruce merely waited in silence until Miss Selina had left us, then he turned to me.

"How's she doing?"

The question startled me, certainly. Of the immediate circle struck by this loss, I had, up until our conversation in the kitchen at least, considered Miss Selina to be the least affected, her acquaintance with Miss Stephanie being comparatively slight.

"I should say she is holding up against the challenges of this sad day most admirably, sir."

He nodded.

"She's okay with playing hostess to a... crimefighting assembly, then?"

I raised an eyebrow. Miss Selina had made passing reference to that aspect of the matter during our conversation, but I had given it little weight compared to the other issues we discussed.

"To the best of my knowledge, sir, she is aware of the potential for some slight awkwardness, but I dare say she is resolved to meet the occasion with poise and dignity."

The master responded to this with one of those guttural utterances that one is forced to accept as considered acknowledgement, but is still, to my mind, little better than a grunt.

"She was pretty upset about that bat yesterday."

"So I gather, sir."

"I, eh, didn't exactly come home early, but I did put off the log entry when I got back. Went straight up to bed. I was just going down now to... put in the log..."

"I suspected as much, sir. There was no coffee cup or disturbance of the papers at your workstation this morning. And one did detect, if I may so describe it, sir, a certain sheltering aspect to your respective postures when one woke you and Miss Selina this morning."

This is not the kind of detail one would normally give admission to noticing, but there are times when Master Bruce is a bit too inclined to deny the more feeling aspects of his nature, and it is useful at such times that he be aware that he has been "caught in the act," so to speak.

"Well she's going to be twice as difficult now if it happens again, Alfred—"

"I should think so, sir. Given the day's terrible news, it is difficult to entirely dismiss Miss Selina's view of the expired bat as something of a portent."

The master said nothing more that I could hear, except for another of those guttural utterances as he went about opening the grandfather clock. He disappeared in the dark passageway thus opened, and I resumed my regular duties.

"Old Silver," such as that found at Wayne Manor, achieves a lovely sheen of whitish patina after decades of tarnishing and polishing. This delicate patina can be destroyed by overzealous rubbing or harsh chemical dips. I have therefore found it prudent to employ the old methods for the care of these beautiful objects, soaking them first in a mixture of hot water and baking soda, and then polishing with a quality silver cream. I was bringing several large saucepans of water to a rolling boil for the former step, for the larger pieces, as you might imagine, require a great deal of liquid to become fully immersed. The kitchen was quite the scene of steam rising from multiple pots when former commissioner Gordon entered.

"Good gravy, man! You look like a mad scientist back there," he exclaimed, startling me not a little. I had left him and Master Bruce in conversation in the drawing room after dinner and certainly never expected him to present himself in my kitchen.

I stepped out from behind the island where I had stationed myself, wiping my hands of any residual perspiration from proximity to the stove, and offered it to my unexpected guest.

"My apologies, sir. Was there anything you wanted?"

"Yes. A darn sight less stiff upper lip, polite chatter about the weather, how-dee-do, and a good deal more frank talk than I can get out there from those two."

This struck me as a rather presumptuous declaration on Mr. Gordon's part. He had, I was given to understand from Miss Selina, invited *himself* to dinner, in a manner of speaking. He had learned of the planned memorial through Ms. Barbara, which was certainly understandable. And feeling, either through his own discernment or through Ms. Barbara's explanations, that because of the costumed identities involved, it would not be a suitable occasion for one such as himself, he opted instead to call on Master Bruce this evening. Miss Selina obliged him with an invitation to dinner, which I had already prepared and served, and left the diners, as I said, in the drawing room in order to resume my own preparations for tomorrow's sad event.

“So. He’s lost another one, eh,” was the somewhat shocking manner in which Mr. Gordon chose to proceed. “How old was she anyway? 19? 20? I often wonder if Dent and I didn’t make a mistake all those years ago, accepting Batman into the official world that way. Where would he be now if we hadn’t, hm?”

“You are not disposed to regard the Batman’s contribution as material?” I asked tactfully.

“His contribution is monumental, Alfred. His is. But come on, it would have been with or without my say so, nothing would have stopped *him* from doing what he does. I just wonder, times like this, if we hadn’t opened that door for him, if the whole thing would have spread the way it did. Robin, Batgirl, Nightwing. Another Robin. Another Batgirl. Where does it end?”

This outburst rather illuminated matters. I knew from first-hand experience the “If I had/If I had not” questions that plagued one at such a time. The former commissioner went on to reference an event the master himself has cited many times. He too considers it pivotal in his career as a crimefighter:

“The three of us, Harvey Dent, the D.A. and me, the police—*official*, the voices of the law—and Batman, nobody, no name, no face, a man in a mask *who believed in the same goals we did*... We stood there and we vowed to draw a line against the crime that was eating this city alive. To this day, I don’t know if we did it because Gotham was really that bad or if he was just that good. How could we turn down what he offered us? Then we lost Harvey and, I don’t know, I guess that just cancelled it out for him.”

“He always viewed you as his greatest ally in your time as commissioner, sir.”

“No. Not the way he does them. He built his ‘bat-family’ and he left me standing on that roof by myself.”

In essence, I could not deny the truth of his complaint. Master Bruce always thought of James Gordon as competent and worthy to be commissioner of “his city.” He saw him as a good man doing a difficult job that was perhaps a little too big for him, with less money and manpower than he should have had, and more political interference than he could have wanted. But it must also be said that Master Bruce did not become a policeman; he became Batman. He rejected Gordon’s way as ultimately wanting. It is my belief that, for all the talk of respect and friendship, that base condescension was always present: he could work with the commissioner, he could respect him, he could call him friend, but he found James Gordon limited in his mindset in ways the “bat-family” (and even Miss Selina) are not.

“...Children. Not just civilians but *children* that have no business...”

Then there is, of course, the matter of the master’s identity. He did not reveal it to James Gordon; Gordon worked it out for himself. That may be a fine testament to the man’s detective skills and intellect, but it is equally illuminating in terms of the trust Master Bruce placed in his allies of officialdom compared to his allies of choice.

“This is wrong, Alfred. This is nothing but vigilantism and frontier—”

“Justice, sir. It is an endeavor in the pursuit of Justice which you yourself valued enough to accept the means necessary to the end. Is it not somewhat late in the day to be finding fault with—”

“Yes.”

“—the manner in which, excuse me, sir?”

"I should have come around to it when Barbara was shot—or when that second Robin 'disappeared'—I *should* have come around to it the very first night he showed up with a young *boy* in a mask and cape."

"I see, sir. You've come for absolution."

"What?! What the devil—"

"I am all too aware, sir, of the tendency to blame one's self when these tragedies arise."

"If you mean him, he—"

"I mean myself, sir. When Master Dick was shot. And Ms. Barbara. And Master Jason met his tragic fate. When Bane injured the master. On each occasion, I pondered if I was right to acquiesce as I have. You did too, I dare say, but not knowing the Batman's identity, the course of action you pursued tonight was unavailable to you."

"Y'mean absolution," he grumbled.

"Yes, sir. I dare say you presented yourself here tonight in the hopes of a dialogue with Master Bruce in which you might put forth your doubts and concerns, and receive reassurance that they are groundless."

"And?"

"They are, sir, and at the same time they are not. What is it Shakespeare says? *'The king is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers, the father of his son, nor the master of his servant; for they purpose not their death, when they purpose their services.'*"

"Shakespeare, eh?"

"Yes, sir. Henry V."

"And what's that bit of pretty poetry supposed to mean, anyway?"

"It's the eve of a battle, sir, a great battle in which our English troops were terribly outnumbered. The soldiers in the camp know many of them are to die the next day. The king who led them into France, into this dire situation they now face, goes among his men in disguise, and they talk over the battle to come and the nature of soldiers and kingship. There are many interpretations as to why he does this. For myself, I believe his motive, like yours, is to purge himself of guilt and find absolution."

"And what does he conclude?"

"When you accepted Batman as you did on that rooftop, sir, you never intended that harm come to him or any other persons he might employ."

He grunted in a coarse, throaty fashion, as I have often seen done to disguise emotion.

"Well, er, anyway, Alfred, that was a damn fine dinner you cooked up. Just wanted to stop back here on my way out and say thanks."

"Thank you, sir. I strive to give satisfaction."

CHAPTER 3: THE CEREMONIES OF LIFE

I broke off my journal entry last night somewhat abruptly, for I was suddenly struck by the realization of a practical matter in preparation for tomorrow's (now today's) sad event, a matter that presents something of a daunting challenge.

I hope the reader will not judge me harshly for dwelling as I have on the more practical aspects of the sad day before us. One is not insensible to the distressing nature of the occasion. Nevertheless, one has a job to do. There is, as I have already explained, a strong wish to give one's best in tribute to Miss Stephanie. I have often found too that there is comfort in times of great strife in the doing of ordinary tasks.

It is now early morning, I should explain before I go further. Miss Stephanie's memorial is to begin at eleven thirty. I have arisen far earlier than is my habit, for I shall have to prepare breakfast for Master Bruce and Miss Selina, see to the acquisition of certain supplies for the day's menus, and double-check that arrangements are as they should be for the service proper in the portrait gallery before guests begin arriving at eleven.

It is that second matter, the foodstuffs for the buffet following the service, which have presented me with something of a dilemma.

I should explain.

Before retiring to my room last night, I prepared the day's menus as usual to present Miss Selina for her approval. I naturally labored over the proposed menu for the buffet. The guest list for this sad occasion is more than usually varied: it includes not only those of unknown alien biology, but of diverse walks of life. I looked for guidance to the Queen's own mandates for her "Meet the People" lunches: appetizing and tasty foods but nothing too exotic. I am therefore proposing, and expect Miss Selina will approve, a selection of tea sandwiches, cold cutlets, small pastry cups filled with hard-boiled eggs and lobster meat, chicken in aspic, scones and Scottish shortbread. These last two, I need hardly add, are in acknowledgment of Miss Stephanie's Scottish heritage, which she was always so keen to share with any who took an interest.

I had completed this menu before retiring to my room. It was only after I had done so and began writing in my journal that I realized I had absolutely no way to obtain the ingredients for this or any other menu.

