



#55

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

Cat Sales

Believe in Harvey Dent

Subscription Info: 1866 237 6480

BLOODY MOB FIGHT



City fights to keep Gotham Goliaths from leaving

British industrialist Sir Walter Randolph Jones' threat to move the Gotham Goliaths football team to Maryland has set off a legal dustup. Mayor Garcia has issued a counter-threat, saying that Jones will be sued for breach of contract if he makes any move to take the Goliaths away from Gotham. Millions of dollars of money was showered with promises to Gotham to take the Goliaths away from Gotham. Jones says...

THE GOTHAM TIMES BACK PAGE
"The Back Page" by George Mazzala

LOOK OUT GOTHAM, HERE COMES HARVEY DENT!



Assistant DA Harvey Dent announces the...

GANG WAR CLAIM

The gang warfare that exploded into the city streets yesterday was far from a seventeen-year-old girl with no links to organized crime. Gina Tortoreci, of Little Italy, was killed by a stray bullet as gunfire erupted at the Fillipazzo Community Festival. The Festival is held yearly on Thanksgiving and is meant to be a happy occasion, where the Italian community celebrates its roots in the Old World and its new life in America. But the Fillipazzo Community Festival's organizer is Sal Maroni, reputed mob boss who took over the Falcone operation after the events of the Narrows Attack. The party-goers didn't know it when they set off for the festival, but they were stepping into a war zone.



Gina Tortoreci, seen here in a family photo, was caught in gang crossfire yesterday and killed.

Business leaders endorse Dent

If you weren't paying attention yesterday, it was easy to think that Harvey Dent had cloned himself in order to get in front of as many TV cameras as possible. It seems to have more energy than a nuclear power plant, flaring from one end of the city to another to address the cameras in his forceful manner. It was clear why insiders say the most dangerous man in Gotham isn't Crime King. It's the space between Harvey Dent and the...

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I BELIEVE IN HARVEY DENT

★ TAKE BACK GOTHAM CITY ★

by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
I BELIEVE IN HARVEY DENT

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By
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I BELIEVE IN HARVEY DENT

"I believe in Gotham City."

In the bright "sun room" on the east side of the manor, Selina looked up quizzically from her book.

"Excuse me?"

Bruce held up his right index finger, while his left hand remained on his laptop keyboard, typing. The right hand joined it, and he typed a moment longer, then looked up.

"Did you say something?" he asked absently.

"You did. When I came in before and asked if my settling in here to read would bother you, you said you believe in Gotham City. And then, just now, you said it again."

"I said it out loud?"

"Twice."

"Sorry, I'm working on the letter to the stockholders for the annual report."

"Don't apologize. It's refreshingly upbeat for you."

"That's what stockholders like to hear. An affirmation. Looking towards the future with vision and hope."

"So this is the Bruce Wayne version of 'I believe for every drop of rain that falls?'"

"No," he interrupted firmly. "Absolutely not. Because the end of that line involves a lot of flowers growing, and despite Poison Ivy's release on Monday, it's been a good week."

"Ah."

Selina said no more, she just watched quietly while Bruce read over his letter and made a few changes. "The end of that line involves flowers growing..." It wasn't exactly a joke, but there was a lightness to the remark that he wouldn't have been capable of in the beginning. That little touch of humanity meant everything to Selina. It was the point where they first connected, the part of him that saw beyond those rigid roles of thief and crimefighter, even if, at first, it was only to take in a woman's curves and then pretend he hadn't.

"I believe in *Bruce Wayne*," she whispered with a knowing smile.

"I believe we'll be skipping lunch," Dr. Yarling said sourly, setting down his newspaper and rising to leave.

His companions were startled. Yarling had asked them to lunch at the Harvard Club. They'd only just settled in and ordered drinks in the lounge, now he wanted to leave? It made no sense... until they saw the trim figure of Harvey Dent removing his overcoat in the foyer. No one could forget that Two-Face had taken Sarah Yarling

hostage in a nightclub years before. Even though the doctor had since divorced his first wife, even though it was one of the most notoriously ugly divorces in Gotham history, and even though Kevin Yarling's vindictive campaign to turn his children against his ex far outstripped Two-Face's momentary appearance in her life for malice intended and misery caused, he still held a grudge.

Harvey was shown into the dining room, unaware that the foursome from Gotham General Hospital would now be having lunch at Balthazar because of him. Lee Ann, the hostess, had a message for him as he took his seat: Angela Vraag had called; she was running late.

Typical. All those society women kept you waiting, whether they were really running late or not. And they could never call your cell, either. They always had to leave a message at the restaurant. It was entirely possible that Angela had subjected poor Lee Ann to all the gory details: how she was having her brows shaped at Damone Roberts this morning, and Damone was terribly backed up. So they tried to foist some horrid girl on her instead, said she studied with Damone at the Beverly Hills salon, as if that was supposed to impress her. So it took ten minutes to get through to them that she was *Angela Vraag* and that Damone did her brows *personally*, and then she had to wait another forty-five minutes for Damone to fit her in. Since then, the whole day had been catch up, catch up, catch up...

Harvey ordered his preferred scotch to pass the time, a single malt, something he'd always enjoyed before the acid but which Two-Face had made him give up, of course. Now, the smoky malt brought him the added pleasure of thumbing his nose at all things two.

Thumbing his nose at all things two *while he waited for Angela Vraag*. He wasn't quite sure how he felt about Angela, or Diana North before her, or Claudia Muffington before her. There was a sameness to them. All came out of those seven sisters schools and had married the men of their own world, men like Harvey himself had been once. All had divorced after ten or fifteen years and one or two children. All had been replaced by twenty-something trophy wives and settled into the same kind of fiercely fashionable apartment in the east sixties. All of their scrupulously tasteful living rooms were decorated by Cora Hathice with a plethora of cabbage rose chintz, and brightened by twice-weekly deliveries of flowers from Annabelle's Florals on 62nd. And all had made the best of their second-class status on the social circuit—until they noticed Harvey Dent.

Harvey was aware that the balance of power had shifted from his Dentmeister days. Then, the most beautiful women his age were prizes to be won. Now, he as a handsome, affluent, single, straight man was the rare commodity. But he had been *Two-Face*. If they could overlook his past as Darth Duality, he could certainly overlook a little Botox and stretch marks. Still, he knew these relationships were built on a foundation of compromise and desperation. Nobody was in love; it was just a mutually agreeable social arrangement. At this point in his life, what more did he expect? He had spent the best years of his life as a coin-flipping... homicidal...

Harvey blinked.

The tricks the mind plays. A few seconds thinking about Two-Face and, for a moment, he actually thought he saw...

Nah. Heh, heh. Ridiculous.

Batman snarled at his own cowl as he entered the costume vault, the echo of Selina's voice pounding in his brain worse than Mad Hatter's when hatted or Ivy's when greened.

"It's getting late. You taking off soon?"

How the hell did that happen? Bruce Wayne did not *lose track of the time*. BATMAN did not lose track of the time. How did it happen? He'd finished his letter to the stockholders, she'd put aside her book, and they chatted about Lois's thank you note after the Rome excursion. Lois had enclosed a clipping from the Daily Planet's society column that referenced Selina Kyle's position on the board of the Science and Industry Museum and, in virtually the same breath, took a few none-too-subtle jabs at the Gotham Post. Selina was sure it was Lois's doing, the real "thank you" for the shoe shopping. Bruce knew that Lois was as professional as they came when it came to hard news, but he really wasn't sure where society columns ranked as far as journalistic neutrality and personal favors. It might not violate her ethics to put a word in the ear of some society columnist, and Lois had come away from the trip with several thousand dollars worth of shoes and handbags. Bruce had joked that the next villain who grabbed Lois Lane and spirited her out of the country would have a hard act to follow, and Selina meowed.

That led to the kitchen, where another beneficiary of the Roman holiday had been experimenting with a pork recipe that Selina brought back. It was said to date back to ancient times, and indeed to have been a favorite of Julius Caesar's. Alfred couldn't resist playing with such an unusual recipe, and every few days he sought out either Bruce or Selina to sample some new variation. Since a new tasting was due, they rather playfully decided to visit him in the kitchen and see the culinary mad scientist in action.

While they watched Alfred cook, Bruce mentioned the new ultralight he was building, with a much sleeker design for improved lift without adding an ounce of additional weight. He also mentioned his annual jaunt to Tokyo to research the latest in electronics and micro-technology. Selina begged him to put it off for a few weeks. Oswald would be out of Arkham soon, and that meant the Iceberg would be reopening. She would be free of her Queen of the Underworld role and could come along. She liked gadgets too, after all. Bruce growled that he wasn't about to change his plans, but only because he enjoyed the way she pressed when she really wanted something he didn't want to give. After all the diamond necklaces he couldn't let her leave with, it was nice to revisit the dynamic now that he could let himself be persuaded.

Then, the unthinkable happened.

"It's getting late. You taking off soon?"

He'd lost track of the time. His jaw stiffened, his eyes darkened, and his muscles tensed imperceptibly. Somehow, in all the play and banter, he had *lost track of the time!* He should have been in costume already, customizing the night's patrol route from the current At Large list, but he hadn't because he didn't realize how late it was.

Moments later, in the costume vault, he cursed as he strapped on the chest plate. He cursed again as he donned the cowl, and cursed a third time as he adjusted the cape. He could make up the time in one of two ways: put on the utility belt without checking

the contents and testing the grapnel launcher (false economy, not remotely worth the risk), or allowing the Batcomputer to program the patrol route from its old subroutines. It wasn't as efficient as doing it himself, but it was a minor loss of efficiency compared to starting patrol twenty minutes late. He stopped at Workstation 1 on his way to the Batmobile, initiated the program, and set it to relay the patrol route to the Batmobile as soon as it was ready. He cursed once more, and headed to the Batmobile...

Doubletalk. If there was one thing that drove Harvey Dent crazy, it was doubletalk. After the lunch with Angela, he decided to spend the afternoon at the Harvard Club. It had nothing to do with the figure he thought he'd glimpsed outside the window earlier. He just didn't see the need to go home when it would be so much more convenient to stay in midtown to meet with the realtor. So he telephoned Sylvia and had her meet him there. She tried not to sound impressed, but you didn't get to be a successful trial lawyer without being able to read people. The Harvard Club. She was impressed.

Harvey explained how he liked the place he was now living—a house sitting job in an ordinary residential apartment building in a nice residential neighborhood. It was so much better than living in some adapted space like the old Flick Theatre. Sylvia agreed wholeheartedly, there was nothing like apartment life in Gotham. She reeled off several pre-war buildings where she had clients happily settled. She was sure she could find Harvey a marvelous place.

That's when the doubletalk began, because she kept talking about the East Village, SoHo and Battery Park. As many times as Harvey reiterated that he liked the neighborhood he was in, she flitted off to some remote part of town. Finally, when he stated in his clearest "the man is guilty" summation tone that he only wanted to see apartments on the upper east side, Sylvia said she doubted any UES co-op board would approve him, "considering."

Considering.

Considering what? Considering Two-Face? Selina had lived in the same building for years... of course, her future neighbors had no idea she was Catwoman when she moved in. Still, it was just monstrous that he, Harvey Dent, who only became Two-Face in the course of his duties as a prosecutor to keep those people SAFE from a criminal element *which actually included Selina Kyle*, dear friend though she was, was now thought unfit to live in her building? The idea that he, Harvey Dent was being penalized for...

Good lord—outside the window—there he was again!

Selina's firsthand knowledge of organized crime was confined to snooping around the grounds of Carmine Falcone's Long Island compound when she attended a nearby boarding school as a girl. When a perfect storm of misunderstandings thrust her into the "Queen of the Underworld" role, she figured she should do a little research. She knew all the Gotham players, that wasn't an issue, but she wanted a few models for her

own performance as Gatta Corleone. Silly as it might sound, she watched The Sopranos.

"What is the finest department store in the city? Answer me that, 'Lina. What is the finest department store in the city and what is the theme of their new window displays?"

Arbitrating a sit down, Gotham-style.

"Bergdorf Goodman and classic board games, that's who. And who has the undisputed right to act on such a theme? Answer me that, just answer me that."

It was hardly Uncle June demanding restitution because some upstart on Tony's crew jacked a truck under his protection.

"Answer me this, answer me that. What a broken record. CLUE is a classic board game, Nigma, and the biggest window in the display! Catwoman, tell him. Yes or no. Isn't Clue a classic board game?"

Some overpriced window designer thought it was artsy to set up window displays based on board games, and now Riddler was up in arms because Cluemaster left a pewter terrier, thimble, and racecar at the Bat-Signal.

"BEFORE HE EVEN PLANNED A CRIME! Claiming the target for himself before I could even get a riddle written, that's what he was doing. That's what you were doing, Brown. Ask him if he actually *HAS* a crime planned, 'Lina. Just ask him. He doesn't."

"I do too."

"He does not. He—"

"Enough! Brown, you'll pay Eddie thirty percent of whatever you get out of Bergdorf's, and something colorful for me. Carolina Herrera is on the fourth floor, Emilio Pucci is on three. Size eight. No ruffles."

Arthur Brown started to object, but something about Nigma's smirk coupled with Catwoman's "talk to the claw" gesture combined halfway down his throat to produce a defeated grimace.

"Thirty percent," he said, locking eyes with Nigma. "Size eight," he confirmed without turning to Catwoman.

"Meow. I've got your tab tonight. Tell Sly on your way out."

It was a dismissal, and Arthur Brown took it as such. Riddler remained at Catwoman's table. As soon as they were alone, the mood shifted to informal Eddie-and-Selina camaraderie.

"You know we'll never see a penny of that," she stated frankly.

"Of course not. All he does is recycle other people's shtick and hope we won't notice."

"Not to mention, half the crap he rips off wasn't any good the first time," she agreed.

"Nope. There's not a thing that petty little brain could come up with that the Bat won't see coming miles away."

"And how. Not that he'd bother. Palm it off on a sidekick or let GCPD have a go."

They both nodded, satisfied, and went on to happier topics.

"What did those Falcone boys want before? I saw them sitting at your table when I came in."

"Oh that," Selina rolled her eyes. "They took over some motel by the expressway. You know what those guys are like: some poor ass with a gambling habit eventually

gets in too deep, and the mom and pop restaurant, cab company, or travel agency they own becomes a mob restaurant, cab company, or travel agency. Usually they run it themselves, but for some reason, the Roman decided it would be more lucrative to sell off their interest in this one."

"And they came to you? Why? Is it the Cat Scratch Motel or something?"

"Nope. The Lazy Sue, and don't even bother trying to find any meaning in that. It's a test: they want to see if I'm acquisitive, like another mob boss would be, or theme-minded like Oswald was."

Eddie considered this, scrunching his lips to the side as his eyes rolled up to regard the top right corner of the ceiling while his brain raced through the possibilities, indexed, and cross-referenced them. Finally, deciding there was nothing in it for him, either as a Bat-scheme opportunity or as riddle fodder, he sipped his drink and turned back to Selina.

"Okay, a STOLEN FACET. But why test you now? Oswald will be sprung soon enough and the Iceberg will be back in business."

"They probably don't realize that. That sort tends to underestimate us, haven't you noticed? And besi—What the hell is going on down there?"

There had been a growing rumble of voices, which periodically crescendoed into a not quite discernable cheer or toast. Selina and Eddie left their booth along the back wall of the VIP room and leaned over the rail to peer down into the main room. There was a cluster of men around the bar, at least half with their glasses raised.

"Tuesday the 22nd," Eddie remarked. "They're remembering Harvey."

"Remembering?"

"Hard not to. Tuesday the 22nd, 'Lina. How can you not think of him? Sip some wine, raise a toast. Nobody could hogtie a sidekick like old Harv. Or pistol-whip a security guard. Or—"

"Eddie, he's not *dead*."

"Good old Harvey."

As if in response, the grumbling mass below raised their glasses again and solemnly murmured their remembrance.

"And nobody could... k-hem... 'handle' Pammy quite like Harv did either," Eddie added.

Again, the mob around the bar seemed to murmur their agreement as if they'd actually heard the conversation.

At first, Selina chuckled. Then, as the grim tribute continued below, she began to realize that she seldom saw Harvey since his healing. She really should do something about that. It wasn't right to lose touch with a friend just because he was...

"He will be missed," Eddie said solemnly.

"Edward, shut up."

...reformed.

"Look at that, even the Falcones are joining in. Well, it figures. Nobody could shoot up a Maroni safehouse like old Harv, either."

Despite the late start, patrol was proceeding satisfactorily. The sweep of Robinson Park, while primarily due to Poison Ivy's release from Arkham, had turned up a drug

dealer and a potential mugger. The sweep of Riverside Park uncovered a burglar casing the townhouses on Riverside Drive. A lucky coincidence checking on a possible Scarecrow hideout put him in the right place at the right time to head off a gang dispute over a prime corner. Interrogating that scum produced a lead which, forwarded to the GCPD, was even now resulting in the raid of a downtown meth lab. So far, so good.

Except for this turn onto Bleeker and 82nd... the Second National Bank.

Batman permitted himself a chuckle. Tuesday the 22nd, the old subroutine still tagged a number of dates and day-date combinations to anticipate criminals obsessed with the calendar: Julian Day, Madame Zodiac, Two-Face...

He would have to modify the programs to eliminate the Two-Face dates.

And he should call Harvey. It had been a while since they'd been in touch.

Contrary to the wisdom of Three Dog Night, Harvey Dent always felt that TWO was the loneliest number. After the acid, when he was alone, he was two, and there was no worse isolation. Being alone with Two-Face meant being *a lone* voice of decency surrounded by all that was corrupt and vindictive and hateful.

Being all alone by yourself was one thing. Being all alone in a crowd was infinitely worse. But being all alone with only one other when that other was the opposite of all you were and all you believed in, there could be no worse isolation than that.

Now, his face healed, Harvey liked solitude. He liked being ONE. He liked being alone in his head, even if it was only sipping a scotch for a few minutes while Angela Vraag kept him waiting.

At least... he always had enjoyed It, before today. His thoughts had drifted to the past before; everyone's did. But his memories had never conjured an actual ghost before.

Unless he really had seen it. What if he hadn't imagined it? What if it wasn't a figment of boredom, memory, and repressed rage? What if he really was back?

CHAPTER 2: SECOND THOUGHTS

It was the dawn of the 22nd dynasty. In the delta region of Lower Egypt, just southwest of Tanis on the River Nile, the capital city of the nome of Am-Khent rose to prominence, becoming the royal residence of Pharaoh Shoshenq I, and by extension, the power center of the ancient world.

This was Bubastis, the center of worship for the cat goddess Bast. Within the greatest temple dwelt the *Mau-im-dwo*, what the Greek settlers came to call the Oracle of Bast. Within the innermost sanctum, the priests of Bast learned a language, the *Mau-im-dwo*, by which they could speak with divine and mortal cats... assuming, of course, the cats were in the mood.

Near the end of the 26th dynasty, a cat which called itself Apekteina Pontiki condescended to explain the very complex and very specific feline dogmas of right and wrong. The priests were utterly mystified. The nuances that were so obvious to cats seemed, to them, nonsensical contradictions: It was natural and permissible to kill a mouse, a bird, an insect, and any other creature whose size and speed was such that it could be killed. In some cases, it was permissible—and even laudable—to play with one's prey, prolonging its demise and torturing it with false hope. At other times, this was the most grievous of sins. There was one set of rules for morning, one for night, and none at all for midday, for nothing that hunted under a high sun was fit to call itself a cat. There was one rule if your belly was empty and another if it was full. There were rules for the flooding season, for the season of planting and for the harvest. Yet the priests could never understand which rules took precedence. If your belly was full, but it was evening and during the drought, but you were outdoors and the moon was waning, didn't that mean you were both required *and* forbidden to kill *and* ignore the mouse in the doorway but not the lizard on the well?

Apekteina Pontiki looked on the befuddled priests of Bast, and she pitied them. The word spread among the cats of the temple and then to the ones beyond: the two-footed creatures were nice enough, but they could not wrap their simple minds around the complexities of the Feline Way. That same Feline Way that governed the torment of mice dictated that Man could not be taunted with a wisdom he could never understand. With heavy hearts, the cats resolved to spare him the frustration. As one, they stopped acknowledging the language of *Mau-im-dwo*.

It took the priests a while to notice, for the cats often pretended not to understand. You just had to wait for the right day and approach them in just the right way... Then the Persians invaded, and the priests, like the rest of Bubastis, had other things on their mind.

Two thousand years later, very little had changed. The woman who was born Selina Kyle had so embraced her feline nature that she was, in every way that mattered, a cat-woman. She too had a very complex and very specific code of right and wrong. She didn't care any more than the cats of old that her rules were different from other people's, nor that they would never be able to grasp it if she tried to explain. She only knew that her code worked for her: Her right was right, and she would keep it. Her

wrong was wrong, and she wouldn't do it. So it was and would ever be, meow and amen.

It was fine to live on the proceeds of her thefts; they were hers. She had taken those paintings, jewels, statues, and other valuables. She had bested Batman most of the time to get away. She had converted the goods to cash through her own paw-selected fences, and she had the proceeds safely tucked away in her Zurich accounts. Meow.

But to profit from Oswald Cobblepot's crimes, that was another matter entirely. That was just wrong.

Okay, Vault had temporarily replaced the Iceberg, she understood that.

She was the de facto "Oswald" of Vault, she accepted that, although nobody quite *understood* it. (The fact that her old Cat-Tales set was displayed behind the bar as part of the themed décor undoubtedly figured in somehow, but even Batman was unable to reconstruct exactly how the dominoes had fallen.)

Since Vault's opening, everyone had apparently gone on paying the house its cut of whatever they did on the premises. It was news to Selina when she discovered it, but it certainly made sense: Gotham crooks were creatures of habit, and if you were supposed to be paying off *somebody*, it was better to be safe than very, very—HAHAHAHA! Closed casket due to the death smile—sorry.

On the same death-avoidance premise, Sly had apparently been converting all this ill-gotten gain into gems and gold bars, replacing the faux riches of her old Cat-Tales set with the real thing.

It left her with a very tricky problem: what to do with it?

She had a sultan's ransom of well-laundered riches on her hands. Spiritng it off to Zurich to join the proceeds of her own crimes seemed wrong, just plain wrong. Leaving it for Oswald, on the other hand, went beyond *wrong* into criminally negligent homicide. With a war chest like that, Oswald could wipe out the other mobs, tearing up half the city in the process and creating ten kinds of hell for Batman. He could also postpone that intermediary step and go after Batman immediately.

There were other scenarios, other variations, and each one ended with either Batman, the entire city, or both placed in very serious danger. She couldn't just sit back and let it happen.

Somehow, she had to make all those riches go away.

Still raining. It was no "dark and stormy night" of cliché-bound fiction, it was a cold, persistent drizzle. In daylight, it might be called a Hawaiian blessing. At night, in the open hours after Batman's early patrol, it was just a nuisance. It was just cold enough and just wet enough for just long enough that most perps didn't bother. The psychopaths didn't care about such things, of course, but psychopaths generally didn't start the day at two o'clock in the morning.

It was a dark and *boring* night. All Batman had to show for his early patrol was the Plymouth townhouse, and he'd been entirely superfluous there. He had seen two police units pulling up to the building and the officers rushing out with their guns drawn. He ascertained from the police band that they were responding to a 10-10, shots fired, and he stood by to assist... but the lead officer had already entered the townhouse and found what is euphemistically called "a domestic disturbance" in

progress. He had disarmed the wife before Batman could fire a line, and by the time Batman reached the street, a stretcher was emerging from the front door. It was the husband being carried to the waiting ambulance... not much blood... a superficial wound to the upper calf... One of the senior patrolmen sneeringly suggested that Batman could make himself useful giving the ambulance an escort to the hospital.

It was a dark and boring *and frustrating* night. The rain was getting heavier. There was no logical reason not to make an early night of it. He could start the late patrol at once and make it a quick one, go home early and... Hell, there wasn't much reason even to do that. If he skipped the second patrol entirely, would Gotham even care?

Except he didn't *WANT* to go home early. He wanted action. He wanted to fulfill his purpose. He wanted... apparently he wanted to stop crimes that *were not happening* at the moment, and he couldn't quite bring himself to wish a crime into being just so he could smack the perpetrator around.

A dark, boring, *and infuriating* night.

Until...

Amber lights. Blinking.

He spotted dim, amber lights blinking on and off in the lobby of an old office building. That meant an alarm had been tripped, but there weren't any police or fire responding. It looked like an older building, not one with a phalanx of on-site security guards. It was even possible the lights were part of some antiquated alarm that was no longer programmed to call in an alert. Batman swung down to the street to investigate.

There was a time when Gotham National Bank would launder illicit funds, as much as you wanted and as fast as you needed. With the cover of a legitimate bank servicing the biggest corporations in the city, they could handle greater sums than any other operation before or since.

Of course, it was that same corporate cover that proved their undoing once Wayne Enterprises got involved. Selina didn't know it at the time, but looking back now... yep, once you knew Bruce Wayne was Batman, the speed with which he acted was just astonishing. From the point where he would have learned what they really were to the point where he shut them down, it just—reowrl—boggled the mind. He really was the best.

Which was, unfortunately, beside the point. GNB was no longer a money-laundering institution... and for that matter, Selina didn't really need the money *laundered*. Sly had done that on his own. It was cleaned, pressed, folded neatly, and stored away in her old Cat-Tales set. She didn't need it laundered. She needed it GONE.

Liberty One Insurance had gone bankrupt in the early 1970s. The building that had once been their corporate headquarters was now rented to a dance studio, a community center, a political action group, and a telemarketing firm. None had anything of particular value: a few computers in the PAC office, a boom box and CDs in the dance studio, basket balls in the community center. Not much to interest

burglars, and the groups' presence brought enough activity to the building to discourage squatters and undesirables from moving into the vacant floors. The original locks were thought sufficient to protect what little was there, and it took Batman all of ten seconds to demagnetize them and gain access to the lobby.

