



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

#54

# Cat = Sales

*War of the Poses*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**WAR OF THE POSES**



**CAT-TALES**  
**WAR OF THE POSES**

By  
Chris Dee

Edited by  
David L.

COPYRIGHT © 2008 BY CHRIS DEE  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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

## WAR OF THE POSES

---

The Batmobile sped into the cave on autopilot. Batman got out and wrote up the logs on autopilot too. He went to the costume vault on autopilot, and then he turned abruptly, heading into the trophy room instead. He walked past a low display case with a question mark cane and a freeze ray, past a taller, squarer case with a perpetual orchid and another with a green velvet hat, to a much taller display in the back between the playing card and the giant penny. He scowled at the purple fabric, the whip holster, and the familiar cat mask.

Catwoman: Queen of the Underworld.

They'd laughed at it, at first. He had. Batman, Gotham's Dark Knight, "nothing about crime is funny," had allowed himself, just this once, to see something crime-related in a different light: the Gotham underworld was a packet of flash paper in a warehouse full of unstable chemicals, he'd said. The lightest touch of a match could set off a soaring tongue of flame, he'd said. Instantly, it could flare up without warning and in a completely unpredictable direction, he'd said. It would burn in a second. If you weren't looking, you could miss it entirely. You wouldn't even know anything happened, let alone be able trace it back to whatever spark set it off. But every now and then, that momentary flame would flick in just the wrong direction, come into contact with exactly the wrong tank of chemicals, and then... inferno. Catwoman—Selina, the woman he'd brought into his life, the woman who shared all his secrets, the woman he loved—had become the de facto head of everything he fought against.

It no longer mattered how, exactly, a fire at the Iceberg led to a replacement bar steeped in a Catwoman theme—and the universal assumption that she occupied the same position at Vault that Oswald had at the Iceberg. Somehow it happened, and Batman had assumed it would burn itself out like all flash paper in the Rogue world. In the meantime, Selina would have her fun. He wasn't exactly pleased that she was seen as a criminal again, but he was happy that *she* was happy. He knew how the Post's hatchet job on her image had pained her. If this new development gave her some comfort and validation, well, what was the harm?

He knew she stopped at Vault now every night after her prowl. Robin and Batgirl both noted it in the logs whenever they were assigned to watch the departures at closing time. Nightwing, typically, didn't name her when he saw her leave. Instead, his log used the cat's whiskers emoticon that he'd invented when he was Robin. Bruce was so angry when he saw it, he nearly broke the keyboard. He was ready to rip Dick a new one when he saw him again. And he might have, except... the next time they met in person was at family dinner. With Selina and Barbara there, well, it didn't seem quite so terrible. When they were all together like that, out of costume and as a family, he could see the joke for what it was.

He looked at the Catwoman costume in the display case and felt his gut churn. That was the problem, really. He had been too ready to see the joke, too ready to say 'that was then and this is now.' He hadn't *forgotten* who she was or what she was capable of back then, but he had drawn a firm line separating the Cat of yesterday from the Selina of today. But it was the Selina of today who prompted what happened tonight, what was happening out there every night.

He could no longer deny that he was, quite literally, sleeping with the enemy.

It was—without question—the most encouraging development in the many years Dr. Bartholomew had treated Patient J. Joker had never referenced any family, any friends, any personal ties of any kind. Now, suddenly, this fleeting reference to "mummy." The first time seemed like a slip. Harley Quinn fixed up one of his Ha-Haciendas with a lot of brick-a-brac he didn't care for, including a vase like Mummy had. He didn't seem aware he'd said it, just went on ranting about slip covers... and a rattan waste basket... and a throw rug that looked like it was made by blind boy scouts...

A few days later, he was relating a wasted day the last time he was released, when two operatives called "Grin" and "Chortle" were late getting in from the airport. Their flight was delayed. Airlines! Airlines suck. Don't they realize how he hates wasting time! He could have killed George Takei, he could have set up a meeting, he could have been *so much more effective*-HAHAHA! But no. No, he had to sit around waiting for Grin and Chortle to get in from Phoenix. Mummy always hated waiting around doing nothing that way...

Two mentions, however casual, after so many years of silence on the subject was unbelievably significant. Clearly Joker's psyche was finally ready to deal with some ancient trauma.

Both mentions were in the context of anger and annoyance. That could be very significant, too. Anger connected to subordinates: Harley Quinn and these henchmen...

Yes, it was very encouraging indeed.

Selina lay back, enveloped in a warm vanilla-lavender milk bath, and purred as no cat immersed in water had ever purred before. It was Batman she fell for—or, at least, the man inside Batman, as she'd thought of him before learning he was really Bruce Wayne. Since the masks had come off, she'd discovered Bruce Wayne brought many delights into her life, delights she never dreamed of in the heat of those charged encounters with Batman. And it was just possible that, of all those unimagined delights, this bathtub was the very best. She stretched out her toes, letting the warm silky water flow down through the crevices and over the skin of her leg. Then she rubbed her arch against the cool, Carrara marble. She closed her eyes and let her head tilt back against the cushioned neck support, breathed in the delicious tickle of vanilla, and again, she purred.

"This... obviously isn't a good time," a hoarse voice croaked from the doorway.

"Purrrrfect time," she breathed. "Come join me."

"No. Um. We'll talk later, when you're not... naked."

Selina opened a suspicious eye—but he was gone. Something about that refusal was very... familiar. She got out of the tub, wrapped herself in a thick terry robe, and went out to the bedroom to find him.

"Not naked and not dripping," Bruce said archly.

"Can't say I've ever had a conversation with a dress code before. Did something happen on patrol?"

"No—Yes. It... It's not really *patrol* anymore. It's driving straight to the East End, parking, and collecting as much scum as I can by dawn. It's like half the underworld has declared war on one neighborhood, and considering the neighborhood..."

"You're blaming me."

He scowled.

"I'm supposed to think it's a coincidence that, since you became 'Gatta Corleone,' crime is up six hundred percent in a few square blocks you personally hate? Look, Selina, it's the Gotham Post printing lies about you, not the people living on the East End. I understand that you'd like those Post stories contradicted in as public a manner as possible, but this isn't the way to go about it. All the wrong people are suffering. Innocents are—"

"What about all the innocents in TriBeCa and SoHo and the Upper Westside that *aren't* getting mugged at the ATM because all the bad guys are downtown in—"

"THAT'S NOT THE POINT!"

"It's exactly the point. It's not like there are any *more* crimes going on than there were before. All I said was, if you're going to do something anyway, I'd just as soon you do it on the East End."

"You did a lot more than that. You *STARTED* this mad rush to—"

"By accident! Crazy Quilt came into Vault to celebrate a big score. He was doing a little boasting. Certainly to be expected. Somebody like him doesn't manage to get one past you everyday. And when he happened to mention this big score was at East End Pharmaceuticals, I picked up his tab."

"Of course! Because crime on the East End should be rewarded and encouraged, right?"

"Oh, don't be so pompous. It was a whim. It was a one time thing."

"It was not a *one* time thing. You invited Rag Doll to the VIP room."

"He's from out of town. Why not be hospitable?"

"Because we don't want him or his kind in Gotham. We have enough thieving—"

"Watch it."

"Thieving *criminals*—*psychotic, thieving criminals* of our own without importing them from Keystone."

"I don't expect you to roll out a welcome mat, but my position at Vault is a little different. He's from out of town, and I was being nice."

"After which, he hit an antique store, two restaurants and a liquor store, all on the East End."

"He may have had a little crush on me after we talked that night. I would have handled it if Wing and Wally hadn't gone all Rambo on him."

"And what about Roxy, hm? Has she 'got a crush' too?"

“Am I expected to give an accounting for everybody I invite to my table for a drink now?”

“Roxy Rocket is the most destructive force to hit that neighborhood since Hurricane Irene came up the Eastern seaboard in 1973. She is reckless, Selina! She rides around on that rocket without giving the slightest thought to the flame trail or the exhaust or the clearance. She’s dangerous, and she’s desperate for attention. You must know that. You must know she’s out to impress you now that you’re— and— and instead of using your influence to defuse the situation, you’re encouraging her and all the rest of them to—”

“Listen, Stud, I have never felt the need to justify myself to you or anybody else, and I absolutely will not be starting now. So don’t get the idea that you get to come to me with a list of complaints at the end of the week or that you’re entitled to any kind of explain—”

“Catwo—”

“I HAVE THE CONCH! ...planation. I am not going to start giving you explanations for every little thing I do. Except I will tell you, just this once, that all I was doing with Roxy was playing matchmaker. Matt was with me that night, and he happened to say she looked good. I invited her to join us because I thought they might hit it off.”

Bruce shut his eyes, shook his head and breathed, expelling one thought while shutting out another.

“This entire situation is completely unacceptable,” he graveled.

“Well... tough. If it’s any consolation—”

“It’s not. Whatever you have to say next, there is no ‘consolation.’ Selina, this is wrong. This whole situation, everything about it and what you’re doing with it is wrong and it has to stop.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. There really isn’t anything I can do. It’s going to run its course, and until it does, I plan to get as much satisfaction as I can out of it.”

“Yes, no matter who gets hurt.”

It was—without question—the most hilarious prank in the many years Joker had been coming to Arkham. Mummy hated waiting around that way with nothing to do HAHAHAHAAAAAAAAA! That got Dr. Bartsy alright, had him hooked like a salmon. Mummy had a vase like that HAHAHAA! Yeah sure, she had a vase like that—where they put her intestines after they were pickled! HAHAHAAAA!

Mummy, Doc, get it? HAHAHAHA.

OH wait, no, it’s too good, it’s too funny. You didn’t think I meant MY mummy, did you? HAHAHAHAAAAAAAAA! AHAHA-AHAHA-AHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

Nearly everyone in the know was calling the sleek, purple Lamborghini “the Catmobile.” Everyone except Batman, because he found the term unsettling, Riddler, because *he* found the term unsettling, and Nightwing, because he found himself too overcome with awe and envy to wrap his tongue around the requisite syllables. He perched on a ledge of the Bair Building and watched the beautifully lined car turn off

Morales and park in the 11<sup>th</sup> street lot. He swung down to the flagpole where he expected to change course for a flashy dismount that would land him right in the driver's path as she headed towards Vault—when the flagpole snapped, leading to a freakish mid-swing adjustment that still produced a clumsy, too abrupt landing which an awkward tumble-roll on the sidewalk did little to cushion.

Catwoman looked down on him, horrified.

"Are you alright?"

Nightwing got to his feet, wincing in lieu of an answer.

"Hurt?" Catwoman asked when he didn't speak.

"Only my pride."

"Happens to the best of us," she offered with a kind smile.

"Do you have to be so nice?" Nightwing said, falling into step beside her. "Couldn't you make some crack about always landing on your feet?"

"You want me to be 'catty?'"

"Might make this easier."

"Ooh, I like the sound of that. I take it this isn't a social call then? You're here on business?"

"Kind of," Nightwing sighed.

"Meow. In that case, you can come inside and accost me at my table, assuming you can walk that far without falling on your face and breaking your nose."

"Sheesh, Selina, that's not 'catty'; it's just mean. And I'd rather talk in private. I was thinking a rooftop."

"I have arrangements for 'private' inside. I don't plan to waste you coming to see me 'on business' on a discreet rooftop. You'll have to come in, come up to my table, and 'be a dick.'"

She stuck her tongue out at him, unholstered her whip, and swung it backhanded until the handle made abrupt, forceful contact with Nightwing's body armor. The blow didn't exactly hurt, but it caught him off guard and he doubled over instinctively to minimize the effect. Catwoman left him in that condition, the wind knocked out of him and a fresh cat scratch on his armor for good measure, and went on her way into the nightclub.

It was—without question—the most encouraging development with Harleen Quinzel since the sad day Patient J turned her from an Arkham staffer into an inmate. Joker had indulged in a childish exhibition that mocked the very tenets of psychotherapy. Never said it was my mummy, indeed. Childish. Willful. And so painfully counterproductive. Why all the time Bartholomew had spent researching maternal dissociate trauma and its links to homicidal mania, only to find out the mummy in question was of the dead, wrapped, and dried out in a pyramid for 3000 years variety (HA HA, indeed). So much wasted time, time that could have been spent helping patients that didn't indulge in childish pranks, patients like Harleen.

Joker had apparently forgotten all about his mummy prank already, a not uncommon purging of thoughts once they had served their purpose for him. But he hadn't purged the fixation on mummies. On the contrary, he was on a positive "Egypt

kick," as Patient Crane described it. His response to almost any development now consisted of "Tut-Tut" followed by a full minute of raucous laughter, and his repertoire of jokes was pruned to those where "denial ain't just a river in Egypt" would serve as a punchline. In session, he'd decided that Dr. Bartholomew's office was a Las Vegas cabaret circa 1962 and he himself was Eddie Fisher. He used Bartholomew's stapler as a microphone and briefed the good doctor on the notorious Elizabeth Taylor/Richard Burton affair while they were in Italy filming Cleopatra. He spoke as if it were happening right now and he himself was Taylor's jilted husband, Eddie Fisher. Like Fisher, he then sang a little ditty called "Cleo, the Nympho of the Nile" and begged Dr. Bartholomew to tip the veal and try the waitress. HAHAAHAHAHA.

As Patient J setbacks went, it was fairly benign. No one had been injured except Nurse Chin, when she tried to take the stapler, and she didn't even need stitches.

Harley's reaction, on the other hand, was the most promising development in years. Patient J's mummy fixation had evidently penetrated their... personal relations, and he wanted her to shave her head and wear one of those Nefertitti cones. She refused.

She refused. She said it was because she'd seen the pictures of Britney Spears, but that was of little importance. Whatever her reason, she had refused. There were things Harley Quinn would not do for "her Puddin'" and that was a discovery of unbelievable promise. Bartholomew couldn't begin to rate its significance: was Quinzel's obsession with Joker finally waning?

Nightwing had never seen anything quite like Vault. Once a vaudeville house transformed into a movie palace transformed into a Two-Face hideout, it was now a nightclub like no other. The focal point of the old theatre lobby was a bar with a sultan's ransom of cash, jewels and gold bars stacked behind it and a dazzling array of lasers, sensors, and searchlights sweeping the area in front. The little café tables and chairs that originally populated this main barroom had been replaced with groupings of deep, overstuffed furnishings that resembled oversized cat toys.

He made his way to the stairs that led to the VIP level and, mindful of Selina's advice to 'be a dick,' he exuded as much hostility as he could while still taking in the fascinating surroundings. At the top of the stairs, he pushed past Raven's podium and strode into a surreal space that had once been the Flick Theatre balcony. A dozen plasma screens of varying size were hung on the walls. All displayed video wallpaper of wild cats. Like the barroom below, the tables, chairs, and loveseats resembled those in a cat lair. Along the back wall, the largest, deepest sofa was covered in a rich leopard print and situated behind a low, ebony table. There, surrounded by Mad Hatter, Firefly, Roxy Rocket, Killer Croc, Magpie, and Cluemaster, Catwoman was holding court.

At the surrounding tables, Double Dare, Signal Man, Zodiac Master, Getaway Genius, Kite Man and Killer Moth eyed Catwoman's circle as if waiting for a chance to join it. They were prevented, Nightwing guessed, by the doorkeepers: a pair of live, fully maned lions posed regally in front of the table like the stone ones flanking the entrance to the Metropolis Museum of Art.

Nightwing marched up to the table, ignoring the growls from the lions and the wolf whistles coming from Double Dare's table.

"Quite the entourage," he said, locking eyes with Catwoman.

"I hate drinking alone," she replied, sipping her martini.

"How does one rate a private audience?"

She smiled.

"One asks nicely. Not something your kind excels at, as a rule." She shifted her attention to the hangers-on. "Off you go," she announced with a shooing motion. "Everybody. Scram. Adult swim."

Everyone but the lions left. Catwoman pointed Nightwing to the seat across from her, and then addressed the lions directly.

"It's alright, Matt. He's housebroken. Why don't you run downstairs and ask Dove to send up a snack plate for the poker room."

The lions roared viciously at Nightwing, and then left on their errand.

"Clayface?" Wing whispered harshly. "You've got *Clayface* running errands for you now?"

"No, I've a pair of trained lions named *Matt* who I'm expecting to bring a plate of mini grilled cheese, chicken wings, and crab puffs to the poker room. Of course it's Clayface, who else."

"Trained lions don't seem any less likely than ordering Clayface around like a paid flunky."

She shrugged.

"I know. Not sure why he's doing it, really. I never asked him to. He seems to be enjoying it."

"You seem to be enjoying it," Nightwing said sternly. "Look at this place. It's like that 81<sup>st</sup> street cat lair blew up."

She laughed.

"I never had giant HD screens in a cat lair. I got that idea from you know who."

Nightwing looked around, and saw the televisions were indeed WayneTech and in a similar configuration to those in the Batcave.

"Sly has been very receptive to my little suggestions," Catwoman said proudly. "He doesn't want any trouble, after all."

"Doesn't want any trouble? Like, you made him an offer he can't refuse?"

"He hijacked my theme, 'Wing. Maybe he didn't mean to, but he did. And, unlike some, he's ready to make it right. The Z put in a satellite hookup, and on game days this becomes quite the viewing room. The rest of the time, we have these lovely pictures of the beautiful cats. Everyone is happy... well, except for Catman and Hugo Strange. I'm told they sit downstairs and grumble in their beer."

"I see. Well it's quite a setup. But when I said private, I meant more private than this."

"I know," she winked. "Follow."

She rose and crossed to the little hallway that led to the one-time projection booth. She unlocked the door with a keycard, to reveal a small but comfortable poker room. On the table, the "snack platter" sat with a pitcher of water.

"Help yourself," Selina said, selecting a crab puff. "I made a few suggestions for the menu too. Oswald's tastes were a little heavy."

Nightwing sighed.

"Selina, what are you doing?"

She looked up sharply.

"I'm offering you a snack, that's all."

"Look, is it really safe to talk in here?"

"Well, the room is soundproofed and I have better anti-bugging countermeasures than even Oswald did. Oswald's, as you may recall, could block Oracle. Mine can mess with eavesdropping Kryptonians, so you do the math. And to answer your question, what I'm doing here is... *nostalgia*. I'm enjoying very selective touches of the way things used to be, the best of the way things used to be, and I'm enjoying them immensely."

"Ok, well... Maybe he was okay with all this 'nostalgia' when he gave you anti-Krypto frequency scrambling countermeasures, but he's not okay now. Selina, he's going seriously bat shit since the... I don't know what to call it, the *upswing* in crime on the East End of town."

"I know. We had a fight a few nights ago."

"I know, and it was *four* nights ago. You know how I know that? I saw the Zogger logs. Talk about nostalgia. 4 o'clock in the morning, forty minutes every night. Tell me, Selina, do you begin to appreciate how much you're messing with his head if he needs forty minutes of Zogger to get to sleep at night?"

"Apparently not."

"Look, I know you don't want to hurt him."

"Of course not."

"Then find a way to end this. For his sake or..." he coughed and reconsidered expressing the rest of the thought.

"Or?" Selina said archly.

"To be honest, if you didn't want to do something like this 'for him,' you could kinda do it for the rest of us. According to Wally, there's been some 'nostalgia' at the last League meetings too."

"I don't want to hear it. That lot needs counseling."

"Let's just say that somebody said something, the kind of remark they never would have made pre-Bat/Cat, but now, occasionally, they will indulge in, because they learned, one lip twitch at a time, that he is flesh and blood under that cowl and he can, within reason, see the..." Nightwing sighed, unable to find his way safely to the end of the sentence. "They were not aware that the mood had shifted," he concluded tactfully.

Catwoman sharpened her claws on the side of a chair.

"What. Did. Plastic Man. Say?" she hissed.

"It involved... Batman... losing a leash."

"I'll KILL him."

"That won't be necessary. It took lantern energy, speed force, and olive oil to pull him out of the slipknot B tied him in."

"Alright. You made your point. I'll... I'll take care of it."

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings, Selina. This place really does look great, and I can see you're having a ball."

"It's okay. I've had my fun."

It was—without question—the most... the most... *cliff diving in Mexico?*

Dr. Bartholomew had spent nine sessions attempting to probe Harleen's ability to distinguish "Mistah J's" wishes from her own—and to put her wishes above his—on this one issue. What made that one demand, shaving her head and donning a Egyptian headdress, different from everything else Patient J asked of her?

For nine sessions Bartholomew had probed, mindful of the delicacy required to coax the idea out from the damaged psyche without pushing too hard and making the patient defensive. Finally, after nine sessions of the subtlest probing, he unearthed a previous occurrence. Harley had refused Joker once before, but she wouldn't say why. Bartholomew knew he had to tread carefully, ever so carefully. It took another six sessions before he got the details: cliff diving in Mexico...

Selina liked parking in the carriage house after a prowl and making the final approach home on foot. It reminded her of old times when she lived in the city, and those delicious final swings before the drop onto her balcony that said "home." Tonight, she didn't want to bother. Tonight, she parked in the garage and came in through the kitchen to take Alfred's elevator down to the cave. She would tell Bruce she was giving up the Queen of the Underworld shtick and, with any luck, head off another night of Zogger. They might even take a bottle of bubbly up to bed to celebrate. After all, he'd wanted her to give up crime for so long. She was giddy with the silliness of the situation, playful as only a cat can be playful that close to dawn, when all the dogs and reasonable people are snoring in bed. She was especially happy to see the Batmobile wasn't in its hangar. He wasn't home yet. Meow.

The giddy-silly-feline playfulness waned as an hour passed, then two, and still there was no roar of the Batmobile pulling into the cave. Selina wasn't *worried*; she knew Batman could take care of himself. But the sun was up (she assumed) and he hadn't come home. There was no way you could call that a good thing.

She played at her workstation for a few minutes more, ignoring the disquiet in her stomach. She scrutinized the bats sleeping on their favorite perches and ignored the growing restlessness creeping out from that uneasy stomach, into her arms and legs. Abruptly, she stood, simply because her body needed to move. She headed upstairs, opting for the stairs to the clock passage this time, and collided with Alfred coming down.

"Ah, good morning, miss," he sighed with relief. "It is good to see you. I was somewhat anxious when I saw the bed had not been slept in."

"Y-yes, Alfred, I'm fine. I've been down here waiting for him. But he doesn't seem to have come home last night."

Alfred pursed his lips.

"Don't alarm yourself just yet, Miss Selina. You must know it is hardly an unprecedented occurrence," he said, moving past her and continuing down the stairs.

"But you just said you were worried," Selina noted, following him into the cave.

"Yes, because you were both absent. I have rarely encountered a completely empty bed since you moved in. But, as I say, in the days before your arrival, it was a not infrequent occurrence. The first order of business on these occasions, after checking the

newspaper and finding no obvious Batman-related episodes that might explain the master's absence, is to consult this panel. There, you see, he activated it four hours ago and has sent a 'heartbeat' signal ever thirty minutes. He is therefore quite unharmed, he is merely occupied on some mission and unable to return at this time. An impromptu League development, no doubt."

"Woof. Any idea how long he'll be gone?"

"It could be a matter of hours, days, or even weeks."

"WEEKS!"

"Most unlikely, miss, but as I say, not entirely without precedent."

"Damn. Guess my reign is extended a little longer."

