



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

#41

Cat = Sales

Identity Element



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES

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IDENTITY ELEMENT

My first Hell Month with Bruce, I didn't even know what was happening. I knew Batman was agitated and erratic in January. I knew because all the others said so; I had never encountered him much myself.

Once Bruce and I got together as a couple, all that changed. He started getting crazy emotional a few days after the new year. The sex got angrier too, but that was as much my fault as his. I was panicking. During one of those emotional spasms, he'd called me the love of his life, and kitty cat hit the panic button. It all came to a head on the 21st. I didn't understand why; I didn't know it was the anniversary of his parents' deaths or that he was getting ready to visit their graves. All I knew was that the nightmares were getting worse and I mentioned it, I expressed concern, and he took my head off. I'd never seen him that way—deliberately vicious, deliberately cruel. It wasn't the Bruce I knew, or the Batman either, for that matter.

Once I found out the truth, it all made sense of course. He gets worse and worse as that day draws closer. Even Alfred walks on eggshells.

Last year, he sent me away. It was his Christmas present. He sent me on a shopping spree in Paris, but it was really sending me away from him during Hell Month. It wasn't what either of us wanted and I wound up coming home early. We were together on the dreaded day. I like to think it was maybe a little better for him, not being so isolated and alone. I can't be sure. I was in such a fog the whole time.

I wound up seeing that other part of him, that Hell Month Bat the others talk about. It was because of Nightwing getting kidnapped. We had to search for him, there was no other way. And I saw that *force* inside of Bruce that isn't even human. It goes beyond "driven" or "determined," it goes beyond the intensity that drew me to him from the start. It even goes beyond the vicious cruelty I glimpsed during that first Hell Month fight. I don't know what it actually *is*, but I know it comes from raw human pain.

I've never been afraid of him, and now I know I never will be. Because I've looked on the beast, and all my eyes will ever be able to see there is the pain, the hurt it must take to wreak a fury like that out of Bruce.

That was last year. I thought that was as bad as it could possibly get.
Heh.

Gothamites are a provincial lot. To the rest of the world, Elongated Man going public about his identity in the mid-80s was a huge event. So was Ray "The Atom" Palmer's divorce from Jean Loring almost a decade later. It was the former story that produced the phrase "media feeding frenzy" and the latter which accomplished the

then-impossible feat: ousting Monica Lewinsky from the cover of *People Magazine* for three weeks running.

But in Gotham, those were the silly escapades people in other cities got worked up about. No colorful cape, no Superman or Wonder Woman or Flash, could ever rank in importance with a denizen of Gotham City, and no exploit of the Justice League, no matter how cosmic in scale, would ever be as interesting as the happenings between the Hudson and Gotham rivers, between Wayne Plaza and the 10th Street Bridge.

When Sue Dibny was murdered, it was news, of course: The wife of Ralph Dibny, Elongated Man, murdered in her home. It was treated in the Gotham press like any other sensational murder involving a famous person with no ties to Gotham: It was a headline. The funeral, peppered with mourners in masks, capes, and spandex, produced an extraordinary photo above the fold. Diana, Princess of Themyscira, gave the eulogy—and the 42nd Street Borders pulled her book *REFLECTIONS* from “Last Year’s Releases” next to the discount bin and put her back in the display window for a week. Those were the only visible effects of Sue Dibny’s death as far as the public Gotham was concerned.

In more private corners of the city, it was different. There were stirrings, quiet ones. Nothing that could foreshadow the potent and terrible repercussions this one event would bring...

Criminals ducked in and out of the Iceberg Lounge. It was Hell Month and nobody wanted to risk being seen, most years they would have left town altogether by now. But everyone was anxious to hear the speculation: Batman was insane in January, every January, it was like he went on some kind of jihad against all crime and all criminals. Would this make it worse—or might it make it better? The wife of a long-standing member of the Justice League was dead: on the one hand, Bats might go straight over the edge and decide to wipe all criminals off the face of the earth. On the other hand, he might be so busy with this one case that he wouldn’t have time to put half the rogues gallery in traction. More than a third of them might reach February 1st without a leg cast, more than two-thirds without a neck brace...

At the Gordon-Grayson home, there was a different undercurrent, just as tense with uncertainty... Dick had gone to Bludhaven for Hell Month, not because he was avoiding Bruce, simply because Batman’s tempers always drove more criminals across the river at this time of year. Bludhaven is where he was needed right now—the fact that it got him away from Bruce was a bonus. Or it would have been except that with Barbara left behind in Gotham, Dick’s situation hadn’t really improved. Every outbreak of the Hell Month Psychobat on the OraCom led to a sequel when Barbara called Dick in ‘Haven to say goodnight... It was January, Dick knew that. It had been like this since he was twelve. They would all get through it. But then Sue Dibny was killed, and Dick really didn’t know what to do. A death in the hero community—in the “family” of the hero community—in Hell Month—and so soon after Stephanie. Bludhaven still needed him, but Dick couldn’t help wondering if maybe Bruce needed him more...

In Wayne Manor, Bruce had “gone to Maui” as soon as the news broke about the Dibny murder. Batman had completed the initial survey of the crime scene before Ralph Dibny had even signed the paperwork at the funeral home. While Ralph was selecting his wife’s coffin, Bruce was organizing dozens of small glassine bags filled

with carpet fibers, hair, ash, clumps of dust, lint and crumbs harvested from the murder scene. While Ralph selected the flowers to lay atop the coffin, Bruce was printing out a floorplan of the Dibnys' living room.

Ralph decided against the white lilies the sympathetic funeral director had suggested. He went with red roses, because there was a red rose on the lid of that first Valentine's Day box of chocolates he gave Sue, the one in which she kept her mementos... Bruce marked up the floorplan to indicate the location where each specimen and fingerprint was taken.

Ralph tried to remember the name of Sue's high school for the obituary notice... Bruce used mobile phase chromatography to isolate trace vapors captured from the crime scene.

At first, Selina kept her distance, sensing that he needed space both physically and emotionally. She ventured into the cave only when CNN began covering the arrivals at the funeral. She found him in the cave, of course, but dressed casually, not in costume except for the gloves, and standing before a long worktable dense with neatly ordered clusters of forensic evidence.

The large main viewscreen that dominated the cave flickered with the same image displayed on the smaller monitor at workstation 1: the left half of the screen cycled through slides from an electron microscope, the right from an infrared spectrometer. A transparent grid was superimposed over these, and it sputtered wildly with a blur of digits and moving crosshairs as the Batcomputer executed incomprehensible analyses.

Selina stood quietly for a moment, waiting for Bruce to acknowledge her arrival. He went on preparing a slide for the microscope. When he set down the tweezers and still didn't speak, she did.

"It's on the news," she said softly. "The arrivals at the funeral. It sounds like they'll at least have some privacy inside the cathedral, but I wouldn't bet the farm on it. You know what the press is like. Look, I know you don't want to watch this, but I did think—"

Bruce wordlessly moved to the workstation, punched a few buttons, and the CNN coverage appeared in a small window on the main viewscreen still dominated by the refractive indices and birefringence values of Sue Dibny's turtleneck.

"I'll check the video later," Bruce growled, "to make sure the fools who went in costume didn't expose anything in front of the cameras."

"Well they couldn't very well go in their secret identities," Selina pointed out. "No matter how careful they were, somebody could notice—"

"Anything," Bruce cut her off. "In costume or not, *somebody* can always pick out *something* from a photograph. I know all the reasons not to go in costume, Selina, and all the reasons not to go out of costume. And that's why I'm *here* right now and not *there*. That's the one advantage to being the cold-hearted bastard of the League, nobody expects me to do the touchy-feely stuff. I paid my respects to Ralph privately. The rest of them can assume I couldn't be bothered."

It was Hell Month. He said things like that in Hell Month that he wouldn't at other times. Selina knew that, but she made few concessions to it. It seemed like all the others did: Dick, Alfred, Barbara, and Tim, even the Justice League—even the *rogues*—everybody changed when he got like this. Selina made a conscious effort to be

different—she was the one person who would not bend to him and his Hell Month demons. She didn't have a perfect record, but whenever she thought to, she made an effort to treat him exactly as she always did. And if he was going to spout gibberish like that, there was really only one way to respond:

"Pffffffft. Bruce, I'm sorry, but with all due respect to Hell Month, Pffffffft! We both know you've got a bigger heart than any of them. If they actually *do not know that* just because you grunt and scowl, then they are quite simply *too stupid to live.*"

"Doesn't it bother you to say something like at the very moment four of them are carrying Sue's coffin into the cathedral?" Bruce asked in Batman's deadliest gravel.

"Not as much as it bothers me to hear you say you're the cold-hearted bastard and they'll assume you don't care at the very moment you're watching that funeral out of the corner of your eye while you pretend to fight with me."

Bruce stared for a split second, grunted, and then turned to face the screen. He touched a button on the console and the image expanded to the full width of the viewscreen. They watched for a few moments.

"Did you know them well?" Selina asked quietly.

"Not really. Ralph fancied himself a detective; he likes to think he's emulated my techniques. But we've never worked together much. He's a showboater, that's why he went public. He likes the *attention*. Eel is the better operative all around: longer stretching, stronger... unattached."

"I've never heard you take something like that into consideration," Selina noted, a strange intensity creeping into her voice.

Bruce turned away from the screen and looked at her in silence for a moment.

"When have we ever talked about this at all? Single is better. A crimefighter with a wife and family..."

"Is less expendable?"

"Of course not. It's just that, strategically speaking—look at Clark. His love for Lois is a greater vulnerability than Kryptonite."

"But he's your first pick to partner with, Bruce. Always. So much for that theory, huh? In the whole League who are you tighter with or work with more, hm?"

"Yes," Bruce admitted. "I work more with Superman—because of the man, not a flaw in the strategic principle. I trust him. I trust his judgment and his ethics and his decency. That outweighs any sweeping general guidelines about the qualities that make a good partner."

"And the fact that he can benchpress a planet doesn't hurt either," Selina remarked dryly.

Bruce grunted. Superpowers were a double-edged sword. Useful in a fight, but a terrible weapon sitting right in the heart of your operation that could always be turned against you... They could *be* turned, or they could simply *turn*. The old proverb was passed on generation after generation for a reason: Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. What kind of fool would a man be to work with those demigods day after day, year after year, and not consider the ramifications of that one fundamental truth:

Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Superpowers corrupt... superbly.

Bruce only grunted. He didn't want to get into this. It was unusual for Selina to take an interest in the League or his work with them.

Of course, it was an unusual day. He turned back to the viewscreen and watched the rest of the funeral coverage in silence.

At the Iceberg Lounge, Hugo Strange retreated to a corner booth, muttering how the others had got it all wrong. No one knew Batman like *he* knew Batman. Debating whether the Bat would devote himself only to this one case or wreak his usual Hell Month vengeance on Gotham. The fools! He would do both, of course. He would clone himself so he could do both.

The only real question was if the clone would take the same Hell Month next year or if the clone-Bat's Hell Month would manifest in July...

After the unexpectedly discomfiting interruption of the funeral, Bruce returned his full attention to the investigation.

He had long ago disciplined his mind to block echoes like that—however grisly the discovery of a body, however poignant the interview with a grieving family member, he would set it aside and focus on the work.

Funerals were... unavoidable... every murder was a death, every murder meant a coffin. It was unavoidable. The world didn't care if it was January, his personal Hell Month, and that it took much less than the sight of a coffin or a few bars of Mozart's Requiem to throw his mind back to that other funeral.

He had to concentrate. Sue deserved that much and so did Ralph. He returned his attention to the fingerprints...

It was very different from Stephanie's memorial, of course. Stephanie's was private. Because her identity as Spoiler wasn't known, the heroes were able to come together in privacy and dignity to mourn their loss... honor her contribution... support Tim. None of that was possible here because Dibny was such a fool. It might be brutal to think that of a man who'd just lost his wife, but Bruce didn't mind being brutal, especially during Hell Month. It was foolish, letting his name and face be known, putting those he loved in peril. For what—for the attention—because some hack at the Gotham Post made up some lies about her. It was so dangerous—she could make all the rules she wanted, they all knew, all his enemies knew whether they'd say so in front of her or not, that something existed between Batman and Catwoman. Getting to her was a way to get to him. Hurting her was a way to...

Hell Month. It was just Hell Month.

Of course it was Hell Month when Ra's took her—when Ra's al Ghul took her from him as a way to—he was afraid she was dead that whole flight to Mongolia. Ra's took Selina as a way *to get to him* and they were just *dating*. Now they were living together. It wasn't just a bottle of shampoo in his shower anymore, she slept every night with her head on his chest—she picked out the *sheets* they lay in.

Bruce wondered suddenly if he had paid for those sheets or if she had. His mind flashed on the penthouse, the fop act, trying to bait Poison Ivy... "Tim was under age,

so he imposed on one of the other groomsmen to buy the liquor. They went a little overboard. Always happens the first time I give someone my credit card.” ...Reminding Poison Ivy that she had a rich man in her snare (or so she thought) was one thing. Selina was a very different proposition. She might playfully sneak his wallet to pay for lunch at d’Annunzio’s when he and Clark had to leave on an emergency, but apart from that shopping spree to Paris, she had never to his knowledge spent his money. Now that the manor was really her home... his house was her home... and she was starting to buy little things for it... Bruce felt himself burning with curiosity to know if she charged those sheets to him or paid for them herself. He could access the credit card statements easily at the computer and—

And a wave of nausea rose as he looked to the workstation, thinking only of Selina and those stupid sheets, and saw spatter-analyses of the scorch marks surrounding Sue Dibny’s head flashing on the viewscreen.

Weak. He was so weak. He had to stay focused. Sue Dibny was dead. Ralph was in agony because his wife was dead. He had to stay focused. This was bigger than Hell Month and who paid for a pair of goddamn bedsheets.

Except the bedsheets were blue, a deep rich royal blue, because Selina bought them and Selina knew he liked the color. And he wanted to know if she charged them to his account because he wanted to know if she would spend his money as if she were...

The mental image of that coffin returned.
...his wife.

My first Hell Month with Bruce, I didn’t even know what was happening. The second, he sent me shopping in Paris. This year, this one was new, he asked me to come down to the cave. He asked me to help with a case. We’d worked together before, of course, but we’d always backed into it somehow. It had never started like this:

Alfred came up to my suite. He’d brought me tea earlier—there is simply no way to stop Alfred from bringing tea, particularly in times of crisis—and I assumed he was just back to collect the empty cup. But he said Bruce had rung on the intercom and wanted to see me in the cave.

I raised an eyebrow, because that had a certain ring of “Here, Fido. C’mere, boy” which cats simply do not do. But I went anyway. Hell Month, I guess. Or maybe I just felt, what with the funeral and all... anyway, I went down to the cave. He was in costume this time, except for the mask.

“Little early to be suited up, isn’t it?” I remarked.

“I’m going to patrol early tonight, just in case they’re emboldened after the coverage of the funeral.”

“Hey, no need to make excuses to me,” I told him, “I like you like that.”

“I know.”

When he didn’t say anything more, I reminded him “You summoned me—like a spaniel.”

“I *asked* you to come down. I need you on this, the Dibny case.”

“Meow,” I answered. Because there are one or *two highly special circumstances* when it is permissible to take a cat’s cooperation for granted, and this was one, and I was pleased that he knew that.

“This is the security system made available to the family and friends of Justice Leaguers who request it.”

“Different from our system here,” I noted.

“Very. You’ll find all the same modifications I made to the Phoenix on the ground floor, and the bodyheat detectors are similar to our alpha perimeter defenses on the grounds. That’s where the similarities end.”

“Because you don’t want any family and friend of the League who request it to have the blueprints to get into your bedroom.”

“This has Thanagarian, Martian, Apokolitian and Kryptonian technology as well, and—”

“Hey, I’m not complaining. It’s also *my* bedroom and I don’t want any of those over-sugared virtue-jockeys having the key *either*.”

“Selina, this system is unlike anything you’ve seen before.”

It sounded like fun, running barefoot through the Justice League’s idea of ultimate security.

“Somebody beat it,” he growled—it was a Batman growl, but a particularly menacing one. “Figure out how.”

CHAPTER 2: CUI BONO

Batman returned early from patrol. He'd gone out early, in case the scum were emboldened by the media circus of Sue Dibny's funeral. They weren't. Gotham was Hell Month quiet. Most years, an uneventful patrol in January left him irate and frustrated. Tonight, he welcomed it. It meant he could return home sooner to check on Selina...

Except she wasn't where he'd left her working on the Justice League security system... He checked the gymnasium (in case she got stiff sitting at the worktable and decided to take a break)... He checked the chem lab (because she sometimes used the Bunsen burner to make cocoa)... He checked the med facility (because it's certainly possible to get a headache working late into the night that way and she could have gone looking for an aspirin)... He checked the costume vault and the Batwing hanger, even though he couldn't imagine any possible reason for her to be there (because feline logic is an enigma)...

Then he punched the intercom.

"Alfred," he barked, not waiting for any acknowledgement, "Where the hell has Selina gone to? I left her working on the—"

...:Good evening, Master Bruce,;... a sleepy but smooth voice cut in calmly, ...:Do you require assistance?;...

"I'd hardly have buzzed you if I didn't, Alfred," was the curt but typical-for-Hell-Month reply.

...:Very good, sir, I shall be down presently. ;...

"NO—Alfred, damnit," Bruce muttered, equally frustrated by the miscommunication and by his momentary loss of control. "I don't need medical attention, I just want to know where Selina is. She's not in the cave."

There was a pause.

...:At this time of night, sir, surely bed would be the most likely—;...

"I left her working on the Justice League security system *in the cave.*"

There was another pause.

...:I fear, sir, that I can offer you no additional information. I will certainly check your bedroom if you wish. ;...

Alfred being Alfred, there was nothing about his words or tone to hint that he was himself already in bed, had been asleep, and viewed this whole proposal as a massive inconvenience. But to Bruce, who knew Alfred so well, those final three words "if you wish" spoke volumes.

"That's alright, Alfred," Bruce said mildly, "I'm going up myself. I'm... sorry to have disturbed you, old friend."

...:Not at all, Master Bruce. Good night, sir. ;...

Guilt, one of several emotions that came so readily to Bruce in January, spiked. He removed the cowl and pinched the skin between his eyes. With all Alfred did for him, day after day, year after year—weathering more Hell Months than any of them—you'd think he could be a little more considerate. Those thoughts of his own selfishness and

ingratitude followed him as he changed clothes and walked through the manor. The clothes he wore that day as Bruce Wayne were gone, spirited away to be laundered, the silk kimono left in their place. Tonight, the kimono didn't remind him of Selina, though it had been her gift. Tonight, Bruce thought only of how he wore it up to bed each night, and the next evening it would be back in its place in the costume vault, waiting for him. Alfred did so much for him, and what did he ever get in return...

The guilt washed away and anger spiked anew when Bruce reached the bedroom. Selina was asleep, Whiskers and Nutmeg curled at her back—taking up more than a little (or at least a *little*) of his space on the bed.

"Out, both of you. Furballs, out," he growled softly, swatting at the space he wished to occupy.

Selina, recognizing his voice, murmured something completely unintelligible that, to Bruce's ears, sounded like "Jackass." He removed the kimono, crawled into the bed, and stared at her for several minutes.

"Kitten," he said finally, giving her hip a less-than-gentle nudge.

There was another quiet mumble that didn't sound at all like "Jackass," no matter how much Bruce's irritation tried to hear it that way.

"Kitten," he repeated, reiterating the nudge as well.

Nothing.

"Selina." Nudge. Nothing.

"Not this time, Catwoman, put it back," he growled in Batman's deepest gravel.

Selina inhaled slowly and rolled over to face him.

"Hey sexy, you're home early," she purred sleepily.

Bruce rolled his eyes to the heavens that had blessed and cursed the world with cats.

"Why aren't you in the cave?" he asked flatly.

Selina's brow furrowed as if she knew she wasn't quite awake, but it still seemed (in her admittedly wonky state) that his question made no sense.

"Same reason you're not," she hazarded with the endearing air of a confused cat, "cause it's something-o'clock in the morning and the pillows are all up here."

Then she ran her fingers through her hair, rolled over mumbling something like "Night, Knight," and then said no more.

Bruce brooded for an hour before falling asleep himself.

Hugo Strange looked out his window for the 9th (or maybe it was the 10th) time since returning from the Iceberg Lounge. Then he went back to his desk and resumed sorting all his clippings.

There was no mention of Batman or Bat-anything in the Times, Gazette, Daily Mail, or Post coverage of Sue Dibny's funeral, so he set all those articles aside in the "Miscellaneous" stack...

He checked the window one more time. There was no sign of the sleek, black car he thought he'd glimpsed on his way home from the 'Berg.

He returned to his stack of papers—the clipping from the Post was sliding off, so he rummaged in the bottom of the pile for a slim book to use as a paperweight. "*How to be a Superhero*" by Doctor Metropolis, the cover read... Hugo laid it on the top to keep the lighter articles in place, now at least it was good for something. He had found the

paperback in the coffee shop at Barnes and Noble and picked it up by mistake, thinking it would treat its weighty subject with the seriousness it deserved.

He checked the window again. And there it was! The black car—long, sleek, quiet—he could see now that it was a limousine. Another limo, of course, pulling up at that new Japanese place across the street.

Just his luck, a hot new restaurant opening across from him right in the middle of Hell Month. Nothing but long black cars dropping off and picking up at all hours of the night. He was going to have to move if this kept up.

In the morning, Bruce awoke in an empty bed.

Well, at least she was up early. Now at last he would get some answers... Then he heard the music—Vivaldi, the Four Seasons—coming from her suite. She was exercising?

Bruce stormed across the hall, fitfully tying the belt of his bathrobe into a knot as he entered Selina's suite.

"What do you think you're doing," he growled in the same tones he once would have accosted her at a crimescene.

She finished executing a long, slow twist, evidently meant to stretch the muscles in her back one at a time. Then she inhaled deliberately and breathed out her next words before starting another purposeful, twisting stretch.

"Morning, Handsome."

"I *said* what do you think you're doing up here?" Bruce repeated, still very much in Batman-challenging-the-criminal mode—a tone Selina didn't notice or else chose to ignore. "You're supposed to be working on the Justice League's security system for the Dibny case," he pronounced, although it wasn't supposed to be necessary to tell the criminal what they were doing wrong.

"Yep, going pretty well," she breathed when the twist completed itself.

"I thought you understood this was important," Bruce growled quietly.

Selina stopped mid-bend and gave him a look.

"Ex-cuse me? Are you not getting enough fiber or something? What makes you think—"

"You're *supposed* to be working on the security system."

"I *AM* working on the security system."

"You're not in the cave."

There was a pause, and then...

"I salute you, World's Greatest Detective."

"Impossible—the system is set up *in the cave*," Bruce insisted.

"Yeah," Selina said slowly, "I took it apart last night. Bruce, did you think I would be in the cave the entire time I'm working on this?"

He said nothing, and Selina realized that was exactly what he'd thought—and she didn't like the implication... She took a deep breath. The breath might have looked like just another yoga-inhale to the casual observer, but Bruce recognized it from a thousand rooftops and vaults. It said "Oh good god, now what perfectly simple thing do I have to stop and explain to the hero-addled intellect?"

“Okay,” she said carefully, “Let me explain. Beating a system like this isn’t trial and error or I’d likely wind up squashed flat on the cave floor by 10 G’s of Thanagarian gravity. A job like this is *thinking* more than anything else, once I know how the buggger works. That’s where we are now: I’m thinking. I do it in the shower, and while I’m doing my nails, and while I’m working out, and on the roof of Cartier’s.”

“You’re *NOT* going to go out prowling!” Bruce cut in angrily.

Selina’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s what this is really about, isn’t it. The cage! You thought I’d be in the cave. You *concocted* this thing with the security to keep me in the cave?!?”

“No,” Bruce lied—then thought the better of it. “Not completely. I *do* need to find out how that system was defeated.” He swallowed hard before admitting the rest. “*And* I would also feel better if you were safe in the cave for the duration.”

“You controlling sonofa—” Selina muttered darkly to herself before exploding, “Bruce, for pity sake, I thought we settled this a long time ago. I will *NOT* bring Shimbala down from the Catitat to be my 900-pound bodyguard, I will not stay in the Batcave 24/7 like one of your goddamn trophies, and I will not—”

“Not all the time, Selina, just—for now—when I’m not at home, I’d prefer it if—”

“If I was tucked away under lock and key like something that belongs to you.”

