



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

#58

# *Cat* ≡ *Fables*

*Demon's in the Details*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**DEMON'S IN THE DETAILS**



**CAT-TALES**  
**DEMON'S IN THE DETAILS**

By  
Chris Dee

Edited by  
David L.

COPYRIGHT © 2009 BY CHRIS DEE  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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

# DEMON'S IN THE DETAILS

---

## Chapter 1: Ra'shomon

It was an auspicious day for one born in the Year of the Rat to begin a new enterprise.

Ra's al Ghul knew perfectly well that his astrologer was a coward who followed the age old practice of those who read the stars of kings: he told only those parts he thought his master wanted to hear. This was not the objectionable sort of cowardice; it was right and natural that they be afraid. Any monarch worthy of the name enjoyed the terror he inspired in his followers. Nevertheless, it was inconvenient when it came to horoscopes. The Demon's Head wanted to know what the stars truly revealed so he could modify his plans accordingly.

That is why he had disguised himself in the lowly garb of an Ajax commander and gone into the village for a second opinion. Sighisoara was Romanian, unfortunately, and their fortune tellers were shackled by the Western world's names of the stars and constellations. But Sighisoara was loyal, and that surely is what mattered. When Ra's al Ghul sent an Ajax commander to have his fortune told, that man's fortune would be told with accuracy. And this local witch with her teas and talismans had, more or less, confirmed his own astrologer: It was an auspicious day for one born in the Year of the Rat to begin a new enterprise.

Technically, the enterprise began some months before. *Technically*, the seeds were planted years before that. But Ra's al Ghul preferred to view any operation as begun only when some definite action had been taken. His planning was so intricate and his understanding so vast, drawn from so many eras and so many nations, even he could not pinpoint the precise moment when a plot suggested itself. Consciously, the current operation had been forming in his mind for, perhaps, six months, but in a more meaningful sense, did the methods and practices he employed not predate even his first meeting with the Detective?

Were the seeds not sown decades before, when those OPEC sheiks, having taken such a preposterously long time to realize the power their oil reserves gave them over the West, failed so miserably to make use of it? Could it not even be argued (if one were to be as ludicrously precise as these astrologers would wish about the exact *hour* and *minute* of one's birth, for example) that the operation which began today truly had its beginning when Ra's first learned of Atlantis in 1937?

Thus, it was folly to name any particular day and hour as the nascent beginning of his operation. Since he could not go by planning, he may as well award the honor to that moment when steel was first unsheathed in his cause. That moment was today—although Western mercenaries were too coarse and barbarous to literally carry a sword. Nevertheless, men of action took action on this day, when the Vermillion Bird

(which Western infidels called Mars) entered his star sign and the Azure Dragon they called Jupiter rose into alignment with his celestial stem.

He could hardly pretend surprise. Auguries and horoscopes notwithstanding, he had finally devised a method to circumvent the Detective. If he had only thought of it sooner, the whole fiasco with Talia would have had a very different outcome. To every creature, there is its own particular lure, specific to its nature. One does not lure the honeybee with light nor the moth with fragrant flowers. It is folly to turn to a man such as the Detective as if he were a Tartar prince and say "Here is a female. Since she is here, enjoy her favors."

Rather than trying to *divert* the Detective's attention with such paltry offerings, Ra's al Ghul would now COMMAND it. He would monopolize that mighty intellect, not occupy it momentarily with some passing distraction. No, he would leave it wholeheartedly absorbed. He would sate the Detective's appetites with the meat of his very nature. He would present his worthy foe with... a mystery.

C'ra, son of N'fai, had the misfortune to inherit his mother's slight frame rather than his father's warrior build. He could never hope for the glory of a combat posting; he was destined to serve the Demon's Head as a humble messenger. But even among messengers there was a hierarchy, and the son of the famous N'fai was at the very top. When Ra's al Ghul had a message he wanted delivered, it was C'ra who was called to the fourth chamber, and often as not, he received instructions directly from Ubu.

After all these years of such glamorous access, C'ra still felt a thrill walking through the portico, knowing that through the archway behind Ubu was the third chamber. It always emboldened C'ra to hold his head a little higher as he announced to Ubu that his unworthy self had been summoned (which the bodyguard certainly knew already or he would not be waiting there). C'ra nevertheless completed the formula: he had been summoned and was presenting himself to receive The Demon Head's will.

Rather than relaying whatever message Ra's al Ghul wished to be delivered, Ubu merely said "Come" and turned on his heel. He walked through the archway, right into the third chamber! C'ra was nearly paralyzed, the fear and awe stopping up his blood in his veins. Did Ubu's order really mean he was to follow *into the third chamber*? He swallowed hard, feeling his mind was not working as quickly as it should in the face of this unprecedented order. He... he... he was sure to fail if he did not pull himself together and obey his orders as he understood them. He hurried through the arch—and had not a moment to take in the wonders of the third chamber for Ubu was stepping through another arch into the second. C'ra trembled, and he struggled to make his legs work without betraying his weakness as he followed through yet another archway into the antechamber of the throne room itself. There was an odd clackety sound which he realized too late was the chattering of his own teeth. He locked his jaw to still them as Ubu continued into... into... C'ra could feel nothing but a vein pulsing in his neck as he stepped into the throne room and saw the actual chair in which Ra's al Ghul sat when holding court.

"The messenger, milord," Ubu intoned formally.

C'ra screamed and fell to the floor in the most awkward but surely the most obsequious bow the throne room had seen in a generation. For in the seconds it took

C'ra to realize what Ubu was saying, he realized Ra's al Ghul was actually in the room! Standing at a side table! Eating a fig! C'ra recited the oath of loyalty to the floor under his face, and begged The Great One to pardon the unforgivable slowness of his bow.

Pardon was apparently granted, for Ra's al Ghul told him to rise.

"Today I begin a great enterprise," The Demon's Head confided, in an unfathomable gesture of liberality. "I wish to consult an astrologer, but my own is too frightened and will tell me only what I wish to hear. If I am to have worthy counsel, I must resort to a deception which I would normally think beneath me. For that, I entrust you, C'ra, son of my most valued warrior N'fai, with a mission of the utmost secrecy. You are to leave the compound through the kitchens, tell no one where you are going, speak to no one you pass along the way. Go through the forest and beyond, until you reach the village of Sighisoara. Make inquiries and find me their most reliable fortune teller. When you have located this person, tell them to expect a visitor from the DEMON compound. Tell them Ra's al Ghul is sending a valued lieutenant who would know what his stars foretell, and that it is a matter of indifference to me if the news he receives be good or bad—so long as it is accurate. Do you understand?"

C'ra confirmed all the particulars. He had never before been so bold; with Ubu he would merely have nodded. But to be called into the throne room itself and receive his instructions from The Great One's own lips, surely such an awesome responsibility required the most aggressive vigilance. He repeated the whole of the message, all the precautions to maintain its secrecy that Ra's al Ghul was so good as to outline for him, and then he bowed and stepped backward, bowed and stepped backward, until he ultimately reached the fourth chamber and felt free to turn his back on The Great One and move in a more natural way.

He had made it as far as the long corridor to the kitchens when Ubu stepped into his path.

"I knew your father," Ubu said seriously. "He was a great fighter and it is wrong that his only son serve at such a low level. This is a great opportunity for you, to be taken into the master's confidence as you have been. It could lead to great things, but only if there is a happy result for the master. You must ensure that the master will be pleased with what he hears."

"I cannot possibly disobey the direct orders of Ra's al Ghul," C'ra cried. "He ordered me of his own lips to tell the gypsy to be accurate."

"There is another way. Fortune tellers want to be loved; they'll always say what will please if they think they know what it is. When you find this gypsy, tell them the man who comes today has been given permission to marry. His star is on the rise, and as a reward for some service, Ra's al Ghul gave him permission to marry. You do this, she is sure to see those portents that speak of a happy and prosperous future. That will give the master comfort, and when he next has an important mission, he will remember C'ra, son of N'fai, did well on this portentous day."

C'ra's chest swelled with pride, to be the son of a warrior who even now inspired such loyalty.

"I will do so," he declared.

“Ubu, send someone to check on the food taster. My breakfast does not sit well. The entire morning listening to Anglaf, I could think of little else. He had nine days to work on that horoscope, yet after ‘Year of the Rat’ and ‘Vermillion Bird’ there was only this cloying taste of spiced raisins, stiffness in my legs, and a disagreeable ringing in my ears.”

That was how the day began. Ubu answered “Yes, Master,” as always, but he knew there was nothing wrong with the food taster or the food. Any time Ubu was occupied with the morning intelligence reports and let Lamar collect Ra’s al Ghul’s breakfast tray, the master lingered too long in his shower, for Lamar had no gift for the complicated task keeping the Demon’s Head on schedule. Too much time in a too-hot shower produced the ear ringing, and the low, hard benches in Anglaf’s quarters took care of the rest.

It would be death to suggest Ra’s al Ghul needed a digestive, so Ubu merely ordered one for himself. If the master happened to eat it, so much the better. If not, Ubu’s own digestion would certainly feel the benefit. He felt it was going to be...

*“Ubu, these reports from Madagascar are 36 hours old, whatever are you thinking?”*

He felt it was going to be one of those days.

As if answering Ubu’s private thought, Ra’s put the antique intelligence reports aside and resumed his complaints about his astrologer.