In the normal course of domestic service, it is common knowledge when a household in the neighborhood undergoes one of the ceremonies of life. When the manor hosted Master Dick's wedding to Ms. Barbara, for example, Mr. Harriman of Harriman's Gourmet Pantry sent over a tray of bagels and croissants so I wouldn't have to worry about making breakfast for the household in the midst of so many other preparations. Similarly, when our neighbor Ingrid Winthrop perished in a Firefly-related explosion three years ago, I myself went to Harriman's to do the shopping for their cook, Mrs. Babbitt, in order to relieve her of this time-consuming chore. Any cook of worth, it should be understood, goes to the market personally and selects their ingredients with their own hand, so it was an honour that Mrs. Babbitt permitted me to assist her in that way. The endeavor also enabled Master Tim to infiltrate the Winthrop home disguised

as a delivery boy, and there he obtained a valuable lead resulting in the capture of Garfield Lynns, the Firefly. That aspect was most gratifying as well.

The difficulty in this case, which I had not foreseen, was that no one should know Wayne Manor was hosting a funeral. If I go to Harriman's two days before my usual marketing day, this deviation will surely pique the interest of Monsieur Anatole. Monsieur Anatole, the Finn's *chef de cuisine* from next door, is a Frenchman of more than usual arrogance. The unseemly interest he takes in my purchases at Harriman's and his presumptuous use of that intelligence to ferret out my menus is an ongoing nuisance.

My personal irritation with this man is, I must emphasize, a minor point only. The security of Master Bruce's secret (and those of his guests) is the prime concern. I must somehow obtain provisions to feed some sixteen guests in a manner befitting the occasion. I cannot let this insolent frog compromise the preparations for Miss Stephanie's memorial.

I confess I was so confounded by the predicament that I left my room and confided it to Miss Selina. Her offer to burgle Harriman's on my behalf, obtaining whatever ingredients I wished (and leaving a suitable quantity of cash in payment, of course), did not, I am sorry to say, seem an ideal solution. She quickly pointed out that Oracle, Aquaman, Nightwing, James Gordon, and even Master Bruce have all availed themselves of her services at various times, and I was obliged to explain that my objections were not ethical so much as practical. The cutlets must be selected while Mr. Harriman is on hand to assist, and as for the lobster...

In any case, I told her that, regrettably, the ingredients I required could only be obtained while the store was open for business. She looked so disappointed at being unable to assist me that I acquiesced to her second suggestion, although I am far from certain of its viability.

But I cannot take the time to worry about it now. The sun is up, and I really must see to my duties.

The day is over.

The weather was exceptionally fine.

This appears to have struck Master Dick as a cruel trick of nature, that the day should be so beautiful when they had gathered for such a solemn purpose.

Of course, his wedding, also held here at the manor, was equally favoured with splendid weather. One supposes the poor lad cannot help but make the comparison.

For myself, I believe notable weather, good or bad, is more of a blessing on these occasions than the young ones comprehend. It gives them something to talk about. For all the fantastic exploits these young people undertake, they are woefully but somewhat touchingly inept when faced with the ceremonies of life.

In any case, the day began early, as the reader is already aware. Master Bruce and Miss Selina were unexpectedly accommodating in terms of breakfast. They were both up and about before I was. That meant no tray to prepare, no bath to draw or clothes to lay out for Master Bruce, and no breakfast in the dining room.

I learned of this unexpected boon as I left my room and detected music and the rhythmic squeak of exercise equipment coming from Miss Selina's suite. I ventured in

to see what she would require in the way of refreshment, and it was then that she informed me that Master Bruce had also arisen and was, as one might have predicted, already in the cave.

“He figures he can get in about three hours on the, the Brown case,” she told me, “and still have plenty of time to change before anybody gets here.”

The Brown case was, of course, Miss Stephanie’s murder. You may well imagine the vehemence of the master’s resolve in this matter. A small portion of the cave, a sort of locker room adjacent to the shower, had been turned into a temporary store room for several filing cabinets and tumbling mats, while the space these objects had occupied in the main cavern was reclaimed in order to organize and study all forensic evidence related to the Brown case.

We all shared, it need hardly be said, the master’s wish to see this heinous crime solved and the perpetrator brought swiftly to justice. But I believe this collective desire to see justice done is amplified, in Master Bruce’s case, by a wish to resolve the matter before Master Tim could become involved in its conclusion. After the tragic loss of Master Jason, no one is more aware than Master Bruce of the particular danger—it is not too strong a word—the *danger* to crimefighters stricken with a loss of this kind. Armed as they are with great arsenals of weaponry, developed as they are into peak physical condition, schooled as they are in terrible fighting arts, the danger is very great indeed. I know, because he has told me, that Master Bruce wrestled with the question of ending the Joker’s vile existence after Master Jason’s brutal slaying. I know too that he is plagued on occasion with doubts as to the wisdom of his decision to leave that heinous clown alive. As much as Batman wants to find and punish Miss Stephanie’s killer, there is no question in my mind that Master Bruce’s greater goal is to spare Master Timothy that decision and those doubts.

In any case, I left Miss Selina to her exercise and proceeded down the hall to the portrait gallery. This wide hallway atop the main staircase overlooks the Great Hall and was therefore thought to be the most suitable location for the memorial. The gallery is elegant but austere, making it ideal in terms of tone. And there were no furnishings to remove, only the Wayne family portraits.

This task Miss Selina completed last night instead of going out for “her prowling,” and it was for that reason I was able to approach her about my difficulty regarding Monsieur Anatole. I found her hard at it, having relocated about half the portraits by then to the unused north drawing room and bringing from there a number of small gilt chairs for the guests to seat themselves.

She undertook this chore, I need hardly add, over my strong objection. Miss Selina is (although one refrains from telling her so to her face) the mistress of the manor. It is simply not *appropriate* for her to be troubling herself with such menial tasks as taking pictures off the wall. While I would not dream of uttering the words “mistress of the manor” or even “lady of the house” to emphasize my point, I did endeavor to dissuade her once again from a chore that was so inappropriate to her position.

The reader will appreciate that this was the close of a long and trying day. I had enjoyed not a moment’s rest since the arrival of the tragic news about Miss Stephanie. I had cancelled Master Bruce’s appointments, managed the ever-swelling guest list from the various heroes prodded by Mr. Kent to pay their respects, I consoled Miss Selina

and Master Bruce as well as I was able, I had an unexpected dinner guest invade my kitchen for a chat, I devised a menu for persons of unknown meta-human and alien metabolisms, and then, just as I had begun to unwind, I was struck with the not-inconsiderable dilemma presented by Monsieur Anatole. So perhaps I can be excused if, in the course of expressing my thought to Miss Selina, I had not fully considered that my words were delivered to Catwoman as well.

She winked at me in what can only be described as an elfish manner before remarking:

“Alfred, please, taking art off the walls is what I do. And ‘inappropriate’ has never stopped me before.”

There followed a grin of such naughtily impish amusement that one was forced, quite simply, to withdraw from the conversation.

I nevertheless returned to the portrait gallery this morning, immediately on leaving Miss Selina in her suite, that I might inspect the results of her efforts arranging the gallery. Those efforts—inappropriate as they most certainly were for the lady of the house to undertake—were carried out with undeniable sensibility and taste. The portraits were all removed, and only a single painting, a rather inspiring sunrise, now hung on the wall facing the rows of gilt chairs. Two urn stands stood on either side with a simple spray of flowers displayed on each. Satisfied with this arrangement, I proceeded downstairs to the kitchen to see about the food shopping.

Mr. Kent has, of course, never hesitated to give assistance whenever it was sought, but that did not make the asking any easier. He was planning to come into Gotham anyway for the memorial. He assured me that coming a few hours earlier would be no inconvenience. He said making the necessary purchases from Harriman’s on my behalf would be no trouble at all. And he himself pointed out (with some amusement) that his means of delivery was more than discreet.

While I was grateful, to be sure, for his gracious generosity in helping me obtain the ingredients I required, I was and am appalled by the trouble Mr. Kent did wind up taking.

Not twenty minutes had passed since I had hung up the telephone informing him of the situation, than there was a quiet knock at the kitchen door. I opened it, expecting to see Clark Kent holding three or four bags of provisions from Harriman’s. Instead, I was confronted with the visage of Superman holding an enormous Maine lobster still in its trap, a basket of fragrantly fresh vegetables, and another basket covered with a plaid napkin that smelled of fresh baked goods.

I admitted him at once, of course, and he began explaining, almost apologetically, that he had made some alterations in my grocery list because he simply could not stomach the prices at Harriman’s.

“I know Bruce can afford it, Alfred, but I just couldn’t do it. \$65 for a lobster, it’s not right. Especially when the guys on the Rusty Puppet told me that any time I wanted fresh lobster, I should just swing on by. They were pretty grateful after I pulled them out of that Noreaster last season.”

I hastened to assure him that it was the finest specimen of lobster I had ever seen, but I feared he went to such trouble on my account. He waved off this concern with a boyish grin.

"What trouble? And while I was out, I figured I'd stop home for the veggies. They're fresher off the vine anyhow."

By now, I was peering into the third basket, which I saw contained shortbread and scones that still steamed with the most delectable aromas. This prompted Superman to demur:

"I was just passing over a bakery in Aberdeen when I smelled that. Figured it would save you the bother of making it from scratch."

"I see, sir," I noted. And I admit I allowed an eyebrow to lift a trifle at this blatant lie. "In your travels between Gotham, New England, and a farm in Smallville, you flew over Scotland."

"Wind currents," he said with a wink reminiscent of that which Miss Selina had teased me the previous night.

I was prepared to drop the matter and thank him when the intercom interrupted.

:: May as well send him down, Alfred. Since he's here. ::

Superman glanced at the mechanism from whence Master Bruce's voice had been heard. Then he looked to me with a more direct gaze than he had made in our conversation thus far. He broke this after a moment and shook his head. He may have muttered something to the effect of "I knew it," but it would have been tactless of me to note his actual words.

I was naturally aware of devices in the cave that would detect Kryptonian entry into Wayne Manor's airspace. I had seen no need to inform Master Bruce of my visitor, the matter being a private one related only to my own domestic concerns. It was a given that he would know Superman was present in the house, and if he wished to see him he would say so—as he had done.

Since we were already in the kitchen, I sent Superman down to the cave by way of my pantry elevator. I had not yet seen Master Bruce, you may recall, so rather than escort our guest personally, I endeavored to prepare coffee and a plate of danish before descending myself. When I brought these, the gentlemen were already engaged in heated conversation.