“If I could *know* that you’re *safe*,” he pronounced with a quiet intensity.

Selina sighed.

“Bruce. I love you, and I’m sorry that every January you relive that alley, and I’m sorry that Sue Dibny is dead. But I will not step into a cage. I will not compromise who and what I am to make you or anybody else more comfortable.”

“Why not?” Bruce said wearily. “What would it hurt? For me, Selina, couldn’t you compromise it just a little?”

“Would you?” she shot back. “If I didn’t want you going after Joker next time, and I said ‘Please for me.’”

“That’s different. Joker is a killer.”

He said no more because he saw Selina had mouthed his exact words along with him. Then she added at a normal volume:

“It’s only different if you want it to be, Bruce. You have your priorities and I have mine.”

“Yours are wrong.”

“Pulling out the greatest hits now, are we? Has it actually escaped your attention that that little ditty has never once worked?”

Bruce grunted, turned, and left.

“And neither has that one,” Selina muttered to her exercise mat.

Titans, Titans of the Nightwing era, Outsiders, Catwoman... Ra’s al Ghul... Huntress... For the life of him, Hugo could not understand how his files had come to be so disorganized. Perhaps it was Batman’s doing? Could Batman have recognized the threat presented by Hugo’s special understanding? Might he have located Hugo’s new hideout, caused that new restaurant to open as a diversion, and snuck in amidst the parade of long, sleek black cars? Why it made sense! If Batman had infiltrated

Hugo's lair and messed up his clippings, that meant he was getting close. Finally, at last, Hugo Strange was getting close.

The clone theory, that must be it. The Batman clone was the key to it all!

"An Identity Element is something that acts on a set of numbers but leaves them unchanged..."

This was Tim, reading out loud from a math textbook.

"Like for addition, $a + 0$ is still a ..."

Studying for the SATs, or so he claimed.

"Multiplication, it'd be 1: $a \times 1$ is a ..."

And if you believe that, I'll tell you another one.

"It's also called a unity."

"Timothy," I said sharply, "How is it that you can maintain a secret identity when you're such a rotten liar?"

He looked all innocent and pointed to his textbook.

"No, really, that's what an identity element is. Acts on something without changing its essence and—"

"Not that," I cut him off with a hiss. "You're not over here studying for the SATs, Tim. You're cat-sitting."

"Selina, honest," he bumbled miserably.

"And the nominees for worst Hell Month performance by a crimefighter in a supporting role," I pronounced. "Tim, I *know* he sent you over here to keep an eye on me. I know he wants me to stay in the cave whenever he's not at home, and since he can't have that he's sent you in to either a) keep me from going out, b) play bodyguard even though you're 750 pounds shy of his first choice, or c—"

"It's not any of those, Selina, it's... dumb, maybe, but... yeah, Bruce did say how he'd feel better if you weren't alone in the house."

"Alone? What's Alfred now, a shadow?"

"C'mon, you know what I mean," Tim sighed, "one of *us*, somebody a little more battle-ready."

"Tim, don't make me punch you flat on your ass just to prove a point here."

"Selina, please, that's what *he* wants, it's not why I went along with it."

I could have kicked myself as the reason Tim went along jumped out at me right before he said it out loud.

"I'm kinda here for Steph," he said simply—and I could have sunk through the floor without any help from the 10Gs of Thanagarian gravity. "Y'know, Bruce was—both of you, really—were so good to me when it all happened and—"

"It's okay, Tim."

"And I was such a—"

"It's okay. Tim, really, stop. I suck at this stuff more than you will ever know. Let's just drop it and go down to the cave for a bit, you and me together, and I'll show you how to outsmart a Martian heat trigger. You might need it for the SATs."

I'd said it mostly because we were on a runaway train speeding towards a Lifetime Movie Channel hugfest. But the way it turned out, spending the afternoon talking

through the details of the Justice League security system was extremely helpful. There had been something bothering me about it since Bruce first brought me in on this. Even as I was reading the specs and taking the thing apart, even as I was trying to ferret out some way to beat it, something nagged and I couldn't put my finger on it. Now, suddenly, the solution twinkled before me.

"Tim, it's been real," I blurted, waving him towards the costume vault. "Now go bother other criminals. Kitty is busy."

"It's January, Selina, there are no other criminals."

"SATs then," I reminded him, "Analogies, very important."

Yes, I wanted to be rid of him at that point. It's always like this: once I have a theory about the flaw in a system, I can't wait to test it. Usually I have to wait until dark. Right now, I only had to shoo away one pesky crimefighter who wasn't going to get his verbals up to Hudson U's standard with construction like:

"Selina, um,"

"Analogies, Tim, go and study. Crimefighter is to pest as Batarang is to...?"

"Why me?"

"ERRKH! Wrong. State college for you, young man."

"You're down here, good," a new voice, the deep graveling voice of the Hell Month control freak, cut in before Tim could reply.

"Look who's home," I noted. "Yes, Bruce, you've got your way for now. I am a cave bunny. But only because I'm onto something with this security system, so shove off and give me room to—"

"Selina, Tim," he began—and my stomach lurched. I knew suddenly that I'd misread him. It wasn't the usual Hell Month do-it-my-way voice at all.

"It's happened again," Bruce was saying. "Jean Loring was attacked in her home. Hanged."

"Oh god."

I *thought* the words "Oh god" but I hadn't said them out loud, and yet I heard them in my ears, "Oh god." Eventually, about six interminable seconds later, I realized it had been Tim who spoke, and I felt stupid.

"No, she's alive," Bruce went on, answering a question I hadn't heard in my fog, "Atom got to her just in time. They were talking, Ray and Jean, they were talking on the phone at the moment she was attacked."

Another wife—technically an ex-wife in this case, but there aren't that many heroes whose identities are known, so I guessed our serial killer would take what they could get—another wife, another loved one, attacked...

Bruce paused in his story, turned to me and added, "Ray can travel across phonelines when he goes molecular," and then he turned back to Tim and said, "He was able to shred the rope, cut her down before..."

"I see," Tim murmured.

Two words and it was like the life had been sucked out him. Atom had *saved* his ex. He had these superpowers. He "went molecular" and rode a phoneline, and the woman he loved was still alive.

But Stephanie was dead.

My heart went out to the kid so much it hurt. I knew I should have allowed that Lifetime hugfest earlier, but that ship had sailed... I wanted to do something, though. I had one other idea, one that might be more productive.

"Tim," I asked casually, "This may sound odd, but would you go upstairs and ask Alfred to make me some tea?"

I saw Bruce's eyes flicker to the intercom like he was telegraphing a batarang throw, and I shot back my best rooftop "try it and taste whip" glare.

Tim said "sure" and left; Bruce looked at me.

"You could have buzzed Alfred," he noted, with yet more disapproving battitude.

"Of course I could've," I said simply. "I wanted to talk to you alone. I have a proposition."

He looked like he was bracing himself for Joker to toss a SmileX grenade in his face.

"I'll stay in the cave," I offered, "until you solve this case or the end of the month, whichever comes first. In return, I want you to toss this solo-patrol thing you've been doing and patrol with Tim instead."

He started to object, which I expected, and I ran right over him before he could cut me off.

"I know. NOBODY but NOBODY tells BATMAN what to do, ever, on a Bat-related issue, any Bat-related issue, especially one as sacred as Hell Month Patrol, genuflect when you say that, Lady. But Bruce, he needs this. Christ, even you need this. You've both got... *issues* that this whole Dibny-Loring thing is making so much worse. Bruce, please, I'm begging you. Put the Psychobat in a drawer this year and be Tim's partner for a while."

He stared at me as if, instead of tossing that SmileX grenade, Joker had walked right up to him and pinned a VOTE LUTHOR: 4 MORE YEARS button on his cape—he was just as revolted, but it wasn't the assault he was expecting.

"Okay," I said when it became obvious the deathglare was the only answer I was going to get, "If you won't do it out of compassion or common sense, there is this: You want me in the cave for the duration, and this is a way to get it. This is my price."

Another deathglare and more silence, but then, without a word, he stuck his hand out.

We shook on it, and, a few minutes later, Alfred brought me tea.

Hugo Strange dismissed the idea of subjecting Batman to low levels of radiation to isolate areas of genetic degradation to identify the clone. Irradiating Batman at this juncture would tip his hand too soon. His personal history with Batman had shown that it was best to have more information before attempting a direct confrontation. But he could attempt a few tests if he could get a small sample of "Batman's" DNA. He immediately began scrambling through his old notes... he knew there had to be something here that would allow him to get close enough to get a sample without being detected...

A half hour after he brought Selina's tea to the Batcave, Alfred returned to collect her empty cup. He found the episode vaguely disquieting, although he couldn't say why.

Selina had never asked for anything to be brought to her in the cave before, perhaps that was it? Or perhaps it was a subconscious echo: he had brought Selina to the kitchen and made her tea the day the terrible news came about Miss Stephanie. He had promised her that tea would hold comforting associations for her—and now that the wives and loved ones of heroes were being murdered, she asked for tea. Perhaps... Perhaps and perhaps. Whatever it was that unnerved him, Alfred would set it aside and offer whatever assistance he could.

Several hours later, he returned to the cave with another steaming cup of tea. This time it was for Master Bruce, back early again from patrol to work on the Dibny and Loring cases. Alfred noted that he still wore his full costume—even the mask, which was somewhat unusual for late night work in the cave, but not unprecedented in Hell Month.

Unlike Miss Selina, Batman did not look up from his work or acknowledge Alfred's arrival in any way, so Alfred coughed softly before relaying his message from Mr. Kent:

"He said they were turning their attention to members of the Suicide Squad."

"It's not the Squad, Alfred," Batman answered. "The squad doesn't benefit, there's no gain."

"Indeed, sir," Alfred agreed readily. "*Cui Bono*, then?"

Batman froze, his gloved hand poised over a collection of mugshots. He turned away from the photos of criminals and analyzed instead the face of a friend. Alfred had said it in Latin "*Cui Bono*" just as Bruce himself thought the words in English "Who benefits?"

"It's the first rule of solving a crime," Bruce recited, removing the cowl and then the gloves before he sipped the tea. "If you want to know who did it, you need to find out who benefits."

"Indeed, sir," Alfred said, remembering the same conversation, so many years before, when Bruce was perhaps twelve years old, enthusing over his first book on criminology. "Asking 'From whom is it good,' a question first posed by a Roman magistrate in the earliest days of the Republic, to determine who stood to gain from a crime."

Bruce set down his cup and sighed.

"A Roman magistrate in the earliest days of the Republic thought to ask *Cui Bono*. But Superman and company are chasing around the Suicide Squad. Some days, Alfred... we're nowhere."

Alfred said nothing. Bruce said nothing. Then there was a flutter of bats as Selina emerged from the med-facility. She was wearing his kimono and holding a pillow under her arm.

"Good, you're home," she observed dully. "I'm going up to real bed then." She performed a strange little neck roll/shoulder shake that caused the whole top of the kimono to jiggle. "Hurry up and solve this thing, will ya, that cot sucks."

Then she padded off to the clock passage, leaving Alfred to look at Bruce and Bruce to look at Alfred.

"Very good, sir. I shall leave you to your investigations," Alfred pronounced at last. Bruce grunted.

CHAPTER 3: OVERKILL

I woke up stiff and it was all Bruce's fault. My body hadn't felt this way since I'd spent six damn hours in a cramped ventilation duct at the Riverside Museum, which was—surprise!—also all Bruce's fault.

That was the thought grinding away at my too-tight calf muscles while I stood there watching him sleep. He was asleep. I was so stiff and achy after just a few hours on that awful cot in that damp cave that even a hot shower didn't do any good, and he was laying there in his soft comfortable bed, with a real mattress and down pillows, wrapped in 1200 threadcount cotton sateen. It didn't seem at all fair, and I thought about pouncing on him and adding a fresh set of cat-scratches to that muscular chest before he even knew what was happening—until I saw that fist clench.

The Hell Month nightmares. He spends the better part of January clenching and unclenching that fist.

So instead of pouncing, I crawled back into the bed beside him and snuggled a bit. I massaged his hand and whispered soothing nothings in his ear, sobbed a little, and wondered how this ever happened... I kissed a man in a mask because he turned me on, and I flirted with him night after night because he thrilled me—the way he'd react and yet not react, how I would get to him, I could *feel* it, but he'd never let on—it was so hot... How from where we started did we ever wind up here? Sobbing on his shoulder because it's Hell Month and tension takes its toll, because I've got this crick in my neck from that damn cot in the cave—and because he's hurting in there and there isn't a damn thing I can do to make it better. He hurts and I feel it just as strong and sharp as I used to feel his wanting on those rooftops, and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it.

All I did was kiss a man in a mask.

“off him now”

He was muttering in his sleep in that deep Bat-gravel. It sounded like the nightmare was getting violent, so I figured I better wake him. It took him a second, once his eyes were open, it was like he didn't recognize me at first.

“The logs are wrong,” he said.

“Good morning,” I answered with a tender smile.

He smiled back, got up to splash his face with water, and returned to the bedroom a second later looking his usual self—for January, at least. I asked about his patrol and he grunted, he asked about my progress on the security system and I purred.

“All finished,” I announced happily.

“You know how the killer defeated the system?” he said, pausing midway through picking out a shirt.

“I know the killer *didn't* beat the system. Nobody has beaten that system.”

He spun around angrily and flung a folded sweater onto the bed like a batarang.

“Kitten, *that* wasn't the assignment. Just because you couldn't figure out a way to get around it doesn't mean—”

“I *found* a way to get around it, Stud. I found *SIX* ways to get around it—and that's only because I didn't bother looking for a *seventh*.”

The look on his face was... priceless.

"You want more," I told him sweetly, "I can probably come up with another twenty by dinner time. All through the same flaw—that's how I know nobody has gotten past this system. There are a dozen ways—hell, there are a hundred—all stemming from this one defect. If nobody has gotten past this thing through that chink, then nobody has gotten past it at all."

"What is it?" he asked with an especially low growl.

"Not to worry, Bruce," I assured him with a laugh, "It's not in your stuff. Your touches are inspired. I particularly like that little box on the power cable that lines up the electrons in the current so you can tell if the electricity has been interrupted or altered in any way." I didn't add that I was so tickled when I found that and figured out what it did, I would have jumped him right then and there if he'd been around. In fact, just thinking about it now... Me-ow.

"Selina. *What* is the flaw?"

"Overkill," I told him simply. "You said it yourself, first day, that thing has got Thanagarian, Martian, Apokoliptian and Kryptonian technology—in one box. You've got what I assume is a Kryptonian motherboard acting as a hub—it and your stuff are the only parts operating in binary. The Martians have got—what is it, Base 16 or something filtered through that glob of green jello—"

"It functions just like a panja router," Bruce interrupted.

"Fine, but it's also a big green glob of goo, and every time Krypton interfaces with it, it slows the system down—not all that much on its own, but then you've got Apokolips up in the corner. That seems to have tossed out numbers altogether and is communicating in pulses somehow, which is clever and confusing as hell, but it slows the Krypto-translator down even more. Have both systems hit it at once, you can sneak in any override you want in that lag. It's like you and Eddie playing chess through Killer Croc. I could have the whole portrait gallery cleaned out by the time you move a pawn."

I was expecting a grunt. It didn't seem too much to hope for. I had trounced the Justice League's idea of perfect security. And I didn't want storm opals or cat pins for my trouble, or even an awed "Wow, Kitten, you're amazing!" I just wanted one, simple, sexy bat-grunt.

"So we're back to the superpowers," Bruce graveled, sitting on the edge of the bed. "If nobody got past the security, then we're back to those who can teleport and rearrange matter, magically or otherwise."

"I guess," I sighed, reminded that a grim reality lurked behind my bit of fun with the security console. There was still a killer on the loose, and we were no closer to knowing who it was.

Hugo Strange stared at the writing in his old notebooks. He had *LOST HIS MIND!*

WHITE MARTIANS!?! He had 34 pages of notes outlining a cover up by the Gotham Post to whitewash Bruce Wayne's losing control of one of his clones. The renegade Bat-double was found in Monte Carlo playing Baccarat, so Wayne dispatched a squad of JLA supergoons to bring him back?!? And the Gotham Post covered it up

with a preposterous story about SHAPE-SHIFTING WHITE MARTIANS brainwashed to think they were human?!?!?

This was INSANE! Somewhere along the line, he, Hugo Strange, had COMPLETELY lost touch with reality!

There were fevered rantings about WayneTech ties to the Vatican and the Kremlin... A picture of Bruce Wayne meeting with Desmond TuTu at a Foundation gala...

How could this have happened? He was Hugo Strange, the only criminal mastermind of sufficient genius to learn the Batman's secret identity! How could he be reduced to sticking color-coded thumbtacks into a map to chart UFO and Batman sightings!

Compared to crime, crimefighting sucks. Bruce was out, so I was stuck in the cave again. Having polished off the part of the case I was good at—the security system—I was now stuck going through the case files of villains that didn't eliminate, the ones Bruce had called "teleporters."

The case files read like a Microsoft manual: Mirror Master technology and something to do with reflective surfaces, *Phasers* that ride radio waves, Mother Boxes...

All I did was kiss a guy in a mask one night on Cartier's rooftop. Phasers and Mother Boxes, this wasn't my thing. It might be Oracle's thing, but she was occupied with some JSA character called Dr. Mid-Nite doing the autopsy.

I would have done just about anything to go out and prowl. Bruce had asked Jason Blood to check the crime scenes for traces of magic use. I thought about tagging along. Even Bruce couldn't complain if I was with Jason: *You thought a tiger would make a good bodyguard, Handsome? Well, check out my very own immortal, supernatural badass.*

I knew I was being childish and petulant. I was bored and weary and alone. And to add insult to injury, Alfred had brought me dinner in the cave: a ham and turkey with dijon and a cup of crab bisque. It was *Batman's dinner* sitting next to me... next to Batman's computer screen scrolling through Batman's case files... in Batman's cave... underneath Batman's bats. The only problem was it wasn't *Batman* sitting there in front of that screen; it was me. It was me scouring the logs to work out if Heat Wave used the same kind of thermal generators as Dr. Light. And I... just don't *do* this shit.

All I did was fall in love with a man in a mask.

I never signed on for any of this.

How could it have happened? He was Hugo Strange; he was a brilliant psychiatrist.

He had become obsessed with a subject of study, with Batman, that was not so very unusual in brilliant minds—particular if they had one parent or caregiver with workaholic tendencies and another with a Jungian fixation on the role of breadwinner as compensating transference for displaced affection.

But somehow that obsession with Batman had *blinded* him to this emergence of paranoid personality disorder and delusional (paranoid) disorder—which, if not for this lucky episode of the White Martian thinking he was Bruce Wayne going to Monte

Carlo to play Baccarat and meet women, might have developed into a full-blown paranoid schizophrenia...

This time, I was still awake when Bruce got back from patrol. Something was definitely under his skin. It was like the old rooftop intensity, pouring off him in waves, but there was something different about it—besides the fact that it was the cave and not a rooftop, and he doesn't do bat-intensity in the cave after patrol, there was still something else... something "off" ...about him.

He didn't even glance in my direction, just sat right down at his workstation and started on the logs.

I didn't know if this was a Hell Month thing (in which case I was going to regret asking about it), or if it might involve Tim (which is why I was going to risk it and ask).

"How are the patrols going with Robin?" (I said Robin instead of Tim, concession to Hell Month).

"Fine."

He typed a bit, then looked at the screen like he was scrutinizing what he just typed. More waves of that weird intensity poured off of him.

"About the teleporters," I mentioned, changing the subject just to see if it would get a reaction. "I did have this idea about magic—"

"What?" he asked dully, like he hadn't even been listening.

"This idea that it has to have been some magic or super-meta-alien teleporter because the security system wasn't tampered with. It occurred to me that we're overlooking something: the simple, obvious, non-super-power way around any lock... is the key."

"What do you mean?"

I could tell I didn't have his full attention. It was like he was listening to me and, at the same time, mapping out a roadtrip to Florida.

"Every lock and every door ultimately has the same 'design flaw': they're meant to be opened. The people that live there have to go home at night. They have friends over. Sue Dibny was getting ready for a party, wasn't she?"

"Ockham's Razor," he said suddenly.

I wasn't sure if it was in response to me or something on the screen—or even something from half an hour ago. Ockham's Razor. It was like he was starting some strange codeword game I'd never been privy to. I thought about tossing out "Picasso's Paintbrush" just to test the theory, when he continued.

"William of Ockham, 14th Century philosopher, logician and Franciscan friar who believed in methodological reductionism. He advocated using the simplest explanation for a phenomenon, 'shaving off' the superfluous and assumptive information and focusing solely on the facts."

His eyes never left the computer screen as he spoke, and I was really starting to think he was talking about something else entirely when he added:

"The lock was not circumvented, therefore the lock was not engaged. You mean Sue and Jean might have let the killer in?"

"I have no idea," I said, "I'm just tossing out a possibility that hasn't been talked about."

"Okay." His whole posture had changed. He was still riveted to that monitor, but his interest in it seemed more... proactive, suddenly. "Strip away the unnecessary," he muttered.

"Bruce, what's going on, you're not even listening to me."

"I'm listening: You have no idea, you're just tossing out a possibility we haven't talked about."

"Woof."

"Woof."

"Now you're just repeating what I said."

He sighed and kept on staring at the computer screen like he was trying to visualize what it would look like painted yellow.

"Something's wrong," he said finally. "Something with the logs, something just doesn't—*fit*."

"You said that this morning," I reminded him. "When you first woke up, you said the logs were wrong. I chalked it up to January nightmares but—"

My tongue stopped, my heart stopped, and my stomach lurched into my throat—I had just alluded to his Hell Month nightmares, a mistake I'd made once before that brought out an ugly, vicious rebuke. But he didn't turn on me this time; he just shook his head slowly.

"No," he said finally, "Not the usual nightmare anyway."

"What then?" I asked, "Do you remember any of it?"

He put his fingertips together, resting the elbows on the desk, and leaned forward, touching the tip of the mask-nose to the very top of the fingers. If you didn't know Bruce and his rabid hatred of magic, you'd think it was some wonderfully mystical ritual involving triangles.

"Bruce," I asked again softly, trying not to break his concentration, "Do you remember any of it?"

"A few days ago, one of the League teams went after Dr. Light," he said slowly. "He'd joined up with Deathstroke and the Leaguers were beaten back pretty thoroughly."

I shrugged. I know zilch about Dr. Light or Deathstroke, but in my opinion, anybody who can deal out a little humility to the Justice League should get a parade.

"And that figured into your dream somehow?" I asked, rather than sharing my *Yay, Deathstroke* thought.

"Somehow," Bruce murmured.

"And *that* somehow connects to the logs being wrong?"

"Yes."

"How?" I asked, beginning to feel like Eddie playing Twenty Questions.

"I don't know," Bruce grunted.

"Think it connects to the murder?"

"I don't know," he repeated.

"Well, I have an idea," I purred. "One of those ideas that never would have occurred to you, pre-cat. You ready? Here it comes... Walk away from it for a while. Leave the log, take off the cape, and come upstairs. Have a warm cuddle, a good

night's sleep, maybe a massage in the morning if you ask me nicely. Come at it fresh tomorrow. Answer will pop right out at you."

For the first time since he got back from patrol, I had his full attention.

The rogues were responsible somehow. Hugo couldn't fathom how; insanity was not contagious. You couldn't just catch it sitting there in the Iceberg, minding your own business, wondering if Roxy Rocket mightn't be the type to enjoy a bondage scenario... where was he? Oh yes, sitting there at the Iceberg, minding his own business. Sure, Nigma spouted anagrams, and Dent referred to himself in the plural, but you couldn't catch that kind of thing!

Perhaps Arkham could be to blame? Might they have unbalanced his brain chemistry at a point where, trapped as he was in an asylum of lunatics, he had somehow cross-transferred his Batman obsession into a Pfith-Meridian fantasoid state where he came to resemble Batman's enemies?

Let it never be said that Catwoman has lost her touch.

He'd never admit it, but Bruce likes it when I tempt him. He grumbled a bit, but he took me up on the cuddle and the good night's sleep, and in the morning, he even remembered the offer of a massage. While I had him all relaxed and softened up, I asked about going with Jason Blood to check the crime scenes.

