



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

#57

# *Cat = Sales*

*Not My Kink*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**NOT MY KINK**



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# NOT MY KINK

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... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

Let's be clear about one thing: Batman is an unmitigated jackass.

He's wonderful, and I do love him, but that doesn't change the fact that he's a jackass. I'm a thief at heart, I'm a bad girl, and I'm a cat. Crimefighting isn't my kink. Never has been; never will be. But somehow, that shifty bastard has me covering for him for the month and a half it's going to take for his back to heal.

It started before I even left the house. I was on my way upstairs. I still keep the catsuit under my bed, and often I'll leave from there, going straight out the window and down this big elm tree. It's the balcony; I love starting a prow from a balcony. It reminds me of my old apartment, the old prowls... even if I am just dropping to ground level and crossing the lawns to the carriage house to drive into town, that one touchstone with the past is just... right. It's the best way to begin and end a night in Gotham.

Tonight, I found a note pinned to the bedroom curtain.

Stop by the study on your way out.

-B

That's my Bat. It wouldn't be him if he mentioned it at dinner. It wouldn't be him if he said "Please" or worded it as a request. But a terse little note pinned where I had to see it on my way out: "Do this. -B" That's pure Bruce and that's why I love him. So, down to the study I went.

"I know you're not going to be leaving through the cave," he said in that deep Bat-gravel, "but it would be a good idea to stop at the Batcomputer and look over the At-Large list before you set out."

I told him I already have a pretty good idea who's out there and who isn't on any given night. The Iceberg grapevine tells me all I need to know, and I'm not going to change now.

He countered with "The Batmobile is on autopilot, and the patrol route is drawn from the At-Large list. It would be best if you note where it's going to be. To the world, that's where Batman is tonight."

In other words, he's thinking it would look suspicious if I appeared to cross Batman's path during the night but the car didn't stop and no Batman got out. That's also pure Bruce. Everybody but him knows that I can avoid Batman just fine without inside knowledge of his patrol route.

I softened the refusal with a kiss on the cheek. Told him I'd be fine. It was just another night in Gotham, a prow like any other, and he should stop fretting. That should have been that, but he moved his hand up to the small of my back and pulled me in closer, deepened the kiss, the other hand went wandering and... well, I agreed to stop in the cave and look over the At-Large list on my way out. I guess I just felt like

there was no reason not to. He's Batman. And he's stuck in that chair. The last time, I couldn't do a thing for him. This time, I can. I would rather give him a sponge bath with rosewater and Dom Perignon, but this is what he wants. So why not?

That's why I began the night in the Batcave, staring at the names of my former colleagues on the At-Large list. Some were friends: Eddie, Matt Hagen, Oswald on a good day. Some weren't: Scarecrow, Ivy, Catman. Even so, they're not *enemies*. It didn't feel right, sitting there looking at those names on an enemies list on a little sidescreen under a bat emblem. I'm not going to become "Batwoman," not ever.

I was going to go out there to... fight crime.

And, since any decent stint crimefighting begins with a solemn vow, I paused right there in the dim glow of a Batcomputer hologram and I vowed that if anyone, friend or foe, so much as whispers the words "Gotham Post," I will claw out their fucking eyeballs and make them into earrings. I will claw out their intestines and feed them to Shimbala, and I shall send whatever is left over to Etrigan for his demon pals in the ninth circle of hell to play school soccer with their skulls.

Anyway, that was getting out of the house. Once I made it into Gotham, I've got to say, this city is a lot bigger if you patrol instead of prowl. I began in my usual territory: uptown. Museum Mile, down Park Avenue to the Fifth Avenue jewelers, Tiffany, Cartier, Van Cleef and Arpels... It's the kind of crimefighting I'm most comfortable with, because there is one particular type of criminal I dearly love to pummel: the overreaching amateur. In crime as in everything else, everyone has their level, and if you're a mediocre nobody, you simply have no business attempting Catwoman targets. The Gotham Museum of Art, The Whitney, The MoMA, Cartier, Tiffany, these are only to be attempted by master thieves for whom the act of thieving is an art.

Any time I have found one of those presumptuous no-talent wannabes attempting to break into Cartier, I have happily introduced them to their own inadequacies by way of the cat-o-nine tails. I was quite prepared to add the museums and the other Fifth Avenue jewelers to the list of targets worthy of that protection. I was quite prepared to add a call to the GCPD after the pain and humiliation of the physical beating. In my experience, overreaching amateurs are inherently stupid and unbelievably slow to learn, even at the business end of a bullwhip. Quite possibly, learning their value *in cigarettes* would show them how worthless they really are.

Unfortunately, there were no overreaching nobodies trying to break into the museums tonight. None attempting the Fifth Avenue jewelers, either—or even the modest little jewelry store near the opera house... Not the Park Avenue penthouses... not the park front condos on the Upper Eastside... and not the park front condos on the Upper Westside...

Since I was there, I checked the park itself. Not that I'm overflowing with goodwill towards anyone wandering Robinson Park that time of night. Safe as the park's become during the day, it still has the hangover of its old reputation after dark. It's mostly just hustlers, drug dealers, and drunken debutantes in there after midnight, and you have to figure they knew what they were getting into. As far as I'm concerned, they can get themselves out.

But it did occur to me that Poison Ivy was the reason Bruce was hurt—and therefore the reason I was out playing crimefighter. Plus, there were a number of unanswered insults from the Two-Face episode, and the park *is* the quickest route from the westside

to the east. If, in the course of stopping a mugging or something, I just *happened* to trip over a good reason to beat Pammy's head into a tree for a few minutes, that would be a detour worth taking. If I found a reason to set her on fire, that would be a night well spent.

Unfortunately—again—I had no such luck. I did scare away a few drug dealers. After all, the hotels and condos off the park are among my chosen protected targets, and desperate junkies fall into the same category as overreaching amateurs: they do not belong in my part of the city. So, I picked three of the scummiest looking dealers, and we had a frank chat about the food chain. Namely, how big criminals eat little criminals. Left them tied up for the police, just as an example to the others. I think I made my point, but we'll see how many return tomorrow.

Midtown was next. I checked the MoMA (on the same principle as the uptown museums). Didn't find anything happening there, but a couple wiseguys were torching a restaurant right down the block. I had NO qualms about taking them out. Fires have that nasty potential to *spread*. They get out of control, and even if all the *people* manage to get out of the way, the Van Gogh next door might not!

The Van Gogh naturally reminded me of Bruce, so I did a pop through Wayne Tower while I was in the neighborhood. Call it enlightened self-interest. After all, the penthouse is my home too, WE is Bruce's bread and butter, *and* it's built over a Batcave. Between what Bruce started with and a few little suggestions I've made along the way, the security is the best in the city. And, as long as Catwoman prowls the night, I'll be testing myself against the best security setups I can find.

I tried breaking into the R&D floor to begin with, and I was happy to see that I couldn't. Then I tried the executive suites, and found I could get into Lucius Fox's office on the first try. Normally, I'd set up a short in one of the outlets rather than bother Bruce. Building maintenance would find the exposure when they opened up the wall to patch the wiring. They'd have a few meetings with their security consultant, and fix the problem themselves without ever knowing Kitty was involved. But with his back injury, Bruce is frustrated. This will give him something to do.

I spotted the Batmobile as I passed Embassy Row. Gave that neighborhood a wide berth and headed further downtown. I obviously wasn't going to demean myself going near the East End, but there were plenty of catworthy areas to look in on: the lofts and galleries in SoHo, the clubs letting out in TriBeCa, and finally, the cutting edge of bohemian chic, the meatpacking district.

Where I hit paydirt.

These two wonderful old landmark buildings had been joined behind their original facades into an ultra-modern studio, showroom, and corporate headquarters topped with a "diamond penthouse" for meetings. The new HQ for one... meowwwwwwwrrllllll... Diane von Furstenberg. The place is all about lighting; it's an art thing. Lots and lots of glorious natural light streaming in every which way, i.e. plenty of *glass*, plenty of mirrors, plenty of reflective white and silver, i.e. the dumb ass roaming around inside in basic catburglar black didn't have a prayer. I watched for about five minutes, just to see how he'd negotiate the DMZ between the Phoenix 2000 protecting the showroom stock, and the 4000 that secured the priceless store of fabrics

in the warehouse—not to mention the priceless *secrets* in the offices and design studio above.

It looked like he was using a Plymouth bypass, which certainly isn't how I would have gone about it, but it got the job done. While he was covering his tracks, I checked the street for a vehicle. Since there wasn't one, I knew he couldn't be there for the fabric. He would need at least one partner and a good size truck to make off with enough merchandise to make the break in worthwhile. So he had to be there for something more portable, like the sketches for next season's designs.

Figuring he was headed for the studio, I went all the way up to the roof and came in through that "diamond penthouse." It was an 8000 up there, and even Batman wouldn't have been able to get past it quick enough to head off a burglar who was already inside—but then, Batman would just swing in through the glass and let the alarms be damned.

Me? I cut my teeth on the Phoenix 8000. My claw-tip wire splice is the reason there's a Phoenix 9000. So I got to the studio in plenty of time, while he was rolling out the sketches to photograph. I un-holstered my whip, lined up my shot, and as soon as he snapped the first picture, I struck.

I bantered a little, cat and mouse stuff, but not because the mouse was any fun. I only wanted to get a look at his camera without his realizing. It was a digital, so it was easy to see any shots he had taken. My goal had been to jostle his arm and blur the picture. I wanted to leave *evidence* of what he was doing, but I did not want to risk a clear image of even one DVF design remaining in that camera. It would only wind up floating around some godforsaken evidence room at the 38<sup>th</sup> Precinct, and Diane would be no better off than if I'd never caught my mouse.

Cops simply can't be trusted that way. There's a reverse snobbery. Because a dress that costs thousands of dollars is beyond their means and experience, they simply don't recognize its value. They would take no pains to protect DVF's designs and would probably ridicule any attempt she made to secure that protection. I've never met Diane von Furstenberg personally, but her clothes exude poise, self-awareness, and class. She deserves better than dealing with some missing link with a badge just to keep her secrets under wraps.

Once I was sure that there was no exposure, I pummeled the mouse. Left the would-be fashion spy hanging on a streetlight outside, and I left DVF a note, which I'm going to copy here, just to see if I've got this Link Document menu figured out.

(Ref: Duty log: Catwoman, supplementary file name, section designation §, seal yes/no, encrypt yes/no)

*Diane,*

*Found a creep snapping pictures of your sketches. Turned over to the GCPD, but it's a simple misdemeanor B & E. I'm sure you'll want to sic your lawyers on the corporate espionage angle. LOVE LOVE LOVE the willow print from the fall runway. Meow.*

*P.S. Peeked at your look book for fall ready to wear. Must have 2, 6, 9 and 10.*

*(/end embed document)*

Boy, that looks messy. That can't be right. Why does he make it so complicated to attach a file? He writes these things up at 4 o'clock in the morning. Wouldn't you want everything to be shampoo simple: wash, rinse, repeat?





## WEEK 2

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

I did it. I demoted Victor's freeze ray to a back row knick-knack and put something of mine in the long display case in the trophy room. I figured as long as I'm participating in this ridiculous exercise, I may as well make my mark down here. His cave. Grunt. I dare him to move it. I dare him. I'm out there fighting crime, for Bast's sake; I'm leaving my mark. I earned it too. If that freeze ray is a trophy, the Iceberg souvenir glass is a goddamn badge of honor.

It started at a cute hole-in-the-wall in SoHo that was once called Gallery Blu. They had some of the worst security in the city for a high-end retailer, and I wasn't surprised to learn they were a front for the Russian mob. The losses from all the uninsured artworks going missing helped their fictional bookkeeping look legit, and looking back, I'm sure there were items they imported just for me. In any case, I was a frequent visitor and Gallery Blu saw its share of Bat/Cat action.

They went under a few years ago. At first, a coffee shop moved into the space. Then a photo development lab, a used record store, a hair salon, and finally, it opened its doors once again under a nondescript sign reading only "SVC." I was curious and checked the back door where deliveries were accepted. There, it was a smaller sign reading "Samovar Vodka Club." Call me crazy, but I couldn't help thinking maybe the Russians were back. So I went snooping.

There are two distinct groups within the Russian mob, and unlike similar organizations, the two sides seem to get along pretty well. The Georgians are into the nasty stuff: guns, drugs, human trafficking, and murder for hire. The Odessa crowd are all business: loan sharking, money laundering, and a controlling interest in most of the big cons. What I found at SVC seemed like the Odessa side of the business. Boxes of prepaid phone cards, maps of the city marked up in various ways, and a lot of real estate titles and paperwork. I took some pictures, sent them to Oracle, and was ready to move on when I spotted an Iceberg napkin.

Now, the Iceberg is like any other bar in that it has its name and logo printed on the cocktail napkins, and Oswald is a proud little bird. He appears prominently in the logo, his Penguin silhouette framing the words "Iceberg Lounge" on both sides. On this napkin, there were six arrows practically carved into the napkin with a deep, menacing stroke, all pointed at the left profile's head. The other profile had a no smoking circle over the head and a nasty line sliced through the neck. Along the top, the word "NO" was repeated six times, the last ones thicker and deeper, like the letters had been traced over many times.

When this place was Gallery Blu, it excelled at exhibiting artworks where a simple image told a complicated story. This napkin would not have looked out of place in that exhibit. It didn't take any great detective skill to see the story being told, it only took a pair of working eyes, a working imagination, and a nodding acquaintance with the people involved. Someone had been sitting in the Iceberg for hours, stewing with dissatisfaction that slowly deepened into malice—and that malice centered on Oswald.

My gut said they had gone to see him for something; that was the arrows on the left—“This is the guy to talk to”—and when he said no, that’s when they moved to the vicious mutilating on the right.

That part was only guesswork of course. The only way to find out more was to... to *somehow* find out more. I started in the obvious places: Odessa thugs aren’t exactly night people, but the Georgian crowd is up until dawn. I went up to Brighton Beach where they’re clustered, and picked off one at a time as they left this club or entered that one. Getting one isolated and vulnerable in an alley, that was easy. Getting one to talk, that is all but impossible.

It’s not that I’m weak and dainty when it comes to intimidation. In some ways, I’m better at it than Batman. Pointy claws dangled too near an eyeball, coupled with a villain’s reputation as opposed to a hero’s, it works. But not with those guys. The old world Russians, they don’t spook. They simply don’t. You have to figure after KGB, former KGB going freelance, gulags, and Georgian death squads, a guy in a mask isn’t all that scary. Gotham’s Finest are an actual joke, and as for costumed villains, well, let’s just say that, given what goes on in some of those Eastern European prisons, “died laughing” seems like a pretty good deal.

I was getting nowhere with Boris, Aleksei, and Gania, so I decided to try the other side of the equation. By then, Oracle had figured out the phone cards and was halfway through the real estate scam. She said she’d have the whole story by the time I reached the Iceberg.

Now obviously I wasn’t going to barge in like a vigilante and start knocking over furniture or beating up henchmen to get information. I was going to do what I always do: go inside, give Raven a warm smile, big tip for Sly, order myself a martini, and get what I was after—my way.

I thought I would give Batman’s alibi a little polish while I was at it. The Batmobile was making its rounds, like always, but it’s been a week since anyone has seen *him*. They haven’t noticed; it’s not like we’re a hive mind. As a rule, nobody goes racing to the Iceberg after a bat encounter. Quite the reverse: if the encounter doesn’t go well, you keep it to yourself. And from the Rogue POV, it usually doesn’t go well.

But anyway, I figured I’d take a few preventative measures since I had the chance. I broke off two claw tips on my right hand—that’s the martini-holding hand and the one that drops the twenty into the tip jar, sure to be noticed by Sly. I already had a broken batarang with me. I inserted one half into the heel of my boot (I knew Talon would be on the door tonight, and he’s a leg man), and the other half wedged neatly into my whip holster, where Crow (an ass man if ever there was one) was sure to see it. Tada! And meow. Without my saying a word, everyone would connect the dots and—Tada and Meow—there’s officially been a bat sighting tonight without anyone actually reporting one.

Back to business (grunt). I went to the bar, and all I could find out from Sly was that Roxy was playing chicken with the Redbird, zipped when she should have zagged, and put her rocket into the 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue bridge. All I could find out from the henchman was that there had been a mysterious shift in the suck up wind, and for some reason, Harley Quinn was the new ass to kiss. None of them knew why, but being the kind of pliable numbskulls that normally go into henching, they were still ready to bend down and pucker simply because of a vague impression based on a half-heard story told by

someone that didn't know any more than they did. Honest to God, these guys deserve to get pummeled.

Anyway, the bar was a waste of time, so I took my drink into the dining room and wandered. Jervis is still up the river, (courtesy of Huntress. Ouch.) so there's no gossip on tap 'til next week... Eddie was chatting up a groupie, so I let him be for the time being... And that left Victor Frieze, who's a nice enough guy if a bit of a downer... and Jonathan Crane, who is not a nice guy but who is better informed than most rogues. I went to his table, Blake snarled as I passed, and I hissed and kicked his chair.

