



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

#42

Cat = Sales

Déjà Vu All Over Again



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

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DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

The lithe, cat-shaped silhouette carefully lowered herself into position above her target. She calculated the angle of descent that would enable her to snatch the coveted object and hit the ground at the optimal angle for a quick getaway. She had only to wait for the right moment and then...

The moment came! The guard's attention faltered and Nutmeg leapt to snatch the thick, crunchy envelope from Bat-Bruce's fingers—only to be caught, mid-leap, in a blur of reflexive movement too fast for any two-foot. She squirmed as the strong fingers that held her repositioned her body to hang helplessly from her scruff.

"No," Bat-Bruce growled firmly.

Nutmeg pawed vainly at the envelope.

"Oh, that's what you're after," Bruce noted. He set the cat gingerly on the carpet, crushed the envelope into a ball, and tossed it lightly towards the trashcan. Nutmeg leapt, seized it, and ran from the room.

Bruce's lip twitched.

"You're welcome," he said, returning his attention to the invitation that came in the thick, foil-lined envelope:

*Gotham Museum of Modern Art
requests the honor of your presence
at our
Gala Reopening*

He knew this was coming, of course. He was on the museum board, the reopening committee, and the Wayne Foundation was a major underwriter of both the building renovation and the reopening events. He knew this was coming for months, even before Richard Flay's clumsy maneuverings just before Christmas. Flay only wanted to ensure the Wayne name would be there, front and center, to bring the event the social prominence it deserved, and Bruce was always ready to oblige in that respect—if only the whole thing hadn't set Selina off so strangely.

Catwoman had a history with the MoMA, certainly. Batman and Catwoman had a history there too. And Flay's reminder at Christmas had sparked something in her, some hidden fear or insecurity, losing her independence or... damn her, she was an impossible woman.

Now the museum was set to reopen, it was going to be a large, widely publicized event, and his name would be all over it.

Catman stared at his image in the Gotham Post with a mixture of approval and disgust, an impossible contradiction in any species but cats.

"You are not pleased, Herr Blake?" an oily voice oozed above him.

Tom Blake looked up guiltily into the eyes of Hugo Strange. Dr. Hugo Strange, who had gone to such trouble to bring about this startling transformation.

"It's very... eye-catching," Blake admitted.

"Indeed," Hugo beamed proudly as he took a seat opposite Catman and turned the picture so he could view it right side up. "There are those who will say Ms. Kyle is no longer the sexiest cat-criminal in Gotham."

Again, Blake was torn in feline contradiction: it was a satisfying thought, upstaging Catwoman, the flea-bitten she-cat who stole his press, *and* the prominence he deserved among the rogues—not to mention the Batman's attention—with equal ease. But the way Hugo was preening himself, as if he was the one sweating hour after hour in the gym: weightlifting, iron cross, bodypresses, 300 crunches a day, and those tofu-vegetable smoothies that tasted like bananas, mowed grass, and wax. What had Hugo Strange done besides sit there on his lazy ass, nattering about motivation and visualizing the goal?

"Herr Cobblepot is expecting a flood of new groupies at the Iceberg," Strange was saying. "His staff is fully briefed, they will do their utmost to direct the most promising candidates to the center."

"I just wish they had pictured me in my cloak," Blake remarked, finally voicing his true objection to the photo in the Post.

"Now Tom—After all we have accomplished together, I may call you Tom, may I not?"

Tom Blake nodded; it really wasn't much to ask after all Hugo had done for him.

"Good, and you will call me Hugo."

"Mhm," Blake agreed, trying not to sound too reluctant.

"Good, good. Tom, you must remember that your costume is only a visual manifestation of the feline powers within you."

"It's not," Blake interrupted curtly. "My cape is fashioned from the fabled fabric of Ka, imbuing me with the mythic nine lives of a cat."

"It would have hidden your new muscles," Hugo countered, abandoning the psychobabble pretext and zeroing in on the practical facts. "The six-pack abs, the defined veins on your forearm, the blonde highlights for which we invested \$385, would all have been obscured."

Catman looked back at his image in the Post, an image not even identifiable as "Catman" if not for the caption, and he hissed.

"And what's the point of all this Green Arrow stuff anyway?" he asked, pointing to the text below the photo. "Why do I have to be beaten down and humiliated to turn out sexy? I can't just look like this 'cause I'm spending six hours in the gym each night?"

"Herr Blake—"

"You know I haven't seen a single episode of *Lost* or *Desperate Housewives*?"

"Tom—"

"Haven't even tried that new pizza with the three kinds of cheese in the crust."

"Sleep," Hugo Strange ordered, snapping his fingers in Catman's face.

Tom Blake slumped.

"Tom, I want you to visualize yourself pleased with the results of your efforts. I want you to picture yourself looking down at your photo in the Gotham Post, smiling

with pride and satisfaction. And most of all, I want you to imagine yourself shutting up about Desperate Housewives and the three cheese pizza.”

The morning the tiny bat appeared on their bedroom window, Bruce identified the species as a “bumblebee bat” and Selina had pronounced it a good omen. She eyed the creature now with more misgiving. Whiskers was watching it, fascinated, as it climbed methodically up the outside of the screen, let go, circled around the spruce tree and then back to the window to start the cycle all over again.

“Wasting your time,” she told the cat, “he’s not getting in.”

Whiskers flicked an ear in her direction, acknowledging the familiar voice, but did not turn his head or move his gaze from the bat.

Selina sighed.

“Listen to me,” she grumbled. “Can’t tell a cat what to do, I know it better than anybody. Certainly can’t tell a cat what to want or not... want...”

So Whiskers had a new hobby for the next few days, it was really nothing to her. It was a bat, a real bat, a living thing. The house was built over a caveful and one had turned up above ground. Big deal. Whiskers noticed because it was something new. It was ridiculous to read anything into it. These weren’t omens or symbols or metaphors, they were living creatures and they were only doing what came naturally.

She reminded herself sharply that she wasn’t even superstitious. She’d stolen cursed antiquities once upon a time, she’d broken the seal on enchanted crypts, and only last week she’d traded barbs about demon lovemaking with Etrigan, an actual prince of hell. She was not superstitious. Her cat was captivated by a bat. He’d eventually figure out it was hopeless and move on.

She didn’t like the sound of that, but these *weren’t* omens or symbols; they were Whiskers and some bat from under the house. That’s all they were. Eventually Whiskers would figure out that the bat wasn’t a toy and go back to some other pastime like his catnip ball that he could actually play wi...

Hell.

“I’m getting out of this room,” she muttered, Whiskers again acknowledging her voice with an ear-flick. “I’m getting out of this room, out of this house, and back into the city for a while.” She checked her watch. It was a little early still for a prowl, but she could pass the time with a quick drink at the Iceberg.

Talia al Ghul did not like mud. It was the one recurring theme in her adventures with Greg (as Gr’oriBr’di preferred to be called as a term of intimate address) that she could do without.

Camping had started out so well. It was not unlike her father’s elite training compounds in the spiny desert of Madagascar, and she had impressed Gr’oriBr’di with her knowledge. She didn’t know how to erect a tent, there were always minions to do that, but she knew to avoid tripping over the pegs and guylines. She couldn’t lay a fire, but she could warm cider over the coals. She had no idea what s’mores were (even after seeing one assembled and choking down a bite she had no idea what it

was), but she could toast lavash. And while Gr'oriBr'di had never heard of the thin middle eastern bread any more than she had heard of s'mores, he seemed to enjoy it... even after they had no more caviar to pile on it and were reduced to smearing it with peanut butter... which simply wasn't the same.

It was all going so well until the rain. There was no rain in the spiny desert of Madagascar. The very idea of sleeping in a canvas bag held aloft by a stick of wood while a virtual monsoon poured gallons of water down on you—water that turned into a revolting black ooze once it hit the ground and seeped into absolutely everything. There was no cell phone signal to find the nearest bed and breakfast or to summon a helicopter to take her there.

Then there was the motorcycle. The speed Gr'oriBr'di found so intoxicating was... well, to be perfectly honest, despite her disgust on learning what was meant by a "bug shield" and greater disgust at seeing how very poorly it served its purpose, the speed was quite exhilarating. But it did serve to coat every exposed inch of her body, and a surprising number of unexposed ones, with a resilient film of dirt in whatever state of wet or dry happened to be in the air that day. More mud. How she hated mud.

How she hated stepping off the motorcycle in those parking lots and feeling her boot sink into a muddy slime, knowing there was nothing before her but another plate of scrambled eggs, the one familiar dish the "fry cooks" in these "diners" could consistently prepare with adequacy.

She had never in her 216 years of life been so utterly miserable, but she endured it simply because it didn't occur to her that there was an alternative. It was only when Gr'oriBr'di found her pounding dirt and gravel out of her ruined Mason Pearson hairbrush, when she burst into tears at his simple "Tee, what's wrong, sweetie?" that she dared examine her own feelings...

"I hate this, I hate this, I hate all of this, everything, it's awful" may not have been the most mature or articulate step ever taken on the road to self-knowledge, but Greg Brady had apprenticed with the Joker. After "HAHAHAHAHA! All the hamsters out of the microwave!" Talia's outburst didn't seem so very odd.

"Okay then," he nodded, "We'll find a drugstore in the morning and get you a new brush."

"NOOOO!" she wailed. A cheap drugstore hairbrush, it was the last straw, and it all came tumbling out in a torrent of words: The brush was her last tie to a life that wasn't caked in fetid, stinking mud—a life, incidentally, in which she was a failure in every respect. She had failed at LexCorp, she failed her father, she failed to capture her Beloved's heart, she failed at everything she had ever tried or wanted before the mud! But she still wanted more than anything to go back to it!

"Well, why on earth didn't you say so?" Greg asked mildly when she had finished—his calm in the face of her tantrum incomprehensible to anyone who hadn't experienced "Rainy Sunday fun, HAHAHAHAHA! Human organ jigsaw puzzles, they're fun *and* educational!"

...:Barbara, I hate Detroit, and I hate Cleveland. Admit it, I'm being punished....

Barbara muted the OraCom and closed her eyes, summoning patience.

Black Canary was not being “punished.” Barbara *had* been giving her out-of-town assignments, but for Dinah’s own good as much as everyone else’s. She’d been making a considerable effort to make Oracle “Switzerland,” to remain neutral and dispassionate in the face of bad feeling from all sides, in the face of her own doubts about Dinah’s involvement in the Dr. Light situation and her own resentment at the pain it caused Dick. She was bending over backwards to NOT point the finger of blame, but if Dinah was so determined to read punishment and payback into everything Barbara said or did, then Barbara saw no reason to go on wasting her time. She released her mic and spoke with the crisp no-nonsense tone they all knew was the voice of the Oracle. It said *do what you’re told, do it now, and chat with Babs later.*

“BC, as you know we can’t retrieve every batarang that gets thrown. The ones we miss usually show up on eBay. We buy them, get them shipped to P.O. boxes in cities outside Gotham, and periodically somebody has to make the rounds and pick them up. It’s your turn, and I’m not setting up a box in Honolulu because you don’t like Cleveland.”

There was an injured pause. Then an acidic ...: *Yes, ma’am, with a vengeance, ma’am...*
Barbara shook her head and cut the line.

“Tee, if you weren’t happy, why on earth didn’t you say so?”

The question hit Talia like a slap in the face.

“Say so?” she repeated dully. Voice dissatisfaction in the life her protector decreed for her? “Gr’ori,” she began.

“Greg,” he reminded her of his given name.

“Greg,” she corrected instantly and was rewarded with a warm smile, which encouraged her to continue. “You are my protector.”

“Boyfriend,” he interrupted.

“...Boyfriend,” she hesitated, not quite so comfortable with this word as the last.

“Or love-stallion,” he joked, and she ignored him.

“It is not fitting to question one’s placement in... When I was... younger and still heir presumptive in my father’s organization, I was sent to Eger for three moons to undergo the training of the League of Assassins. It was a formality only, so I could take my place as its leader, a role befitting the Demon Head’s daughter. The scorn of my fellow students, and even the instructors, they all hated me, Gr’ori.”

“Greg.”

“Greg. They all saw I could not perform up to the standard DEMON demanded, and yet I was there among them and destined to be placed before them all. They did not hide their contempt. The training was grueling and each day it grew worse—but I stayed. I stayed because...”

“Yes?”

“...”

“Talia?”

“I stayed because...” Her lip quivered.

“Your dad wanted you there?”

“Yes.”

"And you wanted him to love you?"

She shot him a viciously hostile glare. Though she had never spoken of the camp or her feelings there to anyone, this talk of pleasing her father had a bitterly familiar ring to it.

"Talia, you can love a guy and not go along with everything he says. I didn't just fall off the turnip truck, I've heard the stories about you and 'he whose name must not be uttered because this whole organization has a big ol' stick up its butt and won't ever use just one word if they can drag it out for twenty.' I've heard the stories, and it's a pretty sorry tale too, even for DEMON gossip: 'Daughter, go capture the detective.' 'Yes, Daddy.' 'Talia, let me out of the holding cell.' 'Yes, Beloved.' You really might want to consider slipping the occasional 'Kiss my ass' in there when those guys put you in the middle that way."

"Yes, Gr'ori."

He paused and looked at her sternly... and saw a daring, impish smile steal across her features.

"You little tease, you just made a joke, didn't you?"

She giggled. "Yes, Gr'ori."

"Oh, now you're asking for it," he chuckled roguishly, rolling up his sleeves, and then pounced.

Tickling, shrieking, and more markedly undemonlike giggling followed.

The first sign that something was amiss came before Catwoman even entered the Iceberg. Penguin was always changing staff and not every doorman snapped to attention as soon as he saw purple cat ears, but this was the first time she ever had to *call inside* for Oswald to *instruct* his doorman to admit her. Ozzy was understandably mortified, but for all his "thousand apologies my felicitous feline"-ing, his excuses as he escorted her inside ("Fledge is new. He didn't realize you were the genuine article.") made no sense.

The genuine article? It made no sense at all—until they reached the main dining room and Catwoman saw... *cat-women*, dozens of them, one idiot in that zipped biker getup with the goggles, several in catsuits of yellow; orange; yellow and orange; yellow, orange, and red; and one in orange, red and pink.

"What in god's name is going on?" she asked, amazed.

"Groupies," Oswald announced. "I take it you haven't seen today's Post."

"Oh hell, what've they done to me now?" Selina muttered under her breath.

"Not you, my dear," Oswald consoled. "Nothing to do with you at all."

Catwoman's eyes shifted sideways to regard Oswald suspiciously. "That should be a good thing, right?"

He shrugged. They had reached her usual table. Selina couldn't help but notice it was already occupied. "I assume you two won't mind sharing," Oswald proposed, "We're appallingly crowded tonight. So many *-kwak-* undiscriminating gawkers."

"Evening Eddie," Selina purred down to the figure slumped at her table.

"Hi," he looked up.

"Hi? That's it. Two letters, no anagrams?"

"What's the point? Why waste the jewel of my intellect on witty badinage when I have become a GenX metrosexual prone to violent outbursts and sporting a question mark tattoo on my neck like some kind of riddling melanoma?"

Selina blinked. "Eddie, I begged you to stop taking those herbs."

"You haven't seen today's Post, have you?" He slid a folded paper across the table. Selina touched it delicately with the tip of a claw, as she would testing an alarm pressure-panel.

"Do not look directly into page six," Riddler advised.

Selina carefully unfolded the paper and gasped.

"Whoa, meow on a stick, who's the beefcake?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Blake," Riddler said flatly.

Catwoman screamed, jumped up in her chair and sprung backward, eyeing the image in the tabloid with horror.

"That's *sick*," she pronounced finally. "They made... they made... I can't say it, they made Catman *buff*?"

"Oh no," Eddie said, "It's so much worse. It's not Photoshop this time, 'Lina. Blake actually looks like that now."

"..."

"..."

"I need a drink," Selina sighed, sinking back into the chair.

"Just think how I feel. Look at the bulge he's got stuffed into those size four safari shorts, then turn the page and look what they did to me. I'm a capon."

"That's it, I'm leaving."

"Stay. I'll buy your drink."

"Eddie, so help me, if you use the word 'bulge' in reference to Tom Blake ever again, I will take out your spleen through your ear."

"Hey, you don't want to mess with me, 'Lina. Turn the page, really. I may be a capon, but I'm a mean, crowbar-wielding, psychopath capon."