“Assured success against the Gotham infidel. That’s all his predictions amounted to. Year of the Rat, Vermillion Bird, and certain victory over the Detective, how am I to put any credence in a horoscope like that? It’s cowardice. He says what I would hear because he fears to do otherwise—which is admirable in most, but not in Anglaf. Those whose minds are so unformed, whose thoughts and views so lacking in comprehension, they should be silent. If they must speak, since they can have nothing to say to minds of merit, they should simply pay their homage and be done. But an astrologer is no such animal. His counsel is *sought*, and if he will merely bleat like a sheep, he is no use to anybody. One may as well sacrifice him to the dragon’s flame and be done with it. Hope for a better one next time.”

Ubu said nothing. He merely examined his plate of figs and ate a few before laying it aside for Ra’s al Ghul to appropriate.

Anglaf was not a coward; Ubu knew that. Yes, the astrologer told Ra’s whatever he thought he’d want to hear. But he didn’t do it because he was afraid not to. He did it because... because he wanted to be liked. There was a desperate neediness in the man, you could sense it whenever you talked to him. He would predict anything you wanted in as much detail as he could muster if he thought you’d be his friend. It was rather sad, but it was hardly worth killing him over.

“Perhaps a test is in orde... Ubu, attend! I was speaking of the operation in the Falklands earlier, and I sensed I did not have your attention as fully as did that plate of figs. Now that I am ready to impart my strategy in re Anglaf’s cowardice, you are looking at the door.”

“Forgive me, my lord. I sent for a messenger to answer for the late dispatches from Madagascar. I will be but a moment.”

Anglaf was not a brother or even a friend, but Ubu did not like that word ‘test.’ It was death to question the reasoning of Ra’s al Ghul—but if it became death to simply tell him what he wanted to hear, that was bad news for everybody. Ubu didn’t care

that much if Anglaf lived or died, but if being too loyal became cause for suspicion... no, Ubu did not like this at all.

The messenger was waiting in the fourth chamber, but Ubu could not waste time on him now. He hurried back to Ra's.

"A test, that is what is called for, Ubu. I will go into the town and consult their astrologer. If he confirms what Anglaf said, Anglaf will live. If he does not, there will be a lesson that shall teach the next ten generations of augers the price for—"

Ra's al Ghul was interrupted by a crash. The messenger who followed Ubu apparently tripped on the carpet and fell on his face.

"Rise," The Demon's Head said absently. "Your timing is impeccable. Go into Sighisoara—do not stop in the barracks on your way to take orders from your friends. If you return with cigarettes and pornography, I will know and you will be flogged. Go into Sighisoara and find me an astrologer. Tell them to expect a visitor who is to be told the truth of their horoscope, no matter how unpleasant."

That did it. "No matter how unpleasant." Ra's was setting Anglaf up to fail this test, and Ubu just couldn't stand by and let it happen. He said he was going to check the reports from Australia, and caught up with the messenger before he had left the compound.

Dika sat in her comfortable flat—one of the nicest in the village, as it happened. Three bedrooms with ceramic tile floors, central heating, and occasional wafts of paprika, sweet onions, and garlic from the Two Feathers restaurant below. One of the nicest flats in the village, which her rude visitor had called "a hovel."

She pulled the bell rope attached to a tapestry, causing it to scroll up like a venetian blind, revealing her television.

A hovel—just the sort of arrogance you'd expect from a "rising star" in the service of Ra's al Ghul. Dika's family might have settled in Sighisoara rather than braving the dangers of nomadic existence under the Soviets, but that did not mean she was unaware what DEMON did to her people. Every year when they made their pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Gregory, young men disappeared. Because they were outsiders in Romania, it was pointless to go to the police. They were despised as thieves and vagabonds, and a few less gypsies, male or female, was viewed as a very good thing. In one sense, no one knew what became of them—but in the truer sense, everyone knew. DEMON. Wherever they were taken and whatever became of them, it was in the service of the undead monster Ra's al Ghul.

When Hajna called from the restaurant and said one of those fanatics had seen Dika's flier and was asking questions, she hoped for a little payback. But never in her wildest dreams did she think she would get to strike at Ra's al Ghul himself.

The first mousy little man—Carl was it? Or Kral? Kra? Something like that. Whatever his name, he was an easy conquest. Dika was no great seductress, but the cooks at the Two Feathers restaurant certainly were. All those delicious aromas wafting up from downstairs... The poor ass had come all the way down from the mountains, it was ludicrous to go back without at least having a cup of tea... and a bite to eat... Her own kitchen was small and cramped, there was really no point in having

one at all with the Two Feathers right below... So down they went for a nice lunch of paprika hendl and a glass of wine, after which it was just as silly to go all the way back to his base without at least having his palm read.

A half hour later—a strong lifeline, a few tealeaves, and six tarot cards later—Dika knew her next visitor, the rising star lieutenant, would be much more than he appeared. “Much wiser, much grander, and much, *much* more important.” Dika considered this, because this Carl had already said he was a rising star who had done something so grandiose he’d be given a bride (poor woman). Dika figured a fine form of revenge would be to plague this man with doubts about his future wife’s virtue, since he certainly wasn’t in any position to refuse her. He would be miserable. Take that, Rising Star.

But now, Dika began to wonder. He was a rising star, *plus* he had enough pull that he not only gets to come into town and get his fortune told, he sends in an advance team, even if it was mousey little Carl, to do the legwork for him. He sounded like quite a big shot as it was. How could he be *more than that* unless...

And then Dika considered: Had she ever heard of anyone being a big shot in DEMON? Granted, she’d never made a study of it, but she had the impression that there were two categories: Ra’s al Ghul and everyone else, the head undead and his serfs. But that would mean... and that was just too good to be true.

Dika refused to get her hopes up. It couldn’t be, it wasn’t possible and it was not going to happen. But without getting her hopes up, she was going to be ready. If the one in a million happened and **Ra’s al Ghul himself** came through her door (with his sniveling minions priming her to pump him full of good news), then she would be ready.

She grabbed her coat and went to see Bogdan, who still had a photograph from when Ra’s al Ghul walked through Sighisoara the last time to call forth the next Ubu. Dika memorized it, and when the cloaked figure who called himself D’t’t’ve came through Dika’s front door, the hope that refused to rise earlier now refused to do anything else. Her hopes soared! She had him. She *had* him. Ra’s al Ghul in the hideous flesh. If his future was full of promise, she would warn him of so many ill omens that he would fear to even get out of bed—nor would he get a wink of sleep. And if his stars foretold calamity, she would pass on not a single warning. She might even spin a curse or two once he was gone to help the ill omens along.

After refusing the hospitality of her hovel, this D’t’t’ve finally put back the hood of his cloak, revealing the face from Bogdan’s photograph.

Dika smiled warmly.

Be careful what you wish for. It seemed such an absurd maxim, as if even lying back and dreaming of bliss was a serious matter that should not be indulged in without prudent consideration.

It’s not like his *wishing* made it happen. Selina was an independent, freethinking woman and she chose what to do with her time, in costume and out. Circumstances arranged themselves to put a choice before her, and she chose, of her own free will, to become a part of Batman’s work. If the situation did correspond to a wildly improbable wish-dream he’d considered from time to time, that didn’t mean there was

any cause and effect. And since his wish in no way brought the situation about, it was nonsense to think any little blemish in the reality was somehow laid at his door. It's not like he was an architect who didn't plan for adequate drainage when drawing up blueprints. Still, if he had been responsible, it's not like any man could anticipate feline logic as if it was average rainfall at the 41<sup>st</sup> parallel.

Selina being Selina, she would never abandon Catwoman's nightlife and become a de facto Robin. Five nights a week, she prowled as she had always done. But two nights, she came down to the cave before setting out, consulted his patrol route in order to intercept him in town, and they met, usually around 10 o'clock at the close of his early patrol. They patrolled together until dawn and often slept in the penthouse rather than negotiate returning to the manor in separate cars. She could have picked any nights for her dalliance with crimefighting, but catlike, she had to find some way to make the decision uniquely her own. She had set on Friday and Saturday since they were "date nights."

Date nights. His enemies had thrown some preposterous ideas at him over the years, so had his allies for that matter. But never had anyone come up with something so utterly... She was getting feline logic on his Mission, that's what she was doing. Date nights. How utterly Catwoman. The irony was that he'd never acknowledged the concept in his fop days. Batman patrolled every night, so his true work life knew no variation in routine. And Bruce Wayne's playboy had always sneered at the workingman's concept of a weekend. It was true he made appearances in the offices at Wayne Enterprise, but it was universally understood that he did so only when it suited him. In his efforts to be as conspicuously obnoxious as possible, he flouted the notion of weekends as the quaint folk custom of wage slaves.

It was strange to think only now when the playboy pose was finished would the notion be introduced—introduced into *Batman's* life, no less, rather than Bruce Wayne's—and by Catwoman. Of all the preposterous ironies his enemies had thrust on him over the years...

Yet the fact was, feline ironies aside, she was a good partner. Like him, she was an ordinary human with all the ordinary vulnerabilities, and like him she knew what it was to work alone before teaming up with a partner. The combination gave her an instinctive understanding of the responsibilities that always eluded the sidekicks. For years, whenever Catwoman ventured into the night in costume, she was her own mistress. She knew what she was giving up in partnering with him—and hence, what he was giving up partnering with her. Each valued the other's trust more because they understood it from their own experience, and valuing it made each more determined to live up to it. So it was a good partnership, and Bruce would be the last to minimize the significance of that fact.