Sly noticed he was being followed. He noticed immediately, not because he was especially paranoid, simply because a Hummer limousine is hard to miss. You see a car like that when you're locking up Vault for the night, you're going to notice. You see it again two blocks later while you're walking home, again you're going to notice. Probably chalk it up to a coincidence; it's going the same way you are... That is until it keeps going the way you are... not speeding to head you off at the curb but subtly pacing you... inching closer as it goes... to finally pull up beside you a few steps from your apartment, and... gulp... roll down its window.

"Yeah, can I help you?" Sly said, trying to approximate the tone he'd use at the bar, although the crack in his voice betrayed him. It just wasn't the same serving the nastiest of the nasty from behind the bar (when, after all, they'd come in for a drink) and having some creepy mysterioso follow you home this way.

The passenger behind the half-open window stayed in the shadows, but his hand emerged in what looked like an awfully expensive suit.

"Give this to Catwoman" he said, handing a sealed envelope.

"Ah, sure, okay," Sly squeaked. "Should I say who..."

The window rolled up before he could finish, and the car crept away as slowly as it had come.

## CHAPTER 2: CAT AND THAT MOUSEY THING

Selina had a theory about Rogues. There were the homicidal psychos like Joker; it was pointless even trying to figure them out. But the others, it seemed to her that their one real character flaw was a lack of outside interests. It was like they had nothing besides their theme, whatever axe they had to grind, and an obsessive hatred of Batman that wound up losing perspective. They went careening off the rails or, almost as bad, they got boring. They became repetitive, sank into self-parody and, worst of all, they became predictable and careless. After that, it was only a lucky batarang throw between them and Arkham.

Mindful of the danger, Selina had always made an effort to keep the elements in her life in balance, including Catwoman. She took pleasure in many things, from a night at the opera to a trip abroad, from a good book to a day outdoors at the Catitat. Even if the preserve evolved from the same affinity that shaped Catwoman, Selina always saw it as a separate part of her existence. Catwoman's activities might pay for it, but it was Selina's preserve, not a part of "Catwoman Enterprises," so to speak.

Maintaining that separation was important to her, which is why she refused to use any photos from the Catitat for the video wallpaper at Vault. Instead, she'd sought out a prominent wildlife photographer who exhibited in a famous Madison Avenue gallery. Both the photographer, Felix Thomas, and the gallery, Wild Thing, had declined the usual promotional tags they would have demanded elsewhere. The whole point of such advertising was to attract a club's patrons to seek out the gallery and become customers themselves, but the patrons of Vault, well, "customers" like that, they could do without. Catman's claws alone had cost them \$48,000 in new display cases the last time he took an interest in their wares.

So, instead of the usual promotional tags, Selina had promised a different type of compensation. It was time for a new cat lair, after all.

The distinctive purple car turned onto Madison and opted for the valet parking at the Parkview Hotel. It was expensive, like everything on the upper eastside, but it was convenient to the shops and most socialites that didn't live in walking distance used it. Selina strode confidently up the street towards Wild Thing, when her eye glimpsed something familiar reflected in a store window. She turned abruptly, but whatever it was had vanished.

She resumed walking... but couldn't shake the feeling that the half-glimpsed something was important... She couldn't shake the idea that maybe she was being followed... She slowed her pace, and looked in a shop window... high concept stereos and phones that didn't interest her, but reflected beyond them... behind her... she could just make out... nothing. She resumed walking.

Twice more she stopped: once at a store selling leather goods, thinking the dark surfaces would offer a better reflection, and once at an antiquities gallery, thinking that late period bronze in their Egyptian collection would make just the right addition to



Selina sighed and shook her head.

"Knew I should have had a second cup of coffee this morning. Okay, hit me. How did it go again?"

"When you don't know what I am, then I'm something," Eddie repeated patiently. "But when you—"

"Stop!" She mouthed that much carefully, processing it, holding each word up to inspect different shades of meaning. "Okay, go on," she said finally.

"But when you know what I am, then I'm nothing."

He paused again, expecting her to want to inspect it the same way, but instead, she just smiled, waiting for the final question.

"What am I?" he prompted, with a playful smile of his own.

"The answer to a riddle."

"That's my girl," he nodded, delighted.

"That's a good one," Selina beamed. "Quite the nifty little paradox too. I'm honored that you used it on me."

"You're the very first. Now that it's had a test drive, I will look for the right opportunity to unleash it on—oh, unless you tell him. You won't, will you, 'Lina?"

"Of course not! Eddie, what do you take me for?"

"Someone who's been letting *Cluemaster* sit at her table every night at Vault just to keep me away. Don't think I'm not onto you, 'Lina. You're one of the smartest, classiest, savviest women I know, and Arthur Brown watches Deal or No Deal. The only possible reason a woman like you would spend five minutes with trash like that is to discourage me from coming over and saying 'hi.' That's why I'm following you, 'Lina. I want to know what gives."

"Oh."

"Yeah. 'Oh.' Come on now, we've known each other too long for those games."

"I thought you liked games."

"There are games and there are games. So... an answer for an answer. Why are you avoiding me?"

"I thought it would be for the best. I'm sorry, Eddie, but with the history, I figured it could be awkward."

"The history. You mean the time I said you'd hung up your whiskers."

She nodded.

"Partially. Eddie, you know more of the truth than anyone else. You must know this Gatta Corleone thing is—"

"A pose, yeah, sure. APE SO, been obvious from day one. But for the life of me, I can't figure out how it happened."

"Join the club."

"You guys didn't do it on purpose?"

"Queen of the underworld? Are you nuts?"

"Well, I admit, it did seem really broadminded, for him, but I thought maybe you were celebrating an anniversary or something and that was your gift. Or maybe he forgot an anniversary and that was a way out. I mean, Doris once got me to—"

"Oh, look!" Selina interrupted, pointing to a window display. "It's a leather waste basket and a matching, eh, placecard thingy."





"True. Still, seems a pity. I mean, you're doing fine but... I'd be better at it."

"Oh really?"

"I don't relish the idea of actually running things, that really seems like more trouble than it's worth. But I do like the idea of having to come up with 92 riddles a week."

Selina laughed.

"You had me going for a minute."

"I know, I saw it in your eyes. Think of it though: a roll of them hanging off the Bat-Signal, like paper towels."

She laughed harder, and Eddie joined in. When they calmed down, he looked up pointedly.

"So what do you do?"

Selina blinked.

"What do I do... about what?"

"Batman. I'm just curious how it works, that's all. Is it like 'you might want to stay away from 96th street tonight, darling, pass the potatoes?'"

Selina blinked.

"Or do you just pretend you don't know each other around the house?"

"I take it back. THIS is the conversation I was trying to avoid."

"You should be careful; that's all I'm saying, 'Lina. He strikes me as a bad loser."

Selina's retort was cut off by a knock at the door, and Eddie flipped out.

"I was just joking," he mouthed frantically. "He really has a freakin' homing beacon in your car, like those chips they put in lost dogs?"

"Of course not, you mental patient," Selina said, smacking the back of his head as she passed behind him to answer the door. "It's Sly. He called me earlier and I gave him the address."

Eddie crossed his arms and waited, looking around the lair for a good place to put a chessboard.

... .. :: Duty Log: Batman :: ... ..

... .. :: Submitted from FoS by remote relay :: ... ..

... .. :: Encryption matrix Delta24 :: ... ..

While the reports of Superman's appearance and behavior were confirmed by all I encountered on arrival in Metropolis, achieving proximity to the figure revealed it was not, in fact, the real Superman. The lookalike possessed Superman's strength and flight capabilities, but not his x-ray or heat vision. It also did not share his vulnerability to Kryptonite. I immediately contacted the real Superman, who joined me at once in Metropolis.

Mxyzptlk promptly arrived, and his presence complicated the situation immensely. I soon had 12 replicant Supermen on my hands. Fortunately all of Mxyzptlk's creations *did* share Superman's vulnerability to Kryptonite, and only one shared the original imposter's appetite for destruction. The chaos ultimately worked in our favor. Superman—the real Superman—persuaded several of his duplicates to help us, and Mxyzptlk conjured duplicates of me in response. An onslaught of superspeed appearances of Batmen and Supermen eventually forced the requisite syllables from his lips and sent him back to his own dimension for another ninety days.



"Mask?" Eddie guessed.

"Hummer."

"Hummer?"

"A limo."

"Guy in a Hummer limo has a note for the gal in a purple Lamborghini. I need a better car."

"Gentlemen, take this outside," Selina murmured, her eyes riveted to her note.

"You look serious, 'Lina. Who's it from? What's it say?"

"Nothing. Get out. Both of you. Go drool over my car. Walk around it, scratch yourselves, and talk about its horsepower, torque and redline. Whoever can guess the 0-to-60 gets a ride later."

An ordinary looking pager in the sleeve of Barbara Gordon's wheelchair vibrated, indicating a message waiting for retrieval on the OraCom. She couldn't leave at once, not when the library sponsored story hour was just getting underway at the community center. It was the one event she never missed, and all her old colleagues from the library would notice. So she ate a cookie, drank a glass of too-sweet fruit punch, and waited. She introduced Victoria Blant, today's reader who they were so pleased to welcome, and she waited some more. Finally, when Tom and Huck were setting off for the graveyard, she decided the suspense to come would be enough of a distraction for her to slip away unnoticed. She hurried home, and retrieved the waiting message.

The video instructed her to initiate a standard absence protocol: Nightwing, Robin and Huntress would modify their patrols to overlap Batman's route as much as possible. Nightwing would be in charge of answering the signal should it alight. She would periodically check on the Batmobile as its automated system crept along the patrol route, giving the appearance of a present and vigilant Batman.

At the same time Oracle was viewing her message, the intercom in Alfred's pantry buzzed discreetly, indicating a communication was waiting for retrieval at Workstation 2. He went down to the cave and watched the brief video. Batman said to tell Selina he was tied up in Metropolis and would send word when he knew anything more.

Selina didn't call before dropping by the Graysons' any more than they did before coming to the manor. She just showed up, one of them buzzed her in, and (on this occasion) Dick hobbled to the door.

"What happened?" Selina asked when she saw him hopping miserably back to the sofa.

"You should know. You were there," he said casually. "Flagpole broke."

"You said you only hurt your pride."

"When a hot woman is driving a hot car, it's all about pride," he said. "Seriously, I didn't think it was anything bad at the time, but after a few more swings and landings, I started to feel it. This morning I wake up, and it's swollen like some kind of melon."

"Ouch," Selina winced.

"Yeah, 'ouch.' Not much sympathy from the marital unit since I did it trying to impress Catwoman."

"You told her?"

"She tracks me, Selina. She knew it happened a block from Vault and connected the dots. She even showed me the replay on her GPS. The little blip that's me goes kerplunk, and she laughs and says 'Serves you right, Sillybird.'"

"You two have a very odd relationship," Selina observed.

"Look who's talking," Dick laughed.

"Exactly. It's not something I get to say very often: *you two* have a very odd relationship."

"Woof."

"Woof."

"So what can I do for you?" Dick grinned.

"I came to see Barbara, actually. I was hoping she could patch me through to Bruce."

"Ah, well she's out. She rushed in about an hour ago to pick up a message and then raced right back out again. Something about getting back to the community center before Injun Joe digs up the gold or... something like that. But I know B is off radio right now. He sent a message one way, she couldn't tell him about my ankle and that I won't be able to cover for him like he asked."

"Fuck."

"I'm thinking that's not for my ankle."

"No. I'm very sorry to hear about your ankle but I've got mice of my own to... um... chase into their little... y'know."

"Boy, it must be serious if you're dropping the ball in the middle of a cat analogy."

"Hm?"

"Hi," Dick waved, and spoke in a too-eager voice reminiscent of his Robin days. "I'm Nightwing, I'll be your crimefighter this evening. Can I start you off with a beverage?"

"Huh?"

"You seem really, really distracted, Selina. I thought maybe a joke was called for."

"Oh."

"But I can see now that you're way past that. I should probably leave you to chase the mouse into his little mousy place. It's called a hole, by the way."

"I'm sorry, Dick," she laughed. "You're right, I am a little distracted. But don't worry. It's nothing I can't handle myself."

Bruce slid the blue crystal from its cradle in the Fortress of Solitude's com station and replaced the milky white one that originally resided there.

"Thanks for the use of the equipment," he said brusquely.

He meant it to preempt Clark. He had seen the grin forming, reflected on the edge of the com screen as he made that last video. It was the same grin Clark always had when Bruce did anything 'homey' with respect to Selina.

"Calling the little woman to let her know you'll be late for dinner?" Clark teased.

"Submitting a log entry on the Mxyzptlk affair while the details were fresh in my mind," Bruce answered in Batman's firmest the-subject-is-closed tone. "And making arrangements for Nightwing and Robin to cover my absence."

"And telling Alfred to tell Selina not to worry. Takes one to know one, Bruce, I do it all the time with Lois."

He grunted.

"Let's have a look at that list of private islands where Morrow could be holed up."

Not being a student of criminal psychology, Catwoman could only wonder if there was any significance to the rendezvous point. She looked down from the roof of the 41<sup>st</sup> Street Post Office at the front of the Exeter Club where the note specified. She decided it was probably just a convenient landmark. Then she saw the limo pull up, a Hummer, just like Sly said, and it occurred to her that there might be another reason. The front of the Exeter was one of those places a Hummer limo wouldn't excite comment.

She watched and waited, although she couldn't have said what she was watching or waiting for. The car just sat there, silent and still. Once it became clear that nothing was going to happen until she made an appearance, she swung down to the street. Immediately, the driver's door opened and a uniformed chauffeur got out. He was a short man, almost womanish in build, a far cry from the bruiser/bodyguard drivers that were becoming such a cliché.

The man didn't speak, he merely opened the door for her. No one was inside, only two telephones, a fax machine, and a bottle of champagne. The standard rent-a-ride fare. She got in. She was in this for answers, and playing along was the only way to get them.

The car took her to the downtown heliport. The waiting helicopter took her to an airstrip outside Bludhaven. The waiting 727 began to taxi the moment she fastened her seatbelt. When the plane reached a cruising altitude, the cabin door opened and she saw her host face to face.

"I trust you won't mind the precautions," he said. It wasn't a question or a token apology, it was the declaration of a man used to being accommodated. "True privacy is the most valuable commodity, Catwoman, and so few people will do what is necessary to secure it."

"Circling Gotham at 40,000 feet just to have a conversation seems a little much for a mere 'precaution,' Lex. It's what most people would call freakishly paranoid."

Lex Luthor smiled.

"Most people are sheep," he said. "You cannot expect sheep to value concepts such as privacy or dignity any more than a fish can comprehend mathematics."

## CHAPTER 3: MAY LOOK AT A KING

A chartered 727 circled wide around Gotham City, out to Bludhaven, up to a corner of rural Connecticut and back again. Lex Luthor looked out the window with satisfaction. The charter's so-called amenities were far inferior to those on his personal aircraft, but a sky without the Alien flying through it was the most important appurtenance, one for which he would forego any trivial extras, such as his preferred brand of bottled water. So he sipped an Evian as he looked out that window, and then returned his attention to his guest.

It was too early to be pleased with his prospective ally, but he was willing to allow that, thus far, he was not displeased. She had refused any refreshment, displaying a sensible mistrust, but she had not been obvious about it like so many costumed types. He studied her for several minutes more. Luthor was always intrigued by the way a subject reacted to silence. The crazy ones were compelled to fill it, forcing their personality on you in all its inanity, along with the cognitive waste they considered their thoughts and opinions. Often, there was manic laughter to be endured as well. None of it inspired much confidence in the proposed alliance. But this creature... like an actual cat, she seemed perfectly at ease, content to sit and wait. Or was she doing quite as much studying as he was? She certainly didn't shrink from meeting his eye. Luthor was always reluctant to humor these costumed lunatics and their ludicrous "themes," but he could not help but recall the adage "a cat may look at a king."

"You're an interesting creature," he said at last. "For one of those who wears—well, why be circumspect—who wears a mask and the costume of a professional wrestler, one hears that you are remarkably sane."

Catwoman's lips curled slightly. Not a threatening smile, but hardly a warm one.

"And for one who wears a tie and the costume of an undertaker, one hears you're remarkably rude, Lex."

"Touché. My point was merely that I believe one can make a deal with you, Catwoman, and expect you to hold up your end. Not decide at the critical hour to go on a murderous rampage in a jam factory instead."

"Not unless the jam starts it," she said brightly. "Seriously, Lex, may I remind you that we *have* done business before and I was not the one who failed to hold up my end of the bargain?"

It was Luthor's turn to smile. He did enjoy when a negotiation went according to plan. Catwoman might wear a preposterous outfit, but her thinking was rational and therefore predictable. If one could overlook the cat ears, it was quite like negotiating any other business deal.

"You refer to my declining to pay you for the Lex-Wing job," he said magnanimously. "I recall the incident, of course. I also recall that you got paid all the same. You had the resourcefulness to get your money. In my view, that means you are entitled to it."

"Survival of the fittest."

"Enrichment of the fittest, Catwoman. Mere survival is for wage slaves and spotted owls."

Catwoman burst out laughing.

"It must've been hell for you being president, Lex. 'Wage slaves and spotted owls?' This is what built up all those years having to pretend you care?"

"How astute."

He said it with a self-deprecating nod, as if disarmed by her candor. But behind the charming smile, Lex Luthor's wheels turned. She *had* been studying him the whole time he was studying her. She didn't look passively either, she *saw*. And she wasn't timid using what she saw. She was quite right, of course. Achieving power in a democracy demanded a polite pretense that inferiors were not, in fact, inferior. It drained him. It exhausted his patience with the pretense itself and with the sniveling mediocrities for whom he'd had to conceal his contempt. And Catwoman gleaned this from a few minutes of unguarded chitchat. He himself would not have wasted such an insight on *amusing conversation*; he would have filed it away for later use.

But squandering the insight was a minor flaw, one that did not detract (much) from a mind capable of making the observation in the first place. *Yes*, Lex Luthor thought, sipping his Evian as the chartered 727 veered lazily out to Bludhaven again, *if Catwoman continued as she had begun, it was likely he would be very pleased indeed.*

Leland Bartholomew finished the paperwork on the late Roland Jaer, stifling the last pangs of a guilty conscience as he saw the dead man's next of kin listed on Jaer's admittance form. He returned his attention to the files of a patient who was not beyond help: Harlene Quinzel, for example, once an Arkham doctor just like he was, or even a patient like...

The D.A. It was the Gotham District Attorney's office listed as Roland Jaer's "next of kin." That was because Patient Jaer had *killed* his own family, every one of them, his wife, father-in-law, and both children. Then the scandalous "not guilty by reason of mental defect" had removed him to Arkham "until judged sane enough to rejoin society" instead of to Blackgate Prison to serve out the four life sentences he deserved. The D.A. was humiliated by the verdict, the police and public were outraged... but no one was quite as outraged as Bartholomew himself.

He really had to put these awful thoughts behind him and focus on his other patients...

Jaer really was insane, that's what tormented Bartholomew more than it did any crusading prosecutor or victims' advocacy group. He knew. He had treated the murdering psychopath for four years and he knew. Jaer thought he had beaten the system, of course, that was obvious from their first session. In the sense that he knew right from wrong, he was correct. He was not *legally* insane; he knew what he did was wrong, before, during, and after the act. But he also had a myriad of mental disorders from paranoia to delusional egomania, and he most definitely belonged in the asylum. The thought that tormented Leland Bartholomew was that Jaer was making progress. In another six or seven years, he could certainly reweave the man's perceptions back into accord with reality. And then what? He'd have to be released. Ten years for four murders? What kind of justice was that?

Bartholomew was a doctor. He couldn't NOT try to heal a patient. And if he did succeed in healing him, he couldn't simply PRETEND he hadn't just to keep the man locked away. The thought had tormented him, with growing intensity, since Jaer's eighth session when Bartholomew realized the question of release might one day rear its ugly...

Harleen Quinzel. Since the breakthrough about the cliff diving, there was real reason to hope there. Patient Isley's situation was also much improved by the recent developments...

The man's next of kin was the *District Attorney*, for God's sake. There was really no point in dwelling on it. The fact was, Jaer was the author of his own fate. "Not guilty by reason of mental defect." That was his choice.

No one else had acted deliberately. The man's name was Jaer. It was the bureaucracy by which the asylum was run since Josiah Arkham's day. Roland Jaer thought he'd beat the system, but the fact was, for a man named Jaer the criminal wing of Arkham Asylum wasn't the safest place to be for any substantial length of time. The proximity of Patient J, just one cell over, was bound to catch up with him sooner or later.

No one knew exactly what Jaer had said or failed to say, but the bloody slaughter that followed—this is where Bartholomew had difficulty facing the situation without taking refuge in the denials or rationalizations he encountered in so many of his patients—the bloody slaughter that followed was a blessing. It removed the nagging dilemma of Roland Jaer from Bartholomew's life, and it demanded Joker's immediate and extended isolation from all other inmates, even in the high-security annex of the criminal wing. That boded well for Patient Quinzel, for Patient Isley, for Patient Jones, even for Patients Watney and Cumanez. It was a blessing for everyone except the late Roland Jaer.

Try as Bartholomew might, he couldn't keep his mind from the awful truth. As often as he tried to put it aside and concentrate on his work, it crept back into his thoughts like some awful spider. His patient was dead, and he was absolutely delighted. What on earth was he going to do?

"I trust you detest the Justice League as much as I do."

At last. It took an hour to get there. An hour Lex Luthor once would have described as "social pleasantries." But now, in his zero-tolerance-for-polite-pretense state of mind, he would call it what it was: a tiresome but vital sizing up of an unknown, possibly unstable personality before proceeding into dangerous waters. Catwoman, on the other hand, looked on it as the most annoying form of inter-villain contact: cat and mouse minus the mouse. There was nothing she found more trying than two predators circling in this way, as if the other didn't know that trick—and that one—and that one too. Superman would have just called it "Luthor being Luthor."

"I trust you detest the Justice League as much as I do."

Selina was quite prepared to lie to get into Luthor's confidence. She was a little piqued that she didn't really have to.

"I don't think anybody detests them *as much as you do*, Lex. But you're on safe ground with the assumption that, if a demon from hell was privy to my thoughts about them, he'd be tickled pink—or, at least, somewhere in the warm earth tones."

"Y-yes," Luthor said, placing a mental asterisk next to his 'sane for a costume' assessment. "Well then, you'll agree that Superman and Batman are the League's core. To destroy them would make the fall of the whole a foregone conclusion."

"I haven't made a study of it," Selina said flatly.

"You should. If you hate them, a dispassionate study of how to destroy them is essential. Removing The Bat and The Alien would obliterate the League's leadership mechanism and demoralize all those who survive."

Catwoman laughed—not manically, which was the usual response when he laid out a plan to decimate the Justice League—but more... more... genuinely and rather condescendingly amused.

"Oh come on, *Mr. President*. I'm not saying the 'world's finest' aren't central to the League, but you don't think it's rather telling that you zero in on the two heroes that took down your administration?"

"My dear good woman, you don't believe that ludicrous story the newspapers put forth, do you?"

"That you flew out of the Oval Office in a space suit that looked like a Tylenol capsule decked out for Mardi Gras? That you were buzzing DuPont Circle, hopped up on Venom and challenging Batman to a fistfight? No. No, I don't believe that one, Lex, but I have tangled with Batman and Superman enough to know there's a grain of truth in that particular tall tale."