Selina couldn't help but laugh. Then she turned the page as instructed and looked at the picture. "With a tattoo," she reminded him. "'Cause without the riddling rash on your neck, the whole thing's meaningless... Boy, who's that little green spec you're whaling on?"

"Green Arrow."

Catwoman smiled a secret, vindictive smile. "Couldn't happen to a more deserving guy," she purred, enjoying the spectacle on the page. "You *could* do it for real, you know. While the air fares are low, long weekend in Star City, show the Post how the Riddler *really* takes on a sub-Bat hero."

"I can't," Eddie sulked, "Green Arrow, who seems to be Post's flavor-of-the-month, is also allegedly responsible for Catman's makeover. According to the Post, they had some big throwdown last sweeps week. Arrow opens a can of whoopass on Blake, spurs him on to the whole transformation. If I go out there targeting Arrow for no reason, it's going to look like I'm avenging Blake! No thank you, I got enough problems right now."

Selina took a deep breath. She'd been joking, but the lengthy, impassioned response seemed to indicate that Riddler had already given the idea serious thought.

She flagged a waiter, ordered a drink, and drank it. She and Riddler watched the room full of starry-eyed cat-groupies. It was he who finally spoke.

"How did it happen, 'Lina? We used to own this town. You and me, Joker, Oswald, then Ivy came along, Harvey, Jervis, Jonathan, Victor... Now look around. I don't know half these people, and if I went by the Gotham Post, I wouldn't recognize the ones I do know."

She said nothing for a moment, then murmured softly:

"Happy birthday, Eddie."

He chuckled.

"How'd you know?"

"Just a guess. Forty?"

"Rather not say."

"Mhm. Well, many happy returns."

CHAPTER 2: MOGGIE'S PURR

Edward Nigma returned to his hideout, pulled a chalkboard from the storeroom, and drew a large question mark with green chalk. He poured himself a glass of Glenundromm, his favorite scotch, and held it up to the beguiling symbol of the unknown.

"A loaf of bread, a glass of wine, and thou," he toasted. "Or a box of Triscuits and a glass of scotch," he shrugged.

He had a mystery to solve, a mystery that might just revitalize his criminal career: What was Oswald up to?

Oswald Cobblepot was the cheapest man alive, particularly where the Iceberg was concerned. Riddler would have been astonished to receive a free drink on his birthday, let alone this... this... enigmatic "gift." But after Selina left, Oswald had waddled up to the table and said he overheard her mention Eddie's birthday. Then he puffed himself up importantly, quacked a few times, and said he was in "a unique position to offer a most *-kwak-* advantageous boon to a select circle of my *-kwak-* most respected colleagues." This "boon" would ordinarily go for \$100,000 up front, and a monthly tribute of twenty percent of whatever the buyer earned with it. But in honor of Eddie's birthday, Penguin said he was prepared to waive the buy-in fee, so sure was he that twenty percent of the esteemed Riddler's take would more than compensate him for his generosity.

"EYEING ROTS" Eddie told the question mark. "SO TEENY RIG" ... "I YESTER NOG, in fact" ... "I GREENS TOY!" ... The word "Generosity," promising as it was as a rootword for anagrams, did not exist in the Penguin's pompous vocabulary. The payoff Oswald was expecting would have to be enormous for him to give away a \$100,000 buy-in just to have the Riddler involved. Eddie was burning to know the details of the scheme, but he didn't want it spelled out for him in Oswald's overblown oratory; he wanted to figure it out for himself. *Then* he would decide if he wanted to be a part of it. It really wasn't his style to sign on as a humble participant in someone else's intrigues, birthday gift or not. It would be far more satisfying to work out the details of Oswald's masterplan and incorporate that into a greater strategy of his own.

Unfortunately, the only lead he had to go on were those two girls from the Iceberg, two of the cat-groupies he saw disappearing into the back room after last call... Jervis said their names were Felicity and Felicia, but Sly thought the second one was called Felina (which made Eddie wince, anticipating Selina's reaction), while Raven thought it was Felita. All Eddie knew for sure was that they were cat-groupies and that Oswald asked them to stay after closing.

It wasn't much to go on, but he was the Riddler after all, and this was a puzzle. No puzzle could remain unsolved if he directed all the faculties of his great brain to unlocking its secrets!

"Felicity and *Felina*?" Bruce asked, allowing a trace of the old playboy to slip into the business persona he'd maintained since these women entered his office. "How... charming."

They smiled at him, and the first one (Felina?) struck what Bruce imagined she thought was a beguiling cat-like pose.

"We represent Moggie's Purr, the new day spa on West 45th," she announced brightly.

"We're sponsoring the MoMA re-opening gala," her companion added, "just like the Wayne Foundation is."

"Although we can't offer anything on the scale of your donation, of course, Mr. Wayne."

"We all do what we can," Bruce noted cautiously. "What is it I, or the Foundation, rather, can do for you ladies?"

In unison, they smiled again, a smile vaguely reminiscent of Catwoman's naughty grin, a smile much closer to that beguilingly feline quality they seemed to be going for.

"It's what we'd like to do for *you*, Mr. Wayne," Felicity purred seductively. "We're newcomers to Gotham, so, of course, we want to introduce ourselves to everybody that... matters. That's why we're offering a free spa day to all the museum board members and, of course, to fellow sponsors like yourself."

"I see. What a delightful idea," Bruce enthused, permitting a little more Fop to creep into his demeanor than he would usually exhibit in the Wayne offices. "I will certainly consider it."

A spa? A day spa? Riddler tried to massage the physical pain of idiocy out of his temples. An *EVIL HEALTH SPA*??? It was such a ludicrously hackneyed cliché, it made his head hurt.

But that's what the silly woman said on the phone when Riddler called the number he obtained from the Iceberg. "Moggie's Purr Day Spa," that's how those cat-groupies answered the phone.

An evil health spa. What could Oswald *possibly* be doing with that old chestnut that was worth \$100,000? As a riddle, a conundrum, a tauntingly unanswered question, it was shaping up to be a barnburner. But as a—*a happening* amongst one of Gotham's old guard rogues—it was... it was... ***it made his head hurt!***

Located eighty miles outside of Gotham, Zack's was the last roadhouse Greg and Talia would stop at before they got back to the city. He stressed this. It really was her last chance to throw caution to the wind and try some pie. All roadhouses had great pie.

"Banana cream," Greg read enticingly off the menu. "Tee, how can you keep eating scrambled eggs day after day and not break it up with a really good slice of pie now and then?"

Talia raised a haughty eyebrow, picked up her fork, and held it out in front of her, suspended between her fingertips.

“This,” she pronounced, “is cheap, punched out tin. No one who presents a diner with a utensil of this kind is fit to prepare food. No food meant to be eaten with a utensil of this kind can serve any purpose other than postponing starvation. As we are only a few hours from Gotham and palatable meals, I am in no danger of starving. A bottle of Evian is all I shall require.”

Greg sighed and grinned apologetically up at the waitress.

“Got any bottled water?” he asked mildly.

The waitress shook her head, and Talia assumed the look of a long-suffering queen in exile as she settled for a cup of weak coffee. Greg ordered “a big slab of that chocolate pie—and two forks,” he added with a wink, “in case she comes around.”

Bruce kept up the genial smile and witless banter until the strangely feline representatives of the Moggie’s Purr Day Spa left his office, then he underwent one of the most disconcerting transformations in existence: his entire demeanor shifted in a split second, his jaw clenching tightly, his eyes darkening, his entire body seeming to condense into a heavier, denser mass. His walk as he returned to the desk was not that of Bruce Wayne in either business or fop mode; it was Batman’s. The forceful punch of the intercom was Batman’s, and so was the brooding scowl that crept over his features as a light, careless voice told Lucius he was leaving for the day.

There was nothing unusual about a new business aiming for upscale clientele. There was nothing suspect in their using museum sponsorship to target the rich, the famous, and the beautiful people. And superficially, there wasn’t anything suspicious in their having a cat theme and their representatives approaching him with such markedly feline deportment. But something about it *was* wrong. Every instinct said so.

Bruce Wayne was known to be linked romantically with Selina Kyle; Selina was known to be Catwoman. It wasn’t a stretch to think he might be receptive to catlike women. If this was a trap... His mind quickly listed and prioritized the pertinent questions:

Who was behind it?

What were they after?

Why was Bruce Wayne the target?

Was he the only target?

When sprung, what would the trap itself consist of?

As with all questions of this kind, Bruce knew finding any one answer would point him to others. The most promising question in that respect was the last, and that meant he had to investigate the spa.

The closer they got to Gotham, the more Talia began to feel her old self again. The sight of the great city growing on the horizon as they neared the 10th Street Bridge, the pitch shift in the sounds of the traffic as they moved from open highway to the close avenues between tall buildings, the smells of those cars and busses, street vents and food carts... It was revolting. Talia did not like Gotham City.

...A billboard for a jeweler screamed “CATWORTHY”...

Talia ignored this large purple reminder of a... a *woman* who made Belov-... who made *Bruce Wayne* happy in ways that she herself evidently could not.

...A T-shirt store in Times Square displayed a huge bat emblem in an enormous yellow circle...

Again, Talia made an effort to ignore the image which represented her Beloved Bruce, and which he himself wore on the many occasions when he... *spurned* her affections.

...*On Fifth Avenue, discreet banners hung from every streetlight announcing the MoMA reopening, sponsored by the Wayne Foundation...*

It was fitting, certainly, that Beloved's name be celebrated in the city he gave so much.

...*They passed another banner...*

It was fitting. Gotham was, in essence, Beloved's capital city—just as it would be if he had accepted her many offers and taken his rightful place as her father's heir. Gotham would be his capital, and there would be banners throughout celebrating his name. But he declined this glory because it was not what he wished his life to be.

...*They passed another banner...*

It was a pity he didn't recognize how wonderful it would be: the two of them reigning as King and Queen of DEMON, and hence, the world. But what could she do? She had tried everything a woman could to entice him, everything to make him understand, and she kept on trying, rejection after rejection, denial after denial, until finally he took refuge in the arms of that vermin slut.

...Finally they came to Wayne Plaza itself, where a signboard listed LL-Research Group, LexTech, and LuCo Investments. Talia's stomach lurched as she saw these former LexCorp divisions being publicly welcomed into "The Wayne Enterprises family."

Everywhere were reminders of old rejections, old failures, old bitterness, and old jealousies. And Talia's eyes swelled with tears... The "vermin slut" was... was no slut. Her name was Selina Kyle and... Bruce, not Beloved, *Bruce* loved the scheming cat-witch... loved "Selina" as he didn't love her... He wasn't bewitched or seduced or ensnared. He was in love. That was how he behaved when he was in love. He had never welcomed Talia into his life the way had the verm... the way he did *Selina*, because he had never loved her—just like he'd said. Many times. Very many times.

Talia did not like Gotham City.

Seventy-eight Floors above Talia squirming in Wayne Plaza, one floor above Bruce leaving the executive suite, Selina strolled alone through the lush penthouse. This is where she'd come the night she faced the truth about the MoMA. The museum had closed for renovation shortly after she closed Cat-Tales. The final meeting between Batman-the-crimefighter and Catwoman-the-thief occurred on their roof, watching from above as they packed up their collection. She had laid down a challenge that night, the reopening gala of the Gotham Museum of Modern Art was going to be a banquet for Catwoman: the art, the jewels, the prestige of the ultimate heist, all hers for the taking. She had challenged Batman, and now, three years later, the time had come to make it good, the museum was ready to reopen... and none of it was going to

happen. She lived in his house now, she slept in his bed, she called him Bruce and he called her Kitten.

Catwoman's great triumph at the MoMA reopening could never happen now.

She'd faced up to that reality months ago, and she'd come here to the penthouse with a vaguely formed notion of playing a prank. The artworks were just as modern as the museum collection, just as priceless, just as... "Catworthy" as that billboard over the bridge put it. Then she'd become distracted, there was an Ivy incident when she'd reached the penthouse and she'd forgotten all about that prank. But now...

After leaving the Iceberg the night before, she'd felt restless and nostalgic. She'd gone back to the MoMA, gone into the offices to learn what she could of their new security and layout. By chance, she found insurance documents on the Van Gogh, Batman's favorite painting. It reminded her of her original plans for the reopening gala.

She slept in his bed now, she *kept her catsuit* underneath his bed—and she discovered the last time she was down there that Nutmeg stashed her treasures there as well. *Her cat stole Batman's socks and hid them underneath the bed they shared*; the days of filching a Van Gogh to prove she could were over. So she'd gone home and crawled into that bed and spent an hour watching him sleep... and then, this morning, she'd come back to this penthouse to decide what to do now.

Oswald Cobblepot glanced at his own image reflected in the banker's lamp, thinking how much he resembled a Gotham Santa Claus. For here he sat, pen poised in judgment over an exhaustive list culled from so many sources: Arkham admissions, Blackgate releases, and outstanding Iceberg Lounge bar tabs, to determine who was most deserving of this priceless gift.

Here, truly, was a census of the Gotham underworld... Double Dare, such charming ladies and sure to make profitable use of the boon if it were offered them. He was sorry indeed to learn they were still locked away in Blackgate... King Snake, limitless profit potential there—but a competitor. Oswald was not about to turn over so valuable a tool to a competing crime boss. He would receive twenty percent of all King Snake earned with it, but Snake himself would keep eighty percent, and with a war chest like that he could destroy the Iceberg. On the same principle, the Italian mobs, Yakuza, Odessa, and the triads were ineligible as customers... Black Mask... a small *-kwak-* chuckle escaped his lips. Like that nattering nabob would ever be anything more than a cheap Bond villain wannabe. One does not bestow the keys to a Ferrari on a pizza deliveryman... That left the rogues, and the rogues could be sadly impractical when it came to the bottom line. Joker, Clayface, Croc, Frieze—they might put the boon to very creative use in their personal vendettas against Batman, but it was unlikely they'd make any money with it. And twenty percent of "OOH-HAHAHAHAHA-Dead-Bat" was of no use to him.

Of course, the one perfect candidate—well, no, that wasn't possible. Damn Hugo.

Nigma was an obvious choice, of course. Even if his schemes were superficially about outsmarting Batman more than turning a profit, he still managed to end in the

black any time he didn't end up in Arkham. Riddler might not be a cash cow, but he could be a solid, dependable earner so long as he didn't get himself captured.

Still, the one *perfect* candidate—the purrfect candidate, in fact—was Selina. She wouldn't go using it to kill Batman, that's for sure; she'd use it as it was meant to be used, to make a fortune for everyone concerned. And yet Catwoman was the one criminal Oswald was forbidden to sell to. Damn Hugo and his conditions! It was all Blake's doing, Oswald had no doubt, and why they needed him involved at all Oswald couldn't imagine. A petty vindictive worm, that's what Tom Blake was.

Selina would make them all a fortune. In one week, most likely, she could set them all up for life. Damn Hugo *-kwak-*. Damn Blake *-kwak-*. Damn them all.

Felicity greeted Bruce Wayne at the front desk of the Moggie's Purr Day Spa with the same suggestively feline manner she'd exhibited at his office, the same manner she'd exhibited at the Iceberg in her hope to attract Tom Blake. She recommended the spa's signature package, the Moggie's Purr: "A sixty-minute deep tissue massage accompanied by the soothing sound of a cat purring." As an added bonus, she said, Mr. Wayne could keep the CD of recorded purrs, ideal for at-home meditation, relaxation and self-healing.

He agreed and Felicity turned him over to a new girl, "Mau," the most unabashedly feline specimen so far. As Mau escorted him into a plush salon, Hugo Strange watched from behind a two-way mirror.

Soon. Soon the soft lull of the cat's purr, and the inaudible but highly functional binaural tracks hidden within those sounds, would gently produce soothing theta waves in Bruce Wayne's brain, which, coupled with the sedative in the massage oil, would induce a state of deep relaxation and intense suggestibility.

Soon, Batman could be switched off with a simple verbal command, enabling Hugo's agents to escape from any confrontation without fear of pursuit. Soon the destruction of the Batman would begin!

"I don't ask much of my friends and colleagues," Eddie complained to the chalkboard, which now displayed five smaller white question marks surrounding the original oversized green one. "I ask only that they not occupy Batman's attention when I am trying to leave a riddle at the Bat-Signal, and that they not be stupid. It really isn't too much to ask."

This Oswald puzzle would drive him mad! The Penguin was one of the all-time great Gotham rogues, and the question of how such a mastermind could be reduced to a tired cliché like "evil health spa" remained unanswered.