He just wished it wasn't date night.



## CHAPTER 2: DATE NIGHT

Selina always admired the cat's ability to try to jump from the end table to the mantel and *miss*, spilling a vase of water onto the sofa and raining rose petals on the carpet, knocking a Faberge egg into the wastebasket as it clawed thin air all the way down to an ungraceful landing on its furry rump... and then blithely lick a paw like that's exactly what she planned from the beginning.

Admiring this quality as she did, it would have been hypocritical for Catwoman to stand on all her vehement objections to crimefighting as if looking forward to date night admitted some kind of mistake in her earlier thinking. For one thing, she wasn't mistaken. She still found crimefighters limited, self-righteous, and pompous. And in every one of them except Bruce, she found those qualities unappealing. But she liked fighting crime *with him*, in moderation, and she had suited up in the bedroom and hurried down to the Batcave in the same spirit Nutmeg licked a paw after an ill-considered leap from the mantel.

"Meow-meow" she announced when she reached the main cavern. Then she looked around, confused. Bruce was in costume, but...

"Where's the hologram map? No At Large list, no patrol route? You're not running a fever or anything, are you?"

Batman scowled.

"No early patrol tonight. Possibly the late one will be deferred too. I have a... *we* have a special investigation."

"Yum. Where are we going?"

Batman glared the way he used to when she made some proposition that tempted him and Psychobat felt the need to assert himself.

"Wayne Tower," he graveled ominously. "Bruce Wayne's office, the executive suites, board room, parking garage, then the penthouse and possibly the manor."

It was Catwoman's turn to stare. She had assumed it was the "yum" that brought on the bat glare. Now, her playful manner faded and she asked what had happened.

"For a few days now I've had the sense, on and off, that I was being watched. It was nothing definite at first. I don't think I was consciously aware of it for the first day or two. But I trust my instincts—"

"So do I," Selina interjected. Psychobat scowled at the needless cheerleading, and continued:

"I trust my instincts," he repeated. "And even though I can't be certain, I believe I evaded several attempts to corner me, simply by..."

"By trusting your instincts. Just unconsciously doing what you do."

He grunted, and Selina went on speculating:

"But today there's a twist. Something happened that turned up the heat under all these unconscious 'Batman being Batman' machinations that you do in the background without even noticing. Something happened that thrust them into the foreground where you do notice and cancel patrols."

"Yes," he breathed. "This afternoon when I left after the finance meeting. There was no one in the parking garage when I stepped out of the elevator."

"That's one," Selina grinned.

"It's not *that* unusual at that time of day. Bruce Wayne keeps his own hours; it wasn't the end of the workday. But then, there was a catering van parked next to my car."

"That's two."

"Yes. That's two. It's Lucius's space, and he uses the car service most days, so it's often empty. But a van is a closed vehicle, no one can see in the back, perfect cover for a getaway with a kidnap victim. And it's parked next to my car. It also wasn't a caterer we use, to my knowledge."

"Not that a detail like that matters at this point," Selina said impishly. "Because they're already busted."

Batman's lip twitched.

"I know the sight lines and strategic strike points in that garage," he graveled. "I knew where the point man had to be positioned, so as I walked to my car, I took out my phone. Called you to see if you'd like to meet for a drink." he added needlessly.

"Brucie, darling, you're a lifesaver," Selina answered, playing along in a society drawl. "I've been shopping all afternoon, and if I don't get a Waldorf martini to restore myself, I will simply die from the exertion."

Batman looked horrified, as if he was witnessing a demonic possession.

"I didn't say I called Bambi Ashton-Larraby," he objected in Bruce's voice. "I called *you*."

"Sorry... Got carried away," came the faux-chastened apology.

"I'm walking with the phone in my hand," Batman resumed. "At the optimal point, I triggered a low frequency stun tone. It *should* have seemed to them like the noise was coming from the security camera they'd disabled, so that later, when they're at home licking their wounds and trying to figure out what went wrong, they would think their own tampering with the camera was to blame.

"Matches, you idiot, you set up some kind of short or somethin'," Selina said matter-of-factly, redeeming her earlier lapse with a shorthand confirmation that she understood his reasoning.

"The noise should have come from the camera," Batman repeated. "Unfortunately, I haven't perfected the directional masking in enclosed spaces yet."

"Eat, drink, and be merry, Bruce, for God grades on a curve. It stopped them without you punching like a prizefighter, didn't it?"

"If they don't blame the security camera, there is always the chance they'll realize *Bruce Wayne* triggered the sound with his cell phone, and why would he have such a device?"

"Uh, third richest man in the country," Selina said, counting off on her fingers. "Owns a tech company, and likes gadgets. Don't all three of those apply to you and have nothing to do with Batman?"

"It means I knew an attack was coming."

"Aware of your surroundings and not as dumb as you look, that doesn't mean you're Batman either."

"I would still be better if they thought it was the security camera."

"It is also better that you didn't get kidnapped."

He grunted.

And she meowed.

"Well anyway, it's date night and we'll know more after we check out the Tower. Right, Handsome?"

"You realize we have no idea what we're looking for," he grveled.

"Of course. That's the fun of it, right? Meow."

Since Ra's al Ghul encountered Batman, fighting the Dark Knight was Ubu's most onerous duty. It was heresy to regret the call to serve DEMON, but if any Ubu was capable of that blasphemous thought, it was the announcement that The Detective had entered the compound which would trigger it.

It wasn't the fighting; to die defending the Great One against a worthy foe was the greatest end a minion could hope for. Batman did decline to kill his enemies, which meant living on in humiliation after a defeat, but this was not what Ubu feared either. It was The Detective's notorious guile. Only the Great One's mighty intellect was keen enough to joust with The Detective. Yet Batman sometimes turned to involve others in the conversation, as if they were something more than ornaments in Ra's al Ghul's throne room. That inclusion never ended well for Ubu. He simply wasn't clever enough to respond as the Great One would wish. Even without being pressed to speak, Ubu's predecessor had apparently betrayed the Demon Head's intentions simply by letting the Detective walk through a door! So it was that, in this puzzling age of heroes, the worst news an Ubu could hear was that Batman was expected in the compound.

In the centuries before the coming of The Detective, however, there was another announcement, a different announcement, most likely to lead a minion, even one of Ubu's standing, into heretical regret that he had ever become a servant of Ra's al Ghul. That announcement was the one before Ubu now:

The Demon's Head was moving to another compound.

There are rules in the Gotham Underworld about attacking people Selina Kyle cares about. Theme criminals who know Catwoman personally (and have a nodding acquaintance with reality) soon learn that an attack on "Eddie" or "Harvey" is an invitation for razor sharp claws to come and pay a visit. Often, the tearing away of leaves, straw, or human flesh is said to be a means to an end, the end being the removal of lungs, kidneys, and other vital organs. Most rogues are fairly sure she's kidding, however most rogues also remember that's what Scarecrow thought when she threatened to set him on fire. Most rogues conclude that, while she's *probably* kidding, it's best not to find out.

When Selina Kyle began dating Bruce Wayne, nobody seriously thought Catwoman's rules extended to him. As the months passed, after a dozen opportunities came and went for her to abscond with whatever Rembrandt, diamond, or WayneTech secrets she was after, a few of the savvier rogues placed a mental

asterisk next to Bruce Wayne's name, albeit in very light pencil. After Scarecrow targeted Wayne with a number of other CEOs in a fear gas-driven stock scheme, that asterisk was traced over in indelible ink.

It was therefore unlikely—possible of course, but unlikely—that they were dealing with a theme villain. That hypothesis was confirmed when Catwoman got the security camera open.

*...:What the hell is this, a wire nut? Who disables a Mohkanson-7 with a wire nut?...*

She was on the OraCom, so she couldn't see Batman's face. Twenty feet away, safely inside an elevator shaft, he indulged in a lip-twitch.

"Someone who was trained on the R-4s," he answered, retrieving another of the sensors they installed to know when an elevator was on route from the executive suite.

*...:An R-4? So... we're talking about an octogenarian. You were nearly attacked by somebody who remembers Pearl Harbor and voted for Roosevelt.:*

Once again, Batman indulged in a lip twitch as he crawled out of the elevator shaft with his prize.

"No, we're talking about ex-military. Probably Fort Leonard."

*...: Oh gee, I feel safe.:*

"Don't worry, Kitten," Batman said through the open air as he came up behind her, "Luthor's one legitimate contribution as President: he retired the training practices at those bases that hadn't exactly kept up with the times."

"Well, we know something about our man, then. One of them at least is ex-military, maybe trained at Fort Leonard, pre-Luthor. It's not much, but..."

"We may know more if he's left a fingerprint inside this. It's what they used to monitor the elevators to know when Bruce Wayne was on his way to the garage."

"They got to the elevator shaft?" Catwoman said seriously.

"The executive elevators between the 40<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> floors, not the one from the penthouse."

"Ah, okay then."

Batman wasn't sure if her relief was on his behalf, because Bruce Wayne's private express elevator to his penthouse also connected to the satellite cave under the tower, or if it was professional pride, since Catwoman herself had been unable to beat that elevator's security, despite thirty-seven attempts (that he knew of) since learning his identity.