"Let him go with you, Bruce," Superman was saying, "He needs it. He's going to do it anyway! You might as well watch over him and make sure he doesn't go too far. Psychologically, *Tim needs that closure*. Rather than forcefully denying him, let him do it, but be with him the whole time—"

I had, at this point, set down my tray and had just begun to pour as Master Bruce said "When I want your advice, I'll ask for it," while Superman rolled right over him with the words "Why do you think I was there to help you get Joker after he killed Jason?"

A most embarrassing silence followed, made all the more embarrassing by my inability to remove myself from the vicinity with the speed tactful prudence required. The act of pouring hot liquid simply takes a fixed amount of time to complete. However quickly one may wish to right one's coffeepot and be gone, there is a limit to the swiftness with which this can be accomplished. It may be only a second, but it is

long enough that one's continued presence is noted. And once noted, to depart prematurely, leaving one's employer with a half-filled cup and his guest with none at all, would only draw attention to the awkward nature of the hiatus. I therefore took my time (since I had no choice), pouring the coffee while the gentlemen continued to stare at each other in an atmosphere of studied agitation. I left Master Bruce's coffee at his side and poured another for Superman. This gave me an opportunity to break the continuing silence with an inquiry unrelated to the gentlemen's conversation.

"Cream or sugar, sir?"

"Eh? Yes. Both. Please," was Superman's somewhat halted reply.

I made these additions to the mug and held it out for him. I then offered the danish, first to him and then to Master Bruce. It may seem at this stage that I was delaying my departure unnecessarily, and in fact that was my intent. There is, as I observed earlier, a comfort to be found in the ordinary. Once the gentlemen were forced to disrupt their standoff and engage in the mundane business of accepting a cup of coffee, the tension between them eased. I was determined to prolong this state as long as possible, without making my efforts conspicuous.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" I asked when I could invent no further reason to remain.

"No thank you, Alfred; that will be all."

"Yes, thank you very much, Alfred," Superman echoed. "The danish was very good."

I gave a polite nod and departed. I was gratified to note that, while neither man spoke until the elevator door shut after me, it was no longer a strained silence of some tacit ultimatum. They were now united in a conspiracy of polite pretense for my benefit—not unlike that Masters Dick and Tim engage in when they have been comparing the charms of Catwoman and Poison Ivy and think I am unaware.

The guests arrived. The service proceeded. The buffet was eaten.

I am negligent in not saying more of the service itself. I should reproduce the passages Master Bruce read to open the proceedings. I should faithfully relate Master Tim's recollections of Miss Stephanie's first appearance as Spoiler: how she undertook her guise to "spoil" the efforts of her father, Arthur Brown, the criminal known as The Cluemaster. How, as Robin, he had chased her down on that first occasion and unmasked her, and how his surprise was so great at discovering a comely female face beneath her disguise that she was able to escape his grasp. I should describe his face as he remembered how proud he was introducing her to Batman as a prospective ally. I should recount Conner Kent's anecdote of her first time fighting alongside Young Justice.

I am certainly remiss in not saying more of young Cissie King-Jones, once called Arrowette before she left the crimefighting life to become a member of the U.S. Olympic team. This slim, frail creature, who seemed so unsure as she left her seat to stand before the assembly and speak a few words, who at first spoke so softly and so haltingly, came to reveal a startling and intimate friendship with Miss Stephanie which none of their teammates knew of. Miss Stephanie had confided in her about many personal matters: a baby given up for adoption and her subsequent pangs about that

sacrifice, her mother's reckless use of prescription painkillers, and, of course, the romantic tribulations common to all young girls.

I should, as I say, relate all these and more in great detail. The truth is I cannot, for I was only half listening. When one has progressed so far in life, one cannot help but be reminded... that is to say, one has been present at too many ceremonies of this kind in one's life. It is no slight to Miss Stephanie when I say I spent much of those hours recalling the too-small circle gathered years before to bury Master Jason, the motley assembly of circus folk at the funeral of John and Mary Grayson, the vast cross-section of professional, business, and social circles who mourned Dr. and Mrs. Wayne... and an equally diverse assemblage years before who paid respect at the grave of my father, Samuel Pennyworth.

I am therefore unable to dwell as I should on the details of the formal observances this afternoon. I can only report as I have done: The guests arrived. The service proceeded. The buffet was eaten.

Three persons sought me out for private conversation in the course of the afternoon. The first was a Mr. Bart Allen, a young person of somewhat anxious disposition, although undoubtedly a dedicated hero. I had noted him hanging about the back of the rooms, an area where I prefer to station myself in order to observe the guests unobtrusively. He was standing alone, with his hands behind his back much of the time, flexing his shoulders in a fretful, fidgety manner. Periodically, he would twist from side to side in the most curious fashion, and, on one of these occasions, I noticed that he held two fingers tightly in his right fist and would yank them in the most bizarre spasms of twitchy energy.

I approached this young gentleman, as you might expect, to see if I could offer any assistance for his comfort.

"You said your name is Pennyworth?" he asked me, for of course I had so identified myself when I admitted the guests previously unknown to me. "And you're the butler?"

I confirmed my name and function and repeated my offer to assist. He replied with the most astonishing outburst:

"I don't know what to do," he began in a hurried, hushed tone. "I don't know what to do; I don't know what to say—to Tim, to Bruce, to anybody."

"That is perfectly normal," I assured him. "Nobody truly knows what to say on these occasions. All that is required is that you make this effort to show support to your friends and comrades."

"No, I don't think you understand, Pennydude. This isn't like *everybody* doesn't know what to say; I *really* don't know what to say—or do. I'm not from here. I'm from—I was never taught to do this. I was raised by a virtual reality machine. I don't get the whole how you're supposed to—"

"Piffle," I told him—somewhat curtly, perhaps, but I confess I have limited patience with that particular type of excuse. "All living souls are mystified and humbled at events of this kind, young man, and that confusion is in no way particular to those possessing whatever super powered piffle you were about to relate. The ceremonies of life, if I may so phrase it, bring us together at such times *despite our differences*, because *at such times* the differences become irrelevant."

“See, I’m from the 30th century—” he tried to interrupt.

“Because,” I repeated more sternly, “Such differences become irrelevant. We are all in the same boat: mourning the loss of a fallen comrade and offering what support we can to an aggrieved friend.”

I paused, only to see if he would again attempt to voice his excuse. When he did not, I continued. “You will find your unease greatly lessened, young sir, if you find something to do with your hands. I would suggest walking to the buffet, picking up a plate, and placing a sandwich upon it.”

I was pleased with the result of this conversation, for young Mr. Allen most certainly made an effort to meet his social obligation for the remainder of the afternoon. I was unaware I had made any impression beyond that until later, when most of the guests had left. I was clearing plates from the buffet when Mr. Kent followed me back to the kitchen.

“That was nice work with Bart, Alfred. He told Conner you were ‘more bat-dude than the bat-dude.’”

“A gratifying comparison to be sure, sir, although one cannot imagine in what context one might possibly...”

“He tried sneaking up on Batman once. He was always doing things like that in the early days when he was Impulse. He had a big magnifying glass with him, which caught a reflection off the moon, which Bruce noticed. He ran off—the wrong way—and Bruce noted the draft in a direction the wind wasn’t blowing. And then there was the smell—novice speedsters sometimes leak a little energy outside the SpeedForce they create, ionizing some of the air when they come to a stop. You don’t need my senses to detect the smell of ozone.”

There was a brief hiatus at this point, as I had noticed Mr. Kent’s glance fall twice on a plate of sandwiches. I moved it towards him, and he took one as he continued.

“So anyway, Bruce calls him on all of that without turning around. Says he knows it’s a speedster back there, but it can’t be Flash because Flash would never insult his intelligence trying to sneak up behind him. So it must be the young protégé, Impulse, either studying him or planning some ill-advised prank. And whichever it is, it doesn’t matter; all that matters is that he be gone by the time Bruce turned around.—He was.”

Mr. Kent chuckled in an easy, knowing way. His story in no way explained why I might be termed “more bat-dude than the bat-dude,” but I would not dream of embarrassing Mr. Kent by noticing the omission. Instead, I offered him one of the remaining cutlets.

“I see, sir,” I remarked, handing him the dish, “That is indeed most amusing.”

“It is, isn’t it? It’d be awfully nice if Bruce could see that side of things.” He took one of the cutlets onto his plate, then his tone changed abruptly. “Alfred, I wanted to apologize for that, that *awkwardness* in the cave earlier. That must have been very difficult for you.”

“Not at all, sir.”

“I don’t know what got into me mentioning Jason that way. I guess I had some idea of being a shoulder, a helping hand, something like that—”

“I understand fully, sir. That desire to assist in whatever way one is able is, after all, the definition of a servant’s role.”

He seemed truly troubled by this and began poking at the cutlet as young Master Dick used to prod an unwanted vegetable.

"I can't understand that," he said finally. "I just can't, Alfred. I always think of you as more of a father figure around here."

"If I may, sir," I said, relieving him of the fork and cutlet, and presenting him with a fresh plate and a slice of shortbread. "I submit that you are, perhaps, simply uncomfortable with the notion of domestic service—although I assure you it is a most dignified vocation—and in your discomfort, you perhaps seek to modify my role into something more familiar."

He looked truly startled by this, and sensing I had put forth an idea which had not occurred to him, I felt encouraged to continue.

"Parenting instincts come into play, certainly, whenever one in a position of caring for a young person. But it is folly to confuse one of the village that helps raise a child with being the actual parent. Master Bruce had a father, and it would be presumptuous indeed to—"

I broke off because Mr. Kent had turned his head towards the kitchen door, and I saw now that it was not my discourse but something he overheard elsewhere in the house which had produced the startled look and which now claimed his full attention. He closed his eyes and shook his head as a wide, disbelieving grin spread over his features.

"They really are perfect for each other," he told me, then jolted upright a few seconds before the kitchen door swung open and Miss Selina marched in.

"I'm going to need a martini, a massage, and a mallet," she announced.

Mr. Kent's eyes met mine and he mouthed the word "Bruce"—although super hearing was hardly necessary to guess the source of Miss Selina's agitation.

Mr. Kent soon departed the kitchen, saying he wanted a word with Master Tim before he left. One gathers that the meeting did not proceed as he might have wished. Indeed, while I know few of the particulars, I am left with the impression that Master Tim exchanged frank words with Mr. Kent, Miss Selina, Ms. Barbara, Ms. Lance, and Mr. Valley.