Then Oswald *compounded* the riddle by sending word that this great "boon" was now ready: A trigger phrase implanted in *BATMAN* to make him abandon pursuit of any criminal that uttered it??? It made no sense—Oswald said the Bat-password *was now in place*—a done deal. How could he possibly have achieved such a thing? And how did the Moggie's Purr day spa fit in? And what was a Moggie anyway?

A quick trip to Google answered the last question; it was a cat of mixed ancestry, the feline equivalent of a mutt—which didn't get him any closer to solving the Oswald

question. A “cat-mutt” only reminded him of Tom Blake, the Catman, who the tabloids had turned into a Greek god, while their new take on the Riddler’s appearance could best be described as “Colin Farrell meets Boy George.” Catman with a hoard of delicious cat-girl groupies, while the only persons hanging around the Iceberg hoping to meet the Riddler were the understudies from the Rocky Horror Show and... wait... Catman groupies were staffing Oswald’s Zoolander day spa, which had a cat-theme “Moggie’s Purr,” and somehow or other they got a trigger phrase implanted into Batman...

But *Oswald didn’t know Batman’s secret identity* and neither did Tom Blake. There’s no way they could know they had him in their spa unless... Someone else was involved, someone who *did* know Batman was Bruce Wayne, and that was a short list.

HUGO! Hugo Strange was NOT one of the great Gotham rogues. Hugo Strange was not old guard like Riddler, Penguin and Catwoman. Hugo Strange was just the sort of addled nitwit that would come up with a mind-numbingly stupid cliché like an Evil Day Spa!

Riddler marched up to the chalkboard, erased the question marks, cracked his knuckles, and set to work.

Barbara knew her Oracle filters couldn’t detect each and every piece of authentic bat-paraphernalia that came up on eBay. There were always typos and erroneous descriptions. Even if she could locate every “Gotam City Bataroon” that came up for sale, there would be so many fakes to sift through, she wouldn’t have any time left to function as Oracle. Her automated routines weren’t perfect, but she was satisfied that they acquired most of the loose Batarangs.

It was only when Dick was outbid on that Haley Circus poster that it occurred to her to tag the others who bid against her in the Batarang auctions and investigate their future buying. That was how she discovered “SigmundFledermaus,” who had purchased, as nearly as she could determine, two genuine Batarangs. SigmundFledermaus... it warranted further investigation.

In her present state of mind, Selina wasn’t thrilled about meeting Eddie for drinks at the Plaza (“just like old times, eh, ‘Lina?”), but given the funk he was in since his birthday, she didn’t see how she could refuse.

He had her favorite drink waiting when she arrived, and he was glowing with pleasure as she sat down as if it was the first good thing that happened to him all day. It was hard to ignore.

“So,” he announced, placing his palms on the table with a determined glint after she raised her glass to her lips, “How many years has it been, my ‘WEAK LION,’ hm? Want to team up, ‘Lina? We could set the city on its ear. I see you in green.”

Selina smiled affectionately as she took her cue. “I work alone,” she pronounced firmly.

"LAKE I NO ROW," Riddler exclaimed, lifting his hand to his brow in an exaggerated pose of dramatic woe as he churned out anagrams on the familiar phrase. "OK, A LIER WON—OW LINEAR OK—WEAK LION OR... The lady works alone."

"There's no one like you, Eddie," Selina laughed, "And there never will be... Thank god."

He smiled, then turned serious.

"They were good days."

"They were," she agreed. "Eddie, you're forty, you're not *dead*. Get yourself a hot sports car... or beat up Azrael. Both are great for the ego."

He grinned sadly. "That how you do it?"

She raised a dangerous eyebrow.

"Do what?"

"Massage the old ego now that you've hung up your whiskers."

"Ex-cuse me?" Selina blurted, nearly spilling her drink in shock.

"C'mon, 'Lina, you forget I know the real story there: you, Bruce, cat, m-hm-bwm-vwm," he added, making a subtle flapping motion with his hands to punctuate the nonsense syllables, "and not so much anymore with the best thief in Gotham City-meow-purr-hiss."

"Good bye, Eddie" Selina spat, standing and collecting her purse, "Enjoy your midlife crisis. It'll go real well with the receding hairline."

"Now that hurt, Selina," he replied sincerely. "I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to offend you. I didn't know it was a hot button. You *have* given it up, haven't you?"

"Technically," she admitted.

"Well, I'm sorry I upset you, in any case" Eddie went on, and Selina sat back down. "I won't mention it again." He pressed his fingers to the front of his hairline delicately, as if feeling for blood.

"I'm sorry I took the shot about your hair," Selina sighed mechanically. "I did know it was a sore spot. I just wasn't prepared for that kind of... insinuation... damnit, Eddie."

"I didn't insinuate anything," he insisted.

"Maybe not, but... it felt like..."

"Selina," he said with a strange gravity she'd never heard before, "Have you got anybody at all over there you can talk to about this stuff?"

After a pause, she smiled.

"I've got Whiskers, I've got Nutmeg, I've got the gal in the mirror. I'm fine, Eddie."

"You need a sports car," he declared, reverting to the lighter mood, "or to beat up Azrael."

She laughed.

"Or a really good win," he added.

"Yeah," she admitted. "A win... would be meow."

The night the first reports hit the Iceberg, Oswald should have been elated. Rumors of wildly improbable escapes from Batman, backed up with celebratory rounds of drinks for everyone at the bar and an extra C-note for Sly just for being the best goddamn bartender in the best goddamn city in the world, Hurrah!

A barful of gleeful patrons falling over each other to buy each other drinks, *and* he got twenty percent of the windfall they were celebrating. He should have been ecstatic, but all his greedy mind could think of was Catwoman. Nigma let it slip that his favorite Felonious Feline was finally fed-up with her fence. The lovely alliteration made the ravenous birdman salivate. For years, Penguin had been shut out of the most profitable fencing opportunity in Gotham: Catwoman was headquartered here, Catwoman *the best thief in the world*, Catwoman who came regularly into his nightclub, called him “Pengy” and “Ozzy” and taught his bartenders to make her special martini. Catwoman lived HERE and yet she gave her business to that Beverly Stendal in Argentina, Igor Fabricant in Brussels, and Anna however-you-say-that-name in San Francisco.

One time Catwoman had given him the chance to feather his nest and he’d laid an egg. She’d just taken up with Bruce Wayne, a new world of fabulously wealthy Gothamites opened up to her, and she’d given Oswald a chance to bid. He thought he’d offered a fair price, but it was too low and she was insulted. He was too “small-time” for her.

Penguin could not let another such opportunity pass him by. He was not small-time; he had a password in his possession to shut off Batman.

Twenty percent of everything Catwoman stole plus the fencing contracts... it was the chance of a lifetime. And the Penguin did not take policy from the likes of Hugo Strange.

CHAPTER 3: CATWORTHY

Selina always found the couture boutiques of Gotham's upper eastside to be stuffier than those in Milan or Paris, and she didn't particularly *need* a new dress for the MoMA opening. Yet there she was, strolling down Madison Avenue eyeballing windows full of strapless, sequined, silken concoctions that wouldn't really suit her.

Still, she found herself stopping in at Ralph Lauren, at Emanuel Ungaro... and finally where she knew all along she'd wind up, at Dior, with her favorite salesman Vince rushing to get her a glass of Pouilly Fuisse and gushing nonstop about the new goddess dresses that were simply made for her figure.

Selina sipped her wine and smiled patiently while Vince screamed for Brigitte to get into "the red goddess number four" for Ms. Kyle. This is what she would have done back in the day, after all. Prior to any gala like the MoMA opening, she would come to Dior, Vince would scream for Brigitte, and before long Selina herself would be in the fitting room getting pinned into a mockup of red goddess number four or whatever it was... It wasn't the dress itself, of course; it was the fitting room that was the goal. The Dior fitting room just before a big society gala was always Catwoman's favored source of information about the new target.

And even if the MoMA wasn't a target anymore, Selina wanted this; she wanted this touch of the past. Ever since Bruce mentioned (far too casually) that the invitation had come for the gala, some part of her knew she would be sitting at Dior, sipping Pouilly Fuisse while Vince screamed for Brigitte.

Oswald asking her to come see him simply provided the excuse. She wasn't expected at the Iceberg until afternoon, yet she'd come into town almost as early as Bruce had, leaving herself with hours to fill amidst her favorite pre-heist haunts.

She knew too what to expect in the fitting room: the backs of heads (and occasionally faces reflected in the mirror) as she passed the changing stalls, the warble of familiar voices... Binky Sherborn, Bunny Wigglesworth, Gladys Ashton-Larraby... Then, while some gorgeous bands of red crepe were crisscrossed into position across her bust, she would hear those telling words about the Stanton girl "going to show off that oh so vulgar ruby necklace she *claims* is a family heirloom but we all know was a present from the lover, that Hollywood film actor, who *else* could be so crass and vulgar, a *twelve-carat* stone surrounded by *fifty* diamonds. How terribly, terribly *nouv*—Oh hello, Selina darling! I see you're trying that red one. How nice to be so tall. Of course *darling Bruce* has given you something fabulous to set it off, I'm sure..."

Much as she wanted to hiss, Selina said nothing that would derail the instructive conversation about jewels and jewelry. The comment about Bruce merely settled amidst a dozen other unsettling thoughts.

"*Stay away from that Van Gogh.*" That's what he had said that last night on the MoMA's roof. In a sense, it was the last thing he ever said to her as Batman. After that night, after that *moment*...

It was like they were *throwing a party* to celebrate that he'd won, that's what the gala felt like. Some pagan ritual to mark the great milestone: Catwoman was gone, the

Catwoman of that night anyway. *"Now that you've hung up your whiskers,"* Eddie had said. The Van Gogh was safe, the twelve-carat ruby surrounded by fifty diamonds... Let the champagne flow, ladies, the Cat's out of business! *"I know the real story,"* Eddie had said. He didn't, but he knew the pertinent facts. *"You, Bruce, and not so much anymore with the best thief in Gotham."*

Selina stared into the mirror, breathtaking in goddess dress number four, the deep reds making a stunning contrast with her coloring, the plunging neckline showcasing her beautiful figure. Viewed objectively, Selina knew she was a vision of feline allurements...

"Massage the old ego now that you've hung up your whiskers."

...but never had she felt less like a cat.

Talia returned with Gr'oriBr'di to the DEMON base in Chinatown. It was the least distressing part of the return to Gotham, up until they reached the door to the White Dragon curio shop. Chinatown, unlike the rest of Beloved's city, was free of all those haunting reminders. There were no Catworthy advertisements or MoMA banners "sponsored by the Wayne Foundation." Talia began to feel herself again. No reminders of the ruinous disasters before the mud of camping... and no mud. There was no ick of mud in her boots to focus on, no grit in her hair, and there was a decent lunch on the horizon, as soon as Gr'oriBr'di concluded his business here: hot *foie gras* on brioche toast perhaps, or poached salmon Florentine, and a nice lemon soufflé.

Yes, Talia was beginning to feel very much herself again, like a glorious butterfly who had slept too long in a rotting cocoon of failure, disappointment, and mud. She felt as if she'd just taken the first truly free breath of her life when the door to the White Dragon opened, and a minion in Ajax garb flung himself face down onto the pavement at her feet, wailing in broken Farsi his homage to the Great One's Daughter, and swearing his loyalty no less than to the Great One himself—may Anubis protect them all from the devils of this cursed city and the snares of He Whose Name Must Not Be Spoken.

"Rise!" Talia ordered imperiously, reflexively snapped into her old manner by this familiar homage.

"Well you're new," Gr'oriBr'di muttered to himself as the man rose—not to his feet but to his knees. Greg Brady rolled his eyes.

"In'Qel," he called inside, "Look busy, boss is comin'."

After a few moments of hysterical cries and thumpings from the backroom, In'Qel appeared with an impish grin. "What ho, Boss-man," he pronounced carefully, "No worries... I 'cover' for you." Then he saw Talia, his eyes grew wide, and he too threw himself facedown on the floor, flung his arms out full at his sides, and began chanting obsequious apologies in his native Burmese.

Greg turned to Talia. "I think it might be better if you go shopping for a while, Tee."

After her fitting at Dior, Selina stopped in at the Iceberg as Oswald had asked. It was early afternoon, and the nightclub was not yet open for business, so she was surprised to see Sly already behind the bar.

“Only chance I’ll get to catch up on the inventory,” he explained. “We’ve been so busy these last nights, between the empty bottles and the breakages. Kinda like Mardi Gras for rogues.”

“What’s the occasion?” Selina asked. “Did I miss another grand Post exposé like Ice having a girlcrush on Wonder Woman?”

“Nah, nothin’ like that, but, boy, what a number they did on Mr. Nigma, huh? I’ve never seen anything so far off what a person really looks like—well, except for you, of course, Miss Catwoman.”

“Meow,” Selina winked, acknowledging the compliment.

“You can go on back,” Sly said amiably, “Mr. Cobblepot is waiting for you in his office.”

To further thank Sly for his loyal remarks about the Post’s deplorable renderings of Catwoman, Selina treated him to an especially feline walk as she strolled down the hallway towards Oswald’s office. The next few minutes were taken up with quacking and social formalities, and then, at last, Oswald got down to business.

“An opportunity, my felonious feline, an opportunity that is truly ‘Catworthy,’ as that billboard says, an opportunity too grand to be squandered on the common rabble, an opportunity as rare and valuable as the priceless treasures you purloin from Wayne and his circle with such delicious dexterity.”

“Ozzy, you’re not going to start singing to me, are you?”

“Pshaw, my felicitous feline,” he began. Then, noting a dangerously disapproving expression, he changed to a detached businesslike tone. “Selina. I shan’t waste your time with idle flattery—although it is hardly flattery when it is all true.”

“Ozzy,” Selina repeated, closing her eyes in strained patience.

“Yes, *-kwak-* quite. I merely wished to impress upon you that I appreciate the Catwoman’s stature in the underworld, and have selected you for this ‘Catworthy’ boon precisely because it is so apropos to the elevated level you occupy above the common—”

“Oswald!”

“—horde. Yes, *khm-kwak*, quite. I shall come to the point.”

“That would be delightful,” Selina bit off each word distinctly with irate but controlled calm.

“What would you say,” Oswald asked with seductive charm, “if I could offer you a password to... temporarily... ‘shut off’ Batman, enabling you to end any confrontation or pursuit without fear of being followed or caught and—”

“What?” Selina interrupted, incredulous.

“A tantalizing notion, is it not?”

“Shut... off... Batman...” Again, each word was distinct, but the irritation—as well as the controlled calm—was no more.

“A simple password. You utter it; he stops. Interested? Or is it too ‘small-time’ to be of use to you?”

As one of the oldest and most powerful rogues in Gotham, Penguin had endured countless Bat-confrontations in his early days in the field, more than a few of which occurred during Hell Month. Although years had passed, he was still a man who had seen things. He was not easily shaken. Yet what occurred in the next moments he

would be unable to relate in his usual style of affected gentility. “Turned my blood to spit” was as close as he could come to describing the sensation.

It was as though calm, stability, and safety were elements in the air, like water vapor, that were instantly removed by a powerful heat burst, leaving an aura of darkly volatile hatred in what had previously been pure, breathable oxygen. And at the same time, as if his very lungs reacted to breathing in this dangerous volatility, he felt a sick congealing in his chest and a pushing outward through his body as if the blood in his veins was trying to flee in panic.

The source of this... *horrific -kwak-* transformation was Selina, obviously, as she was the only other person in the room. She was... just sitting there, actually. She was just sitting there, not even in costume, just as she had been a moment before. She hadn’t moved a whisker, but somehow... somehow she was emitting this pulse of *-kwak- -kwak-kwak-kwak-* mortal dread. The was emitting this pulse of mortal dread that surely warned any sentient being that something absolutely unprecedented was about to occur, and as far as the continued existence of the universe was concerned, all bets were off.

“Oswald,” Catwoman spoke.

(It was Catwoman, costume or no, although Oswald could convince himself he could almost see the outline of the mask on her face.)

“Oswald, tell me everything, and I mean *everything...*”

(It was Catwoman, although Oswald had never heard the menace coiled into her voice that he heard now.)