His cape dripped on the highly polished floor, and his boots made a rubbery squelch that echoed eerily. There was a cavernous emptiness to the place, and the blinking security lights gave off a soft, eerie echo of their own as they clicked on and off. That lifeless heartbeat was disquieting enough on its own, but the blinking lights also made it harder for Batman's eyes to adjust... It was brighter. It was dimmer. It was brighter. It was dimmer... A poorly designed system, considering its purpose.

Batman made his way to the elevators at the far end of the lobby. There were only two, probably considered plenty when the place was built. There were only eight or ten floors, after all. Batman moved beyond these to the stairwell, then turned back sharply—was that a noise? A fluctuation in the rhythmic echo in the lobby? Or just a crimefighter's instinct that something was *wrong*?

He quickly returned to the lobby, senses quivering with that vague feeling of... *wrong*. Something here was wrong. Something was not what it should be. And his senses strained to find what it... was.

Batman swallowed hard as the image registered.

"Lenses engage," he graveled, looking up at... at... how could he have missed this?

He was looking up at a giant coin set in a perfectly recessed niche behind the reception desk. A Liberty head silver dollar, with a positive trench carved deep and savagely across her cheek.

The image glowed brighter and dimmer as the amber lights flicked on and off.

Brighter... and dimmer...

There was no mistaking that image.

Brighter... and dimmer...

Two-Face's coin.

Brighter and...

Something else there is no mistaking: the grinding clack of the safety on a double-barreled shotgun clicking off behind your head.

...dimmer...

Batman dropped and rolled as the first shot of two whizzed past his cowl. He redirected his momentum as soon as he hit the floor to avoid rolling into the path of the second. He regained his feet as his only half-glimpsed assailant snapped the barrels closed on two fresh shells, and Batman raced towards the stairwell just ahead of the next shots. He needed the vertical plane more than the cover. As soon as he could swing UP, he could fire a batarang at his assailant's hands from a safe angle. The last thing you wanted was to dislodge a shotgun on-level and risk—

It was the last conscious thought Batman had before the grapnel pierced some kind of tank suspended above him in the stairwell, between the railings of the second floor stairs. A shower of oily petroleum ooze rained down on him while he was still in motion, but with the grapnel ascent stymied and the assailant's footsteps closing in behind him, Batman could only shift his momentum, trying to regain his footing with nowhere to really go. He shifted his balance towards the stairs—but kept going in a

twisting skid he could barely control. He found himself turning, which would at least allow him to face his attacker coming through the doorway, a surprise assault—

Except his feet *kept* turning on the hopelessly slicked surface, and before he could counter, his balance was gone and his legs were airborne.

Batman lay sprawled on his back and flailing in the oil when the looming figure stepped into the doorway, silhouetted in the rhythmic amber flicker, brighter then dimmer... brighter then dimmer...

Two-Face.

"We wanted to go the extra mile, Sport, seeing as it's been *two* long."

Then the butt of the shotgun came crashing down on his skull.

Once upon a time, Catwoman came across a dockside warehouse full of cash. Back then, theme criminals were few and far between, and Batman's war on crime was principally a war on *organized* crime. He'd shut down every means Carmine Falcone had to launder his illegal income, forcing him to stockpile it like so many pre-printed t-shirts advertising a cancelled concert tour.

A warehouse full of cash, stacked in bundles of bundled bundles: some long and low, like the tables in a dining hall; some tall, at least the height of a man; and some towering more than thirty feet high. Just how much was there, Catwoman couldn't guess. Ten million? Twenty? Thirty?

Selina Kyle had not become Catwoman out of greed. There was nothing to tempt her in a warehouse of untraceable cash. There was no style in such a theft. No challenge, no romance, and no triumph. And nothing to feed the empty place that moved her to steal in the first place.

But there is one appetite that all cats share: mischief. If the money had no value as currency, it was beyond price in its mischief-making potential. What on earth would Batman make of it if she brought him such a prize? Carmine Falcone would be none too happy, and that would be fun too. But it was the Batman side of the equation that Catwoman found irresistible.

She arranged for him to spot her... chase her... catch her... and be terribly manly in all his terrifying crimefighter intensity once he had her pinned.

Then, she oh, so sweetly purred her secret into his ear: of course, she had allowed him to find her, she had much to tell.

It was delicious. Beyond words, beyond thought, beyond a pulsing tingle between her legs... all that intensity, the purest essence of Batman turned in on itself because of her. He was flummoxed, utterly flummoxed, the thoughts racing and twisting behind those fiery eyes, burning to find the answer... all because of her. All hers. All that essence of pure, mainline Batman, *hers*. What a rush. No mere money could buy that.

Batman... because of her... meow.

He was trying *so hard* to hide that inferno of bewilderment raging in his mind, he had no mental resources left to hide what he usually tried to hide. While she played lightly with words, drawing whimsical distinctions between "helping" and "being helpful," his tongue had slipped ever so briefly between his lips, and his index finger slid lightly against his thumb while his eyes were riveted on her breasts.

Meow. Worth every dollar of the ten or twenty million. Meow. Meow. Meow.

What actually became of the *money*, she never really cared. Several years later, Harvey told her that, back when he was D.A., he had gone with Batman to a warehouse full of Falcone cash. He said the two of them doused it with gasoline and burned it to ash. She and Harvey been swapping tall tales all night and she never quite believed the story, but still...

Tipping Batman to the Vault treasure didn't seem like a hot idea.

Batman awoke chained in a spread eagle position over the X on the Liberty head coin.

"Two pounds of C4," Two-Face explained (unnecessarily), pointing to a canister beneath Batman's feet. "Double blasting cap, naturally." He indicated this, flicking it lightly with his thumb and middle finger. "And of course, you will have two minutes," he said, setting the timer.

"And twenty-two seconds," Batman said grimly.

Two-Face considered this, unable to refute the logic, and added twenty-two seconds to the timer. Batman strained to get a better look at the figure's features, but his angle was too high. The unscarred side certainly seemed to have Harvey Dent's hair, but so did a quarter of the men in Gotham.

He risked a direct question:

"Harvey, is that really you?"

"We've no time for chit-chat, Batman. We have a great deal of missed coin flips to make up for. Why, in the time since we last saw each other, we have come up with no fewer than eighteen ways to kill you, this being the best of the lot."

He clicked the timer, set it down, and walked across the lobby. When he reached the door, he paused. He took out a coin, flipped it, and turned back to Batman as he said:

"To be scrupulously honest, Bats, we came up with *nineteen* ways to kill you. But as a matter of principle, we have chosen to ignore the last, rather like lopping off the high score from the East German judge."

With that he winked—a markedly Harvey "the Dentmeister" wink—and left.

Giving the money away, while obvious, was problematic.

First and foremost, it had a distinct whiff of *remorse*. The cat's sense of smell is highly developed, and the thought of Catwoman prowling around the city, breaking into penthouses she had once burgled in order to leave a gold bar or a diamond tiara when she had previously relieved them of a Chagall, that had a very definite odor, the odor of a tabloid's crimefighter making up for past wrongs. No.

Charities were problematic too. While she had nothing *against* orphans, she wouldn't want to give money to an orphanage and appear to validate those demeaning lies about her origins. For the same reason, any kind of city sponsored help-the-poor projects would have to exclude the East End. Talk about the stench of the Gotham Post!

An experienced escape artist could have freed himself from the coin shackles in two minutes, leaving him scant seconds to run from the blast. But Batman had settings in Zogger to prepare for just this kind of situation. He was free in under sixty seconds, leaving him ample time to stop the timer and disconnect the detonator.

Only then did he allow himself to breathe a sigh of relief, and only then did he consider the contracting knot in his stomach as the implication sunk in.

Was it Harvey?

He had only seen the face twice—and he winced at that irony—and also at the growing throbbing under his cowl. The latter was from the blow from the shotgun. What had been only a dull ache, not worth considering in the face of an imminent explosion, was now coming to the forefront. Bitterly, Batman reflected that, even though he'd lost consciousness on the initial hit, Two-Face had undoubtedly struck him a second time.

He summoned the Batmobile remotely and croaked “home” once he was behind the wheel, the headache and growing nausea making it impossible to drive. It was a concussion, no doubt of it, and if his vision blurred while he was trying to drive... He even considered stopping at Leslie's clinic; it was closer than home.

Was it Harvey?

He had only seen the face twice: in the split second before the shotgun came crashing down on his head, and when Two-Face was clear across the lobby and turned back with that crack about the East German judge. Neither was enough for a positive identification. It looked like Harvey, yes—or at least, there was nothing that jumped out at him in those scant seconds that absolutely ruled out the possibility of its being Harvey. That was not enough for a positive identification, even from Batman.

Of course, he had heard a lot more of the voice, and that definitely *sounded* like the Two-Face of old. But voices were tricky. Azrael could simulate the Bat-gravel so well, he had once fooled Commissioner Gordon.

Was it Harvey?

Batman trusted his judgment. As much as any man alive, he trusted his eyes, and he trusted his mind, and he knew how the one could lie to the other. He *wanted* it to be someone other than Harvey Dent; he was perfectly aware of that bias. Wanting could make the eyes lie, and wanting could make the mind refuse to see what the eyes were showing it. But that was not happening here.

Bruce was not ready to say that the man he had seen was Harvey, not because he didn't want it to be Harvey, but because what little he saw was not enough to be certain... and he had just made his headache ten times worse. These circular thoughts hurt more than the blow from the shotgun.

Giving to the arts was a possibility.

When she *was* actively stealing, Selina thought nothing of supporting the opera, the ballet, and even the museum's acquisition fund. There was nothing to prove back then. Big donations brought invitations to the big fundraisers, access to the dowagers and their diamond necklaces, and it put more and better paintings on the walls of the Gotham museums... It was self-interested altruism for the thinking cat burglar, meow.

But now it was tricky for the same reason breaking into random penthouses and leaving gold bars on their pillows was tricky: that vague hint of remorse. She had used the symphony and opera galas as hunting grounds, and she'd taken so much from the museums over the years, it might seem like she was making restitution.

Environmental causes came perilously close to using the money for the Catitat, and that was just like mingling it with the proceeds of her own thefts, pocketing Oswald's money for herself. No. You don't mix the bounty from Catwoman's thefts, the product of feline cunning, grace, and panache, with the payoffs from any Dick, Harry, or Tomcat that schlep through Vault with the proceeds of their brainless strongarm robberies. It wasn't done. It would be like hanging Dogs Playing Poker in Bruce's penthouse between a Picasso and a Cezanne.

That left diseases, and that required some serious investigation into what research was most deserving and most in need of funding. The problem there was that the Wayne Foundation had already done that investigating and did it better than she could hope to. The simplest method, by far, was to turn the money over to the Wayne Foundation to use it where it would do the most good.

Except Bruce would have an aneurysm.

The Batmobile returning home on autopilot always set off an alert as it crossed electric eye omega. The alert sounded discreetly in Alfred's room, and he hurried to the Batcave. He would normally open a com channel to the Batmobile to ascertain if the master was conscious, but in this case it was unnecessary, since the car was already pulling into its hangar. The hatch opened as soon as it reached a full stop, and Master Bruce got out on his own power.

"Concussion. Nothing serious," he said.

Alfred glared, relief battling with preemptive frustration. Of all the injuries he'd treated in his years as Batman's personal medic, there was none where the patient was so difficult and quarrelsome.

"The former diagnosis I accept, sir, as you were undoubtedly in a position to know. The latter is for me to determine after a thorough examination."

"Fine. After the lo—" Batman started to argue.

"Now, Master Bruce. The logs will wait."

Bruce had long ago accepted the futility of I'm-Batman declarations with Alfred. The man who said "now" when it was a skinned knee or a bee sting could say it still, and the duty logs, the Mad Hatter's escape from Arkham, or the Justice League's assault on the Ice Reefs of Symbia 8 were relegated to the same "When I say you can and not before" status as a game of stick ball when Bruce was ten. He removed his cowl and headed for the med lab, muttering his gratitude that at least Alfred didn't wake Selina before coming down to the cave.

Explanations followed while Alfred checked his reflexes, looked for any bleeding or bruising, checked for related neck injuries, and finally, applied ice. By the time he was ready to declare Master Bruce free of skull fractures or brain injuries, Bruce had finished the chronicle of his Two-Face encounter.

"Of course, it wasn't Harvey," he pronounced at the end of the tale. He was thinking much clearer now, and he could see how his earlier musings had been colored by the shock of seeing *any* Two-Face, and also by the physical pain of the concussion.

"Indeed, sir?"

It was said without much inflection, but Bruce detected a note of skepticism. He knew the tone as well as he had known that 'the logs will wait' tenor only moments before. Alfred had found a few lapses in Bruce's logic and would proceed to play devil's advocate until those lapses were addressed. Bruce unpacked his thesis:

"For one thing, Harvey's Two-Face would have taken my utility belt while I was unconscious. Any experienced rogue knows I've got a dozen tools in there to help get out of whatever it is they've put me into. To let me keep it is an amateur mistake."

"Or one betraying a subconscious desire to help you escape, sir. There was an episode with Miss Se— with Catwoman, that is. I seem to recall your expounding at great length on the significance of her leaving you in possession of the belt when she surely knew it guaranteed your swift—"

"Alfred, really. That is not the point."

"It is not a *parallel* case, sir, I agree. I merely remind you of it in order to illustrate a certain flaw in your reasoning. There are a number of reasons this Two-Face may have left you the belt, one of which is not inconsistent with his being Harvey Dent. Mr. Dent's good half would surely not desire your death."

Bruce grimaced. He had opened up to Alfred in much the same way he would have related the incident in the logs—the difference being, the logs did not argue.

"Maybe on its own the belt isn't that significant, Alfred, but there is more evidence to consider. The blow came from the right," he said, indicating the lump on his left temple. "When Harvey was Face, he always swung from the Face-side, the left."

"Master Bruce, really. Having spent the last thirty minutes examining the injury in question, I must inform you that the direction in which it was struck can only be described as *down*. To use any other word merely perverts the language. I fear you must consider, sir, that a significant amount of wishful thinking is presently tainting your analysis."

"You're wrong. As a detective and man of logic, I have to admit that the possibility exists that it could be Harvey. Simplest explanation, Ockham's razor, and all that."

"I sense a 'but' awaiting expression, sir."

"*But*, the only reason to even consider that Two-Face might be Harvey is because he was Two-Face before."

"Yes, sir," Alfred said emphatically. "The fact that Harvey Dent was Two-Face, and is, in fact, the only person who has ever been Two-Face, would seem to be a powerful argument."

"An argument isn't evidence, Alfred. And that argument in particular loses weight given the other copycat psychopaths I've gone up against over the years."

Bruce sighed lightly as his demeanor softened. "Besides, Harvey was doing so well. Why on Earth would he—"

"Begging your pardon, Master Bruce, but how would you know how Mister Dent is doing? How long has it been since you've even spoken with him?"

Bruce grunted.

"And even so," Alfred continued, "how the gentleman 'is doing' is a subjective matter, at best, whereas the dictates of logic and deduction would appear to call for objective and quantifiable evidence. Should I perhaps arrange a meeting with him, sir? Invite him back out to the manor for brunch?"

"That would certainly settle it one way or the other," Bruce murmured, rubbing his head wearily. "Either he shows up with one face, or he doesn't."

It's not like she'd be asking him to launder dirty money. She didn't want it back, she just wanted it to go off into the world where she wouldn't have to worry about Oswald using it to buy a fleet of urban assault vehicles...

"Oh, you're still up."

Selina froze, finger poised on the corner of the book she wasn't reading as she once might have done on the edge of a rooftop skylight. As on that long ago rooftop, she responded to the disapproving gravel without turning to look at him.

"You make it sound like 'those jewels don't belong to you.' In fact, I can think of at least four 'those jewels don't belong to me' and three 'the museum closed five hours ago' when you sounded happier to see me than you did just now. Guess I don't have to ask how your night went."

"It's not you," Bruce said, peeling off the kimono before getting into bed. "There's a... Alfred is making a call for me. He's going to make a call. It's a little too early. Nothing to do for a few hours until he can make the call..."

"Did you hit your head?"

"I didn't hit my head. Someone *else* hit my head, hard and repeatedly. I didn't want to go into that with you until I heard from Alfred."

"Ah. So grumbly disapproving battitude is because I'm awake before you're ready for me. At least that's settled. I don't mind being the cause of that look on your face, but when I am, I like to know why."

"And to have done it on purpose," he noted with a lip twitch as he reached to turn out the light.

They dozed... although Bruce's dreams were plagued with double images and distorted reflections. The foppish playboy blundered over rooftops, and Psychobats tore up a cocktail party at the Knickerbocker Club. When the dream turned to Crime Alley, it was coins that fell to the pavement instead of pearls, and when he woke, he was clutching Selina's wrist the way Batman did when her teasing had gone too far.

Luckily, she was asleep and didn't know. He placed her hand gingerly back on the bedsheets, and stared at the ceiling until the faint yellow-white glow appeared at the top of the curtains. Selina woke and stretched, and after the requisite good mornings, he cleared his throat.

"Have you, um, talked to Harvey recently?" he asked, introducing the subject as casually as possible without drifting into the fop.

Selina shook her head.

"No, but I was just thinking about him a few nights ago. Funny you mention it... oh, of course, you probably thought of it for the same reason. Tuesday the 22nd. The gang at Vault were all 'remembering' him. It was a little off-putting, actually, they way they were carrying on. It was practically a wake."

"Understandable. From their point of view, he is essentially... eh, dead. I can see where that would be... uh, disconcerting for you."

Selina scowled. He'd begun the statement with clinical detachment, the crimefighter expounding on the Rogue mindset he knew so well. Then, halfway through, he glanced up at her and segued into a very un-Batmanlike shilly-shallying.

"Disconcerting to me specifically, you mean."

"Yes, to you."

"Because if Two-Face is dead because Harvey reformed, then, technically, I think Catwoman is a vampire."

Bruce stared as he always had in the face of feline logic, phrases like "those jewels don't belong to you" and "the museum is closed" as useless now as they had always been.

"Not to change the subject, Handsome, but do you remember back when the world was young when I gave you a heads up on that warehouse full of mob cash?"

Bruce raised a slow, suspicious eyebrow before he said "Yes."

"Good," Selina continued with gusto. "Harvey told me a story once; it can't possibly be true, but... You didn't, eh, burn it up, did you?"

"Of course," he said instantly. "While you supposedly get to a normal man's heart through his stomach, to get to a man like Carmine Falcone, you go through the wallet."

"Fuck," Selina said dryly.

"What? That was years ago."

"Hm? Oh. Yes. Right. Just, y'know, memories of Harvey. 'He will be missed.'"

"Now don't you start reminiscing like he's dead, too. We'll invite him for brunch and catch up this weekend..."

While Selina was drawing a mental line through the idea of telling Batman about her Vault riches, Alfred came in with the breakfast tray. He and Bruce exchanged looks, and then Alfred mentioned casually that he had tried several times but received no answer. He would keep trying.

"Damn," Bruce said. It sounded exactly like Selina's "Fuck" a moment before, and she knew it meant the same thing: a plan being overturned.

"This isn't a casual talk we've been having," she said when Alfred had left the room. "Something's up your nose about Harvey."

"It's... it's nothing. It's the concussion. There are just some things I need to check out."

"Check out about Harvey? And what does that have to do with your concussion?"

"No, not with Harvey. It's... I mean... the concussion is making it hard to focus. I've got about 22 things rummaging around in my brain at the moment and—"

"22! Don't look now, Dark Knight, but your slip is showing. Bruce, did—I can't believe I'm asking this—did Two-Face do that to you?"

He grunted. He started to deny it. He stopped. He swore. And finally he said:

"Just let me tell you the whole story before you respond..."

Selina was silent for a long moment after he'd finished.

"Well, it isn't him, obviously," she said at last. "It's a second Two-Face. That was bound to happen sooner or later, right?"

Bruce wanted to agree, to agree and be done with it, laugh it off together, get on with breakfast and start the day. But somehow, he couldn't make his mouth form the words.

"I honestly don't know," he heard himself saying. "I can't believe it's him either, but there's not enough evidence to say one way or the other."

"But he was doing so well."

Bruce chuckled at hearing this echo of his own words earlier, and he answered in a markedly Alfredian tone:

"Pardon me for saying so, but how do we know how well he's been doing?"

The question went unanswered. After Bruce's faux-Alfred voice subsided, the real one could be heard very faintly in the distance. He was on the phone, and they both waited.

Waited.

Waited.

And finally, just to break the tension, Selina spoke:

"Out of curiosity, would you have an aneurysm if the Foundation got an anonymous donation for, say, \$800,000?"

~~CHAPTER 3~~ THE SECOND CHAPTER 2

By its nature, crimefighting is active, often proactive. It is a vocation for the vigorous, hands-on, and dynamic. Passive, sit-at-home personalities need not apply. So Bruce Wayne was frustrated to be back in the cave while Selina went into town alone.

There was still no answer at Harvey Dent's apartment, and no messages had been returned. Someone had to go over and look. It was only natural, Selina said, that it be her. She used to live in that very building. She had favorite restaurants and boutiques in the area. It would be so natural for her to casually drop by while she was in the neighborhood.

Bruce hated the idea. They were both Harvey's friends and they were a couple. There was no reason they couldn't be out on the town together, visiting the museum or doing a bit of shopping, and drop in on Harvey to see if he wanted to join them for lunch at Nino's... He got no further describing his (far superior) plan when he trailed off, his inner strategist noting an expression on Selina's face that meant she was ready to interrupt. It was the corner of his mind that authored protocols capable of bringing down the entire Justice League, and it did not sit idly by waiting for cat burglars to point out the flaw in its tactics. He took her expression as a red flag, and immediately began searching the plan for weakne... Of course.

"It's fine. You go alone," he said, touching the raised lump on his forehead.

Clearly it wouldn't do for Bruce Wayne to show up with a bruise where Two-Face had struck Batman. If it was Harvey...

So Selina went alone, and Bruce reconciled himself to a research session in the cave.

Dr. Kevin Yarling went through life with a Mont Blanc pen in his pocket. It went back to an ad he'd seen decades before. He didn't even remember the details of it, but the message had branded itself into his soul: second string quarterback in high school, salutatorian, took Heidi to the prom instead of June, got the BMW 530 instead of the M5, Ostera caviar instead of Beluga at the wedding, Honolulu instead of Maui for the honeymoon. Just this once... #1. Mont Blanc.

Even though the ad had affected him deeply, his memory had muddied the examples, replacing them with the second bests of his own life. He was second in his graduating class, both in high school and at Dartmouth (his second choice school when he didn't get into Yale), where he was number 2 man on the crew team. Second place for the Lasker Prize at Johns Hopkins (his second choice when he didn't get into Harvard Medical School). His condo was on the upper *west* side, and his beachhouse in *Bridgehampton*. Neither was even his anymore, because his divorce lawyer had been Edmund Parr, the *second* best in the city, while his wife had retained Felicity Amstead.

Catwoman had never bothered much with alibis. She wore a distinctive eye-catching costume and a mask. The world might know that Catwoman had taken the Rosenthal Rubies, although they could never quite prove it. There was simply no reason to establish that Selina Kyle was on a plane to Toronto at the time.

Yet today, she wanted an alibi. She stopped at Barneys, TSE, and Searle, making a small purchase at each and proving conclusively that she had been shopping, for look, here were her bags. She then strolled past *La Maison du Chocolat* so that one particular delicacy in the window might catch her eye. On spotting a particularly delectable-looking ganache, she reminded herself that, while some indulgences are best savored alone, others should be shared with a friend. So she headed for her old building to invite one such friend whom she knew to be especially fond of French chocolates—not Harvey, but Jason Blood—to join her for a treat.

Like any cat, Selina preened herself. This really was a wonderful alibi she had come up with. Subtle, as any cat's should be, for she didn't mean to go babbling the whole story to Harvey should she run into him. It was just *there*, in her movements through her old neighborhood (in case anyone was watching Harvey's apartment the day after the Two-Face episode), and in her mindset as she smiled sweetly to Nick, her old doorman.

She was there to see Jason, of course, but she did ask casually how her other friend was doing: Mr. Dent, the one house-sitting for Binky Sherborn. Nick didn't volunteer anything useful about Harvey, but he did mention that Jason had gone out early this morning. That was a bit of luck, it made Selina's change of allegiance less impulsive. She wasn't inviting Harvey instead of Jason on a whim. Jason wasn't home.

So Selina went inside, reflecting in the elevator how it would be rude to tell another friend he was your second choice on such an excursion, but with Harvey, it was the kind of joke he liked best. She jostled her shopping bags in order to knock on his door, but even that mild papery rustling made enough noise to make the knock superfluous. Binky had two dogs, two horribly yappy little corgis called Balmoral and Sandringham, that Harvey had been walking twice a day as part of the house-sitting obligation. At the first hint of a presence outside the door, they'd begun yipping and crying like... ulgh, like the horrible little rat dogs they were.

Taking a lock pick from her purse, Selina began revising her plan. If the worst happened, if there was no sign of Harvey, she had meant to break in silently and invisibly, as only Catwoman can, leaving no trace of her presence (except, in the old days, for the missing space where the Vermeer used to be). But the yapping dogs changed everything. There was a desperation in their cries that even a cat person could recognize.

Tossing Batman's encounter with Two-Face out of the equation and dealing only with what she knew to connect absolutely to Harvey, Alfred had begun calling at 9 o'clock that morning. That meant the dogs had missed their morning walk and—and that thought was left unresolved as the lock gave. Selina winced from the double blow as the door opened: the acrid smell of dog urine assaulted her nostrils while the dogs themselves serpentine through her legs as if she was their new best friend.

"Krypto all over again," she muttered, going inside to find their leashes. "At least you two can't fly."

It was understandable that Kevin Yarling had a particular resentment for the number two, and nowhere was that resentment so pronounced than in his professional life. Anywhere else in the world, *ANYWHERE* else *IN THE WORLD*, the neurology department at Gotham General Hospital would be recognized as not only the best in the city, but the best by such a margin that patients would beg to be treated, their families would go to any lengths to have their loved ones cared for by these, the best of the best in their field.