It was Mr. Valley who alerted me to the situation. He had, it appears, sought out Master Tim for a few private words of condolence and been rebuffed in terms less than courteous. I hastened to remind him of the boy's misery and he assured me that he fully understood. He had not, in fact, come to speak to me about Master Tim at all.

"It's Cassie," he told me quietly. "In all the concern for Tim, I don't think anybody's really noticed her. She's so quiet anyway. She's really torn up, poor kid."

I had, of course, noticed that Miss Cassie displayed none of her usual hearty appetite, and I naturally attributed this to the sad business of the day. I had not, I regret to say, thought to inquire further as Mr. Valley had.

"That bastard David Cain raised her to be an assassin, Alfred; an assassin and nothing else. He brought her up to have no emotional attachments *at all*. Death is the way of the warrior, theirs or yours, it's all the same thing. Even the Order of St. Dumas wasn't that bad. I mean, I was born, bred and programmed to be Azrael—but *they still taught me to talk*. But what Cain did to that little girl..."

There was a short interruption as I handed Mr. Valley a glass of milk. I had noticed he was clenching his fist in a troubling manner as he began speaking of the Order of St. Dumas, and I poured this refreshment so I might offer him one of those touches of normalcy that are so reassuring when one is distraught.

"Anyway," he resumed while I offered a plate of scones, "She was brought up to have no emotional ties, but she jettisoned all that with the rest of Cain's teachings when she became Batgirl. She joined the human race—she found a family, she made a friend. Now look what's happened."

"You fear, sir, that she might reject the principles of 'joining the human race' and resume her former... outlook?"

"Yeah. I think she might do just that, Alfred. I don't know how she's come this far, to tell you the truth. The guilt, looking back on the things you did—I know what it's like for me. I can't fathom how that little girl can possibly... Some days, it just tears you up, knowing what you've done to people. And now we add grief to the mix. Yeah, I think she might give up on the whole idea of human feelings..." He paused then, as if considering his own words before adding, "...I'm tempted myself."

"Then I dare say, sir, that you might be best-equipped to speak to the young woman."

"What! Me? No! Alfred, I can't do that. I can't talk to people about stuff like this. I can't talk to women at all half the time, and I sure can't come off all 'older and wiser than you are, young lady.' You've got to do that!"

I was not swayed by this appeal. I ventured to point out that Mr. Valley and I had been conversing on this subject for several minutes, so he was most certainly able to "talk to people about stuff like this." I suggested that our position in the kitchen had put him at greater ease, and recommended he bring Miss Cassie for a glass of milk and a plate of food. He consented.

Unfortunately, my duties obliged me to leave the kitchen just then to tend to the remaining party in the drawing room. But I trust that Mr. Valley and Miss Cassie had a very productive talk. The remainder of the cutlets and scones were gone when I returned, along with a jug of milk and half a sponge cake.

CHAPTER 4: LAST NERVE

It is five days since my last entry. The reader will surely appreciate, once I have related the events, why I felt it prudent to spend these past evenings in the cave, monitoring the C-channel in case my assistance would be required, rather than in my room maintaining this journal.

It is five days since the memorial service, four since the developments on “the Brown case,” and three since Miss Selina departed. Now that I am at leisure to record the episodes of these past days and nights, I have resolved to do so even if it takes me until dawn to accomplish the task. I have therefore brewed a pot of strong tea in lieu of my usual hot milk. Miss Nutmeg sits upon my lap as I write. She followed me from the pantry and mewed so plaintively at the door to my room that I felt compelled to admit her. One suspects she is upset at the many recent departures from the established routine of the house: the strangers who attended the memorial, the suspension of our nightly meetings in the pantry, and, of course, Miss Selina’s absence.

This last is the only remaining anomaly and one hopes, fervently hopes, it will be of short duration. She has gone to her preserve, the Catitat, located about an hour’s drive upstate. This property, I am informed, includes a small rustic cabin where one might accommodate oneself for a night or two. But one cannot imagine such a refined being as Miss Selina forgoing the comforts of civilized life for very long. She will surely have her fill of ocelots and leopards and return to the manor tomorrow morning, if not tonight.

If she does not, I fear I must set prudence aside and take some definite action. One would not dream of asserting that Master Bruce is “on his last nerve” since her departure, but his behavior these last days is such that I freely admit I am on mine.

It all began, evidently, while the last guests still lingered after the memorial. Mr. Valley and Miss Cassie were having their talk in the kitchen. I was fetching an aspirin for Ms. Lance. And it seems that two of the younger gentlemen—Mr. Conner Kent and Mr. Bart Allen—approached Master Tim to inquire, quite simply, “When and where?” It seems a given among these young men that Master Tim would be dealing out a very personal vengeance for this crime. Their assistance, one gathers, was also to be taken for granted.

The question of “when and where,” however, was not one Master Tim could answer. It presupposed certain knowledge of Miss Stephanie’s killer and where he could be found.

One is pained to recount this story. It echoes the earliest days of Master Bruce’s endeavors. He was about 12, still so young, a child, and he thought as a child. His earliest efforts had focused almost entirely on the physical: building his muscles and stamina. He wished to punish criminals; he wished, to be blunt, to batter criminals. He only expanded the scope of his labors to include more intellectual pursuits when he realized that in order to hit the criminals, he must first be able to find the criminals.

He became proficient at this, as all the world knows. He is perhaps the most skilled and capable detective in the world—a fact that did not escape Master Tim.

What evidently happened was this: The day after the memorial, Master Tim approached Master Bruce in his study, asking quite openly what progress Batman had made on the case and expecting a blunt rebuff. Instead, Master Bruce consented instantly; as he had plainly thought out the matter beforehand and already reached a decision. He said he had a name but had not yet located the perpetrator's current alias or location, but he was confident that information would soon be known. Indeed, if he had not had to interrupt his investigation for the memorial, he might already—

It was there he broke off mid-sentence, for he had begun moving with Master Tim towards the Batcave. On reaching the landing, he saw Master Dick already in the cave, accompanied by Mr. Conner Kent. They were at one of the tables where the forensic evidence on the Brown case was assembled, and the younger Mr. Kent appeared to be scanning an object in some extrasensory manner.

Master Bruce deduced, quite rightly, that Master Tim's civil and respectful inquiry was nothing but a diversion. It was expected that he would obstruct and argue with Master Tim, and that this would so occupy his attention that the other young gentlemen would have ample time to enter the cave and sift through the evidence.

The reader may well guess the master's anger at this development. The young gentlemen could guess it as well, no doubt, although Master Bruce refrained from expressing it by any overt word or action. It was only later that he told me—but I am getting ahead of myself.

Master Bruce restrained his anger with the young gentlemen and briefed them on his investigation thus far: He produced casefiles on two unsolved murders in Phoenix, one in Las Vegas, three in Central City and two in Richmond. The FBI had detected a commonality in these homicides but had declined to share that intelligence with local law enforcement.

The master spoke most bitterly of this practice. It is easy enough to see why: If these federal investigators had been more forthcoming with their supposed allies in the police, then perhaps this individual would have been found and apprehended before he ever came into Gotham. It is my belief that this consideration weighed heavily in Master Bruce's decision to share his findings with Master Tim—in spite of the terrible anguish those findings were bound to provoke.

The individual responsible for the heinous string of murders is, Master Bruce is quite certain, a mugger that Robin and Spoiler apprehended earlier in the week. He had been released from custody under suspicious circumstances when the evidence against him was somehow mislaid. Master Bruce surmised that Miss Stephanie may have pilfered this evidence herself—a suggestion which brought the most heated rebuttal from Master Tim.

Master Bruce sent Master Dick and Mr. Conner from the cave at this point.

They came upstairs and Master Dick informed me of the proceedings as I have related them. I did not feel it appropriate to comment on the matter, so I asked the present whereabouts of Mr. Conner.

"I left him out in the rose garden with Selina," he told me. "I figure if anybody can keep a guy distracted, she can. I don't *think* Conner could—or would—eavesdrop, but I didn't want to chance it considering what's probably going on down there. Christ. I'm turning into Bruce."

I did not press the matter. It is true that Master Dick is not as generally mistrustful of teammates with enhanced listening abilities as is Master Bruce, but the present circumstances were unusual and, in my opinion, his caution was most prudent. I told him so, and then asked another question that had puzzled me.

"Master Dick, you had said it was Mr. Conner and Mr. Bart who approached Master Tim about this—undertaking. Might one ask—"

"Why it was me in the cave instead of Bart? C'mon, Alfred, two outsiders in the cave alone behind Bruce's back, Tim wouldn't go that far, even today."

"I see, sir. Very good, sir."

"You don't think I should have gone along with it, do you. You think I should have told them no way: it's Bruce's house, Bruce's cave, Bruce's evidence, and you've got no business sneaking in there if he doesn't want you in the investigation."

"That alternative course does seem to have occurred to you, Master Dick."

"Yeah... well. I couldn't do it. I looked in Tim's eyes—I know that look, Alfred. It's just how I felt when Jason died. Like it could've been me, but it wasn't. Was it luck or did I do something right that he did wrong? God as my witness, I don't know which is worse. Did Jason just... screw up?... Is it that simple? One mistake and—bang—game over. ... So I went along. I took Conner down to the cave. And I spent five minutes just looking at Jason's costume hanging there."

I cannot describe the expression with which Master Dick now looked at me, except to say it was hauntingly similar to Master Bruce.

"I was so angry at Bruce, Alfred. He benched me, plain and simple, when I got shot by the Joker. He decided a trained, capable, mature partner is too much of a liability, and then turned right around and took on that green, reckless kid. I was so fucking angry, I turned my back on the both of them. And I will never, 'til my dying day, know what that did to Jason Todd. If I hadn't... If I had *been* there..."

He twisted his head and bit his lip in a manner I well remember from his youth, when tears threatened that he wished to choke back.

"I SWORE," he said loudly, as if he could turn back those tears with sheer volume, "when Tim put on that costume, I swore he would *NEVER* be alone like that. I *swore* I would always be there for him, Alfred, no matter what. I'm sorry if it looks like I betrayed Bruce some way, but... *Fcklugh*."

This last was in response to the tear that had welled, despite his efforts, and now dripped down his cheek.