“And maybe, just *maybe, if* I’m satisfied, I won’t sink my nails into that fat, fleshy neck of yours and start clawing out chunks with my bare hands, until there’s just windpipe left to *THROTTLE YOU ‘TIL YOU DIE!*”

From her early days as Batgirl to her emergence as Oracle, Barbara had never been the kind of crimefighter that ate, slept, and breathed the job. It was five in the morning when she discovered this SiegmundFledermaus character buying Batarangs on ebay. She was tired, she went to bed, and her subconscious was content to serve up visions of a cat called Flummox jumping into a gondola on the Grande Canal in Venice, where she and Dick spent their honeymoon; of a large willowy tree on a lake at the summer camp she visited when she was ten; and a goldfish called Sam she’d had when she was five.

She awoke with no thought of SiegmundFledermaus or anything else related to Oracle’s activities the night before. She rolled onto her side, kissed Dick’s shoulder and pinched his bottom affectionately. “Finest tush in the super community,” she said aloud—to which Dick, seemingly in his sleep, murmured that natural redheads were better than solo in the center ring, quad-somersault, standing ovation, and a chocolate sundae—with pecans.

Barbara smirked and maneuvered her body into the chair. A few minutes later, she wheeled into the kitchen, fed Bytes (“the cat formerly known as Flummox,” as Selina called it), and poured herself a glass of juice...

SIEGMUND-FLEDERMAUS!

...the juice glass overflowed as the thought settled in. Siegmund-Fledermaus!!! Barbara scrambled to set down the glass, to turn the chair towards the kitchen door—to turn *back* and set down the carton on the counter—knocked over the glass, found a towel and wiped up the spilled juice—and finally wheeled herself out to the computer and pulled up her final screen from the night before.

Siegmund. Fledermaus.

Hugo Strange in all his dysfunctional bat-obsessed glory, how tired could she have been that she didn't dive into this at once?

It was still daylight when Selina left the Iceberg. It was the middle of the afternoon and she was in civilian clothes, there was no way she could go up to Cartier's roof, her favorite spot to think. She tried going into the store itself, but was immediately accosted by salesmen who knew her on sight. The fact that she was Catwoman and known to have robbed the place numerous times meant nothing to them. The fact that she was Bruce Wayne's girlfriend was all they cared about. Just like the ladies at Dior, they were all sure "darling Brucie" would be giving her "something fabulous" to set off her MoMA gown.

"Fabulous" is what they insisted on showing her too: a cat's-eye and diamond bracelet fashioned like a leopard, a pink sapphire ring, a heavy necklace of amethyst, red tourmaline, ruby, and garnet. These salesmen were just *showing them to her*, like they *wanted* her to see something she just had to have... because it was automatically assumed that if she did, it wouldn't be Catwoman coming to take it in the dark of night, it would be Bruce flashing his credit card at them.

The bastard.

The MoMA was throwing a fucking party, practically to *celebrate* the end of Catwoman as she had invented herself. Bruce was being so airily casual about the whole thing as if it wasn't a hands-down win for him, pompous, arrogant, bat-prick that he was. The one person in her life she could turn to for love and support through any other difficult time was... *simply not an option for this one*. The rest of the world, which had no idea that *he was* the victorious bat-prick in all this, all assumed he'd be buying her something fabulous from Cartier to wear to the great party commemorating her defeat! And now, while she was treading water as fast as she could trying to hold on to some piece of herself, some idea of what she was supposed to be, along comes Oswald with this, this password.

"...Enabling you to end any confrontation or pursuit without fear of being followed or caught. You utter it, he stops."

It was monstrous. It was sickening. It was mind-splittingly—outrageously—it was so... *they had done it again*. Somebody had SCREWED with BRUCE'S MIND! **AGAIN!** It was so horribly wrong she wanted to actually *be a wildcat*, to rip them to pieces with her bare claws, rip their throats open with her teeth and tear bloody meat off their bones...

...And at exactly the same moment, a small part of her wanted to use it—just to see if it would work, just to know somewhere deep inside... that she could. One tiny, hidden part of her wanted... to be *tempted*. Temptation meant choice. It would mean

he hadn't won, not really. She *could* take the Van Gogh; she could take the twelve-carat ruby; she could take the cat's-eye/diamond bracelet, the pink sapphire, and the amethyst necklace. She could take it all and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He'd lost. Batman had *lost*. She could shut him off with a single word:

Flehmen.

Heh.

Flehmen.

Nice touch that; it must have come from Blake.

Talia's wanderings to pass the time while Gr'ori debriefed her father's minions took her out of Chinatown into a kind of open-air flea market. There were several stalls removed slightly from the others and, going to investigate these, Talia easily saw that they dealt in stolen merchandise. This hodgepodge of stereos, jewelry, MP3 players, watches, silver candlesticks, handbags, and televisions could have no other common attributes to be gathered in the tent of a single merchant.

Talia browsed the goods for sale with a semi-interested eye. Thieves, after all, (when not purple clad cat-witches bent on stealing the hearts of other women's destined Beloveds) were a staple of her world's economy. Her father's operation could not function without the bandits and black markets. It was there, browsing the stolen valuables of Gotham commoners, that Talia began to hear the distressing rumors. The seedy men who staffed this tent spoke of changes in Gotham. The Bat had "lost it," they said. Criminals escaped him regularly now. Soon someone would snuff him, and Gotham would be as profitable as any other city.

It was troubling. Talia realized at once it was all because of her. She had left with another man, after all. However confused Beloved might have been by the Cat-slut's witchery, the thought of her in another man's arms must have snapped him out of it! At last he realized the true calling of his heart, but too late. She was gone—and with no one left to prove himself to, he had suffered this tragic decline.

She raced from the tent and through the flea market to the street, flailing her arms wildly to hail a cab.

With the plethora of groupies hanging around the Iceberg in catsuits since the advent of Catman's new look, Selina decided a change of costume was in order—just temporarily—to distinguish the true Catwoman from silly little girls that wouldn't know a bullwhip from a batarang. She had tweaked her look several times over the years, but had always returned to the classic costume that suited both her looks and her style so beautifully. The base garment, unfortunately, had always been a catsuit... except for once. One particularly hot summer, on a whim, she had tried a skirted costume. It was cooler, but she found the loose fabric cumbersome and switched back after a few months.

She never thought about it again until years later, when she went away on a weekend with Batman and returned with Bruce Wayne. Instead of parting where they'd met up at the little executive airstrip near Bristol, he turned to her with that dangerously handsome, unmasked face and said, "Why not come out to the house?"

He brought her down to the Batcave, showed her the nerve center, the gymnasium, the chem lab, the trophy room—and there, in amongst his giant penny, his dinosaur, and his two-story playing cards, was her old skirted costume displayed on a wiremesh dressmaker’s dummy.

“What did you call this area?” she had asked casually.

“The trophy room,” he answered—which was incredibly disconcerting still, hearing that deep sexy Bat-gravel from Bruce Wayne’s... incredible... unmasked... handsome... face. Reowrl.

“Trophy,” she said. “As in a *prize* of some kind, a token or memento of some *victory*?”

“Something like that,” he said, as she felt a hand fall casually around the curve of her hip. It was mere days since they’d started sleeping together, and he still touched her a great deal. Selina felt a husky purr welling in her throat and used it to drop her voice down to Catwoman’s silkiest tones.

“And what *precisely* do you consider a ‘victory’ from the eight weeks when I wore that?” she pointed playfully towards the costume. “When you managed to prevent my escaping with the Medici tiara? No, got away with that, didn’t I. Maybe the roman mosaics... nope, I got those too. Oh, I know, it must have been the—” And that’s when he interrupted her with one of the more spectacularly vigorous kisses in the history of men and women rubbing their lips together.

“I got to see your legs,” he graveled finally, his mouth still pressed against hers.

“Well,” she breathed, reeling, “I guess it can stay then.”

It was never mentioned again, but now Selina was decided: *that* was the costume Catwoman would wear on tonight’s prowl, the costume he’d claimed so arrogantly for his trophy room.

She got as far as the cave, torn between anger at the presumption—his placing her costume among his trophies—and a nostalgic thrill at the memory of that first visit to the Batcave, the heat of those early weeks together, finally tasting the forbidden, impossible—*Ungh!* She’d run right into him, coming out of the costume vault just as she was heading into the trophy room.

“Hey, Stud,” she purred automatically.

“Need something?” he asked.

“Already in verbal minimalist mode, I see. No, I don’t need anything.”

He grunted and went on his way... to the workstation, she noted. She watched for a moment as he pulled up the At-Large list, then she continued into the trophy room and took down her old costume. She’d expected the anger to spike when she touched it—Catwoman in his trophy room and Selina living in his house, like he had won and she was the spoils of his victory... But in her mind’s eye, she kept seeing him there at the workstation. The workstation meant the logs. The logs were how he realized his mind had been tampered with once before.

She returned to the main chamber of the cave and saw Bruce had pulled up the holographic map of the city and was using the At-Large list to map out the night’s patrol route...

Bruce had.

He was in costume, in the cave. He was entirely in Bat mode—he was mapping out his patrol route, for Bast's sake, it didn't get much more *Batman* than that—but the man she saw standing there was Bruce.

She walked up quietly behind him and glanced over the route he was planning.

"How's it... going... last few nights?" she asked softly.

He didn't seem to hear. He was marking off a list of potential Scarecrow hideouts.

"Did you say something?" he growled finally.

"I asked how it's been going."

"Fine," he grunted.

"Anything... in the logs, the last few nights?"

Again he didn't seem to hear. He touched a lightpen to several points on the hologram, and made a note into a hand console.

"Why don't you leave that for a while," Selina said carefully.

"What?" he turned, annoyed that he had to give the conversation his full attention.

"Leave it. Take the night off. Come upstairs and make love to me 'til dawn."

"You can't be serious."

She paused, tilted her head at the angle debutantes are taught, the angle of a flirty high school cheerleader at the carnival asking her boyfriend, the star quarterback, to win her a plush rabbit. He stared at her for a moment, trying to figure out where all this was coming from, and then started to turn back to the hologram.

"Flehmen," she whispered, tentatively.

He stopped mid-turn, his whole body freezing for an instant. Selina's heart dropped into her stomach. It was true. The password worked. All of those temptations that had needled the back of her brain earlier flew away, replaced with simple, honest, heart-wrenching rage. They'd done it again. They'd messed with his mind. Oh God, Bruce. What will...

He turned back toward her, took a half-step back, tilted his own head a fraction of an inch, and let out a confused breath.

"How did you know?"

Selina burst out laughing, she flung her arms around his neck with unexpected force, and then began babbling, drunk with relief. "Oh I knew it, Iknewit-Iknewit-Iknewit. I knew Ozzy would never get the better of you that way, my Dark Knight, my own..." —kiss— "...wonderful..." —kiss— "Jackass. You've been stringing them along for days, haven't you." —kiss— "So sexy when you're sneakybat."

At which point he was able to grasp the back of her neck firmly and pull her head backward until there was enough space between them to conduct a conversation.

"Ozzy?" he growled. "You found out about this from Cobblepot?"

"Yeah, who else? He's selling it for \$200,000 a pop—or as a bribe to keep me from pulling his lungs out through his nose. But why—"

"Don't wait up!" he called, releasing her as he turned towards the Batmobile hangar, turning with such speed that Selina nearly spiraled off balance.

"Oh nono," she called, racing after him. "No. No, no, no. No. Flehmen, goddamn it, just wait ten bloody seconds, getting changed, coming with you, finding out what in the flaming—STOP! WAIT!—is going on?!?"

In all their professional confrontations, while Batman was the better martial artist, the better scientist and the better detective, Catwoman was, in fact, the faster runner.

At the conclusion of her disjointed tirade, she had beaten him to the Batmobile and stood between it and him, her one hand on the driver's door and the other coming to rest on the pouch of his utility belt where he kept the keys.

"No, no. I need to know what's happening."

Batman grunted, deciding it was faster to explain than to argue her right to be demanding explanations when he was heading out to close the case.

"This isn't *Penguin's* operation, Selina. It's Hugo's. But Hugo Strange doesn't have the resources to set something like this up. He had to have a backer. I've been playing along to find out who. Cobblepot was always a possibility, but I had to be sure. It could have been Ra's or even Luthor."

"I see." Selina whispered. "And now that you know, tonight's special at the Iceberg will be dead duck."

"Cobblepot and Strange are going to learn that messing with Batman's mind is something you simply don't do, something you don't even consider attempting, and then I'll collect the minor players I had to let escape to make them think they had me."

Selina breathed.

"I see," she repeated. "Busy 'til dawn, then?"

"Probably. I tagged four of them with transmitters. I have a shoe tread on a fifth. While I'm at the Iceberg, I'm sure I can obtain a lead on the final two."

She stepped wordlessly out of the way, and waited until he got into the car.

"Happy pummeling," she said then. "Meet me on the MoMA's roof when you're through."

"It will be late, it might be light, it might—"

"I don't care if it's high noon. Meet me."

CHAPTER 4: FLEHMAN REACTION

Tom Blake detested what he was about to do. He detested the way he must look in the ludicrous costume that replaced his own, his own fabled costume fashioned from the mystic fabric of Ka that imbued its wearer with the nine lives of a cat! In place of that worthy garment, he wore this horrid mockery of a batsuit. The Catman masquerading as a bat, what degradation! And yet he felt compelled to continue. He owed Hugo Strange a debt he could never properly repay; he had no right to refuse any simple request.

Not that putting on this absurd mockery of his own splendid costume was in any way simple. The base jumpsuit was clearly meant for a different bodytype, one wider in the waist and belly and smaller in the arms and chest. The thick lycra pulled and tugged in all the wrong places. Then began the humiliating tying on of rubber chaps and a latex chestpiece—the latter also too small, which led to further humiliation with Hugo taping it into place behind his back so the bat-emblem wouldn't "ruffle up" when he moved. Hugo swore the cape hid the embarrassing duct tape crisscrossed all over his back, but Blake found it difficult to trust a man that could offer him his choice of black rubber or yellow canvas utility belt.

Yes, Tom Blake found it difficult to trust Hugo Strange, and yet he found himself going along with the whole ridiculous plan in so far as Strange bothered to explain it to him.

He checked his watch. Soon it would be time to begin phase 2: Now that so many criminals escaped Batman with ease, his standing with the police must suffer. The general public would not know of his failures, they still held him in esteem. Tonight, that would change. Tonight, "Batman" would begin committing crimes himself, and it would all become clear to them: how his crimefighting of the past was merely a ruse, a way to ingratiate himself with the police and, at the same time, eliminate the competition. Now that Batman's true nature was exposed, he would have no recourse. His denials that the criminal Bat was an imposter would ring hollow indeed. With any criminal able to escape him with a word—how would he explain that to the police? They would know a payoff when they saw it...

It did not sit right with Tom Blake. Catman's battles with the Batman were always that of hunter and prey, the natural contest between predators. This whole scheme seemed vaguely... deviant to him. But he could not bring himself to refuse Hugo; he owed the good doctor too much.

Catwoman waited impatiently on the roof of the Gotham Museum of Modern Art. She hadn't been idle. She had painstakingly mapped out the museum's new security layout, tested out two routes into the building, and thought through various possibilities for reaching the gallery that held the coveted Van Gogh. She was just considering if Victor Frieze might equip her with a better means for evading the heat

sensors than the cooling suits that were commercially available, when she heard the telltale whuish-p of cape in the high winds above the city.

"Evening, Handsome," she purred without turning towards the noise.

"What was so urgent that it couldn't wait 'til I got home?" Batman graveled.

"It's not urgent that way; I just didn't want to have this conversation in our bedroom."

He didn't like the sound of that. Subconsciously, he scanned the roof for any clues as to what might be coming.

"So did you have a good pummel?" Catwoman asked, her voice rich with amusement.

"I raided the spa. Hugo and his... women are out of circulation for a while."

"Hugo Strange with henchwenches, that is just so wrong."

"Most of them were unwitting dupes," Batman growled, "but the one they called Mau, that tried to drug Bruce Wayne, was an active accomplice."

Catwoman hissed quietly, but then broke into a naughty grin as Batman continued:

"After the spa, I went to the Iceberg next," he said. "And Penguin—"

"Had a near-death experience?" she interrupted, more amused than before.

Batman answered with the briefest lip-twitch, then concluded the rundown with the words: "Caught up with three of the seven I let escape earlier to maintain the charade. Robin and Batgirl already found a fourth. It's too late to go on with it tonight; I'll collect the others tomorrow."

Catwoman nodded and emitted a second quietly menacing hiss. Then her features underwent one of those startling shifts that indicate a cat is ready for an abrupt change of subject.

"Do you know what it is, a Flehmen Reaction?" she asked casually.