Broke the ice with Jonathan, saying what nice weather we'd been having and what a big crowd there was tonight, and he scooted over citing the batarang sticking out of my holster. Normally it would be rude to mention a severed batarang protruding from the hip of a fellow rogue unless they brought it up first, but Jonathan's costume is mostly straw and he was just trying to avoid getting sliced. Anyway, the ice broken and the straw spill averted, we got down to business:

Oswald was the source of the Harley Quinn suck up initiative. Apparently it all dates back to the rebuild. There's always been a fair amount of gambling in the Iceberg back rooms: blackjack, roulette, couple slots, and the best sports betting concession in the city. When Ozzy rebuilt after the fire, he ordered the same slot machines that he had in the old 'Berg. Same company, same machines—but a new design. Each and every one of the new slots is decorated with a grinning white-faced clown. Leaving Oswald "wedged between two frights," as Jonathan put it. Fright 1, the obvious: No one knows how Joker might react. Grinning clown slot machines, the mind reels! But for Oswald, Fright 2 is just as bad: if he gets rid of the machines, he would be messing with the delicate balance of a gambling den. Gamblers are temperamental and very, very superstitious. If Cluemaster pulled a slot before hitting it big on the '05 Rose Bowl, then they all have to play that machine before placing a bet. Take away their good luck charm, the whole operation could implode. So, until he could find slots of the same size and general appearance that weren't covered in wicked-looking clowns, Oswald had hired Harley to keep Joker out of the back room. Some henchman overheard a snatch of conversation or glimpsed one of the payoffs, and runaway imagination took care of the rest.

Which was all very entertaining, but it didn't tell me a thing about the Russians or what Oswald might have done to cross them.

It occurred to me that, while Scarecrow didn't have any actual information to help me, he might just have something else. After all, the reason I couldn't get anywhere with the Russians was because it's hard to intimidate someone who's survived horrors you can't even imagine. With Jonathan's bag of tricks, that little advantage becomes moot; in fact, it can become a huge liability.

Downside, Jonathan isn't into sharing. And even if he was, I've set him on fire too many times to turn around and ask a favor. That left me with only one way to proceed. It would require finesse, felinity, and also, walking a very dangerous line.

By now, Eddie had finished with his groupie and was free to chat. I let Jonathan see that I had noticed but was making no move to leave. He knows Riddler and I are tight, and he leapt to the obvious conclusion that if I was choosing his company over Eddie's,

I must want something. I admitted it—the trick with Jonathan is you must never insult his intelligence. He's crazy but he's not stupid, and if he figures out you're trying to play him, it's nightmare city.

So I admitted it, straight away. Yes, I wanted something. I said I was a little nervous about asking him because of the aforementioned setting on fire, but that I was absolutely certain this was something he would like to help with. That's important, because the bait I was getting ready to dangle, he *would* find irresistible, and anyone who knows him would know that.

He raised an eyebrow—which, under that straw mask, is one of the creepiest brow-raises in the city. There's no way a smooth, sexy, graphite cowl can compete with all that tattered canvas and straw, it's just ICK! But anyway, I knew the clock was ticking. He was suspicious, and that's as dangerous as he gets. I had to spit out what I wanted before he decided to gas first and ask questions later.

So I quickly told him about this fraternity on the Hudson U campus, and he started to relax right away. His hate-on for Hudson University is the stuff of legend, and now that he knew WHY I thought my little project would interest him, he was ready to listen. This fraternity has a reputation for being "sick pups," and the rumor is that when they initiate little sisters each year, they bring in a cute little kitten. Sit the girls on the floor around this dark blanket, and let the girls play with the kitty for a few minutes. Then they pull back the blanket to reveal a boa constrictor which promptly *eats* the poor little thing!

Needless to say, I paid these sociopaths a visit years ago and put an end to the practice in a way they won't soon forget. But I didn't go into that with Jonathan. I just told the story as if I was only finding out about it now, and he readily agreed that fear toxin served up by a whip-wielding cat was just what the Hudson scum deserved. He gave me a gas pellet, instructions on how to use it, and in an absolutely unprecedented moment of normalcy, he offered to buy my drink. (A fairly meaningless gesture, since he doesn't pay his tab and I drink off a \$30,000 credit from Oswald's botched fencing of the Rosenthal rubies, but still, a gesture is a gesture.)

I stopped at Eddie's table. Once again, Blake snarled as I passed, and once again I hissed and kicked his chair. Eddie asked what Crane and I had been huddling about, and I hissed yet again, this time to let Eddie know whatever I was doing with Jonathan was none of his business. Then I asked what he knew about the Russians, which, okay, I should have known better. Twenty minutes of mind-numbing trivia about matryoshka dolls, Tartars, Napoleon, caviar, the 1812 Overture, the October Revolution, vodka, snow, Rasputin, Siberia, the Moscow Arts Theatre, the Bol'shoi ballet, expatriate ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Fisher-Spassky match, Tolstoy, Chekov, Gorky, Lenin, and *borscht*... I heard more about Greta Garbo's performance in *Ninotchka* (and how superior the 1939 classic is to the 1957 musical adaptation *Silk Stockings*) than one human being should have to listen to in a single lifetime. I was beginning to think I'd ruptured Jonathan's gas bulb and the whole thing was a toxin-induced nightmare, when he actually came up with something useful: Bat's Keg, Eddie's little anagramming pet name for KGBeast.

Now, Beast really isn't a guy you want to deal with if you can avoid it. He's a Cassieque killing machine without the cute. But I've always felt that, as programmed killing machines go, they scraped the bottom of the barrel with Azrael. Once you've

choked down that one, you can take the others. So I say hi to Beast when I see him. “Nice night,” “nice weather,” that kind of thing. I think as much as he tolerates anyone, he tolerates me. So I told Eddie to finish my martini and had Wren send a few vodka shots over to Beast.

Russians have firm views about drinking alone (alcoholism) versus drinking socially (indispensable aspect of the life experience, vital for sustaining the human spirit through the long, hard winter). So Beast was fine with my sitting down at his booth and doing a shot with him. He even had a name—the name—for me to talk to about the Samovar Club. Only catch was, he wasn’t giving it away. He wanted something in return, and as someone who has Oswald’s ear, he figured I was just the gal to provide it.

It seems that KGBeast has a metal plate in his head. I didn’t ask for details beyond that. Unlike career crimefighters, I am a firm believer in the principle of Too Much Information. What kind of plate it is, what it’s made of, who put it there, what it’s for, these are not things Kitty needs to know. The salient point was, he has this metal plate, and every time he comes to the Iceberg since the rebuild, Oswald’s anti-bugging equipment plays hell with it. It was fine at the old Iceberg, and it was fine at Vault. But in the new building, he says he’ll be sitting there minding his own business, and all of a sudden his ears start ringing, or he gets a funny metallic taste in his mouth and starts picking up WCDE. He said the DJ on their late night jazz show has a sexy voice, but he still wanted it to stop.

So I went to Oswald... Brought him an igloo, bought one for myself, and I even paid the extra \$3.50 for the souvenir glass. Ozzy may have appreciated the compliment, but he wasn’t willing to risk turning off the counter surveillance equipment for however long it might take to find the problem. He said he’d given Beast an Iceberg discount card, 10% off, Sunday-Thursday, to compensate for the inconvenience. He offered me the same thing when he botched the Rosenthal rubies. Idiot.

Anyway, I knew for a fact that the Bat Family has enough to keep them busy right now without pressing their ears against the Iceberg walls. It was actually the perfect time for Oswald to turn off the machinery, if only he knew. So I hinted that I had a little escapade in progress that would be occupying Batman’s attention for the next few days. (Note to self, pick up more of that herbal massage oil he likes and stop at La Perla for something lacy).

Ozzy immediately started maneuvering to fence whatever catworthy prize I came away with after this “escapade,” and I told him it wasn’t the sort of loot he could sell. That made him grouchy, and he said even with Batman’s attention diverted elsewhere, it was still too much trouble to recalibrate the anti-bugging equipment. He would only consider it if he could –kwak– kill two birds with one stone. If he was going to mess with the electricity and open up the walls, he wanted to replace the chandelier. He hated the new one –kwak– it looked like a chandelier. He wanted ice stalactites like he used to have. Unfortunately, Victor Frieze was unwilling to use the freeze ray on his behalf.

Woof.

So it was back to the bar to get yet *another* igloo in yet another tacky souvenir glass. Brought that one to Victor. (I have no more respect for crimefighters than I did

yesterday, but I was starting to develop a deep appreciation for what cocktail waitresses must go through). Anyway, Victor's issue wasn't the initial building of the ice chandelier. Seemed like all you needed for that was this dayglow liquid they sell at party supply stores, a garden hose, some food coloring, and a freeze ray. Pump-blast-pump-blast-pump-blast, and viola! You've got this enormous white ice stalactite flanked by two smaller blue ones, giving off just enough glow to justify their place in the center of the ceiling.

The problem, from Victor's point of view, came later. The Iceberg averages eight or ten fracas a week, and at least one good size brawl. The chandelier is always losing a chunk to a Demon saber, a ninja star, or Harley firing a warning shot. Those constant repairs were a pain, and Oswald wasn't exactly appreciative. He always gave Victor a discount card, 10% off Sunday-Thursday. Victor says he has 130 of them.

So I asked him what it would take to get him on board, and he said he wanted "A Living Lair." As everyone knows, Victor has a hard time holding on to henchmen. He's not a particularly vicious boss. He doesn't go shooting the help for no reason or anything like that. But the nature of his condition is... well, it is what it is. He goes through life in a sub-zero cold suit. It's not like it would ever occur to him to trick out a lair with creature comforts. That, plus the occasional thirty-degree dip in temperature if any piece of equipment malfunctions—a thirty-degree dip that Victor himself isn't aware of until somebody tells him... It's not a great gig.

So apparently, Victor read this article on Bill Gates's house: how everyone in the household wears a tag that identifies them, and a central computer tracks them through the building and presets everything from the temperature and lighting to the pictures on the walls to match their personal preferences. He wanted a system like that for his lair, and, of course, Riddler was the only possible person to set it up.

Woof.

So I went back to *Eddie's* table. No drinks this time. Just:

"Thank coin."

That got his attention.

I progressed to a naughty grin and added "Chain knot."

"Sit down, Ninotchka," he said with a happy laugh. "You got any more?"

"I got 'Long Kiss Ticks' for *Silk Stockings*," I told him. "But it sounds kind of disgusting."

He agreed and said selecting the best root word to anagram was always the hardest part. I sat down, and seeing as it was Eddie, I didn't bother being cutesy. I came right out and told him what I wanted. And he... did the same thing.

He wanted a straight answer. Why the sudden interest in Russians? Why I was holding secret meetings with Scarecrow? Why I was brokering deals for Victor Frieze?

"SURPRISE!" I told him. "It's your birthday present. A treasure trove of riddles to ponder, and tonight is only the beginning."

"My birthday isn't for two months yet," he said.

"That's why it's a surprise," I purred.

He thought it over. I could tell he wasn't convinced, but... but I'm a villainess and not a heroine, and Eddie is only a man. I crossed my legs, I did the head tilt and the warm smile, and then I met his eyes and let it all fade.

“Please Eddie, I need this. I’ve been running around this nutfarm all night, downing martinis, delivering vodka shots and igloos, and all I’ve got for my trouble is three—count ‘em, *three*—of those stupid souvenir glasses and a fear gas chaser.”

“You don’t fight fair,” he muttered, breaking eye contact and fixating on my legs—and I knew I had him. He’s a man. He’s the best rogue in the business, but he is a man, and there’s only so much those tripods can take. I let the top calf rub the bottom ever so gently at the knee, and he swallowed.

The end. The dominos started falling, just like that: Eddie agreed to fix up Victor’s lair, Victor agreed to make and maintain Oswald’s chandelier, Oswald agreed to fix the anti-bugging equipment for KGBeast, and Beast gave me the name of an Iranian, one Ben Soleimani, who lives above a caviar import front called Dilmanian and knew absolutely *everything* there was to know about the Russian mobs in Gotham.

Iranians who have made it to the States rank right up there with Russians for being all but bulletproof when it comes to interrogations. They’ve seen worse and survived worse than I could dream up in my worst nightmare. So I went in expecting a battle of wills. I went in hoping it would be enough to threaten the fear gas and that I wouldn’t have to actually use it. Turned out, I didn’t need to do that much. Soleimani assumed Catwoman had come to steal his caviar. He was quite happy to trade information to “buy back” the inventory he couldn’t afford to lose. And at \$1000 a tin for the good stuff, it took quite a lot to dissuade me. So...

The phone cards are legit—but not for long. Odessa sets up these front companies, gets a line of credit, and buys enormous quantities of some prepaid item, like these phone cards. Naturally, they never pay off the loan, and the phone company will turn off the cards as soon as the front goes into default. But by that time, the cards are already sold. Not huge money, but respectable. After all, not every heist can be a Monet.

The real estate swindle is much bigger. A con man poses as a credit counselor and gets distressed homeowners to sign over the titles “temporarily” as a good faith gesture to their creditors. Other half of the operation “sells” the property, getting buyers to agree to below-foreclosure prices with an extra \$50-100,000 paid under the table in cash to reduce the taxes and commissions. By the time the paperwork on the actual sale trainwrecks, their guy is long gone with the cash.

As Soleimani said, it’s all very smart and very low risk—which is why they were not keen on doing business with “Rasputin’s penis.”

Yeah. Mhm. Rasputin’s penis.

I really thought I was the one person on either side of the gameboard that knew how to deal with Batman in any situation. It’s always come so naturally to me, long before “My name is Bruce.” But I have *no idea* how to tell him this.

Batman, Darling, love of my life, I seem to have identified the hidden menace behind this case I’m investigating, and, well, it’s Ra’s al Ghul—but wait, that’s not the funny part. Now now, Bruce, let me finish. Yes, I said *the funny part*, because—Yes, Bruce, I know you think nothing about Ra’s is funny, but that’s only because you haven’t heard *this*—Turns out, our friends in the Russian mob, in a feat of Slavic-Kievan psycholinguistic confusion that defies comprehension, have come around to calling him “Rasputin’s penis.”



Note: learn status of fear gas capsule obtained from Crane, confiscate for study if possible.

Note: Have Oracle check into the Living House setup/configs from Gates. Potential for locating/disabling Frieze's lairs in the future.

Note: Check on Iceberg's current anti-bugging setup. Need to update Batcomputer with latest info on the 'Berg + frequency/modulation; intel may be helpful in dealing with KGBeast in the future.

Note: Nigma. It isn't over. She left him with a question mark, and that's what he does. Project probable scenarios. Construct protocols for same.

Personal note ::Encryption matrix Alpha36:: Appalled she spent so much of a "patrol" at the Iceberg drinking and socializing with the most wanted list. Not to mention, she seems to have facilitated more for my enemies in one night of "crimefighting" than in her entire stint as "Queen of the Underworld." And yet, I cannot deny her effectiveness. It can take six months to whittle away the layers of misdirection around a Ra's infiltration. She cracked it in a night. Leaving me with two strategies to map out: heading off Ra's (which shouldn't be difficult at this early stage of the operation) and how to react when Selina comes to bed and tells me all this, "Rasputin's penis" and all.

I am truly not prepared for this. I've trained inexperienced sidekicks to become full partners and I've worked alongside equals who needed no training. But I have no frame of reference for Selina. "A report" from her isn't a report, it's cuddling in bed while her mind unspools after a longer night than she's used to spent in unfamiliar waters. I really don't know how to—

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

Well that didn't help. And when warm, liquid chocolate doesn't do the trick, it's definitely time for *bed*.

... .. :: Catwoman logout :: :: :: :: ... ..

... .. :: Batman logout :: :: :: :: ... ..



## WEEK 3

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

Okay, it's happened. I woke up in a teacup.

I knew I couldn't expect to go five weeks crimefighting in this town and not encounter a fellow Rogue. I'm not sure what percentage of the total crime pool we represent, but I know whenever one of us is active, we move to the front of the line. The police can handle the small fry, but for a Joker, a Scarecrow, or a Mad Hatter, the city needs a Batman. Since I'm standing in, it was inevitable that, sooner or later, I'd have to face off against someone who once picked my name for a Secret Santa. That it was Jervis, well, I'd love to say it was the luck of the draw, but I can't. I'm not a victim of circumstance; it was my choice. When I heard the stories, I decided to be proactive, I... I'm getting ahead of myself.

I followed Denisovich to his "new job" at the Iceberg. As expected, Ozzy had been just as happy to hire a Ukrainian as a Mexican, as long as they claimed to be in the country illegally and therefore unable to turn on him. Of course, Denisovich wasn't Ukrainian; he was Russian. And I don't think he was in the country illegally either, but who knows? It's not like hitmen need a green card.

So I headed in the front door as soon as I saw Ozzy's new "dishwasher" go in through the kitchen. They weren't open yet, but I knew the rest of the staff had started to arrive, and nobody was going to think it strange if Catwoman picked a lock and let herself in. I said I was missing a pair of night lenses and thought I might have dropped them when I was in last week. They were all busy doing their normal set ups and check-ins, and as long as I wasn't going to mess with their routine, no one cared if I poked around a little. So I went to the bar, the most likely place to have dropped my lenses, and liberated a bottle of tequila. I stored it in the ceiling tiles in the hallway outside Oswald's office, and then "found" my night lenses on the little shelf in the ladies room where Gina keeps the tissues, hand lotion, and perfume samples that justify her existence in the place. "So silly of me to forget I had set them down so they wouldn't get spritzed," and I was on my way. Came back in through the HVAC duct that Oswald seems to think a human can't fit through, and waited in the back room opposite his office.

As soon as I saw Denisovich make his move, I put him out with a neck chop (although the bastard deserved the claws, I couldn't leave any marks.) His gun was already drawn, so I didn't have to fish around for it (thank Bast). Got him nicely positioned face down at Ozzy's door, with his foot skidded right through the spilled tequila so even Gina could figure out how he came to be lying there in an unconscious heap. I lined up the "accidental" shot he would fire as he "fell," pulled the trigger, and did my best bat-vanish into the shadowy blackness of the back room while everybody came running. After the kind of coordinated high-speed lockdown you only see in movies when the G-Men are closing in to raid the speakeasy, the police were called and Oswald's would-be assassin was taken into custody. Meow.