Yarling was a sailing enthusiast, and his favorite anecdote was from the first race that is now called the America's Cup. Back in 1851, a schooner called simply "The America" won a race around the Isle of Wight over a fleet of English rivals. When a piqued Queen Victoria, watching from the royal yacht, turned to one of her attendants and asked who was in second place, the man took one look at the distance between the winning schooner and the rest of the competitors and answered simply "Your majesty, there is no second."

That would be the stature of Gotham General Hospital's neurology department if they were located in any other city in the world. Yet because they were in the same city as Gotham Presbyterian, they ranked second on every list.

In its day, Liberty One was one of the more impressive office buildings in the city. Built in the 1950s as the Gotham headquarters of Liberty One Insurance, it was small at only ten stories, but it had character. The firm used a Liberty head silver dollar for their logo, a giant version of which was mounted on the wall behind the reception desk in the atrium lobby. It might have been cause for concern if the company was still in business by the time Two-Face arrived on the scene. But by then, the Liberty One building was an empty shell.

There was no board of directors to debate whether a nine-foot coin in the lobby might make them a target, or if the "One" in their name would offer any protection. There had never been a cost/benefit analysis of changing their logo, or a discussion to determine their liability if employees were injured in a logo-motivated attack. There was only a Dominican building manager who took it upon himself to buy some curtain rods and fabric to cover up the coin, and an Internet mogul who had bought the building as a tax shelter and declined to reimburse him.

It was an unremarkable building. That was Bruce's conclusion as he closed the file on the building's history. The current and period photos of the Liberty One façade, the blueprints, and the floor plan all vanished from the workstation monitor and the oversized viewscreen, and the bat emblem loomed once more over the cave as Bruce turned to Alfred.

"But it is located between a research lab on Sloekam, where Scarecrow has been known to lift chemicals, and an electronics warehouse on 16th, where Mad Hatter sometimes acquires supplies."

"Meaning it was a near certainty that Batman would be passing, sir, seeing as both Scarecrow and Mad Hatter are free. A well-laid trap indeed."

“Possibly, but not necessarily,” Bruce said. “It seems certain that he chose the location for the coin. He didn’t necessarily know it would be on Batman’s patrol route.”

“I would have,” a saucy feline growl announced from the bottom of the stairs.

Selina crossed the cave, the trademark clip-clip of her high heels announcing her approach as she neared Bruce’s workstation. She set her purse on the console beside him, and looked innocently from Bruce to Alfred and back to Bruce.

“What? I would have. Jervis and Jonathan are both out, and I know where they ‘shop’ as well as you do. Ivy is free too, that’s greenhouse to Sloekam to 16th to Robinson Park for the first patrol. Maybe do a quick pop through the diamond district if you’re looking for me, otherwise it’s down to Chinatown to check on Ra’s minions at the White Dragon, and through Little Italy to creep out the Falconis. How’d I do?”

Bruce scowled, and began mentally reprogramming the patrol auto-routing routines while Selina related her visit to Harvey’s.

“So I walked the slobbering little monsters, an activity which ranks right up there with dimension-hopping into goggles, by the way, when their favorite spot to lift their legs—their favorite spot with that huge park to choose from—is right in front of Ivy’s old lair. The thought of her seeing me trailing after those horrid canine things with a goddamn pooper-scooper... Anyway, that horror behind me, I snooped through Binky’s until I found the cleaning service she uses when the little darlings ‘misbehave,’ as she puts it. I called them and gave Nick a heads-up that they were coming over, and he’s going to take over walking them for the duration.”

“You said it had been about a day since they were walked?” Bruce interrupted.

“I’m no expert on dogs, but that’s my best guess, yeah. I probed a little more, but Nick didn’t seem to know anything about exactly when Harvey left. I didn’t want to push too hard.”

“No. That would have been a mistake. Batman can question him tonight much more aggressively without arousing suspicions.”

“Aggressively? You’re going to pummel my doorman?” She gestured to Alfred. “You don’t see me arm wrestling your butler, do you?”

Bruce closed his eyes and shook his head. He hated the way she could reduce him to chuckling in the Batcave, right in the middle of a case, but the mental picture that presented itself... Some days, Selina could be so... ‘Catwoman.’

“Not ‘question aggressively’ as in pummel,” he said, shouting down Psychobat’s objection that Batman did not ever have to explain himself. “‘Question aggressively’ as in asking direct questions without any preliminaries.”

“Ah. Good news for you, then, Alfred,” she called playfully.

“Very good indeed, miss,” he smiled, only now acknowledging the conversation.

“Anyway, while I was there,” Selina continued, “I left a note for Jason to call. It’s a long shot, but maybe he and Harvey see each other around the building. He might know something.”

Bruce nodded, but behind his eyes, the Bat-fury flared at the mention of Jason Blood. Blood was the most responsible magic user Batman had encountered, but even he didn’t hesitate to draw on powers that violated the most fundamental laws of nature. And the breaking of Natural Law never came without a price.

Dr. Yarling grumbled as he made his morning rounds, for another one of those damn lists ranking medical programs in major U.S. cities had just come out. At least when it was the *New England Journal of Medicine* publishing a list, the public at large wasn't aware. But half the time, Gotham Presbyterian or Gotham Memorial (always rated #1 in oncology) dropped a press release to the Gotham Times, and if it was a slow news day—which yesterday apparently was, damnit—then the whole city read about it. Patients receiving the best care known to modern medicine would start eyeing him like some third world witchdoctor with a bone through his nose.

"Just look at this John Doe," Yarling thought, glancing over the comatose man's chart. Good Samaritan performed CPR at the scene of the accident, kept him breathing but wound up pushing a broken rib into the right lung. The ER focused on the punctured lung and then the obvious external bleeding. In the course of that examination, they reached the neck brace that the paramedics attached on the scene to protect the C-spine, and found the more serious bleeding, external and internal, above the neck. Patient Doe had suffered an epidural hematoma, and that's when Dr. Yarling was brought in. The impact from the car had broken the middle meningeal artery just under the skull, and Patient Doe was bleeding onto his brain. In hours, the weight would have caused serious, permanent injury, and after that, it would have killed him. But Gotham General Hospital was second to nobody in any meaningful use of the word. They found the hematoma within minutes, and Yarling operated: a small hole drilled into the skull just above the temporal bone, the blood evacuated by light suction relieving the pressure on the brain, and the artery repaired.

And yet, when Patient Doe was identified and his family showed up, what were the chances they'd ask about transferring him to Gotham Presbyterian, since they just read in the Gotham Times how good GPH was for head trauma?

There were plenty of times in the old days when Catwoman looked into some incident that caught her interest. It wasn't crimefighting because, at the same time she was investigating this curious little episode, she was also planning her next assault on the Museum of Modern Art to pick up that darling Chagall and she'd just confirmed Igor's payment from fencing that tacky ruby tiara in Brussels.

It also wasn't crimefighting, in the objectionable sense, because she decided what to look into and how. Except for two or three very specific occasions, under unique and highly critical circumstances, she did not take direction from Batman.

Selina had no problem looking into the Harvey situation; he was a friend. She would be investigating on her own if Bruce had never entered the picture. She might even have wound up walking those damn dogs. If her investigation brought her to Harvey's apartment, which was likely, and she found the whimpering little beasts, what else could she do?

But she would not—repeat, she would not—have zeroed in on that stupid detail about the dogs' favorite spot to... to "be dogs" being situated near Ivy's old lair in Robinson Park. That was a particularly Brucian factoid to focus on. That was definitely the World's Greatest Detective doing his thing, spotting a likely clue with the surest of instincts. It would never have occurred to Selina, since she was 1) not a

detective and 2) too caught up in her own misery and degradation walking the damn dogs. She consoled herself with that nodding salute to Two-Face in her inner monologue as she made her second trip into Robinson Park.

Not only would it not have occurred to her that the proximity of Ivy's lair might be important, if it had, she never would have decided to drop in on Ivy for a chat. It reminded her of an old team up with Batman, when she couldn't help but feel that he wouldn't be so insistent about getting the Lorimer Codex by sunrise if *he* was the one that had to squeeze through that quarter mile vent and negotiate the giant gears over the electrified grid. Unfortunately, given the Harvey/Pammy/Two-Face/Ivy history, Selina couldn't deny that it was an angle worth looking into. She also couldn't deny that, with the pheromone history, she should be the one visiting Ivy. It wasn't a job for Batman any more than scrunching through a vent that he was too big to get into.

So, she was back in the park. Although, between Ivy's three favorite nooks in Robinson Park, her alternate digs in Riverside Park, and the greenhouse in the flower market, the chances of her being at home were—

“Catty! What a wonderful surprise.”

Aw, hell.

Jason Blood was the product of another time, an era when, if a lord summoned you to his manor in aide of a quest, you reflected on what you knew of the man while you stood at his gates awaiting admittance.

While Selina's note was informal and did not include the word “quest,” Jason sensed that the matter was a serious one. Etrigan was maddeningly uninformative, of course. He went on and on about his admiration of Bat and Cat, each capable of such magnificent fury, and each able to concentrate their hatred with such focus on the proper object... It was all very Etrigan, and it was all very lacking in specifics.

It didn't matter, Jason thought as he knocked again. He would know what this quest was about soon enough, or at least he would know as much as Bruce did. While he waited for his knock to be answered, Jason reflected, as a knight of old, on what he knew of the lord of the manor.

Jason did not share Bruce's passionate dislike of Magick—although he occasionally wondered why. Given the double wounds inflicted by the first two wizards he encountered, he was certainly entitled to. The deceits of Morgan Le Fey compounded by the lies of omission committed by Merlin... Yes, given the sum damage of the encounters: his soul bound for eternity to a demon of hell, it really was miraculous that he didn't share Bruce's fervent contempt for the magickal arts.

Alfred opened the door promptly, and escorted Jason down to the cave. Unfortunately, once there, he had little information to impart:

Yes, he had arranged Harvey Dent's house-sitting job with Mrs. Sherborn and had been Harvey's neighbor ever since. He had looked in on Harvey frequently during the first weeks, as the man flatly refused to water Mrs. Sherborn's plants. Something about a past episode with a sunlamp and a flytrap. Jason didn't like to pry. As it turned out, most of Mrs. Sherborn's plants were made of silk. There was only one actual live one, on the terrace, which now resided on Jason's terrace. No, he had no idea what it was, he wasn't a botanist. In any case, he still saw Harvey around from time to time, but

surely Bruce must appreciate that the conversation in an elevator is very casual. No, he hadn't seen him for several days, but that really wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

Bruce listened attentively, and then, when it became clear that Jason wasn't going to say anything more, he grunted.

"Alright," he said quietly. "That's what you have to tell me as Harvey Dent's neighbor. Is there anything *else* you can tell me... in another context?"

Patient Doe was in a coma. On the Glasgow scale, he only exhibited motor responses and eye movement in response to pain, and his verbal responses consisted only of incomprehensible sound. That was an 8 on the GCS, which meant coma, albeit borderline. What troubled Dr. Yarling was the absence of a definite cause. They were monitoring to check that the bleeding had not resumed. There was no reaccumulation of blood under the skull. No infections. The EEG and blood work were fine. But Patient Doe wasn't waking up.

It was probably the trauma of the accident coupled with the anesthetic from the surgery, but Yarling ordered another round of blood tests anyway. He hated uncertainty, which was a handicap in his profession. And he never, ever liked leaving a life-and-death matter like this up to chance.

Jason looked impassively around the Batcave, then back at Bruce.

"By 'another context,' you mean is there anything I can tell you as the magician who brought about Harvey's healing, anything that could shed some light on the emergence of this new Two-Face and tell you if it's the same man."

"Obviously," Bruce answered in Batman's edgiest gravel.

"I can only tell you what you already know. Through my error, there was a condition placed on Harvey's healing: If he ever flipped his coin again to make a decision, if he abdicated his free will and left any decision, no matter how trivial, up to chance, then the healing would be undone. He would have reneged on his bargain with the universe, and his face would be as it was before."

"Meaning, he'd be Two-Face again."

Jason hesitated.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Probably. Given the division in his mind, his belief that those scars made him Two-Face. That is why making the scars go away enabled him to see Two-Face as gone, banished from his life, so he could live as Harvey Dent once more."

"But?"

"But... we get better. Bruce, you and I both know that Two-Face was never a separate individual. He was a part of Harvey's character, a manifestation of the darkest impulses, but a part of him all the same. There's always the chance that, living as he has been, Harvey may come to see that. There's always the chance that, if and when the scars do return, that he'll be able to deal with it without reverting to a multiple personality."

"The Two-Face I encountered was very definitely Two-Face. If it was Harvey, he did not 'get better.'"

"Well, I could always scry for him. A magician is often able to detect his own magicks, and if his face is still healed—"

"No. No more magic. One way or the other, the last thing we need is more of that damn hocus pocus obfuscating reality—what's so damn funny, Jason?"

Jason controlled his soft chuckle.

"Forgive me, Bruce. I was not laughing at your beliefs. It was that phrase. 'The last thing *we* need' seemed so... reminiscent of the Harvey that was."

"Crocus flowers are among the earliest to bloom each spring," Ivy enthused over a number of fresh blossoms. "Those with the sense to pay attention to plants say that the crocus represents perseverance and cheer amidst adversity, since they can even bloom in the snow."

"Nice, Pammy. But back to people."

"According to Ovid, the crocus was named for a youth who was transformed into this flower."

"Yeah, that seems to have happened a lot in Greek mythology. I meant real people."

Ivy formed the kind of smile with which icebergs might greet each other as they passed in the ocean.

"Crocus was a young man who transformed into a flower because of his unfulfilled love for a nymph called, irony of ironies, *Smilax*. At the same time, the nymph was transformed into the vine-plant *smilax aspera-sarsparilla*, a tough little shrub. Glossy, heart-shaped leaves. Greenish-white and greenish-yellow flowers. Blooms August through November. Stubborn. Doesn't know what's good for it. Doesn't know who its friends are. No gratitude when it's watered, no appreciation if you give it extra sunlight or enriched mulch. I haven't seen many real people, Catty. I had more than my fill of human company up at Arkham. I just want to be alone for a while."

"O-kay," Selina sighed. "Guess I don't have to ask how Harley is doing. But since you've been out, surely you've had some human contact. Haven't you run into anybody? Anybody at all?"

"You're the first to visit," Ivy said crisply. "And I suppose you're just here to invite me to that dreary little club you started to fill the Iceberg void?"

For Harvey's sake, Selina squelched the angry retort that suggested itself and fell back on her morning alibi.

"Actually, I was doing a little shopping in the old neighborhood, and I saw the most delicious-looking ganache at *Maison du Chocolat*. You know how I hate indulging in that kind of thing alone, so I thought I'd drop in and see if you wanted to join me on a binge."

Ivy blinked.

"You... want to go for chocolate? With me?"

"Yes," Selina lied with the brazen zeal only a true cat can bring to the task. "We had so much fun shoe shopping that time. Remember how we said we simply had to do more ordinary girl stuff together?"

"I prefer RichArt for chocolate," Ivy said imperiously. "They're so artistic, the way they decorate them."

"Well, okay, I don't know RichArt, but I assume that means they do leaves or flowers or something."

"N-no, but *Maison du Chocolate* tends to have women behind the counter, and I don't like to carry money."

Selina massaged her forehead, thinking how, whatever it was men experienced in Ivy's presence, it couldn't possibly equal the sister rogue experience for incessantly cloying, pain-in-the-ass needy, and exhaustingly passive aggressive.

"It's my treat. We can go anywhere you want," she said gamely.

Approximately 3,000 calories later, Selina felt she had softened the ground enough to ask the point-blank question:

"You know, Pammy, Harvey has been living in my old building. Right there on the park, taking regular walks twice a day. You wouldn't happen to have run into him, would you?"

Ivy froze, mid-bite into a coffee-caramel macaroon, and hurriedly swallowed it without chewing.

"Harvey?! No, no, I had no idea. But *twice* a day, did you say? That's certainly a good sign. I mean, Catty, think of it. Twice a day, he comes walking in my park—"

"Whoa. No. Stop," Selina interrupted. She had often mentioned how peculiar Pamela Isley was as a pseudofriend. Right in the middle of being completely detestable, she could step in something that made you almost feel sorry for her. Then, often as not, just when you were ready to give up and admit she was a person with feelings like everyone else and that you did, in fact, feel bad for her, she would do something so obnoxious, you wanted to slap her silly.

"Catty, what is it?" she said, with that creepy vulnerability that always tricked you into pitying her.

"I just don't want you to get the wrong idea, Pammy. He was going to the park twice a day, but it wasn't exactly his choice to go twice a day. It's a house-sitting job, and he has to walk these dogs."

"Oh."

She looked heartbroken.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get your hopes up," Selina said miserably.

"Hopes? Why, I have no hopes for Harvey Dent. I don't care if he lives or dies. I think I'll try a piece of that Andalouise cake filled with the truffle mousse. And, now that I think of it, I tried to kill him twice. So there you are. I'm not even indifferent. I flat out wanted him dead."

"She could have been lying," Bruce said darkly.

"She wasn't," Selina insisted. "She hasn't seen him."

"And you're basing this on?"

"The way she was putting away chocolate. That's not the behavior of woman who just picked up a new boy toy, either with pheromones or the regular way."

Bruce grunted, and turned back to the viewscreen.

The day gone, and they'd learned nothing. Harvey's apartment, Harvey's doorman, Jason, Ivy... nothing.

At least it would be dark soon. Batman could take up the case. He brought up the hologram map of the city, and typed feverishly. Several streets and buildings began to glow a bright blue. Another series glowed white. A third, a muted yellow.

"These are three alternate patrol routes for tonight, drawn from the at-large list and Gotham's calendar of events."

He handed Selina a light pen like a surgical nurse handing off a clamp.

"Look it over and let me know which paths an experienced rogue would be most likely to anticipate."

CHAPTER 4: INVESTIGATION

A SECOND LOOK

From his first appearance, everyone knew that Two-Face was crazy. The coin flipping, referring to himself as “we” and “us,” splitting his wardrobe and even his hideouts down the center to match his disfigured face, it went beyond unhealthy obsession into a full-blown, psychotic disconnect from reality.

But as Two-Face himself was always happy to explain, there are two kinds of crazy in the world. There’s the stupid, pointless, self-destructive crazy, and then there’s *smart crazy*. He was the latter.

He did not go shooting his own henchmen just to prove he was a bad guy. He didn’t go shooting his own henchmen just because it was Thursday. He didn’t even flip his coin to decide whether to shoot a henchman for such an idiotic reason. His rationale was sanity itself: henchmen were a limited good. There were a finite number of men in the world that you could hire to carry a bomb for you. There were a finite number of men who would run up to Batman with their fists clenched rather than run screaming into the nearest alley, police precinct, or church. Of those, only about two-thirds would accept a suitable designation, such as Duo or Ditto, and wear a costume properly divided down the center. In short, while there were plenty of potential henchmen out there, there weren’t so many that you could go around shooting them willy-nilly. It was for practical reasons as much as theme that Two-Face preferred using the same henchmen a second time.

The world at large was not privy to his reasoning (although Batman had speculated a few times in his logs), but they knew the result: Two-Face reused henchmen. Since a copycat would be perfectly aware of the practice, Batman wanted to roust as many former Two-Face henchmen as he could find. Not only were they likely to be approached by either a copycat or the original, they were in a position to know the difference.

It was certainly the most promising route of investigation, but it would have to wait. Nick the doorman was the top priority.

Nick was a longshot as far as having useful information, but he was a civilian and a working man. Civilians deserved better than nightmare shadows coming to life outside their windows in the dead of night and midnight interrogations from masked vigilantes, particularly when they had to be at work in six hours. So Batman called on Nick first, when it was more dusk than dark outside and while the man was still awake and watching television. The silent appearance at the window still *startled* Nick momentarily, but a fully silhouetted and recognizable Batman wasn’t soul-wrenchingly terrifying the way a mass of black with only two slits of vengeful hate glaring through the darkness is terrifying. At least, that’s what Batman told himself. It was just possible that innocents like Nick didn’t fear him simply because they *were* innocents. A clear conscience and all that.

As expected, Nick didn't have much to say about Harvey's movements beyond what he'd already told Selina. He did mention that Mr. Dent was quite the ladies' man (not news), and that he seemed to be something of a serial monogamist. First, there was this hot redhead (Claudia Muffington, surely), then a thin, petite brunette he called Dina (Diana North, Bruce had seen them at D'Annunzio's a couple times), and the current one was blonde. Lotta Botox. Usually wore red. (Could be almost anyone, but the red argued for Angela Vraag...)

Vraag was the Dutch word for "question," and Riddler had kidnapped her once. An ongoing criminal connection was unlikely, however, since Nigma later dated her cousin Penny. That presumably meant he was done with the Vraag angle for criminal targets, but Batman left a mental asterisk over Harvey's lady friends anyway. If Harvey was dating Angela Vraag, and if other avenues of investigation came up empty, it was worth following up with Nigma.

"What is like the popular table in high school... or 16th-century Versailles... covered with leopard print throw pillows... with a little patch of radiant purple in the center... sipping her favorite martini?"

Raven sighed as if she'd heard more than enough of these whimsical requests to be seated near Catwoman in the most exclusive corner of the VIP room. It was never like this at the Iceberg. Oswald's office was just Oswald's office. It had nothing to do with Raven as the hostess. And even if she had been stuck acting as his doorkeeper, she imagined the rogues wanting to see him wouldn't have been in such a party mood.

She didn't show Riddler to a table, she just made a disinterested nod in the general direction. He would just get up as soon as she'd seated him and wander over to Catwoman, assuming he hadn't offended Clayface. If he had, Clayface would morph into the MGM lion, roar twice, and if the unwelcome rogue had really offended him, chase him up to the rafters (since the VIP room, unlike the Iceberg dining room, had no chandelier).

In most nightclubs, a good hostess did everything she could to avoid that kind of a scene, but at Vault, like the Iceberg before it, such uprisings were part of the charm. So she just waved the big names through... Riddler, Scarecrow, Mad Hatter, Mr. Freeze... and let them fend for themselves.

Harvey's building had a night doorman as well. He was on duty until dawn, and there was no reason to question him before midnight. But Batman decided to talk to him next, while the details of Harvey's domestic situation were fresh in his mind. The man's name was Ian Fisher, and Batman had investigated him thoroughly several years earlier. It was shortly after he began visiting Selina's apartment after his late patrol. Doormen are paid to notice the comings and goings at street level. It was unlikely he would see a black cape against a black sky all those stories above, even if he happened to look up at just the right moment. Nevertheless, as Batman began swooping down to that same balcony night after night, he thought it prudent to investigate that nagging "what if."

He learned that Ian Fisher was a native Gothamite, the oldest of four boys. He attended St. Swithun's Pre-School, Elementary, and High School. Joined the Navy, honorable discharge. Married a girl from the neighborhood. 2 kids. Worked as a bouncer at a club inside a downtown hotel. After six months, he became a doorman at the hotel, and three years later took the same job at a residential building in Harrow. Stayed there six years before taking the job at Selina's building. Volunteered at the Adult Literacy League and Habitat for Humanity. A family man, ties to the community, an ideal employee in every respect... which made it very strange that he wasn't at his post.

Batman made four passes around the block, muscle memory adjusting the angle of the batline each time he made the final swing north towards Selina's balcony. On the fourth swing, he twisted abruptly as he saw Ian Fisher back at his post, the legs of his uniform and shoes just visible under the awning, right where they had always been when Batman made this approach in the past. He shot a new line to the nearest gargoyle, swung low to a streetlight, and then dropped to the sidewalk four feet from the awning.

Fisher was slow to react, and Batman proceeded carefully, although he was beginning to suspect why he had left his post for so long.

"Mr. Fisher?" he said, louder and more aggressively than he would normally address a civilian who had done nothing wrong.

This time there was a response: only one word and murmured too softly to be heard. But by now, Batman was quite sure what had happened: the day's events, the proximity of the park, the Sherborn woman's dogs and Selina's investigation... Batman was quite sure what had happened, and he was quite certain what the unintelligible word was. *The day's events, the proximity of the park, man's eyes were glassy and unfocused...*

"Fisher!" he barked, shaking the doorman's shoulders.

"Greeeeen," came the blissfully anguished reply.

Catwoman's Queen of the Underworld differed from Oswald's Emperor Penguin in many respects, the most obvious being her availability. She did not own or manage "her" nightclub. She wasn't on the premises any time the doors were open. She made an appearance most nights, but only after her prowling and only if she felt like it. Top tier rogues, even those who had never set foot in Vault, approved of her methods. It signified a practicing villainess who was still out there, actively challenging the Bat each night in person. Penguin was among the best in his day, certainly, but when did he ever have to vanish from the Iceberg for nearly a week because Batman was out for his blood and Superman was tearing up the skies looking for him after a double-rout in Metropolis?

So Riddler wasn't particularly surprised to see the booth was empty when he reached the back corner of the VIP room; he was disappointed, naturally, but not surprised. He scanned the room for someone else to show off his wonderful new riddle-delivery system. Magpie would be appreciative, but she wouldn't get it. Roxy would be enthusiastic on general principle, but he didn't think she would get it either.

She probably thought riddles were a way to secure Batman's presence at a crime in order to lead him on a high-speed pursuit through a fireworks factory. Double Dare were too full of themselves to appreciate anyone else's methods.

He sighed. It looked like the only rogues present capable of really appreciating the cleverness of his new toy were Clayface, Scarecrow, and Mad Hatter. Was it really worth impressing them?

Ivy.

Psychobat hated all criminals. It was the fire that drove him through pain and exhaustion, in the face of impossible odds and daunting setbacks. But even that most basic core hatred had an ebb and flow. There were degrees and levels. There were spikes and valleys.

Poison Ivy was a spike.