"Animal research term, psycho-physiology. What cats do when they catch a scent: head goes back, nostrils flare, mouth opens to expose as many olfactory sensors as possible to the odor... Your point?"

"It's a response to prey—to other scents too, but mostly to prey—and it's savoring..." She closed her eyes on the word and pronounced it like the sweetest of sins, "nostrils flaring, deep inhalation, mouth tips open... tasting it, letting the full scent fill your palate..." She breathed in, her eyes still closed dreamily, and she purred on the luxurious exhale. Then her eyes popped open and met Batman's with sad defiance. "It's what I've been doing since Oswald told me... I held the scent, let it fill my nostrils, and savored the idea, the possibilities..."

"Possibilities?" Batman growled, and Selina wondered if he really didn't know what she meant or if he was pressing to make her say it.

"Well there is that Van Gogh downstairs," she obliged. "A twelve-carat ruby scheduled to make an appearance at the party. And Cartier has a rather stunning pink sapphire." She paused, but he said nothing so she continued. "So I held the scent, tasted it, maximum exposure on the palate... Part of me... really wanted it to work."

In place of the indignant outrage any crimefighter should feel at such a statement, Batman felt only disbelief.

"Why? So you could steal a painting that doesn't belong to you?"

"I wanted to have the option, yes."

"You miss it that much?"

“What do you think? It was fun and exciting and I was good at it. And it was against all the rules and that made me feel wild and free and alive. You want me to say I don’t miss that?”

“What I want doesn’t seem to be the point,” he grveled.

“Why should it be, you got everything you wanted,” she spat bitterly. “I’m like a master violinist in a room of pianos. I can make music now and then, but... it’s not my music. It’s not me.”

“And the only way to be ‘you’ is to go back to stealing? What is this, Selina? What’s really going on here, because it isn’t that. What are you looking for? What is it that you really want?”

“I don’t know.”

Batman stiffened. The instinct of a thousand confrontations snapped into place. He didn’t believe a word of what he was hearing. She wasn’t lying, not exactly, but whatever it was she was after, it wasn’t the Van Gogh. He would bear down as he always had until he found out what it was, answering evasion with insistence, and silent stare with silent stare...

“Yes, you do,” he insisted.

“...”

“...”

Until finally...

“No point in wanting that,” she murmured softly. “It’s not going to happen, right? That’s for other people.”

The Planet Gotham Restaurant in the heart of Times Square was a perfect target to launch the faux Batman’s crime spree. As a tourist trap, it was sure to be filled with diners toting camcorders, and there was a resident photographer snapping pictures of families at their tables. Tom Blake could be certain the crime would be well documented. He need only wave his grapnel gun sufficiently to terrify the sniveling tourists, and then collect enough of their valuables for the robbery to constitute a felony. It was a very simple plan.

The Living Hell began when he tried entering through a third story window above the main dining room, and his wretched cape (so inferior to the fabled fabric of Ka) became caught on a splintered piece of cornice. As he tried to disentangle himself—without risking any move that might dislodge the cape and reveal the duct tape holding his batsuit together—his antics were noticed by the crowd below. There was a good deal of pointing and laughter, and there were many cameras pointed in his direction. Unfortunately, while the photos might well be as damaging to Batman’s reputation as those Blake had intended to be taken, no one in the crowd seemed to believe the figure on the third floor of the Planet Gotham building (with his cape snagged on the second floor cornice) was the real Batman.

It worked. Catwoman had caved. Finally, the truth was coming out:

“No point wanting that; it’s not going to happen. That’s... for other people, right?”

Finally the truth was coming out, but (“for other people?” What was she saying?) it wasn’t a truth Batman was expecting.

“...”

It seemed, on the contrary, to be a truth he hadn’t even been considering.

“...”

And it was entirely possible that she had misread his bat-stare.

“...”

It seemed increasingly probable that she had misread the bat-stare.

“...”

Completely misread it.

“...”

A stare he directed at her to make her speak, to get her to realize and admit—to herself as much as to him—that whatever was missing from her life, whatever need she was trying to fill, it had nothing to do with those swirls of paint inside the museum.

“...”

That crisis seemed to have passed; they were no longer talking about Catwoman resuming her criminal activities.

“...”

What they were talking about—and here, Bruce had to caution himself, because he could not be certain what that was, exactly. The evidence was sketchy at best. A single reference to the “that” which Selina wanted being “for other people” did not conclusively prove that they were talking about...

“No point wanting that; it’s not going to happen. That’s for other people, right?”

...marriage.

No point wanting that.

It’s not going to happen.

That’s for other people,

Right?

“But you still want it,” he said carefully.

The pause that followed seemed to go on for minutes, but lasted, at most, a few seconds... It was a strangely nostalgic pause, filled with desires that couldn’t be spoken. Desire that was sensed anyway, whether spoken aloud or not. Desire that was sensed but denied and ignored, because to admit it revealed vulnerability. It invited rejection and gave the other power.

“No,” Catwoman said lightly, “Not really. It’s like the Van Gogh. I don’t want it exactly, I just wanted to...”

“To get the scent in your nostrils,” he prompted hurriedly.

“Yes, yes exactly. Just get a good whiff, see what it would... feel like.”

The brave effort on both their parts sank back into strained silence.

Tom Blake freed himself, at last, from the façade of the Planet Gotham restaurant. He could master the bat-grapnel sufficiently to swing himself to the alley behind the building where he hid behind a dumpster until the crowd out front dissipated. Then he renewed his assault on the Planet Gotham building by entering the usual way, through the street level front door.

The lobby was filled with video and novelty games, and a jet of air from one of these blew up his cape, momentarily flashing his back full of duct tape to anyone that happened to be walking behind him. He ignored the guffaws and found his way to the escalator leading to the main dining room.

“Oh, wow. Look at you,” a lusty voice croaked behind him.

Blake turned to see a strangely costumed “shooter girl” eying him the way a hungry lion eyes gazelle. She wore a bikini top, miniskirt, and cowboy hat, all in hot pink leather. Twin holsters of what appeared to be vodka lime and vodka cherry were strapped to each hip. And crisscrossed over her chest, like bandoliers in the old Westerns, she had two straps of shot glasses instead of bullets. Although he had never seen such a specimen before, Blake recognized this creature as a “shooter girl” because the words were emblazoned in red across the band of her cowboy hat. Blake smiled weakly, forgetting in the face of such a rapacious predator that he was, himself, there as a hunter.

“How about a shot before you head in to work, ‘Batman,’” his tormentor cooed, whipping out a glass with one hand and a bottle in the other. Then she arched her back, slid the glass into place in the latch of her bikini top, and deftly filled it with vodka lime.

“I, um,” Blake faltered, taking an involuntary step backwards—smack into another woman who didn’t seem quite so predatory, if only because she was wearing a yellow sundress instead of a hot pink bikini.

“Would you take our picture,” the new girl asked sweetly, waving her camera at him.

An elaborate, multi-layered assault on everything Batman AND Bruce Wayne held dear, stripping him of his stature, his sanity, his livelihood, and finally, his life. It was a plan truly worthy of Dr. Hugo Strange, and the first phase was proceeding without a hitch—until this unfortunate setback with the password malfunctioning, which landed him in bed number four of the Arkham infirmary.

Through a haze of Haloperidol and Vicodin, Hugo outlined for himself how he could direct phases two through seventeen of his great plan from bed number four. Phase six would be especially difficult, since Dr. Bartholomew was unlikely to sanction a fieldtrip to the Bristol Polo Club and Bruce Wayne was unlikely to attend a tailgate at the Arkham parking lot.

If he did somehow make it to phase nine, faking his own death, there were certain advantages to his present location. He could be murdered by Batman’s greatest foe, the Joker, forcing the Bat on a vengeance rampage...

Although the clarity that comes of a Haloperidol-Vicodin injection on top of a concussion did enable him to foresee a likely response: “HAHAHAHAHAAAA! Yeah right, Hugly. I’ve got a better plan, how about I just kill you for real, right here, right now!”

Better surely to stage his murder at the hands of Batman’s greatest foe, Killer Croc...

“You want Croc hit Hugo in head with big rock? Okay.”

Er, the Batman’s greatest foe, The Riddler...

"I'm sorry, Hugo, were you speaking to me?!"

Struck down on the very brink of his rehabilitation by Batman's greatest foe, Mad Hatter...

"Uh, sure Hugo... as long as you can do for me what you did for Blake! I wanna be a studly hunka-hunka too!"

It only got worse when Bat-Blake made his way into the dining room, where adults and children alike assumed he was a hired entertainer working for the restaurant. One woman would take his picture while her children pawed his utility belt. Her husband asked if he could get a baked potato instead of fries with that cheeseburger. And every time Blake spied the shooter girl, she made eye contact, licked her lips, ran a fingertip over the lip of the vodka bottle, and blew him a kiss.

He fled.

Outside the restaurant, he mopped the sweat from his brow. It involved stuffing the end of the cape underneath the cowl, again revealing the duct tape, but he was past caring about that.

He decided it would be enough for Batman to rob a taxicab at gunpoint. It was Times Square. There would be plenty of witnesses, a sufficiently public disgrace for the great crimefighter. He would hail a cab, threaten the driver with the grapnel gun and take his cash, then he would pull the man from the car, take the wheel himself, and drive himself home—never to set foot in Times Square again if he lived the rest of his days in Gotham City.

Catwoman left the Jaguar she'd driven into the city in the little car park near her old apartment. She rode home in the Batmobile with Batman. Not a word was spoken until they passed the "Catworthy" billboard, then the tense silence seemed to crescendo, and the mood in the car shifted.

"There was a time," Bruce graveled quietly, "Dick and Barbara's wedding, you couldn't stand the thought of it."

Selina chuckled, remembering. "Yeah, well, there was a time I'd have my claws on that Van Gogh by now, too. Can't go home again."

"Two full bottles of Tattinger '96, Kitten."

"I was thinking a little cat-scratch on the nameplate during the gala, just to remind you in case you'd forgotten."

"You, Lois, Dinah, and Quinn empty six bottles of champagne between you, because of Gladys Ashton-Larraby."

"Even back then, I knew you'd be there, somewhere, at the gala. We might run into each other at the buffet, reaching for the same crab puff."

"Two little words from a society gossip and you're off binge-drinking with Harley Quinn!"

"The real party wouldn't start until after the guests left. Gallery goes dark, little green light of the security system flicks on, then it'd be just you and me, Stud."

"Selina... what are you doing? What are you talking about? I'm talking about two years ago when you had a meltdown because the words 'Mrs. Wayne' were uttered

and they meant you. Two minutes ago, you said that's what you wanted. You wouldn't use the word, but you got the message through. Now you're back on that Van Gogh? Selina, what's going on with you? And leave the museums and jewelry stores out of it, they have been for two years, four months and eleven days."

"No, that's not true, not really. It was never about the paintings or the jewels. It wasn't just the prize and it wasn't just the thrills. It was... I don't even know how to put this. It was getting back a little piece of what I'd lost. The luxuries somehow touched that old feeling of safety and love and home."

"There's nothing like that I can't give you," Bruce pointed out. "For that matter, Selina, you were set after the first Monet. Why keep going if it was just the money?"

"It was never enough."

He grunted lightly, eyes glued to the road, as if looking at her would cause his entire universe to collapse.

"It didn't matter how much you stole, you would never bring them back."

"Something like that," Selina whispered, uncomfortable with the words he chose even more than the conversation itself and the reality it suggested. She took a deep breath, then spoke the thought. "Bruce, you're not going like this observation, but we're not that different. Why do you go back out each night, hm? Life stole what I had, so I steal back. 'Criminals' violently ripped your life away, so you violently rip back. If it really filled the void, couldn't you have walked away even about two thousand alleys ago?"

"Walked... away... even?"

"Impossible concept, right? That's all I'm saying."

He shook his head, finding it impossible to reconcile the differences between their choices with the same root cause: the life of protecting the innocent versus the life of preying on them.

Once she realized he wasn't going to respond any time soon, she continued.

"You asked why I kept at it, that's why. It was never enough... Then you came along and... and it was the real thing. A real home, a real family, real love, not a cheap substitute that could never..."

"..."

"..."

"So what changed? Is it just the MoMA opening reminding you or..."

"No. And yes, in a way. The opening sort of opened my eyes to it. It's happened again. I had a home and family once. I felt safe and I felt loved, and then it was gone. Forever, never to return. So I had stealing to fill that void, however imperfectly. It's what I did, and it worked for a while... Now that's gone too, just as permanently. I mean, even if I did go back, it wouldn't be the same."

"You said you had the real thing now. So why care about that? You admit it's no substitute, you admit it won't ever fill the void, you said what we had—"

"IS TOO FRAGILE!" she screeched. "It was good for a while, but now, all of a sudden, it seems so... fragile."

She whispered the last word quietly, and neither spoke as the car crossed the borders of the Wayne property and raced through the alpha-delta sensors.

"I know a ring or a piece of paper won't make it any less fragile," Selina said finally, "no more than a painting would."

He grunted.

"And no more than pummeling your ten-thousandth thug will, so don't be so smug, Jackass."

Bruce said nothing as the Batmobile crossed the last omega sensor and pulled to a stop in the cave. He was still in a fog. Comparing her impulse to steal with the necessity of his mission was, was, beyond anything he could... anything he could begin to...

But at the same time, she was hurting so badly. He couldn't just dismiss it. He turned, slowly, without releasing the doors.

"We're home," he graveled.

The theatres let out. Tom Blake, a.k.a. would-be-fake-criminal-Batman, found that he could not get a cab. He walked... disheartened... back to his lair. He first noted the telltale marks of Batmobile tread on the street about a block from the day spa, and, like any experienced tracker, he proceeded with caution.

He satisfied himself that there was no residual bat-presence. He checked that there were no police, which trailed behind the true bat-predator like scavengers. There was nothing left but the yellow tape that sealed the doors to the day spa, but that was small consolation. The lair was raided; Hugo and the cat-nymphs were captured or in hiding; the operation was a failure. Blake sank down onto the step at the front door to the spa. The too-long and spiky ears of the cowl felt wrong as he let his weary head flop into his hands.

This is what came of giving up his magic cape.

"BELOVED! At last, I've found you!" a joyous voice cried across the street. Blake looked up to see a trim figure in white racing up to him, her arms outstretched. "Beloved!" she gushed anew as soon as she reached him, "Fear not, I have returned in this, your darkest hour. You will be again the man that you were!"

Blake felt his head rise a touch at these encouraging words.

"It is not your fault, my Beloved, you fell in with inferior beings and they pulled you down to their level. They contaminated you with their low ways and low standards. But you will be great again, Beloved, for I am here now to pull you up once more, as only I can, to save you from the degradation of those who were never worthy to bask in your light."

"You have a very interesting way of talking," Bat-Blake started to say, but he got no further than "Y-" when Talia flung herself down in front of him and began weeping on his knee.

"Um-r-uh," he said, tentatively.

She looked up in response to these tender entreaties, through a blur of tears, into that masked face she loved so dearly, and she explained—now that, at last, he was ready to understand—she would explain how it was the witchery of that disgusting cat that brought him to such ruin.

"Cats are such vile, despicable creatures, it is no wonder anyone so low as to choose one for their avatar must be depraved beyond reason—"

“CATS!” Tom Blake roared in righteous rage, “ARE THE FINEST AND NOBLEST CREATURES ON EARTH!”

“You are not my Beloved,” Talia declared indignantly.

“Never speak ill of cats again,” Blake growled with a menace truly worthy of the costume he wore.

“If there is one thing I know,” Talia affirmed with dramatic flare, “it is my Beloved. And you, sir, are not he!”

CHAPTER 5: SO THIS IS HELL

She had to walk... across a bridge... to a place called Brooklyn.

After scouring the city for the better part of a day and a night searching for her Beloved—only to have hope dashed from her lips by that odious imposter!—Talia knew the only way, finally, to locate her Beloved Bruce was to wait until morning where she could find him in his civilian identity.

It was not an appealing thought.

To go to his home meant seeing that vermin slut living in his house as if she were the woman in his life, as if she were the one he chose to open his home to and share his life with, as if she were mistress of the manor!

...

But to go to his office meant returning to Wayne Plaza.