Once the cops left, I circled back “since I was still in the neighborhood and heard the sirens.” I just wanted to make sure Ozzy was clear about who tried to snuff him and why, which of course he was. Oswald Cobblepot is nobody’s fool, which meant my job was done. He could take it from there, and I could now file the Russians under “N” for “Not My Problem.”

Except, in the time it took to get that confirmation from Oswald, the happy hour crowd had started to arrive and the pre-sunset edition of the Iceberg rumor mill was doing its thing. Oswald’s moment of excitement was only a secondary headline below the fold. The night’s big story was Jervis. Seems everyone was expecting him to come out of Arkham breathing fire. He was sent up by *Huntress*, and that’s just not something an A-List Rogue can let stand if he wants to remain A-List. Word was, he’d been boasting for weeks that he was going to do something BIG and was going to do it faster than anyone thought possible.

So... the time had come. A Rogue Moon was rising and that meant the moment had come for me to bite down on my role as interim Bat and staff out my first assignment to the sidekicks.

Thanks to a purrfect criminal career unsullied by a single capture, Catwoman never had any official entanglements. But even I know there’s only way to get anything big going immediately after release from Arkham or Blackgate: The Z. This loose association of former henchmen and independent contractors can set up a lair, a cover, a war chest, a computer network, a soup kitchen, a fleet of taxis, or a bogus advertising agency. Whatever you need, they’ll put it together. They do it fast, they do it quiet, but they do not do it cheap. And they tend to pad the job with all kinds of extra expenses to amuse themselves.

It would have got them killed twenty times over by now, considering whose pockets they’re picking, except for the outrageous hilarity of the stings. Everyone wants to keep them alive just to see what they’ll do next: \$1400 in pay-per-view charges on Riddler’s satellite hookup, for boxing and zombie porn. \$6800 on Mr. Freeze’s tab for “fruit and veterinary fees.” Seems that while the Z were setting up his hideout, they kept a trio of pet monkeys. Ventriloquist found his new base included nine brand new jet skis he had no use for. And Catman found he had paid for thirty-seven lap dances at Fat Benny’s bachelor party (the event which presumably emptied the ten bottles of Absolut on Hugo’s tab, which were only discovered hidden under Blake’s “cat’s cradle” deathtrap after Batman broke free).

Anyway, I was sure Jervis must be using the Z to set up his “something big,” so I sent word through the Iceberg that I was looking to set up a new lair. I said money was no object as long as I could have it *fast*, and I left a number. Not ten minutes later, I received a text from “Zed” naming a time and place to meet. I had Robin and Batgirl waiting in the shadows, and as soon as Zed showed, they swung in.

On my instructions, they both swung right past him and came at me. He ran, as any sensible small fry would, but he didn’t get very far, since I was just tossing Batgirl off my shoulder and she landed on him. The batarang she was holding put a nasty slice in his leg, but he still managed to get away (since, of course, the bats were there for me and had no real interest in him). Unfortunately, that gaping wound in his upper thigh kept him from getting very far, so as soon as I had finished off the junior bats, I was able to catch up with the little fool. I was furious that anyone with the Z’s reputation

could be so sloppy, letting himself be followed straight to the feet of a Rogue of my standing. Followed by Robin, no less! How can anyone be so oblivious they miss a yellow-lined cape flapping in the breeze?!

It was fun. I enjoyed chewing Zed's ass on *Rogue* grounds. He was going to taste whip because he had *crossed Catwoman*, not because he was selling drugs in the park or breaking into a townhouse I'd decided to protect. It felt so good to just *be me* again, even if it was a charade. That pretense felt a lot more natural than my reality the past few weeks.

And it worked. Zed was desperate to prove that Robin and Batgirl could not have followed him—or, to be precise, he was desperate to keep his intestines. The best way to do that was to convince me that teenage crimefighters hadn't found me because of him. He gave me a full account of his movements for the last day and a half, and that gave me all the locations the Z had been setting up for Jervis.

Times Square.

Damn.

I've got to admit, it's impressive. They were rigging sixteen billboards in Times Square in some way we've yet to figure out. Robin retrieved the equipment, but it will be a few hours, at the very least, before Oracle cracks what exactly it was all meant to do. But whether it's strobes or subliminals or pulses, the gear was almost certainly meant to send people to the photo booth. That was the Z's second location. They hadn't taken it over yet; they were in position to move in when it opened for business in the morning. They had taken a room in the tourist hotel right above... Woof. Getting ahead of myself again.

One of the stupidest legacies of the Wayne-Luthor pissing contest was a hundred-year lease LexCorp had bought on what was then the biggest video screen in Times Square. When the Demospawn bankrupted the company, the balance of their lease reverted to the city, and given its location, the city decided to use it for goodwill with the tourists. The Gotham Visitors' Bureau set up this cute little photo booth where tourists can get their picture taken on a digital camera, and it's projected for a few seconds on the vid screen. They get a little certificate with the timestamp and a printout from the Times Square webcam during their 15 seconds of fame.

So, the Z had taken a room in the hotel right behind this photo booth. Batgirl raided it and found copies of all the Visitor Center signage and literature, as well as a duplicate "camera" tricked out with all kinds of mysterious Jervis gizmos. And, of course, a box of freebie hats—"I heart GC"—to remember the experience and reinforce whatever the camera had programmed them to do. Once again, it will be a day before Oracle can take the stuff apart and analyze all the details of what it was meant to do to people, how it was meant to do it, and what Jervis would have gotten out of it. None of which has anything to do with me. I was taking the Z's third location. Not Jervis's stuff but Jervis himself, the actual lair.

But first, I zipped through Museum Mile, scooted down Park Ave and over to Fifth, checked on Cartier and Tiffany's. Still no overreaching amateurs attempting a Catwoman target that's far too good for them. Woof.

So it was downtown to 36<sup>th</sup> street and my first tête-à-tête with a fellow Rogue.

Now, no name Rogue skimps on perimeter defenses, but everyone has their own style. Harvey, for instance, likes lasers. Nobody knows why, maybe there's a hidden Trekker under all that Harvard suave. Pammy doesn't like technology; she likes rosebushes who snitch. And Jervis? Jervis likes hatted drones dressed as playing cards. Preferred suit: hearts. He's not cheap; he just prefers hatted slaves to gadgets. It's a preference. Like me, I always preferred claws to henchmen (and for that matter, letting Batman waltz right through the front door). But I'm me. Meow.

So anyway, approaching a Jervis lair before Jervis could have hatted himself an inside straight of lookouts, I didn't anticipate much in the way of defenses. I scoped it out from across the street and six flights up, and I must say, I had quite a chuckle when I saw what the building actually was. Quite the variation on a theme, for Jervis. Not really a hat. You could say he was cheating, actually, but it's so cute, you can't hold it against him.

Hudson Hairpieces.

Toupees.

That's just... damn, Jervis, it's good.

Now, most buildings in Gotham will take what they can get for natural lighting, and Hudson Hairpieces is no exception. They had a nice fat skylight that just screamed "Come inside and play." Or, in keeping with the Lewis Carroll motif: They had a nice fat skylight that may as well have a little tag on it reading "OPEN ME."

I figured with the skylight being that obvious an entry point, the Z wouldn't have rigged the top floor windows. If someone on the roof was coming inside, it would be through that big glass OPEN ME hole in the ceiling. So I went for the window. It had exactly the kind of ten year old lock you'd expect on the top floor of a thirty year old building that had nothing much to protect inside anyway.

So in I went.

And down I went.

Down this fucking greased chessboard chute, like some kind of spiral staircase in a Hitchcock dream sequence designed by Salvador Dali. Halfway down, this puff of mint green gas hits my face, which might have been what knocked me out or might not, because I swear to God, my head kept *bouncing* off *every* goddamn white square the whole fucking way down. Dot-dot-dot, I woke up in a teacup. Not Kitty's finest hour.

So I wake up, and I've landed in this giant teacup, like something you'd see at the original Disneyland. My head is absolutely throbbing—either from the gas that smelled like iodine and Tic Tacs, or else from the 32 bumps on the head. Either way, my head HURT, and Jervis was there, yipping like a Palmaranian. Pomaranian. Christ, how do you spell that? Jervis was jumping up and down, yipping like a Pomeranian. Boy, that looks wrong. I am not a dog person.

Anyway, Jervis explained how he was testing a bat trap (no kidding), working out the very delicate timing between the crimefighter breaking the electric eye at Point A and reaching the gas nozzle at Point B. His problem was simple enough: a big hulking Batman would fall a lot faster than a little wisp of Batgirl, and he had no idea which he might get.

At least, his problem WOULD have been simple to explain if he was anyone else. But with Jervis, the crimefighter isn't falling down a *chute*, he's "going down the rabbit

hole.” And this is where a thorough knowledge of *Alice in Wonderland, Chapter 1* becomes necessary to follow the story, and if you can manage it without 32 fresh bumps on the head, that would be good too.

You see, Alice was falling down that famous rabbit hole for quite a long time. She had time to observe all the things around her as she fell: there were shelves and cupboards, there were maps and pictures hung on pegs. At one point, she picks up a jar of marmalade from one shelf and puts it back on another farther down. She falls for so long, she starts to wonder if she is going all the way through the center of the earth and will come out the other side. She recites facts she learned at school, she gets to missing her cat and hopes that someone at home will remember to feed it. By then, she has been falling for such a long time that it’s getting to be past her bedtime, and being only a little girl, she is getting quite sleepy.

So, back to Jervis explaining his bat trap problem in JervisSpeak: if the crimefighter is going down the rabbit hole, he refers to Point A/the electric eye as “passing the shelf with the marmalade.” Point B, where (if properly timed) they get hit in the face with a puff of knockout gas, that’s where “Alice began to get rather sleepy.” Flawless logic. For Jervis, it actually MAKES SENSE. There’s just one small problem. As Alice is getting sleepy, her thoughts get rather fuzzy. She’s missing her cat and wishing it was there with her. There are no mice for it to catch, but it might catch *a bat*. She starts wondering if cats eat bats, or if bats eat cats.

In other words, midway through explaining a timing problem with an electric eye and a gas nozzle, Jervis saw his life passing before his eyes. He was about to say something catastrophically wrong to a woman with very sharp claws and a notoriously bad temper, and the more he tried to avoid the dreaded words, the more he kept flipping them around and repeating them.

Bats ate cats, and then cats ate bats, and then bats ate cats again. No, of course, he didn’t mean *that*. He meant *cat*—NO! He meant *bat*—NO! He meant cats ate bats, no, no, for there is a rule about that which he would never dream of breaking, for he’s a bleeder, don’t you know, and the bat cat has baw claws and he will bleed cled. He would never dream of batcatting, of catbatting, of batandcaterwauling...

On and on. He couldn’t seem to stop himself. He just kept DIGGING. I finally had to haul my own aching ass out of the teacup and clamp a hand over his mouth just to make it stop. I very succinctly described the electric eye/gas nozzle situation in ENGLISH without any rabbit hole allegories, and that at least put an end to the bat/cat-eating portion of our encounter. Jervis concluded, rather lamely, that it wasn’t a very effective trap he had devised.

I agreed as far as the gas went, but I thought it was extremely effective when you factored in the misaligned checkerboard squares and resulting 32 head lumps. That set him off all over again. It went something like “ohdear ohdear ohdear ohdear ohdear ohdear ohdear.” I think repeated 32 times, one per lump.

You see, in his panic, Jervis hadn’t processed that there was no good reason for me to be there. He was convinced I had been coming to tea. He did invite me for a tea party last October (10/8, it’s a Jervis thing) and thought my coming “late” was the highest compliment imaginable—a line of logic that did nothing to make my headache any better.

He couldn't seem to get past this idea that I would take having landed in a teacup as the ultimate proof that the tea party invitation was a ruse. He was absolutely convinced that I thought he'd asked me to tea just to drop me down a chute, puff gas in my face, and plop me into a teacup. Scared himself right past Alice into iambic pentameter.

And this is where "Rogue" really trumps "crimefighter," because as a crimefighter, I don't think I had a leg to stand on. He hadn't done anything that terrible yet. He was planning to, but thanks to the Z, we were shutting him down before he'd even begun. So I'm not sure what Batman would have arrested him for. Luckily, Rogues don't need that kind of unassailable logic: Jervis had invited me to tea, and I hit my head 32 times and got a snortful of green gas that smelled like iodine and Tic Tacs. Those are sufficient grounds to throw him out the window. I wasn't prepared to take fussy little Jervis to *jail* and say "This fiend committed a crime. Lock him up, and throw away the key." But I was perfectly happy to forget he was a bleeder and use him as a scratching post, and then drop him off at the nearest hospital to get his corpuscles clotting before he bled to death. That hospital happened to be St. Stephens. They're not used to masks, and it's a good bet they'll decide he's crazy and send him to Arkham for observation. Case closed. Grunt.

So my first actual Rogue-driven episode as a crimefighter came and went without any damage to Kitty's reputation as a bad girl, but it was something of an anti-climax. There are certain images that come to mind when you hear "crimefighting in Gotham city": Batcave, Bat-Signal, Batarang, swinging over rooftops on a silken batline, gloved fist with the scalloped edges. Not filling out a clipboard in a hospital emergency room.

So, not willing to end the evening on "O-negative and allergic to tetracycline," I popped into the Wayne Tower again and made sure they had closed the vulnerability on the executive suites. Lucius Fox's office was secure. Bruce's was too, naturally. And while I was there, I stopped in the penthouse for an aspirin and an ice pack. I was really tempted to crash there for the night, but I knew Bruce would worry if I didn't come home. Alfred's got enough on his hands without my stirring that up again.

I also knew Batman wanted me to check the NMK ships' manifests. Oracle already confirmed that all the DEMON agents coming into Gotham were sailing on the faux shipping lines Batman set up for the purpose, but he still wants to see the hard copies now that the first wave of ships are en route. He says that Ra's knows far too much about Oracle for us to trust any computer data without corroboration.

I've been putting it off, but as my last dreary chore for the night, I went down Canal Street to the Bowery and tried to ignore the stench of the East End, which technically began a block and a half from my left boot heel. I located the building at the base of the Gotham Bridge, what had once been a graceful old bank and was now the offices of twenty or so small businesses, including NMK Shipping. I picked a twenty-dollar lock and found all the physical paperwork for the DEMON agents Ra's thought NMK was smuggling in for him unawares. Everything checked out, but I took out my scanner and made digital copies of each page.

I knew Bruce didn't have to see the paperwork with his own eyes. He would have been satisfied if I said I'd looked it over and everything matched the computer files. But that seemed like such a sidekick assignment—not just crimefighting, but anal,

dreary “show your work and check the math” crimefighting. Whereas breaking in and taking pictures of confidential internal documents to turn over to the head of a high-powered company the size of Wayne Enterprises, that’s where I live. Just the kind of job I used to do from time to time, although God knows I never had a corporate employer as hot as Bruce Wayne. I spent the drive home in that state of mind, pretending this was one of those old corporate assignments.

I thought how the break in itself was insultingly simple, really beneath my talents, but that wasn’t Wayne’s fault. He had no way of knowing this company’s security was so lackluster, and that a thief of my skill wasn’t required.

Or possibly he did know and simply wanted the cache of hiring the very best. I used to get that a lot.

Or maybe he thought that since the job was in Gotham, Batman might get involved. Corporate firsttimers always think their scheme is as important to the rest of the world as it is to them. If Wayne thought his shady maneuvering was “Batworthy,” he would naturally want an operative with Catwoman’s experience handling caped irritants.

Or maybe it was just a test, like with Luthor that first time. Maybe, like Lex, Wayne would take this data disk as soon as I handed it over and toss it straight into the trash. Maybe he’d say that, now that I had proven myself with something so trivial, he wanted me to break into *his* office and steal digital blueprints for the X-27 LexWing right from under Superman’s nose. Maybe, like Luthor, Wayne would even try to duck out of paying me when the job was done. Although Bruce Wayne really didn’t seem like that type. If his reputation was to be believed, he might make a pass when the job was over, but I didn’t see him skipping out on the check.

I was in Bristol by then, turning onto Country Club Drive with the tip of Wayne Manor just coming into view over the horizon, as I started to consider that possibility of a sexual advance. It happened a lot with the corporate hires, but I never considered saying yes before. But Wayne was definitely tempting. He was handsome, of course, very handsome. And beyond the superficial appeal, there was an undercurrent. He gave off a vibe that was terribly sexy. Maybe, just this once, I would accept the drink they always offered, and meet his eyes with an encouraging smile when he hinted, instead of snarling and reaching for the whip. Maybe just this once...

I decided to forego the logs and go straight up to bed. The mood I was in, I didn’t want to break the spell by writing out the whole Denisovich story, Zed, Jervis, and giant teacups. I wanted to stay in the headspace I was in: Having just taken the NMK information for Bruce Wayne, as commissioned, I had driven out to his manor to deliver them. I evaded his surprisingly good ground security and reached his bedroom window, to find an equally challenging lock and alarm, which seemed impassable by any means known to jewel thieves *other* than *my claws*. Meow.

I opened the window silently and crept towards the bed.

“Good evening, Mr. Wayne,” I purred seductively. “I have those files you wanted purrrrrrrloined from NMK shipping, and I thought rather than wait or go through channels, I would deliver them... personally.”

Silence.

“I know this is unexpected,” I tried again, “but I’m sure there are any number of items in this room with which you could... pay me.”