The way that woman could wreak havoc on a well-planned course of action. In the past, he'd lost entire weeks of crimefighting in the grip of her pheromones, weeks that should have been spent protecting his city, lost in her madness of green. Somehow, this was *more* infuriating. At least then, she was DELIBERATELY TRYING. When she greened Bruce Wayne, when she greened Batman, it was a purposeful, premeditated and calculated act, with malice aforethought and criminal intent. But this! This was... She was costing him hours—scarce, valuable hours that he did not have to spare from the Two-Face investigation—as a mere waste product of her lonely, psychotic, dysfunctional...

"Greeeeen," the figure in the passenger seat moaned as the Batmobile turned onto Gotham General's emergency ramp. He barked instructions to the trauma team. He nearly punched a nurse's aide coming at him with a clipboard. Emergency room personnel were supposed to know that when the Batmobile shows up, the only question is "SmileX, gunshot, fear toxin, or pheromones?" The rest was not Batman's concern.

He glared at the sniveling non-entity, glared with the ferocious loathing usually reserved for gunmen in back alleys. He spun on his heels, producing a dramatic sweep of the cape worthy of a Dracula exit, got into the car and drove off.

Only then did the guilt hit. His frustration was with Ivy and with the Two-Face situation. He had no business taking it out on a girl on a loading dock, even if she was a more-than-usually-stupid bureaucrat. The Wayne Foundation would have to make up for it, as usual. Arrange an event of some kind to recognize hospital employees, special mention for the night shifts in the emergency rooms, etc. He'd get Cynthia on it in the morning. In the meantime...

He checked the dashboard clock...

Damnit. Nearly midnight and he hadn't even made it back to the Liberty One building yet.

The satellite cave underneath the Wayne Tower was physically smaller than the manor cave, but Batman had made no compromises in the lab and research facilities.

On his return to the Liberty One building, he'd made imprints of the scarring on that giant coin in the lobby. He fed these into the Batcomputer to try and determine what kind of instrument could have made them.

He initiated several other standard routines on the Batcomputer, including a search of the previous night's police reports, since there had been multiple shots fired in the course of that Two-Face encounter. He would like to think that the noise would have been heard and reported... but it looked like the only reports of gunfire in the vicinity was the domestic disturbance at the townhouse. Bruce forced down a second attack of guilt. He'd been bored before the Two-Face encounter. He'd been craving action. And now...

On the long work table, Batman prepared slides with remnants of the "goo" harvested from the Liberty One stairwell, and samples of the same substance dried on his grapnel and on his cape. Analyzing these, he found it was a high-viscosity lubricant composed of fatty acids, graphite, and mica, enriched with Teflon and molybdenum disulfide... used in countless facilities in the greater Gotham area, no help there.

The sample from the grapnel had particles of the container it had pierced, releasing the oil slick and springing the trap. It was made of an ordinary polymer, mustard yellow. That detail gave him the manufacturer. According to the Batcomputer, of all the industrial lubricants with these chemical ingredients, only ThomChemCo used mustard yellow in its packaging... The Thomas Chemical Company was founded in 1949, factory in West Virginia, distribution hub in Bludhaven... number one industrial lubricant on the market, used in at least 8,000 facilities in Gotham... no help at all.

He turned his attention to the bomb. All manufactured C4, and several of the standard components for making it, contain chemical markers such as 2,3-dimethyl-2,3-dinitrobutane to indicate their source, makeup, and manufacturer. It should have been a simple matter to track down where they came from, who manufactured them and who purchased them... but it wasn't. The C4, the timer, and the blasting caps all traced to an Argentine arms dealer who dealt exclusively in the sales of tanks, rocket launchers and Scud missiles. Not likely... A little looking into a forged extradition request regarding a hijacking that never took place uncovered a second provenance for the explosives and the blasting caps: an IRA supplier operating in San Francisco... who turned state's evidence in 1982.

Two false trails.

Worse. Two false trails laid by a person (or persons) with detailed knowledge of forensic investigation. The kind of knowledge an experienced district attorney had at his fingertips.

Batman shook that troubling notion from his mind and checked the time.

There was more than enough of the night left to round up those old Two-Face henchmen. He instructed the Batcomputer to relay its findings to the Batmobile and set out for the most popular criminal hangouts...

As usual, Catwoman felt a dozen sets of eyes tracking her movements as she entered Vault. Some were subtle: KGBeast and Firefly. (What could they want? Torching

Petrossian and fencing the stolen caviar?) Some were not: Eddie stepped away from a video poker machine, leaving the nearest henchman to play out the hand he'd already paid for while he made a beeline for the stairs to the VIP room. At the same time, a ball of cat-size black fur that appeared to be "napping" on the bar suddenly sprouted cat ears, stretched out into a long sinewy form, and then leapt to the stairs as a magnificent panther.

The three settled in at her booth, drinks and snacks were ordered, and Eddie took out a thin wooden box, the size of a small picture frame, to demonstrate his new contraption.

"I got the idea from ancient Rome. They had most of their documents written out on these wax tablets set into wood cases just like this. Check it out, 'Lina, what is the stuff of bees and trees, but holds the keys (to my next criminal escapade), or just a tease."

"Cute," Selina smiled, while Clayface morphed into a Roman senator and posed dramatically with a document/riddle-box identical to Nigma's.

"Cute? *Cute?! Why, it's more than cute, it's brilliant!* Did you know the Roman calendar had special days set aside where no legal business could be conducted? They were called the *dies nefasti*, which is an anagram for, among other things: FINEST IDEAS!"

"I see why you're excited," Selina laughed.

"There are also several anagrams with 'safes' 'finis' 'fiend'... I tell you, there's no end of the fun I can have with this."

"I'm glad. You haven't had much fun lately. Of course, a safe is also a *vault*, Edward. You get any 'finest ideas' about attacking here, Batman will be the least of your worries."

She said it teasingly, but Senator Clayface growled anyway.

"East Side Fin," Eddie offered as an olive branch.

"Damn straight," Clayface said, returning to his natural glorpy form.

"RANG!" a male voice called from below, and the VIP room collectively winced as the shout doubled into two and then was drowned in a concussive crash of breaking glass, falling wall sconces, and, to the trained ear, a man of at least Maxie Zeus's size being hurled into a jukebox.

"I fear someone got up on the wrong side of the cave," Scarecrow observed with the bored drawl of a seasoned rogue surprised by nothing.

"Well this should be interesting," Riddler said with a satisfied smirk. "'Lina, my pet, I don't think you've ever been here before when ol' Batsy showed up and trashed the place."

"Lucky me," she said flatly, looking daggers at him.

Another loud crash erupted below, followed by a roar from Croc and a loud cry in Russian merging into a different crash. To the trained ear: KGBeast hurled into a table where Croc was sitting, and Croc retaliating with a barstool.

"Want me to handle it?" Clayface asked, morphing his hand into a bat trapped in a birdcage.

"No," Catwoman shrugged. "Either he's just messing with the little mice down there, or else he's coming up here when he's finished. If it's the former, it doesn't concern any of us, and if it's the latter... well, why not let him tire himself out first?"

She was pleased with her edict, as everyone else seemed to be... but she avoided Edward Nigma's eyes all the same. It was only after two more crashes that she dared look his way. She saw his arms crossed and an expression both judgmental and peevish.

Downstairs, it became quiet... then absolutely silent... the kind of silence that meant the Bat was leaving. After a minute, the baseline chatter resumed, and a minute after that, Peahen came up the stairs from the main level. She handed Raven a folded note, which Raven then brought to Catwoman.

It was all very discreet, but veterans from the Iceberg knew the routine: Batman comes in, busts up the place, and leaves a snarling, threatening but cryptic message with Sly for his boss. It starts with a patently unapologetic apology for the mess, then gets to the ominous "... and give your boss a message for me: Tell him that if that cache of diamonds ends up anywhere outside US territory, I'll be back to have a little *chat* with him." Sly never knew what the messages meant, but Ozzy (and anyone else involved in that particular operation) knew it was days or even hours away from a Bat shutdown.

Catwoman read the note impassively, aware that all eyes were on her.

Bat said "Tell your mistress that I'm oh-so-sorry for the disruption and that for a woman of her obvious taste and style, I'd have expected a Van Gogh or two instead of all the high tech vid screens."

"Typical," Catwoman sniffed. Then she stood, telling Clayface and Riddler to enjoy the snack plate she'd ordered. Everyone understood that she had some loot to secure before Batman could find it, and they congratulated themselves on hanging out in a club with such a brazen criminal queen pin running the show.

On her way out, she stopped at the bar—just to tell Sly that she was picking up Riddler and Clayface's tab for the night—and while she was there, she overheard the specifics of what the Bat bust-up was about.

He was looking for a Red Coat operative out of Star City. The man's name was Leonard Berlander.

"Stay away from that Van Gogh."

That echo from the past repeated and reverberated in Selina's brain as she traversed the rooftops towards the MoMA.

"Stay away from that Van Gogh." It was virtually the last thing he'd said to her as Batman, that last encounter before their relationship changed forever.

"I'd have expected a Van Gogh" was definitely a summons to meet on the roof across from the MoMA, and Selina didn't need that *"or two"* to tell her what it was about.

Leonard Berlander was NOT a Red Coat operative out of Star City. Leonard Berlander was a dead thug. One of Harvey's first convictions, one he later found out was innocent. But he couldn't be bothered making it right when he found out. He was busy by then, making war on crime. He was forming alliances with police and vigilantes on rooftops, and burning up warehouses full of Falcone cash with Batman. He was building a case against Salvatore Vincent Maroni, the capo dei capi of the biggest crime family in the state. He was on his way to becoming the most successful

district attorney in Gotham history, and then the youngest Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, or who knows... He certainly didn't have time to worry about little Leonard Berlander.

It was only years later, years after the acid, that Two-Face found out Berlander committed suicide. The reminder that Harvey Dent was not the pinnacle of virtue he liked to remember unleashed an identity crisis of epic and violent proportions. For how could Two-Face be Harvey's opposite if they weren't black-and-white but a mottled and subjective gray?

Catwoman thought over the nightmare encounter that followed, until she neared the MoMA. Batman was waiting on the roof across from their loading dock, right where she expected... even from a distance, he radiated that dark intensity. Everything about his stance said that a light opening about the Van Gogh would be horribly inappropriate.

"That's not a good news face," she observed as she landed.

"**No. It's not,**" he said. It was the severest bat-gravel, the most foreboding how-dare-you-pull-a-gun-in-my-city delivery that could make hardened wiseguys run for cover. Then the bat intensity seemed to blink away. His jaw softened, his whole body seemed less dense.

Selina's heart stopped. Bruce just sent Psychobat out of the room. This was going to be very bad news.

"I have a number of automated routines on the Batcomputer," he began quietly. "Routines specially designed to identify and track potential targets of interest to specific criminals who are active at a given moment. Those having to do with Two-Face obviously track all manner of twos, doubles, Gemini and Janus imagery, twins, binary—"

"I get the idea," Selina interrupted.

"Of course."

He was hedging, delaying the inevitable. He knew it and he hated himself for his weakness, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. There was no way to just blurt it out.

"In addition, the program tracks anyone connected with the acid incident. Everyone connected with the Boss Maroni prosecution, the defense attorneys, jurors, bailiffs, clerks, everyone who was in the courtroom that day, as well as the personnel at the hospital where Harvey was taken..."

"What's happened, Bruce? What did you find?"

Another time, he might have reacted to the name. Tonight, he just looked north towards the river, towards Gotham General Hospital.

"There was a John Doe, a car accident hit and run, in the ICU at Gotham General. The man was apparently on foot, between 97th and Loeb, struck by a stolen mini van."

"You said there *was* a John Doe, past tense?" Selina asked, with a sick apprehension creeping up her throat.

"He's still alive," Batman said swiftly. "He *was*, past tense, a John Doe in that he was unidentified. When it goes to 24 hours and they can't match to a missing persons report, they take finger prints. In addition to convicts and military personnel, there are all kinds of prints in the system, including city employees, including current and former workers in the district—"

"Spit it out, Bruce. Who's lying in that ICU in Gotham General?"

“Vernon Fields, the assistant district attorney sitting second chair the day Sal Maroni scarred Harvey with that acid.”

CHAPTER 5 THE SECOND CHAPTER 4: FULL CIRCLE

The People versus Salvatore Vincent Maroni.

In some ways, Harvey Dent had been waiting for those words all his life. In all the cases he'd prosecuted, never had so much been at stake. The grand jury testimony that preceded the public trial was secret, but one thing was clear: Maroni would not go down alone. He'd spent his life battling Carmine Falcone. He would not leave The Roman to take over the city unopposed. If he went down, he would take his old rival with him. With the two major crime families decapitated, Gotham would be free of an evil that was slowly choking the life out of it.

The People's case had taken two full weeks to present. Everything depended on it. Everything depended on the prosecution being so powerful and decisive that Sal Maroni would have no choice but to take the stand in his own defense. If there was any alternative—if his 'Dream Team' cast doubt on the prosecution's experts, if there were grounds for an appeal should the verdict go against him, or if the jury seemed confused by the complicated interrelationships of the Falcone, Maroni, Viti, and Gazzo families and the rat's nest of buffers, code phrases, and laundering operations meant to separate the top men from the criminal acts they ordered—then Sal Maroni would never risk taking the stand and exposing himself to cross examination.

But Harvey Dent's masterful presentation of the People's case left him no such hope: Dent had foreseen every trap the defense might lay and prepped his experts to respond to each. He had weighed each objection and every response to every pretrial motion, sidestepping every attempt by the defense to manufacture grounds for appeal. And he played on his good looks and personal charisma to charge the driest and most convoluted evidence with a captivating air of intrigue.

The technical procedures by which the garbled voices on an FBI wiretap were processed into audible instructions to murder "Capper Kevin" Kelly were a seduction, nothing less. A crusading D.A. out of a movie thriller taking the jury by the hand and walking them step by step through a forbidden maze of underworld secrets, and the ingenious high-tech means by which modern law enforcement battled them. The jurors were never bored or confused; they were riveted. The intricacies of forensic accounting became a glamorous peek into the high-powered world of international finance. Even the mob's method of taping a gun barrel became a spell of enchantment. When the prosecution rested, Sal Maroni knew he had no hope of acquittal without taking the stand.

"I know all this," Catwoman said softly. "Not that you don't tell it well. But I was in Gotham at the time, if you remember. And it's not like it wasn't all over the news."

They were on the roof the Hudson University Medical Annex across from Gotham General Hospital. Before them was a bank of windows on the west face of the building, behind one of which, Vernon Fields lay in a coma.

"It helps to go over it all, out loud," Batman replied, looking across the street and then down at a hand-held computer console the size of a Palm Pilot. "It's that one. Eighth floor. Twelfth from the left."

He pointed to the row of windows, and then showed her a floor plan on the tiny palm screen.

"I told you I can't get anything from that," she said, waving it away. "It's too small. I like seeing floor plans big."

"There's a larger screen in the Batmobile if you want," Batman offered, but she shook her head.

"No, I'd rather just go over and walk it myself. Do you mind?"

He started to object, then realized it was a reflex and there was absolutely no reason to do so. He grunted, and she left.

Alone again, Batman's thoughts returned to the past, the details he hadn't mentioned to Catwoman. Details of his own culpability, details that haunted him every time he'd faced the monster Harvey Dent had become after the acid:

It was his strategy. Not Harvey's and not Gordon's. He was the one who analyzed the history between Sal and Carmine, a history of personal antagonism that went beyond ordinary mob rivalry. They hated each other. And he was the one who saw how that personal hatred could be used, how targeting one could bring down both if they played it just right.

He was the one who picked Maroni because Carmine Falcone was Roman. Calling his family "The Roman Empire" was pure affectation, but that one detail was literally true. He was not Sicilian or Napolitano. He was an outsider and a maverick within the Italian mobs, and that small consideration might just tip the balance. The Mafia's code of silence was legendary, and even Maroni's personal hatred for Falcone might not be enough to make him turn, but for that one detail. "The Roman" wasn't really one of them. A technicality, certainly, but maybe enough for Sal Maroni to justify the betrayal in his own mind.

It was Batman's strategy. And Harvey Dent had paid the price. Of course they all knew the risk. Cornering a dangerous animal makes it infinitely more dangerous. You can try to predict where it will strike in response, but you can always be wrong.

Maroni's direct testimony was exactly as expected. His lawyer—his real lawyer, Joseph Candoloro, not one of the Dream Team hired guns—walked him point by point over the prosecution's case, and he didn't dispute much of it. He merely claimed that it all pointed elsewhere. Two of his former "associates," Bianciotti and Scuro (rest their souls), were up to a lot of unsavory business on their own before their untimely passing. If wrongdoing went on, it was those two. Rotten to the core they were. That's where ambition like that leads...

On its own, the story was plausible *if* you wanted it to be. Left unchallenged, it was a peg on which a juror could hang a "reasonable doubt" acquittal. But Maroni's fable would not go unchallenged. The court adjourned for the day, and when it reconvened, Harvey Dent would begin the cross examination that would make Gotham history. All he had to do was poke one hole, uncover one lie, present one inescapable inconsistency in Maroni's story. A perjury charge would be nice, but Harvey didn't need that much.

All he needed was for Maroni to see that *this* trial was lost, then he would admit to everything he had to in order to bring down Carmine Falcone.

Two mob empires ended at once. It all came down to what happened when the People versus Salvatore Vincent Maroni reconvened.

When Catwoman returned, the sky was beginning to lighten.

Batman didn't want to leave, but with the mounting evidence that it was Harvey behind the "new" Two-Face, his investigation had to take a new tack: in daylight, as Bruce Wayne.

"I need you to stay here," he told Catwoman. "Go back into the hospital, keep an eye on Fields. If it's Harvey, then Two-Face will have two things on his mind."

"It's not Harvey," she insisted, knowing there was nothing but wishful thinking behind her words.

"I hope not," Batman said, recalling a painful discussion about hope when Harvey's healing was first discovered. "But if it is, then we have to be ready. Once, when I'd rigged his coin, he committed a string of atrocities after he found out. A dozen robberies in a row, sans coin toss, to make up for the times the fix was in. Restoring the fifty-fifty ratio, in his mind."

"So if it's Harvey, then Two-Face has been out of operation for awhile now and he'll want to make up for lost time?"

"Correct. He'll have to restore that balance as he sees it. Like I said, if it's Harvey, then Two-Face will have two things on his mind: a second attempt to kill me, and a second attempt to kill Vernon Fields."

There was seldom a shortage of cameras outside the Gotham City Courthouse, and since his first days as the ambitious new ADA under Roger Garcetti, Harvey knew how to play to those cameras.

His arrival the morning of Sal Maroni's cross examination was pure theatre. You could almost hear the rousing swell of a movie soundtrack as he jogged up the courthouse stairs two at a time, and then, halfway up the stairs, when he stopped and turned back... the statue of Lady Justice was just coming into frame behind him. If anyone had snapped a picture, they would have seen her scales seeming to balance right behind his head... that's the spot where Harvey Dent turned and offered a wink and a wave to his favorite reporters. No time for an interview now, he said with a boyish grin, there was work to be done—but he'd give them all the time they wanted after, just as soon as the court recessed for lunch...

It was a darker and quieter scene as Maroni was brought in through the basement. The handoff from the armed escort from Blackgate to the armed escort at the courthouse was conducted in the grim silence usually reserved for death row inmates on the final walk. The men were handpicked by Jim Gordon, and they were acutely aware of the honor. Hence their silence. They might have been mute. And if Maroni had spoken a word, they would have been deaf as well.

The GCPD wasn't as universally corrupt as some pretended, but there were enough bad apples that honest cops like these were taking no chances. Not when they were this close. Jim Gordon searched Maroni personally.

When he was found clean, Sal Maroni was handcuffed again—an unusual practice. The jury is never allowed to see a defendant in handcuffs, “as it suggests they are criminals...” one of those ironies of the criminal justice system that makes most cops, even the bad ones, physically ill. Given Maroni's resources, however—“resources” being a universally understood euphemism for a phalanx of corrupt police and city officials on his payroll—a deal was struck between the defense attorneys and the officers of the court. Maroni could be handcuffed while being moved through the building, so long as the cuffs were removed in the hall before he was brought into the courtroom itself.

As it happened, just as the cuffs were being unlocked, Vernon Fields stepped out of a little anteroom between courtrooms 7 and 8. He seemed terribly embarrassed to have run into Sal Maroni, and he hurried off. Neither of the guards heard much of what was said: the one's attention was fully occupied watching their perimeter while the other unlocked the cuffs. Both recalled that the bookish little twirp said something about the men's room, and one remembered that he had a little plastic bag with him.

Later, the close circuit cameras would confirm the bag and a close-up identified it as being from Gotham Drugs. Vernon Fields had thrown it away by then, but it was found in the trash outside Courtroom 7. Fields readily admitted that the bag was his. He had stopped on the way into work for eye drops, he said. His eyes got very dry this time of year, he said. He still had the bottle in his breast pocket. He still had the receipt in his wallet.

He swore he was only using the men's room. It was a private one, shared by the judges on either side. He knew he wasn't supposed to be in there, but it was always an awkward business using the public one. Earlier in the trial, he'd run into John Tortericci in the public men's room. There he was at the urinal, unzipped and no way to escape, having to listen to the whole story that everybody already knew: about his beautiful daughter Gina, and how he never thought the Sal Maronis of the world had anything to do with honest people like him, not until that night, and that's why they had to get monsters like that off the street.

Vernon appealed to the officers questioning him, and later to Batman himself: what was he supposed to do? He had been standing there with his dick in his hand, and this grieving father comes up DEMANDING to know if Harvey would cut a deal with Maroni to roll on Carmine Falcone. What was he supposed to do? What would any of them do? He didn't want to risk a second run-in with Tortericci, so he used a judge's toilet. He was sorry, and that's all he had to say.

He had a plausible story. He had a bottle of eye drops in his breast pocket. He had a receipt in his wallet.

But somehow *Sal Maroni* had a bottle of “antacid” “for his ulcer” when he entered the witness box.

Somehow, between the pat down in the basement and confessing to the murder of the Gazzo brothers in the witness box, somehow in those twenty minutes in which he had no contact with anyone except Vernon Fields, Sal Maroni came into possession of a bottle of highly concentrated, hyper-corrosive acid.

The rich, golden liquid splashed liberally into a tall wide-mouthed glass, and Bruce tried to disguise his discomfort in a guileless grin.

This was the double-edged sword investigating Harvey as opposed to Two-Face. The old Two-Face hideouts were just that: The Jekyll and Hyde Club, the Twin Pines Furniture factory, the Double-Bagger Cafe... But too many of Harvey Dent's old haunts were also Bruce Wayne's old haunts. Randolph's, the Hudson Bar, the Gotham Racquet Club, the Yacht Club, the Gentleman's Pub in Gainly, and the one in Merchant Square.

When Bruce planned his itinerary for the afternoon, he'd been struck by the echoes. It was all too familiar, almost depressingly so. Now that he'd spent the day talking to bartenders and maitre d's, it had progressed from "almost depressing" to hauntingly ominous. At the Harvard Club, at the Hudson, at the Knickerbocker, at the Endsbury Grille... They all remembered him. Half the time, before he could say his bit about looking for Harvey, they were pouring him a 29-year Dalwhinnie with a Speyside spring water to back it. He had to act pleased. But as the sharp, aromatic barbs of the prized single malt prickled his nostrils, the rest of the scene pricked his memory. The Dentmeister and the Fop...

He learned a little about Harvey's movements in the preceding weeks, but nothing about those critical last few days. He left word wherever he could for the staff to get in touch if Harvey showed, or if they saw or heard anything of his whereabouts. It wasn't a service they would provide for just anyone; such establishments prided themselves on their discretion. But Bruce Wayne was a very special customer. Not only did he tip well, he even arranged subprime loans for the reconstruction that time a Riddler van crashed through the front windows at Spinelli's, the time Firefly burned down Sushi Ichiban, and even the time Catman's claws scarred up the priceless paneling at the Oak Bar.

Bruce talked to a few owners too, when they were handy. Brian Weiss at the Gentleman's Pub and Ryan Fitz at the Harvard Club... the one surprise came from Anthony Granton, the owner of Le Bistro SoHo. It seemed that Bruce was the second person to come around asking if he'd seen Harvey. That Poison Ivy character from the newspapers was looking for him too. Yeah, Anthony said, she might have tried something with those pheromones she's supposed to have to enslave men. The whole place certainly stank like flowers by the time she left. He just figured she was wearing too much Giorgio.

Bruce changed the subject. He knew Ivy's pheromones had little effect on gay men, but he wasn't sure if Anthony Granton was out, so it was best not to pursue that particular line of questioning. It didn't really matter, the story merely confirmed what he already suspected: Ivy was trying to find Harvey too. Pretty aggressively, from the look of it. As soon as she found out he was missing, she went to work. She didn't have Bruce Wayne's extensive knowledge of his Dentmeister haunts, but she knew where he was living (hence the doorman), and she would know of a few bars and restaurants from the days when they dated as Pamela and Harvey.

Another dead end.

Bruce fished out a business card and left it with Anthony Granton, repeating the usual appeal to give him a call on the off chance that Harvey got in touch.

Despite her vigorous protests that crimefighting wasn't her kink, there was one small corner of the revolting activity where Selina had some rudimentary training. She'd spent six weeks as Carlotta Cipriani, completing a training program to be a bodyguard with an exclusive private protection service in London. It got her the assignment with a visiting American divorcee who happened to be having an affair with Lord Pembroke and was to be a houseguest at Pembroke Castle the weekend the Dowager Duchess Natalia visited with the famous Blue Diamond of Dobrinka in her possession. How Batman got wind of her scheme, she never did find out. The diamond eluded her, but she did retain a number of useful techniques for analyzing a public space, such as a hospital, for unmonitored points of entry, staff routines that could cover the smuggling in of weapons, and similar weaknesses a would-be assassin might exploit.

For one with even that elementary training in the field, Gotham General Hospital was a nightmare.