In a way, that seemed more horrifying to Talia than seeing that cat-witch living in his home. She had experienced... thoughts in Wayne Plaza that were an affront to her undying devotion to her Beloved. She had allowed herself, it was for only a moment, but for that moment, she had allowed herself to entertain the notion that Bruce Wayne was not, in fact, her Destiny, that he was not in love with her and indeed that he had never been in love with her; that she had, in essence, wasted all those years dreaming of a love that existed only in her mind... the ecstasy of his imagined feelings for her nothing but illusion, the anguish of all those frustrated hopes for nothing. Those YEARS of suffering—for a lie, for NOTHING AT ALL, for a wisp of empty air. He didn't love her. He never loved her. He would never—it was all for nothing.

No, of course Beloved loved her. She had evidence now, having discovered that odious imposter. She had the means to prove to Beloved, once and for all, that he was bewitched by that hated cat. She had to go to him. She had, surely, to make him see. And the only way she could do so was to face the demons of her own thoughts in Wayne Plaza.

And the only way to do that was to find a place to rest—and to repair her nails and shoes, all the worse for wear after she thrashed at that horrid imposter. The training of those three moons in the League of Assassins, while remaining among the worst experiences of her life, had not completely failed her. Though she had been hopeless in the training camps, she found surprising force within her as she charged and tore at the vile beast who dared to wear Beloved's costume and spoke admiringly of cats!

It was true that he was tall and strong, and he departed the field of battle more energetically than she. But Talia was pleased to view this as fearful flight from her vicious attacks and not, as might be thought, that she herself could not move very fast after the confrontation, between the painful bruise on her hip where she fell after he pushed her away, and the damage to her shoes after all that kicking.

All she had wanted after such a night was to retire to her room, remove those shoes and rub her aching feet, to draw a bath and wash the horrid mud of camping from her body and hair, then to have scented oils massaged into her skin, to relax with some

warming consommé, and finally to collapse into her bed and cry herself to sleep. That is all she had wanted.

But the vile clerk at the Parkview Hotel said his masters “declined to authorize the charge” on her Lexcorp Card, which she had, in the past, at least been able to check in with although it was now useless for paying the bill. That left only the card obtained through her father. It had no “limit” in the crass material sense of these petty Western clerks, but using it was bondage to her in a far greater sense: If she charged so much as a penny on that card, her father would know at once where she was—and he would know she needed him once again. It was insupportable.

She had no choice but to turn once more to her protector. Gr’oriBr’di possessed lodging in Gotham City, after all. He had to live somewhere when he wasn’t at the Chinatown base. Unfortunately, Talia had no idea where that might be. They had met always at her hotel in those heady days before he spirited her off on the adventure of camping.

So when the odious Parkview clerk asked if she “would like to try another card,” Talia said that she only wanted to use the phone. She called Gr’oriBr’di—who expressed his concern (which was strangely troubling) about the way she had disappeared after she left the curio shop in Chinatown. After many assurances as to her safety and a few lies about what she’d been doing, he obliged her with the address of his apartment. This abode was, like Beloved’s manor, located outside the central island of Gotham. It was located, unlike Beloved’s manor, at a place called Brooklyn Heights—and to her horror, Talia learned the simplest way of reaching it was to walk across this bridge like a common peddler.

Selina awoke alone in the bed.

“Just as well,” she muttered as she got up. She felt completely off her game right now and was happy she didn’t have to deal with him. It was all so complicated suddenly: She looked at him as Batman and saw Bruce wearing a Batsuit. She looked at Bruce, and she saw that face Batman revealed to her when he first took off his mask.

She walked into the bathroom, grabbed the soap, and brandished it accusingly at the mirror. “Don’t start,” she warned her reflection, yawned, and stepped into the shower.

When she returned to the bedroom, she saw that the tiny “bumblebee bat” had returned to its place on the window. She adjusted her towel, marched up to the windowpane, and knocked on the glass.

“Shoo,” she told it heatedly. “Don’t you know you don’t belong up here? You’re supposed to be underground. Away from the sunshine. Jackass.”

“Who are you talking to?” a light, foppish voice asked behind her.

“So this is hell,” Selina grumbled under her breath before answering “Nobody. Just thinking out loud.”

She felt Bruce walk up behind her but she didn’t turn. He began nuzzling her neck. When he spoke again, the voice had deepened into the intense bat-gravel.

“I feel like a violinist in a room full of pianos every time I go to the Watchtower,” he said, referring to their conversation the night before.

She turned to look at him, saying nothing for a long minute, just searching his eyes.

"Come downstairs with me," he said. "I have an idea." It wasn't the commanding tone that always made her chafe, but it was a Batman voice. It wasn't Bruce; it wasn't vulnerable or seeking or warm. But it was more a request than a command, so Selina nodded and followed.

When they reached the clock, he set the hands to 10:47 and then turned to her as the passage slid open. "10:47, that's when it happened. Crime Alley. My parents."

"I know. You told me that," she reminded him. That first day, when they returned from Xanadu, he had just revealed his identity, invited her back to the house, introduced her to Alfred, and then after a brief tour of the manor rooms, he brought her to this spot and took her down to the cave.

"I know I did," Bruce said gravely. "C'mon."

This time, the tone was more commanding. Selina wondered if it was proximity to the cave or the subject of Crime Alley, but he became more commanding. She stifled feline pride at being ordered to follow, and fell into step beside him.

"This is the nerve center," he said. "Computer consoles, multi-tiered communication, holographic capabilities. Batmobile hangar, Batwing and Batboat in through there. Gymnasium, weights, training gear... med facility, chem lab... costume vault and trophy room."

"Yes, Bruce, I know," Selina said carefully.

"Do you remember what you said that day, when I first brought you here?"

"Of course," Selina replied tenderly. "I said, 'It's you.'"

Bruce's lip twitched, remembering the moment. Then a stony seriousness returned.

"That's as final and absolute as it gets, Selina. Bringing you here, here, into the heart of everything that I do, everything I am. Isn't that enough?"

She raised an eyebrow, and when she said nothing, Bruce went on.

"We're never going to be like other people. For us, for me, opening this place up to you went beyond anything 'they' do to say it's forever."

"Okay," Selina said slowly. "Can I make an observation or three without you going all psychobatty?"

"If you swear to never use that last phase again, I'll think about it," he growled.

She answered with only a naughty grin until he half-nodded, and then she proceeded:

"Alright, Item 1: What I should have added that day is that this cave is a wonder of the modern world, and so are you."

She paused and waited. Seeing that some kind of response was expected, Bruce reluctantly grunted.

"Item 3," Selina went on.

"You skipped two."

"I'm inscrutable that way. Meow."

Bruce sighed and shook his head.

"Item 3," Selina continued, "It was enough, for me. It wasn't for you, Bruce, because you asked me to move in with you. I moved my cats into your house; do you even begin to realize what that is to me? It's your cave, and me and my cats are living on top of it— in your house. I've got a cranky demonologist living in what used to be my place."

"That brings us to my idea," Bruce put in.

"Oh?"

"Yes... Get out."

Talia's reluctance to go anywhere near Wayne Plaza made it easy to find other things to occupy her time: first she slept, then she spent several hours perfecting her appearance. This was no small task, given the mud of camping and the necessity to appear at her best to meet her Beloved once again. This day, their reconciliation, would be forever captured in his memory. It was important that she shine with undreamt-of beauty.

The task of "Talia Beautification Day" was further complicated by the... the challenges (as the LexCorp financiers referred to such disastrous calamities) of Gr'oriBr'di's... dwelling. No bubble bath with scented oil was possible as there was no bathtub—at all! Only a filthy, grungy shower with stains on the curtain, rust around the drain and some sort of... gunky... substance growing in the corner that was not entirely dissimilar to the biological weapons developed in her father's Feuer-Ziekte labs. Nevertheless, Talia found it within herself to endure these conditions sufficiently to wash her hair, to use Gr'ori's hairdryer without electrocuting herself, and she even managed to apply a little make-up in the 3 square inches of his bathroom mirror that was not covered by a greasy, cloudy haze of whitish... something that smelled faintly of a Turkish coffeehouse crossed with... jet exhaust? When these ministrations were complete, Gr'oriBr'di had returned to the flat and was eager to "show her around the old neighborhood."

Talia acquiesced, for what choice did she have, Gr'oriBr'di was her protector. She didn't expect to enjoy the outing, but within an hour of visiting the pizza parlor, the ball field, and other landmarks of his boyhood, Talia found herself relaxing back into the comfortable ease she often felt with Greg. Those first days camping together, before the rains and the mud, had been very pleasant indeed. And this "Brooklyn" felt... well, it didn't feel like camping, but it did not feel like Gotham City either. The angsty coiled tension, the fear and hate and bitterness all tangled up in a sickly dread that had plagued her since that first drive through the city was lifted somehow.

Greg had introduced her as "Tee," so the men at the pizza shop called her Tee also. It was very freeing to be this Tee, to not be "Talia al Ghul, daughter of the Great One," or "Talia Head, that worthless bitch that wrecked LexCorp," or "Talia, the man wants to wipe out 3/5 of the human race, how can you stand idly by while that sick megalomaniac plans a global genocide?"

The mere thought of Batman's entreaty was enough to snap Talia back to reality. She had to warn him. He was bewitched and she had to free him from the cat-slut's clutches.

It was only then that she noticed the lengthening shadows as she walked with Gr'oriBr'di by the river and realized the hour was so late. The business day was over; Beloved would no longer be in his office at Wayne Enterprises. She had squandered the daylight hours, and the prospect of another night searching for him as Batman—only to encounter some vile, cat-loving imposter in his place—was too daunting to even contemplate.

But wait, there was a third alternative. This night alone she knew where he would be! The Gala Reopening, his name was all over those banners throughout the city advertising the Museum of Modern Art's gala reopening, "Sponsored by the Wayne Foundation." He would have to make an appearance.

Selina would have to admit, even if Mirror Bitch was stubbornly silent on the subject, that there was an upside to that arrogant Bat's presumptuous idea that he understood her.

She leaned in towards the mirror, daring Mirror Bitch to challenge the rightness of the current arrangement, and carefully applied her eye shadow. He was right, there were simply too many associations attached to that gala. It would be impossible for them—for her especially, to dress for it in the same room. This way, she had her gown, her make-up, and so she felt truly at home, Whiskers and Nutmeg, all with her at the penthouse. She could get ready on her own, just like she would have if nothing had changed between her and Batman. Whatever feelings that evoked in terms of her long war with the Dark Knight, she could at least face it without seeing Bruce standing six inches behind her adjusting his tie in the mirror.

"Stay away from that Van Gogh, Catwoman."

"Bite me, Dark Knight—oh, and could you be a dear and zip me up, sweetie?"

No, it was definitely better like this.

In the mirror, Selina couldn't help but chuckle as the top two inches of a blue-gray tail came into view as Whiskers walked by behind her.

"Best laid plans of flying mice and batmen," Mirror Bitch observed. The one part of Bruce's plan that didn't quite pan out, the one thing the great bat-strategy could not control, was her cats. They were there in the penthouse with her, to preserve the illusion that this was her home, but the cats weren't about to pretend. For them, the penthouse was a large new territory and they set about exploring it the moment Selina opened the cat-carrier.

There was something very comforting about that. Batman's great plan could not touch, control, affect, or anticipate her cats.

Selina returned to the bedroom, unzipped the quilted garment bag from Dior, and slid out the dress. There was an audible thik as a small, moderately heavy something was dislodged from the hangar and dropped to the bottom of the bag. Selina peered in... and her breath failed as she recognized the red leather of a Cartier's box.

"He didn't," she said flatly.

Nutmeg darted out from under the bed and looked up at her.

"You're no help," she told the cat.

Nutmeg purred.

"Well, I guess one of us should be purring," Selina shrugged, and then regarded the box suspiciously, like a too-easy-to-open safe. "Only one way to find out," she breathed. "Do it quick, right? Like ripping off a Band-Aid."

Nutmeg continued to purr.

Selina breathed in, closed her eyes, then sprung open the box and looked down.

She saw a folded note nestled in the otherwise empty folds of velvet lining.

She picked it up, carefully unfolded it, and felt a slow, naughty grin steal over her face as she read the words:

“You want the pink sapphire, you’ll have to earn it. –B”

If Bruce Wayne bothered to calculate the number of parties, balls, galas, clubs, and cotillions at which he’d arrived “stag,” it would surely be over a thousand. Advantageous though it was to cross the velvet rope with some photogenic starlet or supermodel, there was always the danger of the women being remembered. When, after an hour, Bruce Wayne was gone and Iman was still at the party, most society gossips assumed he’d left with someone else (and he could expect only hang-ups if he called Iman again). That was fine once or twice a month, but for the vast majority of his playboy appearances, Bruce found it best to arrive alone. Then when he vanished, it would still be assumed he’d left with someone else’s escort, but he was spared the “paper trail” of women who thought at the start of the evening that they were his date.

These thoughts were far from Bruce’s mind when he opened the door of the limo and strolled glibly along the MoMA’s red carpet, nodding an empty smile at the cameras flashing wildly until he reached the door. He greeted the museum director, the architect, and several board members all clustered inside the front entrance. He put on the foppish party-voice as he told them they looked less like a formal receiving line and more like a row of proud papas in a maternity ward, koochie-kooing at the nursery window.

There was a momentary pause, then they all laughed pleasantly at his feeble joke. As they laughed, Bruce saw they each stole swift, subtle glances at the empty space to his right—then to his left—then to his right again.

“Selina will be along later,” he said curtly, annoyed that her absence was seen as some kind of anomaly he was expected to explain. He was more annoyed still when this announcement was met with such warm, relieved smiles, smiles much more sincere than the polite laughter at his earlier joke.

“I think I’ll just take advantage of my freedom while it lasts,” he proposed with a devilish grin, “I’ll be at the bar.”

“Fabric of Ka, I’ve missed you so,” Tom Blake said lovingly to the mirror. Despite the black eye and fat lip he suffered at the hands of that crazy wildwoman at the spa, the combination of his new body and his old costume was truly a sight to behold.

Now he need only reclaim his prestige, appearing—as he should have in the first place—in his true guise of Catman!

The crazed woman was quite right: he had fallen in with inferiors who pulled him down to their level: that Post photo in a loincloth, and then dressing up as Batman in a shameful charade unworthy of a great predator.

He would correct those errors tonight. Tonight he would appear as he was: the Catman, King of Cats!

Reaching the bar, Bruce permitted the Fop to leer at the comely bartender. He pulled a folded twenty from his pocket and held it up over her tip jar, sensuously rubbing the two halves together as he placed his order. She made and held eye contact while she poured, but her look was difficult to translate. Then she handed over the drink, Bruce dropped the bill into the tip jar, and that was that.

He turned back towards the party—and started with uncharacteristic surprise as he saw Talia al Ghul standing close beside him.

“Beloved, I must speak to you at once,” she whispered hoarsely.

Bruce kicked himself that he could become so immersed in his Fop performance that he hadn’t noticed her approach.

“All that’s happened between us, my running off with Gr’oriBr’di that distressed you so, we will have time enough to settle it later. For now, put aside whatever doubts and fears you have of me, and listen, listen well, my Best Beloved One, oh you must, you must listen, I have such dire, dire news...”

She was clutching the fabric of his tuxedo at the elbow and yanking it every few words, jostling his arm and making the scotch jump in his glass to punctuate her words. Bruce looked wordlessly down at her hands on his elbow, then back at her, glaring hateful warnings.

“I shall say nothing to compromise you, Beloved, I swear it, but you must listen to me, please, you must, you must, you must.”

“That’s a Dolce & Gabbana,” Bruce said, eerily mixing the foppish sentiment with Batman’s deadliest gravel.

Talia released her hold, looking truly frightened. When the death-glare did not become more welcoming, she began nervously patting down the wrinkles she had created on his sleeve.

“Go into that gallery,” Bruce growled menacingly, pointing towards a hallway with his eyes, “I’ll give you 60 seconds, 25 words or less. Second 61 or word 26, I’m out of there. Do you understand?”

“Beloved I—”

“Do you understand?” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“Yes, Beloved,” Talia said meekly.

Selina enjoyed her moment on the red carpet. She walked right up to the Post photographer on the very end of the right ropeline—to the delight of the photographers around him.

She paused, smiling, for several seconds, giving them all an unprecedented bonus of close-ups. Then she made eye contact with the photographer just behind him.

“Daily Planet?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Gotham Poster-boy here has no idea who I am,” she remarked. “Be sure to tell him.”

Then she winked and scampered inside as the cluster of paparazzi exploded with stage whispers of “Kyle, Selina Kyle” and “Catwoman,” “the real one,” “No, can’t be

her," "Looks nothing like," "No kidding, dumbass" and then finally "Hey, it's Debra Messing. Debra, over here!"