## WEEK 4

### The Journal of Alfred Pennyworth

Peace at last. If there has been a more trying night since the advent of Miss Selina in the master's life, one would be hard pressed to say when it was. If one were sensible, one would collapse into bed rather than spend further time dwelling on the events of the day. And yet, in these weeks since Master Bruce's injury, I have so often consulted that earlier journal, the one I kept at the time of the Bane calamity. The value of keeping such a record is plain. Revisiting those vivid accounts of my own turmoil has placed so much of the present circumstance into perspective.

Case in point: Guilt is not a logical emotion. It was not I who drove Master Bruce to the brink of exhaustion all those years ago, where judgment was impaired and the physical body pushed past its limits, nor did I subject him to a "back breaker" maneuver which fractured his vertebrae and threatened to end his career as Batman. I merely held a private hope that Master Bruce might one day willingly abandon his crimefighting vocation and the nightly peril in which it placed him. It was never my wish to see that end forced upon him, and when it seemed that might be the case, the guilt I felt was profound.

Enlightened by that experience, I can weigh the guilt I feel tonight by its proper measure. It was not I who ran Miss Selina through with a saber, nor did I stab her with a poison-tipped dagger. Nor was it I, for that matter, who imposed on her to take up a crimefighting mission to which she is not perhaps inclined. My culpability is confined to an oversight, which admittedly contributed to her ordeal. But it would be folly, self-indulgent folly, to blow my error out of all proportion and indulge in histrionics of self-importance and self-pity as a result. I can serve the master and the mistress best if I examine my guilt briefly, that I be able to master it and put it aside. Enlightened by the exercise, I might then use this fresh understanding to help them both through their own turmoil.

Let me therefore inspect my role in tonight's events.

Master Bruce I knew as "Master Bruce" from literally the day his name was chosen and inscribed in the family bible. Miss Selina, by contrast, was Catwoman long before I came to know her as "Miss Selina." It might be said she was a mythic figure from an oral legend, since I came to know her only as the maddening but beguiling antagonist in Master Bruce's accounts of their encounters as Master Bruce himself chose to relate them. If one eventually came to realize he was in no great danger from the adversary he found so compelling, one certainly came away feeling she was a considerable threat to anyone she wished to threaten.

When she became a woman of flesh and blood, a keenly awaited guest invited to the manor for whom one was called upon to prepare Leg of Lamb a la Pennyworth and open a bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, it was Catwoman who acquired a name by which one could address her as one took her coat. But Catwoman she has always remained, in that she has always been a fixture of that nocturnal world, evolved in the night as Batman was and at one with its dangers.

In short, one has been blind to the peril in which that young woman places herself, simply because it did not constitute a change as it did when Master Bruce began his activities as Batman. And yet, these past weeks *did* constitute a change, and one is at a loss to explain one's failure to anticipate this eventuality.

Since coming to live at the manor, Miss Selina has only once sought out my medical services, and that was a day later and at Master Bruce's insistence. She had treated her own wounds and her efforts would have been adequate were it not for the possibility of encountering sharks in her next adventure. There was an understandable concern about antagonizing them if trace amounts of blood were exposed to the open air. In other words, apart from this one extraordinary episode, one has been left with the impression that Catwoman had worked out all she needed to in order to conduct her nocturnal affairs in a way that worked for her. She had done this long before she entered the household, and one has been inclined to let her be.

Nevertheless, these past weeks she has not been conducting "her own affairs;" she has been conducting Batman's. Acting on intelligence Catwoman herself obtained, Batman had quickly established a "shipping firm" which was, in effect, a broker of cargo space on existing shipping lines. This brilliant maneuver gave the impression of a huge, multi-national undertaking with dozens of ships in its registry that had long been a fixture in foreign ports. An operation of such breadth and depth, it could not possibly have been brought into being overnight, even with the vast Wayne fortune at its command.

Batman then exploited an ersatz alliance between Ra's al Ghul and elements within the Russian mob. One gathers that the Russians want no part of the arrangement and it is only Ra's al Ghul who fancies they are working together. This one-sided arrangement was easy to manipulate. Nightwing conducted a few carefully scripted "interrogations" with key Russian thugs which succeeded in placing the name of NMK Shipping before Ra's al Ghul as the desired operation to smuggle his minions into Gotham.

As a sidenote: one was appalled to learn these "minions," enemies though they may be, were being transported as cargo. One has naturally heard horrific accounts of Chinese dissidents packing themselves into crates and arriving on our shores in conditions that must tear at the heart of any compassionate being. One expressed one's horror that even a fiend of Ra's al Ghul's amoral nature could subject his own followers to such conditions. Master Bruce assured me that it is the numbers and illicit nature of the departure which makes the dissidents' plight so dire. When it is ten or twelve men only, rather than forty or sixty inhabiting a container, and when the container is actually made for the purpose of covert human transport and is thus equipped with a degree of sanitary facilities, they can apparently travel quite comfortably. The conditions are spartan, to be sure, but well within that level of privation a fanatic will happily endure for his cause.

Once the cargo containers are entrusted to NMK, the DEMON agents within are, in effect, Batman's prisoners. They are loaded onto a ship bound for Gotham, just as their masters intended. Paperwork is issued to specify the unloading to a bonded holding area to await customs inspection. Such holding areas and the bureaucracy which governs the movement of parcels through inspection are not easily compromised, but the checks and double checks are no match for the combined efforts of Oracle altering

the computer records while Catwoman gains entry to swap the physical paperwork. Once a cargo container is unloaded, it sits idle until the next shift of workers arrives. It is then moved to a third location where it is picked up by another NMK crew and loaded onto another ship to be returned to the port from whence it came. At this writing, two crates of minions have been thusly "returned to sender," while a third, due to a scheduling necessity, is en route to Bolivia. Master Bruce calculates that it will be four days before Ra's al Ghul can learn how his plan has miscarried, by which time another nine crates of minions will be in transit.

If he were active, Batman would naturally monitor the unloading and reloading of the cargo containers from an unobtrusive distance. Since he cannot do it himself, he imposed on Catwoman to keep watch. Tonight she did just that, watching over the civilian dockworkers as they unknowingly transport a crate of assassins, and then keeping an eye on said crate until it is picked up again. Shortly after she began her watch, it seems that a trio of minions from the established Chinatown cell arrived on the scene.

One should explain that DEMON is not an organization where information flows freely in the normal course of events. As a rule, the left hand does not know what the right is doing. If the Chinatown operation knew a dozen minions were expected and those minions then failed to arrive, the expected conclusion is that it was a decision of their glorious master, whose ways are inscrutable and whose wisdom is not open to question. Batman did not, therefore, anticipate this kind of interference. Nevertheless, Catwoman was there to handle whatever unexpected development might occur.

She swooped in to protect the dockworkers. One of the minions tried to open the cargo container, to increase their odds with the addition of a dozen ready assassins. Catwoman prevented him, but in so doing, she opened herself up to the saber strike. Fortunately, no internal organs were pierced, but the physical trauma to a body being run through in such a fashion is not slight. She fought on, nevertheless, and in the course of the ensuing struggle, she sustained two minor cuts from a dagger. One should note that this term does not indicate the street usage but an actual ceremonial weapon such as the master has encountered many times on the servants of Ra's al Ghul. They are habitually dipped in a poison which is, fortunately, meant to slow a combatant's responses rather than directly bring about their demise by swiftly shutting down vital processes. Catwoman was able to hold her own until the minions were forced to retreat, for the dockworkers had sounded every possible alarm and sirens were soon to be heard closing in on the facility.

How exactly Catwoman extracted herself from the scene, I could not say, but one is given to understand from the "pffting" sound in which she dismisses the episode, that it is a skill she has perfected in her years operating on the wrong side of the law.

Here, however, one must abandon the detached nature of the narrative and admit one's fault, for it is here my oversights come into play.

In the earliest days of Master Bruce's mission, I remained awake throughout the night and took pains to remain in those parts of the house where I would hear his early return. In short, I took it upon myself to be alert and aware if he came home in need of medical attention. As his mission progressed, mechanisms were put into place, such as the relay which sounds in my room should the Batmobile return to the cave on

autopilot. It was foolish of me not to realize these failsafes are all built around Master Bruce's crimefighting arsenal and habits, and that a return to the old ways was called for if Miss Selina was to benefit while she is acting in Batman's stead.

Master Bruce would have summoned the car via voice command and had it transport him home without further effort. Miss Selina made her way to her own car and (with difficulty one imagines, given the cumulative effects of the blood loss and poison, not to mention the pain) drove herself home. With the goal of reaching the cave paramount in her mind, she appears to have suffered a collapse once that goal was achieved. If she had been in the Batmobile, I would have known her plight and been waiting on the spot to assist her. Indeed, I would have been in communication with her as the car neared the manor, assuming she was conscious, and so briefed on her condition, I would have had my supplies at the ready and the antidote ready to administer the moment the car door was opened.

As it was, Miss Selina was forced to drag herself from the car to the master's workstation, and from there, to the chair to activate the intercom. One found her there, conscious but on her last fibers of endurance, a condition in which one has discovered Master Bruce on no fewer than twenty occasions. One allows that, disquieting though it is to find a dearly loved charge in such a condition, one has at least grown used to it from repetition. Seeing Miss Selina in that state was unnerving beyond my power to express.

One has seen her weak with fever, and one has seen her bruised but stubbornly untroubled by it. One has never seen her brutally skewered and one hopes never to behold such a spectre again.

My first priority, of course, was to stop the bleeding and ascertain if any internal organs had been punctured. It was not apparent at that moment that the wound was inflicted by a saber, and my patient was no longer conscious to inform me how her condition came about. Hence, the blood loss and possibility of internal injuries were the most immediate points of concern. I was midway through that examination when I noted my patient's pulse was elevated, and her breathing unnaturally shallow. Knowing there were DEMON operations in progress, I hastily administered an antidote for the poison we know their daggers often contain. I resumed the examination and stitched up the large wound. When Miss Selina regained consciousness, she confirmed the dagger and directed my attention to the cuts it inflicted. No stitches were required there, but I administered an antiseptic salve.

Thus far, Miss Selina is a far more biddable patient than Master Bruce. She has expressed more gratitude since waking than all the rest of my patients in the long course of my caring for them. I confess I was almost put off by it, at first. It reminded one of the less worldly young ladies Master Bruce sometimes brought to the house in the days of the playboy pose, who went into such litanies of thanksgiving if one so much as held their chair or refilled their water glass. I mean really, what did she expect me to do, leave her lying on the floor to perish from her injuries?

Then I realized that, in that lengthy period already described, when she was Catwoman long before I came to know her as Miss Selina, she would not have had any such help awaiting her once she made it home. Her little feline companions are affectionate, to be sure, but they could not stitch up a knife wound. It is a certainty that, living as she did, she must have had occasion to drag herself home in similarly

battered condition, only to face the disheartening task of patching herself up alone. It is certainly understandable that, given that history, she would have a heightened appreciation for the services one can provide. One is still somewhat embarrassed by her warm expressions of gratitude, but one is learning to live with it.

There is one aspect of Miss Selina's behavior as a patient in which I must regrettably declare her quite as infuriating as Master Bruce: she has already begun to berate herself for what she should have done differently. The Batmobile has not occurred to her, but she has realized that she possesses an OraCom and could have "had Barbara call the house" rather than suffer that final death crawl to the intercom. One did not think it prudent to suggest alternative points at which Miss Barbara might have been contacted to relay information. One simply prescribed rest, tidied one's workspace, and stopped at workstation 3 to log the medical supplies used and update the inventory. That task complete, I turned, intending to return to the med lab and check on Miss Selina one last time before retiring for the night.

I turned—and there stood Master Bruce, beads of sweat upon his brow, his lips distorted in a grimace of pain, but his body locked into that posture of immovable resolve with which it is quite pointless to argue.

"How is she?" he rasped.

I told him. There was no point in attempting any other topic of conversation until that question was answered. He interrupted no fewer than six times once he heard DEMON was involved. His principle concern was the poison, and at his insistence, I have taken a sample of Miss Selina's blood "for further analysis." His fear, evidently, is that Ra's al Ghul might have modified the poison he has used for 800 years, rendering our antidote ineffective. I find this unlikely from an organization still using sabers and daggers, but there are times it is prudent to simply give Master Bruce what he wants and move on.

Once he was fully briefed on Miss Selina's condition, I was able to learn how he came to be standing there, endangering his own recovery with this ill-conceived effort getting out of bed and making his way to the cave.

Apparently, Master Bruce has been monitoring the Batcomputer's log entry interface every night when Miss Selina goes out to patrol. Tonight, when the hour came and went and no log entry was begun, he assumed she had finally adopted the behavior he expected from the beginning, a mindset he describes as "Kitty's not gonna follow your rules." As more time passed and she didn't join him in bed, he surmised that she might be "stuck out somewhere on the case. Some surveillance, tracking down a clue, following a suspect, et cetera."

Now, one is well acquainted with the particular marks of denial Master Bruce has always exhibited where Miss Selina is concerned. The fact that he enumerates the specific crimefighting activities with which she might be occupied hints that he was in no way convinced that was the case. He had been lying there for an hour or more, mapping out crimefighting scenarios and trying to convince himself that's what was going on, his unconscious fears multiplying as the minutes passed. When an alert finally did sound that a log had been accessed, his relief would be great indeed. When he snatched up his device to read along and saw it was I accessing the medical inventory... well, what more is there to be said?

What Miss Selina describes as “the hero-addled mindset” is fairly easy to anticipate: Catwoman was hurt. He was going to rush to her side to help her in any way that he could, and any risk to himself was irrelevant. That he might be setting his own recovery back three or four weeks would never have entered his head. If it did, he wouldn’t care. He risks life and limb for strangers, what is a little physical pain for the sake of the woman he loves? The fact that he couldn’t actually do anything for her, that is a triviality he will face when he gets there—once the damage is done, in so far as straining his back. It is not logical, but love is not logical, nor is guilt, and I have no doubt Master Bruce grappled with both in his painstaking journey down the stairs.

I have assured him twice now that I have everything under control, and if he would only return to bed, I will update him as soon as I know anything more. I have told him that there is nothing he can do. I have told him Miss Selina will be fine and that she only needs rest.

His maddening response?

“So I’m just supposed to sit up there and worry?”

One could not refrain from telling him that it might do him some good.

It was a lapse to be sure, but one has long thought it would benefit Master Bruce to know what it is like to remain behind when he roars out of the cave in that monstrosity of a vehicle to pursue his Mission.

The momentary ire passed, however, when one saw his eyes darting around the cave—to the med lab, to the chemistry lab, to the gymnasium, and once again to the med lab.

“I’m down here now,” he declared firmly. “And it’s pointless to aggravate my back further going back upstairs. I can stay down here with Selina, sleep in the med lab, and do my physical therapy in the gymnasium. I couldn’t before because Bruce Wayne was known to be injured, but enough time has passed now that he’s better. Wayne One will fly to Barbados in the morning, and that’s that.”

“Master Bruce,” I began, only to be cut off by that tone I have come to know as “the lord of the manor has spaketh and the law of the land is decreed.”

“That’s that,” he repeated. “Unless you want to go to Barbados. Do you want to go to Barbados, Alfred? I think the cricket World Cup is starting about now.”

I politely declined, and suggested, as he was determined to remain in the cave, that he at least lie down and recover from his exertions. He picked up the blood sample and said he wanted to analyze it for toxins before he went to sleep.

I followed, as I was quite sure he would be up until noon if unprodded, and once again I was offered a paid holiday in Barbados. I waited impassively as he prepared a slide, and waited again while he scrutinized it under a microscope. I waited while he punched up a file from the database and compared the image in the microscope with the image on the viewscreen. When he spoke, however, his words had nothing to do with the sample.

“Least I could have done was upgrade her suit,” he said bitterly. “I mean, there are *reasons* the Batsuit has undergone 247 changes over the years.”

“Indeed,” I concurred. “I remember every modification, Master Bruce, and the incidents which led to each. The suit has indeed come to resemble a suit of armor more than a costume.”

“What was I thinking, Alfred? She’s not... She’s not used to crap like this. Ra’s al Ghul and poisoned... I told myself she knew what she was getting into. I told myself if she wasn't ready for this type of confrontation, she shouldn't have gone along with it. What the hell was I... Blaming the victim now? Is that what Batman’s come to? She didn’t know what she was agreeing to. I did. I had no business letting her...”

I was at a loss, at that moment, so I merely placed a hand upon his shoulder and assured him that Miss Selina would be fine. I retired to my room with a cup of hot milk, and have spent this last hour trying to settle my own thoughts on the matter.

It is a paradox of Master Bruce’s life that he fears another loss like the one which made him Batman, and yet the very act of being Batman endangers those he loves.

Such an observation is not likely to bring comfort.

And yet, what further comfort can he have tonight? Miss Selina is alive and safe. Whatever might have happened, it did not. She is in the cave with him, and as he plans to stay there for the remainder of his convalescence, one can expect their working relationship can only deepen in rapport and understanding in the coming weeks.

As the upper floor of the manor is now unoccupied by any but myself and the cats, I have left my door open and allowed Miss Nutmeg to enter and finish my hot milk.



## WEEK 5

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

Honey, I'm home!

Okay, it's night 4 and that little joke has run its course. It is a whole new cave though, since he's been staying down here. The crimefighting itself is just as weird, but going out at night when he's right there at workstation 1, it's... it's good. Alfred is awfully grumpy with the dinner situation, but I really don't know what he expects. Bruce is in the homestretch of his recovery, and he's a lot more mobile than he has been, but he's not going to trudge up those stairs every night just to eat in the dining room, and I'm certainly not going to eat up there alone. Truth is, we've got it quite cozy down here. Although the bats are still pretty wary after my "lesson" with the grapnel gun. I definitely don't have the knack, but it was fun trying. I can't remember when I've seen Bruce so lighthearted. He says once he's back on the job, I'll have to try it at least once in the city with an actual building to grapple. Pigeons beware.