There were two full pharmacies on the ground floor where outpatients, those being discharged, or even the general public could have prescriptions filled. In addition, there were any number of inter-departmental dispensaries throughout the hospital, and countless prescription pads in the various offices that could produce thousands of fraudulent scripts if they fell into the wrong hands. The hospital's entire security mechanism seemed to be built around access to those drugs and the means to obtain them. If you weren't after Trazodone, Naproxen or Percocet, there was absolutely nothing in your way.

It made access to the hall outside Vernon Fields's room simple enough for Catwoman, she simply removed her gloves and cowl, and covered the catsuit with a raincoat. She could blend in easily, have her whip at the ready if an instantaneous response was needed, and change into the full masked-and-clawed cat in seconds. The problem, of course, was that the infiltration that was so easy for her wouldn't be much harder for anyone else. Even Two-Face, the real thing or a fake, would have no difficulty getting close to Vernon's room. The scarring that was so conspicuous elsewhere would blend in. There were a dozen ways to hide it, from bandages to blood. And if he didn't bother hiding it, in the middle of a hospital, would anyone blink an eye?

"I will never forget the sound of his screaming."

That's what Bruce told Alfred the night it happened.

The writing was on the wall. Dent's cross had opened up six glaring inconsistencies in Maroni's story. He was looking at conviction on thirteen counts of murder, conspiracy to commit murder, loan sharking, racketeering, obstruction of justice, illegal gambling, and tax evasion—in addition to which, he'd now opened himself up to six counts of perjury.

It started. The turn that everyone expected finally began.

"Yeah, I hit Mickey Gazzo and his brother Frankie," Sal said calmly, his mouth set in smug defiance. "We tossed their bodies in the Gotham River. Lotsa wiseguys you're looking for are in the Gotham River. Maybe that's why I got an ulcer from drinking the water..."

In over two hundred hours of wiretaps, Sal Maroni had never mentioned an ulcer, but Harvey didn't catch it. Not that it would have mattered if he had.

"It's been killing me," Maroni went on. "Maybe I got a guilty conscience, huh, Dent?"

Bruce had frozen that moment in his memory and analyzed it from a thousand angles. If Harvey had caught the bit about the ulcer, what would have changed? He wouldn't have seen any danger in the words. He wouldn't have stepped further away from the witness box. He probably wouldn't even have bothered to pursue it, not then, not with the name Carmine Falcone practically hovering on Maroni's lips. No, he would have done exactly what he did do: his job. He would have gone on with the one job he had that day. The moment he had been waiting for his whole life:

"I ask you now, under oath. Didn't you commit all these murders and felonies under direct orders from Carmine 'The Roman' Falcone?"

Maroni's coughing. His reaching into his pocket and pulling out the bottle. None of it would have registered in that moment. Not for Harvey Dent.

"I'll ask you again—"

He saw nothing but the mission. Nothing else. Bruce was sure of it. Maroni's coughing. His reaching into his pocket, pulling out the bottle. "**Kaff Kaff*... one sec... *kaff kaff*... I got something right...*" None of it had any substance for Harvey, not until—

"HERE!"

—the contents of that bottle were flung at him and an inferno of fluorosulfuric acid treated with antimony pentafluoride started burning away his face.

The second challenge at Gotham General Hospital was the ease of creating a diversion. Already there had been two crash calls, and an incident at the 8th floor dispensary when an armed security guard was called to escort a teenage candystriper off the floor in handcuffs. When it was going down, Selina had naturally kept her eye on the security man's gun, and only later did she realize that if it had been a diversion, that's exactly what she was meant to do. While she was watching the guard and his gun, Two-Face could be in Vernon's room smothering him with a pillow.

He wasn't. He hadn't. Vernon Fields still lay in his room, a duet of rhythmic beeps emanating from his heart and brain wave monitors. In retrospect, the incident seemed to be exactly what it looked like, but Selina berated herself all the same.

She returned to her base position in the little waiting area at the end of the hall and picked up a Gotham Magazine. It lived up to the reputation of magazines in hospital waiting rooms, being at least 3 years old. She pretended to glance at the society photos snapped at various events—until she realized she was staring at a picture of herself, Bruce, Dick, Barbara and *ZATANNA: Mistress of Magic*, who was then appearing at a Wayne Foundation Gala to benefit the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic. She fought down her nausea at the sight. Bruce was right from the beginning. Magic was not to be trusted...

And Harvey's healing was magic. If anything had happened to him, if he had somehow become Two-Face again, there was little doubt that magic was to blame.

Selina hated dwelling on such worst case scenarios and turned her thoughts back to the incident with the security guard. What an idiot she had been to question it. For one thing, the whole nursing staff knew the guard. It wasn't like a stranger had brought a gun onto the floor...

At that moment, the elevators pinged and an armed stranger—two, in fact—did walk out onto the 8th floor. Two uniformed policemen... or what *seemed* to be uniformed policemen... approaching the nursing station. Selina held her breath, and mapped an intercept between them... and every person on the floor... and Vernon Fields's door.

I will never forget the sound of his screaming.

That's the way Bruce described it.

Maroni was yelling "Did you really think you had me?!" and people in the gallery called out for towels and a doctor. Vernon Fields was the first out the door, saying he would "go get help." But in all that pandemonium, the sound that burned itself into Bruce's memory was the screaming. Harvey's screaming.

That night, he thought the sound had blotted out all other memories of the man, but before long, other memories returned. His laugh for one. Harvey had a wonderful laugh, particularly when laughing at himself.

Bruce remembered a particularly silly episode with a pair of debutantes who had run away from some dreary afterparty and showed up at a nightclub in Chelsea. Bruce and "the Dentmeister" picked them up and began club hopping with them, in theory, but really leading them a few blocks at a time back uptown to their presumed Park Avenue apartments. The girls caught on when they spotted fellow debs from the same party they'd originally left coming out of the Plaza. After fits of giggling, in which Bruce and Harvey were declared "sneaky-weekys," they decided to go swimming in the fountain.

Bruce knew this maneuver all too well. Drunk debs always wanted to go swimming in the fountain, it was practically a rule of nature. He declined to join them, but Harvey was all for it... With the result that Harvey wound up just as wet as the girls, while Bruce had a warm, dry overcoat to strip off and offer the one, while the other got his dinner jacket. Bruce escorted both girls home, leaving Harvey dripping as he tried to hail a cab—and laughing harder than anyone.

As much as he told himself that "Bruce Wayne" began and ended with the Mission, that his antics with Harvey were nothing but a useful way to boost the playboy image while positioning himself close to a law enforcement insider, the fact was that he did like Harvey personally. He did consider him a friend and, as much as he had fun with anyone in those days, he had fun on those "Dentmeister" escapades.

Which always made it especially painful facing Two-Face.

It took a special kind of discipline to block out the memory of big-hearted, laughing, dripping Harvey when he had to fight Two-Face.

Ironically, the corollary didn't apply. The memories of all those Two-Face encounters had never once intruded after the healing when Bruce resumed friendly relations with Harvey. Why? He knew it was really Harvey committing all those atrocities as Two-Face. He knew it was a part of Harvey's mind, not just his body,

trying to kill Batman all those times. He *knew that...* He was a *rational man of science*, and he knew that Two-Face wasn't a separate entity. He was a part of Harvey Dent. Yet he'd been completely accepting of the healed Harvey. Much more so than Selina was, actually...

Cops. Cops were much worse than hospital security. The nurses didn't know them personally, for one thing. If they were fakes or decoys, who would know? And worst of all, if Two-Face had spotted her, if he recognized her—she refused to believe it was Harvey, but Selina Kyle was known to be Catwoman and whoever it was, they could have recognized her—wouldn't cops be the perfect cover to put Catwoman on edge?

Casually drifting into Vernon's room was automatically dangerous if these *were* the real police, especially before she learned what they were after. So, simply because it was the only thing she could think of that wouldn't arouse suspicion, she waited.

She crossed her legs, picked up the Gotham Magazine again, and then... seeing a picture of Bruce posing with Zatanna and Dinah Lance, she tossed away the magazine in disgust. If the act drew unwanted attention, she didn't even ca—

Uh oh.

It seemed that her flare-up did bring unwanted attention. The nurse looked in her direction, pursing her lips, and then turned back to the two policemen. She said something to them and then walked off, heading right for Selina's chair...

Harvey's laugh. That's why the corollary never applied, that's why Bruce was able to reestablish the friendship with Harvey so easily without lingering resentment of Two-Face.

It was one thing to say, as an intellectual concept, that Two-Face was a part of Harvey Dent's psyche, but it was another thing to *believe* it. For all its psychological validity, Bruce had never felt Two-Face was a part of Harvey, *because of that laugh*.

There is no concealment in real laughter. It is a naked and spontaneous expression of the soul underneath. Harvey's laugh was bright, buoyant, and full of life. He was a man born with many natural gifts, whose life had been an easy one, and it infused his view of the world with a vivacious and optimistic intensity.

Two-Face's laugh was cruel and jeering, full of hatred, bitterness, and malice. The first time Batman heard it, he knew on a deep, gut level that Bruce's friend was gone.

And at that first luncheon after the healing, when he heard that laugh again, he knew Harvey—the real Harvey—was back.

The nurse kept walking... past Selina, past the Gotham Magazine, and right into Vernon Fields's room. She emerged a moment later with a doctor by her side, a doctor who looked unbelievably pissed. He walked up to the policemen and, unable to restrain curiosity, Selina went up to the nurse's station herself. She was able to glimpse the doctor's ID badge and see the name Kevin Yarling, M.D. Keeping her back to the cops as if the whole scene didn't concern her, she leaned over and asked the nurse

where the ladies' room was. As she did, she was able to hear the words "otham medical plate M-25145, a silver Lexus." She stopped at the water fountain and took a long drink, long enough to hear "broken into " and "parking lot."

It wasn't necessary to invent an excuse to hear more. Dr. Yarling swore so loudly that everyone in the hallway could hear. There was no question of eavesdropping, the man was positively raving. It would be futile to pretend she didn't hear, and it would have been ludicrous to feign disinterest.

"AND THAT'S THE SECOND TIME THIS MONTH! WITH WHAT WE PAY FOR THAT PARKING SPACE EVERY MONTH—DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH IT COSTS TO KEEP A CAR IN THIS CITY—AND THIS IS TWICE NOW! TWICE! AS IN TWO TIMES, TWO DIFFERENT TIMES THAT CAR, IN AN OPEN PARKING LOT IN FRONT OF A GODDAMN HOSPITAL FOR CHRIST SAKE—TWICE NOW, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY—BROAD DAYLIGHT! TWO TIMES!"

Selina swallowed. She'd heard a fair number of "two rants" over the years, particularly when Harvey had a few.

That was a two rant.

Just like on Harvey's wedding anniversary any year he wasn't in Arkham, and again on July 16, the date his divorce was finalized. There he'd be, bellying up to the Iceberg bar. Started drinking at 7 as if a new prohibition was going into effect at midnight, and by 9:30, the ranting would begin.

She knew the doctor was upset about his car, but there was a difference—and those who hung out with Two-Face knew how to recognize that difference—between being pissed that whatever bad thing had happened, and being pissed that it happened TWICE.

"Alfred, it's me. I wanted to let you know I'll be spending the night at the penthouse. Scrap any—

"Yes, well I've been leaving word at a number of Harvey's old haunts to get in touch if they see him. The ones that already had my number had that one, and it just seemed logical to keep it consistent and give—

"Yes, I realize that, Alfred, I just—

"Yes... Yes... Yes, because they're also my old haunts, sure. And I was living at the penthouse at the time so there might be a little nostalgia. Alfred, I get it. But the fact is, I have been running around to these places all day, and the penthouse is in the center of town. It's more convenient to almost all the clubs and restaurants, and to the hospital where this Ver—

"Mhm... Mhm... Alfred, can I just—

"Mhm... Yes, yes, I do see. But it's still *my* house *and* my penthouse *and* my choice. I'm spending the night at the penthouse, so you should scrap any dinner plans you had and—

"Well, sure, Selina is staying there too. Why wouldn't she?

"Uh huh, I see, so now you have no problem with it. Fine. Goodbye, Alfred, I'll give you a call in the morni—

"No, we'll get something to eat in town, don't worry about it. *Goodbye*, Alfred."

That did it. Selina was certain, absolutely certain. Two-Face wasn't Harvey. Harvey wasn't Two-Face. It was this Dr. Psycho-Lexus-two-hating-nutcase... Somehow. The guy didn't have any kind of scarring. There was no way someone with Batman's experience could mistake him for Two-Face. But he was Vernon Fields's doctor, and he was a walking, talking, exposed nerve about things happening twice.

Satisfied that the cops were exactly what they appeared, Selina was free to indulge in a bat-vanish without arousing their suspicions. She quickly changed into Catwoman while Dr. Yarling was occupied with the police, and watched from a convenient vent while he resumed his rounds... except he didn't resume rounds. She had to relocate twice to keep an eye on him and cursed obscenely when she saw where he was going:

Up three flights of stairs to the roof. He was having a smoke.

She cursed again. Of all the filthy habits. Of all the dumb ass ways for a so-called health professional to calm himself down. Smoking! It was a pain in the ass trying to follow someone unobserved through a stairwell, and the idiot just wanted a smoke.

While he puffed through two cigarettes—his rabid hatred of the number two apparently did not extend to poisoning his lungs with carcinogens twice in one sitting—Selina imagined how Eddie would spend this time constructing anagrams for “emphysema” and she wondered how many he might come up with.

All she had to do with the time was sharpen her claws, and sharpen them she did...

Full circle. The investigation had come full circle. Bruce had talked to everyone he could at those bars and restaurants which were open in the middle of the day. By the time he'd finished, the nightclubs were opening their doors, or at least the staffs were starting to arrive. When he finished talking to them, it was late enough to return to the lunchtime businesses that had a completely different night shift.

He'd gone back to the Endsbury Grille, the Knickerbocker, the bar at the Hudson, and now... right back where he started at the Harvard Club.

And he felt like he knew nothing more than when he began.

Kevin Yarling was on the move. Catwoman tailed him back down to the eighth floor. He stopped in old woman's room first... Hm...

Yarling had been in with Vernon Fields when the nurse interrupted him to talk to the police, but he didn't go straight back there. He went for a smoke, and now he was checking another patient. The act wasn't suspicious in and of itself, the old woman's room was the first he'd come to exiting the stairwell from the roof.

He went into a young Latino's room next. Then a middle aged black woman... Catwoman had a hell of a time negotiating the vents to keep up with him. She lost him temporarily when he stopped—at the dispensary! SHIT!

She left the safety of the vent even though it risked being seen. She had to find out what he'd signed out.

There was no difficulty getting a look at the clipboard... she almost wished there had been when she saw he'd picked up *a syringe*. That could mean any kind of injectable poison or even air bubbles.

She picked up his trail, he was now in the room of another patient—the room of another patient that was still in a straight line between where Yarling came down from the roof and Vernon Fields’s room. Damn, if this guy was what she suspected, he was one cold blooded bastard. Patient, patient, patient, dispensary, patient, patient... Could anybody be that cool and methodical if they were going to kill a man three more doors down the hall?

Feeling she’d seen enough from this angle, Catwoman ducked into the nearest room. Trailing the doctor had shown her all it needed to, it was time to go directly to Vernon’s bedside and take on all comers. She had avoided that position up until now, because she’d assumed the hospital staff that had to come and go from the room were doing what they needed to in order to keep Vernon Fields alive. But now that one of them was suspect, covert protection was no longer an option. It was time for hiss-growl-snarl-whipcrack you only get to him through me.

She’d made a note of Yarling’s position and his obvious route before moving. He had three rooms to go before he reached Vernon. At his current rate that was 15 minutes minimum, probably 18, possibly 20. Plenty of time to let him out of her sight, access Vernon’s room herself by a feline route, and get prepped before the good doctor’s entrance.

She ducked out the window and made her way along an ample ledge to Vernon’s window. She slid it open, and as she leaned in—WHAM! Her neck wrenched at a double blow, as a huge hand clamped around her throat pulling her inside and an equally huge fist smashed into her face, slamming her backwards into the wall.

“Tsk, tsk, Kitty. This isn’t your litter box,” Two-Face said venomously.

Catwoman managed a moan while her eyes regained the ability to focus. Her assailant seemed all too happy to stand there while his blurry image clarified.

“Harvey?” Selina gasped.

He offered a gracious quarter-nod, like an actor acknowledging applause without taking a formal bow.

“You’re still the only one we allow to call us that in the field,” he said amiably. “At least, you are the only one from whom we do not regard it as a sickeningly transparent attempt to appeal to our ‘better half.’ Indeed, we rather *like* the sound of our name on *your* lips, Selina. We like to imagine it cried out in mindless ecstasies of unbridled passion.”

CHAPTER 6: WHAT THE...

That hurt.

Head-back-wall. Fist-stomach. That just *hurt*.

It wasn't the first time I'd been hit in the stomach. It wasn't even the first time I'd been hit in the stomach *by a friend*. Whether that desensitized me or made the moment that much worse wasn't really something I could stop and ponder.

"We don't know why you would want to involve yourself in something like this, Catwoman."

There was a more pressing issue.

"What possible difference could it make to you if this miserable mamma's boy lives or dies?"

After Batman, and maybe Croc, Two-Face has the best right cross in town.

"Normally, we wouldn't say no to having company on a job."

He'd gone to Vernon Fields's bedside, satisfied that I was down and staying there.

"In addition to the '2' principle, there is your very tight ass, which we can never get enough of looking at."

There isn't much to work with in a coma room. No crash cart or paddles.

"But not on this one. This is personal. We wish to send aAAAARGH!"

But there was one of those tables on wheels.

"AURNNGHHH!"

With the tabletop just about crotch-height.

"oooooungh"

Then I kicked him.

"ooph"

Unfortunately, he caught the leg and came down hard on my thigh.

"aorlg"

Then backhanded me onto the floor.

He turned back to Vernon like the whole tussle was nothing but a commercial break in the middle of his favorite TV show. I wanted to stall him somehow, but another attack didn't seem viable. He was *playing* it casual and oblivious, but he knew I wasn't finished and he was on hyper alert. He'd know the moment I started to move... so I tried words instead.

"That's twice I've been smacked into something hard, Harvard. I don't remember any damn coin being flipped."

This couldn't really be happening, could it?

Harvey?

It was supposed to be Doctor Two-rants. It was decided. It was Dr. Crazy. He had a thing about the number two. Who has a hissyfit about the number two?!

He didn't have any scars, but somehow he was the answer. Somehow *he* was the new Two-Face... not Harvey.

It couldn't be Harvey.

"It was," he snarled without looking my way. "It was flipped for Vernon, our personal Judas. Your appearance here is, regrettably, covered by that flip. So do stay out of our way, Pussy Puss. We would not wish to see that delectable ass bruised from further collisions with that very hard-looking floor."

"Covered by the Vernon flip? You're making this shit up as you go along, Harvey. Don't think it doesn't show."

"Two-shay. But as we were saying, much as we would normally welcome a second on any job worth doing, the extermination of this Vernon excrescence is a private matter we will carry out ourselves. If you'd like to stick around, we would be happy to bring you along for Part 2 of tonight's festivities." He turned and displayed a slow, lascivious leer before adding "We *know* how you enjoy a Bat run-in."

It was him.

It was really him.

I couldn't make my brain believe what my eyes were seeing, but it was really fucking HIM!

Throughout his history as Two-Face, no one has ever been able to accurately depict the division on Harvey's face. Police sketches, "artist renditions" in the newspapers, and even shape-shifters like Hagen and Martian Manhunter, no one has ever got it quite right. Contrary to what most people assume and even what eye-witnesses perceive, the division that separates one side of his face from the other is not a perfectly straight line down the center. There are little variances that only someone who has looked at that face for extended periods of time can pick up on. When you're looking at the face behind the double-barrel of a shotgun, I'm sure all you see is *TWO-FACE: right-side normal/left-side scarred*. But when you've sat across the table for hours during a poker game, you start to see the nuances—particularly when he has three of a kind or a full house, and theme starts vying with greed. Anyway, the dividing line is a bit jagged all the way down, shifting with the contours of his face. It jogs a bit down the bridge of his nose, the result of a few too many 'Berg fights (speaking of Croc's right cross) and improper medical care (read: Crane or Hugo) attempting to fix the nose-breaks. Then the line curves a bit under the nose, leaving Harvey's original philtrum intact before curving back across the top lip. It doesn't slice straight through the cleft in his chin either, but slants a bit about halfway through.

That's the face I was looking into. Every detail.

It was really him.

"And do we flip for that?" I asked, just for something to say to keep his attention on me and off Vernon for a few extra seconds.

"You can be the bait, and we'll swing the sledge hammer," he said (which apparently meant no coin flip for Batman). "But for now, we've got some unfinished business with the vegetable."

He held up a vicious-looking dagger.

"Two-pronged, double edge, double blade," he declared unnecessarily.

"Bullwhip," I said, matching obvious for obvious.

I aimed for his forearm and snared it neatly before getting to my feet. I tugged hard, forcing his weapon from his hand. It landed on the floor, but too far away for me to pick up or kick out of his reach.

“Bad move, Kitty,” he said, flicking something at me with his free hand. I felt a dull poke in my upper left arm, and the realization hit a split second before I saw the blade sticking out of it—he had a second knife.

“That one’s only double-bladed,” he said apologetically, yanking the whip free from my other hand and throwing it out the window.

“We didn’t want to do it this way,” he said, picking up the original two-pronged weapon and pointing it at me. “And we won’t tell you a second time to stay out of things that don’t concern you. We would get no pleasure stabbing you twice.”

He looked at the handle of the blade sticking out of my arm, and then at me. The silent threat was as clear as the spoken one, and I took a step away, keeping the arm out of his reach. We locked eyes. There was no question that it was Harvey’s face, but there was no trace of “Harvey” in those eyes—and there was no doubt he was ready to make good his threat.

My arm was really starting to hurt. There wasn’t much blood yet, but there would be if I didn’t get it seen to. There would be if the blade wedged in there was yanked out violently. And there would be if another exchange of blows started my heart pounding faster and harder.

Without warning, Two-Face lunged for my arm, but this time, when I moved away, he was ready. He countered mid-lunge, ramming his head into my chest and forcing us both back against the wall. Then he put his hand on the blade handle, and as he started pulling it out, he was ever so slowly giving it a twist.

It hurt.

A lot.

I was starting to see white, when I heard a cry of pain that wasn’t mine. I fought down a sick breathlessness, trying to focus. At first I couldn’t feel anything but a pulsing nausea that rose and fell with my heartbeat and the excruciating throbbing in my arm. Then I realized it was a man’s cry that I’d heard, Two-Face’s cry, and that he was holding his right forearm in his left hand, cursing a blue streak and stamping his foot to blot out some serious pain of his own. Now the details came in a flood as I saw there were three batarangs protruding from his arm, a batline dangling outside the window, and flashes of movement whirring in front of me. Batman’s fist was pounding Two-Face step by step across the room... until the rhythmic smacking sounds stopped when they reached the far wall, the exact point farthest from both Vernon and me.

Then came the menacing gravel, soft and ominous.

“Stop now, Two-Face. Or you’ll regret it.”

I could barely make out the words. Batman knows that quiet and menacing is infinitely more effective than the angriest shouts. But even the calm, insistent menace of the Psychobat was a bit off. I’m sure no one else would notice, even to Two-Face he must seem like the Bat in full Bat-mode. But I knew it was Bruce under that mask, and I knew he was seeing the same irrefutable details that I had. I knew that’s why his jaw was clenched exactly as it did when he found me at Cartier’s. I knew that’s why he had to shift his weight after the final punch, because his recoil left him slightly off balance.

To the world, that was just Batman being Batman. But to me, it was the man inside reeling from a recognition nut-kick.

Two-Face only laughed at the threat:

"We've had your best, Batman. No beating you can dish out is too high a price to pay, not for this. Not for sweet vengeance, not for ending Vernon Fields once and for all."

"I'm not talking about physical retribution," Batman said darkly. "I mean your worst nightmare—worse than *your* nightmares, Two-Face. A fate so terrible, for you, that the possibility has never even occurred to you, not in your blackest imagined hell... You've become Harvey Dent's patsy."

"NO!"

"Yes. I've been to the Harvard Club. I've been to the North Gainsly Parking Garage. I've been to the apartment on 23rd Street."

"NOOOOmph!"

"Shut up."

Batman silenced the outburst with a gut punch, and then continued as casually as Two-Face had earlier.

"You have no reason to hate Vernon Fields, Two-Face. He made you. That's why you never tried to kill him before, isn't it? You propose the crimes and Harvey opposes. But why would you propose going after Fields? If it wasn't for him, you never would have seen the light of day. This is *Harvey's* vendetta. *He's* the one that hates Fields."

The silence held for frozen, breathless seconds before Batman said:

"He's the one that tried to murder Vernon Fields once already."

"What?" I gasped.

"Catwoman, you're in a hospital. Go get your arm patched up," Batman spat.

"Fuck that. What's this about Harvey killing people?"

Two-Face cleared his throat and looked... embarrassed.

"Ah, Cat, maybe you should go," he agreed meekly.

I took a step closer to both of them, despite having lost enough blood by now that I was a bit wobbly.

"Why? Something you don't want a fellow rogue to hear, *Darth*?"

Poison Ivy did not like detective work.

Her objections were more philosophical than Catwoman's. Roaming around like this was an attribute of the animal kingdom. Plants, by their superior nature, took root where their needs could be met. They drew what nutrients they required from their surroundings and gave oxygen, beauty, and calm serenity in return.

Animals hunted. Male animals especially, when it came to humans. They were the hunter-gatherers, forever roaming and seeking like beggars. The vagabonds of nature, that's what they were, hoping to get lucky and stumble upon something they could consume. It was so undignified. When plants were predators, they kept their dignity, drawing in their prey with a pleasant lure. That is the kind of hunting she was suited to: presenting her beauty to the helpless male in all its leafy glory, until he came close enough to inhale her scent and know the irresistible craving for the green. Not this

degrading *walking* all over town: walking over concrete, walking through the least organic parts of the city, walking in shoes that got caught in the subway gratings.