"A... Tylenol... Mardi... Excuse me?"

"Look, I've seen enough of you to know you're no quitter, Lex. You're not a 'live to fight another day' kind of guy. You're 'if I'm going down, by God I'm taking you bastards with me. See you in hell.' It would take the force of God's own thunder to get you to give up a fight. And that—if you'll forgive the Gotham knows Gotham presumption—is Batman."

Lex Luthor took a deep breath. The negotiation was no longer proceeding according to his outline, and this, this *woman* was not adhering to his behavior models for either costumed lunatics or rational businessmen. She was... she had just... she was quite infuriating...ly... not wrong.

"*IF* I have any personal motives," he conceded coolly, "they are incidental to the overall goal: a world without a Justice League. You may, of course, believe that or not as you wish, as long as you are agreeable to the proposed partnership."

"Partnership!?"

It was lucky Selina had refused a drink or she would have certainly done a spittake.

"Of course. A Gotham-Metropolis alliance, if you will. Our adversaries find it effective. How much more would we, unhampered with their doughy-headed ideas."

It was Catwoman's turn to take a deep breath. To Luthor's eye, she looked surprised but impressed. Back on the outline and behavior model he hoped for: no manic laughter, and the air of one who accidentally drew an inside straight.

"I'll have to think about it," she said thoughtfully.

"The formula by which women are compelled to answer a proposal of any kind. Unfortunately, Catwoman, I must insist on a definite answer, in principle, before we

proceed to specifics. Given the trouble I went through to arrange this meeting, it is the least I can demand.”

“Yes, the Hummer, the helicopter and this plane are all very impressive, Lex, I bow to your feat of conspicuous consumption. Nevertheless—”

“I was not referring to mere money, Catwoman, but to the removal of that pesky Bat problem. Surely you are aware he left your borders immediately after making such a distasteful exhibition of himself in your nightclub. A ‘yellow rose,’ if you will, to begin our association on the right footing.”

“I don’t require any help handling Batman.”

“I know. I have observed how efficiently your agents are able to focus his attention to this part of town or, more importantly, away from that one. And, of course, your assault on the LexCorp Tower to obtain the X27 plans did require you to take on both Batman and Superman single-handed. This is precisely the skillset I require.”

“Go on.”

“That is an agreement?”

“No, Lex. I *read* a document before I sign it. You want me in on your little scheme, it takes more than flattery. I need to know exactly what I’m buying in *to*.”

That, of course, was the downside of dealing with rational business people rather than obsessed wackos. They did tend to ask reasonable questions and make reasonable demands that it was hard to refuse without appearing *unreasonable*.

“Very well, I can tell you this much, Catwoman, and then I really must demand an absolute and unambiguous accordance before any specifics are revealed. As you have observed, I am not one to simply ‘give up’ and I am not inclined to reveal even this much of my plan without a quid-pro-quo. I tender this much of the scheme on credit, not as a gift.”

“Alright,” Catwoman agreed. There is a principle among cats: it is permissible to let the other party think they’ve won so long as you get to nap in the chair you wanted. Luthor’s pride demanded quid-pro-quo, credit and not a gift, and all that jazz. It cost her nothing to nod rather than argue, and it got her the chair she wanted.

“There are three items in Gotham that I need to obtain,” Luthor announced smugly. “Three sets of plans in the hands of three separate businesses. There should be no evidence at all that any thefts have taken place, but because man is an imperfect creature and the best laid plans can go wrong, all the items must be acquired at once. That way, if one of the thefts is discovered, the other locations have no opportunity to tighten their security.”

“Child’s play. I’ve done four in a single night, including an underwater delivery.”

“Yes. Sub Diego, I rather suspected that was you. Ruined a golden opportunity for my administration to assert some control down there... In any case, this job would be similar only in that it involves three swift, invisible strikes in a single night. I would draw Batman out of Gotham as I did tonight, and keep both him and Superman fully occupied in Metropolis. You would have no opposition worthy of the name.”

“Cops and sidekicks don’t impress me either. Go on.”

“Once you have turned over what you’ve taken, it may take me several weeks to formulate the next step. Then, when I am ready to strike, you will reciprocate, keeping Batman and Superman occupied in Gotham while I take action elsewhere.”

"Simple enough."

"Occupied, Catwoman, that is all. You are not, I think, one of these psychopathic miscreants that would decide in the heat of the moment to terminate them prematurely. 'Since they're in the Pit of Despair anyway.'"

"Nope. Not my thing. I don't even own a Pit of Despair."

"Good. It is my wish that they live to see defeat. The fall of their League, the fall of their comrades, the destruction of all they have fought for."

"Well, as long as it's not personal," Catwoman muttered.

Harley thought it was the meanest nastiest horriblocity those horrible nasty meanies ever came up with. Taking her Mistah J away just for killing some dumb nobody that never even cracked a smile. And right when their little game was getting good! First Mistah J's mummy gag and then her daring to disobey him, the slick little detail about the cliff diving, it was going to be a laugh riot when they finally revealed the joke.

"Fool you once, shame on us, Barty old man. But fool you twice, shame on... rice."

Okay, well, neither one of them had come up with the final zinger yet, but there was plenty of time for that. Harley had enough training in therapeutic dialogue to know not to rush it. Bartholomew would only believe he was getting to a breakthrough if he saw hints, very subtle hints, only beginning to form a pattern over several laborious sessions. He had to put it together for himself, and then HAHAHAHAAAAA! Oh how she longed to hear Mistah J's triumphant HAHAHAHAAAAAAA when they showed old Barty that he'd been had a second time.

Mistah J thought of it as a simple prank. That was how Harley pitched it to him; that was the kind of thing that appealed to him. But for her, it was more than that. For her, the idea that there was something WRONG with her lovin her Mistah J, that being devoted to her Puddin' was a problem that somehow needed to be fixed, that notion had to be punished. She knew just how to do it too. She was Dr. Harleen Quinzel, she knew how to get them where they lived. Heartless headshrinking freaks.

Only thing was, now they'd taken her Puddin' away. She didn't really *need* him now for the plan. There was nothing for him to do after the mummy, not until the final HAHAAs, but she still missed him.

Oh, they were going to pay for this, every last one of them. She would make them pay.

This time it was Catwoman approaching the Graysons' co-op, not Selina Kyle. She approached from the 20<sup>th</sup> floor and knocked on the window instead of entering at street level and buzzing the intercom, but the result was the same: Dick hobbling painfully to admit her, and then hopping ignominiously back to his chair.

"Still swollen?" she asked.

"I think it's *fine*," Dick said petulantly. "But Barbara made me see Dr. Leslie this afternoon before I tried going out as Nightwing. She said the damage from the flagpole landing was nothing. It was working through the night afterwards that really messed me up. So if I go back too soon, chances are six hours in the field could cost me six more weeks in the easy chair. I'm not gonna risk that, even with Bruce out of the

picture. If anything big happens, then okay, Nightwing will be there. But with Crane's release pushed back again and no riddles on deck, it looks like you're the biggest threat right now."

"Thanks. I think."

"You here to see Babs?" Dick asked, taking their cat Bytes into his lap and scratching behind her ears.

"Yeah. Situation has changed, I need to contact Bruce—by any means necessary."

"That sounds dramatic," Dick grinned. "Guess you're the biggest threat after all. She's in the den. Likes to see as little of me and Bytes as possible when Oracle is on the 'Com so she moved her workstation for the duration. You can go on back though. It's late enough that it's probably just Batgirl out there now."

"Thanks," Selina said absently, rummaging in the compartment where she kept her lock picks. "Here we go," she said at last, pulling out a thimble-size beanbag and tossing it to Dick. "Something for Bytes. Don't let her have it all at once."

"So I told Puddin' that it wasn't the height of the cliff or the sudden aquatic stop at the bottom. It was the fish. I have it on good authority that there were fishies in that water, and they probably wouldn't like being bombed from way up high by little old me. You don't want to screw around with mad fish, Doc. Doc? Doc, ya in there?"

Harley had embellished her cliff diving adventures much more than she originally planned. It seemed the only way to hold her audience's attention. But finally, even the lure of Freudian meta-symbolism with respect to water joined with the ICK-SLIMY-ICK factor of mad fish was insufficient. Bartholomew kept gazing out the window, resorting to the monotonous flow of "uhuhs" "mhms" and "oh reallys" that Harley employed herself when she was sitting in that chair and a dull old patient that wasn't Mistah J was going on and on about his dumb old childhood.

"Doc, I know you're not listening," she said angrily.

"Mhm. And how does that make you feel?" Bartholomew asked mechanically.

"Like it's time for a HAHAAHAAA-SMACK of a JokerFish right across your smug kisser."

"Uhuh."

"DOC!"

"WHAT!?" Bartholomew jumped.

Harley had jumped up from the couch, and was now twirling her arms in wide circles until finally pointing back to her own face.

"Eyes on the harlequin," she said.

"I'm sorry, Harleen, I'm afraid my mind drifted. Our time is nearly up anyway, only ten minutes to go. What say we call it a day, and I'll give you an extra fifteen minutes next time."

Harley considered this. She took a deep, thoughtful breath... and then juttied out her tongue to produce the longest sustained raspberry in the history of Arkham Asylum.

"Hey, just who I need to see," Barbara cried when Catwoman came in. "Could you take Cassie to the museum next week? Pretend it's an educational thing, Egyptian gods and Roman temple, you know the sort of stuff. And while you're there, casually show her the hiding places and secret ways in."

"Sure, I can. But why are we being cagey about it?"

"She thinks her assassin's training taught her all there is to know about stealth and infiltration. She's obviously wrong: Catman's been leading her on quite a dance all night."

"Blake?!"

"Yes! And I don't like any Batgirl being made a fool of that way."

Selina chuckled.

"Oh come on, you had fun that night. It was a rainy, miserable, gray, foggy, icky wet night and you would have been bored out of your mind if it wasn't for my little game of—"

"Cat and flying mouse? I'd forgotten about that. No, it was not fun. The panther at the zoo was definitely not fun."

"I was watching. I wouldn't have let him hurt you."

"It still wasn't fun."

"You still have the stuffed one from the gift shop, Barbara, I've seen it on your bookshelf. Why did you keep it if you didn't have fun?"

"Humility. Remind myself not to get cocky again."

"Pfft, that's Bruce talking. Speaking of, that's why I'm here. You've got to have some emergency channel to reach him, don't you?"

Barbara turned away from her workstation, teasing mode abandoned, and studied Catwoman carefully.

"Sounds serious."

"Yeah," Selina nodded.

"Wait here."

Barbara left, and Selina studied the fascinating images layered on the Oracle viewscreens. The floorplan of the Gotham Museum's Egyptian wing she recognized at once. The blip of Batgirl's tracking signal on a city map superimposed over it, that took longer to figure out. Just what the orange gridlines were meant to represent she never did find out. Barbara returned with a small snail-shaped device of gold and white metal, embossed with the JLA emblem.

"Great."

Selina puckered, looking at the device exactly the way Batman examined a box covered in question marks.

Barbara showed her how to open it and unlock a relay channel to Batman. Selina then fastened the device to her ear—or she tried to. As if the communicator knew her distaste and wanted to punish it, it kept pulling strands of her hair as she tried to loop it over the back of her ear. It refused to rest securely while still pointing the directional mic at her mouth. In the end, she had to take off her mask completely and hold the device in place.

"Batman, are you there? Pick up," she said, as if she'd reached the answering machine of a friend screening their calls.

...:Batman, 10-6,... came the familiar gravel.

"Ten six?" Selina mouthed.

"He's busy, stand by," Barbara translated.

Seconds passed, and Selina thought through what she would say. She regarded using a JLA Communicator the same way Bruce might view borrowing Eddie's cell phone: the situation demanded it and there was nothing else to be done, but that was no reason to give it more information than necessary.

...: 10-65, Oracle, what's the SitRep?::...

Selina rolled her eyes.

"The 'sitrep,' Jackass, is that you can't tell my voice from Oracle's."

...:Catwoman?::...

"No 10-code for that one, is there, Stud? Look, you need to come home. Right now."

...: ... ::...

"Home. Now," she repeated. Then, straining to find some phrase that might at least hint at her predicament, she added, "I found the Storm Opals."

Four seconds of excruciating silence passed, and then

...: I'll be right there::...

There wasn't anything in the code of ethics to prohibit a doctor walking his patient back to her cell instead of relying on the orderlies to provide a formal escort. Stopping in the staff lounge for a cup of coffee together, that was more irregular. If Harleen Quinzel had never been on the Arkham staff, it certainly never would have happened. But Bartholomew had found himself talking to Harleen more and more like a colleague as they walked along. When they reached the door to the lounge, it just seemed the natural thing to do.

She was right, of course. It was selfish, lazy, and downright unprofessional to short a patient 1/5 of a scheduled session because he "wasn't in the mood," so to speak. It was his job, whether he felt like it or not. Harleen herself didn't feel like it some days, but did she have the choice of saying "Hey Doc, I don't feel like talkin' about my childhood pet Ruffles today, let's say play some scrabble instead?"

She was absolutely right. The fact that she expressed it first in the form of a "raspberry" was a sad commentary on the social environment in which she found herself. If one lives for years in Paris, one comes to express herself naturally and spontaneously in French. If one lives for years among madmen, one adopts their "native tongue" of delusional nonsense in just the same way. What Harleen needed was more time with her peers.

Why, on that short walk through the corridors together, just look at how far she'd come: from the uncouth raspberry to a kindly inquiry why he was so preoccupied during their session. His first answers were guarded, of course. And just look how she responded. Did she become churlish or argumentative? No indeed. She probed just like any therapist would probe when a subject was withholding. She keyed in on a word or turn of phrase, a look, a pause, or a fidget. It really warmed the heart to see her pick up these tools of their trade with such a sure hand.

Such progress should certainly be rewarded. Bartholomew began telling her some of the history with Roland Jael and the reason he was so distracted today. He wished Patient J was not involved in the story and, naturally, Bartholomew would not mention him. Nevertheless, Harleen must be aware of Jaer's fate and the role Joker had played in it.

Perhaps that is what worked the miracle? Having an unavoidable reminder of Joker's homicidal mania placed before her when she was, however tentatively and unconsciously, resuming her old role as a psychiatrist and healer, may have finally reached that part of her mind Joker had so savagely damaged all those years ago.

It took only three minutes for Superman to fly Batman from a 23-acre private island in Tonga back to the Fortress of Solitude. It took six minutes to get Krypto calmed down enough so they could safely use the transporter.

Batman had always kept the cave transporters separate from the general circuit, so direct transport was only possible between the Batcave and the Watchtower. He had to go to the Watchtower first and then allow his body to rest for ten minutes before a second transport to the cave. He spent the time pacing.

"You realize you wouldn't have this problem if you'd set your system up like everyone else's," Arthur said wryly.

Batman glared hatefully, and Arthur chuckled.

"Yeah, that'll help," he noted.

When Harleen Quinzel joined the Arkham staff, Dr. Bartholomew shared his colleagues' lukewarm opinion of her. She had acquired the necessary degrees, the "union card" as it were, albeit from second-rate schools. She had the basic letters of recommendation, albeit from the same faculty at those second-rate schools that didn't mind giving her advanced degrees. Everything about her seemed adequate, nothing more. But then, jobs dealing with the most dangerous of Gotham lunatics were not exactly in high demand. Arkham administrators, like the schools that accepted Harleen to start with, would take what they could get.

Harleen's ambition was obvious for anyone with eyes to see: she wanted experience with the "colorful" inmates because they were famous, a shortcut to books that would sell and a life of celebrity. In those few years she was gathering material, Arkham would have an efficient worker, even if her motives weren't exactly altruistic. But no one, no one ever expected more from her. Efficient, adequate, a nice girl, this is how Harleen's coworkers described her. She was never considered a brilliant psychiatrist with a shrewd insight into the human psyche, she was just Harleen, that new blonde in Jake McCree's old office.

That's why Bartholomew was so astonished as he began talking to her. Harleen was a really gifted listener. She was disarming, perceptive, and non-judgmental. She didn't fall back on the clichés of Socratic dialogue, the "what do you think that means" "how do you feel about that" and "does that remind you of anything we've talked about before?" Instead, her reactions were... well, surprising. She didn't maintain the detachment a psychiatrist should, but she could get you to laugh at yourself, and that

really was a marvelous route to self-discovery. If one could put aside the self-important posturing and admit one's own laughable follies, really, all things were possible.

But while one clung to those poses that really fooled no one but oneself, one was apt to...

Leland Bartholomew laughed at himself, long and loud. "When one keeps on calling oneself 'oneself,' one tends to sound like a putz, and why is anybody going to take advice from any old putz that decides to open his mouth and start yapping?" he quoted from Harleen's earlier barb. "I, on the other hand, am 'getting it on' with Raven, a 'bird' who 'none of those Iceberg loons could even get her phone number'—although surely the colorful Rogue nomenclature should not cancel out proper grammar and it would be more correct to say she was a bird whose phone number none of the Iceberg loons was able to obtain.

After eight minutes of forced conversation, Aquaman conceded that living on the ocean floor did afford a certain built-in protection from surface intruders and he really didn't have the security concerns that other Leaguers might with respect to the transporters. The water pressure alone, at several tons per inch outside the city domes, would deter any would-be intruder that gained access to a Justice League transporter.

After eight minutes of forced conversation, Bruce concluded that his body had enough time to recover from the first transport and he readjusted the coordinates for the manor cave. Selina was waiting, right there at the transport pad, with a pitcher of martinis and two glasses.

"One night only, reprising my role as the owl cave slave girl," she said without a hint of a smile. "Trust me, you'll want a drink when you've heard this. I know I do."



## CHAPTER 4: PLANS

It was a beautiful day to be outdoors. For Selina, there was no better place in Gotham on a day like this than the roof of the Gotham Museum of Art. The little snack cart was unpretentious, the food was tasty, and the view upstaged the sculptures that the museum displayed there to justify the use of the space. This time of year, there weren't many tourists. The wind was just brisk enough to discourage them from staying long, but to those accustomed to rooftops, it was a perfect day. Selina bought Cassie a churro and went to join her on the hard little bench the girl had selected to look out over Robinson Park and the city beyond.

"Thank you," Cassie said quietly, taking the churro. "I in trouble?"

"Why do you think that?" Selina asked.

Cassie didn't need to look around to make sure they were alone. She had analyzed the space as soon as she sat down, and continued to monitor it for any change that might pose a threat or introduce the possibility of being overheard.

"Last time. Was here. Not do good."

Selina smiled kindly.

"Catman. Yes, I did hear about that. Cassie, Barbara is... a *crimefighter* at heart, and she's a cop's daughter, and she's married to a cop. None of that adds up to *subtle*. If she had her way, we'd be downstairs right now in the galleries where it happened, pretending to talk about the differences between Bast and Sekhmet. I, on the other hand, am a cat. Cats are nothing if not subtle."

"Found that out hard way," Cassie pouted.

"Let me guess: He laid a trail for you to follow. You thought you'd found a clue, and you were proud of yourself for being clever. You followed it thinking you'd surprise him, and wound up right where he wanted you to be each time?"

Cassie nodded.

"You're not the first. Cat-to-bat, Cassie, this goes no further. Barbara herself was led on just such a cat-and-flying-mouse chase: uptown, downtown and all around the Gotham Zoo, right into a close encounter with a live panther in their gift shop. She's a better woman for it, too. Some things you only learn when you're looking into the eyes of a hungry panther or—"

"Shh," Cassie hissed, putting her hand on Selina's arm. "No more talk. He hear."

Selina glanced around, wondering how anyone could have approached that she didn't notice. She saw no one on the roof except the cashier at the snack cart, far out of earshot. She turned back to Cassie quizzically, and Cassie just nodded very slightly at the horizon. Selina followed her eyes... and saw a few dots of red fluttering in the distance.

"See what I mean? *Not subtle*," she said coolly.

Then she turned towards the dancing bits of color on the horizon and spoke softly into the wind as she'd seen Bruce do on occasion.

"Spitcurl, the red really is eye-catching when you're hovering like that. You never thought of something more discreet, like maybe a sexy, scalloped black?"

The red cape continued to flutter in the wind, and Selina went on.

“Look, I get it. I’m being followed. Metropolis’s Flying Finest is keeping an eye on me. But we’re having a private conversation here, and the possibility of your listening in doesn’t help.”

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the dots of red got larger. Cassie put her hands angrily on her hips.

“Coming closer. Thinks that prove he not listening. You right. Crime-fight not subtle.”

Cassie stood and headed back towards the elevator that brought them up to the roof. Selina gave the horizon a final, angry glare before following.

“I thought you were the one that knew about teenage girls,” she hissed.

Metropolis Mercantile Bank, Commerce Bank of Metropolis, and First Metro Security. At one time, all three were a part of the LexCorp empire. Lex Luthor would never trouble himself with the day-to-day operations, naturally, but he would certainly never permit a bank he owned to issue loans to persons that went bankrupt a dozen times before.

He had tried to take down the Justice League before. He had failed.

More than once. More than twice. More than he would permit any underling or ally to fail and still be granted another try. Always his campaigns ended in failure. Attempting another had required a fearless look back at those previous efforts and an unflinching analysis of what had gone wrong.

Thankfully, Luthor had had nothing but time for such a look back for several months now. He’d known men and women, in corporate, political, and villain circles alike, who had destroyed their careers by adhering to this idea that they were right—no matter how much evidence to the contrary was piled at their feet. Their plan, their way, was always right. It must be so, and anyone who said otherwise would be flung into the Pit of Despair, in villain circles. In corporate ones, they were transferred to Minnesota just in time for the winter, a practice Luthor considered far more sadistic than the Pit of Despair.

But Lex Luthor was a bigger man than that; Lex Luthor understood the meaning behind the old adage about history. Instead of dooming himself to repeat the failures of the past, he would learn from those mistakes, build on them. He would know exactly where he had gone wrong in his previous attempts and correct those missteps so that this time, he would get it right. This time, he would not fall into those same traps again.

This time, he would succeed.

The first night Tom Blake came to Vault, he could barely choke out the password. “Catwoman gave me the combination,” that was the price to gain admittance to the hub of the underworld: his manhood, his dignity, his self-respect. “Catwoman gave me the combination.” He was not going to do it. He simply was not.

But then... there is a maxim that biological needs must be met before social ones, social before esteem, and so on. The man who has no *oxygen* doesn’t worry if he has no

friends. Catman's JOB depended on ready access to his peers among Gotham criminals. He needed to fence his goods or he wouldn't eat. He needed to maintain visibility between heists or he could fall into that abyss of has-beens who had a good year once and then vanished into oblivion. So he sucked it up, he uttered the dreaded words, and he spent the next hour wallowing in defeat. The next night was the same... but he only wallowed for forty minutes. The next night, it was thirty. And the next, it didn't sting quite as badly walking in the door. After ten or fifteen minutes, he shook it off completely.

Yes, he'd had to let Catwoman 'win,' in a sense, but now that he'd swallowed the bitter pill, it didn't really hurt as much as he expected. He started to enjoy the feline surroundings. The flea-bitten she-cat did have the good taste to put up pictures of leopards and cheetahs. And the furnishings were much more to his taste than the Iceberg's.

It's not like he had to see her or talk to her, after all. Not like he had to sit down at her table and drink with her...

"Mr. Blake, Catwoman would like to see you in the VIP room ASAP."