There are no words of comfort one can fairly offer at such moments, so I merely placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him a few moments to collect himself as he might wish.

"Master Dick," I said at last, "Questions that begin 'If I had/if I had not' have no true answers. You can never know how your actions may have impacted Master Jason's fate. And if you could know, that knowledge would not change the past. The only good that can come of these musings is that which you have already found: in taking the lessons of the past, such as they may be, to guide your choices in the present. Your resolve and commitment to Master Tim is admirable. Master Bruce would be the last to condemn you for it."

"I hope so, Alfred." He sighed. "I really hope so."

Batman surprised many within the “bat family” and the larger hero community in allowing Robin to pursue the case as he did with Superboy and Kid Flash. In my opinion, this merely shows how little they truly understand him.

As he himself put it to me “I wanted to *spare* him pain, Alfred. Not inflict more. Because I know it doesn’t help. I know having the fiend there, right under your fist, knowing what he did... it doesn’t help. It’s just one more moment to relive over and over. It only makes it worse and I didn’t want that for Tim... But Clark was right; he was going to get involved no matter what. Having to go around me to do it would have just shut me off from him at a time he most needed a friend. So of course I relented. What do they take me for, some kind of monster?”

This last question was directed, not to me, but to a small communicator that lay at his workstation. He had, as I said, made a full disclosure of his findings and given his blessing to Robin’s pursuing the case on his own. But he had no intention of letting that trio proceed unsupervised. He himself was already “suited up” and preparing to set out in the Batmobile. And, because of Superboy’s involvement, the master had enlisted Superman. If intervention became necessary, he could certainly not risk being hindered by ‘Tim’s well-meaning friend,’ even if that friend could hurl Batman into orbit.

Superman was already monitoring the situation and had relayed certain comments from the young heroes’ “com-chatter.” It was these remarks that caused Master Bruce to regard the communicator with such contempt and ask if his associates thought him a monster.

“Nope,” a chipper voice announced before us. “Just a stubborn jackass.”

“Good evening, Miss Selina,” I greeted her. “I see that you have already changed for your nightly... excursion.”

She winked at me in that impishly playful manner; I nodded and withdrew a few steps, that my presence might not hinder their conversation.

Miss Selina is no stranger to the cave, but she rarely comes down at that time of night. She keeps her costume under the bed, changes in her room, and, so far as I know, comes and goes as Catwoman almost exclusively through the upstairs windows. Her purpose in coming down at this hour could only be to catch the master before he left on patrol.

One did not, of course, strain to overhear their conversation, but one could not help but note certain phrases when a voice rose in agitation.

“I really hope you mean that,” Miss Selina was saying, “because I’ve got news that’s going to test the theory.”

“Nigma!” the master exclaimed a moment later, followed by Miss Selina, “So this is *not* rigid knee-jerk psychobat?” A few moments after that, she looked aggrieved as I heard her say “He didn’t word it as a question, if that’s what you mean.”

After perhaps a minute of inaudible murmurings, the master slammed his fist on the console and shouted “Because you don’t take what the enemy gives you!”

“That’s Ra’s, not Eddie,” Miss Selina declared firmly.

The master uttered something in reply that I did not hear—in response to which Miss Selina slapped him. I naturally thought it best to busy myself in another part of the cave entirely. I withdrew to the trophy room, always in need of a dusting, and only returned to the main chamber after the display cases rattled from the roar of the Batmobile’s departure.

I spent the remainder of the evening, as I have said, monitoring the C-channel and, through it, following Master Robin's progress in pursuing Miss Stephanie's killer. The young gentlemen broke off their activities that first night at 4:23. Superman, satisfied at the result, appears to have departed Gotham skies at 4:30, while Batman remained a further hour for "a quick patrol."

This is not atypical behavior for him: whenever some undertaking, such as the clandestine watch over Master Robin, forces him to abandon his regular patrol schedule, he always manages to work in at least one make-up patrol—usually on the same night. It is not my habit to wait up for him until dawn on these occasions, but I did in this instance in case Master Bruce might wish to consult me after the somewhat fevered events of the day.

It quickly became apparent that he wished precisely that, for he scanned the cavern immediately on his return and, on seeing my person, he nodded and removed his cowl. He settled at the workstation, as always, and opened his log. The routine in times past has been that he types for a time, then unburdens himself on some matter, then types some more, talks some more, until the matter is resolved to his satisfaction.

Except on this occasion, he did not type but merely stared at the open log.

"Is she home?" he asked after a moment.

"I couldn't say for certain, sir, but would imagine so," I told him. "It is nearly dawn."

The master responded with one of those low guttural utterances. After a short pause, in which again no typing occurred, he said:

"She talked to Nigma this afternoon. Did she tell you about that?"

"The Riddler, sir? Miss Selina informed me she was going out, sir, at about three o'clock. She did not reveal the purpose of the expedition and I saw so need to inquire."

The master sighed heavily, then turned from the screen to face me directly.

"Well that's where she went. He called her. He called her because... because... He hates Cluemaster, Arthur Brown, always has. Considers him a second-rate thug ripping off his 'theme.' Couple months ago it seems, he planted a spy among Brown's henchmen."

"I see, sir. And this agent of the Riddler unearthed some information that Mr. Nigma wished to relate to Miss Selina?"

"Something like that. Brown is gunning for Robin. Tim isn't the only one blaming himself for what happened to Stephanie. Cluemaster has also decided that Robin is responsible for Spoiler's death. Years of neglect and abuse, having her kidnapped, once nearly getting her killed, and now that she's dead, he decides he's the loving father."

"Let me understand clearly what you're saying, sir: Edward Nigma learned that the Cluemaster is mounting some sort of vendetta against Master Robin and... he *warned* you of this, sir? By way of Miss Selina?"

The master glared in a most disquieting manner before confirming that this was essentially the case.

"I confirmed it. It all checks out, exactly like she said."

"A curious development, sir."

"It makes some sense, Alfred. Nigma does hate Cluemaster. To his mind, this would be a rewarding puzzle: In going after Robin, Brown would be setting himself up for a load of 'bat trouble' —if I found out first."

"A certain irony, sir. Miss Stephanie took up the mantle of Spoiler in just this way, did she not?"

"What?" he asked absently.

"Miss Stephanie became the Spoiler to alert the police to her father's activities in advance."

"Yes, I suppose."

Again, his voice was absent of any mark of comprehension, and I suspected he was not listening.

"Something more is troubling you, sir?"

"I said something I shouldn't have, Alfred, when she told me about this."

"Miss Selina, sir?"

He closed his eyes and wrinkled his brow, an expression of deep regret or deep fatigue. When, after a full minute's silence, it became clear he intended to say no more, I pronounced it fatigue (although, in truth, I have my doubts) and sent him up to bed.

The next day, he informed me Miss Selina had gone to the Catitat. "She doesn't want anybody with less than four feet to talk to her for a while," is the way he phrased it.

The days that followed left little time for conversation on personal topics, the hunt for Miss Stephanie's killer taking precedence. Master Robin's team performed with exceptional skill, maturity, and dedication. The second night of their investigation, they obtained a most promising lead. The suspect had, when Robin and Spoiler first apprehended him, worn a T-shirt with a lewd expression and an obscene image. These have since been identified as the name and logo of a band that regularly perform at a Greenwich Village nightclub called Ernie's. A waitress at this club remembered the suspect. She was able to supply the first name of his current alias and a guess as to the neighborhood where he might reside. Master Robin split his team, sending Kid Flash to check out that neighborhood while he and Superboy remained to stake out this nightclub.

Master Bruce was also obliged to alter his strategy. He had wanted, I need hardly say, to maintain the watch on Master Robin personally. If a confrontation with Miss Stephanie's killer occurred, he was surely the best qualified to intercede with Master Robin should the situation require it.

It was not to be. The underworld, by now, was aflutter with the news that a bat operative had been killed. The stories were murky, contradictory, and uniformly inaccurate, but they served to excite this treacherous sub-section of the population. There were those, to be sure, who recognized bad news when they saw it: a crimefighter fallen would only spur those remaining to unprecedented fervor. Others, regrettably, saw it as a victory for all those who flouted the law. The master dispatched Azrael, Nightwing, and Huntress to establish a presence near the various dens of criminal activity. This kept matters well in hand so far as the general criminal population, but there was one nemesis, as always, who failed to conform to any predictable models.

The Joker saw the tales of a Bat-slaying in terms all his own. It was not a sign that crimefighters would be active, neither was it cause to rejoice. He saw it, evidently, as someone usurping his position. It was his prerogative to kill any “Bat-Sidekicks” that needed killing, and he vowed all manner of gruesome reprisals once he found the villain who violated that dictum.

The Joker is the one villain Master Bruce would never dream of “staffing out” to another operative. He took the matter in hand himself, and chose Black Canary to take his place watching Master Robin. You may at first wonder, as I did, why he would not turn to Nightwing for this task, Master Dick’s relationship with Master Tim being a close and brotherly one. The reason, regrettably, is that episode in the cave. Master Dick had shown himself ready to side with Master Tim, to conspire with him in effect to circumvent Master Bruce. One fears that Batman was simply not confident that Nightwing could be relied upon to step in as he should if the situation with Master Robin became volatile.

The task of watching Cluemaster he consigned to Batgirl. This may not have been the wisest assignment. Miss Stephanie and Miss Cassie were, after all, close friends. They would have talked, as all girls do, of likes and dislikes, common joys and common pain. Both had criminal fathers whose methods of upbringing gave each cause to complain. There is no way Master Bruce could have anticipated it, but in retrospect, it is easy to see how it all came about. Miss Cassie had every reason to view Arthur Brown as a vile beast that caused her friend pain. She was herself grieving that friend’s loss, when the beast attacked Robin, another friend and ally stricken by the same loss.

Batgirl did not deliberately overstep the bounds of physical force, of that we are all quite certain. What Master Bruce believes to have occurred is this: The Cluemaster held Robin responsible for his daughter’s demise, just as we were told. But he had blame enough to spare for anyone associated with Batman. When he closed in on Robin, preparing to make his move, Batgirl intervened. Cluemaster was enraged by the challenge—a crimefighter, a Gotham crimefighter, one of those who took his daughter from him—he attacked her, evidently, with a violence far beyond what she expected. A creature such as Arthur Brown could not hope to pose a threat to one of Miss Cassie’s abilities, but his vehemence provoked her to counter-attack in kind. The fight escalated sufficiently to tap into the anger and resentment of Miss Cassie’s own grief, as well as certain issues, one imagines, related to her own father.