She said she wanted to check the penthouse anyway. Shielded from the regular building security, it could appear to an outsider to be the best avenue to get at Wayne. It wasn't the one they ultimately used, but Catwoman was certain they would have investigated it before trying anything as public as a parking garage. And that's when they would slip up, she insisted. That's when they would leave a fingerprint or some other clue, during those preliminary maneuvers watching him, not once they moved in to actually grab their target.

Batman understood her reasoning, but he wanted to wait. There were several areas in the business offices and elsewhere that he wanted to look into first.

"That's fine, you go and I'll catch up," she said lightly.

Again, Batman scowled.

"How would you get up there?" he asked finally.

"Elevator. I live there, remember? My fingerprint works on the panel."

She winked and his scowl deepened.

"Now Batman, you're not *jealous* of Bruce Wayne are you?" she teased.

"I'd like to examine the elevator and shaft before it's disturbed," he grveled.

"Okay, I'll go in from the roof," she shrugged.

"I'd rather examine the rooftop cameras and the balcony without..."

"Fine. No elevator, no balcony. That leaves astral projection or clicking my heels together. Preference?"

"Not funny."

"Look, I'm not going to get cat burglar cooties on your crime scene."

"You don't know what to look for."

"I don't have to; I know what *they* were looking for. It's not like I never scoped out Bruce Wayne. I'll see you upstairs."

Bugio. When Ubu first heard the word, it sounded like an obscenity. The more he learned of the DEMON installation there, the more convinced he became that his first impression was correct.

The Great One, Ra's al Ghul, Light of the East, Terror of the West, Apex of the Age of Oneness through One Rule, had decreed that, in two days time, he would move from the castle in the Fargaras Mountains to the one on the Island of Bugio.

Since being called as Ubu, the man who was born Corcea Porumbescu had served the Demon's Head at the compound in Mongolia, the castle in Nepal, the installation in Uruguay, the fortress in Bangkok, the fortress in Greenland, the fortress at Tuskar Rock, and (most trying of all) the royal suite of the Gotham Imperial Hotel.

Ubu was not familiar with any of these places before Ra's announced his intention of going there, and his first task as bodyguard was, of course, to become familiar with all facets of the DEMON base and the surrounding country. He sought out information on Bugio from the usual source and... and... had spent every minute since wishing he was born Corcea Porumbescu of Los Angeles, California. Ubu was not even certain where Los Angeles, California was. He knew it was on the opposite coast from Gotham City. He knew they had smog, and he knew that is where decadent moving pictures came from, whereby the West spread their doctrine of corruption throughout the world. But he knew too that the women of California did not send their sons to be trained in the DEMON camps at Eger, and if he had been born to a woman of Los Angeles, he would not now be packing up to go to Bugio.

It was always an odd sensation walking through the Wayne offices as Batman. The lobby felt like any other lobby of any other large office building... except for all the black marble that suited his personal taste. The security office was a little better, since the public never went there and it was designed for functionality, not to make a corporate statement. No black marble... Only a bank of *WayneTech* monitors and copious paperwork with *his name stamped all over it*. Still, it was more comfortable than the lobby... The elevators to the 40<sup>th</sup> floor, and the bank of upper level elevators there which took those with business on the higher floors to the 41<sup>st</sup> through 77<sup>th</sup>... well, at

least they were impersonal. He was there often enough as Bruce Wayne, but so were thousands of his employees. Reaching the executive suite on the 77<sup>th</sup> floor, that was another matter. The board room, the executive dining room and fitness center, Lucius's office and his own, it was all a little too familiar, too much a part of Bruce Wayne's life. He felt the muscle memory in his legs as he walked down the hall, maneuvering his hips in a way that felt strange with the utility belt. The cape was longer and heavier than the suitcoat he was used to—it was the only place in the world where his cape felt *unnatural*.

"Any progress?" he said into the OraCom, not because he really wanted to know, but simply to gravel in Batman's voice and shake off this shadow of Wayne. He didn't expect:

*...: You better have some catnip on you. Kitty gets a treat tonight. ...*

"You found something?"

Purring in answer to that.

"Catwoman, what did you find?" he asked firmly.

And bawdy laughter in answer to that.

"Catwoman."

*...: See the thing about Bruce Wayne is there aren't many opportunities to get at him in a secluded area. They never would have done something as public as a parking garage if they thought they could do better. So they must have watched for—You going to close Lucius's door or leave it unlatched?...*

"You can see me?"

*...: Yep. Every meowlicious muscle:...*

"Where? Not from the penthouse, obviously."

*...: Not without Spittlecurl's x-ray vision, no. When I got up there, I started looking for the best place to spy on you, and I had an idea. Same place the spawn went. I'm across the street in the Knickerbocker Tower. ...*

Batman went to the window. "Infrared engage. Magnify," he ordered. And a purple blur grew into focus... She was waving.

"That doesn't mean they were there."

*...: Maybe not, Handsome, but somebody was, fairly recently, and they smoked. Whole area around this window reeks of it. And it's the best window to keep an eye on you as you come into work and move around the office, so I say they were here. ...*

"Anything more?"

*...: Yeah, they used a bump-key to get in. Normally wouldn't mean anything; they're easy enough to make. But when the spawn had LexCorp in here, they installed those bizarre "fLEX-lead locks" all over the place. You know, those stupid specialty jobs he puts on everything, as if Superman is going to give a damn about a locked door. Dipshit. But anyway, an ordinary bump key wouldn't work. It'd have to be specially made, and it's not the sort of thing you could pick up in any old pawn shop:...*

"No, it's not. Kittlemeier?"

*...: For a regular customer, sure. For some jarhead that reeks of Marlboro, I don't think so... Unless he had an introduction from someone we know—or he could be working with somebody that... ulgh, too many 'ifs.'...*

"'Ifs' come with the job. It's still a good find. We're building a profile: Kittlemeier is a possibility, but unlikely. Where else might you get a modified bump-key for Luthor's special locks?"

...: *In Gotham... Dead Eye Zane if he was free...*

"He's not. In Blackgate for another eighteen months."

...: *Then the closest place is Mueller's Hardware in Bludhaven, or find somebody in Gotham who I don't know—which is unlikely.* ...

"Agreed. I'll have Nightwing question Mueller. Finish up there and meet me in the cave."

DEMON always preferred establishing bases in unpopulated areas. The work of the Demon's Head required seclusion and secrecy. From the throne room down to the lowliest pit-stirrers, they spoke of the Dragon's wisdom in extending his revered five-clawed talon to claim those parts of the world "unsullied" by civilization.

The thought that they were taking civilization's leftovers did not occur to them.

At least, it never had until now. The first shock came when Ubu inquired about the skeleton staff at Bugio. A skeleton staff was left at all DEMON bases to gather intelligence, if the area warranted it, and to generally keep the place operational for the glorious day when the Demon's Head sent the word, as he did today, that it was to be honored by his presence for an upcoming operation. But there was no staff at Bugio. None. Once the facility was built, the last man to leave uttered the oath of loyalty, switched off the lights and locked the door. Ubu couldn't understand it. Was there *no one* there, literally no one, making ready for the Master's coming?

No, there was not, and that led to the second shock: the reason why. A skeleton staff had to eat, and it seemed there was no food on Bugio, nor on any of the surrounding islands. No soil meant nothing grew from the land, and as for wildlife...

"Tarantulas, reptiles, and rodents," the quartermaster read from his paperwork. "And a scarce population of feral goats 'brought from Portugal by the mariners who first touched the rocky shores.'"

"Goats?" Ubu said dully.

"Not enough for milk and cheese," Ur'ai answered grimly. "We bring that in with the water."

Ubu stared.

"We have to bring our own *water*?"

Ur'ai nodded.

It was now clear to Ubu if not to anyone else: Civilization had passed on Bugio for a reason.

The satellite cave under the Wayne Tower was smaller than the one under the manor, but its computer equipment and lab facilities were every bit the full cave's equal. There was only one workstation, however. When Catwoman arrived, Batman turned in the single rotating chair, and he studied her.

"You did well tonight," he remarked.

"Night's not over yet," she purred.

"When exactly did you 'scope out' Bruce Wayne?" he asked, with the old rooftop hauteur.

"Ah, something he didn't know? That's going to keep Psychobat up at night, isn't it. I guess your instincts weren't always as finely honed as they are now, eh, Stud?"

"When?"

"Find anything on that sensor from the elevator shaft?"

"A partial print, the Batcomputer is running it against the military database now. When were you stalking Bruce Wayne?"

"I'm not telling," she laughed. "Any word from Dick?"

"Nightwing will report back within the hour. When were you scoping out Wayne?"

"I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"**WHEN?!**"

"Bruce, that doesn't work on me. It never has..." she trailed off, and sighed. Psychobat's bellowing didn't work on her—but neither did letting him ruin date night. "Look, it's not like it ever became an actual plan. I just toyed with the idea for a couple days."

"When?"

"Do you remember Matilda?"

His eyes went blank as he mentally sifted through the faces of countless interchangeable bimbos, trying to place the name.