Catman looked up at Peahen with the stunned horror of a condemned man long forgotten in a crowded dungeon. Suddenly hearing his name called out, what could it mean? Time to rise and be led to the gallows?

"The *who* would *what*?" Blake asked savagely.

"Catwoman. Wants you up in the VIP room. She says you're the only man for the job she's got."

Beneath his mask, outrage and curiosity fought for dominance on Tom Blake's brow. True to his feline nature, curiosity won out. He followed Peahen up to the VIP room, past Raven's podium, and back to Catwoman's table along the back wall. An empty chair sat across from her. In front of it, a glass of his preferred rye and soda.

Catman sat, touched the rim of the glass as if it contained hemlock, and then turned an equally suspicious eye on the woman herself.

"Well?" he asked belligerently.

"Recognize this?" Catwoman said, sliding a photo across the table.

He studied the picture. It was a very expensive-looking bracelet.

"It's green," he said simply.

"Men," Catwoman muttered, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "Well, at least we know you're not color blind. It's *Russian*. A gift from Prince Feliks to Princess Zinaida on their 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, or something like that. Emerald enamel leaves, 24-karat gold, and seed pearl centers. Worth maybe a quarter of a million."

"Nice. What's it have to do with cats?"

"It's in the Gotham Museum of Art on the other side of the wall from the Egyptian gallery with the big gold Sekhmet, where you were playing cat and mouse with Batgirl last night. Since you obviously know your way around there, you could go in and get it tonight. Everybody else needs a few days to stake it out, map out the space and the alarm systems, time the guards' patrols, and make a plan."

"Rush order?" Catman asked.

"Something like that. Hammer and Sickle want it for a prop in a larger enterprise."

"Why can't you take it yourself?"

“Because there’s a limit to the number of places I can be at one time, Blake, and I have other plans tonight.”

The plans themselves were not flawed. Lex Luthor had been brutal in his assessment of his own stratagems and, where he was at fault, he was prepared to admit it. He had made mistakes, certainly. He did not shrink from that reality. But those mistakes were not in the planning.

The plans themselves were sound. It was in the execution where he faltered, more often than not because he entrusted a vital function to persons who were not reliable. Whether it was someone like Ra’s al Ghul or his old associates in the Injustice Gang or Secret Society, there was always someone pursuing their own agenda, either as an individual bid for power or following some psychopathic whim. That would not occur this time.

T. O. Morrow had been much more receptive to the appeal than Catwoman had. He agreed instantly to provide the Superman robot and to unleash it on Metropolis on command. Catwoman, despite virtually the same flattering testimonial about her expertise and sanity making her an ideal candidate for Luthor’s operation, wanted time to think it over. This, Luthor imagined, was a function of her life experience and not a flaw in his delivery. She didn’t respond to his appeal with instant agreement the way Morrow did because she was used to compliments. Women with a pleasing appearance generally were, whereas T. O. Morrow, one supposed, never heard a flattering word from anyone who wasn’t trying to sell him something.

Catman left Vault exuding equal parts satisfaction and revulsion, the kind of contradiction only a true cat can pull off. A few hours later, he returned with the coveted bracelet... and a second shadow.

The shadow didn’t follow him inside the nightclub. Instead, it went around to the fire escape on the far side of the building and entered through the room that had once been Harvey Dent’s kitchen. It bypassed the bar and went into the great empty chamber that had once been the theatre itself. From there, it swung through the cover of blacker shadows until it reached the balcony, where it climbed silently over the edge into the VIP room.

It stalked up to Catwoman’s table, tapped an orange and yellow-caped shoulder rhythmically, and, as Catman turned—Batgirl punched him fiercely in the nose.

Two Ghost Dragons sprang to their feet at the sudden excitement, but they sat back down as soon as Catwoman’s attack leopard roared. Catwoman herself merely shrugged, like it was a cost of doing business, while Batgirl twisted Tom Blake’s arm around his back and forced his face down over the table, until his fist opened and the bracelet dropped to the floor. She let him fall back into his chair, while the leopard—which was now *two* leopards—closed in on her from both sides. She looked fiercely from Catwoman to the closest leopard to the other leopard and back to Catwoman.

“Bring her to the poker room,” Catwoman ordered.

The leopards nudged her several times with their noses until the girl finally moved, walking with dignity through the tables to the door, then down the short hallway and

into a small room. The leopards left her there and, a few minutes later, Catwoman entered.

"Blake was finally good for something," she smiled, locking the door. "This room is completely eavesdrop-proof, even Superman can't listen in. So finally, we can have our talk in peace."

So the plans were never flawed. The personnel, this time, were intelligent, capable, and resourceful enough to do exactly what was required without the extra "Must-Kill-Bat" baggage. That left the Alpha-Omega, the great goal at the end of his journey and the driving force propelling him towards it.

Obliteration of the demigod tyranny was no longer an end in itself. He still wanted to liberate mankind from the super lie, still wanted to establish the Humanist State once and for all, where Man would be his own savior, where Innovation was the means by which he would triumph over any adversity. In the words of the one ad campaign he would never run, but whose author he promoted all the same: YOUR CHILDREN DESERVE TO BE SAVED BY RESCUE SQUADS WEARING LEXCORP JETPACKS.

It was still a dream, yes, but it was no longer the only dream. It was now the means to a greater purpose: revenge on The Bat and The Alien. He would avenge his shattered presidency, and, at the same time, liberate mankind from the superpowered menace and preempt future opposition in his endeavors.

That is what brought him back from oblivion. That was a dream worth living for.

Catwoman's new lair was close enough to Vault that she could have come and gone over rooftops instead of taking her Catmobile. But since the whole point of hanging out at Vault was to be conspicuous, she used the car. It was a flashy way to announce: "the Cat has left the building," "the Cat is on the move," and "the Cat is now at this location."

Reaching the lair, she removed her glove, let the scanner read her fingerprint, and went inside... to find Superman sitting on her couch.

"Thank you for not having k-metal lasers or lead-lined walls," he said mildly.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Spicurl, but yours isn't the cape I want to see on that couch waiting for me after a long night of Bad Kitty."

She made a clawing motion, Clark blushed, and Selina was satisfied. She removed her remaining glove and cowl.

"It won't be long now," he assured her. "We located the island Morrow was using. There's no question he made the bot there. Bruce will be back as soon as he finishes up. Tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

"And in the meantime, he's got you checking up on me every few hours."

"It's easier for me to zip back and forth."

"That's not what I meant. I'm a big girl. I don't need 'checked on,' I don't need protecting, and I don't need a guardian angel in a cape to—"

"Neither of us is too happy that you went to meet Luthor alone," Superman said gravely.

"I *work* alone, Clark. I *always have*. I'm not new at this, remember? I've been playing this game for a very long time. I do my own thing, I do it very well, and I do it alone."

"Well you're stuck with company this time. Apart from everything else, I could never look Bruce in the eye again if I let you go to Luthor a second time without backup."

"You do realize that you're the one he's paranoid about, right? You're the one he's going to be prepared for, even though there's no earthly reason for you to be in Gotham."

"I'll keep a safe distance. I'll stay above the atmosphere if I have to, but I *am* keeping an eye on this meeting."

"Overprotective jackass," Selina grumbled.

Clark smiled. Bruce had told him that if Selina ever called him a jackass to his face, it meant she'd accepted him into the pride.

Well, Morrow's island was lost, that was inevitable. His robot had served its purpose, and since the man himself was safely relocated to Bangkok well before the heroes discovered his island workshop, there was nothing to tie Luthor to the episode. His nemeses would remain ignorant of their true enemy until it was too late.

This time *was* different. Already it was different, already the choices he was making were paying off. Morrow was reliable. He hadn't remained on his island like some crazed Bond villain, expecting to trap the heroes in a shark tank or some such nonsense. He did as he was told, and when discovery was inevitable, he bugged out. Granted, letting Morrow know that a generous allowance would be waiting to build himself a new lab as soon as he vacated the island may have had something to do with it, but such expenditures were necessary to keep skilled associates practicing their skills on his behalf. If there was one thing that running two successful Presidential campaigns had taught him, it was that thrift doesn't pay. Money can be easily replaced. Minimizing your personal exposure must be the priority.

Luthor checked his wristwatch. It was almost time, but he had a few minutes yet to review the contingency timetables before Catwoman arrived. If only she could have provided a reasonable estimate of her prep time at their last meeting, but she refused to even guess without knowing the targets. It was the double-edged sword of sane allies again. A typical villainous cohort would have thumped his chest and cried "two hours tops, Lexie, and we'll be dining on chilled Lanterns' brains, tastefully served inside their severed heads, with a side of Flash liver sautéed in a nice chianti." While he didn't want that kind of irrational arrogance any more than irrational bloodlust, he wouldn't have said no to a guess. Even Alan Greenspan would offer an educated guess when Luthor asked. But Catwoman? Nothing. Not a hint until she knew the targets. Whether it was cool professionalism, willful stubbornness, or a sly attempt to make him reveal the targets before he was ready, she was quite intractable. So there was a question mark between his present position and acquiring the plans, and then three tiers of question marks between seeing the plans and launching the ultimate attack. He simply couldn't know how he wanted to proceed until he saw exactly what the plans were.

He glanced at a map on the wall and furrowed his brow as his eye traced the southern border of Bangkok.

It really was an unprecedented risk, sending out that SuperBot so soon. In earlier days, he would not have dreamed of beginning an operation with four question marks remaining on the timeline.

That was then. Now, he understood the genius of keeping the end game open-ended. How many of his previous plans had been thwarted because one of his enemies—usually that damnable Bat—had figured out the plan before it was finished? Granted, it was usually one of his associates revealing too much, either out of fear or hubris, that brought unwanted attention to his activities. He'd often forgotten that these associates were not intelligent, trained businessmen like himself but overgrown children prone to tantrums and self-delusions.

In those earlier days, there was so much effort involved in attempting to contain a barrel of crazy; a third of his time constantly focused on prevention, a third on damage control, and a third wrangling the likes of Joker or Felix Faust—just so his plan could come to fruition! It left him precious little time or mental energy to adapt or improvise as things went along.

But now... sane allies. It really was a luxury he'd denied himself too long.

Batman returned, as expected, while Catwoman was meeting with Luthor—and while Superman watched from above. This time, the Hummer brought her to the Gotham Yacht Club. A motor launch was waiting that sped her out to a chartered yacht. "We've got to stop meeting like this," she joked as she stepped on deck... and that was the last thing Superman could hear.

*...:It's just like his office at LexCorp,;... he reported over the comlink. ...:It's like he walks around inside a circle of auditory lead.:::*

"As expected," Batman graveled. "We'll have to wait until she gets back."

While they waited, he ran an update and diagnostic on the Gotham business directories in preparation for the searches to come once they knew Luthor's targets. The one thing he was reasonably sure of was that they would not include WayneTech or any other known Wayne Enterprises holdings. Catwoman was known to be Selina Kyle, Selina was known to be living with Bruce Wayne. So Wayne companies were out of the question, except for those few owned through so many shields and holding companies that even Luthor couldn't trace their connection to Bruce Wayne. Of those, only one manufactured anything used by the Justice League. Try as he might, Bruce couldn't see any way that Luthor could use anything from Malinche Tortillas, Inc. to his advantage.

The diagnostics were just completing their final cycle when Superman flew in through the Batmobile entrance. He said that Catwoman was safely off the yacht. He'd followed her car across the bridge into Bristol and then sprinted ahead so she wouldn't know he was being an "overprotective jackass."

Batman's lip twitched.

"You got the J-word, congratulations. But she will know."

A few minutes later, Alfred arrived with steaming pots of coffee, cocoa, and hot cider. He said Miss Selina had just called from her car to say that Superman must be chilled after spending so much time in the brisk air over the river, and that was undoubtedly why he raced ahead to get warm. She told Alfred to bring him something hot to drink as soon as he arrived in the cave and, being uncertain as to Superman's preferences, Alfred had brought a selection of warming beverages.

It would be Batgirl's fourth trip into the art museum in 24 hours, and the third using an unconventional entrance. Cassie felt she was really getting the hang of it: the entry, evading the motion sensors and the guards was almost routine now.

Actually opening the display case, that would be something new, but she wanted to try. She had begged Selina to let her return the bracelet herself. She had seen how Catman bypassed the alarm and opened the case, and she was sure she could do it. Selina was skeptical—not of Cassie, she said, but of Blake's methods. So she talked Cassie through "a better way—meow."

Cassie couldn't see herself ever meowing that way, but she liked Catwoman's methods. Her way of moving through the galleries was more fluid, more than those Cassie learned from either her father or Batman. The concealment techniques were on par, not superior but no worse. And her way of defeating the pressure alarms was inspired. So quick compared to Catman's technique and, if the case hadn't been opened earlier, Catwoman's method would have been completely invisible.

Cassie replaced the bracelet, closed the case and... knew she should go home. The mission was accomplished and she should leave the premises immediately. But she really wanted to practice the new stealth techniques a little more. It wouldn't be dawn for hours yet. She could try another gallery or two.

Selina didn't waste time on pleasantries when she got to the cave. She gave a quick overview of the yacht (Typical Luthor: private chef, superb lobster, lead panels everywhere, jammers to block dolphin sonar. Yes, that meant either he was afraid of *Aquaman* or he just liked being mean to dolphins.) She gave a quick overview of the conversation ("If the past has taught us anything, it's that you don't take down the Justice League by matching Force for Force. It takes small, calculated strikes that undermine and dismantle from within, and those strikes must be performed perfectly, which is why I've sought out the best." Yes, it was transparent flattery. Everybody did that the first time they hired her, even *Aquaman* had—and no, she didn't think that had anything to do with the dolphins.) Finally, she gave a quick rundown of the targets, and that's... when it got scary.

Batman looked at Superman.

"Bruce?"

Superman looked at Batman.

"Spitcurl?"

Batman rubbed his chin while Superman touched the bridge of his nose.

"Guys?"

Superman started to speak, then shook his head dismissively. Batman glared at the edge of a stalactite and grunted.

"Okay. Look, boys, if what you're after in this world is validation of your bad girl identity after a marathon fuck-over by a sleazy tabloid, then cooking up something with Lex Luthor that leaves Batman and Superman speechless is the motherlode. And I'm sure I'd be enjoying it a lot more if I knew what the hell it is. What's so special about this Holce Concepts, Allman-Freely, and WraithMatCo, that Luthor being after their files turns you two into the World's Palest?"

Bruce moistened his lip thoughtfully before answering. Superman just shook his head in a resigned "I knew it" fashion.

"Holce is an architect," Bruce said finally. "Allman-Freely is an engineering firm. And WraithMatCo manufactures ultra-light materials used for various purposes in space stations and satellites, facilities like the Watchtower."

"So what do they add up to?" Selina asked. "What did you have Holce design that Allman-Freely built with the stuff Wraith-whatever makes?"

"He couldn't know, Bruce," Superman said sharply. "He's after something else, maybe the old transporters. Or he doesn't know what he's after. He just knows these companies did something for us. Although how he could have found that out is another mystery."

"Simple. He's building a new base himself. He's out of office, out of business. So he started taking bids for some facility of his own... and he found these firms."

"It's not like we let them advertise that they've worked for us," Superman complained.

"They don't have to. A bid looks different when a company has done similar work before. It's submitted faster, and in a different kind of detail. If you know what you're looking for, you can tell."

"That's very interesting," Selina interjected, "but what is it?"

"It's better you don't know, just in case Luthor employs a telepath at any point."

"She'll know when she sees the plans, Bruce."

"She isn't going to. Nobody is. We'll give Luthor a decoy, something of our choosing and then—"

"And then I'll have eight," Selina interrupted. "I don't like this plan."

"Whatever we give him will seem legitimate," Batman assured her. "He won't have any reason to suspect you didn't bring him what he asked for."

Selina looked from one hero to the other, mentally reviewed the overprotective jackass sightings throughout the day, figured in that she probably only spotted him one time in three, and concluded that she was probably in safe hands.

"Okay, I'm in," she purred as if bestowing a great feline bounty, "How much time will you need to put this decoy together?"

"Selina, you surprise me," Superman grinned. "He already has one. Don't you, Bruce?"

Selina turned expectantly, but Batman grimaced.

"Unfortunately no, I never foresaw this. But I may be able to adapt something from another protocol."



## CHAPTER 5: REVISIONS

"In conclusion, Helen, while the Wayne Foundation does give more to cultural and arts organizations than any other category of nonprofits, that is largely because there is considerable overlap in the other categories. Between education and youth programs, health and human services, environment and conservation, and civic and public programs, I assure you that the Foundation is giving amply to improve all—underline 'all'—facets of life in Gotham. Sincerely, BW, etc, and be sure to include last year's annual report with the list of grants and recipients. Blind copy Lucius and Cynthia, and set up a lunch next week for Cynthia and Helen to make sure it's all smoothed over."

Bruce was about to add that whoever denied the grant for Helen Cabot's clinic was to be in his office by five o'clock to explain themselves, along with whoever should have corrected the situation once the disastrous nature of the decision became clear... when he felt a gentle vibration in his breast pocket. So he told his secretary to track down the responsible parties and send them to Lucius Fox instead. Then he hurried her out of his office and answered the Justice League communicator concealed in his cell phone.

"It's starting," Superman reported. "A subsonic message, a human voice on a subsonic frequency, that is."

"Luthor," Bruce grveled. "The diversion."

"Yes and no. It's certainly the diversion, but the voice isn't Luthor. It's Selina."

"What?!"

"Selina—or Catwoman, rather—purring up a storm. She has met with him twice, and he records everything. I'm sure he's got enough for a voiceprint. With that, he can synthesize any message he wants. I mean, if she'd made a tape for him, she would have mentioned it, right?"

"No. We agreed to tell each other as little as possible once the decoys were in place. It's safer for everyone."

"It sounds awful."

"Apart from the purring," Bruce said, curtly changing the subject, "what does this message say?"

"She's bored with Gotham. Going for something bigger. 'The world, purr-haps,' and she's banking we can't stop her."

"Typical Luthor. Trying to mimic Rogue behavior as he sees it, and getting it all wrong. For a Gothamite like Selina, there is nothing 'bigger' than Gotham. The idea of being bored here and going elsewhere to find a challenge—If he's going to say something like that, he may as well use his own voice."

Superman laughed. Bruce and "his city." Clark had assumed it would be the Riddleresque nature of the taunt that would raise his friend's hackles, not the slight to Gotham.

"Well, it's the bank he's going for, obviously," Superman said dryly.

“Obviously,” Bruce agreed. “I wondered how long it would take him to remember it.”

This bad.

This bad.

This bad.

Father would give twenty lashes and lock in dark closet for day. Maybe two day.

Was first principle of sustained surveillance: mind clock. Surveillance is dead time.

Must mind clock else lose track of time.

Practicing stealth in museum not like sustained surveillance. Not dead time. But still lose track of time.

This bad.

Was exciting. Lose track of time.

This bad.

Lights come on.

Guard in uniform gone. New guard in blue blazer jacket take place.

This bad.

New noise.

Shoes that not quiet on stone floor.

People in shoes that no need be quiet.

People that work in museum.

This bad.

Museum open. Soon be people everywhere.

This bad.

Will be seen.

This bad.

Bruce pushed a thousand nagging thoughts from his mind as he took the elevator from the executive offices down to the lobby, then a dozen more as he took his private elevator “up to the penthouse.” Except, instead of going up, he touched his finger to a hidden button to go down to the satellite cave. He didn’t bother changing into costume, only powered up the Batcomputer to review the history of the Federal Reserve Bank in Metropolis.

When LexCorp was a financial power, Luthor had considerable influence over it. He insisted it adopt “extraordinary” measures to secure itself against “extraordinary” incursions. Everyone knew he meant extraterrestrial incursions, one extraterrestrial in particular. He didn’t care about Sinestro, Martian Manhunter, or that fin-head alien with the third eye. He cared only that outside the Metropolis Fed’s walls or (even better) locked within its vault, Superman would be just like everyone else.

When Luthor became President, one of his first acts was redefining the role of the twelve regional Feds. Gotham City was called the world capital of finance, and its Federal Reserve, a mere three blocks from Wall Street, had always been the largest and most important. That had to be changed at once. Were the walls of its subterranean vault laced with kryptonite? Were the vital conversations taking place in its offices

encased in a sonic mesh impenetrable to alien ears? Was access to its telephone lines and data center secured by k-metal lasers simulating the erythro-radiation of a red sun?

Since only the Metropolis Fed was equipped with such state of the art defenses—thanks to the President’s own foresight—it became, by Presidential order, the repository for all foreign gold deposits. It was also made the primary data center where multi-million dollar transactions between banks, governments, and corporations were processed. The facility was expanded to match Gotham’s in every particular, and its already excessive defenses redoubled and fortified. The colorful moniker “World’s Bank” was bandied about in pro-Luthor circles, and “World Bank of Lex” in others.

After Luthor’s downfall, the status quo was restored, leaving Metropolis with an absurdly over-secured fortress. Batman foresaw its deadly potential even as Bruce Wayne was salvaging as many jobs as he could from the LexCorp ruins. Luthor would be back; it was a certainty. But without the resources of the White House or his corporate empire behind him, he would have to make due as he never had before. He would have to exploit what was already available. A building with a titanium-kryptonite alloy coating its vault was available. A building with lasers that mimicked a red sun was available...

And a woman who once had Batman and Superman running in circles on Superman’s home turf was also available.

“Heya, Doc,” Harley Quinn chirped as she entered the office for her session.

“Good morning, Harleen,” Dr. Bartholomew answered patiently. “Right on time, I see.”

He couldn’t believe how well Harley was responding. He now allowed her to come to his office on her own, rather than under escort. She hadn’t missed one appointment. She hadn’t been late once. She hadn’t abused the privilege by stopping off to visit Patients Isley or Cobblepot. Most importantly, she had not made any reference to Patient J’s extended stay in isolation. It was the most encouraging development thus far in her therapy.

“Whatcha doin’?” Harley asked, peering at the papers on his desk rather than taking her place on the couch.

Bartholomew coughed.

“I am waiting to begin our session, Harleen.”

She looked back at him, then back at the desk.

“I can see that, Silly. I meant before I came in. Oh jeez, you’re not planning on wasting more money on them safety smocks, are ya?”

She had taken a sales brochure from his desk and was fanning herself with it.

“Hot in here, ain’t it?”

“The temperature seems normal to me, Harleen. Please take your seat.”

She did, bringing the brochure with her.

“Suicidal patients need to wear something,” Bartholomew continued, “in the interests of dignity and modesty as well as warmth. And there is a limit to how long

we can keep an individual in a straitjacket without adversely impacting circulation and his or her ability to sleep comfortably.”

Harley rolled her eyes and made a “speed it up/get to the point” motion.

“Yeah, fine. But aren’t they, like, foam, nylon, and Velcro? You could put this thing together for about 39 cents.”

“Hardly. It says right there that they are more durable than cheap imitations.”

Harley gave him a pitying gaze.

“Well yeah, Doc. They’re SELLING them. Naturally they’re gonna say that kind of thing. Sheesh, you been talking to the loonies too long.”

The nagging thoughts were becoming harder to banish.

Luthor had been there, he’d seen it with his own eyes. The LexCorp building was equipped with the same kind of anti-Superman security as the Metropolis Fed, and Luthor had seen the way Catwoman exploited those features to perfection. She eluded both heroes, she escaped with the X-27 plans... and she did it right in front of Luthor.