Arthur Brown is expected to survive his injuries, indeed he was released from intensive care in less than six hours, and was transferred from Gotham General to the Arkham infirmary this morning.

The most serious ramification of the episode between Batgirl and Cluemaster was its pulling away all the carefully constructed supports around Master Tim. Superman first heard the disruption taking place a few blocks from Master Robin’s stake out. He informed Black Canary, who went at once to intercede. Superboy was the next to detect the commotion and, thinking it a diversion, went to investigate himself. Superman followed, his primary role in this mission being as a kind of check on Superboy.

This left Master Robin on his own when, as fate would have it, the suspect believed to be Miss Stephanie’s killer was sighted leaving the nightclub. Master Robin followed, in what state of mind one can only guess. I cannot bring myself to believe Master Tim

would truly seek to bring about another's death, even in circumstances such as these. I believe in my heart he would have apprehended the man and brought him to justice, if only the confrontation had remained between the two of them alone. But that conclusion was not meant to be.

The killer returned to his home, and Master Robin closed in, surveying the building, its windows, sightlines, entrances and exits, as he had been taught. In this brief time of preparation, he observed the Joker making for the entrance. A moment later, he saw Batman trailing the Joker.

It is not so very difficult to understand why Master Robin chose to act as he did. It is easy, in fact, to see how—having never *set out intending* the suspect's death—one could not help but consider the possibility on seeing a known killer of the Joker's famed brutality entering the man's domicile. It is easy to see that, with the very real possibility being suggested to one's mind, one could not help but feel a certain satisfaction from the thought.

It is easy, therefore, to see why Master Robin might have swung down to intercept Batman and delay his pursuit of the Joker.

The conversation was brief, as Master Bruce related it to me. It was heated and not without recrimination; one is pained to report that the participants did come to blows. But when the sounds of frenzied laughter were heard within the dwelling, Master Robin relented. Indeed, it appears it was he and not Batman who transported the individual for further medical attention after an antidote was administered.

Master Bruce's injuries are not severe compared to those he has suffered in past battles with the Joker, although there is a marked stiffening around his lips. This has, of course, occurred before. It is not that frightful aftereffect of SmileX exposure that accounts for the Master's foul temper this morning. It is, most certainly, the bruise on his jaw resulting from the altercation with Master Robin, coupled with Miss Selina's ongoing absence.

CHAPTER 5: A KIND OF MERRY WAR

It is tempting, after so long a day, to put aside the journal and either proceed directly to bed, or at the very least, to relax with a less taxing activity, such as watching one of those films Master Dick so kindly selected for my enjoyment. It is only those several days of neglecting these entries while the hunt for Miss Stephanie's killer unfolded which spurs me on now to complete the task I set for myself and note down the events of this day.

I should say at the outset so the matter may be set aside: Miss Stephanie's killer still lives. He suffered grievous injuries at the Joker's hands, including, but not limited to, broken bones, multiple contusions about the head, and severe inhalation of the SmileX toxin that resulted in the shutdown of several organs. It was, as I stated previously, Master Robin himself who was instrumental in transporting him for medical attention. That medical aid was, we learned at six o'clock this morning, sufficient to spare his life.

I cannot help but wonder if another result would not have been better.

Now there will be a trial, possibly an appeal; who knows when and how it will all end. All that can be known for certain is that Master Tim will have these events hanging over him for a considerable time. It would have been so much easier for him, indeed for all of us, to gain closure and move on if the fiend had simply died from his injuries.

I put this forth to Master Bruce, but he is of another view. He believes this conclusion will be best for Master Tim in the long run. If the villain had died, Master Bruce is convinced that Master Robin would come to question and regret those minutes when he delayed Batman's entry into the dwelling and allowed the Joker's attack to proceed unopposed.

Master Bruce and I have naturally discussed philosophical questions of this kind before. I knew of, and indeed admire, his unwavering opposition to the taking of human life. We rather part company, however, when he extends that principle of not killing to actively protecting—indeed, risking his own life on occasion in order to protect—the likes of Joker, Riddler or Two-Face from potentially fatal dangers. Master Bruce is quite rigid on this question: Yes, he will allow that the world would be a better place without the Joker in it. Yet if someone were out to kill him and the Batman became aware, he would still do his utmost to prevent it. He evidently feels that the very idea of a crimefighter evaluating the moral worth of a potential victim opens a dangerous door. I cannot be so sure, but then I am not the one out there who must make such decisions, to act or not, in an instant. I had not considered it before in this light, but that factor may well explain Batman's extreme and unyielding views on most issues of this kind.

You may wonder then, if I knew the master's attitude so well, why I even bothered to postulate if Master Tim's world, if not the world at large, would not be improved without this particular criminal in it.

I suppose I was curious. Master Bruce may be headstrong, but he is not blindly and recklessly stubborn. If he uncovers some piece of evidence, for example, which contradicts his first theory of a crime, he will give the new information all due consideration and revise his theory accordingly. On this occasion, it was Master Tim's grief and guilt which hung in the balance much more than his own, and that may have altered matters. Master Bruce has also changed in numerous and surprising ways since the advent of Miss Selina in his life. Through her, he has certainly been exposed to a myriad of different perspectives on many aspects of his existence, crimefighting and otherwise. So one was curious, it is not so difficult to understand now that I think about it, one was simply curious if Master Bruce might have changed his mind.

It is frustrating and yet comforting to have learned that he has not altered his views regarding the fundamentals.

I have already mentioned the first journal I kept while studying drama as a young man in London. I began the second when I came to America. It was my father's dying wish that I uphold the family tradition and pursue a career in domestic service. The name of Pennyworth afforded me quick admittance into London's finest establishment for the training of gentlemen's gentlemen. Properly trained British servants have always been in high demand throughout the world. There are many indeed who feel no country but England can produce manservants that truly warrant the title of *butler*. I was therefore, as you might expect, offered situations in many corners of the globe. I chose America—indeed, I chose Gotham City—because, outside of London, it is the greatest theatre city in the world.

I had not, you see, entirely abandoned my hopes of a career on the stage. I had promised my father that I would go into service, and I would keep my word to the best of my ability. I was nevertheless aware that one's best and one's promise are not magical formulae that guarantee success. And as one never knows where one's lifepath may lead, I reasoned that if my career in service came to naught, I would rather be in Gotham City than anywhere else. Here I could best resume what I still, in that stubborn zeal of youth, thought of as my true calling.

I began another journal for a brief period several years ago when Master Bruce was injured at the hands of the goliath called Bane. It was uncertain for a time if he would ever be able to resume his role as Batman. I had, of course, made my thoughts known over the years as to the prudence of the master's vocation. The unqualified horror—indeed, the sheer personal hell—of seeing one's worst fears played out in such a fashion... One could feel no relief at the thought of Master Bruce having to abandon his quest in that way. All one could feel was the anguish of seeing a dearly loved charge in torment. I recall many sleepless nights on that account; indeed, I began to fear that my readiness to serve might falter when Master Bruce had greatest need of it. Hence that third journal. There could be no better time, I reasoned, to take stock.

I had cause to recall that dark time earlier today. Indeed, the morning began with a most disquieting reminder:

Miss Selina did not return during the night as I had hoped. I ventured into the master's room as silently as I was able, in order to ascertain whether the bed contained one person or two. I had, I believe, become adept at these silent entries in the earliest

days of the master's new relationship with Miss Selina, not from any inquisitive impulses, you understand, but merely so that I might prepare the breakfast tray appropriately. If either of them were ever aware of my presence, they hid the knowledge well.

In any case, this morning I resumed the old practice and quietly opened the bedroom door.

"No need for the catlike creeping, Alfred," the master barked in the foulest voice imaginable, "I'm up."

The bed was empty, and the foul voice with which Master Bruce announced his wakefulness came from the bathroom. That element alone distinguished the incident from the many previous ones following that wretched fight with Bane. In those days, Master Bruce seldom slept through the night, waking with the pain of his injuries and plagued, one doesn't wonder, with regret of the past and misgiving for the future. He was nearly always awake when I entered his room in the morning, and his tones in communicating that fact reflected his anger and despair.

It may be that those past mornings, when he "greeted" me from the bed in tones of such hostile misery, coloured my reaction to this morning's salutation. It may well be that it was merely "the Batman's voice," if I may so phrase it, and not some foreboding accent of loathing and desolation.

Whatever emotions it reflected were soon laid aside, for Master Bruce, ever observant, had clearly noted my reaction and hastened to apologize for being abrupt.

"It is a trying time for all of us, sir," I demurred. "Think nothing of it."

I saw that the alarmingly unnatural stiffness around his mouth, an aftereffect of the SmileX exposure, had lessened during the night. I therefore prepared a hot towel, that Master Bruce might shave (an expedient which allowed me to linger unobtrusively) and I was gratified when he gave voice to one of those guttural utterances, signaling his readiness for conversation.

"I gather Miss Selina has not yet returned, sir," I began cautiously.

"No," was the brief reply.

"Dare I speculate, sir, that her continued absence might result from that exchange several nights ago when she forwarded Mr. Nigma's information about the Cluemaster and, by your own admission, sir, you 'said something you shouldn't have' in reply."

"That's really none of your business, Alfred."

"Of course, sir," I noted quickly, for I was quite prepared for the rebuke. It was as deserved as it was accurate. I went on, "It is merely that, if that were the case, it would be most convenient with respect to Master Tim."

"WHAT?!" Master Bruce blurted, nicking his chin in his surprise.

"Master Tim, sir. The situation with Miss Selina affords me a unique opportunity for an extended and private conversation with Master Tim in circumstances almost certain to secure the young gentleman's candor." I checked for the position of the razor, so as not to provoke another startled slip, before I continued, "If only, sir, you will permit me to convey your apologies to Miss Selina for your ill-chosen words in the cave the other night."

"You want me to *apologize*? To *Selina*? Alfred, you don't even know what was said and you want me to *apologize* so you can... *talk to Tim*?"

"Yes, sir."

"No, Alfred."

"Very good, sir. I shall abandon all thought of the scheme at once. I was under the impression that you regretted the outburst that drove the young woman from your side, and were, in fact, distressed by her absence. As you are not, my proposed course of action is certainly not viable. I shall therefore, as I say, abandon the scheme. Out of curiosity, sir, might one inquire what the precise words were for which you feel no remorse?"