"Why are you here again?" Jason asked, in that cynically-amused tone of his.

"Officially?" I told him, "I'm observing how you check for supernatural residue to see if anybody could've used magic to fool the foolproof security system. Unofficially, I wanted to get out of the house."

He raised an eyebrow.

"And you got Bruce to go along with this," he noted dryly. "Perhaps I should give Wayne Manor a once-over for signs of magical residue as well."

"Well, he didn't like the idea," I admitted, "but he knew how hard it was for me being cooped up. And... he likes it when I tempt him."

"Do tell," Jason remarked, dry-cynical smile morphing into a roguish one.

"I poured it on pretty thick," I teased. "Like the old days—like it was Cartier's and I really wanted to leave with that diamond."

"Of course," Jason laughed. "He could never really say yes back then, although he doubtless wanted to more than once. Now that you ask something he *can* agree to... You truly are a wicked creature, Selina."

"Pffffffft, for scoring an afternoon out, yeah, chain me to the wall."

He smiled one last time, then became serious as he turned to the window. He seemed to scan the wall up and down, then turned his foot to the left and did it again... step, turn, and scan... step, turn, and scan...

"Would it wreck your concentration to tell me what it is you're doing?" I asked finally.

"Not at all," he murmured. "Have you ever seen the effects of magnets up close, through an electron microscope, perhaps?"

"Sure," I told him. There are several digital safecracking tools that are magnet-based, so I had a working knowledge of what he was getting at.

"The atoms in non-magnetized metal are in asymmetric 'patterns,'" he said with another slow step-turn-scan. "Just random clumps, really. Once a magnet is moved over them, they align in the direction the magnet is drawn, making symmetrical patterns."

"And magic does something similar?"

"For those with the eyes to see, yes. To teleport distorts space-time in a localized area. Some power of a specific type is dragged over the fabric of our space, realigning the natural order of the objects... none of which has happened here," he declared, with a final step-turn that brought him full-circle to the spot where he'd begun.

"You're sure?"

He answered with a chilling glare that would have unnerved anyone not accustomed to the bat-variety.

"Boo," I shot back at him, and he smiled.

"I'm sure," he said. "But there is a kind of double-check I should perform all the same, although in this case it is a formality and a waste of time. This was a murder. There is no white magick at work here."

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow.

"In scanning for magickal disruption," Jason explained, "I turned counter-clockwise around the room: the path opposite that of a sundial, the path that goes against nature. This is the signature of black magic, of curses and evil intent. A white magician—Zatanna, for instance—would leave a signature in the clockwise direction, a positive force that enhances nature rather than opposing it."

"O-kay," I said, feeling I was back in the cave slogging through that criminal database that read like a Microsoft manual.

Jason repeated the step-turn-scan cycle anyway, this time turning clockwise around the room. He was nearing the end, and I was wondering if I should ask him back to the manor for dinner when we were finished here, when my cell phone rang.

...: Selina, secure the line—no, don't even bother. Get home now. ...

"Bruce, what's—"

...: Now. Immediately. ...

No, it couldn't have been Arkham. Looking over his notebooks, it was clear that Hugo's wildest leaps from rationality all occurred when he was free.

He scoured them, though it was painful to read and reread the evidence of a once-great brain coming unhinged. He scoured them for some sign, for some common thread... alas, the only real common thread was Batman himself.

After Bruce's 'get home now' call, we took the JLA transporter (which the Dibnys kept in their *shower*) to the Watchtower, and from there, I would return to the cave. That intermediary step is always necessary because Bruce won't allow the cave to connect to any other locations directly. And because a transport is physically taxing on

a normal human body, I'm always supposed to wait a few minutes in between. That's a few minutes *at the JLA Watchtower*—killing time, making chitchat with Whatever-Man that happens to be on the console that day. Not my idea of fun.

This was the fourth time I'd done the moonbase layover. The first two were going to meet Aquaman at Atlantis and coming back. It was only J'onn in the Watchtower both times, who I know slightly, enough to make small talk anyway. The third time was going to the Dibny's place. Green Arrow and Flash were in the Watchtower, but I had Jason to talk to so I didn't have to deal with them—which was lucky because they seemed pretty tense.

I know certain corners of the League are still iffy about that Gotham catburglar padding around their lunar clubhouse, but as far as I knew these two weren't among them. Flash is one of those who'd be a notch on Prometheus's helmet if it wasn't for me. Plus, he and Dick are tight. Hell, we danced at Dick and Barbara's wedding...

I'd pretended not to know stuff like that at first. In the weeks leading up to the wedding, there were little references, here and there, to who was who and what was what, and I'd made it my business not to notice. But they all take their cue from Bruce: Once he mentioned Clark and Lois in front of me, Dick and Barbara stopped being cautious about secret identities. Wally was Wally, Dinah was Dinah... "Are Roy and Garth both coming to the bachelor party?" "Don't know, Tim, I'll ask Eel to take a headcount when I get the chance." ...Nobody cared anymore what I might hear or what connections I might make... "Put Diana at Table 3. After that picture of her and Superman in the Tattler, I don't want her and Lois in each other's line of sight." ...And then one night, Barbara flat out asked me to help Dinah send shower invitations using the JLA distribution channel. Turned out I was on the reserves list—which was news to me.

It would've happened right after the Prometheus thing, of course. Superman had said something complimentary—I don't recall what exactly, something that amounted to "Thanks, Catwoman. Lucky you snuck in here armed only with your bullwhip and engaging smile, because we seem to have gotten all of our flying, shape-shifting, super-stretching, super-sonic, immortal, invisible, telekinetic wonderfulness all tangled up in our hubris, and we were slightly screwed." Superman being Superman, the rest of them took it as an invitation. And the Justice League of Arrogance being what it is, I was assumed to have said yes.

So I went on the rolls, I had a userID and a password I knew nothing about—and probably still wouldn't if Barbara didn't want to be seen inviting people to her own bridal shower. There's also a file listing my "special abilities"—with a ridiculous number of annotations and footnotes that I will take up with Bruce as soon as I'm able to prove he's responsible.

Anyway, after all this, Jason and I got to the Watchtower on the way to the Dibnys, and Green Arrow and Flash started behaving like Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts in *Conspiracy Theory*—and eyeing me like I'm Patrick Stewart. I could understand everybody being on edge, but I found it hard to be sympathetic. I had my hands full with Bruce, which doesn't leave much patience and understanding for the rest of them. So Jason and I went all Gothamy and started talking about the campaign to save the Plaza and the new restaurants in the Time Warner building. When the ten minutes had passed, we went on our way.

I was expecting more of the same on the trip back, but when we reached the Watchtower that second time, everything had changed. It looked like Spandex Day at O'Hare Terminal 1. Heroes I'd never seen before racing around like mad, everybody had a phone in their ear, line at the transporters like it was Disneyworld... and a sense in the air—coiled, jittery, furious, fright—the Iceberg that night a DEMON assassin attacked Scarecrow—it felt like a mob was forming.

"Jason," I said softly, nodding towards the line at the transporters without overtly pointing. "If we put Bruce's principles aside for a moment, would you be able to get me home quicker than, y'know, *their way*?"

"Fond as I am of you, Selina" he said very quietly, barely moving his lips, "I am always reluctant to use magick at another's behest without fully knowing their reasons. Teleporting is a serious expense of magickal currency. Do you simply want to get home in a hurry or—"

I shook my head, silently and slowly.

"I thought not. You sense it too, then?"

"The villagers gathering with power rings and pitchforks, yeah."

"I agree," he said.

I started to answer, but my mouth wouldn't cooperate. There was a rushing sound, a wave of black, and I was suddenly doubled over with violent nausea.

I breathed.

Bats squeaked.

I was back in the cave. Jason had his arm around my shoulder.

"My apologies," he murmured, "The options for a rapid departure in such circumstances—"

"What the hell are you doing!" Bruce roared.

I was still coughing a bit, and my throat burned. But looking around now, I could see Jason had deposited us in front of the cave transporter, where Bruce had been waiting at the console to "accept delivery" the usual way. There was a red light flashing and the words "Temporal Distortion" flashed on the screen.

"Do you mind, Bruce," Jason managed. "Teleporting is really a very onerous undertaking. I'm a little drained. Could we possibly postpone your thoughts on magick until—"

"Jason, shut up, will you," Bruce spat. "Selina, I said get home, I didn't say ride a broomstick to do it."

"What's happened," I asked—because there was really no point in mentioning his unconscionable rudeness. "Get home now" and then mob-vibe at the Watchtower, now "shut up, Jason"—something big had obviously happened.

"Go upstairs and pack a bag," he said.

"Bruce, what's happened?" I asked again, just as Jason turned as if he heard a strange sound.

Bruce paused, as if he was waiting to see if Jason was going to talk about whatever he'd sensed. When he didn't, Bruce turned back to me and said slowly, "Someone sent Lois Lane a death threat—one that made it painfully clear they knew Clark Kent's secret identity."

CHAPTER 4: FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Hell Month 1, Batman took me to Crime Alley. Hell Month 2, I went with Bruce to the gravesite. Hell Month 3... I was at the Fortress of Solitude.

This was a great honor. I'm told that only nineteen people have been there in person, and I tried to feel honored. What I really felt was cold. It had nothing to do with being on some ledge in the Andean ice fields either; the environmental controls, like everything else in that place, like everything connected to Superman, was perfect. I didn't want perfect. I didn't want super. I wanted to be with Bruce.

I should never have agreed to go in the first place. But sometimes... There's a terrified little boy still inside Bruce, and when I glimpse him, it's hard to hiss and scratch.

Lois Lane had received a death threat. "I KNOW WHO YOUR HUSBAND IS. YOU'RE NEXT." The S in husband was the Superman emblem.

They all came completely unhinged, the heroes. Secret identities were no protection now. Anybody's family was at risk.

Bruce wanted me at the Fortress "to keep Lois company." He said it wasn't exactly "homey" up there (Understatement of the year, Stud), and she'd be all alone. It was so nice of Clark to suggest it (Yeah, Bruce, like I really believe *Clark* is the one who came up with this idea), and such an honor to be asked (*Asked*, right, same way I was *asked* to join the Justice League reserves: because I couldn't just stand there watching Prometheus beat Batman to a pulp and, when it was over Superman, had the courtesy to say thank you).

I started to remind him that I wasn't any Jean Loring or Lois Lane. I am not a civilian, I don't need rescuing or protecting, and if he ever forgets that Catwoman can protect herself just finethankyouverymuch, he need look no further than those scratches on his chest—or better still, he need look no farther than that scar Prometheus left on his thigh right before *I* kicked his ass...

I didn't get that far, though. Bruce wasn't even trying to interrupt and I sort of wound down after "look no further"... He didn't argue, he just took my hand without a word and led me over to his workstation.

On the screen, the window heading read **Sun Tzu's Art of War**, and underneath the box said:

"Seize what he loves, and he will heed you!" Do not confront the enemy in their strength, but seize something they hold dear. Their force is useless here; they must stop to listen. Anything you cherish makes you vulnerable. Prepare yourself to relinquish it.

"You don't fight fair," I told him.

"It's about the dog, isn't it?" Lois asked.

"Hm?" I started, pulled from the memory, and looked up at Lois.

"The dog. They didn't tell you Krypto was kept here? That's why you look like the Sir Walter Raleigh imprisoned in the Tower of London for 13 years?"

Lois was reading EUROPE FOR VISITORS, and her conversation had been peppered with remarks like that. It's how I found her when I got to the Fortress, her feet propped up on a blue crystal and chrome something, with a stack of travel books beside her and six bottles of nail polish on the table.

"Not the first one of these, dear," she had smiled. Then she offered me VILLAS OF POSITANO and CRUISING ALASKA.

"Hi Lois," was as far as I'd gotten before "Krypto" made his appearance. I've often said of cats that they already know everyone they want to know. Dogs are quite ridiculously eager to meet new people, and this one evidently missed the memo on feline/canine relations. He jumps, he licks, he pants, he slobbers—and what's worse, he flies! In a little under two days, I'd worked out six different ways to beat the best security system in the universe, but I couldn't keep this goddamn dog from hovering around my face and pawing at my hair.

"There aren't enough diamonds in Cartier's to make up for this," I growled—which Flyboy evidently overheard *six rooms away on the other side of the damned fortress*, because he then makes a point of showing me this "Eye of Krypton" he's got among his trophies. It's an egg-shaped jewel the size of a shoebox. He said it wasn't Cartier's, but he hoped that knowing about it would "keep me busy" while I was there.

Condescending super-schmuck.

What a fool Hugo had been! The answer was not in the notes written when his mind was fevered, the answer would lie in those documents of the time before he had become deranged!

He had to go into the sideboard cabinet to find them, the old papers he hadn't touched since the last move, or was it the one before? He sneezed a great deal, taking out the stack of papers. There was a history of Gotham City and some maps... lots of notes on the Wayne Building... a book on sushi... a comic book about a swordfighter—Hugo vaguely remembered that he had a theory about this time... Yes, about Batman studying martial arts in Japan and choosing costume elements from comic books... There were many files he'd assembled on fellow Arkham inmates as well... He remembered those too, for if he were destined to one day transcend to become Batman himself... No, that wasn't quite right. Not transcend, impersonate! He had an idea that if he learned enough about Batman, he could take the vigilante's place in order to... to... oh, so many years had passed, so many schemes, it was so difficult to recall the details of a single one... but he wanted to take Batman's place—to ruin his good name! That was it, of course—he would impersonate Batman in order to ruin him, and to that end, he would obviously want to learn all he could about Batman's enemies...

He sneezed again, put back the useless files, and searched deeper...

Lois Lane is a remarkable woman; I'll give her that.

For all the so-called heroes hitting the panic button, she was the one who *had actually received the death threat*, and she was perfectly calm, cool and collected.

"I've been through it before, dozens of times," she said. "I've been targeted to get to Superman, I've been targeted because I'm a reporter, I've been targeted because I'm a

woman, I've been targeted because I'm an American—it goes with being Lois Lane. If I hid under the bed every time a Luthor or Brainiac said 'Boo,' I'd never get out of the house."

We were in what I guess I have to call the Fortress of Solitude's "kitchen," eating what I guess I have to call Lois's "tuna salad." (Lois is only a slightly better cook than Bruce, so for the rest of my stay at the Fortress, I made us pasta, and on day two, when Ma Kent found out what was going on, she sent cornbread.) But what Lois lacked in culinary skill, she made up for in perspective:

"...like that business chasing around the Suicide Squad. After Sue and then Jean, they're all hurt, they're scared, they're worried and confused, and they're having their typical reaction: give me something to hit to fix this."

Her words made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

"Give me something to hit," I repeated, "My god, you'd think one of us actually living in Gotham during Hell Month would have recognized that one."

"Well, I am a trained observer," Lois smiled happily. "Does it seem like I put too much pepper in this?"

"Maybe a little," I admitted.

"Anyway, these guys have a highly developed sense of the way the world is *supposed* to be. And a very powerful need to do whatever is necessary to *make* it that way. Nobody is supposed to be hurt or in danger, especially not the ones they care most about. The people they love are being threatened, they have to *DO* something about it."

"And what they want to do is what they do best," I noted, "Up-up-and-away?"

"Exactly. Factor in that 'Up-up-and-away' is why the nearest-and-dearest are being targeted in the first place, I'd say we've got us the makin's... Too much mayonnaise too, I think?"

"Um, yeah, and maybe drain the celery next time. So what do we do about it?"

"Do? What's to do but wait it out and wisely use our time to research how they're going to make it up to us when it's over."

"They're going to make it up to us?" I sputtered.

"Of course! Once it's over and they all calm down, everybody's safe and they realize how completely they've overreacted—but only because they love us so and were so scared of losing us—then comes the counter-reaction, the 'oh honeys.'"

The travel books suddenly made sense. I raised an eyebrow.

"Europe for visitors," I said.

"Yep. Clark is bound to want some quality time after something like this. I'm sure Bruce will too."

"Bruce doesn't like leaving Gotham," I explained simply. I didn't add that he wouldn't have that kind of 'counter-reaction.' It would imply something was amiss in the way he'd behaved, and Batman simply does not acknowledge that kind of thing.

"Well in that case, there's an Escada Sport catalog in the bedroom. You really should make a gameplan," Lois said with a wink.

I shook my head no. I didn't want to explain about the shopping spree last year. But Lois went plowing right ahead.

“Look Selina, the fact is that the wife of a hero was just killed. And that means the families of all the other heroes are suddenly... *appreciated* a lot more. You know rumor has it Ray and Jean are actually getting back together after he rescued her. I guess it was just a little too close for a ‘close call,’ even for a guy who can shrink down to Atom-size. Right now, they’re all too caught up in the furor to catch this guy to really feel it. But very soon, a reaction *will set in*.”

“Lois, they’ve got us holed up in a...” the role of polite guest forbade my calling it a cage “...a literal *fortress* in the remotest freezing corner of the Andes. You’re telling me this isn’t it, this isn’t the reaction, you’re telling me it’s gonna get worse?!?”

“Not a bit, it’ll be much better. Selina, don’t you understand, he’ll want to spend time together. He’ll take a night off or two—or six.”

“Not Bruce,” I said simply.

She nodded.

“Even Bruce. Don’t you see, the way they think, we always come in second to the rest of the world. Because they love us, we come in second. Because being with us is their ‘at home’ time, where they can relax and kick their shoes off, scratch where they itch, we come in last. The demands of the job are always the priority; they always outweigh the family stuff. Now, that’s turned completely inside out. *We are* the job this time around. We’re not supposed to be, we’re supposed to be what they come home to at the end of the day. It’s like when the reporter becomes the story—we try to pretend we’re just as objective as always, but we can’t be. We’re too close to it.”

“Not Bruce,” I repeated. I understood what she was saying, but she simply didn’t understand. Maybe for some of them, if the hero thing was just something they did because they were born with certain abilities. But for Bruce, Bruce is Batman *because* of what happened to his family. He could never set it aside for something as trivial as “quality time” with his girlfriend.

“Even Bruce,” Lois said again. “Trust me, I got a nose for these things.”

It was psychological warfare, plain and simple.

First, Batman somehow contaminated all Hugo’s early files with massive amounts of dust, so that Hugo could not look through them without violent sneezing fits.

Then, when he wisely went out to get some antihistamine, he encountered more of those silent, black cars constantly coming and going from that new restaurant. Obviously arranged by Batman, obviously meant to unnerve him.

Somehow, he had to find a way to counter this sinister mind game.

I didn’t hear about the second threat until it was all over.

Lois’s cooking is notorious, and when Clark Kent’s mother found out we were holed up together, she sent cornbread on day two, a greenbean casserole on day three, apple fritters on day four. Superman brought them each day, but he never told us a thing about what was happening out in the world. The fortress isn’t cut off by any means, on the contrary, it dwarfs the Batcave for tech toys. But CNN would never know the details of this story.

Tim's father received a note almost identical to Lois's in its menacing allusion to the secret: "JACK DRAKE"—the R was in red with a circle around it, the Robin emblem. That's all it said. It was laying on top of a box. Inside the box was a gun, and another note: "PROTECT YOURSELF." He barely had a chance to pick it up before he heard the intruder. He called Oracle, Tim must have left him a communicator.

She had him on the 'Com, she heard the whole thing—Dick hadn't sent Barbara away. He'd come back from Bludhaven, but that was all. I think there was a half-hearted suggestion about her relocating to the Watchtower, but she vetoed it and that was that... I could have vetoed too instead of letting myself be carted out to the fortress. I would have been there with them if I had.

Tim had left his father a communicator, Jack Drake hit the button as soon as he found the note, and Barbara heard the whole thing play out. An intruder on the roof. Oracle notified Robin, they were patrolling together, *Batman and Robin*, my brilliant idea. The Batmobile can do something like 260 mph. Bruce got them there just in time to see Jack Drake take a boomerang to the pericardium, that's the double-layered membrane the heart rests in. You rupture it, it puts out an awful lot of blood.

I don't want to think what seeing that did to Tim.

I don't want to think what seeing Tim see that did to Bruce.

I really don't want to think about that. Tim finding *his father* in a pool of blood—what did that do to Bruce? Was Tim even the target? If somebody who knew all secrets wanted to strike at a hero by striking at those he loved, what better way to torture Bruce than to kill someone's parent right in front of him... And I was stuck in some fucking super-fortress in the middle of a goddamn ice flow where I couldn't touch either of them. My arms ached to, and instead I was hearing it all thirdhand from Superman.

The bastard who did it was Digger Harkness, a has-been Flash villain called "Captain Boomerang"—couldn't you just *vomit*. He was dead at least, not that it was any consolation, but Jack Drake is evidently a decent shot. Give him a loaded gun and a cause to defend himself... The news called it a failed home invasion.

Jack Drake's left lung had collapsed by the time they reached the hospital. The surgery went fourteen hours. It was hour ten before anybody thought to tell me. I was too numb to feel it, but Lois was outraged on my behalf.

It was in the files somewhere. If Batman went to such lengths to contaminate them, they must hold the answer.

Hugo sat with a clothespin fastened over his nose and a mug of steaming chicken broth. He would read a page, remove the clip, sneeze perfunctorily, and take a sip of broth, then replace the clip.

Here was an interesting episode where he'd managed to abduct Bruce Wayne and stash him in an insane asylum under the name Farthington... Hm, now how had he come up with the name Farthington again? *-kachoo-* There was no telling what details might be important.

Superman took me straight to the hospital, which I guess made up a little for the lag in bringing me into the loop. Tim was alone in the waiting room when we got there. I couldn't understand it. He said Cassie had gone to the cafeteria to bring him a sandwich, but where were the others?

"Dick, Barbara, and Bruce are kind of busy 'taking care of business,' if you know what I mean," Tim said. There was a weird passion under the words. It made me uncomfortable. "Can't leave the whole city unattended. Dick didn't want to go, but if he didn't agree to watch Gotham, Bruce wouldn't follow up on this other lead O had until—"

"Wait a minute, Bruce *left town?*" I blurted.

"Boomerang didn't send that warning, Selina, he didn't send *the gun that killed him*. This isn't completely over. There's another player. Barbara thinks she knows who sent Boomerang. But Batman wasn't going to follow up, he didn't want to leave me alone like this—"

"Of course not, Tim, this is nuts," I interrupted, but he rolled right over me.

"—I had to *beg* him, Selina. We haven't got time to waste here, *I don't want that filth* to slip away. I'd do it myself, I want to so bad I could scream, my fist is *aching* to take the bastards down. But I can't because I have to be here. So I told B, just like I'm telling you, that he *had* to do this for me. And I told Dick he has to do this too. Nightwing has to watch over Gotham so Batman can go *take care of business*."

It was the creepiest damn thing I'd ever seen. In the course thirty seconds, he was turning into Batman. That Psychobat intensity was building inside his voice.

"Tim, how is your father?" I asked, hoping to refocus him a little.

"They came in with the last update about an hour ago," he said, the Psychobat flickered out in a nanosecond. "Hour seven is the really scary one, now the next hurdle is going to be when they take him off the heart-lung machine and his... his heart has to take over again... Shit, I wish I could be out there, going after someone."

I don't think he knew it, but he was making a fist, Bruce's Hell Month fist.

"I guess that answers my next question, 'How are you doing?'"

"Not good."

Two words, one syllable each. Any second now, he might grunt.

A sneeze, Hugo Strange knew from medical school, was *-kachoo-* a spasmodic, involuntary expulsion of air from the nose, triggered by an irritant. In this case, dust which *-kachoo-* had been placed there by Batman to keep him from rediscovering the Bat's secrets, all once so clear to him, before his mind became clouded with this obsession about Bruce Wayne and White Martians... Somehow *-kachoo-* he had it and then...

then...

...

-kachoo- lost it.

Life went on. By the time Jack Drake was wheeled out of the operating room, Barbara had determined that the hit came through a Noah Cutler, used to call himself

the Calculator, ran around with giant numbered buttons on his chest. Not even a has-been like Boomerang, more like a never-was.

This Noah Cutler/Calculator rube finally gave up the costume, set himself up as a kind of anti-Oracle, in his mind anyway. He calls himself an information broker, but he's really more of a glorified dispatcher. On a good day, he might pass for a market maker. In this case, that's what he'd done: he put together a buyer and a seller, someone wanted a hit on Jack Drake, on the cheap, and Cutler set him up with Boomerang.

By the time Jack Drake was coming out from the anesthesia, Oracle had a suspected location on Calculator, and Batman was on his way.