And then tonight, after dinner, I was just going to slip into the costume vault and change, but he said to wait. Had me sit in his lap, and then he handed me this little purple pouch. I could tell it was cut from the skewered costume, so it matches perfectly. Inside were these 3 perfectly formed "catarangs." Purple (of course), shaped like my claws, and a priceless little paw print on the center joint. I couldn't believe it. I giggled like an idiot, and then I just *stared* at them, and then this bawdy laugh sort of bubbled out of me, and then, finally, I remembered how to use my tongue and managed to thank him. It's...

Cat break. I had to get one out just to look at it again. (Ref: Duty log: Catwoman, scan image-catarang.jpg, seal yes/no, encrypt yes/no) Isn't it beautiful?

He made it. I never realized he made the first batarangs himself. I've used Kittlemeier from day one for my things. But this, he made it himself. Batman did. While I was out last night, probably... Batman, the judgmental jackass... Sometimes it's still hard to wrap my brain around it. I really don't deserve him. I certainly don't deserve the way he spoils me.

The crimefighting was more of the same. Well, to be fair, it's hardly "crimefighting" at this point. I'm still on Alfred restrictions for another two nights, which barely qualifies as a prowl. But just being able to go out at night is a pleasure. After only three days of "bed rest," I was getting pretty restless. Gave me a whole new appreciation for what Bruce is going through. But anyway, to the extent that I am crimefighting again, it was more of the same. I'm still keeping an eye on the meatpacking district. Besides the fashion houses, there is a lot of money down there. Nothing in my Museum Mile/Fifth Avenue cat-egory, but still, money. Worth protecting. STILL no overreaching amateurs at Cartier though. It really doesn't seem fair. I got run through by a freaking DEMON troll, I'm absolutely entitled to claw the stuffing out of one really annoying, unjustifiably arrogant nobody. Woof.

No Ivy either. I've been keeping such a close eye on the park, it's safer than that bench outside One Police Plaza. I'm starting to think she skipped town. Maybe gone

to see Harvey or something. I had meant to stop in the Iceberg and see if anyone's heard from her, but the time got away from me. That would be Falconi's fault. Just why the idiot wanted to go into COUNTERFEITING in this day and age, I can't even guess. I mean, other than drug deals and black market kidneys, who pays in cash anymore? It seems like it would be more trouble than its worth, getting enough counterfeit bills converted to the real stuff to justify the time and manpower involved. But the rumors turned out to be true. Somehow or other, Carmine got hold of a beautiful set of \$100 plates. Had them at his townhouse, which was not a challenge getting into or out of but I did pick up a tail during the getaway. By the time I lost them, I'd missed last call. Fuckers.

Not having anything better to do, I checked the alley off Michigan, and Robin was still there keeping an eye on Parsel. We finished up our chat about the Cassie situation. I reiterated that jealousy rarely if ever gives the impression that you love someone; it gives the impression that you are insecure. Then Parsel made his move and we broke off to follow and pummel, after which I concluded that insecurity is really not attractive. Robin expressed a desire for more pummeling, and I said "No, school night," and sent him to bed.

Of course he wasn't going to go just because I said so. I would have been spectacularly disappointed in him if he had. The bat boys are stubborn, just like their mentor, it's part of their charm. So I started playing with my new catarangs, and that brought him out of hiding. After 14 repetitions of "Oh cool," I suggested a zip through the park on his way home. He thought I meant *patrolling together*. That would be the addled crimefighter brain, junior edition at work. As if I'm going to be seen traipsing around Gotham looking for bad guys to pummel with Batman's sidekick in tow! (Yes, I know, I helped him pummel P. But Parsel is a bottomfeeder, and nobody is going to believe he even *saw* Robin or Catwoman, let alone both, and forget either of us stooping to acknowledge his existence if he did come into our field of vision.

Anyway, I let Robin chase me through the park. He kept up quite well, although he's still not quite as good as he or the tabloids think he is. I have no doubt that he'll get there one day, but for now, Batman is still first among crimefighters and there is no second. Not to mention, with Batman, he's got the tightest ass in the western hemisphere, and the perfect concentration of muscle, especially in the chest and shoulders. Just enough to be really strong without being too bulky, so you can't help but want to kiss all the way down those bulging biceps, dragging your teeth ever so lightly over the skin as you go. Too bad he doesn't realize I can tell when he's reading over my shoulder that way, which is really quite silly since I already told him all about my night as soon as I came home. That much maligned *feline logic* would say that if you already know what happened, there isn't any reason to be reading along as I type up the logs, but as long as you've put a shot of Baileys in that hot chocolate, we'll call it even.

... .. :: Catwoman logout :: :: :: :: :: ... ..

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

Mmm, that was nice. Anyway, as I was saying before the interruption, the crimefighting itself is still pretty weird, but going out at night—and the coming home,

now that he is in the cave, it's so much different. Completely different. I could definitely get used to it.

The only real drawback is the dressing situation. I don't mind keeping my costume in the vault, I did it before, for a short while, before I'd even moved in. But I can't bring myself to sleep nude in the open air of a cave. I just can't. I mean, it's a *cave*. I know it's The Batcave, but still—CAVE! So I've commandeered his pajama tops, which are fine to sleep in, but he does get grabby in the morning when I just want to scoot up to the manor and get a shower. Still, small price to pay. Meow.

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



## WEEK 6

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

... .. :: Catwoman logout :: : : : : : : ... ..

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

All I did was kiss a man in a mask. That's really ALL I did. I know some rubies and Rembrandts changed hands along the way, but that isn't what set any of this in motion. It wasn't pearls or Picassos that did this, it was YOU, you unmitigated jackass Psychobat prick!!!!!!!

... .. :: Catwoman logout :: : : : : : : ... ..

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

You want to know why I kept it out of the log? This is why. Psychobat. I knew you would do exactly what you did. Because Psychobat doesn't give a shit about your happiness, Bruce.

... .. :: Catwoman logout :: : : : : : : ... ..

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

And he certainly doesn't care about mine.

... .. :: Catwoman logout :: : : : : : : ... ..

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

I do!

... .. :: Catwoman logout :: : : : : : : ... ..

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

And doesn't that make me a terrible person!

... .. :: Catwoman logout :: : : : : : : ... ..

... .. :: Duty Log: Catwoman :: ... ..

Christ. Could things be any more fucked up? Riddle me that, Edward.

Once again, the night began with a spat about the armor and I stormed out of the cave. I stomped all the way to the carriage house and took the long way into town. I'm getting to have very warm and fuzzy feelings about that Catworthy billboard off the 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue Bridge. "Catworthy" as an instant, one-word measure to convey the excellence of jewels! Somebody out there gets it.

Plus, once I pass that one simple word of vindication, it's a quick turn into the meatpacking district. I like getting that out of the way early. It was a kick at first, having this one little patch of the city that was my idea to keep an eye on. But it's started to feel so crimefighter-y—"My city, grunt"—for the same reason. I'm not blowing them off entirely; it's not like they're the East End or anything. I just do a quick pass, first thing when I get into town, and most nights, I don't even have to get out of the car. Then I head uptown and park in my old spot underneath my apartment.

Jason Blood is so cute. He doesn't have a car, so an upside to giving him my apartment was that I got to keep the parking space. A few nights into the crimefighting gig, these four fist-size stones appeared on the four corners of the space, each one carved with a Norse rune. I looked them up, and they're symbols for protection, harvest, victory, and forward motion. Isn't that too sweet? He comes off like such a crusty old cynic, and underneath it all? Marshmallow. Hee hee.

So I parked, checked Museum Mile, headed down Fifth Avenue... and saw the Bat-Signal light up. That's not my problem; I don't do Bat-Signals. I thought it was Robin's night. Dick's night in Bludhaven should mean Robin answers the signal. But the OraCom went off a few minutes later and Barbara said that Cassie wanted to meet me at the southwest corner of Robinson Park. I didn't even connect it with the signal until I got there. It just never occurred to me that Batgirl would have been the one to answer it.

"Robin busy. Snake again," as she put it.

King Snake has always had this obsessive hate-on for Robin, and I knew things had heated up since he shut down a Ghost Dragon operation in Hell's Kitchen last week. But still, I don't care how busy he was, he had no business sending poor, monosyllabic Cassie to answer the Bat-Signal on her own. I would have bent my rule and gone with her if any of them bothered to explain the situation. Hell, I'm Catwoman; I BREAK RULES! Shouldn't they all know that by now?

So anyway, Batgirl had answered the signal alone, and as it turned out, it didn't tax her conversational abilities one bit because there was no Commissioner Muskelli to talk to—only a Riddler package. I wasn't *happy* about it, seeing that bright green box covered in yellow question marks, but at that point, I had no reason to think it was anything more than bad timing. Then BG showed me the contents: there was a little pewter bowler hat that I wouldn't have even recognized as a variation on the Monopoly piece if it weren't for the card packaged with it. It was that very distinctive orange of Monopoly "Chance" cards, the same size and lettering, and the old coot who appears on all those things was pictured wearing (of course) a question mark t-shirt under his tailcoat.

The riddle printed on it read:

*A better game it may be,*

*Minus three.*

*Or plus 37.*

*But good heaven,*

*Who wants to figure out that one?*

*Better to take the third chance plus one,*

*And be done.*

I knew Bruce would be as pissed as I was that I found it so easy to solve. I hated it because it was the most Batman-y thing I'd had to do yet, solving a Riddler clue. He would hate it because it wasn't any great feat of crimefighting that got me to the solution, it was knowing how Eddie thinks: Go is a much better game than Monopoly, as far as Eddie is concerned, and Go is a square on the Monopoly board. Go "minus three" means move three squares back from Go, or else "plus 37"/move forward 37 squares, which would land you in the same spot. But good heavens, who wants to go to all that trouble, counting 37 steps forward when you can just go back three. I didn't

have a gameboard to reference, but I was willing to bet that the Go-minus-3 square was also one square past Chance. None of which mattered, because the first part was the easiest to figure out in my head: 3 squares backwards from Go had to be Park Place.

I was really impressed that Cassie had apparently figured out that much on her own, since she'd asked to meet at the park. I asked her how she did it, and it turned out she didn't get it from the riddle at all. She just pointed across the street.

"Window changed."

I crossed the street to Bergdorf's where she was pointing, and she was right: new windows. Bergdorf Goodman is the best department store in the city, with the most elaborate window displays going. I doubt Batman, Nightwing, or Robin keep track of what merchandise is on deck at any given time, but I do—and apparently, so does Cassie (Good little Batling, she's got more potential than you'd think from all the badass fighting rep).

Anyway, since Monday there had been this 1930s radio theme running through all the windows, showing off some wonderful pastel sweaters and knits (lightweight but layered, so suitable for all seasons, I'd been meaning to stop in and stock up). Suddenly all the sweaters are gone, and all the theme elements are replaced with a set of windows from months before displaying scarves, belts, and other accessories. The theme of the new (old) windows? Classic board games.

"Saw before. Windows changed," Batgirl repeated.

I felt this sinking in the pit of my stomach. The board game windows were a point of contention between Riddler and Cluemaster during my stint as queen of the underworld. They both claimed the right to use it for a crime spree, and I had to arbitrate a sitdown. So why would Eddie restore those old windows, that was the real riddle. Was it a message for me?

I told Cassie that I would take it from there, and also that she should keep this incident out of the logs for the time being. I hoped I was wrong, but if this was going to be a personal Eddie thing, I knew I had to control when and how Bruce found out. Cassie agreed straight away, no questions asked. She certainly knows what it's like trying to deal rationally with the Batboys on a subject where they are determined to be irrational. (Speaking of which, I've done my best to stay out of the Jai situation. Unlike some crimefighters, I am not an obsessive control freak and I tend to think whatever is going on between Robin and Batgirl is their business, not mine. I stay out of it unless one of them deliberately seeks me out and directly asks my advice—which they have both done six times now. I swear, if any rogues were privy to what really goes on in the Bat family, they could pull a heist every night and never encounter a cape. Six times those rascally little batlings have finagled their patrols in order to catch up with me and get Kitty's two cents on their romantic tangle.)

Anyway, I sent Cassie on her way and investigated the windows on my own. The Monopoly area seemed too obvious after the riddle box, but I checked the game board anyway, just to see if anything was left on Park Place. There was: the pewter terrier, i.e. *the dog*. Might have been a coincidence, but somehow I didn't think so. In my mind's ear, I heard my own voice say "woof" a thousand times when Eddie was in earshot... and once again, I had this gnawing churn in the pit of my stomach.

The Clue window was next. That game came up repeatedly during the Riddler-Cluemaster sitdown, and I knew there was a Mr. Green among the suspects. The Mr. Green mannequin was holding a green glove that didn't really seem to fit the character. So I took a closer look and, sure enough, found a little slip of paper rolled inside one of the finger holes. It read:

*Not my birthday, but it is my sign.*

*Now it's yours.*

And there it was. I'd been looking for any indication that he wasn't talking to me. That this was a bat-riddle like any other announcing a Riddler crime like any other. That anything more—anything that *seemed* like something more—was just ego, guilt, and imagination on my part, turning a few stupid little coincidences into a SELF CUR TUCK (as Eddie likes to put it). But there was no pretending now. This was a personal message. "Not my birthday" was a direct allusion to our talk at the Iceberg. He had solved the riddle of my behavior that night—or more likely, he thought he had solved it but he didn't want to believe the answer he'd come up with. He didn't want to believe it any more than I had wanted to believe his using these windows was a personal message directed at me. So he devised a test: a riddle that only I could solve.

It was Scarecrow's first Halloween shindig and I had very foolishly eaten a petit four—which I freely admit was a damn stupid thing to do. What can I say, it was Jonathan's first party and none of us knew the hazards yet. There was a cute black cat on top in the icing, and, anyway—BOO! Eddie turned into this giant black panther-grizzly bear-dragon-scorpion thing. Trick or treat. The effect only lasted a few seconds, but that was long enough to swing the Eddie-dragon-bear into a headlock and ram its head into the wall a few times. We were sitting together, licking our respective wounds, when Madame Zodiac came around passing out these cards for a fortunetelling game. Line 1: Aries—March 21 to April 19. Eddie got terrifically excited because Aries the ram, the sign of Mars, has the anagrams for "ram" and "Mars" right there in its name. It was so right and perfect, he decided *that* must be his sign. Birthdays be damned, HE was an ARIES!

Except "Aries" A-R-I-E-S doesn't have either of those anagrams inside it. No M. He kept taking the M from March. Remember the headlock and skull ramming? The great Nigma brain hadn't quite recovered from the jostle, and for ten minutes, he couldn't wrap it around the notion that there is no M in Aries. That was my doing, I banged his head into the wall, and it's been our little joke ever since. Aries is his sign because of me. Once he even said the M came from Meow.

So it was a test. "*Not my birthday, but it is my sign.*" He was testing me, the little shit. Batman would never know what it meant. The only way he could know, the only way anyone could know this riddle points to an Aries crime, is if I told them.

I didn't. I didn't tell anyone. I just pretended that a ram was a cat and tried to work out what the best theme target would be. It wasn't hard. There are four gemstones associated with Aries: the diamond, ruby, bloodstone, and carnelian. Aries is also the god of war, so a thief who was merely toying with the idea of a theme crime for a lark but whose primary motivation was greed had a few more options. He could hit one of the defense contractors headquartered in Gotham, steal a prototype weapon (or the underlying software for one, much more portable) and ransom it back or even sell it on the black market.

But Eddie was not driven by greed; he was driven by the game. And this time, he was playing against me. He would go for the gems. So... diamonds, rubies, bloodstones, and carnelians. We all know where the money is on that list. I thought through the biggest concentrations of diamonds and rubies in Gotham, eliminated a few whose security was beyond Eddie's capabilities, and came up with one he would really like: Adamas. The Greek word for "invincible" is where our word "diamond" comes from. Eddie would love that. And the Adamas Exchange, in the northeast corner of the diamond district, does a healthy business in rubies as well. That was going to be his target. I didn't know if there was some more specific psycho-chronological cipher drawn from the bi-fractal indices of key items in the store window that a crimefighter like Batman would feed into a chain of linked Crays and come up with the exact longitude and latitude of the Adamas Exchange, but I knew, *the way a Rogue knows*, that Adamas was the place to hit for the Aries crime. Meow.

And woof. I might be Rogue enough to know that Adamas was the place to hit, but I wasn't the one going to hit it. I was the one... I was the one going there to confront a friend.

Now there are basically two kinds of security setups in the diamond district: the ones that put all their faith in technology and have people as a backup, and the ones that put all their faith in people and have the technology as a backup. Adamas was the latter. They have the best armed guards that money can buy, and rather than upgrade from a Phoenix 8000 to a 9000 when a catburglar comes around with razor tip claws to defeat it, they put the money into extra guards. Instead of retinal scanners at the vault entrance, the security staff gets a pay bump. Instead of heat detection cameras at the windows, 401Ks. It's really nice from a human resource perspective, but it's a vulnerability all the same. Mefentanyl is mefentanyl and it's going to knock them out no matter how much you pay them.