"Oh for heaven's sake, Alfred. If you must know, I made a comparison. I had said you don't take what the enemy gives you. I meant that any information that comes from Nigma is suspect. It did make sense that he would strike at Cluemaster that way, but I couldn't discount the possibility that the tip might not be what it seemed. That he might have another agenda entirely, it might be a trap of some kind. So I said 'you never take what the enemy gives you,' and she said 'That's Ra's and not Eddie.' She started it, Alfred. *She* made the comparison first, she opened the door."

"The door to what, sir?"

Master Bruce sighed as if the weight of the world had descended on his shoulders.

"I compared her to Talia," he said, barely audible. "I didn't mean it, it just slipped out somehow. Her bringing me news of some scheme from Eddie, something an enemy obviously wanted me to know and act on to suit his own ends. It was... It *was* like the kind of thing Talia would do, but at the same time, it's not... I don't know where it came from, Alfred."

"I might hazard a guess, sir," I told him quietly. "The issue with Ms. Al Ghul was always one of loyalty, was it not?"

"Of betrayal, you mean."

"Yes, sir, precisely. And you experienced a betrayal of sorts earlier that day in Master Dick's efforts to aid Master Tim, admitting himself and Mr. Conner to the Batcave when—"

"That's a strong word in Dick's case, Alfred. Dick wasn't being treacherous, he just—"

"Not treacherous, sir, but there were elements of the underhanded, surely, in the actions of two young men whose loyalty you took to be beyond question. And the circumstances were such that you had no opportunity to address your feelings on the matter. You suppressed them, in fact, Master Bruce, as you are apt to do under circumstances far less trying than those of this past week. Not to be denied, those feelings found another outlet that was, perhaps, not entirely just."

"You mean I took it out on Selina."

"Yes, sir."

He indulged in another of those guttural utterances, and resumed shaving at a much brisker tempo than before.

"And you think you can set it right?"

"No, sir, I make no guarantees with respect to Miss Selina."

"Ah... I see. It's just a ruse to talk to Tim?"

"I would not like to use the word 'ruse,'" I told him honestly, "there is an implication of wile and deception, sir, that I hardly—"

"Yes, yes, alright Alfred," he sighed, "do whatever you think is best."

It is a drive of approximately two hours to Miss Selina's Catitat. I invented a mild infirmity in my right ankle and imposed on Master Tim to drive me, lest the extended time at the wheel prove too much of a hardship for me.

The first half hour passed in polite but sporadic conversation. I had preempted the possibility of musical distraction by bringing a CD of my own (a pleasant but nondescript classical guitar recital) and of any roadside stops by bringing a picnic basket (minced chicken and bacon sandwiches, cheese straws, and ginger cake).

When I thought enough time had passed in erratic small talk and the Bach Suite No. 1 in G major, I cleared my throat and expressed satisfaction that Master Tim's black eye was healing so rapidly. This injury, the reader may have guessed, was the result of the altercation with Batman.

"Yeah, well, I'm young. S'posed to heal fast. Right?"

He said nothing more for a minute, then he asked pointedly, "You heard all about it right? I wanted to let Joker do to him what he did to... pretty sick, huh, Alfred?"

"The desire for vengeance is certainly understandable," I told him. "For most people touched by a tragedy of this kind, no direct revenge is possible. The thought of a creature like the Joker delivering the kind of violent retribution that only he can remains a... a fantasy of sorts, confined to dark corners of the imagination."

"But Bat Family aren't most people."

"No, sir."

We rode in silence for a moment when Master Tim asked abruptly, "Is Bruce incredibly pissed?"

I told him, truthfully, that Master Bruce had voiced no animosity regarding their altercation. I went so far as to tell him of a not dissimilar clash he had with Superman after Master Jason's death. It was meant as a comfort, to show how Batman understood as few others could what Master Tim was going through. But I fear my mentioning that episode only made his situation worse: Master Jason's murder was certainly parallel in terms of a loss to the "Bat-Family" and their desire for vengeance—but it was the Joker himself that had killed Master Jason, and it was the Joker who Master Tim, in his zeal to avenge Miss Stephanie, prevented Batman from pursuing.

"He must hate me," Master Tim murmured. Then he said nothing more until we had reached the Catitat.

Despite the forewarning that she wished no one with less than four feet to talk to her, Miss Selina received us cordially at her preserve. She brought us to the small rustic cabin I have mentioned. It is primitive, to be sure. A single room of respectable proportions with a kind of kitchenette in the corner—if a miniature refrigerator, stove and toaster can be called such—and necessary facilities in a kind of closet partitioned from the main room by an oilcloth curtain. Still, the inclusion of those facilities indoors as well as the tangible effect of central heating gave one the impression that, for all the rustic trappings, this was a perfectly comfortable dwelling.

The walls were paneled in dark wood and a single image was hung on them, a large and dramatic photograph of a tiger. The room contained a kind of daybed covered in pillows and a blanket-like throw, each with a different pattern of catlike markings:

tiger stripes, leopard spots, and so on. Upon this daybed—and I confess I was taken aback when I realized what it was—two live wildcats were curled up together, evidently enjoying a nap.

I had not registered the presence of these creatures when I first scanned the room. There was no reason to notice a still mass of reddish brown amidst the throw pillows, and I was of course preoccupied greeting Miss Selina. She was most keen that Master Tim meet a particular resident of the preserve, an ocelot called Nirvana who seems to be a particular favorite among her pets. She stepped out for a moment to escort him to this creature's pen, which is, I gather, a short hike from the cabin. Remembering the leg infirmity that was my excuse for enlisting Master Tim on this journey, I elected to stay behind at the cabin. Miss Selina assured me that she would return promptly and begged me to make myself at home.

I confess I have acquired a certain habit when visiting one of Master Bruce's immediate circle: I am inclined to tidy. This I proceeded to do, although Miss Selina's cabin offered little in the way of accumulations compared to Miss Cassie's flat or Master Tim's dorm room. There is, nevertheless, always some area that can be enhanced by the lessening of clutter. And recalling Master Dick's bachelor residence in Bludhaven, I espied the throw pillows on the daybed.

Imagine my surprise when the largest of these "pillows" moved at my approach and raised its head to regard me with striking feline eyes, while the most extraordinarily shaped ears perked in my direction.

I may have uttered something to the effect of "My word" which caused the second creature to wake and point another set of those strange ears at my person. I thought it prudent to desist from further comment or movement, and after a minute, both creatures put their heads back down to resume their nap. A moment later, Miss Selina returned and, when I inquired, she introduced her companions as caracals, "Brii and Mick." She then regarded me with inquisitive eyes quite as feline as those of the caracals, although decidedly more playful.

"You don't approve of my furry roommates," she declared.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that, miss, although I certainly fear for the damage animals of such size might do to one's belongings."

She laughed, pointing out that many people keep dogs of that size, and that some others will store millions of dollars worth of electronics amidst hundreds of wild bats. Unable to disagree with the observation, I delivered my message.

"Miss Selina, you are of course aware that when Master Bruce is in 'Batman mode,' so to speak, he is inclined to speak his thoughts without fully considering the impact his words might have on the listener. Surely given the pressures of the past days—"

"Alfred," she cut me off, "Don't tell me he sent you up here to plead his case."

I admitted that the apology was something of a subterfuge. Her reply rather astonished me.

"Well that's good. I know he doesn't apologize and that's just the way it is. If he really had sent you up here, it'd mean he was really off the rails."

"I am certain, Miss Selina, that, formal apology or no, Master Bruce does regret his words with respect to Ms. Al Ghul."

"To tell you the truth, Alfred, I'm not that angry with him, I just needed some time to myself. First Eddie, telling me what Cluemaster was up to really put me between a

rock and a hard place—which, okay, another kind of guy might appreciate and opt to be less of a jackass for once, but that’s not Bruce. It’s just... between the two of them, I needed to get away from people for a while.”

I apologized, this time on my own behalf, for interrupting her retreat with my fewer-than-four-footed company. She laughed with her old vitality and brought a hand to her cheek to cover a becoming blush.

“He didn’t tell you I said that. Oh Alfred, now I really am mad at him. Well, it doesn’t matter, you’re an honorary cat in my mind anyway.”

I bowed and expressed myself honoured by the designation which, coming from her, denoted the highest praise. I asked, as I began unpacking the picnic basket, how I came by such a distinction in her eyes. She cited a number of attributes it would be immodest of me to list, although I will point out that some, such as dignified reserve and a knack for quiet observation, I regard as professional skills rather than aspects of one’s personality.

In response, she took a piece of the ginger cake, which was of course set aside for the dessert and not meant to be picked at before the sandwiches and cheese straws were consumed. She held the morsel up between her thumb and forefinger and astonished me (a second time) by referencing a practice of which I did not know she was aware.

“And then there’s Nutmeg,” she said. “You sneak Nutmeg treats, Alfred. That’s pure feline guile, no way around it.” She popped the bite of cake into her mouth, chewed and swallowed before I could begin to fashion a reply.

My brief moment of inarticulate shock went unnoticed, and for this, I have “Mick” (the larger of the two caracals) to thank. The creature must have smelled the food I was unpacking and thought this adequate inducement to conclude his nap. He had risen from the daybed and approached us in the kitchenette, his nose flaring excitedly. His companion came immediately to join him, and my conversation with Miss Selina was briefly suspended while she evicted the two cats from the cabin. When this was accomplished, she resumed as if she had never been interrupted.

“You had Whiskers and Nutmeg settled into the manor and seeing it as home before I’d even unpacked.”

“Miss Selina, I merely did all I could to help your little ones adjust to their new surround—”

“—You did all you could,” she said over me, “to shut the door behind me and make it all but impossible for me to leave.” Then her aspect changed. The carefree playfulness was gone, but so was the feline sophistication. I had the impression of a much younger woman—a girl, in fact—ingenuous and certainly more vulnerable. For a moment, it looked like she meant to say “Thank you,” but instead, the coy playfulness returned in an instant and she said “Anybody else tried that, I’d scratch their eyes out.”

I replied, in that tartly ironic tenor so useful with Master Bruce, that I was quite sure she would. And she smiled in a most bewitching manner, as if she found some reassurance in the banter.