She also did it with an ease no high-powered adversary of Superman’s had ever managed.

In front of Luthor.

And, he wouldn’t want to tip his hand yet. He would want to keep Batman and Superman from learning who they were really up against. Why else use something like a Morrow robot for that last diversion?

Bruce shook his head, trying to physically force the thoughts from his mind. They had agreed to tell each other as little as possible. They agreed.

Even a feline human like Selina received no special privileges when it came to reading. Curling up with her book... stretching out with her book... lying back on the sofa with her feet up and the book in her lap... sitting up in the chair and leaning forward with the book on the table and her elbows positioned around it... all had met with pretty much the same response: Whiskers pawed while Nutmeg burrowed underneath, Nutmeg pawed while Whiskers sniffed the pages, Whiskers pawed while Nutmeg crawled on top, or both cats pawed until Selina decided they would make a movie of the damn thing sooner or later, and set the unapproved book aside to play with them until dinner.

They hadn’t reached the goal yet, but they could tell the moment was near... when the distant click of a door and the faint smell of outside air told them another kind of excitement was afoot. Both cats flicked their ears towards the hallway, straining to hear the footsteps.

It was Bat-Bruce. Not in boots. Other shoes. Shoes that meant there would be city smells instead of cave smells. Both cats went to investigate. They liked city smells, it reminded them of their old territory, when Selina-cat lived in the highrise place. There was a terrace where Whiskers would be the stalking jungle cat of death. Bat-Bruce would land on the terrace as Two-Foot-in-Boots, and his cape would brush the planter. Then all the leaves had to be adjusted before the jungle cat of death could stalk his prey again.

So the cats went to investigate whatever city smells Bat-Bruce had brought them, even though it meant Selina-cat would be able read her book in peace. But just as they were heading out the door, Bat-Bruce came in through it.

The cats checked his feet, sniffing them just to make sure. There weren't any boots. There wasn't any cave smell. But he seemed more like Two-Foot-in-Boots, who landed on the terrace and messed up Whiskers's planter...

"It's starting," Bruce announced, echoing Superman's words.

"That was fast," Selina grinned, setting her book aside. "Lexy must be chomping at the bit. I mean, it was only last night you said your decoys were in place, and I just called him this morning to—"

"You called him?"

"Yes. He was waiting for me to do my preliminary research on the targets, rememb—"

"I know that."

"Did you used to interrupt this much? I could've sworn I remember being able to finish a sentence in the old days."

"I am aware of the plan," Bruce said through clenched teeth. "I know that Luthor was waiting for word from you, from... Catwoman, that she was ready to proceed, before he started the diversion. I know that those 'preparations' were really just waiting for me to finish with the decoys. And I am aware of what I told you last night about the decoys being ready. I surmised that you would be contacting him, I just didn't think that... A phone call, it seems so... I thought it would be something more covert. You didn't use the house phone, did you?"

"My cell," she smiled.

"Because the LUDs, if it's a local number, or the—"

"Bruce, I know how to do this. So does Luthor."

"Sorry," he shook his head wearily. "I told you this could get rough."

"Yeah, but I thought you meant on me. Arm-twisting and a right cross, or maybe some batarang dings in the Catmobile. Not flipping out over a phone bill. You okay, Stud?"

"..."

"I didn't think so. Because this is exactly the sort of thing we said we wouldn't talk about. You grunted, I meowed, we had an agreement. Not like you to go back on a deal after the grunt-meow."

"You said that you called him," Bruce noted.

"You started it. You came in here and said—"

"Yeah. I did. Because I'm going out of town, and that's what people do before they leave town on business. They come home and tell their significant other, kiss her on the cheek, and say 'I'll miss you.'"

"It didn't sound that way," Selina said softly. "It sounded like Batman bursting into a lair and saying the Sultan of Juanpur wanted his ruby back."

A tense, brooding silence congealed. Even the air seemed heavier, and the sunlight streaming through the windows seemed just a little greyer.

"And that feels a little like the 'I want you but I can never have you because you're a thief' brooding stare," Selina whispered. "Come on, Bruce, we got past this years ago."

He stood and walked to the door, paused in the doorway, fist clenched, and slammed the doorjamb brutally. The nearest picture frames rattled against the wall, and the cats scurried under the sofa. In the recesses of his memory, the echoes of a careless, heedless Catwoman mocked him: "Congratulations, Dark Knight. You just jostled Rembrandt's Old Man in Fur Cap and frightened my cats. There's a victory for crimefighting."

He turned to face the real Catwoman, but saw no trace of that playful flippancy. She was much closer than he expected. She'd risen from her chair and come up behind him, so that when he turned, he found himself looking straight into her eyes. He was struck by the eloquent pain they revealed.

"The deal is off," he grveled, hating himself and his weakness. "There are things I have to know. Things I have to ask."

It was riskier, for both of them. It wasn't the smart move. It wasn't the right move, from a strategic, crimefighting position. And it wasn't what he'd planned. But he had to know. He couldn't go to Metropolis not knowing.

"Then ask," Selina said gently.

"Did you make a recording for Luthor?"

"No."

"Did you let him take any measurements, scan you, or take photographs from multiple angles?"

"No."

Bruce shut his eyes, relieved at the answers so far, but dreading the third.

"Are you going to be in Gotham tonight... or Metropolis?"

"Gotham. I've got a date with Holce Concepts, Allman-Freely, and WraithMatCo while you're 'out of town on business,' remember?"

Relief pushed up Bruce's body like a physical force, starting mid-thigh and forcing air upward until a ragged exhale expelled a thousand undefined fears.

"Thank God," he murmured.

"My turn to ask one," Selina said, stroking the side of his face. "What the hell?"

"The diversion. Whatever Luthor has planned, it's going to be very different from what we were expecting. The Federal Reserve in Metropolis, unofficially called the World's Bank since his fiddling as President."

"That sure sounds like Luthor," Selina said wryly.

"It does. Except the taunt Clark received this morning didn't sound like Luthor, it sounded like you. Literally, sounded like you. Your voice. It's Catwoman who's going to rob the World Bank."

Selina giggled.

"Seriously?"

"Yes!" Bruce spat angrily. "And I don't—" Again, a fist had formed with a will of its own, and he turned to the doorjamb in a fit of frustration... only to see Nutmeg's back legs as she trotted hurriedly behind the sofa. Feeling a fool, he relaxed the fist and sighed.

"I don't want to have to fight you," he pronounced with eerie intensity. "I don't want to face some T. O. Morrow replicant that looks like you, either. Luthor has thrown us curves before, but I wasn't ready for this one, and I—mm-mph."

He got no further. The next several minutes were spent in a warm, searching kiss that he couldn't bring himself to end. When their lips finally did separate, it took Bruce a second to reclaim his thought.

"He's throwing me a curve too," Selina said, regaining the power of speech first. "This is the first I've heard that 'I' would play any part in the diversion. And since I'm not likely to be in Batman and Superman's confidence, I would guess that I'm not meant to find out until you two get back from whatever grisly party he's got planned and show up at my door for the payback."

"Luthor isn't anyone's idea of a trustworthy ally," Bruce noted.

"Yeah, I guess my point is just... 'So what?' He's Luthor, he brings plot twists, big deal. He can't touch 'us,' right?"

Bruce stroked her hair thoughtfully.

She didn't understand. She was right that Luthor couldn't touch what they had as Bruce and Selina. But 'Bruce and Selina' should play no part in Batman and Superman's battle with Lex Luthor. They should exist in a vacuum, far from this part of his life, far from the work. Even if Catwoman was involved, what he shared with her, the part of him that loved her, the part of him that made love to her, should not be.

And yet, this entire conversation had just taken place.

What's more, he initiated it.

And worst of all, he felt better because of it.

This simply was not acceptable.

Batgirl hid in the crevice of the Roman temple, behind the ropes where visitors couldn't see. She heard the first tour groups approach, heard how young some of the voices sounded, and remembered all of the school groups she'd seen the day before when she visited with Selina.

She sat very still, thinking through her options...

"There she is," Superman said as soon as Batman arrived.

They stood across the street from the Metropolis Fed, Superman pointing to an upper floor. The building, like it's Gotham counterpart, was fashioned after an Italian palazzo. The ledges were ample, and the façade was rich with columns, colonnades, arches, and pilasters that could camouflage a figure crouching near its windows.

"Lenses engage, full spectrum, magnify," Batman grveled.

"28<sup>th</sup> floor," Superman prompted.

Batman was able to make out a curve of purple just visible behind a column.

"She could be working on a window behind that thing," Superman noted. "The 14<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> floors are the ones without reinforced windows. She must be crouched

down to get to the alarm. I can't see through that column, though. Can't even make out a heartbeat."

"It's close enough to the building that its 'heartbeat,' if it has one, would be masked by the sonic mesh."

"It? Batman, it might not be her, but that curve is definitely female."

Batman looked at his colleague contemptuously.

"You want me to call that thing a she, she's not moving."

"That's the most secure building in the city," Superman countered. "You don't just slide open a window. Even if she was the real thing, it would take her a while."

"I won't tell her you said that," Batman noted. "You'll have your jackass status revoked and go back to being another hopeless cape."

"She moved! Did you see that?" Superman pointed eagerly.

"No. The light changed, cloud over the moon. 'She' hasn't moved." Batman withdrew his grapnel launcher. "And she's not going to until she gets what she's after. May as well get this over with."

"Wait a minute, you're going to confront her? This is my city, remember?" Superman grinned with an always-wanted-to-say-that twinkle in his eye.

"And she is my foe. That's why he's staged it this way. There will be something for you soon enough." He fired a line and added "Don't be late" before he swung away.

Batman landed on the roof and approached the Catwoman figure. As he got closer, he could see it was more than a protruding curve in the right shade of purple. The shape was certainly that of a woman of Selina's proportions, crouched as if working on the window. The texture of the costume was leather. Everything about the look was right, but the figure itself was unnaturally still and stiff.

"Catwoman?" he said in the clear, challenging tones used to accost criminals on the ledges of banks.

...astree...astree...astree...beeeeeeeeeeep...

The voice-activated detonator locked into the trigger sound, trilled through its detonation sequence and...

## BOOM!

...detonated. The Catwoman-explosive burst into a concussive fireball, and Batman was falling. The thought that he had suspected trouble and braced himself as well as he could on a 3-inch ledge was a small consolation as the pavement sped closer. He twisted to a better angle to fire a line, when the lurch of a half-expected Superman catch abruptly ended his fall.

"I'm never late," Superman said, returning Batman to the street.

Both heroes looked up at the window blown open by the blast.

"Now we have a way in. How considerate," Batman grveled.

"If you are dissatisfied, simply return for a full refund. That's like, if you use the safety smock on somebody and they manage to off themselves anyway, like using the sleeve as a noose or something, you can get your money back?"

"I assume so, Harleen," Bartholomew sighed, rubbing his forehead wearily.

"Doesn't sound like a very good sales pitch, does it?"

"Harleen, could we possibly talk about you instead of the sales brochure? That is what these sessions are for. Now, how have you been sleeping?"

"Oh, fine, fine," Harley said, waving her hand airily. "They shouldn't have you botherin' with this stuff, Doc. Not your job. You're the Doc, after all."

"Purchasing merely asked my opinion, Harleen. It goes with the territory. I'm sure you remember what that's like."

He said it without thinking. It was a casual remark; he hadn't meant to allude to her past as an Arkham staffer as any kind of probing mechanism. And yet...

Sniff.

Harley seemed to be...

Sniff sniff.

Crying.

"Yeah. I sure do, Doc. They were good days, weren't they?"

"Uhm, yes, of course. They certainly were, Harleen."

"Your three o'clock is here, Dr. Quinn."

"Harleen?"

"Bunch of us are going for a couple brews after work, Dr. Quinn. Want to come along?"

"Harleen?"

"That certainly was a close call with Killer Croc, wasn't it, Dr. Quinn? We're lucky Batman just happened to be in the neighborhood..."

A set of sprinklers had gone off on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor in response to the explosion, but there didn't seem to be any other alarms or response systems activated.

Batman and Superman looked around. Like the LexCorp Towers, every wall within the Metropolis Fed was covered in lead-based paint. Unlike LexCorp, the floors and ceilings were not. Superman couldn't see around corners, but he could look down through any number of floors until he reached the lobby. Whatever was underneath, like the vault known to be five floors below street level, was beyond another barrier of lead, titanium, and who knew what else.

"Something moving around on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor," Superman reported. "Walking slowly, like sentries. Not human though. Mechanical. Some kind of heat blooms in their centers."

"Number?" Batman asked.

"Three... No, four... five. Five total. Three on the fifth floor, and two more a couple floors down."

"Two areas requiring extra security," Batman nodded. "The data center is on five, and on the second floor, a special elevator that leads to the underground vault."

"Two areas and two of us, imagine that."

Superman elected to search the data center. At first, it was nearly silent. Banks of computers that were once manned 24/7 now reduced to two servers softly humming in the darkness. Then, a strange, vaguely metallic padding noise approached. It approached and then faded, the pace consistent with the movement he'd seen

watching above. Superman followed the noise and glimpsed the something making it as it crossed a hallway. Whatever it was, it was about as tall as a small car.

Batman started in the lobby, like an ordinary visitor would who had come in through the front doors. He examined the security checks and metal detectors, strategically positioned to the side so they wouldn't detract from the jaw-dropping first impression: the stone, the marble, the cast iron, the bronze statues, the high ceilings, all of it calculated to humble and impress the mere mortals walking through its doors. An ordinary visitor clearing the security check could then proceed to the elevators... and get a second dose of the marble, stone, and bronze treatment... but as the elevators were turned off this time of night, Batman took the stairs.

The second floor reception had a second security area cordoned off, and then a trio of wide, deep stalls for receiving deposits of gold bars meant for the vault. Beyond that was another elevator, *the* elevator, the only means by which men and gold could access the vault five stories beneath Metropolis. Examining the controls and the chamber, Batman saw that it resembled the pressure doors on the old JLA satellite. This "elevator" was really a pressurized lifepod that moved through an airtight, watertight shaft. It was impressive, but even the man who kept his most private possessions triple-locked behind a hologram wall inside the Batcave considered it overkill.

"Batman?" the comlink squawked just as a rhythmic, metallic padding noise sounded in the distance.

"Go ahead?"

"I've spotted one of the robot sentries. Looks a little like The Terminator after the skin was burned away, right down to the red eyes. Except it's not a human form, it's..."

Batman looked towards the metallic padding and saw the exact thing Clark was describing.

"A tiger," he grveled.

There was no answer from Superman, only a high-pitched whine over the comlink, followed by a sickly crackle.

The same whine was now emanating from the robo-tiger before Batman, and he dove to evade the thick beams of red now pulsing from the creature's eyes. He rolled to ease the impact, only to hear the same whine coming from the space ahead of him, the space he was rolling *towards*. He changed course, but not before a palpable wave of heat coursed through the back of his cowl at the neck. A hit. A hit of... something.

He cried out, in surprise more than pain, but he did regain his feet. Both robo-tigers were now closing in, and Batman slid two disks from his utility belt, and fastened each to a batarang. He moved quickly and erratically, evading the slow-moving creatures until he had the angle he wanted on each. It took time, almost a minute, and he suffered several more hits from the red beams. They did little damage to the body armor other than creating uncomfortable hotspots, but Bruce had a sick suspicion that Superman wasn't finding the effects so trivial.

Finally, the robo-tigers were in position, and Batman fired the batarangs simultaneously at each. Both weapons hit their marks, and Batman quickly activated the magnetized disks. Each robot registered a new presence, one with the harmonics

and heat signature of the being hardwired into their system as the primary target: Superman. Two sets of red eyes locked onto the batarang embedded in the other cat, and fired thick, sustained beams.

Batman ran to the stairwell, leaping three and four steps at a time. He had reached the fifth floor landing when a duet of sizzling thumps from below indicated the robo-cats had been destroyed.

In one sense, it was egregiously unprofessional. It could actually be said that Dr. Bartholomew was foisting dreary unwanted work off on one of his patients.

But in another, very real sense, it was a daring experimental treatment. It's not like Purchasing actually *cared* what he thought of Ferguson safety smocks. It's doubtful they even read his opinion cards. They just needed a piece of paper on file. It was the same with the other 30-odd products he was asked to evaluate. The evaluations were just going to be three-hole punched and set in a binder. What difference did it make if he wrote them himself or merely signed his name?

And it would do Harley a world of good. A world of good. Actual work of the type she was originally hired for. It was yet another step in restoring the woman she had once been.

Batman knew what he would see reaching the fifth floor, but the sight was still a shock. Superman was lying in an unconscious heap, awash in a dim, red glow. Three robotic tigers circled, slowly and methodically, their glowing eyes projecting thick, sustained beams over the fallen hero's body in measured, emotionless sweeps from his neck to his ankles.

Batman charged the robots, but with their prime target in such proximity, they refused to engage him. It made it easy to attach the batarangs, which he essentially "stabbed" into each cat's torso. This time, there was no chance of fooling the program with a faux Superman signal, not when they had the real thing lying in such proximity. So Batman had to use a different approach: there were no transmitters in those batarangs, but an explosive charge. He could only hope that Clark's body was still invulnerable enough to withstand the explosions.

Batman shielded himself behind a computer panel and hit the detonator.

## BOOM!

Cassie shed her mask, cape, gloves and belt, and then folded the cape into thirds. She wrapped it around her waist like a skirt, so it just covered the tops of her boots. It looked stupid, but just stupid enough to be a fashion statement.

She left the mask, gloves, and belt in her hiding place in the temple, and ventured out until she was spotted by a harried tour guide. "Here now! You can't go back there, little girl!" and she had the cover she needed to leave the temple area and join one of

the tours. She crossed her arms over her chest like she was bored, obscuring much of the bat emblem, and then hid behind other students for the rest of the tour.

When that group returned to the lobby, she could have left the building easily enough, but that would mean leaving half her costume behind. “Unacceptable residual presence” her father would have said. Batman would use different words, but he would be just as disapproving.

So, instead of disappearing out the door, she slipped into the checkroom. There were any number of book bags and knapsacks she could have used, but she went for a shopping bag from the big t-shirt store in Times Square. She took the bag into the washroom and changed into the t-shirt. It was too big for her and it had a strange picture on the front of Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn, arm in arm. But it would do the job. She folded up the empty bag and hid it in the top of her boot, then returned to the busy museum lobby. She attached herself to another tour of schoolchildren and stayed with them as far as the Roman temple. Then she slipped away at the same point she was discovered before.

No one noticed. Before, she had wanted to be seen. She projected the loud, sloppy aura of the careless people around her. Now, she wanted to be invisible, and she projected... void. The silent, shadowy void, surrounding and concealing her. There was nothing at all to see. Nothing at all slipped into the Roman Temple. Nothing at all retrieved her cowl and gloves and belt. Nothing at all stowed them safely in the shopping bag. And nothing at all edged back into the public area outside the temple. The group she had been with was gone, and Cassie looked around for some new camouflage.

“You’ll have to check that,” the guard in the blue blazer jacket called out.

He pointed to her shopping bag.

Cassie looked down at it, then up at him.

Luck. Father said never *depend* on luck. But there was no dishonor in *taking advantage of it* if it happened.

“Where go to check?” she asked meekly.

The guard pointed again, giving her detailed directions back to the lobby.

Reducing the menacing robo-tigers into sizzling heaps of electronic giblets was surprisingly easy compared to the next challenge: lifting Superman to his feet and hoisting that dense, Kryptonian bulk into a fireman’s carry. But Batman managed it. The priority now was getting his friend outside.

They had both gone into this knowing it was a trap, knowing they were to be “kept occupied” while Catwoman burgled the Gotham targets. Well, fine. They had been “occupied.” But now, Clark was unconscious. He wasn’t going to recover until he had a good few hours of sunlight in him, but until then, he least Batman could do was get him away from this damnable building with its lead walls and red lasers and rumors of kryptonite lining its vault.

He staggered into the stairwell, now lit with the yellow flicker of emergency lights. The last trio of explosions had finally set off a real alarm, Batman was glad to see.

For ten steps, he was glad... Then he saw the foam pouring in from the ventilation ducts. Firefighting foam—foam that *sucked the oxygen out of the air* to suffocate a

flame—foam meant for INSIDE a computer station, not a stairwell where human beings were trying to escape the blaze. Already Batman was exerting himself, Superman was not light—his breathing was already labored—air that was growing thinner—exponentially thinner every second—was not helping.

His mind was already sluggish. It took him too long to remember the rebreather in his utility belt. By the time he fumbled for it, his fingers were clumsy and uncoordinated. He dropped Clark. He...

Floor.

His knees hit the floor.

No air.

No...



## CHAPTER 6: KITTY EX MACHINA

“Laser is actually an acronym: light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation.”

Dr. Hamilton droned on, writing the words meticulously on the blackboard and underlining the significant letters portentously. It didn't seem unusual that the S.T.A.R. Labs scientist was teaching at Smallville High School. All Clark knew was that he was bored. He folded his arms and sat back in his chair, stretching out his leg until his foot just touched the edge of Selina's chair. He pushed it forward very slowly, pressing her into her desk—until her arm whipped around and smacked his leg away. Somehow, her nails left a painful scratch in his leg. It shouldn't have been possible with his special physiology, but there was a lot he still didn't understand about the ways he was different.

Possible or not, the scratch was there and it hurt. He reached down to check if there was any blood, and he saw that Selina had somehow slipped a note into the top of his sock. He slipped it into his palm, and then leaned back even further in his chair to unfold it...

With the omniscience that comes in dreams, he saw Bruce sitting in the row behind him, rolling his eyes. Bruce always thought that Clark overdid the casual routine, so Clark tried to tone down his performance, repositioning in his seat and finding a different casual-but-not-*too*-casual pose. Again he unfolded the note and furtively snuck a peek.

“You and L, movies after with B and me?” it read.

Clark looked over at Lois, who seemed even more bored with the lecture than he was. He waited until Dr. Hamilton turned to the blackboard again, and then supersped over to Lois and tapped her shoulder, returning to his own desk in the blink of an eye.

“Movies?” he mouthed, now that he had her attention.

“What's playing?” she mouthed back.

Clark looked down at the note, which magically produced the answer:

“Meowing Purr Purr at the Fed.”

*Oh great, a chick flick*, he thought. *Bruce won't like that.*

“New Lex sequel at the Luthor,” the note offered as an alternative.

He passed this information along to Lois, who nodded eagerly. Then he felt a sharp tap on his shoulder from behind.

“You should probably be paying attention to this,” Bruce whispered, pointing to the blackboard.

“But let's say we vary the type of radiation used in amplifying the light,” Hamilton droned on as he reached under the high worktable and pulled out a kryptonite rock the size of a coconut. “If we substitute a metal that has been radiated from these local meteor rocks, for example...”

He set the kryptonite on the worktable at the front of the classroom like “Exhibit A.” Clark began to feel queasy. He looked around for some excuse to leave the room, and

saw Selina and Lois were now sitting together, giggling about what kind of hot car Bruce would show up in to take them to the drive-in.

“...The rock itself, while carrying the highest concentrations of k-radiation, is useless for reflecting light. But once we use it to radiate a conducive metal...”