Fact is, neither approach is going to keep me away from their sparklies. Thieves on my level, it doesn't matter what they do. If we want to get in, we get in. Biometrics, sensor nets, infrareds, bring it on! That's why I still break into the Ross Exchange once a month just for fun. There is also a level of criminal who will be defeated no matter what. The sheer size of the prize intimidates them. They know that whatever a building in the diamond district has for security *must* be beyond their limited abilities, so they don't even try. And then there is the middle level, Eddie's level. He hasn't developed the skill set to defeat any security setup anywhere the way I have, but he's good enough to be good enough. If he picks his targets carefully, choosing only those that he can really nail, he can appear to be in my league.

So I checked the Phoenix and saw how the receipt hub been fiddled with so the harmonics were shifted out of phase. It wouldn't be detecting anything less than a 747 taking off from inside the showroom—which was a damn clever way to get the job done, in my opinion, and I made a mental note to compliment Eddie (right after I punched him in the mouth). I figured whatever gas he used had probably dissipated by now, but I put on nose filters just to be safe. Went inside, stepped over the guards where they fell, and made my way to the night vaults. And that's when the evening took a turn from vaguely bad to downright shitty.

“Riddle me this, Catwoman. Which of us would you say is least happy to see the other right now?”

I noted the formal address. I didn't go in expecting “Lina,” but I didn't exactly expect “Riddle me, Catwoman” either. I didn't know how to answer such a flamboyantly tacky opening, so I just gave him that look women give men watching The Three Stooges.

He clicked his tongue.

“These sacks are too big,” he said offhandedly. “I brought two, one for the diamonds and one for the rubies. Dumb idea. I can carry them out together and sort 'em out later.”

“You want my professional opinion on transport? Mark Cross shoulder satchel, strap worn diagonally, Lara Croft style across the chest, with an extra loop of velcro stuck on the back so you don't go raining diamonds all the way down on 47<sup>th</sup> Street when I lash your ankle midswing and twist you into a pretzel.”

He tilted his head like a dog hearing a new noise—looked a lot like Azrael, actually, except more bemused than stupid.

“That sounded like a threat, 'Lina.”

“That's because it is a threat, Edward.”

“You're pissed,” he noted.

“Oh, I'm pissed,” I agreed.

“WELL, SO AM I!” he screamed. Then he... he *swung* his sack of rubies *at my head!* I ducked, and he kept going. Spun himself around almost a full 360 and spilled a few rubies on the floor before he caught his balance, and then skidded on one and fell on his ass.

“Mark Cross,” he said, opting for dignity as he got up, and then straightening an imaginary tie. “Does it come with the velcro or...?”

“No, I get Kittlemeier to put it on. Breaks his heart, too, 'cause it's really good leather and he hates to mutilate it.”

“Woof,” he said.

“Woof,” I agreed.

Nothing more was said for almost a minute. I started to think maybe I was wrong about the gas. Possibly there was some still floating in the air and he was just stalling until it took effect. But then he rubbed his tailbone where he'd fallen, and that pretty much shattered the image of Machiavellian guile waiting out an opponent while an odorless, colorless gas renders them unconscious. It was just that guy thing when they don't want to talk, that's what he was pulling. Then he rolled his foot back and forth over a few fallen rubies, like he was testing the skid (or, knowing Eddie, coming up with anagrams for “falling on my ass”). I was trying to come up with a way to break the silence when he finally did speak:

“So I'm hurt and pissed. You're just pissed. And when you get pissed, somebody's gonna get hurt, right, 'Lina?”

I thought about that for a long moment, and tried out my best bat-glare.

“What right do you have to be hurt, Edward? You PUT ME in this situation. If you didn't want me here, why in the flaming fuck did you send an Only-'Lina-Can-Solve-It clue?”

"I couldn't help it," he hissed. "I had to solve the puzzle. You beat up Jervis, you're asking about Russians, there had to be some explanation. I had to figure it out."

I sighed. Eddie and his had tos. What is a 5-letter word for a walking criminal compulsion that likes country music, murder mysteries, and Ed Wood movies?

"I had to figure it out," he repeated. "But I couldn't! There was only one explanation I could think of: you'd gone to the Dark Side. You were doing BATMAN'S JOB for him, and it couldn't be that. It just couldn't. It wasn't possible, not my 'Lina."

"So you had to prove the negative, that's what all this is about?"

"Do you know how many anagrams there are for 'Lina White Hat?' A Tail When Hit, I tell you. A Tail When Hit Alienated Good Thinkers."

"Eh..." I winced, having no idea where to begin decoding that one.

"'Lina White Hat, 'Lina gone to the Dark Side,'" he explained quietly.

"Ah," I said. "You do realize that, technically, it would be the other way around. Crimefighting would kinda be the light side."

He glared—which was fair. I found the notion as disgusting as he did, and since I couldn't glare at myself, I was happy someone was doing it.

"I had to work out what the real answer was," he said. "There was no way you'd gone 'Postal,' so there had to be another explanation, and I had to figure out what it was. I had to. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't solve it. It would be hanging over me, this giant question mark, hanging right over my head everywhere I go. 'THIS IS THE ONE THAT BEAT YOU, EDWARD NIGMA! THIS IS THE QUESTION YOU COULDN'T ANSWER! THIS IS THE PUZZLE YOU COULDN'T SOLVE!' I'd be the dot! Don't you see that, 'Lina? I'd be the dot underneath this giant unanswered question mark!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"I'd be miserable," he ended lamely.

"Good."

Wasn't the nicest exchange in the history of vault-front banter, but it was from the heart. I knew I wasn't holding up my end of the conversation, as a crimefighter or as a friend, and I was beginning to see why Batman craved action. Fists would be so much simpler than this.

"Oh, don't worry, 'Lina, I'm still plenty miserable. That I could live to see this. The constipated crusader is out of action for a spell, and you're filling in. You'll be happy to know Jervis hasn't worked it out. Has there been anyone else who... who *we know*?"

"The Cadaver," I told him.

"Well, not like *he* wasn't already aware of your connection with Bats," Eddie chuckled. "So he's not talking, and the Postish East End 'she's-a-crimefighter' rumors stay dead—unlike him."

At which point it was my turn to chuckle. Eddie just... he has a way about him.

"Still, there is that *other* question," he said grimly.

I didn't know what it was going to be, but I knew I wasn't going to like it. And I really would have thought by now he'd have learned *not to ask it*, whatever it was. But

I also knew it was pointless to say so. It would just be another had to. What is a 5-letter word for a walking criminal compulsion?

"So I've got this vault open," he said with this even, soft-spoken tone that was somehow apologetic and assertive at the same time. "I've got these sacks. And there are these shovelfuls of diamonds and rubies I was planning to take away with me. My question, 'Lina, is this... Are you going to stop me?"

Yeah, he has a way about him all right.

Was I going to stop him?

The question just hung there in the middle of the vault.

Was I going to stop him?

"I was having the best week I've had in a very long time," I told him tersely. "I'm sleeping in a damp cave with squeaking furrries over my head, but I'm balancing what I do and what he does, and I'm making it work. I've made him laugh, he's made me smile, and getting home at night and sharing it all with him has become this high point of my day, like cashing in the chips after a huge win at a casino. And you WRECKED IT, you obsessive, egomaniacal, my-compulsion-outtranks-my-own-happiness little troll! Not only am I going to stop you, Edward, I am going to tie you in a knot so tight, Arkham will have to hose you down with petroleum solvent just to get you into the straitjacket."

He got that "I just went too far, didn't I?" look.

I answered with a "Yes, you did" bat-stare. I wasn't proud of myself, but I can't deny, it *was* a bat-stare. A smug, hostile, humorless, thou-shalt-not-burgle-in-my-city bat stare.

Quoth the Nigma: "Ouch."

He slunk away... or at least he started to. He got as far as the door, and then he spun around, this strange little smirk curling the corner of his mouth.

"You conniving little bitch, you almost had me," he pronounced. It was said quietly. He wasn't shouting or anything, but I could tell he was livid. His whole face had turned pink, and the forehead and cheeks were actually growing red while the pink was moving half way down his neck.

"But I think you forgot who you're dealing with," he said, brushing past me as he went back to the spot where he had been standing when I first came in. He carefully picked up the sacks he had swung at my head and seemed to weigh them in his hands.

"Questions are my thing, after all, like you and the puddy tats. One would hardly expect to trip up the great Catwoman with a bit of cat trivia she didn't know, like say, how many LIVES she's supposed to have. Same with me when I pose a question. It's not often anyone can get away with NOT ANSWERING ONE that I set before them as a challenge, not without my noticing. But you almost pulled it off. Not because you're a clever puss, don't kid yourself there. It's only because I was a little distracted attempting to remove *the knife from my back*."

"You sure you want to do this a cappella, Eddie? Because it really seems like you're building to something that cries out for a swell of violins."

"Best week you've had in a long time, was it? I wrecked it? That's your answer? Oh yes, your personal animosity toward me for messing up your happy little Hallmark holiday, that would have provided a very convenient excuse, at least for tonight. But I caught you out, 'Lina my pet, and I'm not letting you off so easy.

“I wasn’t asking ‘Will you stop me *because you’re mad at me?*’ The real question, the exquisite essence of the unknown represented by that particular question mark is this: Would you stop me anyway? If you weren’t mad, if you didn’t have a nice, pat, Selina-acceptable reason to tell yourself...

“Oh, you answered my first question the moment *you* stepped through that doorway. *A Tail When Hit Alienated Good Thinkers*. You’ve gone white hat all right. But as usual, solving one puzzle only uncovered another. So riddle me this, Catwoman: What happens now? Will you be chasing the idiot friend who messed things up between you and your bat beau, or will you be chasing the criminal who dared to – gasp– perpetrate a crime in *your* city?

“It seems to me, there’s an easy way to learn the answer...”

He slowly took one step toward the doorway of the vault, his eyes never leaving mine.

The bags landed at his feet with a soft tinkling thud as his smirk changed into an arrogant snarl. “No evidence, no crime. Your move.”

With that, he bolted out of the vault, leaving the jewels behind.

Asshole.

I’m sure to his mind, it was a perfect little corner he’d painted me into: Leave the jewels behind, no crime in progress, nothing for a crimefighter to do here. So if it was just me, if I wasn’t Batman’s stand in, if I was really motivated only by anger, then I should still go after him—Hell, I should tie him into TWO knots since I was now twice as pissed as I was before. The thing Eddie doesn’t understand, thank god, is that you can’t test a cat. She makes her own rules, and she always keeps them. If she appears to break one, that means she has invented a new rule and you better figure out what it is if you want the game to continue.

I cleaned up the rubies, closed up the safe, and double-checked the security closet to make sure there were no cameras or anything recording what had happened in the vault. (That’s his influence. I didn’t used to be so cautious. Woof.) Then I locked up, went back to the Phoenix hub, and ripped out all of Eddie’s rigging. It would be a shame to let them find it in the morning. It’s too good an idea to waste that way.

I was half way home when I realized I forgot to tell him how much I liked it.

Walapang squawked at me when I got back to the cave. I hissed at him, and Bruce heard. He guessed I’d had a bad night. I said I didn’t want to talk about it, and he grunted.

Eddie is wrong. There is no “white hat” or “dark side” for a cat. I do what I personally feel like doing, regardless of how any dog or man would classify that behavior. That’s why his test ultimately fails to answer the question. I went to the Adamas Exchange initially, not because there was a crime being committed in my city that I had to put a stop to. I went, ultimately, because Eddie asked me to. I went because cats are curious, and I wanted to see what would happen. He is so obsessed with his compulsion, he can’t think in any other terms. He NEEDS to know an answer the way Batman NEEDS to stop a crime. A cat’s curiosity is different. It’s not a burning *need* to know, I *want* to know. Cats also indulge their wants. It’s playful (most nights) and it’s fun (most nights).

I said I'd make the cocoa. Usually Bruce makes it while I'm typing up the log, so he had to know what I meant. But still, after we had our nightcap, he went and asked: wasn't I going to write up a log?

I said no, I wasn't.

He rubbed my neck and asked why.

I repeated that I did not want to talk about it.

I should have just lied. I should have realized you don't let the World's Greatest Detective glimpse the edge of a mystery any more than you let Whiskers glimpse a bag of catnip. Getting into it becomes the mission of his life.

He went on rubbing my neck. Didn't say a word for probably ten minutes. Then he pronounced:

"It was Nigma."

"You got that from the knots in my neck?" I asked.

"No, I've been expecting it," he said with that impossible "I'm Batman" assurance. "Nigma was always the most likely to realize something was amiss with you, and once he did—"

"I know, I know, he's got this compulsion to solve the puzzle. We discussed it at length. I would be this giant question mark hovering over his head wherever he went, and he'd be the dot."

"That's how he's framing this?" Bruce asked. The neck rub had abruptly stopped, and I could hear the astonishment in his voice. I had to turn around and see the face that went with it. He was dumbstruck.

"It never ceases to amaze me how little criminals understand of their own minds," he grveled finally. "It's not Riddler's obsessive need to answer the unanswered question that drove whatever he did tonight, Selina. It's his friendship for you. I have no such compulsion about puzzles and riddles, but if the situation was reversed, I would have to know if a close friend was switching sides. Not even for safety's sake, just because the very idea of it being true would be upsetting to me."

"Don't look now, Dark Knight, but you just acknowledged Edward Nigma's humanity."

"If I did, I'm the only one," he said sharply. "It sounds like the two of you have taken denial to a whole new level to avoid..."

He broke off and there was an abrupt density shift. I never got to see my own bat-glare, but now that I could observe the original, I am forced to admit I overstated my version's battitude. Even without the mask, Bruce's could reduce an entire planet to ash.

Luckily, I am not a planet and it's never had any effect on me.

"Finish that sentence, I dare you," I told him.

He shook his head.

"Denial is a reflexive response when personal feelings conflict with the demands of the job," he said clinically. "The conflict can only exist if there are two sides. Vanish one and you vanish the emotional turmoil arising from the conflict, at least superficially. You can't ignore the crime being committed but you can put on some powerful blinders about your own feelings... Hence, Riddler sees only his 'compulsion' to answer a question rather than consciously acknowledge his feelings about fighting a friend."





## WEEK 7

... .. :: Personal Log: Batman :: ... ..

... .. :: Encryption matrix Delta36 :: ... ..

My tolerance for nostalgia is now exhausted. The back injury, the physical therapy, Riddler's Greatest Hits... shattered hopes regarding Catwoman.

It was an idiotic fantasy, this idea that once my back is healed and I am able to resume patrol, that she might accompany me, for a few nights, at least. I even dared to dream she might like it enough that a few nights could stretch to a few weeks, and then, perhaps... Idiot. Won't I ever learn? Investing in a fantasy that can never be, just because the night is cold and the cave is empty.

That entry of hers from the night I was asleep: "Maybe it's just knowing there's no one to go upstairs for. It's just me. Down here. With the bats." Did she even realize what she was writing? No one to go upstairs for. Just me down here with the bats. How those words have haunted me. Yet the dreams I had of her back then have become a reality. It's no longer an empty manor and a cold bed waiting when I climb those stairs each night after the logs. Next week when I resume patrol, she will be there, just as she was before this damn injury. She will. Selina. Warm and tender and alive... If that impossible wishdream could come true, was it really that absurd to hope for more? Continue crimefighting at my side once I'm back on the job, a true partnership. Is that more improbable than Catwoman waiting in Bruce Wayne's bed at the end of the night when Batman's work is done?

Instead, she's given it up entirely, while I have another week of physical therapy before I can risk the Batline. Riddler is running the team ragged scattering cat-clues all over town, while all I can do is sit here coordinating positions on a map and picking up Catwoman's bad habits.

All those insanely chatty, pointlessly detailed, and completely undisciplined logs of hers. Reading her narratives all these weeks, my own entries, even the unsealed ones, have become alarmingly introspective. I am sure that will be quickly terminated once I return to the field. Having a night's worth of incident to chronicle will put an end to this preponderance of personal content. For now, however... there really is little else to do until the next Riddler strike.

It's clear that Nigma is unaware Selina has quit. At first I wasn't sure, the first clue was ambiguous. The board game windows reappeared, this time at Macy's. Robin and Batgirl inspected them one by one and found a clue rolled up inside "Miss Scarlet's" cigarette holder:

*I'd say it's more purple than scarlet,*

*But a bad girl's a bad girl all the same.*

*She's nothing to do with the lead pipe or the rope,*

*But what's between the kitchen and the study is another game.*

Obviously purple and bad girl referred to Selina, but as a taunt, that could have been directed at me as much as her. As a riddle announcing a crime, it was absurdly simple. Robin had it solved before he called it in. The kitchen and study are corner

squares on opposite ends of the Clue board connected by a secret passage, and there's a new restaurant by that name in SoHo.

So Robin and Batgirl went to SoHo and established a perimeter while Oracle ran the usual checks on the owner(s). It wouldn't be the first time a riddle appeared to name one location when Nigma really intended to hit the owner's home across town. Secret Passage, however, was not owned by a private individual. It was part of a corporate consortium headquartered in Phoenix. By this time, the Batcomputer had run an analysis matrix of the restaurant's menu, printed reviews, and any mention of it in internet blogs. Finding no coded messages or additional clues, we forwarded the lack of alternative targets to Robin and Batgirl.