Master Tim returned from his visit with the ocelot Nirvana. Miss Selina unfolded a little wooden cart next to the daybed into a surprisingly sturdy table, and the three of us commenced to eat the picnic lunch I had prepared. Miss Selina questioned Master

Tim with some vigor as to his impressions of the ocelot and her preserve. At first, I thought this a questionable tactic. Master Tim has been understandably withdrawn since the tragic event and all efforts to draw him out—including Miss Selina’s—have been met with hostility. But this one subject was so dear to her, her cats and her preserve are so fundamental to her being, that Master Tim was able to see her exuberance in a different light. It was, after all, a mark of the highest regard that she shared this part of her life with us, and her eager curiosity to know how it was received was quite touching.

Master Tim answered every query, and after a time, I began to perceive another aspect of Miss Selina’s questioning, an aspect which, I must say, persuades me to resume my efforts with her regarding the decorating at the first opportunity.

This ocelot, Nirvana, is evidently a creature of remarkably maternal disposition. She has a habit, so Miss Selina informed us, of mistaking the tight raised skin of human scars—such as the “bat-family” acquire in abundance on their arms and hands—for matted fur, and tries most diligently to remedy the situation with industrious grooming from her large rough tongue. Master Tim was wearing a long-sleeved shirt but had pushed the sleeves halfway up his forearms in the course of the drive, so that a quarter inch of one such scar was exposed. Miss Selina saw this and asked if Nirvana had noticed. When Master Tim reported that yes, she had, Miss Selina seemed to view the matter with great satisfaction.

It is my belief that Miss Selina has a stronger desire to nurture than she would like to admit. She is quite as exasperating as Master Bruce in that respect. The collective ability of that pair to deny the most *natural* and *laudable* instincts a being may possess, and insist instead that nocturnal marauding makes them immune from the yearnings of ordinary unmasked humanity—some days, one is truly moved to throttle them. But I digress. Miss Selina is, as I say, a warm and loving woman with a natural impulse to nurture and comfort. Either because she felt this indicative of some clichéd notion of “maternal instinct” that she finds incompatible with her feline independence, or more likely because her first overtures with Master Tim were less than successful, I believe she sent him to this conspicuously maternal ocelot as a kind of proxy, to give him the kind of attention she felt him in need of but thought herself unable to provide.

It was then that matters took a very curious turn. Master Tim asked, without any sort of precursor, if Miss Selina had ever hit Batman with a brick. She said she had not. He said that she distracted Batman many times in order to escape. She said “Yes and no,” because she had some objection to the word “escape,” but she allowed that she had certainly performed a variety of misdirectional and diversionary maneuvers over the years and that these had been, on the whole, successful.

“But you never hit him hard in the head with a brick?” Master Tim repeated.

“No,” Miss Selina confirmed.

“Stephie hit me with a brick,” Master Tim said softly. “You know that story I told at the service, how I chased her down that first time and pulled off her mask, and I was so startled that she was, well, a girl, that she got away? Well, that’s how she got away. While I was being all stunned that she was beautiful, she clocked me with a brick.”

Miss Selina smiled at that and said she was sure he had asked for it.

I am unable to reproduce the rest of their conversation in detail, as it referenced aspects of the rooftop life of which I am, of course, unfamiliar. I have naturally heard

of such scenarios from Master Bruce, but the terms in which Miss Selina and Master Tim now spoke were rather different. The discussion concluded when Miss Selina pronounced him “quite the junior jackass,” and Master Tim thanked her, kissed her cheek, and then threw the last bite of ginger cake into her hair.

She exclaimed “HEY” and hissed; he, that it was “softer than a brick” and stuck out his tongue—and I, at this point, felt it necessary to take charge of the situation before my fellow guest and our hostess sunk to further indignities. I collected our plates, flatware, and cups into the picnic basket, and Miss Selina surprised us by announcing her intention to return with us to town.

She drove back in her Jaguar, which, of course, she had used to reach the preserve initially. But even though she was not physically with us in the car, her implied presence altered the mood of the drive back. Master Tim was more communicative about his relationship with Miss Stephanie, which had deteriorated sadly in the last days of her life.

Master Bruce knew of this, and I now saw *this* was the true source of the tension between them. It was not that physical confrontation between Batman and Robin that weighed on Master Tim, but two earlier conversations in the Batcave.

The first of these occurred the very night Master Tim and Miss Stephanie ended their relationship. Master Tim encountered Master Bruce in the cave and related his thoughts on the matter. He had lost all faith in his connection with Miss Stephanie. He was not naïve, he did not expect a relationship to be perfect, he knew there would always be difficulties. But the rapport between himself and the young woman was simply insufficient, he judged, to overcome those obstacles. He told her so, and they parted.

Whatever Master Bruce might have thought of this development, he said nothing at the time, no doubt feeling it was none of his business.

The matter was not spoken of again until Master Bruce declared that the break-up spurred Miss Stephanie to the actions that led to her death. After he ordered Master Dick and Mr. Conner from the cave, he spoke frankly to Master Tim, pulling up Robin’s own log entry from that night, citing a mugger captured, a mugger with a knife, suspected of being something more. “This was the night of the break-up,” Master Bruce said, “Tell me you and Spoiler didn’t have words about this?” Then he produced a police report detailing the suspect’s release, a sentence highlighted stating the reason; the crucial evidence was missing.

To one of Master Bruce’s understanding, the cause and effect would be as clear as it was undeniable: A girl, thoughtless and immature, lashing out in the rejection of a break-up, desperate to prove herself right and worthy and doing exactly the wrong thing, latching on to a recent point of contention, taking the evidence, getting the man released, losing control of the circumstances she set in motion, and ultimately paying with her life.

We rode in silence for a time after Master Tim unburdened himself of this terrible truth. Miss Selina’s Jaguar raced on ahead of us, the distance between the two cars increasing by the minute, as if Master Tim’s sorrow compelled him to slow the progress of the car.

"Master Tim," I said finally, "I don't believe I am betraying a confidence by telling you this. From the beginning, Master Bruce's greatest concern has been the easing of your guilt. I thought he meant only in the sense of revenging yourself on Miss Stephanie's killer. I see now there were other grounds for his concern."

"You can't tell me it's not my fault, Alfred."

"I shan't, Master Tim. I am all too aware how hollow words can seem at such times as these, particularly when they are half-truths at best."

"Huh?"

"I could no more convince you of your blamelessness than I could Master Bruce or Commissioner Gordon, when you, most certainly, have as much of the young woman's blood on your hands as they do."

"Alfred, I don't believe this! You think Bruce and Jim Gordon—what—how—no."

"As Master Bruce said himself, sir, he should have seen she was not up to the task. The young lady simply did not have the maturity and disposition to be a crimefighter, and one of Master Bruce's discernment should have noted it at once and taken steps to remove her."

"That is so totally unfair, Alfred. Steph was no screw-up; she made a mistake, that's all. People make mistakes. It doesn't mean she wasn't up to the job. How was Bruce supposed to know she'd screw up in just this way in response to this one thing, huh?!? She shouldn't be dead, Alfred, she SHOULDN'T be, and it's natural to want to blame somebody, but this isn't Bruce's fault! It's not. It's just not. You should tell him that, not sit there repeating all his—sure he blames himself—that's what he does. But you can't... just..." He was quiet for a moment and looked at the road. "Playing me, right?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"You're playing me. You said all that about Bruce to get me to come around and defend him and blurt out some big truth that makes it all better."

"Hardly that, sir."

"No?"

I said nothing, we drove in silence again until Miss Selina's Jaguar came back into view on the road ahead of us. Then Master Tim asked,

"What was Gordon's story?"

"Sir?"

"You were going to lay into Jim Gordon if blaming Bruce didn't work?"

"The former commissioner did express concern, sir, that in accepting Batman as he did, he opened the door for sidekicks, and in so doing, bears a responsibility for their fates."

"That's dumb."

"It is not an argument that compels unanimous agreement, sir."

"Yeah. Dumb. What'd you say to something like that?"

"I drew his attention to certain observations from Shakespeare, which I believe gave him some small consolation."

"Shakespeare."

"Yes, sir. *Henry V*. A fitting passage to the effect that: *Each man's duty is to the king, but each man's soul is his own.*"

"Whoa, good stuff."

"I believe it has given uniform satisfaction, sir."

"You got any of that on deck for Bruce?"

"Sir?"

"For Bruce, like this thing with Selina, whatever he's stepped in now. Any snappy snippets from ol' Shakespeare to fling his way?"

"I have often thought that Master Bruce would benefit from a better acquaintance with 'the joyful comedies.' With respect to Miss Selina, surely the subplot of Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* might offer a much-needed perspective."

"They're the ones that bicker all the time, right?"

"'A kind of merry war' is how it is described in the text, and surely the couple derive some delight in their playful battles of wit and words. But I was thinking of the conclusion to the tale, more than the story itself. Signor Benedick knows, in the end, when to give up the fight and simply kiss the lady. Whereas—"

"Y'mean like that?"

Master Tim had slowed the car nearly to a stop. At the side of the road, there sat Miss Selina's Jaguar, alongside Master Bruce's Porsche. Between the two cars, the two of them stood together, locked in a fervent embrace.

I cleared my throat and, had I been at the wheel, we would, of course, have proceeded onward without deigning to notice this spectacle. Master Tim was not so discreet. He honked the horn, then pulled over beside them, got out of the car, and grinned.

Master Bruce's explanation was endearingly preposterous. He claimed an old tracking device, placed on Miss Selina's vehicle many years ago, had inexplicably reactivated when the car reentered the Gotham city limits. He claimed too that he had stopped at a roadside stand to purchase the two-dozen roses Miss Selina now held.

We left them there; Master Tim's mood was much improved. Nothing will heal his wound except time, but one hopes he is over the worst of these first days and nights.

Although they never passed us on the drive home, Master Bruce and Miss Selina somehow beat us back to the manor, for the Jaguar and Porsche sat side by side in their respective stalls when we reached the garage. I have seen neither of them since, but one suspects a race or challenge of some kind was declared and is perhaps still in progress—considering the absence of another automobile from the cave's garage. I did observe a very curious and cryptic note left in the costume vault, tacked onto the wall by means of a cat-claw and positioned just above the hook, where someone hanging up the cape could not help but notice it. Rather than hang the kimono on that hook, I therefore elected to fold it and lay it off to the side.

The "merry war," one must conclude, continues.