By the time Drake was transferred out of the ICU, Batman was reading a taunting note from Calculator, who'd fled the site at least five hours before.

By the time I got home, Batman was back in the cave.

"J'onn, GET OUT of my head!" he was yelling, "Just find him now!"

"Honey, I'm home," I murmured softly, not expecting to be heard or noticed. But he turned right around to face me.

"You were right," he announced, as if I'd been standing there the whole time. "Nobody breached the security, not at the Dibnys' and especially not at Jean Loring's place... There's always the same flaw—everybody has to go home at night. You nailed that one, Selina."

"Why do I think we're not talking about the best way to open a locked door?"

"Captain Boomerang was a hired thug, a burned out nobody from nowhere. There's no way he killed Sue, there's no way he attacked Jean, there is *no way* he got past that security system. He was set up to take the fall. That note was sent to Lois to set everybody on edge—"

"Well it worked," I put in.

"Yes. It worked. Then the hit is put on Jack, and he gets a warning and a weapon. We're left with a *body* we'll all assume is Sue's killer."

I didn't want to say it to his face—if he didn't have the mask on, I don't know if I *could* have said it to Bruce's face—but to Batman, in the cave, in Hell Month, I found the words came quite easily:

"And if Jack missed, and Boomerang escaped... You know the thought crossed my mind, when Superman told me what had happened, I had the thought that you might be the target here, not Tim. They probably figured you'd hunt down anybody who attacked Robin's father, so same result. We'd have a body we thought was our killer."

"You know I'd never do that," he said quietly.

I searched his eyes for a moment.

"Yes, I do. I know that's a line you would never cross, no matter what. But your killer doesn't know that, do they?"

"No. For this individual, snuffing out a life is nothing but a means to an end. They murdered Sue Dibny *only to establish that there was a killer striking at the wives of crimefighters.*"

"What?"

"Cui Bono, Selina? Who benefits when the wife of a hero is killed? The wives and loved ones of all the other heroes."

That certainly didn't hold in my case: I'd been locked away, first in the Batcave, and then in the damn Fortress of Solitude... but that thought of the Fortress reminded me what Lois had said: the 'oh honeys'... because they love us so and were so scared of losing us... the families of all the other heroes are suddenly appreciated a lot more... he'll want to spend some quality time... even Bruce... we always come in second to the job, this time we are the job...

"Nobody would do something like this just to move up the chain of priorities," I breathed.

"Three attacks," Batman said simply. "Dibny establishes there's a killer, Drake provides us with the culprit. Which does that leave? Which attack serves no other purpose except achieving the result the killer intended?"

Of course it was about control, all of Hugo's battles with Batman *-kachoo-* were about control one way or another.

In engaging Hugo's own sneeze centers with this dust, Batman *-kachoo-* had achieved a momentary control over the muscles of Hugo's own abdomen, chest, diaphragm and vocal chords. And since the contaminated files all concerned Batman *-kachoo-*, the effect was almost as if the very act of reading about Bat *-kachoo-* would trigger a sneeze.

That's what he was up to! He was attempting to engineer an artificial allergy! How diabolical! Like photic sneezers that react to sunlight, Batman... *-kachoo-* was trying to make Hugo allergic to *-kachoo-*

It was what scientists call simultaneous discovery: Ray Palmer, The Atom, realized his ex-wife had staged her attack just as the JSA autopsy team found microscopic footprints in Sue Dibny's brain and Batman reasoned it out from the detective's triangle of motive, means, and opportunity.

Officially, Dr. Palmer checked Jean Loring into Arkham that night and disappeared. Unofficially, he met with Bruce for about three hours in the cave afterwards. Loring would remain an Arkham inmate on paper, but there was no way she could be kept there long-term, not with all that she knew about the League. Medication, segregation... nobody trusts Arkham that much. She was quietly transferred to a similar facility in Ellesmere, Canada. Ray Palmer did disappear then. Who can blame him; he needed time.

So did Tim. It wasn't what nearly happened to his father, he'd bounced back from that surprisingly quickly once Jack Drake was discharged from the hospital.

It was the revelation about Jean Loring being the killer.

Stephanie got herself killed right after Tim dumped her. We don't say so out loud, but everybody knows there was an "I'll show you" aspect to her final, fatal act of defiance, getting that mugger released and going after him alone. Her death came out of her reaction to the breakup, that's how it is. It was her own deluded foolishness and she paid the price, but Tim is the one who has to live with it.

Now there was another ex, Jean Loring, just as deluded, reacting badly to a breakup, with deadly results. Sue and Ralph Dibny were one of those couples that Tim looked

up to—hell, from the sounds of it, they were one of those couples all the heroes looked up to: two people with a relationship that worked for all those years, and now it was gone. Sue was dead because of another woman reacting poorly to a breakup.

So the poor kid needed some time. He wasn't turning his back on Gotham or on Bruce, he just needed some space. Dick took him to Bludhaven for a while. That "quality time" Lois talked about, it's not just for couples.

We thought it was over. Hell Month was over. The murder was solved. The culprit was found. We thought it was all over.

Heh.

It had only begun.

CHAPTER 5: SUPERBLY

I had slept in again. After the hell month craziness, confined to the cave and then the fortress, I was letting off some steam, prowling later. Bruce was beating me home most nights. Alfred was very sweet about it, always letting me catch another hour of shuteye after Bruce got up, so I was surprised at first that he would come wake me.

But Tim had called from Bludhaven and wanted to “say hey.” He was just checking in; there was nothing wrong or anything. But he’d asked to speak to me.

So I got up and took the call.

...: *Hey Selina, ...* was how he began.

“Hey kid. Fair warning, you’re catching me before coffee,” I yawned. “How’s ‘Haven?’”

...: *S’okay. Makes a change. We broke in on a guy last night that said ‘I got the drop on you, gumshoe,’ how about that! Never hear hokey shit like that in Gotham. Well, except from Scarface. Scarface called his guys ‘mooks’ once. ...*

“Sounds like quite the vacation you boys are having.”

...: *Yeah. It’s okay. Dick is cool. ...*

I smiled.

“Yes, he is.”

...: *Oh, before I forget, they don’t have analogies on the SATs anymore. ...*

“Huh?”

...: *Remember when I was over studying for the SATs, and you said how analogies were so important in the old days. Well, I checked, and they don’t do those at all anymore. ...*

“In the old days? You mean back when I used to shred cocky little teen sidekicks?”

...: *Yeah, back then, y’know, before movable type and penicillin. ...*

I could hear in his voice how he was grinning. I also heard Dick in the background, adding some joke of his own. This was the point of the call, evidently: let’s tickle the tiger’s tail. At first, I thought maybe he just wanted to hear a friendly voice, but it sounded like the whole Bludhaven escapade was going well. So this “saying hey” was definitely starting to feel like boys being boys.

I let them have their fun—for now. They were good boys, after all. And they had to come home sooner or later. When they did, they would discover Zogger now identified them on login as “Mouse 1” and “Mouse 2.”

When I hung up the phone, Alfred was waiting. He said Bruce wanted to see me as soon as I was up, so I stopped in the kitchen, picked up a muffin and poured a cup of coffee, and I was about to take Alfred’s elevator down to the cave, when he stopped me. He said Bruce was in the sunroom.

I knew he was meditating before I got there. There was a delicious hint of incense in the hallway, sweet and smoky. Bruce was kneeling in seza, silhouetted by the light streaming in through the windows; I couldn’t see if his eyes were open or closed.

“Been meditating?” I asked just to announce my presence.

"Not exactly, but something similar," he murmured altering his posture slightly. "A mental exercise... extremely useful one. I try it every few years... Imagine yourself as a fictional character."

"Oh that," I laughed. "I've done it. Remember my stage show?"

"Different," he grunted. "That was still you in Cat-Tales. It was a heightened, stylized version of you, but clearly the same woman who invented herself as Catwoman in the first place crafted that character on the stage."

"Then I don't know what you mean."

"This is different from taking on a masked persona, this is... removing yourself completely from your own inner thinking and seeing yourself—*describing* yourself—only as another person might. Describing your thoughts and words and actions—all from the outside."

"And this is useful?"

"Very. At first, it helped me refine the fop act, shape Batman's interrogating techniques, even helped me run smoother meetings at the Foundation."

"And now?"

"Now, I know why the log is wrong," he growled. He'd dipped into Batman's voice, which I don't mind, of course. I moved the rest of the way into the room and settled on the floor in front of him. From this position, I could see now that his eyes were open—and it was, as I could have guessed from the gravel, Psychobat and not Bruce staring out of them.

He reached out and took my hand, just like he had before sending me to the Fortress. It was strange because Bruce will do things like that but Batman does not, and Psychobat wouldn't ever.

"This isn't going to be good news," I noted dryly.

"No," he pronounced. "Imagine you had a blackout when we went to Tokyo last year. How would you know what had happened?"

"Assuming you're not going to tell me," I began hesitantly.

"No, I'll tell you everything."

"Then I'd know, wouldn't I?"

"Assuming you believe me, yes."

"Are you going to lie to me?"

"Nope, I'll tell you the whole truth."

"Then I'll know everything."

"You'll know what I tell you. I can tell you what you *did*, what you *said*, where you *went*. But I can't know how you felt or what you were thinking."

"Okay," I nodded.

"Making a log entry at the end of the night doesn't work that way. It's more than a dry rundown of where I patrolled and who I apprehended, it's more than a dry recitation of facts. I use that time each night to decompress. I download all the wild associations, the false starts, the chains of ideas: if a stakeout was boring and I wound up thinking through notes from the marketing meeting that afternoon. If Gordon seemed distracted when I answered the signal. If a playful catburgler changed her perfume, and it's going to drive me crazy until I figure out what her new scent is."

"Really now," I purred, nestling in a little closer.

"Behave. I used that example for a reason. Writing a log entry is a highly individual and personal exercise. Do you understand?"

"I guess I do. I do it in the mirror sometimes, after a good prowling, or sometimes I talk to Nutmeg..."

"Close enough. There was a night, years ago, when none of that occurred. I didn't consciously realize it at the time, but something must have felt off about it as I was making the entry. Some part of me held on to this feeling that something *wasn't right* there."

"This is where the nightmare comes in?"

"Right. When the Leaguers went after Dr. Light, it triggered that memory—no, not a *memory*, but that *remembered sense* of something wrong back there. There were nine individuals involved in that battle: Green Lantern, Hawkman, Zatanna, Flash, Atom, Green Arrow, and Black Canary on the one hand, and Dr. Light and Deathstroke on the other. It could have been any one of them that was triggering that association, so I did a search in the Justice League databanks for missions and encounters I'd had with any of them, then looked up my personal log entries for those dates. I didn't have to look very far before I found it. I went on a mission with all seven Leaguers, against Hector Hammond. The log entry for that night is the one that is wrong."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. I've read it a dozen times now, and it's exactly what I remember, but it's wrong. It feels wrong. It feels like a police report: went here, went there, like I was taking dictation from my memories, not—not—*writing* the log naturally."

"Okay. Well, now we know when. Just not... what... or why?"

"I know more than that. Now that I know where to look, I know everything. I just don't know yet what it is that we know... Let's go for a walk. I'd like some fresh air before going down to the cave."

I took a minute to duck back in the bedroom, for a warm sweater, I told him. The truth is I needed a minute to myself. It wasn't like Bruce to imply that there was anything less-than-welcoming about the cave, even down to the freshness of the air. He usually meditates down there by his favorite stalactite, but today he wanted the warmth and brightness of the sunroom? And now, hot on the trail of some idea that's been bugging him for weeks, he wasn't going straight down to the cave—he was going for a walk?—for some fresh air?—and he wanted me along?

We weren't far from the house when I realized where we were going... He was headed for the gravesite.

I'd been at the Fortress on the Anniversary this year. I assumed he'd gone alone, like he always had before: the gravesite during the day as Bruce, the alley after dark as Batman.

"Imagine yourself as a fictional person," he was saying. "Imagine someone writing you, right now, walking up this hill, in a story. Think of all the detail they'd put into those shoes you're wearing, how they're not the most comfortable pair of flats you've got, but you wore them anyway because the color is just right with that sweater."

"My shoes are brown," I told him in the firm voice I use to set a price with Oswald. "Which goes with just about everything. And they're perfectly comfortable. Are you insane?"

His lip twitched.

"Not insane. Just a man with precious little idea what goes on with women and their shoes. That's my point. What were you really thinking about just now instead of your shoes?"

"Honestly?"

"Yeah. Honestly."

"I thought how I was away this year, at the Fortress. I wondered if you'd come up here alone or if Alfred or someone maybe came with you."

"Really? That's what was going through your mind?"

I felt funny. It was like he caught me out at something.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

He smiled—more than just a twitch. Then he did that density shift, the smile vanished and it was Batman glaring again.

"I didn't do too well then, 'writing' your thoughts. The Tokyo blackout scenario, if I tried to fill in more than facts, if I tried to supply you with details of what you thought or felt in that time, I wouldn't do so well, would I?"

"No. Bruce, spell it out for me," I blurted. "I can tell you're getting at something, but I don't see it."

"Ockham's Razor. Cut away all the irrelevancies, cut right down to the bare bone: The log is *exactly* what I remember. And the log is *wrong*."

Ockam's Razor would have cut away as irrelevant the fact that it was seventeen degrees and we were walking through a graveyard. Those extraneous details had nothing to do with the chill I was feeling.

"So your memory is wrong," I said finally.

"My memory is wrong," he said. "About twenty minutes of that night... my best guess, twenty minutes... is missing... and replaced with someone else's idea of me."

For about ten seconds, I felt like I might vomit. And for about ten more, I thought about clawing up a tombstone, despite the fact that I wasn't wearing my claws and whoever else might be involved in this, Charles and Marie Wayne St. John were off the hook, having died in 1825 and '39, respectively.

"Okay then," I breathed, forcing myself calm. "Mind games, that's Hugo, Jervis, Jonathan, maybe Ra's. I'd like first crack at Jervis and Jonathan—"

Bruce was shaking his head no.

"Don't start," I told him, "I'll let you have your pummel. But Jervis is a bleeder and Jonathan is such a squirrely little wuss, if you pound them first, there won't be anything left for me to sink my claws into."

"Selina, it's not them. It's not... *Gotham*. Whatever happened, it's connected to the League somehow, not the rogues."

"How do you figure that?"

He was staring down at a quotation on the headstone of one Colonel Ernest B. Wayne:

Truth is the beginning of every good to the gods, and of every good to man. -PLATO

"Because Superman knows," Bruce said softly.

"WHAT?" It wasn't my voice that said it. It was the loud screech of a hellcat. I don't know where it came from. "Um, excuse me," I cleared my throat, trying for dignity, and got my tone back to my normal octave. "What do you mean 'Superman knows?'"

"It was right about that time he... wouldn't look me in the eye... for about a week and a half. Then when he did, well, Clark isn't the world's best poker player. I could tell he *knew* something. It must have been this."

"And you didn't push to find out? *You* didn't? Six weeks you wouldn't let up about those stupid Mouawad diamonds—"

"Those weren't yours," he graveled.

"Not the point."

"No, it's not. The point is that I trust Superman's judgment. Whatever it was that had set him off, he had to have a good reason for feeling it needed to be kept secret. The good of the League or... something. Whatever it is, I know he'll tell me what he knows when he believes the time is right."

It was my turn to glare.

"You can't believe that."

"Why not? Selina, with what you've asked me to swallow about your 'friendships' with Dent and Nigma, why is it so hard for you to believe I trust Clark?"

"Um, in a word—protocols!"

He sighed—and I felt awful.

"I never expected to have to use them," he said, and he sounded exhausted suddenly. "It was necessary to have them, in case, just like you have a smoke detector *in case*, unlikely though it is you'll ever need it and much as you hope you never do."

"Look, I don't want to argue," I told him. "I'm just not sure what to make of this. I'm not even sure why you're telling me about it."

"Don't you? Really? Selina, don't you have any idea?"

All I could think was because I'd told him about the nightmare he'd had, but having brought up that forbidden subject once already and gotten away with it, I wasn't about to press my luck by doing it again.

"You said 'we,'" he said, squeezing my hand. "When we were talking about the Dibny case that night in the cave, you said 'We'd have a body we thought was our killer.' It wasn't the first time."

"Oh." My cheeks felt warm. Again I felt like he caught me out at something embarrassing. "Just picking up the slack," I said, feeling I should make some excuse. "Since Harvey doesn't do it anymore, I figured I'd try it on for size."

He didn't smile or say anything more. We'd reached his parents' tombstone. Even though it was weeks since his anniversary visit, I felt I should leave him alone. I tried to pull my hand free but he wouldn't let go... He's grabbed my wrist quite a few times over the years, but he's never dug in that way. It's easy to forget, when he's Bruce, just how strong he is. I couldn't begin to pull away, and I didn't want to make it a thing. So we stood there in silence for a while, then finally when he'd had his fill, he turned to go back and let go of my hand like he didn't even know he'd been holding it.

Bruce's body isn't the only instance of Gotham history told in scars. The faux-glacier interior of the Iceberg Lounge has some fascinating mementos. There's the divot left where Eddie's back hit the wall the night Joker caught him putting the moves on Harley, which had been patched but knocked loose again when Killer Croc hurled

Azrael into the same spot. There are cracks near Poison Ivy's booth where a few of her "babies" punched through the floor laying down roots. There's a permanent discoloration behind the jukebox from numerous blasts of freeze ray.

And there is also, now, a vigorously scratched patch on the bar itself. It is what the rogues will forever refer to as the spot where Catwoman expressed her joy on hearing a certain writer, the one responsible for the most outrageous libels about her consorting with East End lowlifes, had finally been flushed from his job at the Gotham Post.

They can think that. It doesn't matter. The truth is it was my reaction to a story from the rogue rumormill, but it had nothing to do with those Post hacks, and it certainly wasn't joyful.

It was where I heard what had happened to Dr. Light—what they had DONE to Dr. Light—the "Justice" League—the rat bastard jackbooted thugs masquerading as heroes League. The implication of it—I didn't know I was doing it, I was just sitting there letting it sink in, and I guess I dug the claws into the bar... a few hundred times...

What Bruce said about Harvey and Eddie got me thinking: I had sources of information he didn't. Sure, he had the League, he had the Bat-team, and he had the scum he could always pummel a few more details out of. But I had me. I had my standing at the Iceberg and the fact that Oswald was itching to become my fence again. I had the simple truth that half the underworld skips town for Hell Month and everybody returns brimming with news. I had that other simple truth going for me as well: rogue men are still men, and at the end of the day they like to kick back and talk—preferably about themselves and preferably to a pretty woman. So I prowled early for a change and then stopped in at the 'Berg.

Dr. Light's story, as told by the rumormill, was... disgusting. Nobody's pretending otherwise. He'd found a way to penetrate the old Watchtower, back when it was a satellite. He said he wanted his light gun back. They'd captured it, had it on display in their trophy room, and he wanted it back. He picked a moment when they would be busy elsewhere, when the place would be deserted—I just know it was when Bruce and those other seven were out fighting Hector Hammond—and he went in. Except the Watchtower wasn't deserted; Sue Dibny was there. And Light raped her.

I'm not pretending it's not monstrous. I'm not pretending it's not disgusting.

They caught him "in the act" so to speak. The seven Bruce mentioned who had been on the mission: Green Lantern and Flash—the old ones—Hawkman, Zatanna, Atom, Green Arrow and Black Canary, Elongated Man... and Batman. They'd all been on that mission; they all would have gone back to the Watchtower.

But Elongated Man left to take his wife to the hospital, and Batman left too. According to the log—the log Bruce says is wrong—Gordon had found a package in his office containing a top hat... so Batman left the Watchtower, leaving those seven "hero crimefighters" alone with Dr. Light.

They lobotomized him. Zatanna, "Mistress of Magic," wiped his memory of the event, of Sue Dibny and the rape, and then they changed his personality. Rogue opinion is split on if it was intentional or if Miss Magically Wonderful didn't know what the fuck she was doing and botched it.

As far as the underworld is concerned, inside Gotham and out, that's the story. It's clear now why that particular group of heroes went after Dr. Light when Sue was murdered, and somehow or other in their battle with Deathstroke, something ziggled

when it should have zagged and Light recovered his memories. That's the story: just one of those things that happens in the wacky world outside of Gotham.

I don't know how long I sat there, unconsciously digging my claws into the bar, letting the implication sink in.

I mean, it was the rumormill... the Rogue Rumormill has a slightly better truth-to-bullshit ratio than the Post, but so does an Elementary School playground. But everything about this story seemed to fit. I got it from multiple sources, they were consistent on the important points. Much as I wanted to believe otherwise, it seemed like more than some Keystone flyweight blowing smoke.

Hearing about that battle between Dr. Light and those seven Leaguers is what triggered Bruce's nightmares, it's what reminded him of that gnawing feeling about the log—it was that night he was missing memories—no, not missing them, he had false memories. That poisonous witch—the seven of them led by that poisonous parched cunt witch—They took Bruce's memories. Somehow, he must have found out what they were doing to Light and they wiped his memory of it.

I had four options... 1) I could wait until my heart stopped pounding so I could think through what to do next—which would only waste time, so screw #1. 2) I could get home to Bruce—but he probably wouldn't be home yet, so I'd have to wait and I was NOT in the mood to sit around the cave listening to the bats squeak, so screw #2. 3) I could call Oracle, find out where Batman was patrolling, and get to him right fucking now... or 4)... 4) I could make a stop first—If those monsters thought they could get away with something like this because they had superpowers, they didn't understand the first thing about cats.

I'll admit I wasn't in the calmest frame of mind on the trip uptown, but fortunately I used to live in the apartment Jason Blood now occupies, and I can navigate the way home from the Iceberg on autopilot.

Once I hit the balcony, I found the effort of presenting myself as a sane and rational person focused my thoughts admirably. Jason came out, expressed pleased surprise at my visit (although, in my experience, Jason is seldom surprised by anything), and I found that in answering him, I was Catwoman again. It was my voice, my walk, I sounded playful and pleasant, calm and collected. I didn't really feel that way, but faking it made it real on some level. Jason offered me a brandy and we sat. I came straight to the point:

"Would it be possible for you to conjure up some kind of magic vaccine, like to keep a specific magician from tampering with a specific person?"

"What a curious question. This is not a remote hypothetical, I assume."

"Of course not. Jason, you said you wouldn't use magic for someone without fully knowing and approving of their reasons. I think you know already why I'm here and what my reasons are."

He said nothing at first, he just looked at me carefully.

"Thou shalt not mess with the people Selina Kyle cares for," he pronounced finally.

"I suppose, yes, there is that aspect," I admitted.

"And something more?"

I knew there was no way to get what I wanted without being honest, so I opened my mouth, not knowing what I might say, and let the words come...

"Maybe I just don't like the reminder that he is, after all, only human... more vulnerable on one level than any of them."

"Yes. Even him. Especially him," Jason mused.

I glared. He smiled at me. And I hissed.

"It wasn't meant to be a mocking smile, Selina. It was meant to be sincere and sympathetic."

"Will you help us?" I asked—sounding a lot meeker than any cat's pride should allow. "I figure you magic-users are like nuclear warheads. They have theirs, so we have to have ours."

"And yours," Jason gleamed with a wicked smile, "will be bigger, badder, and capable of breathing hellfire in tight spots."

"I knew you would understand," I said, feeling I could kiss him.

"Well, I played court magician on occasion in the past, Selina. Serving as such for the Dark Knight and his lady... I imagine it will be fun."

I chuckled, because it was just how Bruce would have said fun.

Hugo Strange shuffled listlessly into the Iceberg a short while after Catwoman stormed out. He saw Oswald occupied at a table with some men that looked vaguely familiar. Hugo associated them with gambling, in Star City... or maybe it was Keystone. In any case, he could wait. He went to the bar, puffed up importantly and coughed until he was noticed, and ordered a club soda from Sly. Then he sat and overheard the drivel of inferior minds. Gossiping, like so many old women. No wonder he had deteriorated, hanging out with such riffraff.

When Oswald had finally finished his business with the trio of... whoever those unimportant fellows were, Hugo moved to intercept him on his way back to his office.

Oswald ushered him to a free table—a better table than Hugo was ever given on his own, on the strength of his own position in rogue circles as Batman's most dangerous foe. But that was just another in the long campaign of slights and insults that eroded him into this sorry condition, and how like Oswald to rub it in that way.