"That's a no," Selina observed. "If you knew who I meant, you wouldn't have to think about it. Matilda is the resident cat at the Algonquin. Ninth one they've had since Dorothy Parker's day, when John Barrymore brought in a bedraggled stray he'd named 'Hamlet.'"

Beneath the cowl, a terrifying transformation occurred as a ghost of Fop Wayne clicked into the memory.

"Oh of course, the fashion show!" he exclaimed, like a dimwitted socialite who thought it was the most amusing thing in the world to dress up cats in "Meow Wear" and parade them up and down a runway. In a moment, the Bat-persona returned, but not before Selina had blanched.

"That was the most genuinely creepy thing I've ever seen you do," she said flatly.

"A cat fashion show, fundraiser for the Wayne Animal Shelter," he announced brusquely. "Bristol Feline Club supplied show-quality cats to be 'models,' the clothes were donated by some pet fashions company in Bludhaven. What was your problem with that?"

"I didn't have a *problem* with it, it was going to be a room full of money, jewelry, and cats."

"And you were going to kidnap Wayne in the course of it? For ransom or...?"

"No," Selina rubbed her temples. "I figured you'd be a way *in*. I had a vague idea of getting an invitation and then bumping into you at the door and... what difference does it make? It was a small little nothing event that wouldn't have covered my tips. The only reason I took an interest was because of the cat, but then the Hemingway House down in Florida put their Picasso cat on display. So I forgot about you and went to get some sun."

"How long were you watching me?" he graveled.

“Bout a day and a half, give or take.”

“And you didn’t see anything... suspicious.”

“Bruce, you really think you’d only be hearing about it *now* if I had?”

He grunted.

And the Batcomputer pinged.

“We got him. An 81% probable match. Ross Witford. Regimental Landing Team, 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, Operation Desert Storm. Dishonorable discharge, 1994. One arrest for coke possession with intent to distribute, also 1994. Last known address... 413 Claggart Street, Bludhaven.”

Ross Witford thought he was anonymous and invisible in Gotham. He would have been to any standard law enforcement. But standard law enforcement can’t burrow into the banking records of a hardware store in the Bludhaven “Spine” while Oracle puts the kettle on for a fresh pot of tea. It can’t cross reference those records with an advertising database at *Soldier of Fortune Magazine* while Barbara rationalizes that, no matter what Alfred says and no matter how much Bruce must have spent on that special blend he brought her from London, teabags are just easier. And, while the maligned little bag of orange pekoe steeps, standard law enforcement cannot determine that the same credit card that bought a classified ad six weeks ago in *Soldier of Fortune* also registered a room eight days ago at a Day’s Inn on the Gotham waterfront.

There were a couple dives in the neighborhood where scum like Witford might go for a burger and a beer. Catwoman had picked the most likely of these, in her opinion, and established her lookout point on a rooftop between it and the motel. While she waited, she scrutinized a palm unit (with the predictable bat-emblem mounted on its face) and flipped back and forth between Witford’s outdated driver’s license photo and an identikit sketch Nightwing had put together from Mueller’s description. When she spotted her man, she swung down to divert him into her chosen alley—by way of her boot heels planted squarely in his chest, midswing. It resulted in a less-than-graceful landing in the alley for her, but a decidedly worse one for him.

Catwoman’s interrogation style was not like Batman’s, or any vigilante’s. She relied on her reputation as a villain, and the natural squeamishness anyone feels at the sight of a very pointy clawtip dangled near their eyeball. Yet Ross Witford held his tongue. He stood up to ten minutes that felt like ten hours, and then took the opportunity he knew would come, slugged her, and ran. He made it two full blocks before a scalloped shadow fell across his path. The next thing he knew, he was face down on the pavement, with his arm twisted behind his back in what had to be a fucking vice, and an equally strong hand behind his head, pushing his nose into a pothole.

It was the same strategy Bruce Wayne employed at auctions: hold back and let the small fry take each other out. When there is only one bidder left, come in with a higher offer. “New bidder, thank you, sir. The bid is to you,” and the auctioneer would turn back to the last high bidder. Often as not, it was so demoralizing, confronting a new opponent when they thought they had it won, they’d drop out without placing another bid.

That was the way to attack Witford: let him exhaust himself defying one interrogator, and as soon as he thought he was free, the second would swing in. The only question was who would go first. Selina said she didn't want Batman "loosening the lid" for her, so he agreed to let her take the lead. It was the better strategy anyway. For a guy like Witford, being roughed up by a broad was worse than any beating Batman could deliver. It was bad enough in itself, but if another man knew about it—and the first thing Batman did was let Witford know he'd been watching—that was the final, unspeakable humiliation. He was beaten.

Ra's al Ghul did not anticipate the Detective's presence at Bugio.

That's what Ubu had said, and that, at least, was something. Ur'ai still had to obtain provisions for a full staff and up to twenty prisoners, but he would not need to feed the additional four hundred men drawn from the Elite *Žalčiai* Corp. The four hundred that were always on hand when "He whose name must not be spoken" was expected to interest himself in a DEMON operation.

Unfortunately, the nearest supply port was in Funchal, and they had become ridiculously cautious about sales to organizations who might be "terrorists." Their demands for credentials and official paperwork had stymied Un'ai for several hours, until G'fal gave him the idea of a cruise ship. P'tirn made up the necessary documents, and he became chief purchasing agent for *The Žaltys*: Queen of the Wyvern Sea.

That, at least, enabled him to buy as much meat, fruit, water, and sundries as The Demon's Head might require for the Bugio base... which was a very good thing, for Ubu came by a moment later and said that, even though the Detective was not expected, the operation was of such size and scope, The Great One thought it best to bring the *Žalčiai* Corps anyway.

"Madagascar, I don't get it," Selina moped, taking off her gloves.

They had returned to the manor. At the start of the evening, with no patrol and only the Wayne investigation before them, Catwoman had ridden into town with Batman in the Batmobile. With no second car to worry about, it was much simpler to just return home. On the way, he told her what Witford revealed about his employer. He didn't have a name, but the man who hired him operated out of a large plantation in Madagascar.

Selina had listened quietly, and then seemed to be thinking. She only spoke when they got back to the cave. She pulled off her mask and gloves, and followed him into the costume vault.

"I don't get it. I absolutely do not get it. Madagascar isn't high tech. They grow vanilla, don't they? Why would some vanilla farmer half way around the world be hiring mercenaries to grab Bruce Wayne? It makes no sense at all."

"I know," Bruce grveled, taking off his cowl. "Wayne Tech, Wayne Enterprises, the Foundation... I can't think of any angle, offhand. But that doesn't mean... Well, just look at that case you mentioned earlier. The Matilda fundraiser at the Algonquin, you didn't have a logical reason for coming after me."

"Hello? Cats, remember? Your fundraiser was a fashion show with the most famous cat in the city—*second* most famous cat," she added quickly.

"I meant it's not a logical reason to go after *Bruce Wayne*."

"I wasn't going after 'Bruce Wayne,' you just happened to be running the thing. I was in it for the cat."

Bruce's eyes went square.

"It wasn't about me... it was about the cat," he said in a low, thoughtful voice. Then, as he tried to step past her and found he couldn't, he grabbed her upper arms and kissed her cheek. "You... are very good at this," he graveled, and then pushed her aside and marched out of the vault and into the main cavern.

She followed, once the shock wore off, and found him typing away at his workstation.

"Here it is, Eduardo Melo Pequena. I thought I remembered something in an old Interpol report. Family is Portuguese, obviously, and they've had a vanilla plantation on Madagascar since before the Bourbons. It's just a blip, nothing was ever proven. But he is a collector who is a 64% probable for having stolen goods in his collection. And there is a notation in his Interpol file from... 12 years ago... speculating that he had kidnapped the son of a thief to force him to steal an item he couldn't get any other way. There was also a rumor that he threatened the wife of a smuggler some twenty years before that. Now, two unconfirmed rumors over the course of thirty-five years is hardly conclusive, but—"

"But you remembered it. Because you're Batman."

"I didn't remember, actually. I just had a vague... Look at that, he bid on some Kryptonite six years ago, that's probably when I read his file."

"Bruce, I love you, but if you think anything you just said makes you look less freakish..."

"Haven't you ever heard of this guy? I mean, I'd think if he did have a reputation for snatching the families of thieves to get what he wants, word would get around."

"Nope, never heard of him. Might be too smalltime for the people I talk to. What does he collect?"

Bruce glanced at the file again, and after he skimmed for a moment, he shook his head.

"It doesn't say."

"See, this is why I say cops are stupid, even the glamour international kind. '64% probable' for having stolen goods in his collection, and they don't know what he collects."

"They don't mention it, it's a data blip, a... a footnote in a larger criminology analysis of... of something that wouldn't interest you at all. The point, unproven but worth considering, is that maybe they weren't after Bruce Wayne as Bruce Wayne. Maybe they're after Catwoman's boyfriend."

It wasn't the food that worried Ubu, it was the water. The food taster provided adequate protection against poison taken at meals, but it was impractical to have him sample the water with which the master might brush his teeth. It was more daunting

still to test the water in which he bathed. If the water could not be tested, then its delivery would have to be supervised. Each step of the way, from the initial transport into the Bugio facility to the portion drawn for Ra's al Ghul's personal use, to its final delivery into his bedchamber... That was certainly possible in the normal course of DEMON operations, but if the Detective should make an appearance, Ubu would have greater concerns than guarding bathwater.