A number of metallic objects now joined the kryptonite on the worktable, while Bruce joined Selina and Lois. The three laughed and joked together, oblivious to his plight, while Hamilton set up several additional items as he continued his lecture.

“...While the ‘dosage’ of radiation is greatly reduced, we now have a radiated *foil* from which we can, of course, build a mirror. Now observe: light amplified by stimulated emissions of *kryptonite* radiation!”

He switched on a black box positioned behind this special mirror, and a pinpoint of innocent white light emerged. It thickened and intensified as it hit the mirror, and grew thicker and redder as it bounced around the room, hitting every reflective surface from windows to eyeglasses, until it finally struck Clark square in the chest. A sickening haze of warm, viscous heaviness spread through his body. Whenever it came to a muscle, it oozed inside and latched onto his strength, then and oozed back out again, taking his strength with it. Clark felt himself sink to the floor, the classroom darkening around him. It was about to go completely black when he was jolted back to semi-awareness by a loud, violent thud—Batman landing on the floor beside him. He tried to focus on this, and saw black blurs were coming towards them...

Blurs that grew arms and legs as they came closer...

Blurs that wore helmets with letters...

S...

W...

A...

T...

SWAT blurs.

SWAT blurs that bent down and hoisted Batman into a fireman’s carry...

A Batman that didn’t have a utility belt on...

A SWAT blur holding Batman’s utility belt... so a SWAT blur that took Batman’s utility belt...

That didn’t seem right...

That didn’t seem right at all...

...

All flowers were precious, that was a matter of principle. All flowers were Poison Ivy’s children, and a mother was not supposed to play favorites. Nevertheless, there were a few species she could never quite warm to. *Tacca Chantrieri*, for example, commonly known as the Bat Flower. For years she had avoided it, telling herself the high humidity it needed to flourish made it impractical for the Gotham climate (although that never stopped her from cultivating the most exotic rainforest orchids in her greenhouse).

Today, Ivy thought it was finally time to put the Bat Flower to good use, and she was considering ways to do so once she was released... when her reverie was interrupted by an absurd voice outside her door.

"Patient Isley, you have a visitor."

It was Harley's voice, trying to sound deep and masculine. It was wonderfully funny when she used it for a Batman impersonation and even funnier when she imitated Two-Face, but "Patient Isley, you have a visitor" wasn't funny at all.

"Harley?"

"Harley who?" the voice intoned, like it was a knock-knock joke.

"Harley, what are you up to?" Ivy asked impatiently.

The cell door opened, and Ivy was shocked to see that her friend was all alone.

"Heya, Red!" Harley squealed, entering the cell and flopping down on Ivy's cot. "What's shakin'?"

"Harley, how did you get the door open?" Ivy shrieked.

"Cinchy, they still list all the pin codes on the bulletin board in the staff lounge."

"Good to know," Ivy noted quietly.

Harley was shifting her weight on the cot.

"These mattresses aren't very springy, are they, Red? Think we should get some new ones?"

"Harley, what were you *doing* in the staff lounge?" Ivy asked, refusing to be drawn into a discussion of the bounciness or lack thereof in an Arkham mattress.

"Oh, I just wanted a little sugar fix after lunch. Sometimes they've got packets of Swiss Miss in with the teabags in there. I used to like mixing it in my coffee."

"I see," Ivy said, meaning just the opposite.

Superman awoke first, a salty vinegar taste in his mouth, and a dull, heavy ache that pulled painfully down his neck into his shoulders. He'd felt this way before, weighed down by the proximity of kryptonite. Maybe not that much kryptonite at the moment. He didn't feel like he was dying, not exactly. He felt... he felt exactly the way Lois *looked* that time she was seasick on a Greek fishing boat.

He opened his eyes...

...and saw ceiling. That didn't tell him much. He already knew he was lying on a very cold, hard floor.

He sat up...

...and saw Batman. His friend was lying unconscious on a hand truck. Clark listened for a heartbeat, first thing. It was there. It was strong. And Clark nodded to himself, relieved. Then he looked around.

He had woken in many such places over the years. Usually, they were quasi-military quasi-scientific quasi-industrial compounds. But given where he and Batman had been before losing consciousness—and that drained feeling that meant he was surrounded by trace amounts of kryptonite—there was no doubt they were still in the Metropolis Fed, in that famous vault five stories below street level.

A glance around confirmed it. They were in a long hallway with cinderblock walls that he could see through easily. Each stall off the main artery held stacks of gold bullion—presumably that's what the dolly Batman was lying in was meant for, moving the gold. There were more hallways beyond, more stalls and more dollies, but in each direction, the cinderblock eventually gave way to a wall that Superman's vision

couldn't penetrate. That meant lead, at the very least, and probably lead mixed with something. Probably the walls were the source of that kryptonite drain he was feeling. At the far end of the hallway was an enormous steel cylinder. Looking through it, he could see it turned to open the elevator.

Batman moaned and rolled to his side, then pushed himself up slowly with one arm until he could support himself with the other.

"That was humbling," he managed before sitting up further. He reached forward and drew a long thin cylinder from his boot. "Here," he said, tossing it Clark. "UV. It's not sunlight, but it's the best we've got until we're out of here."

Superman switched on the lightwand and drew it repeatedly over each arm, leg, and across his chest, while Batman slid off the dolly and examined the walls and the cylinder.

"None of those robots down here, I take it?" he asked.

"No. I can see through to the outer walls. We're completely alone."

"Robotic tigers. He can't possibly expect us to believe Catwoman was behind that," Batman growled.

"It wouldn't have to be Catwoman, it just has to be 'not him.' Luthor did use k-laser robots once, circa 1998. And most of my enemies recycle his old ideas and technology. As camouflage goes, it's actually a pretty good stunt. Something Luthor did *before* that *failed* could be literally anyone *except* Lex Luthor, who would never repeat himself that way."

Batman grunted, continuing to examine the cylinder. He wedged himself between the edge of the wall and it, and pushed. It didn't budge. He repositioned his feet and pushed... He shouldered against it and pushed... It didn't budge. Superman got up to help, positioning himself just next to Batman. Together they pushed... and still the cylinder didn't budge.

"I was afraid of that," Superman winced. "Red radiation poisoning from earlier plus the k in the walls, I'm not going to be much use to you."

"Don't be so sure. You're still Kryptonian. Your body can withstand the vacuum and pressure failsafes in the elevator shaft if we can get to it."

"And how do you suggest we do that?"

Batman grunted.

Ivy had yet to figure out exactly what Harley was doing in her cell, why she was suddenly at liberty to wander the halls of the asylum unsupervised, or what spawned her mysterious interest in the quality of Arkham mattresses.

Harley herself seemed content to sit on the cot and glance curiously around Ivy's cell as if dropping in on a casual friend whose home she had never seen before.

"Seems a little sparse in here, don't it, Red? They let you have up to four personal items. Y'know 'to create a comforting and familiar healing environment.' Why don't you fix things up a little?"

"I am not permitted to have plants, Harley, as you well know. What other personal items would be of interest?"

"I don't know, maybe some curtains, little chinnoiserie, somethin' to break up the drab."

Harley craned her neck, and looked around theatrically, then hunched down and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"I wanted to talk in private, Red. I need to pick your brain. You're the best there is at manipulatin' the male of the species. And I got one hooked, Red. I got Dr. Bart hooked like a slimy old fish on a smiley ol' fishhook. But I can't think of nuthin' else to make him do!"

"Eighty percent of the bank's security is intended to keep people out, not in," Batman declared. "In that sense, it's entirely to our advantage that we're inside the vault."

"Unique way of looking at it," Superman muttered.

"We only have to work around the relatively minor precautions meant to keep dishonest employees from remaining behind after hours and absconding with a gold bar or two."

"And I can see those controls," Superman added, pointing diagonally at the steel cylinder. "About four feet that way, there's an inset panel like an ATM. Probably to make the cylinder turn the rest of the way so we can get to the elevator, because five or six feet beyond that, there's a full doorway-sized opening. If only we could get it to turn."

"Unfortunately, that's almost certainly on a time lock, one that will only be accessible from upstairs." Batman's tone and manner changed as he tapped the side of his cowl. "OraCom activate. Private channel metro-one-alpha. Do you read?"

"You can't be serious. It's like Luthor stacked the entire table of elements over our heads. Even I can't tell how much steel, lead, and who knows what is up there but—"

"Private channel metro-one-beta. Do you read? That's why I installed a special signal booster. Private channel metro-two-alpha..."

Superman stared.

"Private channel metro-two-beta. Do you read?"

"You planned on getting stuck down here?" Superman gaped.

"It was always a possibility. Private channel metro-three-alpha..."

"~~~~andsom~ ~~~avri~~~~itty~~~~" sounded in his earpiece.

"There she is," Batman noted. "Lock in metro-three-alpha, shutdown all nonessential operations, enhance signal, all parameters."

"B~~m~an~~~~ad~me~~st met with Lex and ~~~m the works, ke-to decrypt~~~~lans~~n hog heaven, it was disgus~~ng~~~~sch an obnoxious troll~~ ~~~ ~nwa~~~~~ ~~~~~pected you'd be~~ack b~~ow."

"We were delayed. We're trapped in the vault."

"~~~~ault? th~~~~one under the ~~~~~ank? Yo~~~~ill there?"

"Yes. We're going to need you to take out the time locks."

"Th~~im~~ocks? In Met~~~~olis? ~~~~~ant me t~~~~ to Me~~~~li~~~~ime locks fo~~"

"Either that, or we're stuck until the bank opens for business on Monday."

"Wel~~ow suppo~~~~et there?"

"Transport to the Watchtower. J'onn is expecting you. He'll send you on to the transport station at the Daily Planet."

"~~~"

"Selina?"

"~~~"

"Selina?"

"~~~~oing~~~~claim villainess privilege and~~~~ay no."

Ivy was shaking. Her hands were literally shaking. She couldn't remember ever having such a scare.

Harley may have begun what she was doing as a pose. Her "cure" may have started as a pretense to set up some infantile prank. If that's all it was, Ivy would have backed it completely. Pranks *were* a little Jokerish for her taste. If she wanted to make a man suffer, she would make him grovel. She would make him beg on his knees for permission to spurn his family for her sake. She would make him plead to sign over all his earthly possessions to her. She would make him beg to be allowed to water her plants with his tears. But pranks? "Gotcha, HAHAHA," it really wasn't her style.

Still, if Harley wanted to torment Dr. Bartholomew simply as malicious fun, Ivy would have gone along with it. But Harley wasn't doing it for *fun*. She was doing it because, in her view, Leland Bartholomew had to be *punished*. Punished for trying to break Harley's pitiful fixation on that homicidal clown. It was the only worthy thing anyone in the Arkham establishment had ever attempted, and Ivy would absolutely not participate in anything meant to obstruct such a noble goal.

But even that wasn't the worst. No, if Harley was going to waste her time cooking up some preposterous revenge on the Arkham staff that was only trying to save her from herself, Ivy would stay out of it if that's all there was to it. She wasn't about to help, but she certainly wouldn't take up arms against her poor, deluded friend. But that wasn't all there was to it. The sustained pose was affecting Harley in ways that could not be ignored. She seemed to be reverting to her pre-Rogue self in ways she wasn't even aware of: putting in a recommendation for new mattresses, since she was "writing up proposals for purchasing anyway." Circulating a birthday card for Nurse Chin for everyone to sign, and then rushing back to the staff lounge when they were singing Happy Birthday.

Granted, she brought her slice of cake back to Ivy's cell rather than remaining to socialize with the staff. But then, as they ate, Harley had reminisced just a little too much about Nurse Chin. How they had been friends when Harley first joined the Arkham staff. Ivy justly observed that, from what she had seen, Chin was one of those people who couldn't hold on to friends for very long. And that's when Harley shook her head and clearly murmured "Pamela, tsk tsk. Projecting again." Then she wiped a dab of icing from her lips and said "Yeah, you said it, Red."

"It's been more than an hour since she claimed 'villainess privilege,'" Superman noted. "You're sure she's coming?"

"Fifteen minutes at the Watchtower between transports, figure fifteen more to get here from the Daily Planet, that means she can't possibly have been working on the time locks for more than half an hour. Give her a chance."

Superman said nothing.

"How are you feeling?" Batman asked suddenly.

"Like I'll need to fly *into* the sun when we get out of here," Superman breathed. "If we're stuck in here until Monday, it's going to be bad."

"We won't be," Batman said, looking up towards the top of the cylinder.

As if on cue, the column of steel began to rotate until the recessed panel Clark likened to an ATM was revealed.

"Kitty *ex machina*," Superman admitted, while Batman examined the controls. There was a keypad and a retinal scanner. Superman scanned the surface of the keys.

"The 1, 2, 5, 8 and 9 have the most wear," he said mildly.

Batman had twisted off the heel of his boot and extracted a thin, plastic case.

"You planned on losing the belt," Superman noted.

Batman grunted as he took a number of odd-looking items from the black case. There was a pinhead screwdriver, that one Superman recognized. There was a plastic square that looked like the world's smallest pocket calculator mounted on a postage stamp, with four filaments of wire extending from the top edge. And there was another square of clear plastic, half the size of a fingernail, that Superman could see was embedded with ultrathin wire and miniature microcircuits.

"Can I help?" he asked, while Batman unscrewed a small panel beneath the keypad.

"You already have," Batman grveled, fastening the filaments on the "miniature calculator" under the panel. "1, 2, 5, 8 and 9, wasn't it?"

Superman nodded, and Batman touched those numbers on the calculator's keypad with the head of the screwdriver.

"That could take a minute. 1.9 million combinations if it's the 9-digit model, 9.8 million if it's the 10-digit. While we're waiting..." He inserted the clear square into the retinal scanner. "That will fool the receptor into thinking the reader is transmitting whatever data it sent last, presumably the scan of an authorized employee."

"What a fascinating trick. Wherever did you pick it up?"

"Exactly where you think I did," Batman muttered without looking up, "but she doesn't know, and we're not going to tell her." He looked up. "Are we?"

No friend worthy of the name would stand by and let the weed of "Dr. Quinzel" grow back to choke off the vibrant flower that was Harley Quinn. Somehow, Ivy had to stop this ghastly transformation. The problem was that she could only think of two ways to go about it, and both options made her want to vomit.

There was warning Dr. Bartholomew, man and salad eater, that Harley was faking. It offended every fiber of her being. Taking a man's side against her friend? It was like murdering flowers to make a parade float honoring Batman! And yet, Bartholomew was the seed from which this monster sprouted. Harley was only exposing herself to these dangerous cuttings from her former life in order to teach him a lesson—when of course it was Harley herself who needed the lesson: clown bad. It wasn't a difficult concept. Harley Quinn was the only person in Gotham who didn't get it.

Clown bad. That was the crux of Ivy's dilemma. Because Joker was the only other being she could think of that might offer a solution. Joker was the vilest creature to

ever step on a blade of grass, but he had done one thing of value in his worthless life: he made Harley into the woman she was. If the worst happened, if Harley was lost, he would be the one hope to get her back.

That thought made Ivy ill, physically ill. Bartholomew might be a man and salad eater, but Joker was *Joker*. There was no question which was the lesser of two evils. The problem was that Joker would at least know that the return of Dr. Quinzel was a great evil to be stopped. Bartholomew would think it was a good thing. Ivy wasn't sure how to work around such blind, all-encompassing stupidity, except with pheromones. In an otherwise rational person, one or two wrong ideas were like a few wilting leaves. You didn't toss the plant. You talk to them soothingly about what needs to be done, snip snip the bad leaves away, and give them a little extra sunlight to make up for it when it's over. Problem solved.

But a plant *growing* in fetid, diseased soil? There came a point where wrong ideas were too fundamental, like root rot, so prevalent at so elemental a spot that its deathly brown must inevitably spread into every stem and bloom and leaf. There is no way to reason with rotting corruption at the source, you can only blot it out with massive inescapable doses of green.

Unfortunately, sustained greening of a member of the Arkham staff while Ivy herself was an inmate was a practical impossibility. There were too many checks and double checks in place, most suggested by that cursed Batman.

Once again, she thought of the Bat Flower. She really must do something about that when she got out.

As Batman predicted, Superman had no trouble surviving the pressure failsafes in the elevator shaft. Within minutes of Kittlemeier's "calculator" defeating the keypad, the heroes were standing on the sidewalk outside the Metropolis Fed. Catwoman was nowhere to be seen, but Batman hadn't expected her to wait around and risk being spotted. She was undoubtedly returning to Gotham the way she had come. Rather than risk a reunion during her layover at the Watchtower, he accepted Clark's offer of "a lift home."

Reaching the manor, he postponed the logs and went straight upstairs. After any kind of technically illegal but bat-sanctioned activity, Selina was giddy. Tonight's marathon series of robberies would be no exception.

He found her in their bedroom, a trail of rose petals beginning at the top of the grand staircase... leading into the sitting room outside the bedroom, where the petals were joined by at least two dozen candles... the trail continued into the bedroom itself, where a warm fire roared in the fireplace. Selina lay in front of it, wearing nothing but three batarangs positioned artfully on her sternum like a necklace.

"The Sultan of Juanpur wants his ruby back," Bruce said dryly.

"Then let *him* transport to Metropolis and get your vault open next time," she purred.

He came closer and ran a finger slowly over the batarangs. It was as close as he came to saying thank you, and she took it as such.

"How in the hell did you wind up trapped in the vault anyway?" Selina asked, lifting his hand to her lips and kissing the knuckles.

"You really don't want to know," he graveled.

"Was it bad?" she asked, meaning "Any serious danger of dying?"

"Nothing unprecedented," he answered, meaning exactly that. "How was your evening?"

"Completely unprecedented," she smiled. "Not the robberies themselves, those were pretty routine. But afterwards, best apri-heist ever."

"Because no Batman was around to trail you back to your lair and reclaim the Sultan's ruby?"

"Ah, there's the ego I know and love. No, my dark knight, what made this homecoming special was Alfred. Oh, if I'd had him back in the day. He waited up and made me scrambled eggs with asparagus when I got home."

Bruce scowled. For as long as he could remember, scrambled eggs and asparagus were the late night staple at the manor. After the opera, debutante balls or charity galas, there was always a covered dish of scrambled eggs and asparagus, and a basket of ultra thin Parmesan toast. The thought of Alfred staying up to prepare that repast for Selina when she had been out *stealing* was... bizarre.

"Alfred's gone to bed, but I can fix you something if you're hungry," Selina said, getting up and repositioning behind him to rub his neck and shoulders.

"No thanks. Just keep doing that," he murmured. It felt wonderful, and neither of them spoke again until she was finished. Then...

"Clark said to say thank you."

"Naturally. Clark always says thank you, that's how I wound up in the damn League. Your turn."

She repositioned again, so he could massage her shoulders. Again neither spoke until it was over. Then...

"Luthor happy with the delivery?"

"Another satisfied customer. Go Kitty."

Bruce's lip curled into a slow, malevolent smile.

"Good... Good."



## CHAPTER 7: MISDIRECTION

Lex Luthor knew the importance of a disciplined mind. As President, there were a thousand potential crises on the horizon on any given day. If he couldn't block out thoughts of what *might* be coming, he wouldn't be able to focus on the thirty pressing issues already on his desk. He had brought this strict discipline into his civilian life, and into his current operation: he had not speculated about the nature of the plans Catwoman was taking. He knew only that they were important to the Justice League. He suspected that they were somehow connected to the Watchtower. He knew, in short, that they were worth having. It was folly to speculate beyond that, to start dreaming up schemes based on a giant IF. It was a waste of time and effort. With a discipline and maturity that distinguished him from common villains, he had been content to wait.

Now, at last, he could set patience aside. Now, at last, he had the coveted plans. Now, at last, he knew the full value of what he had acquired: complete schematics, blueprints, software and wetware interfacing to create a bank of Justice League transporters. If he had indulged in the childish game of expectations, this surely would have exceeded them all. A full bank of League transporters, the possibilities were legion. He could beam a plague down to Atlantis, a nuclear warhead onto Themyscira, a battalion of troops into the Alien's fortress. And those were only his first fleeting thoughts as he walked to the bar to pour himself a scotch.

While he uncorked the decanter, he considered the identity angle. Two or three of those young fools would certainly have their personal transporters located where it would be a simple matter to deduce their identities. Covert access to their personal lives could produce a devastating series of blows that would not even be recognized as an attack on the League. The arrogance of heroes would certainly lead them to assume such destructive and painful assaults must come from their personal nemeses.

While he poured his drink, Luthor then considered access to the Watchtower itself. Plague, troops, and warheads were options there as well, naturally, but only for a *coup de grace*. It would be criminal to rush into a fullscale scorched moon scenario simply because he could. He must consider all his options with respect to the Watchtower: infiltrating their computer systems, communications, even the hydroponics garden and trophy room... their arsenal, detention cells, medical and research facilities... personal living quarters... and any other features he had yet to discover in that imposing base.

Luckily, he would have ample time to consider those possibilities while he constructed the transporter.

The bats squeaked overhead. Bruce put a bizarre headpiece over his eyes and adjusted the focus on its protruding lenses. Selina prattled nervously.

"You know, some people think the whole masked bat thing is weird, but I was never one of them. Some people say you're as crazy as Joker: Bat-car, Bat-cave, Bat-arang... It's odd. But not me, I never said that. I accept the whole thing. The complete

package, right down to plastering the sexy bat silhouette right smack in the center of your chest like a bull's eye. I love every damn Bat-bit of it. There's just one thing that I think is weird. Know what it is?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me," Bruce murmured, swabbing her upper arm with disinfectant.

"It's having the med lab down here. We've got at least twenty unused rooms upstairs."

"In Bruce Wayne's house," he graveled, examining the end of a strange-looking, tri-pronged needle.

"Yes," she agreed. "I know we like to keep Bruce Wayne's house clear of all Bat-activities. But the thing is, Bruce Wayne's house is also clear of... how do I put this delicately... *wildlife!* I'm looking at a live bat right now. See, right through there? Wild animal scratching its chin and drooling, that's not something I like to see when I'm being prepped for surgery—OW! What was that?"

"That was the surgery," Bruce said, extracting the needle and swabbing the insertion point again.

"That was it? You're finished?"

"Finished. The nanite transponder is located right here, between the fourth and fifth layers of skin, and it's microscopic. Even Clark would have to know exactly where to look and what to look for in order to spot it, so you won't have to worry about scans."

"It's still a leash," Selina scowled.

Bruce's lip twitched. He had suspected that was her real objection to the procedure, not the proximity of innocent bats in the cave.

"It's not a leash," he assured her. "It doesn't transmit your location; that *would* be detectable by any number of scanners. This will just identify you as you whenever you enter a League teleporter."

"It's hard to make a leash and collar sound like the *good* option to a cat, Bruce, but you just managed it."

"Selina, in two months it will be completely dissolved, I promise."

"And until then, I've got, what, a Justice League secret decoder ring in there?"

Bruce coughed before his lip could twitch again.

"This is where our being on a separate circuit from the rest of the League comes in handy. While any teleporter will detect that device, there are only three units that have any programming directives to respond to it: the one here in the cave, the one in the satellite cave, and the one Luthor is building."

Selina sighed unhappily, and Bruce kissed her cheek.

"I'll make it up to you when it's over, Kitten. Oh, and by the way, stay away from Vault tonight."