It wasn't the first time Ivy had to find someone or find out about someone. When a publisher or a manufacturer went too far, strip mining a beautiful meadow or raping an ancient forest, she found them. Deed transfers, articles of incorporation, annual reports, and then reverse directories, Who's Who in American Business, or sometimes, the social register. She found who, she found where they were *and* how to get at them, and she seldom had to go farther than the Internet café across from Riverside Park to do it. Occasionally, she had to venture out to a public library, but then she only had to find a receptive librarian. Her newly devoted slave would conduct all the dreary research on his own and bring the results to her in her lair (often with some little trinket or love token, such as the contents of his savings account or his wife's jewelry).

Finding executives had never entailed this kind of legwork. Compared to the John Forbes and Bruce Waynes of the world, Harvey was proving ridiculously hard to track down.

If I hadn't been busy trying to keep Vernon Fields alive, stay alive myself, and figure out what the hell Batman was talking about, it might have occurred to me before then that we'd all been making a fair amount of noise and no one from the hospital had come to investigate. I realized now. Either Two-Face had found a way to harness *dumb luck*, or he'd arranged a diversion to keep the staff occupied on the far side of the building.

He'd arranged a diversion to cover what he expected to be a simple, two-minute murder, not a protracted confrontation with Catwoman and then Batman. His time ran out, the door swung open, and that doctor, who had a two-fixation to start with, came running in before he saw what he was getting into.

When he saw a room full of Batman, Two-Face, and Catwoman, he froze. Two-Face seized the moment, punched Batman, and lunged at the doctor, swinging him into a choke hold. The batarangs still wedged in his arm pressed against the doctor's throat, and Batman's manner shifted instantly from Dark Avenger to hostage negotiator.

"Two-Face, don't do anything rash," he said, stretching out his fingers so we could see he wasn't palming a batarang. "You're only here in this hospital because of Harvey. Don't let *his* agenda force you into anything."

Rather than go out the door (the non-Rogue, ordinary criminal's move that brings a SWAT team and a camera crew from Channel 6), Two-Face simply walked Dr. Yarling across the room and then threw him into me. Before any of us could react, he'd gone out the window on the batline Batman left hanging there.

It's a good trick. I've done it myself.

Naturally, I never had the chance to see the look on Batman's face on those occasions.

I saw it now. Not a pretty sight.

He took a second he really didn't have to look over Yarling, my bleeding arm, and Vernon's bed, before he followed Two-Face out the window.

The Gotham Intercontinental Hotel. It wasn't a park, but Ivy found it something of an oasis in the midst of all the concrete and car exhaust. How often had she and Harvey actually stayed there, four times? Five? Not enough to be sentimental about. It was just a quiet place to stop for a few minutes and rest her feet, that was all.

She didn't even *like* the hotel at the time. "Fresh flowers flown in daily from Holland," the sick bastards. "Toiletries from the finest cologne makers in France," as if grinding up the rarest blossoms nature could produce was something to brag about.

She'd held her tongue, of course. She had a cover to maintain. Harvey had picked the hotel because it was near the courthouse, handy for a matinee or to meet for a quick drink in the Scampi Lounge (where the wholesale massacre of fruits and berries really got out of hand). They'd meet for a drink as if they were about to set off for a night on the town, and once or twice they actually did go out instead of slipping upstairs to the room she'd booked as Daisy Chloris of Persephone Pines, Montana.

If anything, the associations from those days were negative. She certainly wasn't stopping back at the Scampi Lounge for sentimental reasons. She certainly didn't *want* to remember that first fling with Harvey. He was nothing but a useful convenience back then, a city official to be enslaved, used, and then disposed of. She had no affection for him.

And the only reason she'd taken up with him later when he became Two-Face was for the novelty, not because of any lingering attachments or fond memories of the man he had been.

She and Two-Face had no special places. It wasn't that kind of a relationship. So there was absolutely no reason to be sitting here now, other than resting her feet.

If one has to be stabbed, I'd have to say doing it in the middle of a hospital is the way to go. If you also have the chance to help a surgeon to his feet when he's just been in the middle of a hostage standoff, so much the better. Alfred couldn't have been more solicitous stitching up my arm than this Dr. Yarling. He was a brain surgeon, literally, but he wouldn't hear of sending me down to the emergency room to be treated by lesser mortals—not when I'd been wounded by that thrice-damned two-headed monstrosity. He had to do it himself.

Naturally, I was expected to join in his wholesale condemnation of the "thrice-damned two-headed monstrosity." The beast had thrust a knife into my arm and then twisted it for fun. I knew what I was supposed to say, I knew how I was supposed to behave... but I couldn't really get into the spirit of it. Harvey was Two-Face again. And Two-Face was toting a mad-on that would make Genghis Khan suggest an anger management program might be in order. The question of *HOW THE HELL IT COULD HAVE HAPPENED* screamed in my head, shouting down a chorus of quieter but more practical questions like *What now? What did this mean? What was the backlash going to be after all those months of a fully healed Harvey? Was the new Darth-dominant Two-Face a permanent thing or would he eventually get back to the half-psycho/half-lovable-ol'-Harvey that everyone knew?*

I had too many questions to join in with the righteous indignation Dr. Yarling expected. He chalked it up to trauma and blood loss. Tactfully changed the subject to something I would find easier. He asked about my claws: the way the gloves were

made, the slit in the top where the points came through. It was pretty amazing really, the way he faked an interest. I guess a brain surgeon doesn't get a chance to do the whole "bedside manner" bit very often.

When I was stitched up, he called a dermatologist up from the third floor to consult on the best ointment to prevent scarring. While we waited for that prescription to be filled, he brought me a cup of coffee from the doctors' lounge instead of letting me drink the cheap swill from the vending machine. I think if I'd asked, he'd have peeled me a grape.

Of course, the downside of having a very attentive surgeon patch you up and then escort you through the hospital is that it virtually requires you to leave by the front door. I only barely managed to escape the wheelchair treatment, and I suspect that was only because he'd seen my claws up close and knew they were too sharp to argue with. But I was in still costume and it was still daylight, yet there I was strolling out the front door into midday traffic. The best I could manage was to do the thank you-and-goodbye bit with Dr. Yarling, pretend to hail a cab, and then sprint around to the back of the building and go back inside through the emergency room.

The emergency receiving area is filled with TVs, and that's when I saw the Batman/Two-Face pursuit was all over the news. GCN was looping footage of the Batmobile chasing a stolen ambulance up 5th Avenue (and omitting the part where their own helicopter caused the traffic snarl that enabled the ambulance to get away).

It took me ten minutes to get up to the roof, and only then could I check for messages. There were two. One from Bruce saying we'd be at the penthouse tonight. One from Batman saying the ambulance was found abandoned at the corner of Fleeting and 2nd. If that was a joke, it was Harvey's and not Batman's, that's for sure.

I took a rooftop route to the penthouse and was surprised to see Bruce had beaten me.

"I brought sesame noodles," he said dryly.

Really, when you stopped to think about it, it was perfectly natural that Ivy was thinking more of that first, brief affair with Harvey than the longer, tumultuous relationship with Two-Face. She was visiting their old places: Bistro SoHo, Fusion, New Paradise, and even Scampi at the Intercontinental (although just to rest her feet).

She was going back to all their old places, and she was wracking her brains trying to remember more. Not just the spots they visited together, but places he had mentioned. So, of course, she was thinking more of the milquetoast D.A. than the volatile rogue. It made perfect sense. There were two Harvey Dents, after all, and the one she was seeking bore a greater resemblance to the first one. Now that he was "Fullface," he was going back to his old habits and avoiding the Two-Face crowd. He wouldn't be at the Iceberg (or Catty's ridiculous substitute, whatever it was called), he would go back to Bistro SoHo and the Scampi Lounge.

There was nothing sentimental about it. This was the proper way to look for him.

The meal was somber. It began in near silence, apart from a request to pass the soy sauce and a cough. Then Bruce wiped the corner of his mouth with a napkin and took a sip of water. In those few seconds, the density shift occurred and Selina knew the next words she heard would be spoken by Batman.

"Well, it could have gone better," he graveled.

"Ya think?" she replied.

Silence returned for another few bites. Then Selina sighed.

"I can't believe it. Harvey..."

"That wasn't Harvey," Bruce said quickly. "It was Two-Face and only Two-Face. It's Harvey's body but that's it. That's why he's not flipping the coin. There's no dissenting opinion in his head, no opposition that has to be satisfied."

"Okay, wait, reality check. Two-Face *is* a part of Harvey. I mean, I know we all talk about him like some freeloading Neanderthal cousin who's been staying on Harvey's couch for too long, but he is part of Harvey Dent."

"Not in Harvey's mind. For years, he separated himself from his own worst instincts. You remember the Leonard Berlander mess. He'd been thinking 'Harvey-good; Two-Face-evil' for so long, he'd forgotten that, pre-acid, he had flaws like everyone else."

"Yes, I remember... It was memorable."

A stiff silence followed as they both replayed a fight they'd had in the course of that episode, the first since they'd become a couple, and the worst. After a moment, Bruce reached out and took Selina's hand.

"I'm sorry but we do need to focus on this."

"Yeah," she nodded. "'For years, separated himself from his own worst instincts,' continue."

"And once Jason 'healed' him, once in *his* mind Two-Face was gone because the scars were gone, he went back to living as Harvey Dent, but not the Harvey he had been before the acid. The Harvey he'd become."

"Two-Face's opposite," Selina whispered.

"Yes. He's been suppressing every negative thought and impulse without realizing it. It was a psychological powder keg. When he saw Vernon Fields again after all those years, it went off."

"That's what you meant when you were talking to Two-Face, about Harvey trying to—"

"To murder Vernon Fields, yes. I spent the day going around to Harvey's favorite haunts. I had to go back to the Harvard Club to talk to the dinner shift, and I hit rush hour traffic. There's a human tidal wave of commuters coming out of the 23rd Street station heading for the East City Park hub, and they all pass right in front of the Harvard Club window. It reminded me of a notation on the Vernon Fields paperwork at Gotham General, a handwritten notation because his insurance hadn't processed a change of address. Six weeks ago, Vernon Fields moved to a new apartment on 23rd Street."

Selina moistened her lips thoughtfully.

"So he could have walked right past the window while Harvey was sitting there," she murmured.

"And Harvey snapped," Bruce said darkly. "I went to the apartment. The clean up was good but... rushed. It was obviously the true scene of the crime. I didn't take the time to harvest evidence, but I sealed it. I'll send Robin tomorrow for that. It's good experience for him."

"If you're farming it out to the sidekicks for experience, that means you already know what it will turn up."

Bruce swallowed hard before answering; he stared darkly into space, his mind's eye locked on the one crime he hated more than any other.

"It will reveal all the forensic markings of a homicide. Blunt force trauma to the head, and when the victim was prostrate, kicking. Fields's injuries were always ambiguous. There was no reason to doubt the hit-and-run at the time because there was a police report. But the police never spoke to a witness who actually saw a vehicle hit Fields. All they had was a 9-1-1 call that *reported* a hit-and-run, and a body in the middle of a newsstand that had obviously been totaled by a mini van. There was plenty of transfer paint on the remnants of the newsstand, but none that I'm aware of on Fields himself."

"And you found the van at this parking garage?"

"No, that was a guess. Two-Face would have no trouble stealing any car he wanted, but he wouldn't take something off the street. Moving a body, he'd want the cover of a garage. And he wouldn't want to go far from the apartment. So..."

"You say 'the garage in North Gainsly' and he assumes you've been to wherever he got the van."

"Correct."

"You said *Two-Face* would have no trouble stealing a car. What happened to 'Harvey' as your would-be killer?"

"I believe Harvey found himself in Vernon Fields's apartment, looking down on what he thought was a dead body. He's never been able to accept the realities of his dark side. He couldn't face the truth of what he'd done: he himself, the 'good guy,' not 'Darth Duality,' had killed a man. So he took refuge in Two-Face. He flipped a coin. His scars returned..."

"And everyone would assume Two-Face had done it. Two-Face, the patsy."

She let out a low whistle.

"To his way of thinking, it is the perfect alibi," Bruce added. "But I believe the 'alibi' was the secondary goal. His primary purpose was to hide from the truth of what happened. To hide it from himself, not the rest of us."

The Scampi Lounge mimosa. As if it wasn't enough to take an orange, so unique and fragrant and perfect in its natural state, and grind its poor defenseless body until it was pulverized, eking out the last drop of its precious nectar to satisfy decadent human cravings. As if that wasn't enough savagery for one day, that beast of a bartender must then pour in the essence of champagne grapes, just as rare and perfect in their natural state and just as cruelly ripped from the mother vines that gave them life, just as cruelly pressed and processed until there was nothing left but liquid... Then, finally, adding insult to injury, they dropped in the lifeless corpse of a red raspberry for no

reason whatsoever. Just to be mean. Their "special touch." May the bastards rot in hell for eternity.

How many of those wretched beverages had she consumed when she was with Harvey? Just because the Lounge made it a specialty and just because their breakfasts were a bliss without which no overnight stay at the Intercontinental was complete. "You have to try the Belgian waffle" (with more raspberry corpses, oh joy)... or the pancakes (lingonberry bodies this time, for variety). Even their afternoon quickies, they'd order room service and more champagne and strawber...

This was pointless.

Goddesses were not suited to nostalgic reminiscence any more than plants were suited to hunting.

Why did she even care what became of Harvey Dent? He certainly never cared what became of her. He only came to see her that one time after his face healed, and that was only to end things his way instead of Two-Face's. As if it mattered. Her relationship with him pre-Two-Face was nothing but a lie and a con so she could use him and then kill him. If anybody was going to leave it at "fuck you, bitch," it should have been him. Of the three of them, he was the one most entitled to be nasty, but rather than leave it where they...

Oh dear.

Harvey was quite a wonderful man.

"So we've really lost him," Selina said softly.

"No," came the instant reply, and Selina was surprised to hear it spoken in the Bat-gravel. "Harvey might have tried to vanish completely into Two-Face, but he's still in there."

"Not based on anything I saw," she said, touching the bandage over her stitches.

"Selina, you said you were in Gotham when he ran for D.A. Do you remember his campaign slogan? 'I believe in Harvey Dent.' All the corruption back then, the mobs running the unions, the dirty cops, the dirty D.A.s... And he stepped into the middle of it, without a mask. 'I believe Harvey Dent can look Evil in face and win.'"

"He didn't. Bruce, he looked Evil in the face and Evil took a bottle of acid out of its pocket and scarred up everything Harvey Dent was and dreamed of being. You dropped out of the picture. You didn't really know who he was after the acid. You're in no position to judge what he—"

"And *you* dropped him after the healing, Selina. When we first got together, Harvey was your best friend among the rogues. After his face was healed and Two-Face was out of the picture, you started spending more and more time with Nigma."

"That's not true, I just... shit, I guess it is true."

"I think I understand why, but it doesn't change the fact that if I 'don't know who he became after the acid,' *you* don't know who he's become in these months since he got his life back. I've seen a lot more of him, I've talked to him as Bruce and as Batman, and I am in a position to judge. It was true then and it's true now: I believe Harvey Dent can look evil in the face and win. He didn't then, you're right. But he can. He has the courage to beat this."

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be difficult here, but I just don't see where you're getting this."

"A punctured lung. One of the complications when Fields reached the hospital. Someone had performed CPR hard enough that they drove a piece of his ribcage into his lung. Someone was fighting like hell to save that man's life, and it certainly wasn't Two-Face. It wasn't anyone at the scene of the staged hit-and-run, I checked. It had to be Harvey. When he realized Fields wasn't dead, he fought his way through Two-Face—through a Two-Face he himself released only minutes before, a Two-Face that was a hundred times stronger than he'd ever been after being pent up all that time—Harvey fought his way back to keep Vernon Fields alive. He's still in there, and there's still good in him."

"Why am I not convinced?" Selina sighed.

Bruce suppressed a lip twitch as a line from the past suggested itself.

"Because one of us has to be the brooding vortex of despair."

"Ah. No wonder you scowl so much. This sucks."

"A naughty grin suits you better," Bruce admitted, kissing her cheek lightly.

She forced a smile, then said "I don't make a habit of this, but I'm going to get drunk tonight."

Bruce froze for a second, a chain of thoughts falling like dominos.

"Oh my god," he graveled as the final thought fell into place. "Two-Face's last hideout... Vault!"

~~CHAPTER 7~~ THE SECOND CHAPTER 6

"Batman?"

The caped figure continued to stare silently at the horizon. He didn't turn, he didn't speak, he didn't even grunt. Most people would assume he hadn't heard. Robin and Nightwing would know that he had, and would assume the lack of response meant he was ignoring them. His teammates in the Justice League would know he had heard too, and they would either take it as a personal insult, because the arrogant Bat was such an elitist shithead that he didn't think anyone could possibly have anything to say that he didn't already know, or they would just shrug. Only Catwoman understood the particular gradients of a Bat-silence. That particular one meant he had heard (a given), knew the subject she was about to introduce (always likely), and also that he had been wondering when she was going to get around to it. The lack of a "back off" signal meant that now was as good a time as any and she was free to continue.

"You do realize that this insane scheme of yours forfeits your right to any future proclamations about the Rogue intellect and the screwy perceptions of the criminal mind or the crazy plots they cook up in order—"

"First, this isn't a scheme."

"You don't imagine calling it a protocol will make it any less screwy, do you?"

"It's not a protocol. It's not a scheme. It is merely seeking out the individual best qualified to reach Harvey and persuading her to help us."

"And if that person was Lucius Fox or Claudia Muffington or Eddie or even that two-crazy Dr. Yarling, I'd be right there with you, Handsome. But Ivy? There is no way you can involve that woman without the words 'screwy scheme' entering into the conversation."

Batman looked out at the horizon towards Robinson Park, and then back down at the Flick Theatre, the former Two-Face hideout that now housed the Vault nightclub. The doors opened, and several groups exited at once: Catman with a groupie. Hugo Strange alone. Kiteman and Mad Hatter with two groupies dressed alike in Riddler-themed costumes and matching wigs, like a pair of question mark twins. A DEMON minion followed that group (obviously one of the intelligence-seeking minions, not those who ventured into the Iceberg for un-DEMON-sanctioned recreation). Several Ghost Dragons brought up the rear with a very drunk Scarecrow henchman.

"Last call," Batman graveled. "The big exodus is starting now. In half an hour, Sly will start ejecting the stragglers. I want to stay until the staff leaves, but you can head home if you want. Get some sleep for tomorrow."

"No, I'll stay," came the instantaneous reply.

"Selina, he's not going to hit the club tonight. He needs time to assemble his forces. Men and weapons if it's to be a full out assault, or else—"

"If he's not hitting it tonight, then why are we here? Hm?"

"In case."

"That's what I thought. 'In case.' That's why you're here. That's why I'm here. That's why you're staying until the last employee has left, and that's why I'm—"

"Being an utterly impossible woman," Batman grumbled under his breath.

"Love you too, meow," she replied crisply.

Below, a dark stretch limousine pulled silently up to the curb just as King Snake left with an entourage of more Ghost Dragons. All but one followed their leader into the car. The one who had lagged behind (just a little too casually to Batman's eye) now looked around suspiciously, first up and down the street, and then up at the rooftops. Batman took a step back from the edge of the roof to avoid any cape movement giving him away, while the Dragon drifted carelessly (again, it was a bit *too* carelessly) towards a side door. He opened it... and the waitress Peahen emerged, ending the mini-drama and confirming the detective's maxim that the simplest explanations are often the most likely. The two of them walked off together, the bar regular placing his hand on the cocktail waitress's backside as they disappeared together down the street... and Batman grunted.

The simplest explanation is always the most likely.

Yet he had devised the most improbable theories to convince himself the new Two-Face was anyone other than Harvey Dent.

"How's the arm," he asked Catwoman abruptly.

"A little stiff. I'm just lucky it's not my whip arm."

"You're lucky about more than that. You should go home. Rest it. Take a painkiller. Get some sleep. The morning is going to be... challenging."

"Yeah, it is. I think I'll save the thought of a pain pill for after we've seen Poison Ivy."

Garden apartments are the most coveted dwellings in Gotham City, and the terrace of the Wayne Penthouse, which stretched across a full two faces of the building, was graced with a magnificent assortment of potted trees, shrubs, and flowers, creating a private park of unrivaled beauty. From a distance, Selina appeared to be a picture of contentment as she made the rounds from one terracotta planter to the next. Someone watching from the nearby Moxton Tower, for example, would see only the antique copper watering can in her hand, and her scrutinizing each plant she came to, judging if it appeared healthy or needed a drink. If that someone had binoculars, they would even see her lips moving as if she was talking to the plants as she made her rounds.

Of course, if, in addition to binoculars, the someone also had a radio receiver in his cowl and was, in fact, the party being addressed through the microphone Selina wore, a very different picture would emerge:

...:Not like there's any shortage of crazy in this business, but inviting Queen Chlorophyll over for breakfast, for Bast's sake...:

"You said yourself she's a morning person," Batman answered. "Plants and sunlight, remember?"

...:I also said that I could go to her lair like before. I thought the one subject where we were in complete agreement was that Poison Ivy should be kept as far from Wayne-Anything as humanly possible. You don't want her anywhere near the caves, and I don't want her anywhere near the gardens, not at the manor and not up here. You remember the last time she came to the penthouse?...:

"Yes, and I want *her* to remember. I want to tap into those feelings of abandonment that led her to come after Bruce Wayne in the first place. I want her subliminally

reminded at every turn. She was desperate, she was lonely, and she was fixating on you as a symbol of what she wanted and didn't have. All of that works in our favor."

...:You know, normally I just love it when you're a heartless, manipulative bastard, but I fail to see how her envying me gets us anywhere....

"Because you can't do this, only she can. You have to ask her for help. If her positive feelings for Harvey aren't enough, maybe her negative ones for you will help it along."

...:Why do I have a feeling the next thirty minutes are going to top the knife twisting in my arm for the shittiest part of this adventure....

"I think we both know what the 'shittiest' part of this is."

...: ... :...

"..."

...:Yeah....

"Did you get any sleep last night?"

...:No. You?...

"..."

...:Batman?...

"Stand by. There's a green cab pulling into Wayne Plaza."

...:Sounds like showtime....

"... Negative. It's a man getting out. False alarm."

...:Figures. Goddesses seldom arrive early....

"Just as well. Gives us a chance to review the plan one last time. The key to persuading a personality like Isley's—"

...:Hey, Sensei, may I remind you that my people were singing *The Ballad of Humoring Pamela* back when your crowd thought it was as simple as 'plant woman enslaves men with pheromones'?...

"The key to persuading a personality like Isley's is making her see it's in her best interests, not his or ours. Appeal to her self-love, her desire for personal gratification, the need to be the center of the drama."

...:In other words, tell her the truth. She is the only one who has an intimate connection with both Harvey and Two-Face, before the acid and after. She is the woman for the job. It's not a subtle point of 'rogue psychology'; it's the simple fact. That really isn't the stumbling point, in my opinion....

"And what, in your opinion—"

...:She might think the new guy is an improvement....

"..."

...:She's had all Harvey. She's had half-and-half. She might think all Two-Face and no Harv is the cat's me—...

"Stand by. Another cab... A woman getting out this time, wide brim hat... red hair, long raincoat..."

...:Then it's five minutes to curtain. Funny, I remember this moment being more fun....

Batman listened intently as the private elevator made its ascent. He listened to the discreet ping as the doors opened, and the strained "good mornings" the women

exchanged on their way out to the terrace. Predictably, Ivy didn't comment on Selina's bandaged arm. It would have been the obvious social gesture with anyone else. It would have provided a natural, easy opening for the delicate subject that had to be introduced. But Pamela Isley was not anyone else. It was doubtful she even noticed a detail so wholly unconnected with herself.

She did scan all the greenery the moment she stepped onto the terrace, just as Selina predicted. If there had been any cut flowers or wilted leaves, she certainly would have commented. As it was, she merely looked them over and then turned her attention to the breakfast.

"I see we're consuming all manner of slaughtered wheat, fruit, and coffee beans this morning," she said, sitting and crossing her legs regally.

"Unless you'd prefer murdered tea leaves," Selina said sweetly, handing her a plate to help herself. Following her eyes to the basket of breakfast breads, she added wickedly "The dearly departed in bagel form are from Pola's, and the scones and danish are from Brez Bakery."

Batman was amused to see that even Poison Ivy was Gothamite enough to take a Pola's bagel onto her plate. Once the coffee was poured, and the obvious small talk about the weather and the view had exhausted itself, Selina cleared her throat.

"I know you've been looking for Harvey," she said bluntly.

"What if I have," came the too careless reply. "If I decide to look up an old friend after our last meeting, I can't see where it's any of your business, Catty."

"Pamela, I asked you over today. I invited you into my home, and I clearly went to two different bakeries to put this spread together for you. So does this sound like an unpleasant, talk-to-the-claw confrontation, or does it sound like a friendly, well-meaning chat?"

"Your home? How you do rub it in, Catty. Reminding me that you have the biggest tree in the forest providing you with all this green and shade for the asking, when the best I could procure from him was a lousy Whitman Sampler."

"I certainly wasn't going to go there, Pammy, but since you brought it up, *fine*. Let's talk about the difference between a man who's been greened and the one who chooses to be with you of his own free will. You've been *looking* for *Harvey*. Could we please dispense with all the passive-aggressive bullshit where you pretend it's all the same to you if they want to be with you or just have a noseful of pollen and can't even—oh hell, is that a cape?!"

Ivy scrutinized the horizon where Selina was pointing, a full 120 degrees from the rooftop where Batman was really lurking. She saw nothing and said so. The women sat down again, and after a minute of silent munching, the conversation resumed.