Unfortunately, the spotlight of a good table in the Iceberg dining room was not suitable for the private conversation Hugo wished to have. He suggested the seclusion of Oswald's office, but was rebuffed. He suggested again, but Oswald was too busy watching the comings and goings at the door to really pay attention... To Hugo, it seemed like Oswald was fully preoccupied playing the role of the great crime boss tonight. He would have to return during the day, when Oswald would have no audience to play to.

"Selina, really," Jason complained, thumbing the pages of a ponderous tome. "I understand that, like all women, you must take any male's agreeing to do what you want as some sort of personal triumph. But if you would kindly desist from that infernal purring while I am trying to work?"

"If you insist. Out of curiosity—yes, it's a cat thing—out of curiosity, Jason, how do you vocalize delight?"

He glared up at me, then returned his attention to the book.

"I don't believe I'm familiar with the emotion in question," he grumbled.

"Non-gloom," I explained in the same tone I'd use with Bruce.

"Bruce," he began, as if he knew of my mental comparison, "Lost his parents as a child, and has, as a result, devoted his life to making a better world. Good human with the occasional need to lighten up. Myself: Raging demon inside who wants nothing more than to rip me apart so he can get out and rip all of you apart. Fifteen hundred years. No respite from it. That's all I'm going to say on the matter of non-gloom."

"Fine, be that way. It took me nine years to get him to crack a smile, sort of, so don't think I'll give up so easily on you."

"You are welcome to spend your time however you wish, Selina. I ask only that you do so quietly while I am researching your situation."

I waited. I wandered around the room and looked at the spines of his books. I looked at his case of antique weapons. He had a bust of Ares on top, which was new. He previously had a Grecian plate up there depicting Achilles examining armor. I'd got it for him from the Boston Museum, a little thank you because he'd sent me in to get a Roman seal carved from a cursed gemstone and I found the most extraordinary crouching tigress displayed right next to it.

"Well?" I asked when I felt I'd waited long enough, "Find anything?"

"Indeed. There are two options available. One would create a blanket shield against all memory charms, the other would block all magic from a specific caster directed at the protected person—or persons, as I expect you'll want the same sort of protection for yourself as for Bruce."

"Yes, definitely," I agreed. "I suppose the second is what we'll want. It's not magic itself that's the problem, no matter what Bruce says. It's that fucking League. It's Zatanna. Jason, you stood up for me when I found out about Etrigan and that crazy Avalon crank, Lyle, wanted to make me forget it. And you don't go flinging your mojo around for anybody that asks—in stark contrast to Z, whose answer seems to be 'would you like a Big Gulp with that for only \$3 more.'"

"Yes," Jason nodded, "For me as a magickal practitioner, that is the most disturbing aspect of the matter."

"Will there be trouble, for you, I mean, when she finds out about this?"

Jason laughed.

"Upon discovering their magick no longer affects some individual, a wizard will likely try to a) overpower the protections, b) find the other caster and attack him, or c) fail at A and move on to B... Zatanna is a child who has channeled the magickal force for less than thirty years. She could no more overpower a spell of mine than I could pit my control over the magickal forces against Etrigan's."

"Alright then," I breathed. "Any other fine print I should know about before taking this to Bruce? I know he'll be pissy about it. Zany hijinx could ensue, that's what usually happens when I have the perfect solution and he's being too much of a jackass to see that my way is best."

"You love him very much, don't you, Selina?"

I was thrown by the abruptness of the question, but I nodded.

“Well then, take this thought with you for the dark hours to come: It is a ludicrous fiction that love conquers all, but it can, in fact, conquer quite a lot. I am Iason of the Blood, Knight of Arthur, King of the Britons, reborn into dark service in the year of Our Lord five hundred and sixty. My power is vast, and for none to arrogate but by my will and decree. My services are engaged, Selina. Tell me what you need to ease your pain in this, and it is yours.”

CHAPTER 6: NEGOTIATING PRICE

Bruce was just headed into the costume vault when I got home. I hid in the shadows, just for a few seconds until he'd gone inside to change. I felt like if he saw me, he'd probably stay in costume, he does that when he's thinking as Batman. But I didn't want to have this conversation with "Batman," if you know what I mean. I didn't even want to have it in the cave if I could avoid it but, well, it doesn't matter, we can't always have what we want.

After a minute, he came out, minus the cape, cowl and gloves, but still in costume and still very much in Bat-mode, took one look at me and grunted. An old grunt, the kind he used to make at Tiffany's or some museum.

"I thought I heard something," he growled, still looking me up and down like I might have a loot bag or something.

"I didn't hear a thing," I told him.

"It's the bats, they go quiet when someone is out here."

"Can't pull one over on the great detective," I admitted. I'd taken a step closer—I wasn't even aware I was doing it. Something about that look of his, the grunt, the tone, it was all so much like the old days. It brought out the old instincts; it made me flirty. I'd walked up to him and started playing with the insignia out of habit. He let it go on a lot longer than he used to; he didn't take my wrists or push me away. Finally, I just wound down, stopped fussing around the bat-emblem and looked up at him. I realized it didn't really matter if he had the mask on or not, at this distance he was just... eyes.

He hesitated and then put his arms around my waist. I could tell he knew. *He's Batman*. Finding out things is second nature to him. He'd probably heard the same stories I had, or something similar, about Dr. Light and come to the same conclusion. But I asked anyway.

"Rough night?"

He nodded.

"Me too," I said, "But I have a solution..." I felt him stiffen, and I knew right then it was hopeless. I'd lost before I even said a word—*Just this once, Dark Knight, let me leave with the diamond sparkly. Where's the harm? After all I did capturing Penguin for you, leaving him neatly trussed up at the Bat-Signal, you couldn't look the other way just this once?*

"No, no, no! Selina, I won't have it. It only compounds the problem—adding magic on top of magic. I never wanted or needed magical protection before and I am NOT starting now. I don't like it, I don't trust it, and I will not use it."

"This magic shit is like nuclear weapons, Bruce. You may not like that they're out there at all, but if they have theirs, then we have to have ours."

"Forty years of Cold War taught us the futility and idiocy of that logic."

"I knew you were going to be this way. Damn it, *why won't you let me protect you?* Is it the tiger-bodyguard thing? I went along with everything else, Bruce, I stayed in the cave, I went to the fortress. That went against *my* principles, but I made an exception for special circumstances. So what's it going to take to get you on board with this?"

“Selina, listen to me. This isn’t protection; it’s an overreaction that’s not going to matter in the end. Protection *from Zatanna* is pointless.”

“After what she did, it’s *pointless*?! How can you say that?! Bruce, are we even living on the same planet here!”

He paused, his face hardening even more, if that were possible. “Because it’s not going to be Zatanna next time,” he said.

There was an undercurrent I couldn’t figure out. I could tell he was hurt, I could tell he was angry, I could tell he had blood flowing to it a hundred different ways, but what “it” was exactly, I couldn’t figure out. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

“Ockham’s Razor,” he was saying, “Remove the extraneous: the real problem is not the magic or the magician, it’s the betrayal. Next time it won’t be her, it’ll be someone or something else. Then what? More protection compounded for another magic-user? It won’t end: *once you cross that line, it will just keep escalating*. The only real way to protect me or anyone else from the next time is to make sure there is no ‘next time.’”

I asked, with as much controlled poise as I could muster (which admittedly wasn’t much), how in the raging bloody hell he expected to “make sure there is no next time” without shoving it down their goddamn star-spangled throats that they **COULD NOT** ever do it again, that they would **NEVER** in a thousand lifetimes be in a position where they could **FUCK WITH HIM EVER AGAIN?**

He looked at me—actually, it was more like he was looking through me—and then turned on his heel and left.

Bruce knocked once at the door to Alfred’s room before twisting the knob, entering and closing the door behind him. He hadn’t waited for any acknowledgement or permission to enter; he didn’t want to risk Selina seeing him if she’d followed from the cave.

“Is there a problem, sir?” Alfred asked, concerned, as he reached for his dressing gown.

“Not an emergency, Alfred, but yes, there is definitely a... I just had the most *unnerving* moment with Selina. There’s definitely a problem, old friend, yes.”

Alfred noted silently that Bruce was still partially in costume, and also that he was unnaturally pale.

“Sit down, sir,” he suggested, pointing to the chair. “It seems you’ve had an alarming shock of some kind?”

“Remember Dick’s idea about Wayne Manor being cursed? I’m almost starting to wonder if there’s something in it, not the manor, but me...” He related briefly what was known—and what was suspected—about Dr. Light and the mindwipe, but before Alfred could answer with more than a murmured “My word,” Bruce waved him off that topic entirely. “It’s typical,” he grunted. “I’m not happy about what happened, but I can’t say I’m surprised. The fact that they had to wipe *MY* mind because I would *stop* them only goes to prove that they knew they were in the wrong and they had to cover their asses. They did it the only way they could, using their powers.”

Alfred wondered if it was really that simple. After so many years, so many confidences, he knew there were times Bruce merely described what he knew to be so, and there were times he spoke a thought out loud to convince himself. This could well

be the latter, and normally Alfred would press to find out... But there was something more at work—something deeper—Bruce had left the cave in the middle of the night, only half changed from his costume. There was more to the League story, certainly, but Alfred sensed there was something... *else* going on.

"It's... disgustingly typical, but that's not the issue right now. Alfred, it's Selina, her reaction to this, what I saw in her just now, it was..."

"It was what, sir?"

"It was *me*," Bruce whispered the last word.

"Master Bruce—"

"Remember when I said I was going to train Dick as a crimefighter, do you remember that fight we had over it? How I saw—it wasn't just that he'd lost his parents, it was the pain and anger, the fire in his eyes, his voice, that burning need to *fix it* somehow... Alfred, I never wanted to see anything like that in her, not in Selina. She's supposed to be this little corner of the world that's life and joy, not obsession and 'this is *wrong*; we have to *do* something.'"

"Master Bruce, Miss Selina may be greatly distressed by the news of the day. I don't doubt that her reaction is impassioned and, perhaps, not lacking the kind of resolve and determination you yourself have been known to exhibit in matters of import. But I cannot believe, sir, that the woman you know is materially changed by these events. I am certain that, in time, that 'life and joy' you spoke of will assert itself again and—"

"So help me, Alfred, if they snuffed that out of her, I'll—"

Both men were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Alfred, are you awake?" Selina's voice called.

Bruce massaged his brow and ran fingers through his hair as Alfred said, "Come right in, miss."

She did. She was wearing his kimono again. She looked right at him as if she had guessed he was in the room.

"You left this downstairs," she said simply, running her fingers over the fabric. "Figured I'd bring it up. I'll sleep in my suite tonight if you want some space."

"You don't have to do that," Bruce answered as she turned to leave.

"What do you want then?" she asked over her shoulder.

Bruce said nothing for a long moment, and Alfred flicked imaginary dust off his nightstand.

"That's what I thought," Selina murmured.

"Go on to bed," Bruce said finally, "I'll be there in a few minutes."

Alfred coughed. "Begging your pardon, miss," he said before she could leave, "Might one ask what it is that *you* want?"

Selina thought for a minute... then the faintest hint of a naughty grin tugged at the side of her lip. "I want Zatanna to wake up tomorrow to find a rabbit's head in her bed."

The idea was that we'd sleep on it. When Bruce came to bed, we agreed that we both needed some time; we'd sleep on it and talk in the morning. It was maybe twenty minutes later I heard "You're awake?"

“Yes.”

“Selina, I do understand what you’re feeling. I’m prepared to take steps so it won’t happen again. I won’t have those steps include magic in my body, in my world, or in my life. It’s that simple.”

That was it for another fifteen minutes or so. Then it was my turn...

“Still awake?”

“Yes, Kitten?”

I crawled across the bed and curled tight against him, resting my head on his chest.

“What would you do?” I whispered.

“Make sure the League never resorts to such tactics again or even considers it, and punish the guilty.”

“Well that certainly sounds like you, but—”

“But you wanted to know specifics.”

“I don’t know what I want. I want to know you’re safe.”

“And you think Jason Blood can deliver that better than I can. Because he’ll use magic.”

“Because he goes on day after day, year after year, decade after decade, holding in Etrigan when there is nothing in it for him but more grief, and he does it, despite all that cynicism and distance from humanity that I guess just goes with being immortal, because it’s right—a concept he won’t even admit he cares about, a concept he will *claim* he loses sight of more and more each year. And yet if you look at what he *does* and not what he *says*—in stark contrast to those ‘hero’ friends of yours—he’s up there with you for complete and total dedication of his whole life to this one purpose that makes the world better for everybody else but him. And on top of all that, he could roast Zatanna on a spit over a flame of actual hellfire without even setting down his teacup. So yeah, I figure he’s the guy for this one.”

I know I got a little carried away. I’d sat up in the bed and was scrunching up the sheet by the time I was finished.

“I guess I could use some space then,” Bruce said dully. It felt like the whole world tipped away under me. “You stay here, I’ll go across the hall—” Any second now, I was going to slide down into a vacuum and all this shit in the room was going to come tumbling in on top of me.

“Bruce, wait, please don’t do this.” It was my voice talking, but it sounded a lot calmer than I was. “You asked how I felt.”

“And you told me.”

“It’s not like I had him *do* anything. I just went to find out what might be possible. It’s just an option.”

“An option you want to go ahead with.” Batman’s voice. Vault voice. I’ll never have anything to do with you because you’re a thief voice. None of this could really be happening, could it?

“After what they’ve done, I don’t know how you can feel safe without it.”

“I’m sleeping across the hall tonight.”

“WHY? Why are you pulling away from me when I only wanted to—”

“BECAUSE YOU DON’T TRUST ME! I said I will handle this. I will. Either you accept that or—”

“Or you need space and go across the hall, I get it.”

"Well?"

"Bruce... You won't even tell me what you're planning. It's a lot to take on faith."

"In other words, that's your price. I have to convince you. If I don't have something better, to your mind, than Jason Blood can provide, you'll go right ahead, behind my back, and have him inflict magical protections on me without my knowing—"

"NO! Bruce, how can you even think—"

"—because YOU decide that's best!"

"I would never do that. How can you even think I would do something like that... to you... Bruce, Jesus Christ, how can you even..."

"..."

That undercurrent was back, just like in the cave earlier. Hurting, angry, blood flowing into it a hundred different ways. *It's not the magic or the magician, it's the betrayal...* It's not—

Shit.

"It's not Gotham. Whatever happened it's connected to the League somehow, not the rogues."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because Superman knows."

Shit.

"Oh. Oh, I see. You trusted *Clark*. And Clark screwed you. And I get the bill. Is that it?"

"Selina, I—"

"This morning it was 'we.'"

"..."

"This morning we were in this together."

"..."

"Will across the hall be sufficient distance, or would you feel safer if I left the premises entirely?"

"I don't want you to go."

"Well, I don't want to go either, Bruce, so what are we talking about?"

"Let's just... give it some time. Trust me. Trust when I say I will handle it. Let that be enough. Okay? Tomorrow, I'll call Clark. This begins with full disclosure. By 10 a.m. tomorrow morning, I'll know what he knows, and then I'll know how to proceed."

I said nothing. This morning, it was "we."

Neither of us went across the hall. We curled together and lay there in silence until dawn. I'm not sure how much he slept. I'm not sure how much I slept either. Eventually, a yellow-white glow appeared above the curtains. I got out of bed and opened them. It was morning.

"Now there's a good omen," I purred.

Outside the window, perched upside-down at the very top of the screen, was a small brownish bat.

Bruce came to the window and glared at it.

"He's kind of cute, backlit like that," I noted. "I never realized how thin the wings are, look at that. You can see the bones, you can even see where the bulk of the body starts."

A lecture followed. Bruce declared this specimen a "Bumblebee bat," the smallest variety, with a wingspan of about six inches, weighing less than a penny. The wings were essentially long fingers covered by that nearly transparent skin. He pointed out the elbow and clawed thumb, and then I stretched up and kissed him.

"What was that for?"

"Just being you," I told him.

Superman arrived, punctually, at 8:15. I was in the cave with Bruce, waiting. He showed me the alert that indicated Kryptonian entry into Wayne Manor's airspace, and I went upstairs to admit our guest.

"Alfred is out shopping," I mentioned as I escorted him down to the cave. It was a lie, which Bruce said he would know since he would hear five heartbeats in the house, three human and two feline. It was to be the first subtle hint that matters had changed.

We made smalltalk as we walked. I told him I'd called his mother to thank her for the cornbread and fritters she sent when Lois and I were holed up at the Fortress. I told him it was his father that answered the phone and that we'd had a nice chat. I told him that repulsive writer who insisted I started out as a prostitute was finally gone from the Gotham Post. I told him the forecast called for rain. And then we reached Workstation 1 and I handed him over to Bruce, for what I was sure was going to be a conversation the Iceberg crowd would call "some quality dinner theatre."

I retreated to the Trophy Room, a spot Alfred had recommended as sufficiently out of sight and out of earshot, yet close enough to reach the main cavern in an instant if the situation required it. That moment came after about ten minutes.

I could see why Alfred favored this location. The acoustics of the Batcave were complicated; I knew that from my attempts to sneak up on Bruce at his workstation. But Alfred has had so many years to study them, he's found tricks none of us can ever match. From this one spot, I couldn't make out what was being said, but I could hear the burr of voices in conversation, the highs and lows, the general timbre and mood of the conversation. I couldn't help but smile at this little insight into Alfred's "magic": from here he gave Bruce and whatever guest was in the cave their privacy, but he could make an appearance in case of a lull—or break the focus if the situation went wrong.

They only raised their voices once, about five minutes in, words leapt out from the muffled hum. First Superman's: "It wasn't my place to tell anybody anything!" and then Bruce's: "But it's your place to eavesdrop? And if you hear something this potentially damaging to your precious League, don't you think you have a responsibility to tell someone?!" Then Superman: "I'm not sure I need to be taking lessons in responsibility from—" "From what, Clark, from an ordinary human being that can't even fly? How dare flesh and blood presume to judge the behavior of a god?"

It got quiet then.

No, not quiet—silent. The voices *stopped*... ..and didn't start up again... ..close to a full minute passed... .. in complete silence.

Then, finally, the calmer, more rational, but unintelligible hum of conversation.

It was about five minutes later that Bruce called out, not very loudly, "Selina, a moment."

And in three steps I was there, clearly standing by. I said nothing, and Bruce merely made eye contact and left without a word. Superman looked at me, and I smiled sweetly.

"It's like he's more pissed at *me* than anybody else," he murmured.

He wasn't talking to me. It was just one of those inner thoughts that leak out the mouth. I continued to smile, while envisioning what he might look like dodging Etrigan's fireballs.

He noticed and I could see his wheels turning —smiling, not responding— —smiling, not responding— It wasn't what he expected from me. After a minute of awkward silence, he started talking again, mostly to himself, it seemed to me.

"I mean, if I'd been there, it never would have happened. But I only learned about it after the fact. By then, it was too late. By then, it was another issue entirely. Something like this could tear the League apart, probably for good."

Bruce returned and I left, again, for the Trophy Room. After another few minutes, Superman's voice became audible again: "Are you pissed because the League did this or are you pissed because the League did it *to you*?!" but this time Bruce's reply was a low gravel. I couldn't make out the words but I recognized the cadence. Superman was definitely getting an adapted version of: burglary is a crime in this city even if you do look hot in purple leather.

After another minute of that, Bruce called me back in. I nodded, and again he left without a word. Superman watched him go, glanced at me for a moment, peered back in the direction that Bruce had left, and then looked straight ahead—not looking at me or anything in particular, just staring off into space.

"I get it, he doesn't want me down here alone, right?" he muttered, slight disgust creeping into his voice.

"Got it on the first try," I observed. "And they say you guys with the powers aren't very bright."

He tried for the upright hero's look of disdain towards the lowly criminal's taunt—a conceit I've always enjoyed popping even when it isn't a total sham.

"I really don't think you get to do the righteous crimefighter bit," I whispered conspiratorially. "Not down here, not today."

"No, I suppose not," he said frankly, looking me in the eye. "Selina, listen. They did what they did to keep him from interfering. Was it the right thing to do? No. Would I have done the same thing? Certainly not. Was I pleased to find out about it? Hardly. But I was looking at the bigger picture. Telling him about it after the fact would have only started a cycle: they wiped his mind to keep him quiet, but I told him, so now they've got to think about wiping us *both*—which leads to a full League vs. League fight. Back then, the Secret Society, Lex Luthor and Grodd, had a real chance at taking over the world. The Justice League was our last best hope to—"

"Don't you dare quote Lincoln," I interrupted.

Superman paused and took a breath. “Despite what you might think, this wasn’t an easy decision to make. I struggled long and hard over this. It wasn’t an easy choice, but ultimately the good of the many had to come first. Selina, there are things that are bigger than Batman.”

I smiled.

He looked confused at my reaction—the expression that no doubt led to the theories about his not being very bright. We just won. He didn’t know it.

“Bigger than Batman,” I mused. “That’s an argument you don’t want to use again. Look, I’m not here for the conversation, I don’t care about your reason or theirs. But I’m telling you, don’t use that argument again.”

His expression morphed from confusion to slight indignation. He was no doubt wondering who the hell I was to be making a declaration like that. I smiled all the sweeter.

“Did I mention I had a nice chat with your father this morning?”

He nodded.

“I told him about the fall of that miserable little Post writer that said I was a whore. It reminded me of this great story Tom Blake would tell around the Iceberg whenever a new issue hit the stands, just to try and ruffle my fur: This guy at a dinner party asks a socialite if she’ll sleep with him for a million dollars. She says yes. Then he asks if she’ll sleep with him for ten and she’s insulted. She: Certainly not, what do you think I am? He: We have already established *what* you are, now we’re negotiating price.”

Superman is not, in fact, a stupid man. He realized by then what he’d stepped in, and, to his credit, he let me continue without trying to cut me off. Maybe that shot Bruce took about an ordinary human being daring to spank a god hit a nerve. Good.

“‘Bigger than Batman’ is not the same as ‘more important than.’ Abraham Lincoln did what he knew was right, even though it prolonged a war and cost lives, and he risked ‘the last best hope for earth’ to do it. And you stand there pretending right and wrong is a numbers game and use Lincoln’s words to justify it? Look, I DON’T DO THIS SHIT! I shimmy through Cartier’s vents left-left-down-right-squiggle-001004873-jewels-that-don’t-belong-to-me! I can’t *stomach* the priggish little lectures about right and wrong, law and justice, crime and punishment. Not. My. Thing. But this! Your—for lack of a better word—*reasoning* on this is so exquisitely fucked that SOMEBODY has to step up and SAY SO! Sometimes the good of the one *does* outweigh the many because of the principle involved—otherwise, you’re just *negotiating price*. And here’s the kicker, Spiccurl, I think a man raised by the couple I spoke to this morning *knows that*.”

Throughout the whole thing, Superman had this strange mixture of haughty superhero and whipped puppy dog on his face. But now his eyes shot up and locked onto mine. Given my own current state of mind I couldn’t be sure, but I swear I saw his eyes glowing red for an instant. Then, just as suddenly, his face relaxed into a determined stare and he spoke in a calm, frank voice.

“You know, your indignation would carry a lot more weight with me if it weren’t coming from someone who once kidnapped my wife. I’ll take the heat from Bruce. I deserve that. But you? Well, you said it yourself: You. Don’t. Do this.”

I figured that was coming. Parents are a hot button with anybody that doesn’t sprout from spores. There was a weapon—at least, what his kind would consider a

weapon—in the fact that Catwoman was a criminal. That made him superior, in his opinion, and, oh look, push him just *that much*, and, yep, he'll reach for that particular club. It was as inevitable as what Bruce knew was inevitable: push them just enough and they'll reach for those other options that make them "superior." I was about to say so when—

"She does have a point."

It was the first time in a long time that Bruce's voice actually startled me. I didn't realize that he'd come back. Superman looked over at him as he returned.

"Yes. She does." He turned to look directly at me again. "If you want me to say it was a mistake to keep this quiet, I'll allow that it might have been. If you want me to say I would do it all differently today, I don't know that I can. I understand your position: a League that has to be preserved in this way might not be worth saving. I can never feel that way. My mission is to protect the billions of innocent people on this planet the same way that Batman protects Gotham. If maintaining my ability to do that, to protect those I care about means having to sacrifice a—"

"Sold, one superman."