Alfred was quite aware that "date night" meant Master Bruce and Miss Selina often spent the night in town. He was therefore unconcerned when he found their bed had not been slept in. He made his own breakfast, and rather than ironing the newspaper to place on the breakfast tray, he read it himself. Deciding to take advantage of the light morning, he went for a walk around the grounds. Only when he returned did he venture down to the cave, to retrieve the kimono Master Bruce would not have needed to change into on returning from patrol.

He was shocked to hear Miss Selina's voice as he descended the stairs:

"I FOUND IT! I GOT IT THIS TIME! BRING ON THE CATNIP!"

And Master Bruce's, coming from the direction of the chem lab:

"One minute... I'll be there just as soon as—"

"As the watched pot boils, I know. Pfft."

"Miss Selina, have you and the master been working here all night?" Alfred asked (in much the same tone he used with Master Dick when that young man's date with the charming but regrettably irresponsible Clarice Kenton had extended a full seven hours past his curfew).

Selina turned, and Alfred could not help but note the unkempt hair and fatigued eyes that Master Bruce displayed so frequently when found in the cave at this time of day. Like him, she seemed unaware of her exhaustion.

"Hey, Alfred. Congratulate me. Rascally little Portuguese art collector tried to pull a fast one on Kitty, but he's no match for me, the Internet, and Walapang." She pointed playfully to the bat hanging low over the workstation, and Alfred could have sworn the bat squeaked in return. "We got him, didn't we, Buddy," she cooed. "Took six hours and a lotta coffee, but we got him."

Alfred sighed.

When Selina entered this household, he hoped her influence would bring Master Bruce's sleeping habits into closer alignment with those of ordinary unmasked humanity—*not* the other way around. A part of him wanted to tell her so, but one didn't scold the mistress of the manor. Instead, he offered to bring her some fruit juice. He knew better than to even ask Master Bruce, he would just bring a full carafe with two glasses, and hope for the best.

When he returned, at least the master and mistress were together, huddled around her computer screen.

"See, I told you if you'd leave me alone for half an hour, I'd find his kink," she said smugly. "Oddball collectors like that, it's never as simple as 'lithographs' or 'antebellum pottery.' It's always something chewy, like this."

"A half hour is thirty minutes, you took four hours," he grumbled. "But this does seem... plausible."

He poured a glass of juice and drank it down absently. Selina sipped hers.

"Alfred, this guy is a collector," she explained proudly. "He's fascinated by disputed inventions, things where more than one person or country claims credit for coming up with it. The telephone, steam engine, porcelain, barometer. It's pretty interesting, actually. Most of the also-rans are curiosities, so they're not that valuable to anybody. He's probably amassed quite a collection without anybody really noticing. He only surfaces now and then, when he tries to get something that *is* recognized as the real deal, so it's much more expensive. Like this wire recorder from Thomas Edison's workshop, that's the last time he surfaced, bidding on it at Sotheby's."

"The last time he surfaced *legitimately*," Bruce interjected.

"Right," Selina resumed. "This guy has a dark side. When he finds something he can't get any other way, we think he targets a thief who can steal it for him. And rather than paying them like anyone else, he kidnaps someone they care about to make them play ball. And this idiot went after Bruce, can you believe it?"

"It's conjecture," Bruce said mildly. "But it does conform to all the facts that we have. Now that we know the nature of his collection, his 'kink' as Selina puts it, we may be able to identify what he's after, and then—"

"Oh I found it," Selina said brightly.

Bruce stared.

"I was going to tell you, I didn't get a chance," she explained.

"What is it?" he asked, biting off each word.

"It's irresistible. Most things on this list of 'disputed firsts' don't go back more than three hundred years, but this... Meow. India, China, and some little corner of Persia all claim to have invented chess. Now, I found a set of chessmen from... someplace I cannot pronounce" she said, pointing to the screen. "It has Indian style pieces, but the board is laid out like the Chinese version of the game. So for a dispute nut, this a *must-have*. And it's on loan to a tiny little private museum in Istanbul for a limited run exhibit they're got. And that's the catch. It's only there for three weeks. Then it disappears back into the collection of whoever loaned it to them. Now, no thief is that good. This is not a major museum. To go in cold, slip into Turkey without attracting attention, case the place without attracting attention, research it, get a floor plan, get the blueprints, devise a way in, devise a way around their pressure panels, devise a way out, and then get all the equipment together in Istanbul where you've got minimal if any local connections... it can't be done in twenty days. Can't be done. The only way to get those chessmen is to use somebody that already knows the facility."

"Someone who's robbed the museum already," Bruce said.

"Right. It's only been done three times," she said happily. "The Serbian Fox, who's in Iron Heights for fifteen to twenty. The Japanese cat burglar known only as Tomio, nobody knows where he retired to."

"São Paulo, Brazil."

"Fine, nobody but *you* knows where he retired to. And the third thief to successfully burgle this particular little boutique museum in suburban Istanbul is, of course, me."

Bruce scowled.

"They had Babylonian lions," she smirked.

Bruce scowled.

"Do you know how rare artifacts from ancient Babylon are?"

Bruce scowled.

"I'm going to bed," Selina sighed.

When she had gone, Alfred turned to Bruce as if to say "Oh well done, sir."

Ubu moistened his fingertips with the healing Hovirag oil used by his people, and touched his temples gingerly.

There was no Lazarus Pit in Bugio.

The nearest convergence of ley lines where a pit could be constructed was more than six hours away. How was he supposed to safeguard The Demon Head's continued existence when the nearest Lazarus Pit was more than six hours away?

## CHAPTER 3: DISPATCHES

Valerina glanced at the fresh dispatches, and then at the handmaid who brought them. It was like looking back in time, at herself when she'd first come to the palace. She had seen no more of Atlantis than the fourth dome where she grew up and went to school, and the district in the open-air part of the main dome where her grandmother lived. Back then, a visit to the main dome seemed like the epicenter of the universe. Much as she loved her grandmother, it was the glamour of the open-air city that thrilled her. You could see the spirals of the palace right from her grandmother's window! Then when she finished school, her scores qualified her to work at the palace. Little did she think when she crept in through those gates, too frightened to even look up, that one day she would be personal aide to the king.

"Let me guess," Valerina said to the handmaid, "before you came in right now, you stood outside the door reciting the protocol they taught at the nursery. If you found King Orin alone, you were to address him as 'My Liege,' but if any consulars or ministers were present, then the first address would be 'Your Majesty' after which a simple 'sire' would suffice."

"Is it not correct, ma'am?" the girl asked without raising her eyes.

"Not in this palace. In front of outsiders, 'King Orin' is fine, but he's not big on ceremony when it's just him and you. Just 'Orin' is fine, and once he invites you to—and he will—you can call him Arthur."

"I-I-," the handmaid stammered, still not lifting her eyes.

"You could not possibly," Valerina filled in the words for her. "I know, that's just how I felt. It took me two migration cycles to get it sounding natural. You'll get there. You can start by looking up."

"Ma'am?"

"Look up. You'll be forever bumping into things if you don't. That's what he'll say. He likes eye contact."

"Yes, ma'am."

Valerina would have liked to erase the 'ma'am' as well, but she didn't want to load the girl down with too many corrections at once.

"Now, let's see those dispatches," she said instead.

It was challenging, being personal aide to the king, particularly when he was out of the palace. He would check in twice a day, once with Vulko and once with her. Vulko briefed him on affairs of state, and Valerina on "everything else." Valerina knew Vulko's responsibility was far greater, the weight and importance of those briefings was certainly beyond the minutiae of "everything else," but she couldn't help but think Vulko had it easier when it came to boiling it all down. When King Orin called in, he only wanted what he called "the broad brushstrokes," and he expected the call to last no more than five minutes. He said it was something to do with the Justice League satellite moving out of range, but Valerina always suspected it was really his own patience running out. In any case, five minutes was the point where, if you had more to say, you'd be saying it to a seriously irate sea king. Through trial and error, Valerina

had determined that she could bring about two minutes worth of material to the call. That allowed ample time for the king to ask questions and give instructions on each issue.

Sifting through and prioritizing dispatches was the hardest part of the job. Those who lived in the palace always heard quickly when the king was away from the city for more than a day, so requests for a personal audience dropped off almost immediately, as did the follow ups. There was no use asking if the king had reviewed this report or seen that petition if you knew he wasn't in the city. The problem came from outsiders. They had no such knowledge of the king's comings and goings, nor did they have any inkling of their relative importance (or unimportance). They all assumed their case was the crown's top priority. When King Orin was in the city, he determined what took precedence, but when he was not, it fell to Valerina to decide what made the list for his two-minute briefing.

There was a note from Lorena of Sub Diego, thanking King Orin for a birthday gift. He would want to answer that personally—which was just as well, since Valerina was unsure what Lorena's actual status was, politically. Vulko said that, as the head of state for an independent undersea city, she was a queen and King Orin's equal, even though her city was much smaller and poorer than Atlantis. King Orin, on the other hand, referred to her as a friend. Unsure what else to do with the thank you note, Valerina consolidated the intelligence reports into a single stack, clearing a space for "personal correspondence" on the king's desk. One down...