"Very well. I will concede that I have been looking for Harvey, just to get back in touch, mind you. It has been a few months, and I thought it would be nice to see how he's getting along. Although I still can't see why that concerns you, Catty."

"Because you didn't find him and I did," Selina said gently. "Pam, I saw him yesterday. He gave me this." She pointed to the bandage high on her left arm, and left the implication unspoken.

"No. No, that's ridiculous," Ivy said dismissively.

"It was a lot of things, 'ridiculous' is not one of them. Pam, what I saw was Two-Face, *all* Two-Face. The scars are back, and the manner was... He wasn't 'of two minds,' as he used to say."

"What do you mean?" Ivy asked, knowing perfectly well what was meant.

"I mean, all 'Darth Duplicity.' No Harvey. No Harvey at all, do you understand? Harvey Dent has left the building."

"..."

"Pam?"

"..."

"Pamela?"

"..."

"Ivy? Earth to Poison—"

"I hear you just fine, Catty. Don't go on so. I believe there *is* a cape blowing in the wind over there, now that I give it a closer look. You should go over and, and scrutinize it or something. Make sure that awful Bat isn't about to swing in and interrupt our lovely little breakfast."

The voice trilled erratically as she spoke, the kind of charged build that, in any other woman, hints at a flood of tears ready to pour forth and only being held back by the hysterical application of pride, will, and bluff. In Ivy's case... it might well mean the same thing, and Selina wasn't about to take chances. Obediently, she went to the edge of the terrace and stared into space. She knew she was looking in nearly the opposite direction from Batman's real position on the Moxton roof, but she also knew he was listening and watching. She would have given anything to be able to see what he was seeing behind her, and to know what he was thinking.

Over the next thirty minutes, Selina would reflect that there is a very good reason "cat and mouse" is the classic contest. Not, say, "cat and plant." There were certainly timeless paradigms to be studied in the cat when she had a proper foil, but with plants... Oh hell, the truth was dealing with Poison Ivy was too exhausting to work up a decent cat metaphor. She fought down the urge to hiss, and tried, yet again, to introduce the pertinent facts.

"Pammy, I know you and Two-Face didn't have the easiest relationship, but it does seem like every time you broke up, however ugly it was, you always got back together. There must have been something you kept going back for, right?"

"Well, Two-Face was a perfectly vile specimen of the male animal. That predisposition to, you know, think with the penis. All bluster and bravado to glorify their inadequacies." She sighed pityingly before explaining. "Rather than grace them with the ability to create life, they were given only a sad little flap of extra flesh. Rather than admit Nature, in her infinite wisdom, gave them the short end of the stick—"

"So to speak," Selina interrupted with a naughty grin... but Ivy ignored her.

"—they build their entire civilization around swords, skyscrapers, and utility belts. It's really quite telling."

Selina scratched her nose, positioning her hand carefully to block the Moxton Tower's view of her lower face.

"Yes, okay, men as a species, right ho. But about *Harvey*."

Ivy sighed again, this time without the pity.

"Harvey had his moments when he was... not entirely unappealing. He was very confident, probably just because he was so good-looking, you know, before... He was *terribly* handsome. Catty. And you know how it is when they look like movie stars. A few easy successes early on, they develop such egos. But, still, that self-assurance is rather... I wouldn't want to use the word 'sexy' but... well, anyway, why dwell on it."

"Why indeed. You like him, Pamela. You like him so much that it trumps the fact that he's a man. Someone you care about is in serious trouble, and you're probably the only person in the world that knows the real Harvey, before the acid and after, to be able to reach him right now. That's why it's worth talking about."

"Oh come now, Catty. Harvey and I may have... visited each other's lairs on occasion... overnight... but we were certainly never friends. You're the one he doted on like some revolting little sister and—"

Selina pointed to her arm.

"I'm the one he *stabbed*, Pammy. Obviously, when he greets me with a knife in the arm, it's a pretty good sign that I'm not the one he needs to see. You're his best hope. Maybe his only hope. Honestly, if you don't care enough to roll up your sleeves and do whatever it takes to get through to him, I don't think we have much chance of getting him back."

"..."

"Pammy?"

"..."

"Oh come on, Pammy, we're not going to do this again, are we?"

"Selina," she began, biting her lip thoughtfully as she fought the impulse to make a terrible confession. "You wouldn't have any way of knowing this, but after we had split and after his face was healed, Harvey came to see me one night at my lair. He told me that he only took up with me after the acid because... because 'Darth' got off on it. Making the woman who once tried to kill Harvey the District Attorney cry out his name in the throes of a screaming—"

"Too much information, Pam!"

"Ahem, yes... well... you get the picture. It was just Two-Face's sadistic idea of fun. There was no affection—"

"Pammy?"

"Certainly not on Harvey's side—"

"Pammy!"

"..."

"Harvey *was* 'Darth.' Darth was a part of Harvey. He never thought of it that way, because he couldn't. He had to hide it from himself, the dark impulses he had. He had to rationalize it, dressing it up in a "Darth Duality" costume. But every single time Two-Face came back to you, it was because a piece of Harvey wanted to. It *was* Harvey coming back, no matter how he explained it, to himself or to you. It was the real Harvey, the whole one you knew before the acid. That guy."

"The 'Dentmeister,'" she said with a wistful smile.

At that moment, the shadow of a Bat-grapnel passed over the table between them. Both women looked equally piqued as it clamped onto the mount for a security camera over the terrace, trailing a thin filament of Batline behind it.

"That's just what we need," Selina muttered, as Batman swung onto the terrace.

He had landed some distance away, where it was doubtful he could hear. But all Rogues of Poison Ivy's stature knew he could read lips. Hers curled into a wicked smile as she murmured:

"And he's out in daylight. I don't suppose we can hope he'll spontaneously combust in the sunlight, like Dracula in those old movies. Leave you with a nice little pile of Bat-ash, it would make wonderful fertilizer for that plum tree."

Both women smiled and giggled, giving the impression of a knowing, girlish conspiracy.

"Catwoman, a word in your ear," Batman announced, just loud enough to be heard.

Selina got up with a smile that rivaled Ivy's for wicked mischief.

"Nice to see he's shined the belt for the occasion," she whispered, and Ivy's discreet giggle gave way to a strident guffaw.

Selina approached him with more hipsway than she normally indulged in without the costume.

When she was close enough to be addressed, Batman spoke just loud enough that perhaps one word in three could be heard by someone seated as far away as Ivy was—assuming she was listening intently.

"I went to great lengths to keep Two-Face's appearance at the hospital out of the news," he said sternly. "There were no witnesses other than the doctor and the paramedic he knocked out when he stole the ambulance. They've both agreed to keep it quiet. I want you to do the same."

"I wasn't planning on holding a press conference," Selina said acidly.

Batman very clearly glanced over at Ivy, and then looked back at her.

"Oh no?"

"Yes, I am telling Pamela, that is none of your concern."

"None of my—Ivy?! Ivy, the psychotically self-absorbed?! You're damn right it's my concern, Catwoman. Of all the worst *possible* people to open up to—a woman who doesn't have an iota of concern for anyone other than herself, least of all Har—"

"OH, YES I DO!" Ivy shouted, jumping to her feet.

She marched fiercely across the terrace and poked Batman squarely in the chest as she continued:

"And what a typical man! WHAT a TYPICAL... MAN! As if you know anything at all about my feelings or any woman's. I am VERY FOND of Harvey Dent. VERY fond. And he is quite fond of me, I'll have you know, you, you caped... *weed!* Two-Face is a part of Harvey Dent. And he came back to me, time after time, every time we broke up, back he came. That means it was his choice. Harvey's. The real Harvey. He wanted to come back to me and he did. So there."

Batman did nothing more than take a breath prior to responding, when she began again.

"And another thing! I know him better than any of you. I'm probably the only person in the world that knows the real Harvey Dent, before the acid and after. I'm the

one who can reach him right now. I'm his best hope. And when someone I care about is in serious trouble, I am going to DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!"

Once again, before Batman could do more than open his mouth to reply, Ivy poked him in the chest and resumed.

"The very last thing that poor, troubled man needs right now is you and your snarling interference. I will deal with this. So there."

This time, Batman waited.

This time, Ivy didn't speak.

This time, the moment held.

Eyes locked. Eyes narrowed. Eyes glared.

An inventive observer might imagine they heard the whippoorwill from a Clint Eastwood Western.

Realizing that someone would have to speak eventually, Selina cleared her throat.

"Pamela, um, I'm not happy to be taking Batman's side here, but think about it. You can't green him. We need Harvey back, not just his dick."

"I am perfectly capable of reaching him without resorting to pheromones," Ivy said crisply.

Selina looked at Batman.

"I am!" Ivy insisted.

Batman looked at Selina.

"I AM!" Ivy repeated.

"Well... not like we've got anything to lose by trying," Selina admitted.

"A sad commentary on our circumstances," Batman declared.

"I'll show you both," Ivy decreed. "I am going to find Harvey Dent. I am going to reach him as only I can, and so help me, I am going to return him to Gotham City in better condition than he has ever been!"

CHAPTER 8: DOUBLE OR NOTHING

Batman's Personal Log, Sealed Encryption Matrix Tao-Mu-Iota

I'm losing my mind. Delusional paranoia due to sleep deprivation. It's six weeks since Two-Face disappeared (REF: Duty Log: Batman; Incident: Gotham General Hospital, §4) and six weeks since I turned an essential objective of the Mission over to an unrepentant criminal.

It's six weeks since my nightmare began to change.

In the past, it's as though the small traces of light in the alley seem to shift whenever the gunman moves, keeping his face always hidden in shadow. A few days after the incident at the hospital, that changed. Now, the gunman leans into the light after the shooting, and he is Two-Face. I admit, I found this troubling. There are few constants in the universe that don't involve the speed of light or electromagnetism, but Crime Alley has always been one of them. Any variance, no matter how obvious the psychological stimulus, would be troubling. But now...

Much as I hated the Two-Face variation, I had at least grown accustomed to it. Three nights ago, the dream altered again. Now, the gunman never arrives. As soon as the boy begins walking with the two giants, leafy vines creep in from all sides, covering the walls of the alley at tremendous speed, and I wake up in a cold sweat.

Until today, I didn't think it was affecting me. I am still sleeping a solid five or six hours per night. But when I begin to suspect that Alfred and Selina are engaged in some kind of conspiracy, I must accept that my perceptions are... distorted. I can only conclude that my subconscious is so troubled by the recent variations in the nightmare that it is resisting REM sleep, limiting the mentally recuperative benefits to a few minutes per night, at most. The effect on my psyche is that of extended insomnia, which would account for the paranoid delusion in re Alfred and Selina.

Six weeks. This situation with Two-Face and Ivy must be brought to a conclusion, or I will most definitely lose my mind.

We never liked Metropolis. We always found the henchmen wimpy.

Near as we can figure, it's Superman's fault. When the resident hero's best punch can bust your jaw open, you get a decent brand of tough guy. But Superman's can literally knock your block off and catapult it into space, leaving your shriveled noggin to ice over in the cold vacuum of space until it eventually falls into the orbit of some piss-ant asteroid in the vicinity of Sirius-B. Everybody knows it, so even the dumbest fuck that ever knocked over a liquor store in Metropolis can figure out that when Superman aims his fist at an ordinary human, he holds back. As my former "better half" would say in his stuffiest summing up for the jury mode: "One has only to look at the number of lead villains roaming around Metropolis, look at their average contingent of 8-10 henchmen per, look at the lack of disembodied heads orbiting Sirius B, and draw the obvious conclusion."

Batman doesn't hold back. Every dumb fuck knows that, too. Every wiseguy and every homeboy and every wannabe rogue knows: you commit a crime in Gotham and you draw the short straw running into the Bat, that spiky gauntlet will be coming at your face with every pound-per-inch it's got. You wouldn't believe the number of muscle-bound goliaths, who have all gone up against *Superman*, that won't even consider a simple two-crime contract in Gotham for fear of that fist and the punishment it can dish out.

We did manage to pick up a few men from Conduit and Neutron, but we have no confidence in them. They patch radiation suits and clean up energy spills, and we aren't hiring night janitors for a nuclear power plant. We wanted soldiers, and we don't know if this lot can even fire a gun.

We never liked Metropolis. We only stayed two nights, and the second was just on principle. We knew by 2 PM our first day that we were wasting our time.

Selina marched silently through the Batcave. She reached Workstation One and dropped a small, silver bat the size of a thumbnail onto Batman's desk. Then she dropped a second. Then a third.

"I'm driving out to Arkham," she said crisply. "You know why."

Bruce looked over the homing beacons he had placed in the lining of her purse, the heel of her shoe, and the glove compartment of her car... and he grunted.

"It would still be safer if I track you," he graveled. "Two-Face—"

"Is almost certainly going to hit Vault when he surfaces, not come after me personally. He chose that building in the first place because there are giant comedy-tragedy masks on the façade—literally, two giant faces hanging on the front of the building, one laughing and one crying. The only thing that could make it a more perfect spot for Two-Face is taking it over a *second time*."

"And if he decides to do that in two steps? If he decides grabbing you first won't make the coup at Vault that much easier?"

"Then I'll deal with him my own way, just like I would have if you'd never entered the picture. I'm a big girl, Bruce. I can take of myself."

"Selina, do you imagine Batman wouldn't be looking out for you if we'd never become involved? I agree that Two-Face is going to retake his old headquarters. But he may also decide to take out the person who's appropriated it to run the Gotham underworld. Believe me, if it was Penguin or King Snake or Killer Croc in your position, I'd be tracking their movements, just in case."

"Then I'll tell Oswald you send your love," she grinned, leaning over to kiss him.

Bruce accepted the kiss, slipping his hand around her waist as he returned it, and pulling her in closer to sit in his lap as he deepened it.

Without breaking the kiss, Selina very knowingly reached around her back to intercept the homing beacon as he slid it into the waistband of her skirt, and then, still without breaking the kiss, she plopped it silently on the desk next to the others.

"Later, Jackass," she said affectionately.

"Impossible woman," Bruce murmured, as she left.

He quietly collected the homing beacons and returned them to the inventory, where three, smaller, bat-shaped indentations remained empty. Selina wasn't wearing the

necklace containing the fourth, but she was wearing her wristwatch that held the fifth, and the sixth was embedded in the keychain in her purse.

We always liked Star City. “There is a pervading air of machismo,” as our better half would say. Perfect for hiring muscle.

We ain’t got money to burn, after all. If we can get two henchmen for the price of one just by going to the right bar and getting tossed off a mechanical bull once or twice (twice), we’re all for it. All you gotta do then is the graceful loser crap: dust yourself off and buy the winner a drink. Couple pitchers of the local microbrew is a real cheap investment when we could staff a whole crew from one bar’s Friday night regulars.

So we had a few mugs of the Star City swill, even though it tastes like piss, and we listened to them talk trash about their local hero. We have no real beef with Green Arrow, and frankly we find it hard to believe he’s as much of a boob as those henchmen let on. But that’s how henchmen are. It was the attitude we expected, and it made our job easy. A few backhanded compliments and they were ready to agree that he was to blame for their collective lack of great criminal accomplishment. A real man only knows what he’s worth going up against real men, right? And no real man makes as much noise as that blustering Arrow. That guy’s gotta be covering for some serious inadequacies, and these fellows—who, by now, we thought of as brothers—sure deserved better than that. They positively owed it to themselves to come to Gotham and try their collective mettle against the best...

Six new henchmen ready for anything, for the price of one from Metropolis. We always liked Star City.

The last time Oswald Cobblepot abandoned his pretense of insanity to obtain a release from Arkham, he assumed the young man waiting for him outside the gate must be with a car service arranged by the city. A ride back to town was the very least a civilized state could provide—kwak, kwak—after the inconvenience of incarceration. When it turned out the young man was not a driver but an officer of the court waiting to serve him with 147 subpoenas, Oswald had fled back into the asylum like a medieval thief pursued by a torch-wielding mob. He had clutched at the altar cloth claiming sanctuary—in the form of hysterical screaming about giant birds ready to peck his eyes out if he ventured beyond the safety of the Arkham walls.

It had taken him months to free himself from the rat’s nest of fines, liens, amercements, forfeitures, levies, garnishments, and penalties compounded on penalties. Now, at last, he was ready to embrace sanity once again. To rejoin society. To dispense with birdbrain euphemisms like “embracing sanity” and “rejoining society” and get down to the serious business of rebuilding his empire—kwak!

Needless to say, when he emerged from the Arkham gate this time, he was not expecting a ride back to town and he never would have accepted one from a stranger. But the striking purple of the Lamborghini idling across the street was not the signature color of a stranger. Oswald still approached cautiously, his umbrella pointed fiercely at the woman whose hair was wrapped in a silk scarf and whose eyes were

hidden behind dark glasses. She was waving cheerily at him from the driver's seat, but he remained on his guard until he was close enough to see that it was, in fact...

"Selina, my felicitous feline, what an unexpected—kwak, kwak, kwak, kwak, kwak—pleasure."

"Sounds like you've been saving those up, Ozzy. Get in, and I'll give you a ride back to town."

"Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Relax, Oswald. I'm done devouring birds for today, and we have to talk. Get in."

He looked around as if for snipers, lurking henchmen, or deceptively ordinary-looking young chaps bearing subpoenas. He then considered Catwoman's firm position against killing, the hundreds of thousands of dollars it had cost him to extract himself from his financial nightmare, and the probable cab fare back to town... he got into the car without further discussion.

Keystone is a great town for rogues.

We personally like it because it's a "twin city," natch, but beyond that superficial attraction, there is the uncommon hospitality of its rogues. Captain Cold is a gentleman villain of the old school. He demands a standard of civility from the hometown baddies and extends every professional courtesy to visitors like us. (Apart from the inevitable personal beefs, naturally. Any group bigger than two is going to have its Joker and its Poison Ivy, and nobody expects them to link arms and drink each other's health.)

But back to us. Having no enemies in the region, we were greeted as a respected colleague. There was this sweet piece of ass called Violet. At first, we thought she was a henchwench, but later, we found out she's something called a "Rainbow Raider." She arranged a room for us, which her colleagues had decorated to our supposed tastes. The room was divided more or less down the center. We can't say we enjoyed looking at that much red and green side by side, but we were touched by the effort. We picked up eight henchmen, but the flipside of this remarkably civilized rogue environment is that good henchmen know what they're worth. Now we shall have to pay the Star City troops twice as much. When the men are all together in Gotham, they're bound to talk, and if the Star boys find out their associates are paid more, there will be all kinds of trouble we don't need.

Selina gave a reasonably truthful account of the Vault nightclub's rise to prominence, its function as the hub of the Gotham underworld, and the laughable assumptions made by certain gullible individuals regarding her role as its queen.

She stressed that Oswald's staff had been kept together, as he requested. She downplayed the 'Queen of the Underworld' nonsense as a huge misunderstanding, one that seemed to have originated with *Robin* and *Batgirl* questioning some bridge-and-tunnel nobody with dreams of becoming a henchwench. She was betting that would be the end of it: a potent triple cocktail tapping into Oswald's snobbery, placing the blame on the junior bats who burned down his nightclub in the first place, and presenting him with the return of his original Iceberg staff which she hadn't even

renamed. All his Doves, Wrens, Sparrows, and Chickadees were exactly as he left him, without a single Pussywillow or Kat-rina added to the mix.

He was chewing his cigarette holder in a way that usually meant smug contentment, but Selina turned onto the interstate all the same. She was deliberately taking a circuitous route back to Gotham, with plenty of back roads where she could really open up the Lamborghini. Oswald may have taken the “Gatta Corleone” announcement in stride, but there was more bad news to come. With Two-Face storm clouds brewing on the horizon, Clayface as her superpowered goto guy at Vault, Poison Ivy as the first line of defense to deal with Two-Face, the history of antagonism between Hagen and Pammy, and Batman lurking somewhere as the eternal wildcard, Oswald couldn’t have his staff or his “Emperor Penguin” status back just yet.

Just in case he reacted badly to that information, Selina wanted miles of open road to calm him down. Ozzy might be an excitable bird, but he wouldn’t do anything crazy while she was driving 110 mph.

Central City is an armpit.

Unfortunately for us, the “twin” designation is what my better half would call “a misnomer.” We still had to spend a few nights there for two reasons. One: it is Keystone’s twin, and to visit the one without looking in on the other would offend our principles. And two: without this last stop, we would have recruited men from an odd number of places. This too offends our principles.

Unfortunately, as we said, that “twin cities” label is bullshit. There is one criminal element that moves freely between the two cities. The henchmen who were worth having had already come to our attention in Keystone. Central City only gave us a second chance to look over the dregs.

Unfortunately for us, part two: the twin shit is just as inaccurate when it comes to food and lodging. In Keystone, that hot little wench-turned-villainess set us up in a themed lair and pointed us to a diner with the best dry rub in the region. In Central City, we had to make due at a Motel 6 that smelled like mildew, stale sex, and feet. And their idea of barbecue seems to be a quart of McDonald’s secret sauce poured over shredded cardboard.

Nevertheless, we are quite happy with the staff we have assembled, far from prying Gotham eyes. We expect the next 22 hours to bring us the standing we have always deserved as the undisputed king of the Gotham underworld.

Catwoman made her entrance at Vault much earlier than usual.

She and Batman had fought about it. In the weeks since Two-Face vanished, Batman insisted that everything about the nightclub should remain exactly as it was. They had a tactical advantage in knowing with near certainty where Two-Face was going to strike, freeing the Bat Team to focus on other significant variables like when and how. Any changes in the club’s routine might tip off Face and waste that strategic advantage.

Selina argued that nothing could “remain exactly as it was” with a walking fern in the room. Now that Ivy was on the job looking for Two-Face, she’d become a Vault regular. She and Clayface had been giving each other a wide berth, but that could change at any time. While Catwoman made no pretensions of being a master strategist, she did feel that leaving fire and gasoline unattended was a far more “significant variable” than whatever Batman was factoring into his protocols. Until tonight, that sensible argument was always overruled.

Tonight, Batman was forced to admit the situation had changed. He agreed that the Rogues-as-criminal-threat parameters (on which he *was* the acknowledged expert) had been superseded by one of those Rogues-as-unsettlingly-human developments, where he freely admitted she had superior knowledge (and he would just as soon keep it that way).

The unexpected shift had come from an equally unexpected source. Ironically, and for the first time in recent memory, Catwoman owed the improvement of her reputation to a periodical for sale at the 41st Street newsstand. It began with the Costume Institute at the Gotham Museum of Art mounting a special exhibit on superhero fashions and featuring her as an iconic archetype. She was astonished when the museum she’d broken into no less than thirty-six times (and successfully robbed twenty-three), took the trouble to get her costume absolutely right. There she was: purple, wielding her whip and lacking complexity, a jeweled bracelet clutched in her hand and not a Gotham Post goggle in sight. She was so pleased, she overruled the Code of the Cat and redirected a portion of the Vault riches into a healthy, anonymous donation to the museum’s acquisition fund. If the Universe took that to be making restitution for the golden Sekhmet, so be it.

As often happened when the museum did something big with respect to fashion, Vogue followed their lead. They commissioned the best designers in the world to create fantasy variations on several costumed women’s themes. Nina Ricci produced a fantastical Poison Ivy evening gown, but Dolce and Gabbana’s Catwoman was used on the cover.

Selina had padded quietly down to the cave to surprise Bruce with her triumph, when she saw the same cover looming over the cavern on the giant viewscreen. That meant the image was currently being viewed at workstation one. As she approached, she saw that Bruce was glaring at it... and also that he seemed to be frozen mid-density shift.

“You win,” he said, one word spoken in his own voice, one in Batman’s most foreboding gravel.

“Go me,” she replied, unfazed. “What do I win?”

He turned fiercely, and for a second she could almost envision the mask on his scowling face. Then the effect vanished as quickly as it came.

“You’re on the cover. Ivy is on page 26. After all the bimbos, you think I don’t know what that means? A Vogue cover, thumbnail on the table of contents, splash page on the article. Bruce Wayne has seen slights like that ignite socialite wars that make Superman and Darkseid look like drinking buddies by comparison.”

“Hang on. ‘Slights like this’ sounds like Ivy was actually *entitled* to the cover and Vogue somehow denied her the placement she deserved in order to give it to me. If you are suggesting—”

"I am *not* getting in the middle of this," Bruce declared, his voice and body language fluctuating wildly between playboy fop and immovable crimefighter. "You should be at Vault before sunset. Go for happy hour. And don't let her out of your sight."

So Catwoman arrived at Vault even before the tourists and gawkers, and she settled inconspicuously in her corner booth. She would let Ivy make an entrance. She would let the damn flytrap stroll through the VIP room and let the ferns drape themselves over her beautiful leopard-print pillows. And she would—for now—let the cattiest remarks pass without scratching.

It was for Harvey.

When this was over, however, *grrrrrrlllll...*

A 1958 Mercedes 220 is not an inconspicuous car. Painting half of it black and half white does nothing to make it less noticeable, so Two-Face had gone to considerable trouble to get it shipped into Gotham inside a wide-load trailer. Then he'd gone to more trouble to find a garage near Vault where it could be hidden.

The garage entrance didn't have the clearance for the trailer, so the car had to be unloaded in the middle of the night and driven half a block to its hiding place. Two-Face knew the vigilantes kept an eye on the comings and goings from the Iceberg, and he assumed they kept a similar watch near Vault. Even if they didn't, the Vault patrons themselves would have recognized the significance of a two-tone 220. Much as it pained him to make the transfer at 3:30 in the morning, he couldn't risk a two o'clock move. He had his men wait, had them double check that they were not being watched, and at 3:32 precisely, the car was moved to its present location, skillfully parked with its black side to the wall, hiding its two-tone nature as much as possible.

Now, as his advance team checked in two by two, Two-Face sneered.

"It's time," he announced to Double. The driver nodded and started the ignition...