Once inside and through the receiving line, Selina wandered towards the new sculpture court, sensing that she was being followed. This wasn't unusual; men often followed her at parties, working up the nerve to introduce themselves... and of course Bruce was there already; she'd gathered that much from the welcoming committee that greeted her at the door. Three of them had mentioned it pointedly: "Bruce arrived a half hour ago, my dear. He told us, of course, that you'd be coming. So good to see you here at last..."

Selina wondered what it all meant. She was Catwoman—the art thief; they all knew it. They didn't know she'd once made plans for this very event, but they weren't morons, they had to know she had taken an interest in the museum over the years. Yet they were all so happy to see her there, so eager to tell her Bruce was there already... Was it turning that screw? Was this the first thorn this night would poke into kitty's tender paw? They didn't fear Catwoman taking their Van Gogh anymore. Oh no, they were happy Selina Kyle was here, finally, to keep the Fop in check: Bruce went towards the Atrium, dear, and so did the Hilton sisters. Do go find him before he reverts to that foppish lout and does something unattractive in the sculpture garden...

Or maybe it was something Bruce set up himself. Maybe it was a Bat-game? for the pink sapphire? in which case that was undoubtedly him following her. She turned into a conceptual gallery, a dead end that would force him into the open. She was astonished when the figure came around the corner and she saw who it was.

"GAME CHAMP SINS," Eddie offered with a twinkle, extending a tray that held two fluted glasses. "Champagne, miss?"

"Edward Richmond Nigma, what on earth are you doing here?" she asked, unable to conceal her shock.

"Same as you, my WEAK LION, I'm checking out the art."

Selina raised a skeptical eyebrow, and Eddie took the remaining glass for himself and casually slid the tray into a double helix of twisted white metal.

"Wait 'til you see it, 'Lina. James Sanborn, guy who did the giant code sculpture at CIA headquarters."

"Kryptos, I know," she declared. "Nobody's cracked it," she added with a knowing smile.

Their eyes met silently for a half-beat as he straightened his tie smugly, then both eased into a soft, private chuckle. Then Eddie spoke again:

"He's got one here, in the museum, big code thing. Come and look."

Selina laughed and followed.

"Birthday sulks are gone, I see," she noted. "You're ten years younger, Eddie. And I think your hair's growing back."

When they reached the Sanborn installation, Selina could see why Eddie's riddling nature was so excited. The room was completely dark and empty, except for a cone of light in the very center. The light was surrounded by metal from which numbers, letters, and symbols had been cut, projecting Cyrillic characters onto the walls, the floors, and the people in the room.

"And this is a code?" Selina asked—although she was well aware of the answer. Eddie enjoyed it so if you phrased it as a question.

"It is a code," a stranger announced, entering the room before Eddie could supply the answer himself. Richard Flay walked up to them, in full art-sycophant mode. "It's a fragment of an old document of the KGB's on espionage. The idea is that merely coming into this environment of secret codes and deception, we become 'stained' by it."

"She asked me," Eddie told him petulantly.

"A fake Batman?"

"I saw him, Beloved, with my own eyes. The very likeness of your costume, it was monstrous sacrilege."

Bruce massaged the bridge of his nose.

"Alright, I'll look into it," he growled. He didn't bother telling her that it was doubtless connected to a string of pranks reported around Times Square, pranks that seemed like a publicity stunt or teenage hijinx more than anything criminal. "Is there anything else?" he asked wearily.

"Much more, oh my Beloved, more than you can imagine. This imposter, he—"

"That's more than 25 words," Bruce noted dryly. "Fewer Beloveds next time, Talia, and you would have made it."

"Bruce, please," she begged. "She has bewitched you, the cat-witch. I have proof, I have proof at last of her black sorcery."

"So this is hell," Bruce muttered to himself.

"This fake Batman was also ensnared. Don't you see? It is proof she has worked some enchantment on you, some spell that all who don that costume must become enamored of cats!"

"Mhm," Bruce answered calmly. "I see. Well, thank you for telling me, Talia. I'll look into that also."

"You must believe me, Beloved, you must," she resumed, clutching his elbow again.

"Yes, Beloved, you really must," a new voice, amused yet menacing, purred from the doorway. Bruce and Talia both turned to see Selina standing primly with a plate of hors d'oeuvres. "Not like she's ever been, you know, deluded out of her mind, or outright lied to you about anything, right? Crab puff?" she offered sweetly.

"You shameless harlot," Talia spat, "What will you do now that your wanton sorcery is exposed?"

"Off our medication again, I see. What have I done this time?" she asked Bruce, "Jimmy Hoffa? The Lindberg baby? Enron?"

"Witchcraft," he said flatly.

"Ah. Well, if you count playing patty-cake with Etrigan," Selina shrugged, popping the crab puff into her mouth.

"Hey 'Lina," Eddie called lightly, entering behind her, "That Flay guy invited me out to the Hamptons to see his—JENNIFER JIGSAW what is SHE doing here?"

"YOU!" Talia hissed, "You loathsome worm."

Selina let out a low whistle. "Well now it's getting interesting," she remarked, equally intrigued by the scene unfolding before her and the sixth sense tingling from

behind. The Bat-tingle. Of course, for Bruce would have snapped into Bat-mode the moment he saw Eddie appear where he wasn't expected.

"Petty, vindictive, stupid little snatch," Eddie cried, pointing at Talia with a stuffed mushroom impaled on a toothpick.

"Arrogant, monstrous swine!" Talia answered, pointing the corner of her *peau de soie* evening bag with equal venom.

"You two, eh, want to be alone?" Selina quipped.

"NO!" Eddie cried, jumping behind her, his hands at each of her elbows to maneuver her as a human shield between him and Talia. Bruce shifted slightly, repositioning himself to intervene—but then realized that probably wouldn't be necessary with Nigma, er, cringing (?) behind Selina.

"Eddie," Selina said calmly, "may I remind you that you're a mean, crowbar-wielding, psychopath now. You want to stop cowering behind my Dior?"

"She sent DEMON-guy-superassassins to kill me!" Eddie wailed.

"He checked into my hotel, thinking he could romance secrets out of me with his low, smarmy—"

"She has to blame everybody but herself because she screws up—"

"—revolting, transparent—"

"—because she's got a ridiculously high opinion of herself—"

"—bringing a diseased cat to my room!"

"—considering she's such A-DIRE-HA AIRHEAD!"

"Trying to seduce me into revealing Beloved's secrets!"

"Don't flatter yourself, Sweetheart!"

"Like some simpleton pawn!"

"You ever hear the one about buying the cow after you've already got the milk?"

Selina's eyes flicked over to Bruce's.

"This is so not what I had in mind for tonight," she confided.

"EVERYONE GET YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR," a harsh voice rasped in the main room before a gunshot rang out.

Bruce's head jerked instantly toward the door, just as Nigma muttered:

"There we go. Another fine robbery brought to you by the Wayne Foundation."

"Shut up, Eddie," Selina hissed just as Talia shrieked, "How DARE you speak that name, you festering parasite!!!!"

Bruce would have vanished; Selina knew that without even glancing in his direction. Rather than draw attention to his departure, she turned conversationally towards Eddie.

"Festering parasite?" she asked, sweetly. He winked. "Vermin slut, nice to meet you," she quipped, offering her hand.

"HANDS UP, EVERYONE!" the voice in the outer room boomed again. "PREPARE TO HAVE YOUR VALUABLES PURLOINED BY THE KING OF CATS!"

The last words echoed across the reflective museum walls. There was no other sound in the quiet alcove for a count of five. Selina's eyes met Eddie's, they glossed over Talia, they registered the empty space no longer occupied by Bruce, and they were drawn finally, magnetically, to the doorway to that outer room, where muted cries mingled with the hoarse rumble of Catman ordering his victims to empty their pockets and purses.

“Ho-kay, that’s it,” Selina exploded with quiet venom. “Miniature bat on the window screen, groupies in catsuits, password, demonspawn, witchcraft, Richard Flay out to the Hamptons—and by the way, Eddie, already enough chatter about which way you ‘swing your cane,’ if you know what I’m saying—Oswald, Hugo, ‘Jennifer Jigsaw,’ ‘Festering Parasite,’ and ‘not buying the cow if you can get the milk for free’. And I’ve been fine with it. But King of Cats out there with my Van Gogh?!? No. That’s it. We’re done here.”

She turned on her heel, wrenching her one arm free of Eddie’s last grasp and twisting the other one clear of Talia as she passed, and stormed off towards the main rotunda, snarling like a wild cat.

CHAPTER 6: ITEM 2

Selina sat in the empty gallery in front of the famous Van Gogh, the torn skirt of her evening dress tied off above the knee. The floor was strewn with broken glass, splintered picture frames, and sequins. She held a chilled bottle of champagne, which she alternately drank from and held against a swollen bruise on her cheek.

"Vincent," she told the painting, "I had plans for tonight, you and me, him, and this room."

A familiar masculine footstep echoed off the reflective walls of the gallery. Selina ignored it as it came closer. She took a healthy swig from the bottle and glared up at the painting on the wall above her.

"Right about now," she added, checking her watch.

The footsteps came closer still... Swig.

"This was not it," she declared.

Just as the footsteps reached her, the dark figure passing wordlessly behind the bench on which she sat, a small, glistening orb landed hard and cool in her lap.

"I know I said you'd have to earn it, Kitten, but *Jesus*," Bruce remarked dryly.

Selina glanced down to see the pink sapphire ring from Cartier.

"I was pissed," was her only comment.

"I noticed that," Bruce replied quickly. "I think it's fair to say everyone noticed that, particularly Blake. That was really quite a... an unusual move with the backhand and the ice tongs and... his nose."

They sat in silence for a minute, while Selina took another generous swig from the bottle. Then she offered him a taste, which he refused.

"Thanks for the Batarang," she mentioned casually.

"That's not how they're meant to be used," he grveled disapprovingly.

Earlier...

By the time Bruce had slipped away to the 5th floor balcony where he'd stashed his costume, changed into Batman, and returned to the main rotunda, the Catman situation was well in hand. Selina had disarmed him, certainly, for Richard Flay was holding the only gun in the room, picking it off the floor, his fingertips curled uncertainly around the butt as if it were a dead rodent, but keeping the barrel pointed safely at the floor. Batman returned his attention to Blake, who Selina had pinned in an obscure Kano-hold, her ungloved, unclawed fingers having evidently torn off enough of his cowl to apply the paralyzing nerve-poke behind his ear.

Talia had made her way from the side gallery where Bruce had left them. And having presumably recognized Catman as the Bat-imposter, she was maneuvering around the pair of them screaming about monstrous sacrilege of a great man's mantle, witchcraft, and cats. Batman was amused to see Selina reposition Blake slightly to face the onslaught head on, turning his struggling body directly into the path of Talia's rising knee. Catwoman and the demonspawn might never "team up" in the

conventional sense, but Selina was evidently willing to step aside for twenty seconds to let Talia get a few licks in. Hell, as far as Selina was concerned, wanting to ram her knee into Catman's chin was probably the first good idea Talia ever had.

The situation, such as it was, was under control; at least it was sufficiently under control for Batman to survey the rest of his surroundings. And the first thing he looked for was Edward Nigma, the only potential threat still unaccounted for. When he wasn't visible from the rotunda, Batman raced silently to the spot he was most likely to find the little weasel, a fiery rage building with each step until he reached the Sanborn room.

Batman's mouth filled with a salty metallic taste he'd only experienced in his first confrontations with Gotham criminals.

"NIGMA" he hissed, the bat-fist shooting out in a blinding flash, picking his nemesis up by the throat, and slamming him against the light column.

It was exactly what Batman knew he would find entering this room: Edward Nigma, the Riddler in a second rate civilian tux, dismantling the Sanborn sculpture and preparing to leave a coded message of his own in its place...

"Your little plan misfired, *Eddie*," Batman hissed, a throb of pure fury pulsing behind his eyeballs.

...It's exactly what Batman knew he would find, but a part of him—a part he didn't want to admit existed—had *hoped*...

"You thought she would be a distraction."

...hoped...

"You thought stirring her up would be a diversion, keep me occupied so you could get the Sanborn."

...hoped, for Selina's sake, that he was wrong.

"Instead, she's freed me up to give *YOU* my *FULL ATTENTION*."

The fist pinning Eddie to the light column tightened around his throat.

"I know you're the one who maneuvered Cobblepot into telling her about that password."

Batman changed hands, allowing Nigma to gasp momentarily for breath.

"And I can guess what buttons you pushed on her: the good old days? Her reforming? This opening being just the sort of target she would have loved once? Needing *a win*?"

While Batman's left fist clutched Nigma's throat, the right appeared inches above his nose, two fingers extended like a peace sign.

"That's *TWO*," Batman growled, his voice hoarse with raw hatred. "Sending that cat Flummox to the house, that was *ONE*—" The fist blurred and a fierce crotch-punch contorted Nigma's lower body while that remaining hand on his throat held his head and torso in place.

Nigma tried to speak, but found he could only force a raspy burble.

"And this was two," Batman said simply, delivering a quick, brutal blow to sternum.

The fist then opened slowly and deliberately, and Batman held the gloved palm purposefully in front of Nigma's face for a beat before closing it once more around the villain's forehead.

"You're very proud of that brain of yours, Riddler," Batman observed, pushing the head firmly backward against the column. "8.5 millimeters of bone tissue, mostly calcium phosphate, makes up a human skull. It's not that much protection. So riddle me this: If there's ever a THREE with you using Selina to get to me, where do you think the next blow will fall, hmm?"

"Bytes!" Barbara screamed as "the cat formerly known as Flummox" hopped onto the desk at her left and trotted happily between her and the large, central computer screen. She crossed back and forth until she'd received enough attention, then pounced away to the right.

"Boy, she's a cute one," Dinah noted, picking up the mewling creature before she could make another pass across the desk.

"Okay," Barbara grumbled, now that the distraction was removed from her workstation. "Take a look at these shots from an ATM camera in Times Square last night. See that pointy-eared blur waving on the corner? That's our fake Batman."

"Same one as the reports from the Planet Gotham restaurant—*Ooh, look at you, you sweetiepie*—with his cape snagged on the front of the building?—*Yes you are, you sweetiepie.*"

"Gotta be, how many Batmen can there be running around Times Square in a single night—Dinah, put the cat down, will you. I'm trying to concentrate here."

Dinah set Bytes down petulantly, and then mouthed "yes, you are" three more times before turning her attention back to Barbara—who was staring at her, openmouthed.

"*WHAT* are you doing?" Barbara asked flatly.

"Your cat is the only one left who's nice to me, Babs, what do you want?"

Barbara said nothing for a moment, although it was clear she had something to say on the matter. Instead, she turned back to the main screen, punched a series of keys viciously, and a number of small thumbnail photographs appeared on the sidescreens. Work. If she learned anything in those months after the shooting, it was that work really was the best medicine. It was a distraction, of course; it gave the mind something to do besides dwell on its own problems; that much was true for everybody. But for the Bat-Family, there was the added balm of knowing you were doing Good, knowing the world was just a little better because of your efforts. That knowledge put you in a better state of mind to face... the realities: spending the rest of your life in a wheelchair... or accepting that your best friend and most trusted ally was capable of an unspeakable betrayal.

"This is our guy from outside the Planet Gotham building," Barbara said, returning to the crisp all-business mode. "Everybody's got phones in their cameras these days, and look at him, that was something to see. So there were plenty of photos. I was able to snag about half the images sent through the Times Square cell relays in that timeframe."

"What a buffoon," Dinah chuckled.

Barbara turned from the screen to frown at her silently for a moment. The guy was an imposter in a cheap costume who'd gotten his cape stuck on the cornice of a building. He *was* a buffoon, and if anyone else had said so, Barbara wouldn't have

blinked at the comment. But coming from Dinah—after what she did, who was she judge, who was she to laugh at anybody in a Bat-costume. Did Bruce look like a “buffoon” when they made him helpless and wiped his memory of it?

“Well he’s no Batman, that’s for sure,” Barbara pronounced, opting again to let the panacea of Work smooth over the situation. “You can see in this image that it’s not a quality costume, but then look here, back at the ATM—same guy, presumably—he’s hailing a cab, or trying to, and look in his hand, that’s a Batarang.”

“He’s trying to hail a cab, standing in the middle of Times Square, waving a Batarang,” Dinah said flatly.

“He lived. Somehow,” Barbara noted. “Anyway, look at the ‘rang; it’s real.”