"You and Bruce really are perfect for each other," he said grimly. "You should think about getting married."

"Kiss my ass," I answered, just as grim.

Bruce made it back to where we were standing, looked at me and nodded toward the Trophy Room. Like before, I turned to leave, but Superman interrupted, an annoyed edge to his voice.

"She can stay."

Both Bruce and I spun on him. He was in absolutely NO position to be making demands and I sure as hell wasn't about to "stay"—that might work with your little Kryptonian hyper-mutt, but not me, Flyboy.

"If the both of you are going to be taking pot-shots at me, at least have the common courtesy to do it at the same time. Let's give the tag-team theatrics a rest."

Typical. How completely typical of the hero-addled intellect to think this was some sort of prearranged good cop-bad cop thing. If he couldn't see that Bruce honestly needed to step away in the course of a conversation like this and get some air... Honest to god, I think we'd be better off starting with smart people and teaching them to fly.

I looked to Bruce for an opinion, and he grunted.

There really wasn't much more to be said anyway. I gathered that he already told Bruce what he'd overheard at the Watchtower: the vote was split about 'altering' Dr. Light: Green Arrow, Black Canary and the earlier Green Lantern voting against, Hawkman, Zatanna, and Atom in favor, with the old Flash being the deciding yea.

The vote to wipe Batman's mind was unanimous.

That was the point where Bruce had excused himself from the cave when Superman told him the first time. This time, his face just hardened into this dull grimace and his eyes radiated a pulsing fiery hate. I'd seen that look once before, second Hell Month, searching for Nightwing. The Beast.

"Of course," Psychobat rumbled softly. "Those who voted against the first time were most aware it was wrong. They had to cover themselves."

I felt Superman's eyes on me, so I looked up at him with a calmly pleasant half-smile. *Yes, Spitecurl, I've seen him like this before and I can handle it just fine, what's your problem?*

He went on a verbal ramble about how that incarnation of the League never truly recovered, that it was the beginning of the end of that group, that the division lines drawn that night never truly faded, etc. It was, quite honestly, a pretty disturbing picture. All Bruce had done was turn on a little Psychobat and one of the most powerful beings in the universe loses it.

"...Some of those involved still haven't fully accepted what happened that night, the League itself was already in disarray—and the effects of that night are still being felt today. I'm not even sure if some of the reaction to Sue's death wasn't a continuation of that old argument..."

This, I gather, is what happened "that night" as well. According to what Superman overheard, in the cabal's own words, "You think you've seen him mad... you've never seen him mad, not like this" and they (again in their own words) "panicked."

Pussies.

Superbeings? I've seen him that mad. Harvey has fought him that mad. So has Eddie and Oswald and Tom Blake and Hugo Strange. The absolute joke figures of Gotham have all endured really pissed Psychobat and lived to tell the tale. Earth's mightiest heroes can't go thirty seconds without hitting the panic button.

"...The point being, I was trying to keep the League from completely crumbling—sometimes with my bare hands—and part of the decision was based on not wanting to add a hostile, unknown variable into an already volatile situation..."

Yes, he called Bruce a hostile, unknown variable—to his face. I'll do stuff like that, but *I know how to do it*. I can pull it off—it's one of *my* special powers, it goes with the naughty grin. Superman frankly should have known better.

"Just a reminder that I have Jason Blood on speed dial," I told Bruce as soon as we'd got rid of Superman.

"Don't ever say that again," he growled.

So that was that. I was shut out again. It was 'We' while Superman was present, we were a team, but as soon as he whooshed on home, I was back on the watch list.

"It was just a joke, Bruce. Trying to lighten the mood a little."

"Don't."

I conjured one final image of a magical catglove with claws that could slice into otherwise invulnerable Kryptonian flesh and give a certain chiseled cheek the smack it so richly deserved... He had no idea of the harm he'd done. *"I work more with Superman because of the man. I trust him. I trust his judgment and his ethics and his decency."* And Trust does not come easily to Bruce...

"So what happens now?" I asked.

"Now we ensure that the guilty are punished and the League never resorts to these kinds of tactics again."

CHAPTER 7: PLAYING THE TABLE

*So Iason of the Blood,
You arrogant sot.
And your power is vast?
What sickening rot!*

*Such pomp and formality,
All to proclaim,
You'll be lady-cat's bitch,
Iason of the Shame.*

Etrigan, do shut up for once, Jason thought sourly. I happen to know you –identify– with Bruce. You're not really upset I'm going to help them, you just have to complain about anything I do.

*It's true I admire the Bat's soul of fire,
A fellow demon trapped with wretched men.
And such men! though they fly, to cuckold an ally
Will bring chaos fit to rip the world again!*

*"Meddle not with devils"
Is wisdom old and sound,
For revenge feeds demon revels;
We enjoy it, ask around.*

Bruce had said the reason to start with Superman was "full disclosure." He said "Once the floodgates are open, Superman will tell me whatever he knows." He said "Once I know who's involved and how, I'll know how to proceed." He said the League has a monthly poker game to which he's never been invited. He said that was wise, they'd lose their shirts. He said the way you win at poker isn't by playing your cards, it's by playing the table.

He said he had another guest coming and I should leave the cave.

I went upstairs. I found Nutmeg and we played with the fringe of the carpet. I thought about Jason Blood. He offered to do whatever I asked to ease my pain in this. I wondered if, instead of some magical favor... I wondered if it might wind up being... hell... giving my apartment back.

I told myself this couldn't go on forever. Bruce was reeling from a horrible devastating shock, but he'd get past it. He would come around and open up to me again. It would take some time and I would give him that but... how much? ...at some point, if he kept shutting me out... It was the League that stuck a knife in his back and

it was Clark that knew and didn't tell him—but I was the one living in his house, the one that maybe he didn't want that close anymore.

I couldn't believe how foolish I'd been, how safe and happy I'd let myself become. I'd let myself make a home here. It was his house, not mine, and with this one thing that happened years ago that I had nothing to do with, it could all be taken away. How could I have been so STUPID! Feline independence, it was all I knew, and for a few kisses I'd let him, somehow, take all that away and turn it into—

"Selina?"

Fuck him, he never knocks. I looked up; I don't think I've ever been angrier with him in my whole life, even that time he kept me from the Katz Collection.

"Just once, as an experiment," I spat, "Why don't you pretend the doorframe is a Joker henchman, make a fist and act accordingly."

"J'onn is downstairs. He said your mind was screaming."

"He should stay the hell out of my head," I hissed.

"He does. He works very hard, constantly, not to invade others' thoughts. Selina, you were screaming. It wasn't something he could ignore."

"Fine, I'm wrong again. J'onn is wonderful. The League is wonderful. Life is great. Now go away, I'll try to keep my thoughts quiet so it won't disrupt your meeting."

"I'm sorry I've hurt you," he whispered, and he was stroking my hair the way you pet a dog. This was exactly how he sucked me in the first time. The man inside the bat, it's such a seductive idea: under all that Battitude, he's a man of flesh and blood, and we could care about each other. "My poor Selina." My. Like I'm something that belongs to him. He kissed the top of my head. Bastard. This was how he did it. This was how he took Catwoman's independence and left me in this sorry place where my home and my happiness were all tied up with him. "Come downstairs. You're going to like what J'onn has to say."

A part of me wanted to resist, refuse, and just plain SCRATCH HIM. The rest of me was desperate to hear what it was I would like.

I felt his fingers at my chin, turning my face up to meet his.

"Selina, last year you dug in like a wildcat to get me to leave the cave during Hell Month, remember? Time to pay up, Kitten. Come downstairs. It gets better, starting now."

On the way down to the cave, I let myself hope, just for a second, that Bruce was right, that it really might get better. It was a scary feeling, hope.

We were walking down the stairs into the Great Hall. Bruce explained why he was bringing "J'onn" in before taking this to the full League.

"Clark might revere everything the JLA stands for, but the League is the closest thing to *family* J'onn has known on this planet. He deserves better than to have this sprung on him at a meeting, in front of all of them."

"And?"

"You think I have an ulterior motive for seeing him alone?"

"You said you were going to play the table," I reminded him. "If the League is like family to him, their turning on one of their own would have to strike him as— what?"

I stopped because he was staring at me just like he had in the cave, right before he turned on his heel and left.

"You are quite the little strategist, aren't you?" he grveled—Batman's deepest gravel, not quite vault disapproval but something close. Then he resumed in a more conversational tone. "Yes, that possibility had occurred to me. So did the possibility that, because of the way he feels about the League, he might think just like Clark, but moreso."

"JLA first, last and always, no matter who they have to step on to keep it running smoothly, yay-team?"

"Yes."

"And the only way to find out was to have him over and ask?"

"Yes."

"Here, in private, where it couldn't bite you unexpectedly in front of the rest of them."

He grunted, but said nothing more until we reached the grandfather clock, then he turned to me.

"I still wanted to tell him first and privately so he could deal with it *alone* and *privately*. That's why I didn't want you in the cave, Selina. I wasn't shutting you out."

I couldn't answer. He'd already opened the clock passage, which meant an end to our private conversation. When we reached the main cavern, I saw they had swiveled two of the workstation chairs to face each other. That's how Bruce broke the news. In my mind's eye, I saw them sitting there... It seemed strangely tactful (for Bruce), and I was sorry I'd questioned his motives.

Martian Manhunter was still seated; not exactly slumped, but you could tell he was reeling from the shock. For one thing, he was *teal*. I know zilch about Martian biology. I know he's a shapeshifter, and I presume the green I've always seen him in is his natural color. I know when human beings go a full three shades redder, whiter, or grayer than normal, it means something radical is going on inside. I don't know exactly what happens chemically to make Martian skin bluer, but I didn't have to be a telepath to know there was powerful emotion fueling it.

"Hello, Selina," he said mildly.

"Good morning, Īōnń," I answered.

Bruce shot me a look. And Īōnń chuckled. It was quiet for a few seconds, and I wondered if this was the awkward pause it seemed to be or if they were talking to each other telepathically.

Then Īōnń looked directly at me.

"Your mind was screaming," he said simply.

"Your skin is teal," I told him, just as frankly. "Just one of those days for all of us, I guess."

He nodded.

"There are no words to explain something like this in human language," he said finally. "For a Martian, such callous disregard for the mind of another being is tantamount to blasphemy. We are taught at a very early age to respect the thoughts and mental privacy of ALL others. To alter another's mind—to *invade* a—*a colleague* and *friend's psyche*—to manipulate his *memory* without his knowledge and against his

will? This idea is so egregiously foul, there is no way to express... What Zatanna and the others have done is the Martian equivalent of—of—crashing a party and defecating in the punchbowl.”

I couldn't help but smile at that. Bruce had an ally. It wasn't going to be him against the whole League. Not everybody with a superpower was blind to what had happened and what it meant.

“I would catch mental glimpses,” he was saying, “glimpses of *something* when Hawkman and Green Arrow would go at it. But it never made any sense to me, so I dismissed it. For that, I apologize, Bruce. If I had thought to look into it, if this could have come to light in some other way—”

I thought that might happen. Heroes. They're such a mess sometimes.

“Let me interrupt you right there,” I put in. “I have a suggestion from the world of self-seeking unprincipled criminal infidels. I suggest you don't turn this into one of those ‘everybody is at fault’ deals. That's a cheap way to excuse the ones who really are to blame, and it spits in the face of everyone they've hurt. And that's you, Íðmí, almost as much as Bruce. I can't imagine anybody else being more upset by this or—”

“Flash,” he said softly.

Then he looked up at Bruce.

“His mind has been screaming as loud as hers was. I thought it was because of Sue. But if they told him about this...”

He trailed off. He and Bruce got that look, when they're speaking telepathically. I assumed it was because J'onn didn't think I knew Wally's identity (which meant he really *didn't* go snooping around in unsuspecting brains—score another point in the not-all-metas-are-shits column) or else it had to do with that earlier Flash, Wally's predecessor, who cast that deciding vote to alter Dr. Light.

“I'll leave you two alone,” I said, with as close to a half-smile as I could manage.

I went back upstairs. Alfred made me tea. He's convinced it helps. I'll admit it's warming, but I couldn't find it comforting. His gesture, so well meaning, was just another reminder of how much I'd settled in here. The “Bat-family” was a family, but it wasn't mine. It was Bruce's. They had made me feel at home, and like any cat given half a chance, I'd made myself at home. In all that hominess, I started feeling safe and loved and settled. And I forgot that cats have to be free. Cats don't need anyone. If you need them, you can't be free, you're trapped.

I was trapped—and I had no one to blame but myself. For a few kisses I'd let him... I couldn't go to Jason now and take advantage of his offer because Bruce didn't want it. I didn't have the option to steal anymore because it would ruin our life together and that had become so important to me I couldn't even consider... and he could toss me out any time he wanted. This was his house, not mine. And I let myself feel safe here. I let myself think I'd found everything I had lost: a home, a family... love.

I let myself think *he* had given me everything I'd lost.

But it's none of those things. It's just Batman's house and Batman's butler and a garden out back where the old Robin married the old Batgirl. It's a goddamn crimefighter commune, and I let myself pretend it was some kind of—

I looked up and J'onn was standing there.

“Screaming again?” I asked.

“Not exactly. Bruce and I are about to leave for the Watchtower, and I wished to talk to you before I left.” He paused—one of those ‘choosing my words carefully’ pauses that you just know means fun times ahead. “You realize, don’t you, Selina, that he is very different with you than with anyone else. The man you know is vastly dissimilar to—”

“I’m not some cabana bunny he picked up on the Riviera, Ĵōnń,” I cut him off. “I’ve faced him on a rooftop, I brought cookies to a friend he put in traction last Hell Month, I know what he’s like.”

“I don’t doubt it. That is not what I meant. Selina, it’s not that we see something in him that you don’t. It’s that you’re allowed to see a part of him none of us are privy to, even me, and I’m a telepath.”

“What’s your point, Ĵōnń?”

“It is home. When he’ll be the man with you he won’t be with anyone else, when you make compromises for him you wouldn’t make for any other person, that is home and that is family.”

“I thought you didn’t go poking around in other people’s heads uninvited?”

“I don’t. I didn’t invade your thoughts just now, I simply... *recognized* them. I lost my home and family as well, and I had to find another. One that may not outlast this day—but I am going to fight for it. Don’t throw yours away.”

I went down to the cave. I badly wanted a few moments alone with Bruce before he left to deal with the full League. Unfortunately, for all the hidden feelings Ĵōnń had picked up on since his arrival, he was oblivious on that one. He walked with me down to the cave and kept hanging around the transporters. I guess his mind was thoroughly locked onto the upcoming “fight to save his family” (i.e. the big throwdown at the Watchtower), he just didn’t realize and wouldn’t take the hint. I only wanted some alone-time, a minute or two, no more, with Bruce before he left.

Bruce was already at the transporters and thoroughly in bat-mode, of course, so all I could manage was a soft touch of his cheek, which he tolerated—barely.

“Give ‘em hell,” I whispered. He didn’t say a word, he didn’t grunt, he barely even breathed, but there was this wicked spark in his eye, just for a split second. I knew that spark—angry sex—passion, violence, pure mainline Bruce.

Again, I couldn’t help but smile. They’d never know what hit them.

I will never be the sort of woman who waits in the drawing room or sits around the cave while he goes off and fights the good fight. I knew I had to go out. Normally, it would be the catsuit and the museum, Egyptian wing, or maybe Cartier’s. But today I had a much better alternative.

Jason opened the door before I knocked.

“Let me guess, you sensed I was coming?” I asked with a naughty grin. “You know, between the magic and the telepaths and the superhearing, it’s no wonder Bruce gets

edgy around you people. Individually, you might be fine, but collectively, after the third or fourth episode in a single day—”

“‘You people,’” Jason quoted acidly. “Selina, please, I have spent years trying to disabuse the Justice League of the notion that I am their ‘Wizard on Call,’ so to speak, simply because they include my name on their rosters. You yourself are technically on the rolls, I believe. You’ve helped them on occasion. You would certainly take offense if I included you in a sweeping generalization about—”

“Yes,” I admitted. “Yes, Jason, touché. It was a figure of speech and I apologize. Let’s start again.”

I knocked on the doorframe, and he assumed a look of dry sarcasm as he intoned, “Why Selina, what a delightful surprise.” He ushered me in and I saw he had a number of large, old books collected on the table. “I take it we’re ready to proceed?” he said, assuming that look I can only describe as the ‘supernatural badass.’

“Yes,” I told him. “But in a different way than we planned. Bruce had a hissy, as expected.”

“Ah,” he said after a pause.

“He can’t stand the idea of any kind of spell worked on him, and I have to respect that. I mean, he was right all along...” I trailed off. I would feel so much better, so much less *vulnerable*, if I could know he was protected that way. I sighed. “He says he’ll handle Zatanna himself... and that I have to trust him.”

“I see. So I am dismissed as court magician after all.”

I looked up at him.

“Not entirely. There is still something you can do for me that shouldn’t offend Bruce’s scruples, something that serves *my* idea of justice. I want to use magic to invade *their* privacy this time around. I want to see what’s going on up there today, at the Watchtower, when they have their conclave to settle this mess.”

“There is a certain symmetry to that,” Jason said with a smile. “Come.”

I followed him back to what used to be my exercise room. And I felt sick.

“Every magician of worth has a *sanctum sanctorum*,” he declared with his hand on the doorknob, “that is both repository of knowledge and power center, a *cella vires*. Like Batman’s cave, it is more than a space for convenient storage, it is an expression of who the magic-user is as a magic-user, an aspect of his being. What I am saying, Selina, is that it is no small thing that I admit you to into this room. The seeing ritual we shall undertake together begins when you step through this door and enter this space that is so intertwined with my magick.”

I felt sick. I knew what I had to do.

And I knew what a crock it was when Clark talked about the hard decision he’d wrestled with. It wasn’t hard at all, *knowing* the right thing to do. The hard part was sucking it up and *doing* it. I took a deep breath, forced down the butterflies, opened my mouth, and hoped for the best.

“Jason, I spanked Superman this morning for not coming clean to his friend about a damaging secret. It would be a level of hypocrisy even I’m not capable of for me to stand here and not tell you... to let you go on with this thinking... Jason. Last year, when Janus and Hella took over the park, I... I needed my costume and supplies, there was no time to go out to the manor and... Jason, I broke into this apartment and went

into that room to use your Tempus Stones, so I could get my costume out of the past when this was my apartment.”

“Very creative,” he said dryly. “I wondered if you would tell me.”

“You knew then?”

“Bruce knew his mind was violated without knowing the particulars. Do you imagine it’s any different for a magician and his *cella vires*? With something so personal and of your essence, it is impossible not to know on some level if it has been... touched.”

“I’m sorry, Jason. I didn’t realize back then that there was a personal side to it. I thought it was just a room. I’m terribly sorry to have done that to you. I’ll do anything I can to make it right.”

“As you say, Selina, you didn’t realize. And there *were* pressing circumstances that caused you to act as you did, but I notice you haven’t mentioned them. Instead of reminding me that the park was overrun with demons and Berserkers, several trying to kill Bruce, that he was hampered by an enchantment reliving the pain of old injuries as he fought, how Superman himself was unable to slow the events racing towards Ragnarok... instead of explaining all that in order to justify your actions, you merely *apologized* once you understood the personal nature of the injury you had inflicted... And that, Selina, is good of you. I accept your apology. And that is what I meant by symmetry.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, of course you don’t. Come inside, you will understand soon.”

He pointed me to a small, low table with two chairs. I sat, and he took a strange bowl off the shelf and laid it in front of me. The outside was silver; the inside looked like mother of pearl. “You’ll be surprised to learn, Selina, that you have already paid for that day, breaking into my sanctum sanctorum and stealing my magic by using those Tempus Stones. Do you recall helping me take the Leabhar Seun from Lyle of Avalon?”

“Of course, that’s how I found out about Etrigan.”

“Yes. That was how you paid the debt. The help you gave me that night, obtaining the Leabhar Seun, but also the comfort you gave me when Lyle sprung her trap and brought on that—that—*identity crisis* for lack of a better word, plus the burden of knowing about Etrigan... all that was your debt to me, Selina. Paid in full.”

“Jason, that’s ridiculous. That was more than a year before I even gave you my apartment.”

“Temporal debts work that way sometimes; it’s all interconnected. You helped me that night because you would one day violate this room, and it is because you helped me then that I am able to help you now.”

He held up a bottle of blue glass with a stopper of silver filigree carved with Celtic knots.

“Water of Avalon,” he announced, pulling the stopper and pouring the bottle’s contents into the bowl. “I returned the Leabhar Seun to Lyle when I thought she had learned her lesson—and this was my price. The Water of Avalon is the stuff of magical seeing, Selina.”

When the bowl was filled, he set the bottle aside and sat in the chair opposite me, laid his hands on the table on each side of the bowl, palms up, and looked up at me with that piercing, supernatural-badass glare.

I looked back at him, down at his hands and back at him. And I reminded myself of the sixteen times I'd repeated to Bruce how I trusted Jason Blood. Then I hesitantly laid my hands palms down touching his. I felt a whirl of red, fiery malice.

"That's Etrigan," Jason said blandly. "Don't be afraid, he is in good spirits today. He is something of a fan of Batman's. He is quite eager to witness the wrath of the man-demon."

"So am I," I whispered.

"Hush. Still your mind. Concentrate on what you would see... The Watchtower, the League, the Batman, now in this present time... And look into the water."

I looked at the bowl, the creamy whiteness of the mother of pearl visible through the clear water. I thought of the Watchtower conference room. I had been there once, after Prometheus, I waited there while they cleared out the press... I visualized the room in as much detail as I could remember. I held the image and thought of the present... Batman would be there... and Martian Manhunter... and Superman... the creamy whiteness of the bowl became glassy-white, and the water took on a silvery mirror appearance. It became harder to distinguish the water from the bowl... I thought of the Watchtower and suddenly... there it was. We were looking right into it like a movie screen.

Jason's hands curled slowly around mine and he took a long vibrating breath that sounded like a snore.

"There," he said at last. "We can relax now and watch, as long as our hands remain in contact."

"Talk has its place, naturally," Jason announced after about an hour, "too often, one has to keep the heroes from blindly throwing themselves into certain death. But when they finally do choose to exercise speech as well as shiny rings and magic bracelets, they can become tedious. And then one almost wishes they'd go back to the blind throwing again."

I just stared at him for a second. It honestly took a few moments to process individual words. There had been such a monsoon of rhetorical nonsense.

"How," I managed at last, "can these people... *function*... in the world?"

"I recall having the same thought about the dons of Oxford," Jason said blandly, "around 1360. The debate that day was translating the bible into the vernacular against the wishes of the papacy... As I recall, they didn't reach a conclusion until 1610."

We had endured four cycles around the table. Someone would say their piece—and then, often as not, Wonder Woman would step in like Dan Rather after a presidential address, repeating what they had said, explaining the difficult parts in case anybody didn't get it, and then telling everyone what they should think about it.

"Themyscirans tend to have certain predictable attitudes, in my experience," was Jason's summary.

I noticed that sometimes Aquaman cut her off, and sometimes he just sat there grinding a knuckle into the table. Everyone else seemed to tune her out, like they were used to it. I did too, and I used that time while she was talking to scope out the others.

Flash was certainly taking it the hardest. I remembered J'onn in the cave saying he would be more upset than anybody. Green Lantern looked shocked, but when he spoke, it was with a "who am I to judge" attitude that would have pissed me off under other circumstances. He was one of the "Big-7," he was in that meeting. The chair he sat in made it his place to judge. But I couldn't really feel angry. I got the feeling he didn't care as far as the *debate* went. His eyes kept going over to Flash. All he saw was a friend in pain and that was his concern, not the big ethical questions the rest of them would argue to death. So I couldn't be angry, even though he wasn't exactly on our side. It was exactly how I felt. I didn't care about the big philosophical issues either. I only cared that they hurt Bruce.

Plastic Man was next. To say he was stunned and disgusted does not begin to do him justice. Every time I've met him, he works it in that he's a reformed criminal, and I guess there's no zealot like a convert, because he's got that black-and-white thing down pat: This was *wrong*, just flat out *wrong*, it was something *criminals* do, *not heroes*, and certainly not The Justice League.

"It is painful to see one's heroes fall, isn't it," Jason remarked in a rather bored tone when Eel had finished.