"Catty, *darling*," Poison Ivy called out with ferocious enthusiasm, approaching the corner booth as Norma Desmond might have crossed the soundstage to greet a rival movie queen intruding on her set. "My *deepest* sympathies, that *hideous* cover. Will your press woes never end? I mean, if I had only known what that awful Dolce and Gabbana were going to do to you, I would have greened them for you. But now I suppose it's too late."

It's for Harvey, it's for Harvey, it's for Harvey, Selina repeated to herself. Claws would not do. But feline pride did demand some kind of response.

"Why thank you, Pamela. That is *terribly* sweet of you. But as it happens, I know Domenico and Stefano personally. Turns out, they just love me as I am, no chemical attractants required. Something about the way I move, and, well, being so sexy and pheramin—I mean, feminine—at the same time. That's why they asked specifically to use *me* for their inspiration, over all the costume and theme types available. So you see, I really don't think I *need* the assist from greening. I've always found they're perfectly receptive to requests made the usual way: with a smile and a credit card."

Neither the Iceberg nor Vault had ever checked patrons for weapons. Zealots like the Ghost Dragons would never have agreed, and it was only the Dragons' code demanding they free themselves of debt at the end of every month that kept the nightclub's legitimate operations in the black. Other patrons like Poison Ivy, Killer Croc, and Clayface were weapons all by themselves, and it was considered unsporting not to let the rest of the clientele defend themselves.

So there was no need for the advance team to kill the bouncer, or even to knock him out. All Deuce had to do was give the password, and the entire party of twenty-two men could have come in heavy. But Two-Face wanted to see a series of quick, silent strikes before the main assault, invisibly removing those Vault employees who might interfere and replacing them with his own men. It was the kind of violent flourish he preferred: an advance team operating in pairs, synchronized to the second, executing their tasks with brutal efficiency. It was the stuff of action movies and spy thrillers, the kind of thing his better half always scratched out of the master plan. Mr. High-and-Mighty with all his inside knowledge of how *real* crimes happened, la-di-da. Like it didn't matter that all the cases that came across a D.A.'s desk were loser shithheads who got caught!

Now, Two-Face was free to do it his way, without all that meddling interference.

Deuce would give the password all right, but Ditto was going up the fire escape and in through a window. Right now, at this very moment, he'd be entering what had once been Harvey's bedroom. He'd follow the path Two-Face had mapped out until he came to a big storage closet co-opted for the staff's locker room. That would bring him out behind the bouncer, just as Deuce was coming in the front door. When Deuce recited the password, "Catwoman gave me the combination," Ditto would strike. A swift double blow to the back of the neck—bouncer down—and all that would be left is dragging his sorry ass back to the supply room which Duo and Dual would have already secured. Deuce would replace the bouncer, and the others would meander to the main floor and blend in with the crowd. Just a few more freelance henchmen looking for work.

At the same moment, Twin and Twain were infiltrating the back entrance where several of Penguin's old lieutenants were known to congregate. Twain would take out Talon, while Twin took care of Crow. Then both would advance to the kitchen, flash a couple ten-dollar badges from the 2nd Avenue pawnshop, and say they were from Immigration. That would clean out the kitchen staff...

Ivy had seen Clayface coming up the stairs to the VIP level, so she knew her window of opportunity was about to close. Too soon, Selina would have the odious dung heap at her side, like a shape-shifting attack dog.

"Well, you can always hope no one will know it's supposed to be you," she concluded brightly. "I know I didn't. I saw that cover and said to myself 'Is that supposed to be based on Catwoman? Here I thought bondage gear was coming back.' You know, Selina darling, you really shouldn't encourage that kind of 'reinterpretation' of your look. It might give those idiots at the Post ideas... oops, too late."

By which time, it was too late. The walking dung heap brushed past her as he slid into the chair opposite Catwoman.

"Gotta say, that was some good press, Cat," he said casually, waving to Dove and then calling out for her to bring him a mudslide before he turned his attention back to Catwoman. "I know it's not your color, but that costume sure was slick. Did I read right, that was Swarovski crystal on the mask?"

Ivy decided to give the commoners on the lower level a thrill by going down to the bar herself to get her drink refreshed, surrounded by all of her creeper vines, flytraps, wisteria, and ferns.

Deep within the Mercedes ignition, a tiny bat-shaped beacon had activated the moment the key turned. For all the elaborate pains Two-Face had taken to avoid the prying eyes of vigilantes and their sidekicks, he never thought about their cameras. Batman had been recording a six-block radius around Vault, 24/7. He saw the two-tone car arrive and moved in to investigate within hours of its appearance. As soon as he confirmed Harvey Dent's fingerprints in the backseat, he placed the tracking device which had just activated.

Miles away, a soft beep sounded at workstation one, and the signal was immediately forwarded to receivers inside the Batmobile and on a vibrating com unit in Batman's utility belt.

He unhooked the latter and tapped a button twice, the first silencing the alert, and the second relaying to Bruce Wayne's cell phone, instructing it to dial a pre-programmed number.

"What's that?" Clayface asked, looking around sharply as if a fly was buzzing near his face.

Catwoman reached into her whip holster and pulled out a sleek, purple cell phone.

"Nothing," she said, flicking off the alert. "Just the boyfriend being a nosy jackass. He does that sometimes. You know how civilians are."

The two-tone Mercedes pulled up to the front entrance, the doors swung open, and Two-Face strode into the nightclub with Duplicate and Replicate shadowing a half step behind him. He clicked the safety on his shotgun twice as he passed Deuce, and the henchman nodded. He locked the door and took his place behind the other henchmen as the foursome strode onto the main floor.

"Two minutes of your time!" Two-Face bellowed.

The entrance would have been enough to capture everyone's attention without firing into the ceiling, but Two-Face had had enough of such sissy restraint. He snapped his fingers twice, and Duplicate fired a shot. That would produce the usual screaming, which two more snaps and Replicate's second shot was to silence.

Except there didn't seem to be any screaming.

Everyone was just looking at him as if he'd proposed a round of double malts to toast a new deathtrap.

He should have realized, Vault was like the Iceberg: Rogues, Dragons, Demons, and henchmen. They were not inclined to scream.

He briefly considered a coin flip to decide about the second shot, but then decided it wasn't worth the time. He had wanted everyone's attention, and now he had it.

"This is our establishment," he announced, pointing the shotgun to the rafters in a slow swirling motion. "All of you working for the old Iceberg operations are now working *for us*. Any objections shall be submitted in duplicate to the double barrel of this shotgun. Are we clear?"

For a still moment, it seems as though silence would be the only answer. Then...

Clap.

Clap.

One single set of hands...

Clap.

In a slow, sarcastic rhythm...

Clap.

Of pure, ironic contempt.

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

Until the crowd in front of the bar parted, allowing Poison Ivy to move graciously onto the main floor.

"That really was an astonishing display, Harvey. So... so... what's the phrase I'm looking for... so 'tough guy stupid.' I can only assume you picked it up from one of Hagen's old movies."

Two-Face looked her up and down the way a wolf looks at raw meat—then swung his shotgun until the tip pressed lightly into the side of her nose.

"Ivy," he leered. "We will be happy to explain the nuances of our scheme to you later, two-on-one. For now, all objections may be submitted in duplicate to the barrel."

"You said that already," Ivy said instantly.

"We are SAYING IT AGAIN!" he roared.

"Ah, so it's true," Ivy smiled, flicking the gun away from her nose as one might shoo a fly. "It's just you now, is it?" Two-Face's mouth had dropped open very slightly as Ivy spoke. It should have been a simple matter of closing it to reply, but, for some reason, his mouth wasn't quite working. "No more Harvey in the way?" Ivy inquired again. Then, taking his silence as agreement, she continued. "Thank God, he was such a whiny nuisance. All that self-pity. And of course *so timid* and *boring* where it really counted."

At last, Two-Face managed the coordination of breath, larynx, tongue, and lips necessary to form a reply—although it came out as a sort of half-hearted grunt.

But that was only because she'd wrecked his rhythm.

There was an adrenaline rush mounting an armed attack—that's what had built up a certain pressurized tightness in his chest, that's what had ignited a burning churn in his gut—and then Ivy came traipsing in and cut him off before he got rolling. It was that shift in momentum that might have slowed his reflexes a little, and that was the

only reason his reaction might have been a bit slow or seemed less than whole-hearted.

Yes. He definitely agreed with her. Harvey was a whiny nuisance. Harvey was a pathetic, self-pitying loser. Harvey was a wuss.

"Of course, if he is really gone, that *does* leave you with a bit of a problem," Ivy continued. "Look around, Facey my sweet. Harvey was always the brains of the operation. Just look what you come up with on your own: men and guns and tough talk. It's all so pathetically impotent." The last words were spoken through a pleasant laugh. "He was a whiny nuisance, but he was the *brains*," Ivy concluded simply. "You're just dumb muscle."

"BULLSHIT!" he exploded... although a nagging corner of his subconscious whispered that "bullshit" wasn't a very good answer, and if that was the best he could come up with, it sort of proved her point.

"Oh please, Face. You think *this* is the grand scheme of the year?" she asked, motioning around the bar. "You replace Mike, Crow, and Talon with your own men. You don't think Croc or KGBeast or... well... *me*, are going to present a significantly bigger problem? Admit it, Face, this is a plot to take over some restaurant or cruise ship far, far from Gotham, someplace without any *people like us* in it. It's from one of those hack mobster TV shows Harvey used to watch at 2 a.m."

She smiled, delighted with her own cleverness as she concluded:

"Which means, he is still in there after all."

"No."

"He is! For one thing, he picked out that tie. Harvard red, isn't it?"

"No. Harvard is *crimson*. This is *blood red*, much like you're going to bleed when we blow your fucking head off!"

She clicked her tongue as she sidled up to the scarred side of his face.

"If Harvey were really gone, you would have done that already," she whispered, breathing huskily. "You've never been one to take any lip from 'the green broad,' Face. 'Yes, Petal' was all him. If you were really all alone in there, you would have shot me on sight. Or tried to screw me. You're carnal lust incarnate, right? Unburdened by all of Harvey's boringly conventional prudery... So why haven't you tried to fuck me? Is it because we both know that no matter who started... Harvey was always the one to finish?"

Once again, Two-Face's mouth had dropped open. This time, before he could form a better response than simply closing it, Ivy had strolled over to one of the corners with an overstuffed couch and leopard-print chairs positioned around a low table.

"Oh look, votive candles," she said as if the words held some hidden meaning. "One, two, three, four of them... And an overstuffed pillow... I wonder if it's... *goose down*."

Whatever it meant, the recitation brought a high flush to Two-Face's cheeks. Barely containing his fury, he clenched his teeth and forced out the words "Can't we do this later?"

"Still blush evenly on both sides, I see," Ivy observed dryly.

“ENOUGH!” he roared—and once again pressed the gun into her nose. “Don’t flatter yourself, Petal. You were good, but you were never *that* good. Under all the leafy pretensions, you’re nothing but a freak, same as we are.”

Ivy tilted her head and knit her brow.

“Well now I *am* confused,” she whispered. “Because if hot wax and goose feathers don’t even rate a coin flip, I don’t know *who* you are. As I recall, ‘Double or Nothing: Tickle, Drip, or Spank’ was the one thing you both agreed on.”

In the VIP room above, Riddler, Scarecrow, Catwoman and others had lined up at the rail, leaning over to watch the action below.

“I don’t get it. Why’s she letting him stick a gun in her face? Why doesn’t she just green him?” Scarecrow asked peevishly.

“Why do you tie tufts of hair, fur, and feathers to a fishing line to catch a trout?” Riddler said instantly, and Selina was pleased she wasn’t the one who had to explain it. Or so she thought, but then Riddler continued: “Instead of, say, dropping a concussion grenade into the stream and picking up all the fish you want once they float to the surface.”

Scarecrow turned from Riddler to Catwoman.

“Translation, please?” he asked.

“Pride,” she answered. “Ivy’s always liked that she can get to him without the pheromones. So she’s doing it the way that requires actual skill...”

“Just like landing a trout,” Riddler nodded happily, pleased at the painstaking (if needlessly clear and straightforward) explanation of his thesis.

“*Besides,*” Catwoman thought silently. “*With pheromones, we don’t get Harvey back.*”

While the others continued to comment on the action below, Selina felt a soft tap on her ankle. She looked down, and saw a ball of tiger-stripped fur the size of a tennis ball rolling around the tip of her boot. She looked over to where she’d last seen Clayface, and instead saw a trio of Matt Hagens watching her intently. She nodded slowly, only once, and then pointed discreetly to the darkened exit sign on the far end of the theatre below.

The men Two-Face stationed to guard the various entrances were falling quickly. Four were taken out by batarangs, two were seized by creeper vines, and two more had their heads knocked together by a fire hydrant that had sprung up into an animated mass of clay.

Nightwing spotted the final two henchmen standing back-to-back at the fire exit, their weapons pointed at assailants closing in from both sides. The thug on the left pointed his gun at a giant flytrap, although his hands shook so violently, it was doubtful he could have fired. The thug on the right pointed his gun at another massive clay form. The plant and the clay, while clearly menacing, seemed to regard each other as a more hostile target than either of the henchmen. The clay mass split itself into three, while the flytrap must have somehow “called” for reinforcements, for suddenly all the vines released their captives and inched to its side.

Nightwing scrutinized the surrounding rooftops, looking for an optimal angle. Then he swung down, grabbing the henchmen without landing, and leaving the plants and the potting soil to settle it among themselves.

What was that quaint expression Catty had... PURR-FECT?

Two-Face said he had changed (typical man), but Ivy could see that was nonsense. If only she could get him to flip for something, he would see it too. He would have to. His coin was still the one indisputable chink in his double-breasted armor. A flip would mean a difference of opinion, a good Harvey at odds with a wicked Two-Face, just like old times. Through that small opening, she could slide in the knife and split him open, just like a stubborn bulb that had clenched up too tightly during the long, cold winter and needed some not-too-gentle prodding to bloom again. Since the coin was obviously the key, she had waved a quarter under his nose and suggested he kill Batman whenever he showed up. She realized immediately that was too simple. Even before he knocked her to the floor, she realized it.

"Do you imagine we have not included the Bat's arrival and fiery demise in our plan?!" Two-Face had hissed. "We've got it covered."

And there it was. COVERED. Purr-fection. It was that word "*covered*" that gave her the answer:

"Yes, of course," she said, happily jumping to her feet and returning to his side with the coin. "I misspoke. I meant kill Catty!"

"Come again?" Two-Face said flatly.

"Catwoman! Off with her head! She is in your way here. Best way to start a new regime is to kill off the old one, right?"

Once more, Two-Face's mouth had dropped open.

One flight up, Catwoman's had as well.

Ivy's merely curled into an infuriatingly feline smile. So this is what Catty meant when she said puuuurr-fect. Ivy could see why she always seemed to enjoy it so. It was absolutely delicious:

If Two-Face flatly refused to shoot Catwoman without even flipping the coin to decide, it meant that Harvey was alive and well and living on the right side of his face. So protective of his dear "little sister" Rogue, that he wouldn't even put it to a coin flip.

If, on the other hand, he *did* flip the coin, that still meant that Harvey was in there, because a coin flip meant a difference of opinion. In that case, good side up: Harvey wins/Selina lives. Bad side up: it still meant that Harvey was in there but he was overruled, and Ivy's life would be rid of the meddlesome Cat. Win-win.

The only remaining possibility was if Harvey was absolutely gone. In that case, Two-Face should have no qualms about killing Catty without benefit of a coin flip. Messy, and she would certainly miss Harvey, but as a consolation prize, her life would be rid of purring purple cover girls stealing her press.

She looked up eagerly to see how Two-Face would respond...

He was staring at the coin in her fingers as if it were a snake.

"We..." he began, then shook his head, displeased with whatever argument had presented itself.

“We...” he said again, but one again, he stopped there. His brow seemed to accordion until the normal eyebrow on the right merged into the scar tissue on the left.

“We will stipulate that there is a certain precedent among organized crime figures,” he said at last, “wherein a new boss might come to power and/or consolidate power via the removal of his predecessor. However, we strenuously object to the notion that we would be guided by the precedents of organized crime. If you were to argue that we are a crime syndicate, we would draw your attention to the established definition of Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations for which the RICO act is named, pursuant to—”

“THERE YOU ARE!” Ivy cried, flinging her arms around his neck. “Your objection is sustained, my precedent is full of it, welcome home, Harvey!” And with that, her mouth clamped over his, terminating the conversation for a full minute.

Two full minutes.

Three.

Ghost Dragons tugged at their collars, swallowing loudly.

Four.

Five.

A black ooze moved quietly around the edge of the crowd, creeping up behind the remaining Two-Face henchmen and clubbing them with a giant, clay mallet.

Six.

Seven.

“Geez, get a room,” a Jervis-like voice muttered from the back.

Eight.

Selina glanced up and saw a dark shape just visible through the skylight. It looked mysteriously like a spiked gauntlet giving a thumbs-up.

EPILOGUE

"So that was it?" Tim asked indignantly. "By the time Batman showed up, there was nothing for him to do?"

"Just hose them down," Dick answered, taking a muffin from the dining room table.

"Well that bites."

"Tell me about it," Selina said, entering the dining room and going straight to the sideboard. She poured coffee, added milk, sat, sipped, and looked as put out as any cat who had its designated naptime interrupted. The demeanor remained for several sips, and then, at last, she gave a little shake and was her usual self.

"So, what are you guys doing here at this ungodly hour?" she asked. "Official breakfast meeting, or just poking around for news?"

"Poking," Tim said. "BG and I missed all the fun last night. Trouble with one of the Triads."

"Not me," Dick said through a mouthful of muffin. "Bruce asked me to come by early. Something about taking his early patrol tonight."

"Probably both patrols," Selina guessed. "He's going to Seattle as soon as Wayne One is ready. It'll take the whole day. Maybe more."

"The place he mentioned last night? The Meadow..." Dick asked.

"Meadowlark Institute, yeah."

Dick turned to Tim and explained:

"In the history of jurisprudence, pretty much the one thing that Harvey Dent, Two-Face, Batman, *and* Catwoman can all agree on is that Arkham is not the place for Harvey to be right now."

"Well, sure. Psych 101," Tim said. "It's where Two-Face was always sent when he was caught, right? So sending him back there would just reinforce the idea that Face is back. Familiar people, place, situations..."

"The other rogues wouldn't exactly help, either," Selina added. "They missed Two-Face. They'd be happy he's back and treat him like the prodigal rogue returned. An out of state facility is definitely better. And Bruce has a lot of pull with this particular one."

"A generous grant from the Wayne Foundation," Tim grinned, pulling out the oft-quoted phrase.

"More like ten generous grants," she said. "Apparently, he's been keeping an eye on them for years. They do good work."

"How's that going to work legally?" Dick asked. "I mean, Harvey tried to kill that guy."

"And he's surrendering voluntarily," Selina explained, checking her watch. "Probably walking into the Gainsly precinct as we speak. Harvey's side is really very conventional that way. That simple, in-the-box, policeman's mentality."

"Hey," Dick exclaimed with mock offense.

"Zing," Tim laughed.

As always, Selina ignored the crimefighter's outraged sensibilities and went on as if she'd never been interrupted.

"Once we pried Face and Ivy apart last night, Batman broached the subject and Harvey flipped the coin. First time, it came up scarred, and he agreed to 'two out of three.' Two flips later, we had an agreement. He'd turn himself in as long as he goes somewhere other than Arkham. Bruce says the D.A. won't oppose it, and Judge Bradshaw will go along with the recommended sentence. Everyone at the courthouse wants this one to go away."

"Which just leaves his scars," Tim noted. "What's the deal there? I'm guessing no more hocus pocus."

Dick and Selina exchanged looks.

"You do it," she urged. "You can do the voice. I can't get that low."

"Yeah, but you do the glare and the scowl much better."

"Pfft," she exclaimed. Then she cleared her throat and massaged her brow with her fingertips, getting into character. When she pulled her hands away, her eyes and jaw were set in a portentously grim Bat-sowl.

"If this regrettable episode has taught us anything," she declared with I'm-Batman finality, "it is the fallacy of magic and the magical quick fix. Natural law is natural law. It can't be broken without dire consequences."

Dick and Tim both laughed, and Selina waited before continuing in her own voice and manner:

"Jason may have meant well, but—"

"But a man nearly died as a result," a deep voice interrupted. "Vernon Fields was almost killed, and Harvey has to face the reality that he's the one who nearly killed him. That's going to be a painful, uphill struggle. All because of a superficial, cosmetic band-aid called 'magic' slapped onto a deep-rooted psychological problem.

"When Harvey is ready inside, I will certainly pay for the plastic surgery to restore his outside. The proper way, the natural way. It takes longer, and it may not be perfect, but that time and those imperfections are exactly what the mind needs. That, along with the proper counseling provided by regular, non-magic healers who understand from experience what the mind goes through during a process of this kind."

"When Harvey is ready," Dick quoted. "Don't you mean *if*?"

"No, he means 'when,'" Selina chimed in. "Bruce believes in Harvey Dent."

"You sound like you don't," Dick observed shrewdly.

"I just got my stitches removed where he stuck a double-bladed knife in my arm," Selina said with an air of offended feline dignity. "I didn't get to scratch any payback out of Two-Face. I didn't get to scratch up Ivy. I had to be unspeakably nice to Oswald. And I—mm-mm-MMPH."

Bruce had clamped a hand over her mouth, mid-complaint, and now he spoke for her, apologetically.

"She's had a bad week. She'll believe in Harvey Dent tomorrow, as soon as we get her fur unruffled.

ICEBERG LOUNGE
O. Cobblepot, Proprietor
GRAND REOPENING GALA EVENT

Batman grimaced as he noted the sign on the last swing of his late patrol. First, it was a simple “Coming Soon.” Then, it was “Reopening Soon.” Then, a “Grand Reopening,” and now, a “REOPENING GALA EVENT!” By the time the doors finally did open for business, Oswald would probably have a brass band, a red carpet, searchlights, and penguin balloons on the scale of the Macy’s parade hovering over the building.

That revolting mental picture haunted him as he slid into the Batmobile and started for home.

He should be relieved, really. The return of the Iceberg meant the end of Vault and the end of Selina’s stint as “Gatta Corleone.” When all was said and done, it had been a preposterous episode: Batman, the scourge of criminals everywhere, sharing his home and his bed with the woman half the Gotham underworld viewed as their queen. It was absolutely ridiculous. And even if she felt somewhat vindicated after all that Gotham Post nonsense, he at least should be glad it was over.

The Iceberg Lounge, O. Cobblepot, Proprietor. It was the one status quo he should be happy to see return. Penguin was trouble; there was no doubt about that. But even that nefarious bird was preferable to these lingering... he couldn’t even call them “doubts,” not about Selina.

And he certainly couldn’t call them suspicions. Selina had justified his trust in a thousand ways since he’d revealed his identity. What they had now, what they’d been through together, it went beyond trust and beyond intimacy, they were practically...

So why did he keep seeing it? The little looks, the body language, the trill in her voice. She was up to something. For weeks now.

His dreams had returned to normal. He was sleeping through the night. There was no hint of insomniac symptoms, delusions, or paranoia. So why did it still seem like she was up to something? The little looks, the body language, the trill in her voice when she said his name, the way she’d been hovering by his workstation that day after he’d changed his password, the way she—

His thought cut off abruptly as he pulled into the cave and saw a dark shape up ahead where no shape should be. He hit the brakes, causing a harsh squeal to echo off the cavern walls, disrupting the bats and provoking a chorus of fearsome squeaking in return.

Batman ignored them as he got out of the car. He was long used to the bats in all of their moods. He was not used to surprises, not in his Batcave. He walked up to the shape—now recognizable as much more than a shape—taking up a full space in the Batmobile hangar. The space reserved for the car currently in use.

Batman stared at it for a full ten seconds, trying to process the sight...

Then he glanced back at the Batmobile behind him for comparison...

And, once again, at the sight in front of him...

It was... He glanced back and glanced forward again... It was... it was...

It was a Batmobile, all right, but... beyond that, it was...

Better.

It used the Belz variation on the Williams headlights and hood, and the Barbato wave over the wheel mounts to minimize wind resistance. It used the Avery grill and rear design around the thrusters... The Mitchell... The Effler... The Oshira... All the patents he had tagged over the last year to incorporate into the next Batmobile... How was this possible? Did it come through a time warp?

Another possibility dropped like an anvil into his gut: What if... what if at some point in his paranoid insomniac loopiness, he had actually *ordered a new car and didn't remember doing it?*

It didn't seem possible that he could have been that far gone. It was only diminished REM cycles manifesting in a few fanciful suspicions about Alfred and Selina...

Alfred and Selina.

Selina and Alfred.

As if in answer, three moments with Selina flashed through his mind with crystal clarity: A Catwoman on a rooftop long ago: "I don't want to help, but I might be helpful..." Selina in bed only a few months ago reminding him of that night: "When I gave you a heads up on that warehouse full of mob cash..." Followed by "Would you have an aneurysm if the Foundation got an anonymous donation for, say, \$800,000?"

"SELINA!" he bellowed.

...: VOXRec initialized, ... the car said in a mechanized monotone. ...: *Specify name for this voiceprint, or delete and start again...*

Bruce closed his eyes and shook his head, forcing down a whirlwind of conflicting emotion.

"Initialize voiceprint Batman. Make primary," he said wearily. "Download VOX command menu from main computer. Purge all preinstalled menus and defaults."

...: *Confirm deletion of unplayed message 'Meow'...*

"..."

...: *Download complete. Confirm deletion of unplayed message 'Meow'...*

"Negative. Play message."

...: *Hey, Handsome,...* the car emitted in a familiar, sexy drawl. ...: *I'm sure being the world's greatest detective and all, you've figured out that it was Alfred who gave me the heads up on that little town in Emilia-Romagna halfway between Bologna and Modena where they make nothing but casks for balsamic vinegar and really hot cars.*

...: *Consider this a parting gift from the only Gotham crime boss who liked to see you show up in the blue because it brings out your eyes. Also the only one you're going to thank with a foot rub. Meow, Gatta Corleone...*