They went in cautiously, expecting to find a crime in progress or about to begin. Batgirl scrutinized the patrons' movements, balance, and body language for any sign of concealed weapons or malicious intent, while Robin pinpointed the location of the cash receipts. There, taped to the face of the cash register, he found a slip of paper with the following:

*Do Cheshire cats drink evaporated milk?*

It was hardly a riddle. It was, quite pointedly, a reference to the Mad Hatter. So Robin left Batgirl at the restaurant "just in case" and went to Tetch's last hideout at Hudson Hairpieces. There he found "*A countryman between two lawyers is like a fish between two cats.*" Obviously a Two-Face reference, so Robin proceeded to the old Flick Theatre which produced "*CAT ADVICE: Take some time to eat the flowers,*" i.e. Poison Ivy. Wisely deducing that Robinson Park was too big to hide any sort of clue Nigma expected us to find, Robin proceeded to the greenhouse Ivy sometimes uses in the FloMa district. There he was greeted with "*Purranoia: the fear that your cats are plotting against you*" and he noted that these alleged clues resembled fridge magnets more than riddles (an observation that should have occurred to him earlier). Nevertheless, he proceeded to the Hudson U campus, since "Purranoia" must allude to the Scarecrow.

Oracle conducted a brief search of the university website and found that office hours were listed for one name that did not appear on any faculty directories: one Patricia Urrano, Interdisciplinary Adjunct. Or, as it appeared on her office door: P. Urrano I.A.

A search of that office produced "*Cats' favorite game: 'Ha! Made you look!'*"

It seemed impossible that Nigma would send Selina to a Joker hideout if he thought she was crimefighting in my place. However hurt and angry he may be, he is simply not that cavalier with human life, particularly hers. And however irrational he may be, he is not so deluded that he couldn't see the potential for disaster. At first we were stymied. If "Ha! Made you look" did not allude to Joker's "Ha-Hacienda," what other Rogue tie-in could there be? It was Dick who came up with the answer. He had been in Bludhaven most of the night and only heard the story from Barbara when he got home. Hearing it all in a in the span of a few minutes rather than seeing it play out over hours gave him the crucial perspective to see the punchline for what it was.

Ha! Made you look.

And he did, the rascally psychopath. But I knew Riddler too well to believe this was a simple prank. A riddle points to a Riddler crime, that's how he operates. He could no more leave this string of riddles unresolved by a criminal act than he could commit a crime without announcing it first with a riddle. There was more to come, I knew.

I didn't tell Selina. I still haven't.





Running all over town, location to location, never getting the satisfaction of a confrontation, always being met with another one of those puerile ditties.

*Catholic (n): a cat with a drinking problem.*

By the time she finally saw him, she would see nothing else, only the chance to wring his scrawny neck. She'd go charging into whatever trap he had set for her, the trap meant to keep the hated crimefighter safely out of the way while his real scheme played out.

*Cats have 9 lives. Do radioactive cats have 18 half-lives?*

If it was me he was baiting, it would be a deathtrap. But Nigma would not want Selina dead. He would merely want her detained, and he would want it to be unpleasant.

*Curiosity kills more mice than cats.*

It was a painful task, but I put myself in Nigma's position and thought through the various ways to hurt Selina:

1. Kill her—he doesn't want that.

2. Validate the Gotham Post's lies about her—after which, she would kill him. He doesn't want that either.

3. Hurt Wayne—which he would love to do, but years of trying have shown it's not as easy as it sounds.

4. Hurt cats—not worth considering. That's sociopaths and nascent serial killers, completely inconsistent with Nigma's pathology and self-image. He will certainly consider bluffing: threatening to blow up an animal shelter without ever intending to do so, but he'll quickly reject it as a lame and shallow stunt unworthy of a Rogue.

5—a variation on 1. Place her in a faux deathtrap where she is never really in danger.

He would like that idea, since the illusion of deadly peril would require the kind of magician's stagecraft that appeals to his puzzler's mentality. He would make a list of potential devices and get as far as sketching a guillotine or an iron maiden before he realizes the snag: it's a magic trick. Everything on his list is. A few variations here and there, sure, but nothing that a moderately alert individual wouldn't recognize from a half-dozen stage magician's "DEATH-DEFYING" finales.

Nigma is in a position to know that Selina's hatred for Zatanna is more than a wild story from the Rogue rumor mill. Mad as he is, he wouldn't want to pull that particular tiger's tail. It's one thing to deliberately punish her for hurting him. It is quite another to give offense as an unintended waste product of an unrelated scheme. His pride would balk at that. He couldn't let Selina think THIS was the best he could come up with. He couldn't let her think he was *unable* to whip up a plot without subtext. He would feel it reflected badly on him. He would spend a day trying to make it work, recognize all of his attempts as flimsy rationalizations, and finally give up.

6—a variation on 2. Strike at her standing as a Rogue...

I had progressed exactly that far when an image came into my mind. Seeing it through a villain's eyes, I could almost feel my lips curling into a malevolent smile as this ideal target revealed itself in all its vindictive perfection.

Catworthy.

If I was a villain bent on attacking Selina where she lived, what better way than to take a few ironic swipes at her stature as a jewel thief, as THE jewel thief, the one by which jewels worth taking are defined. It was perfect. If I wanted to punish her for turning “white hat,” what better way than to make her defend Objects of Desire, the very jeweler who proclaimed their wares CATWORTHY in 10-foot purple letters.

I sent Batgirl to observe the building, so we’d have some idea what to expect when the vital clue came in. Even after the exercise getting inside Nigma’s head, I was... surprised when I learned what it was.

EDIT: Unacceptable. As long as I am participating in this indulgent practice, using the logs as a kind of father confessor, I must at least be honest about it. I was not surprised, I was enraged. For a full minute I could think of nothing but a gloved hand closing around Edward Nigma’s face and slamming the back of his head into the wall with a force to crack plaster—not to mention his skull. A thousand times—ten thousand times—I have been gripped with fury in the face of some criminal outrage, but I have never actually, literally *tasted bile*. Until now, I thought that a fanciful figure of speech. Of course, in the face of those ten thousand other criminal outrages, I had the ability to *act*. This sitting around “healing” does not foster patience. If I knew where he was—and if I had been out there these past weeks, I certainly WOULD know where that sniveling monster was—I would scrap the last week of prudence, suit up, get out there, and introduce that precious cranium of his to the concept of a concussion. Multiple. Multiple severe contusions to the head and neck by way of a well-trained fist that knows *exactly* how much force can be administered to deliver maximum punishment without...

This is what comes of listening to her. She thinks our life together proves she was right all those years ago. Well, I was right too, obviously. *Eddie’s* humanity, her good friend *Eddie* who would never hurt her. I let her soften me, and it will never happen again.

The shift came on the third clue last night. After “*Cats do not keep mice away, they preserve them for the chase*” and “*Anything not nailed down is a cat toy,*” the format changed to an actual question.

“Catwoman, are thy claws sharp?”

Still not a riddle, but when the catalyst was applied and the invisible ink darkened, no new location was revealed. Instead, only certain letters darkened into boldfaced type.

“**Catwoman, are thy claws sharp?**”

The key letters to phonetically represent “Catworthy.”

In Riddler’s mind, Selina would be charging to Objects of Desire, intent on foiling his crime and pummeling him beyond recognition. Instead, Robin went in. He went in as a crimefighter does, through the service entrance, not as a jewel thief would through the skylight. He proceeded cautiously, as I taught him, not blinded by rage. He spotted each tripwire, each electric eye and trigger, disconnected the gas nozzles, and secured the fear toxin for safe disposal.

Fear toxin. It’s almost inconceivable. Maybe I was wrong not telling Selina what was happening—but I couldn’t stop to think about that now. The toxin trap was meant to keep the crimefighter occupied while the real crime played out elsewhere, and I had





## WEEK 8

... .. ::	New Database :: New File :: Unindexed	:: ... ..
... .. ::	Selina's Decidedly Off-Duty Definitely Not-a-log	:: ... ..
... .. ::	Chronicle	:: ... ..
... .. ::	of Whatever She Damn Pleases	:: ... ..
... .. ::	Meow	:: ... ..

Love jewels. A diamond Napoleon gave to Josephine, a necklace Lord Byron had made for Contessa Guiccioli or Horatio Nelson gave Emma Hamilton. They're not always spectacular gems in their own right. Most are, especially if they're given by a king, but some are smaller stones, a little cloudy or not particularly well cut by modern standards. But the story, the romance and the history behind them, to a certain kind of collector those gems are priceless.

I always enjoyed snatching a love jewel. There's the bragging rights, naturally. Plus the challenge; famous jewels always have the most creative security protecting them. And then there were the collectors: those obsessed, competitive, relentless, and often quite ruthless collectors—but such romantics, so *passionate* about their obsessions. When they located a jewel, they wanted it *so badly*. And when the item in question was collecting dust in some corporate vault, only seeing the light of day once in a decade when it was sent out to be cleaned, it made for a very satisfying heist. Rob from the indifferent and give to the romantic.

Well, *sell* to the romantic. I can't say I did it for love. Byron, Nelson, and Napoleon may have, but Kitty did it for cash. But that doesn't mean I can't appreciate the collector's fascination. There is something very special about those pieces beyond their obvious cost. Czar Alexander has some exquisite piece of Fabergé made for his wife, the Czarina Maria Feodorovna, and a century later Stephen Spielberg buys it for *his* wife because she's playing a Russian princess (descended from Alexander and Maria, as it happens). Edward VIII has a pair of Cartier panthers made for the woman he gave up a kingdom to marry, and a half-century later, an American crimefighter who bought them to bait a cat burglar winds up sliding one across the dinner table, because that cat burglar isn't an adversary anymore. It's not the jewels in and of themselves, it's not their intrinsic value or even their beauty. It's what they mean, what they represent: the grand gesture.

I fought crime for him. It's not my kink, I didn't enjoy it much, and I wasn't particularly good at it, but I did suit up in the Batcave, checked the At-Large list before setting out, and went into the city to stop baddies like me from doing what comes naturally. And I did it—started doing it, at least—because he asked me. He wanted my help, he wanted to include me in his world, and... and like an *idiot*, I just *FORGOT*. I forgot the burning, soulful ache that started it all. Crimefighting isn't something Bruce does because he's bored playing polo. It's who he is. No one will ever suffer what he suffered if he can prevent it. How can you not love that? And he wants me to

be a part of it. Bruce wants me to share his mission with him, and I let Edward Richmond Nigma pull my focus. For that alone, I should break him in two.

There was this one spectacular bracelet Edward VII gave his last mistress, Alice Keppel. Hostesses of the period preferred inviting Alice instead of the queen whenever the king came to dinner, since she was the only one who could defuse the situation when he had one of his explosive tempers.

His back is fine now. Has been for nearly a week, and he could have easily climbed the stairs and gone back to living in the manor. But Batman wasn't quite ready to resume patrol. He needed an extra few days to "limber up" for the Batline, and it just seemed right to go on living in the cave while he did it. So we spar a little in the gymnasium and follow the sidekicks' progress on the OraCom. There's nothing to stop me from going out myself, but... well, little gestures are worthwhile too. He doesn't want me catching up with Eddie until Batman is back on the job, and it costs me nothing to go along with it. There were an awful lot of nights when some little compromise that cost nothing would have made us both a lot happier, so what the hell.

Bruce is obsessing on the fear toxin (speaking of men with explosive tempers). It's not that I'm overjoyed at that little detail, but there's another angle that bothers me a lot more. It's that string of Rogue hideouts that Eddie kicked off with, before the ATM clues: Mad Hatter's place, Ivy's greenhouse, Two-Face's last base at the Flick Theatre, Scarecrow's fife at Hudson U. That's what Bruce sees anyway, a typical Cape missing the point completely. He sees "Rogues." But Eddie isn't saying "Rogues"; he doesn't think of them as Rogues. He thinks of them as Jervis, Pammy, Harvey and Jonathan. What he's saying is "Who's next?"

Scratch that, if we're going to do this, let's put on our straitjackets and do it in all its Arkhamesque lunacy. What he is saying is "Riddle me thus, you faithless puss: Who is next? That's why I'm perplexed. Is there anyone you won't turn on for him? Is there any friend you won't cut just to help the bat win?"

Okay, you know what, I'm not an Arkham case and I suck at the rhyming shit. Point is, what Eddie is really saying is "Who's next?" And because, despite all his charm, he's a fucking nutjob, he can't come right out and *say that*. He has to dress it up in a string of fridge magnet clues pointing to Rogue lairs. And then, apparently, he had to top it off with a crimefighter trap sprung with fear toxin. Furious as I am, I almost feel like... like... I don't know. It's almost touching. The grand gesture.

I don't expect Bruce to see it that way, of course. I might not myself if I had actually snorted the stuff. We did talk about it that night when he told me what Eddie had been up to, what I might have seen. The greatest fear question, it's a big one, and most of us night people consider it from time to time. At least the sane ones do. It's not something you want to let take you by surprise, particularly not in front of somebody who wants you dead. So if you're smart, every now and then you put on some Beethoven, pour a glass of wine, and do a little soul searching. I hadn't. And Bast knows, I should have. It's been a good few years since my last exposure. My life has changed completely since then, and it's fair to say the big fear has too. Considering the old fear involved exactly where I'm living *now*, who I'm living *with*, and what compromises I'm willing to make to keep it that way... yeah, the greatest fear has definitely changed. I haven't told him, of course, but he is the world's greatest detective, and he knows me pretty well. He must at least *suspect* what that old fear

toxin nightmare was. Anyway, we talked about it that night: what the new triggered fear might have been and... and what the hell Eddie could have expected to accomplish by it.

Ironically, what he *did* accomplish was ending my fight with Bruce in the most amicable way possible and renewing my subscription to Crimefighters' Quarterly. When you find out your best friend spent the last week conspiring to lead you around like a demented puppy chasing a stick, only to introduce you to your greatest fear at the end of it, I don't care who you are, *you need a hug!* I needed a hug, I said so, Psychobat handed off to Bruce and that was the end of the fight.

We should probably thank him. It would hurt a lot more than the pummeling he's going to get, but I would be the last to deny Bruce the satisfaction of that pummel. He's been inactive all these weeks, he's frustrated beyond belief, and the first Bat-beating is going to be epic. It's going to be savagery incarnate wearing a scalloped cape and a graphite mask. And it is going to Hurt. Like. Hell. It's downright patriotic of Eddie to step up and volunteer for the job. Meow.

So my own satisfaction will have to wait a bit, but until my moment comes, I'll get to enjoy his and that should be quite the spectacle. Again I say "Meow."

We've already begun. Bruce and Selina returned from St. Kitt's the day before yesterday. Just in case anything went wrong with my cover, we wanted to make sure it was only Catwoman who was exposed. Nothing will go wrong, but if it does, then Selina Kyle is obviously up to something, using her relationship with Bruce Wayne to gain access to Gotham banks for some felonious reason. But if Selina isn't supposed to be in Gotham at all, if she's supposedly traipsing around the Caribbean with Bruce when she's found to be posing as this Georgina Barnes, that would lead to all sorts of questions about Bruce's real whereabouts. So Monday we came back, and Georgina reported for work at CashPulse, the first banking networking on our list. The dear thing doesn't dress very well: a fiercely blue suit that contrasts just a little too jarringly with her fiercely red hair, so that that's all anybody sees. The brassy redhead in the blue suit doesn't have any facial features, a particular sort of voice or a certain color eyes. It's a perfect disguise really, giving them something particular to notice instead of trying to be nondescript.

CashPulse was a bust, but it did give me a good introduction to the system. Apparently that's what Bruce had in mind. He started me off at the company least likely to produce results, allowing me to get acclimated in the financial world. Then yesterday, once I was presumably "acclimated," he started sending me to the most likely firms. Today at BankLink International, I hit paydirt. Second try and we found it. He's that good, my Dark Knight. Is it any wonder we all love taking him on?

Riddler gained nothing from the first ATM shuffle. Batman searched every chain from every compromised account, and not one penny ever found its way back to Eddie. It cost the banks time and money to clean up the mess, but that money went into overtime and extra advertising to polish up their reputations after the meltdown. So... Riddle me this, riddle me that, how to make money while annoying a bat? If he didn't turn a profit that night, it must have been a demonstration. He's proved he can infiltrate the banking networks and shuffle the money around at will. If they don't want him to do it again, pay up!

That's not the kind of threat the banks would take to the cops, obviously—rather like diamond merchants relieved of a love jewel. Diamonds are a very small world and million dollar deals are still made on a handshake. Reputation is everything. So if you're hit, you don't let that be known. Insurance premiums go up, and nobody needs that, but worse, your reputation now has a big asterisk hanging over it. *\*Security isn't what it should be. \*Vulnerable and careless. \*Lacking in judgment or resources to look after their own interests. \*Putting their most valuable assets at risk.* No one needs that either, so they take the hit quietly and move on. That's what we count on, the cats and the collectors.

Although... You know, if it were me, I wouldn't go to the police either (obviously); police aren't discreet. But if it were me, I think I'd have to at least consider the possibility that *a man in a mask* might be. I mean, Batman *doesn't have a face*. He obviously understands the concept of a secret worth keeping. But anyway, banking networks, like diamond merchants, are not going to go running to the cops, and either because they didn't think to or because they didn't know how, they didn't come running to Batman either. So we had to go to them. So, this afternoon at 1 o'clock, right before slipping off to lunch, Georgina Barnes messed up the really complicated logout routine on her new computer at BankLink. She had to consult the index card everybody has to check 10 times their first day, and somehow, one oops following another, she wound up triggering the backdoor that some low level WayneTech coder left in the first generation software ten years ago—accidentally giving herself godlike access to all accounts, emails, documents, and encryption logs.

And the most recent file sealed with the CEO's password? No riddle there. No crimefighter's instincts required. A simple cat burglar could have guessed: Eddie is asking for control of an account with a \$25 million stake, and \$5 million to be added every month they wish to continue without another cyberattack. It's smart. He knows they'll be lulled into a false sense of security by that monthly payment. They'll think they have plenty of time to track him. But that money will be gone as soon as he gets control of the account, and he'll never return for subsequent payments. Not a bad little scheme, really. The money moves electronically, it's not like saying 'leave a paper bag under the bench by the sailing pond in Robinson Park,' so Eddie probably thinks he's still hidden. He doesn't really understand what Bruce is capable of. For all his posturing about Batman as the only brain fit to do battle with his own, Eddie really has no idea.