"Yes," I murmured, "But there's no growth without pain." Jason looked at me strangely and I didn't know why I'd said it. "Maybe it's better like this," I demurred, "for him to see they're not perfect, rather than to blindly assume anything the League does must be right and wind up getting bit."

"Like Bruce was?"

"Bruce never had blind faith in anyone, Jason."

"But he did. He believed in *himself*, Selina. He believes in Bruce Wayne and his ability to take on all comers with his *mind* and his *body*, and what he himself has been able to develop them into. By attacking that, by robbing him of his control of that—Selina, for all your indignation, I wonder if you understand the true nature of the *crime* that was committed by these 'heroes.'"

Diana finally got the floor, officially, not just offering color commentary on what everyone else had said. Just as Jason had said, she was thoroughly predictable as a "peace through superior firepower" kinda gal: whatever it took to make someone understand, using whatever tools are necessary. She didn't view someone as unbalanced as Dr. Light as a person having any rights whatsoever to his mind, body, or will. He was a rabid animal that should be put down.

She never once looked at Batman, but I watched only him while she was talking. She never alluded to what happened to *him*, it was as if it was in no way related to the subject under discussion. Dr. Light deserved it, that was the beginning and the end of the conversation. I watched him watch her talk, knowing he was seeing the same thing I was: the ultimate vindication of the protocols, the ultimate vindication of everything he said about superpowers being open to abuse. The mortal man objected to what they had done, so they *used their powers to prevent his stopping them*. Whatever it takes to make someone understand using whatever tools are necessary.

Aquaman spoke last, and I was reminded he was the one in this group who was a professional politician. He was, like J'onn, a telepath, and as such he was "appalled." And yet he admitted he had been known to quiet the minds of out-of-control sea life—although he was quick to add that, in those cases, the animals were poisoned and diseased as a result of surfacers' criminal disruption of the aquatic ecosystem. But he could, in a sense, understand where the Leaguers were coming from in so far as the initial question concerning Dr. Light.

Wonder Woman puffed up and looked about to launch into her approving recapitulation of his remarks, but he held up a hand in her direction.

"I'm not finished," he said sternly, "I said what I feel as a telepath and as a member of this League. There is another role I assume which offers me a perspective none of you have. I am a *king*. I am not a citizen of a democratic republic; I am a ruling monarch. We don't *vote* in Atlantis: we debate, we discuss, and then ultimately *I decide*. What I decide will please one group and displease another, every time. And unlike some," here he shot a withering look at Diana, "I do not have the luxury of pretending the argument I personally agree with is the only one of worth. Because those people on the 'other side' are not rabid dogs and lowly criminals; they are my subjects, no less than the ones I agree with. If it is a question of great moral and ethical import, I will always—regardless of my personal beliefs—err on the side of *caution*," his voice shifted on that last word, the way Batman's does talking about justice.

"The day I don't, the day I use my power to support my view regardless of what would be best for my subjects, is the day I cease to be a ruler and become a despotic tyrant. This group, these seven rogue Leaguers were *divided in their views*. No decision of this kind should EVER hinge on one man's vote. This was a question of monumental moral and ethical import, and they were *DIVIDED*. It is obscene that they did not err on the side of caution. I move that we dispense with any more of this whaleshit and call the surviving members of this 'secret inner League' up here to answer for themselves. I personally would like to hear Oliver Queen explain to me what kind of crimefighter stands by and lets this happen in front of him on the grounds that he was 'outvoted.'"

"Wow," I murmured, "That was almost worth sitting through the hour and a half of, what did he say, whaleshit?"

Jason scowled like I said he'd look good in pink polka dots.

"I said *almost*," I repeated.

The League took a recess, thank God, while they summoned the surviving members of the cabal: Green Arrow, Black Canary, Hawkman, Zatanna—and technically Atom, although he had dropped out of sight after discovering his ex-wife killed Sue Dibny and leaving her at Arkham. Nobody expected him to show and everyone seemed to agree that he'd suffered enough.

The recess gave Jason and I a chance to let go of each other's hands. We stood up, stretched our legs, and in Jason's case, he went off to the kitchen. He returned with a tray and set out a plate of biscotti, another of chocolate, two small glasses and a small bottle of wine.

“Very important to have sugar in the bloodstream when channeling even the smallest amounts of magic,” he decreed.

“And the bottle,” I said, pointing. “Very important to have a belt or two in there when listening to even the smallest amount of crimefighters pontificating?”

“Vin santo,” he answered, pouring, “Italian sweet wine, I’m quite fond of dipping the biscotti in it—your cell phone is about to ring. You’ll have excellent reception as well as privacy on the terrace.”

I reached for my purse, and, sure enough, just as my hand touched it, Bruce’s ring sounded. I went out to the terrace and heard the familiar :: *Selina, secure the line.* ::

I felt such a pang hearing that voice. All he was going through, it was so wrong. As if he didn’t have enough pain already. I wanted us to be in bed, holding each other, with all this behind us. But he wasn’t calling me for that kind of comfort. After all that self-important bluster, he wanted to hear me light and heedless and feline.

“Hey, Handsome,” I purred. “How’s it going?”

:: *As expected.* ::

“As expected-good, or as expected-we’re screwed?”

:: *Poker.* ::

“Meow.”

:: *We’ll be going back in a few minutes... Selina, you’re watching, aren’t you?* ::

Busted. It had been a long time since he’d so completely read me.

“How did you know?”

:: *Poker. Playing the table. You’re at Jason’s, you’re watching, you’re using magic to do it.*
::

“Yes.”

There was a long pause during which I decided to answer the question he wouldn’t ask.

“And that’s the only way I’m using it, Bruce. Nothing I’m doing here will touch you in any way. You can trust me and believe that, or not. If you can read me so well that you knew I’d be here, then you should know you can trust me on the rest.”

:: *I would still rather you didn’t use it at all. I would prefer—* ::

“I know. And I’m doing it anyway. It’s hardly the first time I’ve done something you’d rather I didn’t. The entire Impressionist gallery at the GMA comes to mind.”

He grunted. It was music to my ears. The grunt was pure Batman, my Batman, the real Batman. Not the Uber-Psychobat pulling back from me and everyone else because of what Superman had done.

:: *I have to go,* :: he graveled—but he didn’t hang up. Instead, there was a long pause, and then, :: *Selina, when this is over, tell Jason to show you Zatanna’s apartment.* ::

The words “witch hunt” were used a lot when the meeting reconvened and the cabal were called up one at a time to explain themselves. Green Arrow went so far as to give a whole history lesson:

“Y’see, witches have a numb spot somewhere on their body because they’ve had sex with the devil. So to find out if someone is a witch, here’s what you do: stick a needle

into every inch of our skin and if we don't say 'Ai' each time: Guilty! The way of the matchstick we go."

Plastic Man started to say something about there being a reason witches were hunted in the first place, that nobody liked the idea of someone using magical muscle to victimize their neighbors. I couldn't follow very well because Jason was chuckling.

"I take it Etrigan has something to share?" I guessed.

"He does, on the subject of demonic lovemaking and the aftereffects."

"Do tell," I said.

"Selina, I would not repeat this for the world, especially not to a lady."

"Oh, c'mon, Jason, it's been three hours and this is the first six seconds that are interesting."

"Let's just say Etrigan strongly denies that a female who has enjoyed the –cough–*pleasure* of demonic caresses becomes in any way unresponsive, quite the reverse, he says. And he has some intriguing theories as to how impotent and inept human males could have arrived at such a ridiculous conclusion."

I smiled.

"Quite the hellacious sex machine, eh, Ety?"

"Selina please, I beg you, do not encourage him."

We returned our attention to the Justice League. A new tension had settled on the table. Aquaman and J'onn were both going after Green Arrow. The others, especially Flash and Green Lantern, had gone quiet.

Up until now, Jason had seemed bored with the proceedings. He was suddenly riveted to the scene before us.

"Because sometimes you **HAVE** to do what you'd rather **NOT** do!" Arrow was yelling. "And **SOMETIMES** you don't even have the luxury of **KNOWING** it's the right thing. And you **LIVE** with that because it's the **PRICE YOU PAY** for **DOING WHAT NEEDS DONE**. And **THAT** is as much a part of being a hero as running into the burning building."

"We no longer know if you'll run into that building," J'onn replied calmly, in marked contrast to Green Arrow's angry shouts. "If it's some corporate headquarters strip-mining valuable resources, you might decide the greater good is served by letting it burn."

"Or Hawkman might decide those employees deserve to die, and you'll go along because you're outvoted," Aquaman added.

"Of course," Jason said quietly. "J'onn and Arthur were part of the first League incarnation. They were both outsiders and the League offered them a sense of connectedness with the rest of the world. The Justice League is their 'baby,' in a sense, and this goes beyond standard 'teenage rebellion'—this is your sixteen year old stealing the family car, robbing a bank and murdering thirteen people."

"The others have gone quiet," I noted.

"Now that they're over the initial shock, they've started to notice the strain between Batman and Superman. They must know there's a bond there, just about everyone does. We can see the tension between them from here, Selina. In the room, it must be palpable."

I watched and he was right, just about everyone was sneaking glances at Batman and Superman.

“So now they get it. If this is big enough to drive a wedge between *them*...”

“Yes. Quite.”

It went on. Aquaman was relentless. He went after Hawkman and Zatanna for disrespecting their fellow Leaguers so thoroughly that they first formed this secret inner group to do what they knew no full League would ever consent to, and then had the audacity to proceed even over the objections of their fellow conspirators. He went after Green Arrow and Black Canary for not fighting for their beliefs. They were the ones in that circle, they knew what was going on, and they had a duty to fight for what they knew to be right.

When it was over, each of the four had the chance to make a final statement. Zatanna whined that she “never meant to hurt any of them”—it was a disgusting display and I was delighted when Jason muttered something about “conjuring up a little responsibility for what you do with your magicks.”

Hawkman did that much; he didn’t make excuses. He behaved like the Nazis at Nuremberg, but he didn’t make excuses. He didn’t accept that the panel he sat before had any authority to judge his actions. He did what he did, he’d do it again. The end.

Black Canary came the closest to looking genuinely contrite. And Green Arrow spoke directly to Flash.

“You know I loved Hal. You know I loved Barry. This has been twisting like a corkscrew in my chest for years. Do you think I wanted to sully their memories? There’s not a thing any of you can do to me to add to the hell I’ve known living with this.”

It occurred to me, listening to them as I held Jason Blood’s hands with Etrigan’s hellfire coursing through his veins, that I would like to test that little theory.

“Selina,” Jason said evenly, “don’t let the hatred into your heart. It will make a *hole* there.”

“I want to hurt them, Jason. I want it so badly.”

“I know. Now let it go.”

J’onn was talking.

“If any villain had used magic or technology to program the mind of another being to change their moral code and bring it into agreement with his own, if a member of this League tried to stop it and was prevented in this way, there would be NO DEBATE WHATSOEVER about right, wrong, gray areas, slippery slopes, or witch hunts. Why because Hawkman, Zatanna, Green Arrow and Black Canary are in this League do we put them in another category? Are there now to be two sets of right and wrong? One for the Justice League and one for everyone else?”

It was very eloquent, but I just wanted to hurt them. I thought of Bruce clenching his fist as he had another nightmare. I wanted to see them suffer, I wanted to hear the screaming.

“Don’t let the hate in,” Jason repeated. “Trust him.”

Over Batman and J’onn’s strong objections, the “Justice” League decided no actions were to be taken against the former members involved in “the incident” beyond revoking their Reservist status and “barring them from using any League ‘services or equipment’ — Watchtower, teleporters, etc.”

Batman also instructed them to reveal all that had happened to their JSA, Birds of Prey, and other teammates, because the other teams needed to be aware of what they had done, and each individual would have to decide for themselves if they wished to continue working with them.

“Tell them or I will” was the phrase he used.

He was looking at Superman when he said it.

Once the former members were gone, Batman addressed the remaining Leaguers. He informed them that if anything like this was to happen again—or was even *considered*—the League would be instantly disbanded, the Watchtower would be shut down and dismantled, and he would use every resource at his disposal to ensure that no Justice League ever formed again.

Wonder Woman went ballistic—no single person, not even Batman, had that kind of power over a group like the Justice League! They were bigger than any one man! It was ludicrous and insulting to believe that he could exert that kind of control or make that kind of demand!

Batman reached silently into his belt, pulled out a small device the size of a credit card and hit a button. The Watchtower plunged into darkness and then that deep voice that makes my toes curl whenever I hear it uttered two simple words:

“Watch me.”

The grumbles of dissent started, but were instantly silenced as J’onn stood up and walked around the table to stand next to Batman. “And he wouldn’t be alone,” he said firmly.

Batman restored the power as he and J’onn stared around the table at the others. J’onn was the one to finally break the silence.

“Regardless of your personal beliefs,” he said, “permanently manipulating the mind of another being—especially against their will or without their knowledge—is flat out *wrong*. And a Justice League—*any* Justice League—that engages in such practices to impose its will on others does not deserve to exist. We’re better than that. We *should* be better than that. If you don’t understand that, get out now. Your personal beliefs are your own, but the Justice League will not engage in this behavior again. If you can’t accept that, you don’t want to be in this League, and no matter what abilities you bring to the table, *we don’t want you here.*”

Diana, ever the diplomat (and clearly the one most offended by the idea of someone that wasn’t her dictating the way it was going to be), attempted to diffuse the situation by calling for a vote. There was a harsh, growling “NO!” that, had I not been looking directly at him, I would have sworn came from Bruce. It could have been the water we were looking through, the details were a bit unclear, but I could swear I saw that teal color creeping back into J’onn as he glared at Diana.

“No. No more votes. As Leon McKinley, I spent a great deal of time in Washington last year, as all of you know. What private time I had, I spent at the Jefferson Memorial. There is a quote on its rotunda that fascinated me. ‘I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.’ That man is the architect of your democracy, Diana. *I have sworn upon the altar of God*

eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.' We will NOT vote on this. The *morality* of the League will not be decided by consensus.

"Those of us who see this abuse of power for what it is will not stand aside this time and let it occur under a banner of 'Justice.' 'Almighty God hath created the mind free,' that's what your Thomas Jefferson said. The JUSTICE League *will not* act like this ever again, or the Justice League will no longer exist. It will cease be a *Justice League* in anything but name—and if it takes my last breath, I swear to you I will not allow any of you to use that name to expunge the good, the self-sacrifice and heroism this organization has come to represent. The Justice League DOES NOT do this. I *WILL NOT* be a part of any organization that would do this. If you will not be a part of an organization that won't, leave. And having left, if you use your powers to impose your will and code on others, know that the Justice League will stand against you as we would any tyranny over the mind of man."

CHAPTER 8: HANDS-ON KARMA

While I'm not clear on all the intricacies of the history, I know that Martian Manhunter is more than just another member of the JLA. Those inclined to be a little rococo with their metaphors have called him the heart, the conscience, and in one case, the "central nervous system" of the Justice League.

However you want to phrase it, he's respected—a lot. He has the kind of pull that only comes from being quietly right over many years, not spouting off on every subject or taking a hard line on every opinion. When he finally does put his foot down, it means something; it has weight and mass. It has the calm, silent force of a thousand conversations where one or another of them had prattled like a fool and he sat there, patient and understanding, knowing whatever it was they were saying was terribly important to them, but mindful of its true (in)significance in the greater scheme of things.

But he'd spoken now, and he'd done it for us. He'd stood beside Batman and said No, this is not how beings of honor and integrity use their powers. He'd spoken firmly and finally. After a speech like that, the matter was done with: The Justice League does not do this. The only one who could have challenged the finality of J'onn's declaration was Superman—and he wasn't saying a word. Diana looked at him. It wasn't an appeal exactly, but she seemed to know that he was the last chance to dispel that aura that the final word had been spoken, the decision was made and the discussion concluded.

And Superman did not say one word. He just looked at Bruce as if there was no other person in the room.

The meeting adjourned, and I turned to Jason.

"I have a special power of my own," I mused. "On any given day, I can tell Alfred to make leg of lamb *a la Pennyworth*. Do you think it would be an unscrupulous abuse of power if I rewarded a speech like that by inviting J'onn over for dinner?"

Jason raised an eyebrow.

"Since I myself am eligible to receive some expression of your gratitude, Selina, I would certainly not condemn using Mr. Pennyworth's estimable culinary skills to do so. In all my years assisting Batman and the full Justice League, I can't recall anyone making such a delightful suggestion. It's been quite a while since I've had a really good leg of lamb."

I grinned, assured him he would be on the guest list, and forwarded Bruce's message that once the League meeting broke up, Jason should show me Zatanna's apartment. He seemed to listen for a moment, then slowly laid his hands back down on the table beside the bowl holding the Water of Avalon, and he looked up at me, his eyes glowing faintly red. As I laid my hands back down over his, that whirling malevolence felt stronger than it had before.

"Etrigan is nearer the surface?" I asked, although there wasn't any doubt; I could feel him there, fiery and cruel.

“Yes, he is here,” Jason said dully. “This *isn’t* vengeance, Etrigan. Batman is about Justice, not retribution.” He paused, and I felt that malice surge into me, as if Jason had a fever and the heat of it coursed out of his hands and into mine. It pulsed halfway up my forearms while Jason went on talking. “Because she needs a serious lesson in every action having a consequence,” he was saying, “She tends to forget that fact most of the time because she can get away with it.”

The whirling fire surged again: Etrigan was answering Jason, and I started to feel the fiery hatred had a rhythm to it, like poetry, almost like music. And the music wanted the same thing I did: to hurt them, to see them suffer, to taste it like rich fruity wine.

Jason was apologizing for the delay and pointing my attention back to the bowl. His voice seemed more distant than it had before. We had chatted easily while we watched the League meeting; it was like watching television. But this time the image forming in the bowl seemed more real, more present, than anything in the room with me. It was a simple apartment, plainly furnished, with a bare brick wall dominated by a large theatrical poster advertising *ZATARA: The Master of Magic* and several smaller framed photographs of various costumed heroes. That room was more real than Jason’s sanctum or the table, the bowl or the water. There was a woman in the room, more tangible than Jason or the warmth coming from his hands. She was wearing blue jeans and a tight black T-shirt pocked with yellow stars and moons. She sat alone at a small table, finishing her dinner. It was Zatanna, and I could *feel* her as if she was the one whose hand I was holding, linked in some magic ritual, and it was Jason we were passively watching hundreds of miles away... I could see *right into her*.

She stood up to take her dishes to the kitchen—or at least she thought she was going to stand... but she didn’t. She just *stopped*—and I could feel it, I could *sense* her confusion—she *couldn’t move*. She tried again, but for some reason her body wasn’t responding. She tried to speak, to call out a spell to free herself, but even her mouth, even her tongue, wouldn’t budge. Panic tickled, just the slightest touch of it was starting to rise in her, that first little blip of fright, I could feel it. I could taste it—a rich, fruity wine—she was starting to panic—and then this growling voice came from the shadow in the corner. I closed my eyes, just for a moment, to savor the sound...

“Interesting fact about the brain...”

God, I love that voice.

“...While voluntary motor function is controlled in the motor cortex, located at the back of the frontal lobe, involuntary motor function is controlled deep in the brain stem. By shutting down the motor cortex as well as various pieces of the parietal lobe, you can effectively paralyze a person—rendering them completely immobile—while still allowing the base biological functions to continue.”

Batman stepped out of the shadows and into her direct line of sight, slowly approaching the table where Zatanna sat motionless.

“The heart continues to beat,” he said, “the lungs continue to breathe. Sweat, blood pressure, body temperature, blinking, swallowing—everything continues to function normally. Cognitive function remains as well—the person is still perfectly aware, able to perceive their surroundings and interpret external stimuli. Essentially, the fully functional consciousness remains untouched inside a perfectly motionless body—a mind trapped inside a physical prison.

“While medical science has yet to develop a drug or toxin to perfectly achieve this effect, a powerful enough telepath—a Martian, for instance—is capable of reaching into the brain and shutting down these motor control centers with no lasting effects.”

Batman reached the table and stared directly into her eyes.

“This isn’t revenge. This is about facing the consequences of your actions. As a practitioner of magic, you are no doubt aware of the Rule of Three: any negative action you perform against another will be revisited upon you threefold.”

He pulled out the chair across from her and sat, his eyes never leaving hers. His face tightened into an angry scowl as he affixed her with that glare that could extinguish the sun.

“You stole twenty minutes of my life. I’m taking an hour of yours.”

He leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms across his chest while still maintaining that death glare. Neither of them moved; Zatanna because she couldn’t, Batman because he wouldn’t. He just sat there, staring and hating. The tension and animosity filling the room was... delicious... it pulsed with every pounding heartbeat in Zatanna’s ears... I could taste it, like rich fruity wine. I sat there too, watching them, listening to that music.

At the end of an hour, Batman rose silently and left.

And I remembered I was sitting in Jason’s magic room, holding his hands, looking into a bowl of water from Avalon. My heart wasn’t racing, but it was beating just a little harder than usual. My face felt flushed. And my breathing was just a little deeper and faster than normal.

“That was a rush,” I heard myself saying.

“It wasn’t my place to interfere,” Jason said. “The choice was yours, Selina. I hope you enjoyed your dance with darkness as much as Etrigan did.”

Bruce says with magic there’s always a price. Maybe I had enjoyed what he did to Zatanna a little too much. Maybe I’d let the darkness into my heart, just a little. Having my thoughts and feelings so intertwined with Jason, and therefore Etrigan, during something that emotionally charged, it was probably inevitable. And if that was the price, for me, of using magic this day in this way, then that was the price. I wasn’t going to whine about it. It happened. I had *touched* evil, and now I’d just have to live with that.

Everything still felt the same when I got home, at first, anyway. Alfred said Bruce was back, so I went straight down to the cave. He was at his workstation like nothing had happened. I felt this incredible urge to kiss him so hard and so long, to hug him so tight—then he wheeled around and glared at me not that much friendlier than he’d looked at Zatanna.

“My hero,” I said sincerely, ignoring the death glare. “You were wonderful.”

He grunted and went back to work. And I realized it hadn’t been a *hostile* glare, just the usual one since this Dr. Light thing came out. In my euphoria, I’d forgotten he was shutting me out.

“You *were* wonderful, Bruce,” I repeated softly to his back.

"The meeting will be at Dick and Barbara's," he graveled. "As soon as Nightwing and Robin get back from Bludhaven. I'm going on patrol directly afterwards, so you'll have to go in costume if you expect to ride in with me."

"Meeting?" I murmured. "I think I skipped a page somehow. What meeting?"

"Black Canary has to make full disclosure before the Birds of Prey and the Bat Team if she expects to continue—I thought you were watching."

"I was, I knew about that part, I just didn't... Bruce, I'm not 'Bat Team,' I'm not one of your little trained minions. Why do you want me there?"

He swiveled his chair around and looked at me for a long minute.

"You don't have to be if you don't want to. I assumed you would... for Tim at least, you two've been so... This is going to be hard on him, on all of them. I thought you would want to be there."

"Sure," I said casually. "I'll go. Just give me a minute to change."

So I went to see Black Canary stand before all her Gotham teammates and confess how she'd been a part of this secret group inside the Justice League that took it upon themselves to change Dr. Light's personality, wound up lobotomizing him, and used magic against Bruce when he discovered them and then wiped his memory of it.

I don't know what was wrong with me, I felt so detached from it all, from all of them. When we got to Dick and Barbara's, she was all keyed up about her hunt for Calculator, and Dick and Tim were full of news from their adventures in Bludhaven. They were all about to receive a gut punch. They didn't know it, and I did. And I couldn't work up any kind of feeling at all.

Huntress and Azrael arrived together, which seemed strange at first, but I figured they were both equally uncomfortable coming to a meeting like this, especially there. Then something interesting happened: Huntress eyed me up and down like... well, like a criminal. I almost laughed. It felt *good*. After all this time with Bruce, she was the first of the "Bat Family" that didn't accept me straight away because he had.

Then Black Canary arrived with Batgirl—I wondered if that was coincidence or if Bruce arranged it, a variation on not leaving Superman alone in the cave. I suspected that none of those four would be allowed in Gotham without an escort for a very long time.

Canary made her little speech. I wasn't exactly listening. By this time, I'd heard it all so many times... at the Iceberg, from Superman, at the Watchtower... about eight versions altogether, not counting the nightmares. So I didn't listen very closely. I just watched the others. I watched Tim especially.