“Barbara, it’s a squiggly little blur, how can you tell?”

“It’s a crappy costume, Dinah. Even the *good* costumes make the Batarangs too big, so they look better from a distance. They don’t need to be functional; they just need to be recognizable as a Batman Batarang. This one isn’t. It’s the right size. The fakes are never the right size.”

“Okay, valid theory. But so what?”

“SigmundFledermaus. He bought two. Actually, he’s bought roughly \$4,000 worth of assorted bat-crap in the past eight months. But in with all the ripoffs and kink, he scored two genuine Batarangs. Handle like Sigmund Fledermaus, it’s got to be Hugo Strange, right? Batman just busted him, we got his front operation, found his lab and his apartment—no Batarangs. Somehow this guy, in this pathetic crap-costume trying to hail a cab in Times Square in theatre traffic, somehow *he’s* tied to Hugo Strange, and he’s got one of Hugo’s Batarangs.”

The window opened and Nightwing entered. He glared hatefully at Dinah, then glanced at his wife and finally at the cat.

“You two almost done?” he asked curtly.

“Almost,” Barbara answered coolly, “Another few minutes.”

“Good, then Black Canary will be leaving.”

Dinah’s mouth puckered slightly into a sour expression, but she did not acknowledge Nightwing or his words in any other way.

“You certainly don’t need me for your last few minutes,” she told Barbara, squeezing her friend’s shoulders. “Thanks for the chat, and for including me.”

Barbara’s own feelings were still a muddle where Dinah was concerned, but Dick’s open contempt was enough to rekindle the forgiving impulse that led her to invite Dinah over in the first place.

“G’night, sweetie,” she said gamely.

Dinah nodded, waved at the cat, and then left through the same window Nightwing had come through. He shut it behind her.

When Batman returned to the rotunda, two police units had arrived to take Catman into custody. With their arrival, a few lingering paparazzi and curious onlookers had used the opening to gain admittance to the museum. One of these was Greg Brady. He reached the rotunda just as Talia was picking herself off the floor, dusting debris of the fight, both real and imagined, off her evening gown.

"I told Ig'thar he was crazy," Greg announced, looking betrayed and disappointed. "I told him that report had to be wrong. No way was that *Talia al Ghul* running all over town looking for He-Whose-Name-Can't-Be-Uttered; she's over that loser—no offense, Dude," he added, noticing Batman lurking in the background. "I told Ig'thar he was crazy," Brady repeated. "I said it couldn't be you. Thanks a lot, Tee."

"Gr'ori, please, you don't understand."

"Greg. For the love of god, it's *Greg*. Greg Brady. You are like the only person in the English-speaking world that can't get that down. Greg. Brady."

"Did he say Greg Brady," Richard Flay remarked, "How positively *camp!*"

"Greg-I, I can explain," Talia answered.

"No, Tee, you can't. See, Ig'thar, he's thorough. And he knew if there was going to be any kind of rogue activity that would bring Batman out into the open tonight, it would be here at this party because, check it out, 'sponsored by the Wayne Foundation.'"

"You can say that again," Nigma mumbled, limping miserably into the rotunda from the direction of the sculpture garden.

"Ig'thar got the lowdown from all those pictures the photographers were taking as people arrived at this shindig. Information age, Tee; everything's digital. We had the print outs before they passed the first cheese tray. And there you were, clear as day."

"But Greg!"

"Look, Tee, I'm not a moron. I never thought I was Mr. Right or anything. I thought at the very least I was Mr. Right-Now, and we were having fun together, even if you can't get the cellophane off a slice of American cheese. And I thought if we had fun long enough, maybe you would eventually notice I happen to be '*He who can deal with all your baggage and nutsitude and still finds you rather appealing*' or '*He who can make you giggle like the schoolgirl you should've been but never were*' or even '*He who you could tell those awful stories about the Legion training camps and why you learned English.*'"

"Gr'ori, please!"

"You ever hear that one, Bats! Was 1911, Days of Empire, one-fifth of the world's population lived under English rule. Daddy had a nice English duke picked out for her to marry, isn't that right, Tee? He was only eight years old at the time, but the old man thinks long term, you know how it is."

"GR'ORI!"

"Greg," he spat. "So dutiful daughter here learns English; League of Assassins gets ready to remove a few Windsors from the line of succession, and then Britain, India, Australia, and a slew of smaller provinces would be his in one fowl swoop. Unfortunately, by the time His Grace comes of age, he's gay, and then before Princess here can regroup, he gets killed in World War I. Great One is 'most acutely disappointed' and Tee gets tossed back into the dustbin of ideas that didn't pan out."

No one said anything for several seconds. The only sound in the gallery was a stifled sob from Talia.

"Guess you hadn't heard that one, huh, Bats?" Greg continued, cruelly. "Know why? She didn't tell you about it. Bet you didn't ask. Bet you wouldn't care. She told *me*. Why is that, Tee? Why open up to me, hmm? You didn't notice we click that way, that we're good together?" His face suddenly dropped; all the anger, the pain, the

indignation washing away, leaving a look of complete resignation. He glanced around at the assembled patrons in the gallery. "Sorry to interrupt the party, folks," he announced, then turned back to her. "Goodbye, Talia."

He turned to go and, after a moment's blinking away the shock, Talia chased after him.

"Greg, wait, I can explain everything, really," she began, finding her voice just as she passed Nigma, who spoke at the same moment: "Rhett, come back! Where will I go, what will I do?"

Talia pulled back, delivered a feral hiss, and punched Edward Nigma squarely in the jaw.

Selina and Bruce sat side by side on a low wooden bench in the long-empty gallery. Above them, the impassioned whirlpools of blues, blacks, and yellows that formed Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*; behind, the dim green of a Forsythe-Goldleigh security system kicking into idle.

"I know why this is your favorite," Selina said finally. "That was 'Item 2.' In the cave this morning, Item 2 that I didn't say: I know why this is your favorite painting."

"It's a powerful piece," Bruce grveled.

"It's more than that; that's his pain up there on the canvas. The paint is an inch thick, nobody realizes until they see it in person. It's an inch thick. He's trying so damn hard to express it, to make somebody understand, get his message through. Van Gogh was going mad and he knew it, and it tortured him... and that's what he did with it. That is the most lasting, and powerful, and significant creation anybody has ever—that is what a human being can make out of their *pain*..."

Bruce said nothing. As Batman had on that long drive home in the Batmobile, he merely stared in front of him as if looking at her would cause his whole universe to implode.

"Just like the cave," Selina whispered. "And just like Batman."

"Selina—" he began, but she cut him off with an abrupt change of tone.

"But then he cut off his own ear, and that was just self-destructive and stupid."

"This is still Item 2?" he asked with a growl.

"It is."

"You think I'm cutting off my ear in some way?"

"I do," she said levelly. "Every time you say we're not like other people. How exactly are we different, hmm? Arms, legs, fingers, toes. We eat, we sleep, we fuck... we fuck very, very well, as a matter of fact."

Bruce gave her a withering look, which she answered with a naughty grin.

"You just proved my point. There is nothing in this world as delicious as getting *that* look out of you. Meow."

"You're shameless."

"I'm an 'impossible woman,'" she said playfully. "Emphasis on *woman*," she added seriously. "We're really *not* that different from other men and women, are we?"

"I am."

"You're *not*, Bruce. Maybe you can sneak that one past everyone else in this world, but you can't sit there and say it to me. I know better. I was there on that roof. You

want to go up right now for a reenactment? You want exactly the same things other men do... For one thing, you wanted me."

"I do," he said, repeating her earlier words and inflection. "But marriage, Selina? I don't know if I'll ever want to be married. I may never be capable of that kind of—"

"You said just bringing me to the cave was a commitment, Bruce. We already wake up next to each other every morning. You've already raised a son."

"*And* helped raise two others. *And*, some could argue, a couple of daughters as well. But 'commitment' isn't what I was going to say. I may never be capable of that kind of... vulnerability."

They both sat in silence for a long moment until Selina glanced down at the gemstone in her hand.

"Of the three items they showed me at Cartier's, I notice you bought the ring."

"Maybe I just don't like the word," Bruce said frankly. "Beloved *wife*, beloved *husband*, right off that tombstone. 'Til death do us part. Those words that mean love and commitment, and togetherness for everyone else—to me, they're just a constant reminder of my... of... two bodies lying in an alley, a smell of spent gun powder and blood. Pearls soaked in this reddish black ooze... Yes, you're right, there are ways we are just like everybody else. We eat, we sleep, we breathe—"

He paused, taking a deep breath. "We die. I can't... maybe I will never be able to get past that one."

"Ah."

"Just words, Selina. Words on a piece of paper... or carved into—I've already made that commitment to you; let you into every corner of my life. The rest are just words. Are they that important to you?"

"No. No, they're not. Truth be told, I don't like the w-one that much myself. I just... Since the whole Zatanna thing came out, it all seems just a little more... fragile or something. Vulnerable. Those words that don't really mean anything make it seem, I don't know, more *solid*, somehow. More real."

"You mean that *I* seem more fragile and vulnerable since Zatanna?"

"Maybe."

He sighed, exasperated. "What a mess. I always told myself it could never work with us. It was supposed to be crime that came between us, not something like this. I'm worried that getting too close makes us vulnerable and you worry that we're *too vulnerable* so you want us closer. You get scared by a glimpse of mortality and want to get married to make it more real and solid, and to me, the more 'real and solid' it gets, the closer we are to, to..." He trailed off.

"To death," she said, as if accepting a dare.

Bruce said nothing.

"This is, without a doubt, the most revolting conversation we've ever had," Selina noted, "and that includes the time Joker sprayed me with that radioactive goo to track me all over the city, and your brilliant plan to catch him was to plop me into Blackgate."

"That plan would have worked," he grunted.

"No, it wouldn't, because you would have had a hard time driving him out to Arkham with my whip shoved up your ass."

"Yeah, well... it was still a better plan than this turned out to be."

"Oh, I don't know," Selina smiled. "Whiskers likes the penthouse quite a lot. I kept seeing that little furry 'dorsal fin' going by in the mirror."

Bruce chuckled at the word-picture.

"And Nutmeg?" he asked.

"Set up shop under the bed."

"Well, it's not so pleasant at home. Alfred is mad at me. I told him it didn't mean anything and it was just for tonight, and he... Well, I guess he's heard a lot of denials and qualifiers like that over the years, from me, where you're concerned."

"You're babbling, Bruce."

"I told him you'd be back tomorrow—"

"I will."

"—and that taking the cats was just to... you *will*."

"Yes, of course I will. You don't think something as stupid as 'beloved wife' and 'beloved husband' would really be the end of us, do you?"

"I would hope not, but... well, you're not as easy to anticipate as you used to be, Selina. Half the time now I don't even know—"

"Bruce, I love you. I want to be with you."

"And I, you."

"Then, it's that simple. If what we have now is all there ever is, it's a lot more than either of us thought was possible that night. Remember, '*Stay away from that Van Gogh*,'" she mimicked.

"Take the Van Gogh," he said abruptly.

"Excuse me?"

"The Van Gogh, take it."

She stared at him incredulously.

"I want it for the penthouse. You can get it for me. Go for it, see if you can earn that sapphire ring after all."

"What the hell are you talking about? You don't want it and you certainly don't want me to steal it, so what the hell are you—?"

"I'm telling you to take the Van Gogh. Or at least... try. I mean, let's be honest here: we both know that you're not going to get it."

"Oh really? And why is that?"

His voice shifted into the deepest Bat-growl.

"Because I won't let you!"

"You won't let me?"

"Look, you've got the rest of the night as a free woman, at the penthouse, a night to be 'her' again, why not have a little fun with it?"

"Hang on there, back it up. You won't let me?"

"You're out of practice. You don't have what it takes to get back in here and get it before I stop you..."

"Oh, you're going to regret this one, Stud."

Talia sat in a crumpled, wet heap in a surprisingly well-appointed booth in a gleaming diner in lower Gotham. The flatware was still of the cheap, punched-out

variety all these miserable eateries seemed to use. The table was positioned so far from the seat that an individual of Ubu's girth or even larger could sit comfortably—possibly with room for another minion in his lap. Yet the walls were covered with dark wood paneling and cheery sconces of frosted glass. In her teary fog, Talia scrutinized a framed print on the wall, a detail of an Edward Hopper painting; the original of which had hung in the museum—the museum where Greg had left her. She wondered why the image would be here? What cruel fate would—

"Ready to order, Hun?" the waitress asked pleasantly.

Talia blinked up at her. She felt completely adrift. She only took shelter in this place because it was preferable to wandering the street. She moistened her lips thoughtfully, and spied a familiar glass cover on a raised plate on the service counter.

"Do you have pie?" she asked hoarsely.

"Cocoanut cream and lemon meringue. But it's not the greatest. We got grilled stickies if you've got a sweet tooth."

Talia formed the next words carefully, as if she was breaking in a new set of vocal chords.

"Please bring me a, a 'big slab' of your cocoanut pie, then. And a cup of coffee. Please."

The waitress shrugged and wrote the order. Talia regarded the Hopper print once again. She realized now the image was pictured in this place because it depicted an all-night diner: a smiling soda-jerk serving two patrons, a man and a woman. But this pleasant, happy-diner image cropped off an isolated figure seated by himself further down the counter. The complete painting, which Talia had left only hours before at the museum, was a portrait of loneliness.

Greg was gone.

What was she going to do? Greg, her protector, her... Greg, who... who listened to her. Greg, who didn't spurn her affections, who didn't make her feel like she had to prove herself by working against her father, who took care of her and teased her and, and, and let her become this wonderful, magical being called Tee that wasn't a failure or a bitch or a sniveling, shrinking embarrassment to women, who wasn't a remora in \$400 shoes or the stupid, weak-willed pawn of men who didn't love her.

Somehow, she had to get that creature back. That person who existed for those few seconds in Chinatown before a minion threw himself at her feet. She had, somehow, to find her way back to being "Tee"—and she had, somehow, to win back the heart of Greg Brady.

Their explorations concluded, Whiskers and Nutmeg had curled together on the corner of the sofa that both agreed was the most comfortable nap-place in the vast Wayne penthouse. Both cats suddenly sprang to attention as a violent noise shattered the silence. The full-length window had burst open at the hinge and two figures—Bat-Bruce and Selina-Cat—burst in through it, locked in a heated embrace.

"Slipping, Catwoman," Batman growled through ferocious kisses. "Letting me trail you back to your lair."

“Don’t be so sure you haven’t stepped into a trap,” she panted against his lips, clawing wildly until the cape fell loose to the floor.

Whiskers briefly considered rising from his comfortable pillow to examine the fallen cape, but the area seemed hazardous, boots shifting heedlessly, a heavy belt dropping to the floor. Whiskers decided to wait.

It was a jaded and despondent Ra’s al Ghul that surveyed the day’s intelligence reports. The picture they painted was all too familiar: ground gained on one front but lost on another, murky indecision here, endless waiting there, mixed messages and trade-offs. His puppet was restored to a position of influence in the Laotese Ministry of Information and had already begun an aggressive propaganda campaign, but in Balliprai, his efforts to inflate the price of staple foods were thwarted by the introduction of a disease-resistant “dwarf wheat.”

Despite the galling information that this dwarf wheat was introduced to the region by—imagine his surprise—the Wayne Foundation, Ra’s felt no surge of angry indignation at the setback, no more than he could feel satisfied contentment in the more promising reports. He felt, in truth, nothing at all—other than a lurking worry that the real reason for his languor was the gray hair... or hairs to be precise, 12 of them. A sign, surely, that it would soon be time to immerse himself in the Lazarus Pit. He felt no effects yet, but the appearance of the first hair nine days ago, coupled with its sudden eruption into a full dozen iron-gray tendrils in less than two weeks, left little doubt. Soon he would require a dip. The effects of each immersion seemed to dissipate a little sooner than the last... and still he seemed no closer to his great goal.

His jaundiced eye scanned the wheat report once again, searching out a single word, a single name. Not Norman Borlaugh, who developed the high-yield crop that thwarted Ra’s designs on the peasants of Balliprai, but of that other name, “a humanitarian agricultural initiative of the *Wayne* Foundation.”

“How long, Detective? How long will you withhold from me the siring of a worthy heir?” he grumbled before calling loudly, “Ubu! Apprise the Pit-Stirrers that the Demon’s Head shall present himself for the *Mergulho al Ghul* at the eve of the next moon. Let all things be made ready for the ritual.”