He's outmatched. That arrogant little touch using the WayneTech satellite, it gave us a traceback range. A *40-mile* traceback, but still, it was a start. The extortion email to BankLink was sent by the same method, through a STAR Labs satellite this time. Traceback #2 overlaps traceback #1 across an oval stretching from 71<sup>st</sup> Street up to 96<sup>th</sup>. 25 city blocks may not sound like "Gotcha, Nigma," not until you run it through a few directories and find... *Backgammon*. A quaint little place in the basement of the Madison Building on 78<sup>th</sup>, not the sort that even has a sign on the door. An old world carpenter making inlaid chessboards and backgammon tables for rock stars—if you believe their website. If you believe a place like that *HAS* a website.

So there we are. It's 24 hours before Batman goes back into action. 0-minus-24 and we already know where Eddie is hiding. He's sitting there now, completely unaware he's outmatched and outmaneuvered without the Batmobile ever leaving the cave.



It was the first time I'd ever heard that voice, maybe the first time that part of him had ever spoken from inside the cowl. Would certainly explain all the stops and starts. But that look in his eye, that's what I saw now.

"Want a lift? Or taking your own car?"

There was no searching for the words this time. Batman is nothing if not direct. But the look was the same; everything changed between us after that look. He was toying with an idea the same way I'd look in Tiffany's window deciding if I was going to let them keep a diamond tiara or turn it into an extra leopard for the Catitat. That night, after that look, he sent the note asking me to meet him at the opera house. What the hell was he thinking about now?

"Technically, it's the car you gave me," I pointed out, stalling for time. I gave the words the lightest, freest lilt I could manage, even adding a little smirk at the end, but as usual he didn't bite.

"Technically, it's the car you gave me, too," he grveled.

(And hiss-growl-hiss-hiss-spit-growl, you just CANNOT win a game of chess with that man!)

"You don't think it's a bad idea for Bruce Wayne's girlfriend to be riding around in the Batmobile?"

"Just for tonight," he said.

I nodded. I'm still not completely sure what I agreed to, but I nodded, and twelve minutes later, we were speeding across the 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue Bridge and he grunted as we passed that billboard.

"Catworthy," he spat. "Opals and tourmalines? Catworthy? You never would have wasted your time on a place like that no matter what their advertising agency dreamed up for a catch phrase. Not when Cartier is only 4 blocks away, still using the same panther motif the Duchess of Windsor made famous."

I chuckled, which brought quite the death glower.

"A so-called friend should know that," he hissed.

"Come on, you wouldn't have wanted him sullyng Cartier, would you? I know I wouldn't. Besides, I doubt Eddie could even get in, and if he could, your counter operation would have been screwed because Robin never would have made it inside."

"He would do what was necessary."

"Not in a hundred years would that boy make it to the show floor to find whatever trap Eddie had laid for me. Cassie *maybe... if I coached her and we practiced for a few nights at the Olivieri mansion.*"

He grunted, and that was it for conversation until the car turned onto 78<sup>th</sup> Street. I guess I was holding my breath or something, because he told me to breathe. I did, and that was it for conversation once again.

He stage managed it beautifully, the car slowing as it approached the Madison Building, nearly coming to a stop right in front of it, right across from the stairs leading down to Backgammon, and then... Whoosh! Speeding away down the street with a roar of Bat-bravado.

Four blocks away and 20 stories up, Eddie was hunched over his computer screen, watching the feed from his hidden camera, this sour pout in his face that said "thwarted." (An anagram for which happens to be THWART ED. What it lacks in originality, it makes up in pertinence.)

What Eddie didn't know, of course, was there was no one in that car. We were both right outside the window, watching him watch the Batmobile pass on his decoy.

"It's showtime," I whispered.

But Batman just stood there.

"No. You go in. You need to talk it through." Then he massaged his knuckles slowly, the way a connoisseur swirls a fine cabernet before tasting it, ending with an ominous "I'll be here when you're finished."

I couldn't believe it. He's been dying to get back into action, and now he was postponing the confrontation? But it wasn't the time or place to question it, so I edged a few windows over, sliced up the pitiful CPD gizmo Eddie had rigged up on the bedroom window, slid it open, and went inside. I looked around for the Riddler equivalent of my Zen Cat. There was a photograph of Doris in a silver frame. Just the right size and certainly the right spirit, but it had a glass cover. That could get ugly. Head wounds bleed a lot. The blood is very thin, slow to clot. So I poked around some more. He had a Rubik's cube calendar. It was a little small and too angular. I didn't want to feel like I was clonking him with a rock. I wanted something flat, book sized, and personal... I found it hanging over the bed. A framed fragment of a movie prop, a jigsaw puzzle Susan Alexander is working on in *Citizen Kane*. Purrrrrfect.

I took it off the wall, crept out to the main room, and positioned myself without Eddie hearing a thing. One thing I've perfected living with Bruce is coming up behind someone when they're looking at a computer screen without creating any telltale reflections. Also, being silent on a stone cave floor is a lot more difficult than on Eddie's wall-to-wall carpet. Meow.

And THWACK!

I gave him a good solid smack across the back of his head with his precious puzzle.

"OW!" was the predictable and predictably non-clever response.

Which I enjoyed.

He tried to get up but I grabbed the back of his head and pushed it into the desk a few times. Then he stopped trying to get up, and I pulled up a chair and took a seat beside him.

"You are an addled nitwit, Edward Nigma, a fitting anagram for which is *addled nitwit*. And you're a shitty friend, an anagram for which is *shitty friend*."

"Look who's talking, Traitor."

"Oh give it up, Eddie. I have been spectacularly patient with your marathon shiththeadedness since this whole thing began, because unlike the crimefighters you're determined to paint me as, I understand that when a cat brings you a disgusting not-entirely-dead chipmunk, it's because he thinks it's a fine gift. He's working with what nature gave him: claws, teeth, and small furry animals that don't have the sense to stay out of his way.

"So I wasn't pissed at the cat clue you sent to the manor. I shrugged off the mind games at the MoMA, I didn't hold a grudge after Metropolis, and I certainly wasn't going to go on a jihad because of your Aries stunt at the diamond exchange. I know a dead chipmunk when I see one. Don't sit there calling *me* a traitor when *you* tried to come at me with fear gas."

"You work on his side of the street, you've got to expect that, my weak lion." Then he started counting off on his fingers, "You've got to expect fear gas, hatting, SmileX, Ivy turning that Hell Month fighting machine against you..."

"Eddie, you talk like I don't get that anyway. Jervis has hatted me. He's hatted you, he hatted Jonathan, and then he had you both attack me while he fear-gassed Harvey. We all got past it. If we held onto those things forever, nobody would be speaking to anybody—which would certainly limit the potential for future throwdowns, but it wouldn't be any fun. I mean really, it's a big city out there and it sucks to be alone, so..."

I shrugged. It's the price you pay, being a Rogue. He knew that as well as I did.

"You can dress it up any way you want to, 'Lina, you still went white hat."

"Yeah, I did. So what?"

"..."

"Paging Mr. Riddler, there's an unanswered question on the table. That's is your thing, isn't it? There isn't *actually* a white hat/black hat divide for cats, but from your limited non-feline perspective, that's the only way you can see it. So I am conceding the point. 'Lina White Hat, A Tail When Hit, or whatever it was. So what?"

"..."

I hummed the Jeopardy theme to annoy him, and by a cute coincidence, his screensaver kicked on and played the same music. He tried so hard not to react, he was sucking in his cheeks and probably biting his tongue trying to hold the pissed-off, dangerous Rogue mask. But that dinky little tune kept playing and it all got the better of him. He lost the battle and out came the snicker.

"You planned that," he insisted.

I actually had no idea what his screensaver was, but there was no point in going that far off topic. I just smiled like "the ways of the cat are inscrutable." Then I figured it was time to remind him he was still a dot with one of those giant unanswered question marks looming over his head.

"Riddle me this, Eddie," I said softly. "If I have 'gone white hat,' so what?"

"So," he said, lips pursed. "I don't like it. I like *you*, I do *this*, dot-dot-dot, more little chats like the one at the Adamas Exchange!"

"Oh, with you there," I nodded vigorously. "Liking the crimefighter personally (which I'm not one, but again, we're making allowances for your limited non-cat intellect), liking the crimefighter totally, *totally* sucks. Awkward, pissy, strained exchanges on rooftops, angst-ridden aftermath, mess of a situation for everyone involved. Been there, done that, it does suck. What's your point?"

"..."

"Your point is that it's not pleasant being caught between a rock and hard place and you'd rather not do it?"

"... Kind of."

"You know what else sucks? February. When those slushy puddles of not quite melted snow are everywhere, but you're not wearing boots anymore, so you always wind up with that really cold wet ooze getting into your shoe. And then you have to walk around all day with that cold squishy feeling."

"Um..."

"I hate that."

"Yeah, so do I. Ah, 'Lina, we seem to have wandered off the subject a little..."

"Did we? I thought we were comparing notes about the many and varied dead chipmunks that come with living in an imperfect world. All those little annoyances that—"

"We were talking about you, that you would go so far for that... that..."

"Batman."

"YES, BATMAN! THANK YOU! That you would go so far for that Bat-man that you not only stop stealing yourself, you come after the rest of us."

I smiled. I never *went after* Eddie, *he* pulled on *my* tail. But I didn't say that. Instead I just smiled, which does tend to unnerve them, Rogue and crimefighter alike.

"What, what is it?" he said, looking around frantically like he thought he was sitting on a bomb.

"I ever tell you about Colin Lerrick? Reclusive Brit, chess grandmaster, buried himself in puzzles, IQ of 220. Been thinking about him all week, I can't imagine why," I grinned.

"No, you have never told me about 'I Click Loner,'" he said acidly. "Pray continue with your transparent parable."

"He's not a fiction, Eddie. I did not make up a name that had a nice snappy anagram for you. You can Google him if you don't believe me. I'll wait."

He did and confirmed that Colin Lerrick was real, studied philosophy at Oxford, inherited a pharmaceutical company at age 23, sold it for a hundred million pounds at 24, and retired from the world.

"If this rich guy likes puzzles so much, how come I've never heard of him?"

"Because he doesn't collect them, Eddie, he just likes them. It's not the kind of thing that goes in Who's Who. He'd have no interest in your *Citizen Kane* jigsaw, so he'd never bid on it."

"So how did you find out?"

"Oh COME ON, Eddie! Live up to your name, figure it out! It's no fun if I tell you, is it?"

He made a face and sighed.

"Well obviously, since you were so stupidly unguarded saying he doesn't collect *puzzles*, that means he must collect something else. Something Catwoman would be inclined to steal—back when she had some scruples."

"Only two insults, I think you're coming around. And of course you're right. Lerrick collects love diamonds."

"Love diamonds," he said flatly.

"Right. A necklace Lord Byron had made for the Contessa Teresa Guiccioli, for example. She was the last woman Byron loved, his mistress when he was living in Ravenna, beginning work on *Don Juan*. It's a big gem, Eddie. On its own, it'd be worth a quarter of a million. But you add in Byron, Teresa and *Don Juan*, the history and the romance... Lerrick collects love diamonds. He's obsessed with them, actually. All those collectors are.

"Complete romantic under the eccentric hermit shell. Had me deliver the stone to his estate, inside this vault-cum-bunker-cum-private museum he has under his house. Showed me his whole collection, jewels and paintings all connected to the great love

stories of history. Beautiful stuff of course, but it was the vault itself that was the real treat."

"Well of course," Eddie said smugly. "If there's one thing a puzzling man knows, it's how to devise a decent lock."

"The walls were two feet thick," I told him, leaning in and speaking low, like it was something sexual. "Reinforced concrete, sealed off with a tri-bi titanium door... Twin-bolt Swiss gear lock on a prearranged time release, fingerprint recognition plus a 4-digit pin that changes every 30 minutes—the sequence radioed out from the manufacturer in Zürich..."

"O-o-oh, I like this guy," Eddie shuddered.

"At least a code that's radioed in can be intercepted," I pointed out. "Unlike the vocal signature for a voice recognition backup linked to the main alarm. Could tell the difference between human vocal chords and a recorded voice... I was giddy. Would have let him have the Byron necklace for nothing if he'd let me have a go at its resting place in his fortress. I almost proposed it, but he obviously thought it was his collection that had brought such a flush to my cheeks, and I didn't want to take that away from him."

"Aren't you a sweetie. So you settled for cash."

"The thing is, Eddie, Lerrick lives and breathes puzzles as much as you do, but his *passion* is love jewels. Can you guess why?"

"I have no idea."

"Of course you do."

He sighed.

"Edward?"

"Because love is irrational, 'Lina. That is why it fascinates him. It's the puzzle that can't be solved."

There it was. He'd said it. Game. Set. Match.

"Puzzle that can't be solved," he repeated, his eyes darting around the room.

"Nope," I agreed. "Can't be solved. Catlike, it follows no rules but its own, and only it knows what they are. Also it can change the rules any time it wants, in any way it wants, and there's nothing anyone can do about it."

"The puzzle... that cannot... be solved," he said again—and I noticed now he didn't seem to be breathing very well. "Love is a *puzzle*... that can't be *solved*."

"Eddie, you're not going to have a panic attack or anything, are you?"

He lifted his finger like he was going to say something VERY important, and then put it down.

Then the whole right hand swung around to his hip, like he was ramping up to sing "I'm a little teapot" with the force of King Lear raging into the storm. But when he did speak again, it was matter of factly:

"It's a puzzle that can't be solved," he declared, his left hand flitting up to complete the teapot effect.

"And since Bruce and I cannot be solved, you're ready to leave it alone?" I asked brightly.

His face fell, and then his head pulled back a little, and he seemed to be staring at something invisible a short distance in front of his face.

"I can see I have been looking at it the wrong way," he said finally—directing his statement to the invisible something, as near as I can figure. Then he looked up at me.

"An addled nitwit?" he asked.

"And a shitty friend," I answered.

"But still a friend?"

"If you want to be."

"I assume he's waiting out there to rip out my spleen."

"At the very least."

"Hmph."

"I'm pretty sure you can live without one. Like the appendix and tonsils."

"You've made a list of *organs* he can rip out of people without killing them!"

"Oh come on, Eddie, he's Batman! I'm sure he knows without anybody having to tell him."

"Hmph."

The silence continued for a moment. I figured somebody had better break it before nosy outside the window noted the lack of conversation and took it as a cue.

"I came in through the bedroom," I mentioned casually. "I see you still have Doris's picture in there."

"Well, I am an addled nitwit," he said with a sad resolve.

"Puzzle that can't be solved, Eddie. Have you thought to... maybe give her a call?"

"No, I don't think that's such a hot idea, 'Lina. Doris isn't the type who would enjoy receiving a collect call from the Arkham infirmary."

"When you get out then."

"And say what? Before I met you, I never went a day without solving the Times crossword in less than 10 minutes, and now I haven't gone a day without solving the Times crossword and missing you?"

I shrugged.

"It's not bad. As dead chipmunks go."

"No," he said with a sour face. "It's not really on point. Like those cat clues, they had *nothing to do with banking*. I tried, 'Lina, I wracked my brains trying to come up with some kind of obscure banking trivia that tied in to paws or whiskers or even milk!"

"What about Bengal Central Bank, where you inserted the virus."

"You noticed that, eh?" he beamed.

"Of course. It was a very thoughtful touch."

"Ah 'Lina, it's not the same. The *clues* should have had something."

"Maybe your heart wasn't in it," I suggested.

"Oh, my *heart* was in it. Just not my brain, I guess. Oh well, I'll do better next time."

"Of course you will," I smiled.

The moment felt good, natural, easy. Then his smile faded.

"Time for me to take my medicine," he said darkly.

"Yep," I rose, planning to go back the way I came.

I'd gotten as far as the bedroom door when he called out "'Lina, before you go, uh..."

I turned back. He looked embarrassed. When he spoke, I understood why:

“How’d you find me?”

Poor Eddie. He has this little quirk, leaving clues unconsciously when he doesn’t mean to. We’ve talked about it. Every time he thinks he has it beaten, his subconscious goes and leaves Batman an extra hint or three. I started to tell him he’d done it again, but he refused to believe it:

“Oh come on, no! It can’t be—NO! NO! NO! That hasn’t happened for more than... six years! Six years, three months and eleven days, I’m clean. No more Freudian clues, none. I’ve licked it, I tell you. I...”

I shook my head sadly. And his eyes darted around the room again, trying to figure it out.

“What’d I do?” he asked finally.

“Vince Turner. Eddie, you rented this place under the name Vince Turner.”

“So what?”

“Vin. *Wine*. Eddie, ‘*vin*’ is French for ‘*wine*.’”

“Wine turner,” he said dully.

“And the process of turning champagne bottles as they ferment so the sediment collects in the neck is called...?”

“FUCK ME!”

“No, ‘riddling,’ but I take your poi—”

“Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck—”

“O... kay,” I whispered, backing slowly towards my window.

“Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me!”

I’m pretty sure he doesn’t carry on like that when *Batman* answers the big riddle, so I figured I’d just go and let them both do their thing.

“Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fu-KRRHKK...” was the last thing I heard before swinging away.

With the OraCom, I knew I’d be able to meet up with Bruce by morning and get a ride home. I headed uptown to prowl, and then...

At last...

A worthless, overreaching amateur was trying to break in at Cartier.

Meooooooooooooooooow.