He said it casually, trying to keep any trace of Batman out of his voice and manner. Batman saying "don't" in any context was a ball of yarn that Selina could never resist pawing.

"Why?" came the inevitable question.

He should have known. Regardless of his tone, Catwoman could sniff out Bat-fun the way he could pass a derelict building and sense if there were criminals inside. He would have to let her in on the plan—and who knew how big a ball of Bat-yarn that would represent in her eyes.

"I don't know how closely Luthor is keeping an eye on that nightclub," Bruce said grimly. "It's only natural that Batman would confront you after that Metropolis episode. So tonight, he'll show up at Vault and tear the place up looking for you. If he can *find* you, that would lead to one absurd conversation, one that I'd like to avoid. And one that we *can* easily avoid having in front of the entire VIP room if I can just beat the location of your lair out of the scum when you're not around. We'll leave the rest to their imaginations."

So far, so good.

Ivy knew she couldn't just waltz into Bartholomew's office and warn him about Harley. He would be suspicious of her help, the fool.

But if it didn't seem like "help," if it seemed only like she was "making progress" in his twisted view, then she could say anything she wanted as long as it was rooted in the right soil. In Bartholomew's warped view of the world, people were valued more than plants. If Ivy pretended to consider that perverted notion, he must certainly allow her to talk about the few people worth considering on par with plants.

Then, in considering Harley's many fine qualities, it would be quite natural for her to state the opposing case. Plants might not be as much fun on a high speed chase with the Batmobile, but plants do not deceive. Just look at what Harley was doing...

Yes, that should do the trick. It was a different kind of seduction: bring the object of desire close enough so the poor wretch could see the beauty of its petals and inhale its intoxicating scent, and then withdraw it. Bartholomew would be so caught up in the reversal of Ivy's "progress" that he would not suspect an ulterior motive in what she was telling him about Harley.

Father teach: any mission you come home from is good one.

Am home.

Got out museum. No leave piece of costume behind.

Got free shirt.

Strange shirt with picture of Poison Ivy on front.

No like new shirt. Could take back museum lost and found.

But foolish go back. No reason to risk. Use shirt for dust.

Must write up log. Not be good log.

Cannot lie in log, is great dishonor.

Plus Barbara know tracker at museum long time.

Sometimes can make bad log entry better by leaving out extra words.

Some dishonor there too, but not so much.

Could ask Selina.

Thief skill trying out at museum come from Selina. Should check with her before writing log.

No dishonor if wait to consult sensei.

Will wait. Then leave out extra words.

Begin to understand this "Bad day at office. Boy do I need a drink."

Constructing the hardware of the physical transporters did not present much of a challenge. Luthor once tried to build such a device for the Secret Society. While the project had failed, he still had the benefit of that copious research. He had read all scientific papers on matter teleportation dating back to the 1940s. When he became President, he had access to even more material, classified material. Although he didn't have the time to study it while in office, he had made copies of anything that might be useful later.

The transporter hardware completed, Luthor turned his attention to the software on an encrypted disk from the Allman-Freely portion of the plans. He was surprised to see that the engineers used a LexCorp encryption module to encode it—unlike ninety percent of the world that used WayneTech. It made for a very easy crack, although it would have been just as simple without that bit of luck. Lexcorp's encryption tools were all based on the WayneTech algorithms.

The database of global coordinates which the software drew on, on the other hand, was turning out to be the real headache. A lesser man might have considered the words "insurmountable obstacle" as he paged through the incomprehensible screens of data, but Luthor was far from defeated. Every day when he finished soldering, he took out pad and pencil and resumed decrypting. Finally, at the end of day three, he saw it: two batches of data that simply *looked alike*. He had been swimming in this accursed data for so long, it had all begun to blur around the edges. And, as a blur, something about these two looked similar... The length of the lines, the patterns of upper and lowercase characters, numerals, and symbols... he tossed out everything else and just concentrated on those two records.

Batman considered *Operation: Bad Kitty* a minor bookkeeping operation, not warranting an alert to the full Bat Team. Batman and Superman didn't overlook assaults with k-lasers, robotic tigers, and being locked in a kryptonite-lined vault. Luthor knew that, so the episode represented an outstanding debit that needed a corresponding credit. That's all his appearance at Vault was meant to be: a checkmark for Luthor's benefit, just in case he was watching.

Unfortunately, Luthor's agents weren't the only ones watching. If Nightwing had been observing the comings and goings at Vault that night, Batman's arrival would have passed without comment. If it had been Batgirl or Huntress or even Azrael... but it wasn't. It was Robin, and Robin was bored from too many hours of surveillance, too many nights without Rogue action, and too many solo patrols without the company he'd grown used to. When he saw the Batmobile screech around the corner and pull to an abrupt stop before Vault, his eyes gleamed with anticipation: this was going to be good.

The car had triple parked, clogging the street so that, at best, only a motorcycle could squeeze through. Batman had stormed angrily through the door, and Robin could see the excited flutter of shadows just inside the entrance—Batman slugging his way past the bouncer, for sure! Robin pounded his fists excitedly on his knees in a rapid flutter of anticipation—if only he could hear what was going on inside.

But Vault had even better anti-surveillance measures than the Iceberg. Robin performed another round of knee-drumming before opening the OraCom, relating the

situation, and securing Oracle's agreement that he should swing down in order to "monitor the situation" from inside the building, where his radio would at least get around those blasted anti-bugging measures.

Oracle knew as well as Robin did that Batman didn't need any help, but she also knew as well as Robin did that whatever was going on down there, it was going to be good. So she put out a general alert and, as the others checked in, she let them know what was happening and the channel to tune in if they were free.

Over the next hour, they heard Batman interrogate Sparrow, Dove, Magpie, Bags Datillo, Blades Shinoda, One Eye Manning, Cottonmouth Pierce, Margot Marceau, Catman, and Cluemaster. They heard him extract four contradictory stories about the location of the new cat lair. And then... then they heard him get the muddy end of a Clayface smackdown, punctuated by the disheartening commentary "Oh, man" from Robin.

Pressed to elaborate, Robin said only "not now, not now, I gotta get him out of there before—Oh, man."

The com erupted into a crackling-pounding-whooshing they all recognized: it meant the person wearing the open microphone was in motion. Then, they heard one syllable of Batman's voice barking "Ro—" before an abrupt cut off. Fourteen seconds of dead silence passed, and then Robin's voice returned.

*...: Party's over, guys. Batman's fine. But he left the club, uh, 'involuntarily...' He's kind of rolled up in... I guess you'd call it a 'carpet' of Clayface goo. And I don't think it would be a good idea if he knew we heard all that. Robin out:...:*

EUREKA!

Never had Alexander Luthor thought to utter such a hackneyed phrase, but when he reran the first target sample through his theta-four decryption matrix, he saw it. It was still an incomprehensible block of data not resembling any known global coordinates, but the incomprehensible block began with the characters "00TTHEMYS." The second block of data began "00TKEYST2." No programmer could fail to see it: 00—some sort of begin line designation, T for transport, Themyscira. Then: 00, T, Keystone—presumably the second of two transport pads in Keystone City.

He had it! He had cracked the coordinates. It seemed to be some kind of proprietary system, probably the work of that nuisance Steel. There might not be a way to blindly translate the system's coordinates to an ordinary globe or GPS, but that wouldn't be necessary when he had the rest of the teleporter up and running. In all probability, he would be able to work it out after a few transports, once he saw where the various coordinates landed him. And if he never did crack it, what did it matter? If he could teleport a plague onto Themyscira, it didn't really matter if he could find it on a map. The inhabitants would be just as dead.

After Batman's ignominious exit from Vault rolled up in a carpet of cloying Clayface glop, he felt a brief pause was in order to build up suspense. For two nights, absolutely nothing happened. No Batman, no Catwoman, no developments of any kind at the

nightclub. On the third night, Matches Malone showed up looking like he'd gone a few rounds with Mike Tyson. He ordered a Tesco and Coke, which meant he was off duty, since everyone knew that Catwoman didn't let him drink anything but mineral water when he was acting as her bodyguard.

Matches didn't warrant serious attention from anyone that mattered, but a few henchmen wondered about his bruises. He wore them proudly, which meant he got them from a serious heavyweight. You didn't parade your battle scars in public if you got them from a ninety-pound kid in a cape or some twirp from the Triads. But Matches wasn't boasting the way one usually did when they weathered a Bat-encounter. Unless...

At the same instant, four henchmen thought of a reason Matches might be keeping quiet after a back alley fist-dance with Batman, but none of them would ever say it out loud. It was the reason *they* had kept quiet when they'd walked away with bruises like that... because they'd spilled their guts.

Conversation about Matches Malone abruptly ceased among the few people who thought him worth talking about. Matches himself, unaware he was ever a topic of conversation, had two drinks, played a few hands of video poker, hit on Wren, speculated that she was a lesbian when she turned him down, and left.

All the story needed now was some kind of closing parenthesis. Everyone knew the beginning, a few had a puzzling glimpse of the middle, now if they had a closing image—preferably one that might embarrass Catwoman and therefore wouldn't be openly discussed—they would all fill in the details on their own and the matter would be quickly forgotten. There had been considerable discussion at the manor on exactly what that closing image was to be...

Lex Luthor was not a sentimentalist or a simpleton. He was not predisposed to see emotion in the face of a dumb animal, but it did seem to him that the white-faced capuchin monkey looked angry. Something about the furrowing above eyes and the shape of the mouth. It seemed to Luthor that if anyone had a right to be angry, it was him, not the monkey.

He had modeled certain aspects of his presidential manner on Ronald Reagan. The man was popular; there was no denying that. He knew how to conduct himself behind a podium, and a politician could get away with a lot if he could sway the mob. But the modeling was confined to those areas where Reagan excelled: photo ops and press conferences. It included stance, carriage, body language, and vocal delivery. It did not include subjecting himself to the indignities of a 1950s film star. It did not include partnership with a monkey. This fidgeting, scratching, screeching simian—that some demented breeder had actually named *Bonzo*—did not help Lex Luthor feel “presidential.”

Bonzo was necessary, however, if Luthor was to test his transporter. He had wanted to begin with something smaller, an object that would not raise any suspicions if it were found in the destination tube. He tried teleporting a penny, but the system evidently required a certain mass, for it only moved the penny one tube to the left.

Luthor then considered that the system might need living matter to properly activate the chamber, so he tried transporting a spider. That too would arouse no suspicion,

even at the Watchtower. They had plants. They had dozens of people coming and going, equipment and water always beaming up from Earth. An ordinary garden spider getting in would be nothing at all.

Unfortunately, the spider, like the penny, disappeared from chamber A and reappeared in chamber B. That's when Luthor realized it must be *mass* and *volume*, not the presence of living tissue, which was the problem. So he was forced to accelerate his trials and go straight to the test subject that most resembled the ultimate human user: a primate. That brought him to "Bonzo," but so far, Bonzo had brought him only headaches.

Luthor had disabled the incoming teleport alerts, but even so, no hero—not even Plastic Man—could be so addle-minded that they would dismiss a white-faced capuchin materializing at the Watchtower. So he had to find a destination tube that was sure to be unobserved. Luthor calculated that, of the destinations available to him, the Alien's fortress was the most likely to be unoccupied at any given time. He could magnify the odds by arranging another diversion or simply waiting until Superman was occupied with some naturally occurring and well-publicized disaster.

The target destination chosen, Luthor's Bonzo problems were far from solved. The little beast screeched like mad if the door to its cage was locked, but he was happy enough to stay in there as long as the door could be opened. It would spend hours opening and closing the door: unlatch—open—climb onto the bars, clinging from the inside—swing until the door was full open—swing back—close door—latch—repeat.

It was driving Luthor *insane*.

Unlatch—open—climb onto bars, clinging to the outside this time, just for a change—swing until door was full open...

Few moments in the Gotham underworld were as carefully stage managed as Catwoman's return to Vault. After a week's absence that saw some ominous portents, anticipation was at a fever pitch. Anything obvious like a black eye or a swollen cheek would be suicide. Her appearance at Vault was, essentially, taking a hit on nineteen in blackjack. It wouldn't take much to go bust.

So Catwoman's entrance on the ground floor was the letdown of the year. She seemed her usual self in every respect. Her walk, her easy smile towards those she favored, her contemptuous scowl towards those she despised... and her oblivious passing by of those too insignificant to bother despising. Hugo Strange hunkered over his lager as she walked past his table as if she didn't even see him. He was used to the slight. Tom Blake muttered an obscenity. And Catwoman offered Sly a fingertip wave as she passed the bar on her way to the stairs.

There was a similar anticlimax when she reached the VIP room. DEMONS and Ghost Dragons didn't notice a thing. Neither did the Rogues viewing from a distance. It was Jonathan Crane, only one table over, who first noticed some odd pulls around the collarbone of her costume. It was nothing blatant, but when a costume fit so tightly, any little flaw was apt to have an effect. He got up to take a closer look.

"I feared you'd been caught in the rain," he said smartly, thinking it a brilliant excuse for having approached her.

"It rained?" Catwoman asked, arching her eyebrow.

"Yes," Scarecrow lied. "About an hour ago. And I know how cats are afraid of water."

She seemed to consider this (and Scarecrow knew he sounded like an Arkham case even before Catwoman broke out the humoring smile and said "How nice"), but he didn't care. He'd seen what he wanted and returned to his table, quite satisfied.

He waved excitedly to the Mad Hatter, and as soon as Jervis was in earshot, he whispered the shocking news:

"Finger marks in the leather. Right around the throat."

"No!" Jervis gasped, wild with excitement. "So it was one of *those* encounters, was it?"

At last, there was flooding in Montenegro!

Luthor wasted no time rushing from the newswire to CNN, and there he waited anxiously for reports that Superman had been sighted. He had the television set up next to the transport console, so he could begin testing as soon as the wretched Alien started showboating.

Since the fortress must now be empty, Luthor had only to send Bonzo on his way... Put that way, it sounded simple. Except Bonzo was more interested in playing with the buttons on Luthor's shirt than getting into the transport tube. Then it was more interested in climbing the outside of the tube, sitting on top of the chamber, unscrewing bolts and throwing them at Luthor. The window of opportunity came and went...

Luckily, in Montenegro, landslides often follow floods. This time, Luthor was ready with a leash and choke collar. Before the Alien had pushed back the first avalanche, the collar was on the monkey and the monkey was in the tube! Luthor set the dial for the Alien's fortress, and at last...

The monkey dematerialized from tube A and rematerialized in tube B.

Luthor cursed.

He tried again. The monkey dematerialized from tube B and rematerialized in tube C.

C into D. D into A. A into B again. Luthor threw caution to the wind and set the controls for Themyscira. The monkey made it as far as tube C. Keystone... C into D. Philadelphia... D into A. Star City... A into B.

By now, it was no longer a matter of fanciful perception, the monkey *was* angry.

Intriguing. Harley had made more progress with Poison Ivy in a few unauthorized visits than Bartholomew achieved in years of formal sessions. Her methods were daringly unorthodox, but there was no denying the results.

In order to deliver her "warning," Ivy had mapped out all the attitudes of a sane individual and thought through the ways her own values diverged. She then constructed a plausible path to "get there from here." In order to pose as a Poison Ivy on the road to recovery, she had unknowingly taken the first steps.

It really was an astonishing achievement, and Bartholomew was forced to admit he had completely underestimated Harley's potential as a psychiatrist all those years ago.

Of course, he couldn't really consider sanctioning this kind of guerilla therapy. Sending Harley among the theme criminals as a kind of spy to plant therapeutic time bombs through manipulation? It violated every tenet of medical ethics, and a good few of common decency, not to mention common *sense*.

Then again, as Harley herself had pointed out, it's essentially what Patient J had done to her when she was on staff. Might she have put up a better defense if she had a working knowledge of the weapons that would be used against her? Why, a little proactive manipulation of the "Rogue" patients could almost be seen as a preventative measure, like an inoculation...

No rumors spread faster or with more credibility than those unheard by the common rabble, those that only first and second tier Rogues whisper behind their hands: Catwoman's costume marked with these finger-size indentations, right around the throat. They all knew what that meant, and they all knew the announcement that would follow—which is why it didn't matter so much that Jervis's way of saying it didn't make a lot of sense.

"The old new cat lair is now the new old cat lair, for the new new must go the way of the old new once the Jabberwok has been inside, or even the Ace of Hearts. For you know how it is with flying cards, once one knows, they all know. You can say 'Oh, but it's only the Three of Diamonds,' but if you do, sure as not, the whole pack will be flying in the window."

Translation: Catwoman was moving again. Superman-size hole in the north wall of the cat lair.

There were only three possibilities:

1. Luthor had made some sort of error installing the special coordinates in the system, the proprietary software was not accessing it correctly, and so, lacking a valid destination, it was defaulting to the next valid coordinates it had: the next tube in the same bank.

2. The system needed a human or humanoid organism to initiate the proper transport operation. A man, Martian, or Kryptonian it would accept; a rambunctious monkey, it would not.

3. Catwoman was pulling a fast one, withholding some vital portion of the data she had stolen in a bid for power or profit.

Luthor felt Hypothesis #1 was... unlikely.

Hypothesis 2 was possible.

Hypothesis 3 was very possible.

Three hypotheses, but only one definite way to test them. Any of four billion people could act as a human guinea pig to test Hypothesis 2, but only one of them, only Catwoman herself, would also serve for Hypothesis 3. If he used her as a test subject, he would either have the answer when he was finished with her, or he would have

eliminated both Hypotheses 2 and 3 and be forced back to 1 as the only viable explanation. Luthor was not such an egotist that he refused to consider that infinitesimal possibility that he himself had made an error, but he would eliminate the far more likely options first.

He would have to bring Catwoman to the center.

## CHAPTER 8: A POSE BY ANY OTHER NAME...

"This is why I work alone," Selina thought sourly.

It didn't occur to her that she was working with both Batman and Superman at the moment. She was thinking only of her supposed alliance with Lex Luthor, not the real one with the world's finest heroes. And her pose of a partnership with Luthor was beginning to grate.

This time, the note summoning her to a meeting had come through Raven. "Some horribly butch woman" had intercepted her on her way to the washroom and "been really rude about it." The note had once again led Catwoman to a rendezvous with a Hummer limo, and that again brought her to the heliport. This time, it was a different airstrip and a different chartered plane. This time, Luthor was not onboard, only a stewardess who was entirely too bright-eyed and cheerful to be a Luthor employee. She undoubtedly came with the charter. She offered drinks, snacks, movies to pass the time, but precious little information. The flight would be a little over six hours, she said, which is the point Catwoman began her silent mantra about working alone. People were fine as people, but as *working partners*, they were an endless series of inconveniences and annoyance. Six hours on a plane to Bast-knows-where, only Luthor!

The plane flew west, give or take, and finally landed at a good-sized airstrip in what had to be Oregon or Washington State. There was a glow of a city in the distance, but Selina couldn't see anything identifiable. A glow on the horizon could be Portland, could be Tacoma or Seattle. Considering they were dealing with Luthor, it could even be a military base in the middle of fucking nowhere.

Naturally, there was another damn Hummer waiting, the usual size Hummer this time. The driver, in striking contrast to the too-chipper stewardess, seemed to have no emotions or personality whatsoever. Indeed, he didn't seem to have the basic motor mechanisms to produce any variations in his voice or facial features. Selina would not have been surprised to learn he was a robot, if he didn't have some kind of bite marks on his hand, clumsily covered with a Band-Aid.

The Hummer took her through the kind of dense forest associated with fairy tales, and into a dark opening in a side of a mountain that turned out to be an abandoned mine. She was taken down a rickety cage-door elevator, through a shaft that became abruptly more modern after thirty feet. At the bottom, the door opened onto a high tech installation that might have been a bit small for the Bond villain effect, but was otherwise pure Luthor.

Rather than look around and express wondering admiration, Catwoman regarded her host coldly.

"Lex, seriously, consider the telephone."

First, Joker mentioned “mummy.” He did it twice in less than a week, which would have smelled fishy to anyone that wasn’t a psychiatrist with a sentimental weakness for Freud. But Bartholomew’s hopes had soared, just as Harley knew they would. Then, she herself baited that little hook about cliff diving, leading him to think he’d found a chink in her devotion to her beloved Mistah J. That blossomed into a full reemergence of Dr. Quinzel once her Puddin’ was put into isolation after that Roland Jaer nonsense. And now, now she had him having her make “little suggestions” for all his Rogue patients.

Little suggestions that, in her wild enthusiasm for the task, she was structuring as complete therapy roadmaps, some for patients that weren’t even in residence at the moment. Why, when she was finished, Dr. Bart would have a brilliantly insightful plan to lead Calendar Man, Catman, Clayface, Cluemaster, Firefly, Killer Croc, Killer Moth, Mad Hatter, Mr. Freeze, Ratcatcher, Riddler, Roxy Rocket, Scarecrow, Hugo Strange, Ventriloquist and Maxie Zeus back to sanity.

The length of the list was no accident. For Harley wasn’t just constructing a therapy plan for *individual* Rogues, but a...

#### TEMPLATE ROADMAP to ROGUE WELLNESS

Harley giggled with delight as she wrote the heading in bold block letters. Then she went on to explain her intention: since only she had the inside knowledge of the Rogue mind borne of living among them, and since this was not a viable method of training future therapists, she would not only devise these therapy roadmaps but do so in a precise fashion that documented her process and could therefore be mimicked later by those not so fortunate as to have the benefit of her experience.

She read the sentence back. Something seemed wrong about it—other than its length and having a big ol’ stick up its butt. That was necessary to seem all academy Dr. Quinzelishlike. But something else didn’t quite...

Oh, of course. Given her readers’ bias, that should be “not so *un*-fortunate...”

She made the correction, giggled with glee, and continued.

...so unfortunate as to have the benefit of her experience. As such, she would want to write the first section—and indeed, the first *paragraph*—for each Rogue before going on to the second. Then do the second for each before the third. Only in that way would an actual methodology emerge.

Again, Harley giggled at her cleverness.

She counted up the Rogues on her list, worked out how long it would take to finish two paragraphs or three on each. Introductions never said much, but they would take some time to compose... Even so, she added Crazy Quilt, Doctor Death, Kite Man, and Cornelius Stirk to the list, just for a safety margin. It would be days into the composition before she had to reveal anything useful about anyone.

Luthor had had enough of Catwoman’s badinage.

“I’m just saying, you have overlooked the potential of the telephone as a means of communication. Ten numbers, that’s all it takes, Lex. You dial ‘em, and even though we are three thousand miles apart, we can still have a conversation without going to all this trouble every time.”

"Most amusing," he said acidly. "Now if you will come this way, please. I will show you what the plans you took in Gotham have wrought."

He scrutinized her reaction when she saw the transporters for the first time. If she had known what the plans were for, she wasn't giving anything away. She inspected the transporter tubes with interest, and spoke unguardedly about the time she infiltrated the Watchtower with a press junket, disguised as Cat Grant.

"They brought us up in shuttles. We saw the teleport tubes as part of the tour, but they didn't let us get this close. It certainly *looks* right."

For the first time, she seemed duly impressed with Luthor and his achievements.

"And it works?" she asked brightly.

"That is what you are here to determine," he said coldly.

She looked up suspiciously, only to see Luthor step in close as if forming an imposing physical barrier between her and the rest of the room.

"If you please," he said menacingly, opening the nearest tube.