There was a revised schedule from the Watchtower listing dates and times for the next two months of staff meetings, as well as an assigned rota of "monitor duty" with several squares on a grid labeled "Aquaman." Valerina was used to the unusual name by which surfacers referred to the sea king, but she would never get used to this concept of monitor duty, where they simply *told* the king of Atlantis when he was to appear and expected him to show up.

"The Justice League forgot to send the agenda again, too" she complained to the viewscreen once Arthur checked in. "How are you to determine which meetings require your attendance and which do not? It's as though they expect you to go to every meeting just because it is Satyr's Day or whatever they call it."

...:Saturday. And yes, they do:... answered the frozen, static image on the viewscreen.

"They have no understanding, do they, Arthur? Of how vast the seas are, and how insignificant their land-based concerns are, in comparison."

...: Valerina, would it surprise you to learn that, to a Green Lantern, the oceans are nothing but a speck compared to vastness of space?:...

"Green Lanterns do not *rule* in space," Valerina replied, rather than backing down. "Nor do they have millions of subjects, such as you do, making claims on their time. Are the whales alright?"

Arthur smiled. He liked having assistants who would challenge him. He liked bright, articulate men and women who were not afraid to speak their minds—as long as they did it with respect for his office and his experience. He liked it as long as the women didn't do that one trick that always reminded him of Mera: making her argument and then immediately changing the subject with a question that she knew he'd want to answer at length. So the only way he could respond to her last word on the original subject was to bring it up later, in this case after he'd told her about the

whales, which made him sound like an argumentative jerk who was holding on to an issue long past its time.

"The whales are fine," he said, figuring he had time to go into it before the JLA satellite moved out of range. "There is a bit of a mystery about what exactly happened. A number of males around Hawaii reported a scent as if females were in estrus outside of their regular cycle, but none of them are. I've checked the area, I've talked to everyone I could find. No one is in heat. No one is ill. No one knows where the smell came from. The males are understandably irritable, but other than that, everyone is fine. I'm still looking into it. Working hypothesis at this point is that there was some sort of chemical dumping."

...:Arthur, I know surfacers are perverse, but dumping whale hormones? Why in Poseidon's name?...

"It wouldn't have been 'whale hormone' they were dumping. It would have been something else, some waste product from their manufacturing that just happened to smell that way once it reacted with the salt water. I have a scientist colleague from the Justice League who could look into it."

...: We have scientists of our own,;... Valerina objected.

"We do," Arthur agreed. "And Atlantis scientists know far more about whales, but far less about surface corporations. Batman knows where their factories are, what byproducts result from their manufacturing, and which companies would be likely to dispose of those byproducts improperly in the South Pacific."

...: Very well. Shall I have Vulko make contact with this 'colleague' or —:...

"No, it can wait. I'll call him myself when I return. But Vulko can call the Watchtower and have them send the meeting agenda."

"Mr. Drake, 'prep' stands for preparatory."

Every time Tim heard that old wag from Mr. Offred, he'd wanted to scream, but now he'd have to admit, Brentwood Academy lived up to its promise. He got into Hudson University (as well as Dartmouth and the University of Metropolis). He came in with 12 credits, thanks to all those A.P. courses. And he discovered that a lot of those papers he slaved over at Brentwood made a decent foundation for his freshman class work. None of them were viable as written, but they made a solid starting point.

Just look at his paper on methane as a greenhouse gas versus methane as an oil alternative. It was thin, but because Mr. Offred insisted on meticulous footnoting and detailed bibliographies, Tim was able to return to his original sources and flesh out the arguments. Professor Milpini said the finished work was so exemplary for a freshman, Tim should submit it to the Junior Science and Humanities Symposium, where it got an honorable mention. Scored him a \$25 gift card at Olive Garden and two passes to the *real* symposium.

Tim was stoked. Professor Milpini said E.J. Meadows was attending, and he'd be sure to introduce them. It took Tim a minute to place the name, but then he realized E.J. Meadows was one of the researchers he'd quoted in his paper. It was dumb, but he hadn't quite thought of those names in the footnotes as real people. He knew they were, obviously, but not in the sense of someone you'd meet at a party. Not someone

your Geo 104 professor marches you up to at a cocktail reception and says “this is the young student who’s been following your work.”

“Vulko, next time you have to call the Watchtower, check the monitor schedule first and call when Martian Manhunter is on the desk. It saves time.”

Vulko said he would remember, and Arthur apologized for snapping before he ended the transmission.

It’s not like it affected him. So Diana was “revising” the meeting agenda, so she said she would send it when it was finished (ha, ‘finished,’ like that would happen.) So what? As it turned out, he wasn’t returning to Atlantis yet, so it hardly mattered that the agenda wasn’t sitting on his desk. Vulko had plenty of time... And that’s what really irked him. He wasn’t going home yet.

First missing coral off the Great Barrier Reef, then a sea storm under the Indian Ocean, then this upheaval with the whales, and now—now that he was finally heading home, now that he was ready to put his feet up with a cup of hot praula and the new Michael Connelly novel, now that he could practically taste a nice morsel of unagi in a cloud of spun sugar kelp—now he had to go all the way to the East China Sea because “King Shark” was spotted off the coast of Nagasaki. King Shark... added to all the other irritants.

If there was one thing that got under Aquaman’s skin, it was the surface press and their penchant for naming things in his realm. It was true there was a nemesis who plagued him from time to time, a nanaue or “man-shark” who operated in the waters around Hawaii. It was mildly possible the reports were true, that whatever attacked bathers or fisherman off Nagasaki was the nanaue he knew as King Shark... It was *possible*, but not very likely. Japan was too far from his native waters. But something was seen off Nagasaki, and another mutated shark was certainly possible. He wouldn’t know until he got there and spoke to both the human witnesses and the sea life in the area. So home was postponed, yet again.

Tim wanted to impress this E.J. Meadows, whose ample comments on methane hydrates helped him stretch his four page paper to six all those years ago without having to dig up another source.

Methane hydrates provided stability to the sea floor. Who knew! Tim certainly hadn’t, but that simple factoid let him pad his paper, getting Mr. Offred off his back so he could spend the next two days rescuing Stephanie from the Gully Carson gang.

So yeah, he wanted to impress. But he also wanted to do everything he could not to come off as a freshman science geek with no social skills. That little worry was Dick’s fault. Tim had never been awkward socially. College was new, but it wasn’t all THAT different from Brentwood. Not until Dick came around with this business about “The Talk.”

The Talk.

And Tim had fallen for it. Hook, line, and sinker.

Stupid. Arthur did not consider himself a stupid man by any means. Without false modesty, he could honestly say he had brought a broader scope to the ruling of Atlantis, thanks to his history with the surface world, and a more balanced and informed understanding of the thousand factors affecting his kingdom and its people. Nevertheless, he was fallible. He could stick his foot in his mouth as deep as any other man, and never was that clearer than today. Of all the kelp-headed stupidity he'd been guilty of...

There were vents in the Pacific, inside the deepest gorges, fathoms below where surface light could penetrate. Vents where the icy seawater flowed deep into the Earth's warm core through gaping cracks in its surface. It would return to the ocean floor as geysers of superheated mineral-laden fluid. Most sea life would find it highly toxic, but the areas around each vent had its own ecosystem: plants which fed on those concentrations of chemicals instead of surface light, and the fish that fed on them in turn. Arthur always found it hard to communicate with these particular fish. The sea as they knew it was as different from his world as his oceans were from the land. Consequently, their thoughts about everything were completely foreign.

"Communicating at all is a struggle," he told Lorena. "And on top of that, the chemicals interfere with my telepathy."

"You were high?" she giggled. "That's why you dropped in uninvited? You've got the munchies?"

Lorena was not born to the seas. She and several hundred surfacers had been plunged into the ocean when an earthquake submerged a portion of San Diego. Only then did they discover they'd been genetically altered to become water-breathers. Lorena still had a surfacers' frame of reference. That might be why he liked visiting.

"I wasn't high," he insisted. "I just get a weird ache behind my eyes and the telepathy gets fuzzy. I dropped in since I was in the neighborhood."

"Checking out a new seismic vent," Lorena said skeptically.

"On Poseidon's trident," he grinned.

"That's like a Boy Scout oath, right?"

Arthur glared.

"Valerina said you'd written," he mentioned, changing the subject.

"Not really, just a thank you note. The scroll is lovely. That's it hanging in that alcove, by the way."

He turned to look, then turned back, puzzled.

"Looks nice there. Fits the space."

She laughed.

"Come on, Arthur. 'On Poseidon's trident,' you've never seen that thing before in your life. You staffed it out."

"I'm sorry," he said, abashed. "I haven't been in the city. It's been one thing after another for almost two weeks now, and I didn't want you to think I'd forgotten your birthday, so I asked Vulko to send something."

"Oh that I knew," she said smugly. "It came addressed to *Queen* Lorena. That had to be Vulko's doing. You would know better."

He winced.

"Was there trouble?"

"A little. I'm an elected mayor and my constituents are very cognizant of their rights as citizens of a democracy. I explained that Atlantis tends to be... confused."

"I'll speak to Vulko," Arthur said quietly.

"I had a better idea, actually. We had talked about trading ambassadors."

Arthur was astonished. It was true they had talked about it, one day, when Sub Diego was ready. Atlantis would establish an embassy in Sub Diego, and Lorena would send one of her people to speak for her in Atlantis. But he never dreamed they were that far along.