I'll admit I've had a soft spot for the kid. He's been through a lot. And he's another one that could have turned into Psychobat Junior when Bruce and I started up. He could've made things hard for me, but he didn't. So maybe it was gratitude for that, or maybe I'd bought into the whole "Bat Family" packaging a little bit after I moved in with Bruce, started to feel this collection of cops in capes really were family. Or maybe I just liked the kid, I don't know. But sitting there watching the color drain out of his face while Canary got to the part about Batman, I knew all that was over. I felt nothing.

"Dinah." It was Barbara's voice, not outraged but quietly bewildered.

“How could you do something like that?” Dick, more of an edge than Barbara, angrier.

Tim is a nice kid and he’s been through a lot. And it’s not fair that life keeps piling it onto him lately. But I couldn’t work up an ounce of sympathy, sitting there, watching it all unfold. All I could think was that Tim Drake was Robin. He might become Batman one day or he might find some moniker of his own as Nightwing had, but one day he and Cassie and Superboy and Kid Flash would be the new Justice League. He was going to end up one of them, that’s what Bat Family meant, right? Little crimefighters become big crimefighters.

And why should I care anyway? He was nothing to me. It’s not like he was my kid or anything. Hell, he wasn’t even Bruce’s kid. He was just—

Leaving.

He stormed off towards the kitchen. It reminded me of the way Bruce had left the cave in the middle of the talk with Superman. He wasn’t being dramatic or throwing a tantrum, he just needed some time on his own to process what was happening.

Dick was angrier than I’ve ever seen him. He even snapped at Barbara when she stopped him going after Tim.

“I screwed up,” Canary was saying. “We all did. It was dumb, we panicked, we’d just seen someone we knew and loved raped before our eyes. Some had blood in their eyes, and the rest of us were too off-balance to stop them from... it went out of control so fast.”

“This stinks,” Dick said, still standing but evidently giving up on the idea of following Tim. “We’re supposed to be satisfied that the Justice League settled this themselves and we just decide whether or not we personally trust you enough to work with you again? Okay, fine: I say no way in hell. You stay away from me, from Bludhaven, from Tim, an’so help me, any of you even think about laying a finger on Bruce again, you’ll find out there are worse things than a pissed off Batman on your tail.”

“I can be trusted, Dick” she stressed, quiet and emphatic.

“I wouldn’t trust you to walk my dog,” he spat, then turned to the rest of us. “The rest of you should make your decision quick, so I can throw this *person* out of my house.”

I would have gladly changed places with Dinah at that moment. Because I wanted out of that room and away from all of them—when it occurred to me that no self-respecting cat stays in a place if they’d rather be elsewhere. So I left, not knowing if any of them would notice or care.

It was a little early for a prowl. The afterparties were still going on following the big fashion shows. The stretch in front of the Four Seasons was littered with limousines and couples parading their bling. I spotted a diamond bracelet that looked to be in the mid-six figure category.

Then I felt this shift in the breeze and my peripheral vision picked up a flutter of red. I turned to look and there he was: Superman, hovering.

“You realize a felony burglary charge is 8-10 years,” quoth Earth’s Greatest Hero.

"And you realize that coming into his city unannounced is playing three card monte with Fate," I countered. "So let's dispense with the banter, Spitecurl. What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you," he said, dropping the caped crimefighter tone.

"I kind of figured that much," I mentioned, "seeing that you're hovering three feet off the rooftop I'm standing on."

"What were you looking at down there, Selina?"

"I think you know."

"The chandelier earrings?"

I clicked my tongue, disappointed. "The bracelet," I told him. "Really, I don't know what kind of rubes pass for jewel thieves in Metropolis, but the diamond bracelet is the only thing down there worth following anybody home for."

"Noted," he said flatly. Then he started to say something but stopped awkwardly.

"No, I wasn't going to go after it," I announced. "Lord knows I *could*, and frankly I'm in the mood for a little flutter. But I happen to value what I have with Bruce, and so I'm not going to wreck it. See how that works?"

He shook his head, not 'No, I don't understand,' more 'I can't win'—which is a realization all dog-people have to make sooner or later where cats are concerned.

"Come fly with me," he said abruptly.

"You make it sound like a dare," I told him, nodding my agreement. "Once a month, I like to accept a dare from a man in a cape."

I didn't manage to *breathe* before we were out of Gotham airspace. He hadn't gone nearly that fast when he took me to the Fortress of Solitude or brought me back. But this time, the jolt of air breaking across my face as he headed towards the river made it all but impossible to inhale or even open my eyes. Then I felt us slow to a more comfortable speed, and I popped my eyes open to see that we'd just passed over the Beacon Avenue Bridge. Before long, we were over the ocean, and he turned south, following the coast for a while... Then turned again so we flew over land—some beautiful horse country, around Virginia was my guess... Then farms, small ones and then bigger square ones... another turn, another one of those sprinting-out-of-Gotham bursts of speed where I couldn't breathe or open my eyes, and he sat us down at a magnificent waterfall in, as nearly as I could tell, the middle of absolutely nowhere.

"Thank you for flying Air Clark," he said with what women who like that sort of thing call boyish charm.

"What's so special about this waterfall?" I asked.

"Nothing much. It's a nice spot is all. City girls miss out on the beauties of nature."

There's a look Batman sometimes had when he'd find me on a museum rooftop. It was perfectly obvious why I was there, but if I quipped about it being a nice night for a stroll or something like that, he'd turn on this sternly unamused glare that clearly wanted to skip over the foreplay and get to the point. I did my best to recreate that expression now, and judging by the wry grin from Superman, the one that always seems to proceed "you two are so perfect for each other," I succeeded.

"We needed a private place to talk," he said, coming to the point at last. "And I wanted to see if you would trust me now, after all that's happened."

"I trust you not to drop me into San Francisco Bay," I told him honestly. "That's not really the same thing, is it."

He dropped his head and let out a sigh. At first, it looked like defeat or even shame, but then I realized he wasn't hanging his head, he was glancing down at his own chest.

"Sometimes people forget that it's an 'S' for 'super,' not a 'P' for 'perfect,'" he remarked coolly. Then he raised his head back up and his eyes locked onto mine, just as they had in the cave after I'd mentioned his parents. "It was a *mistake*. I should have told Bruce and I didn't. It was a judgment call, and not an easy one, but I made a choice. And yes, I will admit now that I chose poorly. I'm sorry, Selina, I truly am. And I'm fully prepared to handle the consequences of that decision."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I fell back on the obvious.

"I'm not the one you need to be apologizing to," I said gently.

"What Bruce and I have to settle, we'll settle our own way. We *will* settle it. I know that because I know *him*. Like I know he has more protocols, like I know the first time you two switched off this morning he went and put that ring in his belt. I do *know* him, Selina, and I know we'll find a way to resolve this between us, because he'll see the need to work towards that as much as I do."

I had my doubts that any of them "know" him. I don't really know the part of Batman that he gives to the League, but I know *him*. I know the *whole man*, and so I know what a tiny sliver of him it is that they see. They see that one miniscule fragment, and they think they know *him*? I really had my doubts. But I kept them to myself. Superman had brought me all this way to say his bit; the least I could do was listen.

"But I don't really know you, Selina, and I do... I do *feel* that you and I have to settle this between us. I'll admit I was taken aback this morning when you were there in the cave and inserted yourself in the middle of... I mean, when I saw that you knew all about it. I couldn't imagine why he would have told you, why you were involved at all, but, well, then this afternoon after the League met, I went home to Lois. I realized if the situation were reversed... If she perceives anything as an attack on me, heh, I'd rather face an army of Brainiacs than—"

"You really should stop doing that," I interrupted quietly. "That comparison, me and Lois, it's not valid. I am not Bruce's wife," I told him firmly. "I'm not going to be. Ever. Can you understand that? You think you *know* him? He will *never* be able to take a leap like that, and if he would," I shook my head slowly to indicate no. "People get married to start a family, Clark. And any child of his is going to wind up in a mask on a rooftop, it's practically a given. And I'd be fine with that, that's my world as much as his. But little crimefighters have a way of growing up into big crimefighters. And if you think I'll see any child of mine in that League of yours, you must not be paying attention."

"Because of *one mistake*?!"

"All it takes is *one goddamn mistake* when he can *DIE*, you moron!" I heard myself screech.

He looked down again—not at the S on his chest this time.

"This morning you talked about my father," he said finally. "One of the things he taught me, when I was just about Tim's age, is that there's more to being 'human' than biology. Selina, all I can do is *the best I can do* with the gifts God gave me. I am capable of making mistakes. And it's my curse that if I do make a fatal error, it's people like

Lois, and Bruce, and my father, and you that can pay the ultimate price for it. It's not an easy truth to live with, but I have no choice. I'm a man, Selina. I can lift the earth behind Wayne Manor and make a waterfall twice as high as this one if you want one. I can fly up to Maine to bring Alfred a lobster. I shave with my heat vision because no razor will cut through this stubble. But I don't automatically know the right thing to do. I have to grapple with a tough call just like you do, and at the end of the day I can make the wrong one. Does that really cross me off the list of people fit for your children to know?"

"Fair point," I said.

"I care about him too, Selina. Don't think that I don't because, in this one instance, I was willing to risk my relationship with him to protect the League."

I couldn't suppress the sad laugh welling up inside. I hadn't felt like this since having to explain the word 'pheromones' to AzBat.

"It's not *your* friendship with *Bruce* that you fubar'd, Clark," I said, constructing the simplest sentence I could to convey the point. "It's Bruce's friendship *with you*."

"I don't understand."

"I know... You're 'selfless guy.' If you lose a friend for the good of the League, then that's the price you have to pay. That's not the issue here."

It really did feel like talking to Pheromones that night. I wasn't sure why.

"Look, if I'd gone for that diamond bracelet back in Gotham, do you think that would be just another Friday night burglary to him?"

"Obviously not."

"Because of the bracelet, or because I was the one that took it? It's the same thing here. He trusted you. He *trusted*—for him that's... And now it's gone. And I don't know if we'll ever get it back. You wanted to know why I was so pissed at you this morning, well that's why. You didn't just risk your 'friendship' with him, you jeopardized a part of him that was fragile and precious—the part of him that trusts—because you thought something was 'bigger'... bigger than this one obligation, this one personal connection with the man who can die."

He chuckled.

"Nice to know my concerns are so amusing," I remarked.

"There's a certain irony, that's all. When the League found out about you two, your *relationship*, we worried that if it went sour, the fallout could wind up hurting *us*." He started laughing harder; if I didn't know it was impossible, I might have suspected SmileX. Then he pulled himself together and shook his head. "God, the way you love him, Selina... I'm going to go on making whatever comparisons to Lois I see fit. Deal with it." He started chuckling again. "We thought his involvement with *you* was going to bite us... Instead, it's the fallout from his involvement with us that's affected his relationship with you. As I recall, that day in the Watchtower, Bruce took off his mask, looked each of us in the eye, and swore that his personal life would never affect the League, but if it did, he would take any action we saw fit, even so far as resigning. And they call *me* 'Superman.' Well, if I'm to have anything approaching his integrity, then I have to do the same. Whatever you see fit, Selina, tell me what I can do to fix this."

Again I didn't know what to say.

"You already apologized, Clark. And you can't give me back the part of him that's... *lost* in all of this. I'm not saying that to be hurtful, it's just the truth. You can't take that look out of his eye, that gnawing fear that if he was wrong trusting your judgment, who else is he wrong about? What else is he missing?... Go back to Gotham, make your peace with him as best you can. I won't make any trouble for you."

"But you won't forgive and forget. No, that's not good enough, no deal. You accept my apology, fine. But apologizing isn't enough, I want out of the doghouse. What will it take to get there? I suggest you come up with something, it's a long walk back to Gotham."

It was my turn to chuckle, although I'm not at all sure he was joking. By laughing it off, I wouldn't have to find out. I thought about what he'd asked... and after a minute I came up with something.

"Okay, I've got one," I said at last. "Remember, you asked for this—you pushed for it—so no 'SuperPout' if you don't like it. You're on the hook."

"Agreed."

"When you go back to Gotham, when you talk to Bruce, you will not mention, cite, or in any way allude to the protocols."

"See, I figured you'd want me to press some coal into a big diamond or something," he hedged.

"I have no problem getting diamonds," I told him. "This is what I want, erase the p-word from your vocabulary."

"You know the Eye of Krypton is the largest gemstone in the world."

"I'm living with a billionaire, and I can get into Cartier's vault in four and a half minutes. Do we have a deal on the protocols or am I hitchhiking back to civilization?"

CHAPTER 9: IDENTITY ELEMENT

They patched it up somehow. Superman accompanied Batman on patrol later that week, the Hacienda East burned to the ground, Joker wound up in Arkham with some unusual injuries, and the next day Bruce and Clark went to a ballgame. Call it “Male Bonding: Gotham Style,” I guess.

There was more to it, of course, but I wasn’t privy to whatever was said in the cave this time around. I gather it had something to do with “that ring” that Superman mentioned at the waterfall, whatever that means. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Bruce calls him Clark again; *that’s* what matters. It’s going to take time but they’re both working to rebuild the partnership.

That left me with my own... *status* to figure out... with Bruce, with Gotham, with all of it. I couldn’t get on top of it somehow. I didn’t know what I was feeling or even how I wanted to feel.

I wound up prowling the park, always a favorite spot in the old days when I was restless. So close to the digs, it was a great place to begin an angsty prowl—and it still was until I came upon some late night scum roughing up a homeless guy and... well... I beat them to a pulp. It took the edge off, a little, so even though pummeling thugs isn’t my idea of a proper cat’s night out, I went snooping around the Ghost Dragons to get a little more. The ones I found were harassing a storeowner. I didn’t bother to find out what it was about; I just let loose on the bad guys for a while. When it was over, the storeowner started gushing, telling me this whole story about cigarettes they wanted him to sell, cheap because they didn’t have a tax stamp or something. Like I cared. Like I was some do-gooder crimefighter that gave a shit what laws these guys broke or thought the world would be a better place if people like him weren’t victimized. I just left him standing there in the alley behind his store, with his gratitude, a couple banged up Ghost Dragons, and forty cases of stolen cigarettes.

I started for home when *déjà vu all over again*, I had this tingle, the ‘Bat is watching’ tingle. It made for an interesting flashback, heading home after a prowl and feeling that prickle of excitement because he was lurking nearby. I was a few rooftops away from the lot where I’d left the Jag when I spotted him, this dark, looming, pointy-eared mass of blackness standing there blocking my path.

“Evening, Handsome,” I drawled as soon as I was close enough for him to hear. “Nice night for a stroll.”

He didn’t say anything at first; he just took my hand and examined the knuckles of my glove.

“The trick is not to like it... too much,” he graveled without looking up.

“How exactly do you manage that?” I couldn’t help asking.

His eyes flickered up at me.

“Keep a little bit of pain with you inside.”

He didn’t say anything more, and the city sounds filled the silence for a minute. Somewhere in the distance, a siren warbled. Somebody hurt. Status quo for Gotham.

"Here I thought the whole idea of the pummeling was to pound away the pain," I remarked.

"No," he grunted. "Just makes it easier to live with."

"This isn't me," I heard myself babbling. "I don't know who this is. I want *me* back."

"I know. So do I."

I noticed he was still holding onto my hand. Not caressing it or anything; he just hadn't let it go.

"I want *us* back," I murmured.

"So do I," he said again.

"How do we do that?" I asked.

Then he uttered three words nobody ever wants to hear coming out of Batman's mouth...

"I don't know."

The first siren had died away, and a new one, further west, took its place. I stretched up the way I used to, to tempt him. It brought our lips so close, I could taste his breath, all we had to do was breathe in sync and our lips would be touching.

"Trust me again," I whispered.

He grunted. He said "That's far enough, Catwoman." And I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. He probably didn't mean it that way. He probably figured it was like old times: I flirt, he rebuffs... But it hurt. It cut so goddamn deep, I felt like... Hell, I don't even know what the word is... shattered. He must have seen it, because I started to feel his gloved fingertips making these gentle circles over my knuckles.

"I never made a *decision* to trust you," he said. "That moment at Xanadu, telling you the truth, I... I did what I've always done in this life, I trusted my instincts and I followed where they led. Those instincts have kept me alive in a thousand situations where there isn't time to make a considered decision. You're one of the few people in this world who can understand that."

I sighed, deflated, which only put more distance between us.

"That was a long time ago, Bruce. Since then, we've come a long... At some point, god... you mean at some point it never occurred to you that..." I trailed off for the third time. None of this was right. "Never mind," I muttered, exasperated. "This is a stupid conversation. You feel how you feel. The whole idea of 'convincing' somebody to trust you with words is pretty asinine."

"Then don't tell me. Show me."

I snapped. I'd *had it*.

"You've seen all there is to see," I hissed. "If it's not enough, fuck you."

His lip twitched. "There she is."

It took a second—my heart was pounding—in a good way—and I felt the grin pouring over my lips. I was still pissed but... he was right, I felt like *me* again.

His lip twitched a second time and he nodded reluctantly. The nod was sad, but it was nice seeing that twitch again. Way back when, it was the first real glimmer I'd had of the man inside the bat. Then he spoke again...

"I'm not the only one who's pulled away, Selina. I'm not sure what it is I'm doing or not doing, what you're picking up on, but if my behavior *has* changed towards you, maybe it's because you seem so different these last few days."

I think it's possible my mouth dropped open. I know I hadn't felt that kind of blind shock since that moment, a lifetime before, when I broke back into the museum after Cat-Tales and he said "This isn't a burglary, it's a date." My own words over the last few days echoed in my brain... to Jason: "Maybe I just don't like the reminder that he is only human, more vulnerable on one level than any of them" ...and to Clark: "All it takes is one mistake when he can die." This whole thing had forced on me just how human, just how mortal and vulnerable, Bruce really is.

And it scared the living hell out of me.

And I pulled away.

It wasn't the museum after Cat-Tales I was remembering, it wasn't "This isn't a burglary, it's a date." It was the vault weeks later. He wasn't "Batman" to me anymore. I looked into his eyes and saw a real person looking back. And I realized he never called me "Catwoman" anymore, it was always 'Selina,' we'd gone beyond the masked personas... and I knee'd him in the stomach—and then I ran away.

I saw the real, exposed, vulnerable man, and I pulled away.

Shit.

"Selina?"

"Feline independence," I murmured. "If you need them, you can't be free."

I was pulling away from all of them. I'd been cutting the emotional ties like mad ever since it hit me: I love him and he could die. I wasn't free. I had no power at all over a situation that could destroy my world. Making a life with him was giving me back everything I'd lost: a home, a family, love. Didn't the laws of self-determination demand that I get *some* kind of control, a foothold, a word, a thought, something to have, to hold onto, to make some little piece of this *mine*?

"Let's go home," he was saying. "It's cold. You're shivering."

Bruce, I want to get married.

That siren in the distance was still warbling. For an awful sickening second, I thought I had said it out loud. It was the last thing we needed. Why would I even think something like that? If anything, we needed time *apart*.

Or was I doing it again? We get closer, I get scared, I pull away or push him away?

"Selina, are you coming?"

None of this is what I signed on for. All I did was kiss a man in a mask.

"Selina?"

He'd fired a line already. Christ, what was happening to me?

I looked at him standing there and tried to see that tightass crimefighter from a thousand rooftops ago. I thought about asking him to call me Catwoman again, for old time's sake, just to hear that voice roll over the word.

"Hey, what's going on in there?"

Wrong words. Hell, Bruce, of all the times to not be Bat-Prick, couldn't you work up a bit of that smug, paranoid, obsessive, judgmental jackass when it could actually do some good?

He'd stepped away from the edge of the roof. He was standing right in front of me. I wasn't going to look up at him, but then I remembered how he'd noticed when Clark wouldn't make eye contact. So I glanced up. And those eyes surrounded by mask were looking right into me, flashing as his mind rolodexed through possibilities.

Could he tell? Could he read on my face that wild, stupid thought that flashed through my mind for a nanosecond? *Bruce, I want to get married.* (Yeah, that's the one. Stop that. Bad kitty.) He sees a lot, but he can't read minds. He can't. No superpowers, remember? Great detective, but cannot actually read, see, or hear a private thought.

"You go on home," I said lightly. "I want to stay in town a while longer."

His eyes narrowed.

"Why?" he growled suspiciously.

Good. Suspicion. It was something. It was something real I could grab onto.

I licked my lips slowly. It was just the touch of him I wanted, the real him, the complete him. Batman. My Batman. Not that "the guy inside Batman" from the vault but... (I could barely hold back the purr at the catnip thought)... "the Batman outside Bruce."

I almost said "I love you," but instead I ran a claw, slowly, around the oval of the emblem on his chest. "I thought I might stop at Cartier's," I teased. "For old times sake. See if I can beat my old record in and out."

He tensed up, just like he used to when I teased. I wasn't expecting Psychobat or anything; I'm not sure what I was expecting from him. Once upon a time, I'd push him when we were like this, press bit by bit, until he'd cut it off with a gruff "stop" and push me away. Tonight, he just put a hand over mine as it traced over the emblem—the gesture said "stop" too, in a way, but it wasn't at all gruff or final.

"Don't romanticize it," he said—causing me to pause once again and reassure myself that he could not read minds. "There were moments—but then *we each went home alone.*"

I breathed.

He was right.

That part sucked.

I could feel my heartbeat, I couldn't seem to feel anything else. And I couldn't summon up any words.

And then...

Bat-Signal.

That goddamn light sliced through the sky and a great big bat silhouette glinted off the clouds.

"Showtime," I remarked. He turned and saw it, then looked back at me. It was just a moment's hesitation, but it was there.

"Cats always land on their feet," I reminded him, lifting my arms to fall around his neck. "I *am* going home alone... to a cold, solitary bed... but there should be a dark, handsome stranger coming around before dawn to... keep me warm." Then I kissed his cheek and even managed a purr, which I thought he would appreciate, but instead his right eye shifted like he'd raised the eyebrow behind the mask.

"A stranger?" he graveled.

I shrugged. "That's the way it feels right now. Not so bad, we've managed that way before."

He looked really put out, turned back to the signal and then back to me. I could tell he was torn, and it was starting to piss me off.

“Oh for pity sake, go and stop being such a jackass,” I blurted. “Large, seven foot glowing light in the sky with your logo on it, I think somebody wants your attention.”

He smiled—a real one, not a lip-twitch. And he kissed me—also a real one.

And then he was gone.

I watched the dark flicker that was him swinging out towards the signal until it disappeared into the other flickers on the horizon. Whoever was responsible for it... Eddie, Joker, Scarecrow, Hatter... I didn't know whether to be angry or send them a gift basket.

Hugo Strange paused with his key in the lock as the bright overhead beacon lit up the night sky. He glanced up to see the emblem emblazoned across the clouds and smiled quietly to himself. What better omen could there be to spur him on to complete his great work: The Bat-Signal, so emblematic of the awe and veneration that so many in this wretched city held for Gotham's protector. Awe and veneration that would soon be his. He allowed himself a small chuckle; not the insane cackling or fitful giggles that so many of the Iceberg denizens were known to emit, but a small, self-assured chuckle, a chuckle of the right and the righteous.

Hugo went inside. He flicked on the light and beheld the gleaming wonder of his new laboratory—well, he beheld what would soon be the gleaming wonder of his new laboratory. Right now, it was what commercial real estate types called “a raw industrial space.” But all it would take to develop the raw space into a state-of-the-art lab was money. And money was now readily available.

How easy it was once he remembered how! The Penguin had a seemingly endless stream of money! It flowed through the Iceberg like an underground river, all those black market operations and all that money laundering for the various gangs and syndicates. Yes, the Penguin's wealth was a magnificent resource, and one Hugo could now utilize any way he wished. All he had to do was sway the mind of Oswald Cobblepot, and Oswald was proud, vain, and stupid. Such men were not difficult to maneuver. A few simple appeals to all that witless narcissism and the fool actually believed it was his own idea: Cobblepot would bankroll Hugo's efforts and receive a share of the benefits. He could then pass on those benefits—for a price—to his various underworld clients, mobsters and costumed rogues alike.

Hugo had yet to decide if those “benefits” would ever materialize. Once Bruce Wayne was neutralized as a crimefighting force in Gotham City, Hugo might well take over the power of the Bat-mantle for himself, in which case the fortunes of Oswald and his criminal cohorts would hardly improve. But that was a decision for the future; tonight Hugo's dreams centered on his new lab.