Catwoman could hold her own against Batman, one of the best martial artists in the world. There was no doubt that she could lay Luthor flat on his ass if it came to a fight, but instead, she offered a light smile of acquiescence, the way one does when cornered by some definite threat that cannot be ignored.

"As you wish," she said, stepping into the chamber with her hands raised as if he held a gun on her.

He nodded, satisfied with his victory, and stepped behind the control panel.

"There's a bit of a smell in here," she said casually.

"Disinfectant," Luthor grimaced. "The last test subject was less hygienic than one could wish. Do you have a desired target destination?"

Catwoman restrained her smile at the mental picture which presented itself.

"Did he bite?"

"Yes," Luthor spat. "Do you have a desired target destination?"

"Lex... it was a monkey, wasn't it?"

"Do you have a desired target?"

"You had a monkey that pee'd in the transport tube."

Luthor sighed and began to repeat "Do you have a..."

"I ask because I've seen *The Fly*, Lex. I want to make absolutely sure that you got all of it out of the tube before we go any further. Not keen on the idea of my molecules being disassembled here and reassembled elsewhere with a few *extras* from your simian pal."

"Catwoman, do you have a desired target or shall I pick one at random and risk your materializing in a fallout shelter in Beijing?"

She laughed wickedly.

"Of course I do. I want the Batcave."

"Catwoman, really," Luthor winced. "Popping into the Alien's fortress is one thing, but you don't invade the Batcave unless you're bringing World War III with you."

"I can handle it. C'mon, Lex... for Kitty?"

"Very well," he sighed. "It's your funeral. Will ten minutes be sufficient?"

"Meow."

He selected the destination, and the chamber lit up as always. Then it flashed brighter than usual, and Catwoman disappeared from Chamber A, just like the penny, the spider, and the monkey before her. Unlike those earlier test subjects, she did not immediately rematerialize in Chamber B...

THURSDAY! That meant breakfast at Arkham would consist of bran flakes, orange juice, raisin bread and butter (which was rather high carb and low protein for starting off the day, and Harley wondered if she shouldn't shoot off a memo to that effect before continuing). Thursday also meant it was time to use her run-of-the-asylum status to get some credentials.

They would be Lisa White's credentials. Harley always thought Lisa would look better as a blonde anyway. She just had to wait until the senior staff meeting was going on; Lisa never wore her jacket to senior staff. It was draped over the back of her office chair, right where Harley knew it would be. She unclipped the ID card, took it out of its plastic sleeve, and made a quick photocopy. She returned the original to Lisa's office and, while she was there, looked up a certain item on the Internet.

Harley sighed, happily. It was just PERFECT! She printed out the coveted information from the website, folded the pages carefully, and slid them into a special envelope for inmate mail. She carefully copied Lisa White's ID code from the identification card, indicating that the contents of the envelope had been examined and was approved for delivery to Patient J. She slid it into the outbox, under a check requisition and a couple file folders that presumably needed to be refiled. Lisa wouldn't notice a thing when she got back, and by the end of the day, Puddin' would be fully prepped.

Harley didn't want to risk any more time in Lisa White's office, and the identification number from her ID could be used on any Arkham computer. So Harley went back to her cell... by way of the staff lounge to find out who was out sick today.

Nurse Chin was, but that was no help. Chin worked in the infirmary.

Melanie Fontana was sick too. Harley didn't recognize the name. Turned out, she was a new girl in the regular wing. She had no contact with the high-risk patients in the high security wing. She'd have no clearance to get the kind of information Harley wanted. But she had an office. An office meant walls and a computer, and that's really all that Harley needed. With that, Lisa White's ID code would open the files she wanted.

Now all Harley had to do was find out where the heck this Melanie whatsherface had her office.

The transporter tube flashed, and Catwoman found herself standing in the Batcave. Batman was at the controls, and Robin was waiting on the platform with a purple cell phone and her old, skirted costume from the display case.

"Quick, get changed into this," Robin said urgently. Then he made a show of closing his eyes and turning his back, and Selina couldn't hold back her smile. Robins were just *so cute*. The first twenty times he'd seen her in costume, Tim's eyes had riveted on her breasts and didn't budge throughout the whole dreary discussion of museum

skylights and jewels that didn't belong to her. Now, you'd think he was embarrassed to be in the same cave as the notorious Catwoman.

Selina turned her attention from the back of Robin's cape to the one he'd handed her.

"Scorch marks?" she said, noting the streaks of charred black on the fabric.

"Yeah, you really trashed the place. Oracle and I already loaded that phone with the pictures."

"That they had far too much fun creating," Batman added disapprovingly.

Selina turned her attention to him, still standing behind the control panel exhibiting all the detached professionalism of a crimefighter on duty. She flashed him, and he hurriedly tilted his head down towards the panel to pretend he hadn't seen. She celebrated the victory with a wide Cheshire grin, which she held for a full ten seconds before tactfully changing the subject.

"You're not telling me that Lex actually has the ability to beam in here," she asked, wrapping the green cape around her shoulders—and noting it was ripped as well as scorched.

"No," Batman said flatly. "The transponder in your arm caused Luthor's system to emit a supersonic squelch when he activated the tube you were in. That, in turn, activated this console, and I was able to pull you off his pad."

"Sweet," she said, slipping on the low ankle boots she preferred with the skirted costume. She went on to silently adjust her cowl, her gloves, and finally she told Tim he could turn around.

Batman took it as a cue.

"Close your eyes and hold your breath," he ordered, taking an atomizer and a fire extinguisher from behind the control panel and subjecting her to a spritzing with liquid smoke, followed by short bursts of dry baking soda and CO2 fog.

"You guys are sick," she coughed.

In reply, Batman lifted part of her cape, blasted it solid with two shots from a freeze ray, and shattered the lower third with a well-placed blow.

"I'm supposed to explain all this when I go back?" she asked.

"Your choice," Batman said offhandedly, "Luthor won't believe anything you tell him. He'll assume it's something you're making up to conceal the real details of what happened here."

"Ah."

"Ready to go back?"

"Almost," she breathed. Then she stretched up, kissed his cheek, and said, "For luck," giving the cheek a nasty scratch as she spoke.

He bore it stoically, until she twiddled the tips of her claws at him.

"Fresh blood, little detail you left out of the master plan. Lucky you have me to catch those things. Ciaomeow, Dark Knight."

And with that, she stepped back into the transporter, and in seconds, had vanished in a blue-gray flash.

NOW things were happening. In the privacy of Melanie Fontana's office, Harley used Lisa White's ID to get access to the Arkham network. She found out that

Puddin's next session with Dr. Bartholomew was tomorrow at four. She also looked through the staff calendar and found that tomorrow was Simone O'Roarke's wedding anniversary. So she logged out of the network and hopped back onto the Internet to have a dozen red roses... no, *three* dozen red roses... delivered to Simone's office first thing in the morning.

No plants would ever be delivered to a patient in the high security wing, especially when Red was in residence, but the staff was another story. If some dolt of a husband didn't know the rules and sent his wife flowers on their anniversary, they would make it through.

Now, twenty or thirty dollars slipped into Saul Vics's hand would make sure Puddin' was taken to his session past Simone O'Roarke's open door and SQUEEEEEEE! Harley hugged herself. This was going to be great!

Luthor's excitement at seeing Catwoman actually disappear from Chamber A without instantly reappearing in Chamber B was nothing compared to his giddy delight ten minutes later when Chamber A erupted into a wash of light again at his command and... yes... yes... there was a definite purple shape materializing within the light! He had—paraphrasing the Apollo challenge—sent a Catwoman to the Batman's cave and returned her safely to Earth.

"WHEW! What a rush!" Selina exclaimed, doing her best Roxy Rocket impersonation. "Goddamn, that was fun, Lex." Then she giggled, high on adrenaline.

Luthor's exhilaration was tainted somewhat by surprise, and he stared openmouthed the top of her thigh. It's not that it wasn't a very shapely thigh; it was merely that the bare leg hadn't been visible when she disappeared.

"That's not the costume you were wearing before," he said dully.

"No," she purred. "I found this in the bastard's *trophy room*, can you believe that? A costume of mine in with his trophies! So I played a little prank or three."

She handed over her cell phone triumphantly, and meowed.

Luthor opened it cautiously... and saw a picture of a giant playing card bisecting a Lucite case that displayed a (similarly bisected and somewhat crushed) green velvet hat... an enormous projection screen pierced by a Riddler cane... a computer console consumed in flames... and what appeared to be a natural history museum simulacrum of a tyrannosaurus eating Robin. (Although the last, on closer inspection, was only the cape of a Robin costume draped over the dinosaur's teeth, the rest of the costume being visible in another picture of a shattered display case.)

"Most amusing," he said, handing back the phone. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have a number of similar, albeit more discreet, trials to conduct before the system can be used for a fullscale assault."

He set the controls, stepped into Chamber A, experienced the blinding wash of blue-gray light firsthand, and then... found himself standing one tube to the left in Chamber B.

"NO!" he wailed, racing out, resetting the controls, and stepping into Chamber B. Like the penny, the spider, and the monkey before him, he dematerialized from B, and instantly rematerialized in C.

He raced out of the teleport tube again and grabbed Catwoman roughly by the arm. She was still giggling as she scrolled through the pictures on her phone, he noted. In the face of these inexplicable irregularities with the transporter—crux of their master plan—she was giggling at the photos on her phone. He shuddered at his assumption that she different from other costumed lunatics, and flung her into the nearest tube, which again happened to be B.

Before she could object, he hit the controls, blinding her with that wash of light. Just as before, she vanished from the tube she was in without reappearing in the next tube over.

Except...

The tube flashed again and, on the very spot where Catwoman had stood was... was... a cat cowl, a bullwhip and a purple cell phone lying on a shapeless heap of purple and green fabric.

Leland Bartholomew felt buoyant, positively buoyant, ever since Harleen stopped by his office first thing in the morning just to say hello. She had been working on a surprise for him all week, she said, a surprise that would open his eyes “and the world’s” on the delicate problem of Rogue reform. She was two-thirds of the way through the introductions for her “roadmaps” and she enthused about these in detail, going so far as to show him drafts for several patients—which she needed back, she hastened to tell him. This was just a preview.

Bartholomew was somewhat skeptical that Harleen’s efforts would really mean a revolutionary step forward in the treatment of criminal personality disorders, but his hopes for Harley’s own recovery had never shone brighter. Her ferocious ambition and wide-eyed naiveté was so much like the Harleen Quinzel that first joined the Arkham staff. Never had she seemed so much like her former self.

The day flew by after such a hopeful beginning. Patients Cobblepot and Lynns in the morning, Isley and Baker in the afternoon. Before he knew it, it was time to review his notes for the final appointment of the day.

The subject was a depressing one, testing Bartholomew’s good spirits as nothing else had. For the notes discussed Patient J’s appalling talent for creating bloody mayhem, of which Roland Jaer’s murder was only the latest tragic example.

The biggest factor seemed to be that when Patient J didn’t have his preferred “SmileX” to work with, he tended to go for the head: noses, ears, throats, and so on. Blood above the neck being on route to the brain, it did tend to be very thin and thus didn’t clot very well. It also tended to be oxygen rich, and hence very, very red. Q.E.D. when there was a Joker attack in Arkham’s halls, not only was there a large quantity of blood left at the scene, it was very bright. Definitely made for a ghoulish moment of discovery, even on those occasions when Patient J didn’t help matters along by painting smiles and HA-HAs on the wall in some poor corpse’s O-negative.

Bartholomew looked up sharply, thinking—no, knowing—that he’d heard a voice. It was too distant to make out words, but there was no mistaking the cadence. Even if it wasn’t cackling, Bartholomew knew that voice better than he knew his own: Patient J.

He checked the clock, thinking perhaps he'd lost track of the time as he reviewed his notes. It was a *little* early for Patient J to be arriving for his session, but not intolerably so. Bartholomew rose from his chair. Perez and Martinez were assigned to escort Patient J to his office today. They were good men, but if Joker was *talking* to them, Bartholomew felt he should go out to the hall himself and personally take charge of the situation.

He opened his door—and clutched at the doorframe as the first wave of shock hit.

Red.

In light of his pre-session reading, it is understandable that he processed the trail of bright red leading down the hallway and reacted with horror before realizing anything more.

Perez and Martinez—and indeed Joker—were nowhere to be seen, but there was a bright line of red leading down the hallway to... Rose petals. Bartholomew's brain caught up with his vision at last, and he realized that the vivid streak of red was not blood after all, but rose petals.

Bartholomew ran down the hallway, making remarkable time for a man his age, as Joker's voice wavered on and on, a terrible familiarity beginning to take shape in the rhythm of the half-heard syllables:

*"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*

*Thou art more lovely and more temperate."*

Bartholomew rounded the corner...

*"Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,*

*And summer's lease hath all too short a date."*

...to see the trail of roses leading right up to Harley Quinn's foot.

*"Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,"*

How could this happen?

*"And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;"*

She should be back in her cell.

*"And every fair from fair sometime declines,"*

Harley squealed in delight.

*"By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;"*

Joker went on reciting...

*"But thy eternal summer shall not fade*

*Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;"*

and...

*"Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,"*

...of course...

*"When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:"*

...delivered the last, unshredded flower...

*"So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,"*

...on the final line.

*"So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."*

"OH PUDDIN'," came the inevitable cry. Harley performed a maneuver Bartholomew had witnessed twice before: throwing her arms around Joker's neck while pulling herself up to wrap her legs around his waist. As in the past, it caused

him to stumble backwards against the wall, where she held the pin and engaged the mad clown in what Bartholomew believed the young people call “a lip lock.”

Unlike those previous occasions, Joker let her down instead of backhanding her away. They joined hands, turned to Bartholomew and, moving as one... they bowed. Then they turned away again, and Joker began “escorting” Harley back to her cell by her hair.

She stopped suddenly and turned back to the doctor, a soft “oh yeaah,” barely audible as she looked him up and down, and then looked back at Joker.

“Puddin, did we ever come up with a closing zinger?”

“Fool you once, shame on us,” Joker declaimed, with every bit of the theatrical panache he’d accorded the Shakespeare. “Fool you twice, shame on rice! HAHAAHAHAHAHA!”

“WHAT?” Harley screeched.

“HAHAHAHAHA! Sheer genius, isn’t it, Harls? Shame on rice.”

“That was a placeholder! A filler! Until we came up with something better!”

“No, no, see, there was the mummy fakeout, that was once, and now—wait a minute. Shame on rice doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“You were supposed to come up with something better,” Harley hissed.

“I mean no sense at all,” Joker said, ignoring her. “Shame on rice, even Dubya couldn’t pull that off.”

They walked away down the hall, bickering about whose job it had been to come up with a better “zinger.” Bartholomew turned back to his office, too despondent to even sound the alarm. Patient J was freely roaming the halls. Harleen was lost again, just like it happened before.

He should feel grateful, he supposed. She could’ve broken Joker out, like last time, but what did it really—

“DOC!” Bartholomew froze at his office door as he heard the footsteps running up behind him.

Patient J. Here it was. The deathblow.

“I’ve got it! Doc, I got it, HAHAAHAHA. Are you ready? It’s a killer. Fool me twice HAAAAAAAAA shame on OHAAHAHAHAHA it’s too funny... Fool me twice, shame on RICE! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Joker clapped Bartholomew on the shoulder, loving life. Then he returned docilely to his cell, all the while repeating, “Shame on rice, heh, heh, heh. Gotta remember to tell Bruce that one.”

Tense minutes passed while Lex Luthor considered and rejected a thousand hypotheses, each more preposterous than the last. For the first time in his life, he was completely uncertain how to proceed. Then, the purple cell phone rang.

Luthor’s mouth dropped open.

It rang again.

He looked at it in horror.

It rang again.

At this point, any new data was worth having.

It rang again.

He answered it.

*...:OF ALL THE BLUNDERING, ASININE, THICKSKULLED MORONS THAT CAN'T TELL A VIABLE IDEA FROM A FEVERDREAM.....*

"Catwoman?" Luthor said hopefully.

*...:DAMN NEAR WOUND UP IN BLACKGATE BECAUSE YOU EAT PEPPERONI BEFORE BEDTIME AND MISTAKE THE RESULT FOR A MASTERPLAN.....*

"Cat—" he repeated.

*.....ABSOLUTE DUMBEST EVER, LEX, AND THAT INCLUDES JOKER TRYING TO COPYRIGHT FISH.....*

"Cat—" he repeated, or started to, but got no further when the walls started to rumble.

*.....LEAST HAS THE EXCUSE OF BEING A COMPLETE PSYCHOPATH.....*

Then the ceiling started to tremble.

*.....NOT THAT IT'S DUMB BUT THAT YOU DON'T KNOW IT'S DUMB! I MEAN WAKE UP AND SMELL THE FAILURE, BALDY! IF YOU DON'T GET IT BY THIS TIME.....*

The ceiling gave way, and Luthor's next words fell silent on his lips when Superman swooped in with the typical "Nice try, Luthor. But your scheme is over before it's begun."

*.....ATCAVE ISN'T MY IDEA OF A GOOD SHOWING IF.....*

The phone screeched on, but Luthor was no longer listening. He had other problems as Superman bashed the transporter console with one hand, holding the remains of the ceiling up with the other and sweeping the teleport tubes with his heat vision.

*...:And NAKED!...* the phone voice added.

"Huh?" Luthor said, instinct whipping his head and his attention back to the phone.

**POW!**

Luthor's head snapped backward as his jaw exploded in pain.

Alfred's head snapped backward as the champagne cork exploded with a much louder pop than expected. Bruce and Selina both glanced his way, knowing a good vintage wouldn't make such a noise under normal conditions. But Clark and Lois seemed delighted, so Bruce met Alfred's eyes and nodded. The butler filled the glasses as if no duty he'd ever performed was so important, and then withdrew, leaving the foursome to their celebration.

There was a toast to Luthor's comeuppance. Bruce and Selina raised their glasses, Clark and Lois clinked theirs, and after the requisite "mmms," Lois assumed her professional fact-checking manner.

"So let me get this straight: you didn't know where Luthor actually was until the final phone call?"

"No," Bruce confirmed. "Luthor would be too smart in going over the plans not to recognize a signal beacon hidden in the construction. And if he suspected any kind of Trojan horse, it would have been bad for Selina."

"Meow," she said sweetly, taking up the narration. "And all I knew after that interminable flight was that we'd landed somewhere in the Pacific Northwest."

"But after her second transport to the Batcave, we left him with a cell phone," Bruce resumed. "A special cell phone that would traceback even through a shielded bunker. Selina's 'frantic' final call originated from the cave, so I had an instant trace on. Clark was standing by as soon as we had the location."

"Happy endings all around then," Lois said brightly.

"Not quite," Selina smiled. "Happy, yes; ending, no."

"Here it comes," Bruce graveled knowingly.

"The deal was: Lex would keep the boys busy in Metropolis to clear the way for me stealing the plans, and then I was to return the favor when he was ready to attack the Watchtower or whatever."

"But there's no need for that now," Lois noted.

"Oh, but there is," Selina chanted, glaring with playful malice at Bruce.

Lois and Clark traded confused glances.

"The transponder is a leash," Bruce explained. "Hence, there must be punishment."

"Ah," Lois said.

"Ah," Clark said.

"So, what are you going to do?" Lois asked, wild with curiosity.

"Oh the usual, kidnap you," Selina said lightly. "Wayne One is all fueled up. What would you say to some shoe shopping in Rome?"

"I LOVE this plan," Lois cheered.

Clark's eyes looked as wide as hers, but for a different reason. He turned appealingly to Bruce as the women left arm in arm, laughing at how, really, when you looked at it dispassionately, Lex was right.

"I mean seriously," Selina was saying. "Force for force never works against the Justice League. Makes them all depressingly united."

"Oh I agree," Lois nodded vigorously. "And we've seen that they have an almost limitless capacity for sabotaging themselves when they're not busy. The damage he could have done as a 'fly on the wall' alone... Hey, can we eat at Café Dolce Vita?"

"In Piazza Narvona? Yeah, if he'd gone to almost anyone else to get those plans, it would have been a very good and very dangerous plan. His only misstep was the rational but mistaken assumption that I was on his side. I was thinking someplace less rushed for lunch, like maybe Alfredo di Roma."

"You could almost pity him: perfect plan if he hadn't gone and asked Batman's girlfriend. Alfredo like the fettuccini?"

"The original place that came up with the fettuccini. That's where the name comes from."

"Sold. Armani, Gucci, then lunch. Then Prada, Valentino and Versace."

"Meow."

"And how."

Back in the study, Bruce nonchalantly sipped his champagne as Clark's super-hearing tracked the women approaching the door to the garage.

"Bruce?" Clark looked pleadingly at his friend, images of a credit card bill the size of a third world country's Gross National Product flickering in his mind's eye.

"It's okay, I've got it covered," Bruce assured him evenly. "There's a certain justice in paying for their little excursion with some of the windfall from the LexCorp subsidiaries that Wayne Enterprises absorbed."

"Well, in that case, I hope Lois takes full advantage."

Clark took another sip of his champagne, relaxing a little in his chair. He and Bruce sat in silence for a moment longer, until he heard the telltale growl of the Lamborghini accelerating as it turned out of the manor drive and onto the open street.

Setting his champagne flute down on the end table beside his chair, Clark leaned forward, lacing his fingers together on the edge of his knees.

"And the *real* Holce Concepts-Allman Freely-WraithMatCo project is safe. Even Selina doesn't know what the original plans were for?"

Bruce shook his head.

"No. The secret is safe. For now."

Harvey Dent enjoyed running his own errands. He could have had his dry cleaning delivered, of course. In Gotham, he could have everything from a leather loveseat to a dime bag of Kona Gold delivered. But he liked being out in the world, performing all those little tasks that were such a trial in his Two-Face days. It still happened occasionally: some clerk would recognize him and have a little seizure trying to avoid eye contact without being obvious. Now that those encounters were rarities, Harvey could be kind about it. When it was day-in/day-out, everywhere he went his face went with him, it really used to get on his nerves. Of course, it didn't help that Two-Face always noticed and suggested something unpleasant in retaliation, forcing Harvey to take the opposite position and defend the obnoxious nobody.

But those days were over, and now he could run all over the Upper East Side, picking up his dry cleaning, picking up some photos he had developed, picking up some kung pao chicken, and even picking up a cute little blonde from Hudson U, and never encounter a single averted gaze.

Harvey juggled his packages as he neared his building, but seeing that Nick, the doorman, was occupied with one of the older women in the building, Harvey figured he'd manage on his own. He almost enjoyed his bungling into the elevator. It was real life. What a fool he'd been, staying in that old theatre all that time, a place he'd only bought for a Two-Face hideout. He should have come back to this, to real life, as soon as Face was gone. An ordinary (if rather upscale) apartment in an ordinary (if fiercely upscale) neighborhood, living like an ordinary (if slightly the worse for wear) person.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened, but something didn't seem right as Harvey jostled his packages anew. Then he saw it: a spray of tulips, not daffodils, on the little table in front of the gilded mirror in the hall opposite the elevator. Every floor had that table in that position, every floor had the mirror above it, but on every floor, the flowers varied. He'd pressed the wrong button, and he was on the wrong floor.

It was a silly mistake, the kind that everyone makes, and Harvey readjusted his packages and pushed the correct button without ever noticing—or caring—that the wrong button he unconsciously pushed by mistake was 2.