"You're ready?" he asked, unable to conceal his surprise.

"I don't know if we're ever 'ready,' in that sense. But it's time. We're stable economically; we have trade agreements with California and Mexico. The Wayne Foundation facilitates the transactions without taking a cut, which I must say has turned me around on Bruce Wayne."

"You trust them?" Arthur probed. He knew Bruce's foundation was beyond reproach, but he wanted to see if Lorena had considered the matter.

"I don't have to trust them. They have an office here, so I can keep an eye on them like anyone else."

Arthur's mouth dropped open.

"How can they possibly have an office?" he gaped. "You don't have the resources to seal off an entire office building and pump it full of air!"

He was thinking of Atlantis, where the palace could drain and flood rooms individually for the convenience of air- and water-breathing visitors.

"Oh Arthur," Lorena laughed. "How do you THINK they would open an office here? They hired thirty of our people."

"Ah," he said hoarsely. Of course. It was so obvious—to Lorena, to Bruce, to anyone not of Atlantis. His subjects would find the idea so alien, it never would have occurred to them: *Working for a surface company? How utterly bizarre.*

"So anyway," Lorena said crisply, "we're stable enough to send a permanent ambassador to Atlantis and to receive one of yours."

He agreed, they talked over the details, and she gave him a nice dinner. What Sub Diego knew of undersea cooking, they learned from Atlantis. Arthur was delighted to see oyster liquor and other liquids served in little spheres of alginate skin. It wasn't as sophisticated as the roes and foams Atlantis chefs served this way, but Atlantis had a considerable head start. It was still the touch of home he had been craving—and that's what led him into trouble. It would have been a perfect visit if he hadn't started talking about his frustrations getting home. That led back to talk of the vents. Lorena didn't see the appeal.

"It's the same fascination surfacers had traveling to the moon," he explained. "So much of my world is known, if not to me personally, then to Atlantis scientists. But this little corner, this is undiscovered country, unknown and undreamed of. It is entirely new."

"Arthur, how is that possible? You told me Atlantis is thousands of years old. How could you *not know*?"

"Because the vents are in these gorges between mountain ranges that dwarf the highest peaks on land. They are mountains and canyons formed by the most volatile fault lines. Atlanteans never found them because we're always built on solid sea floor

as far from the turbulence as possible. We only went to the mountains in the ancient warring days. Only a race of fools would *build* their civilization over such a..."

He tried to stop. Just as soon as he realized where his words were heading, he tried to stop. Sub Diego. The earthquake. IDIOT!

"Lorena, I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

"Of course you are. Good night, Arthur."

Queenly good manners. Regardless of her political title, she displayed the gracious smile of a monarch who simply didn't notice the appalling faux pas.

If there was a downside to being king, it was all that protocol, remaining polite and good mannered with subordinates, so that when you did truly relax, there was a bit of a pressure valve effect. Surface colleagues in the League knew that was just Arthur's way. Lorena wasn't a superpowered heroine and she wasn't in the Justice League, but she had swum alongside him in battle. When he was with her, he was Arthur not "King Orin," and if he'd never been coarse, he had certainly never been guarded. He spoke exactly what was in his head. He just didn't think...

"I am truly sorry," he said again, knowing it was pointless.

"No offense meant, none taken," she said evenly before she left.

IDIOT. IDIOT. IDIOT.

No offense meant, sure. None taken, sure. But she was going to cry when she was alone in her room tonight. She was going to cry for the life that had been hers before the quake, before the mutation was triggered, before a monster took it all away. She was going to cry and it was his fault.

The Talk. It sounded plausible. Having a secret identity as a high school kid was an entirely different proposition from having one as an adult. The real world wasn't high school, adult relationships were infinitely more complicated than teenage ones, and if anyone was in a position to know that, it was Dick. He had made the transition from Boy Wonder to Nightwing, and having lived the experience, he was here to impart his wisdom.

And Tim had bought it!

College was the time to try out identities, after all, to make that transition from the boy you were to the man you'll become—that's what it is for *them*. For those of us who have secret lives, it's a time to lay the foundations for a lifetime of cover stories. You want to figure out what kind of secret identity you'll be comfortable with, and which ones you're equipped for.

It made sense! Of course Tim had bought it, it made perfect sense. Superman could have done anything to "hide" in plain sight, but he wanted to be in a place where he'd hear first about whatever was happening in the world. A newspaper was the logical choice, and that meant a career in journalism.

"Yeah, but it's way more complicated than that," Dick had said. Superman could have done anything? Could he really? Could you see him acting the jet set playboy like Bruce? The son of Smallville farmers would have to explain where he got all that money, and okay, so it's not hard for Clark Kent to hit the lottery. Let's say he does, let's say the money is explained, can you SEE it? Can you picture Clark at some party

like Fop Wayne? With a bimbo on each arm bragging how his new chateau in St. Moritz is even bigger than his place in St. Bart's?

Yeah, it made perfect sense. Tim thought it all made PERFECT SENSE. He should take some time in these next few weeks and think through his options. What kind of person did he really want his adult persona to be?

He sat there listening to Dick's detailed analysis of the classic poses: the pros and cons of "The Playboy," "The Guy," and "The Smallville," as well as more obscure options called "The Keanu," "The Hugh Grant," and...

That's when the truth dawned.

"There's always 'The Trekkie,'" Dick had said, straight-faced. "Wally and Garth both think it's a natural for you."

"The Trekkie?" Tim had sputtered.

"Yeah. I mean, as camouflage, it's tighter than the Playboy and the Smallville put together. No one will believe you can fight your way out of a wet paper sack, and it doesn't matter if someone recognizes you in your uniform, because, y'know, you're one of those guys. The Robin getup might look really authentic, but your Darth Vader armor and Captain Kirk 'season one' uniform are just as good."

Tim felt his face harden into the fierce malevolence of the bat glare.

"Pros: You are Lord of the Dungeon Masters," Dick enthused.

He was being punked.

"Cons: Dating. You don't get to. You are the stereotype, and your sex-slash-social life pretty much consists of discussing Vulcan versus Romulan mating habits on the message board at there-but-for-the-grace-of-god-dot-com."

Not since Johnny Warlock did Tim have such a burning desire to dropkick someone's head into a self-imploding energy ball.

"Dick, you've been sitting here for like half an hour, Bro. And what I want to know is what kind of a person takes that much time to devote to pulling someone's leg?"

Dick laughed.

"I thought you'd catch on much sooner," he snickered. "Like, five minutes tops. Probably two sentences in. Come on, it's April Fools' Day, Bro!"

"Oh, yeah, right," Tim said sheepishly. "Forgot the date. I've had midterms 'n stuff."

That was that. He had laughed it off at the time (making a few silent vows to revenge himself, but good, when the opportunity presented itself), but since then, he kept thinking back to it. Maybe he bought into it because, joke or not, it was true. He did have to give some serious thought to who his adult alter ego was going to be.

And WHY exactly was The Trekkie "a natural" for him? Was that part of the gag, or did he come off like some uber-nerd? He was a freshman and his Geology professor was talking about introducing him to some researcher he'd footnoted in an academic paper. If that wasn't an uber-nerd, it still didn't sound like he was on his way to "The Playboy."

So he stopped in the Batcave to do a little digging. He figured he'd check E.J. Meadows's *Who's Who* listing, his biography in the Aerobiologia directory, his profile in Aquatic Geochemistry, and assuming he was still at the University of Queensland, Tim would check out his faculty page on the UQ website. He wasn't stalking the guy or anything. He just wanted to find out one or two personal details, so if the

conversation went that way, he was prepared to talk about something other than methane hydrate.

Well, he found a personal detail straight off. E.J. Meadows was a woman—and she was totally, totally hot.

There was a persistent myth in the Justice League that Batman was rude. He never bothered to correct the idea. To do so would be to indulge in the petty, time-wasting nonsense his colleagues did, his rejection of which gave rise to the “rude” label in the first place. He might be abrupt. When busy people with vast responsibilities gathered for a common, serious purpose, he expected them to focus on that purpose without superfluous social preliminaries, and to stay focused without superfluous interpersonal detours. If the less busy and less burdened saw that as rude, he really didn't care.

But Bruce had been raised to a high patrician standard, and in fact, he was exceedingly *polite* to his colleagues, much more than they imagined. Consider this request from Arthur. To be asked *as a scientist* to investigate a chemical contamination, and yet be given *no data whatsoever*. Arthur had no samples of the seawater that had allegedly been contaminated and no description of the presumed contaminant. He had no evidence, or even a guess, as to where or when the dumping might have occurred. A study of the tides and currents in the area was pretty much useless to figure that out without knowing any key characteristics of whatever they were looking for. Something that reacted with the saltwater instantly would obviously be dumped much closer to the point of discovery than something that took a week to transmute—and all of that presupposed contamination from the surface and not, to name but one alternate theory, something fallen from space. ALL of which assumed Arthur's guess—too random to be called a hypothesis—was right that something actually had, accidentally or deliberately, been introduced into the water. Bruce didn't mind being consulted as a scientist, but as a scientist, the anecdotal testimony of *fish* really wasn't anybody's idea of a starting point.

But Bruce hadn't said any of this. In Arthur's mind, he was paying Batman a compliment in asking his input over that of his own Atlantean experts. To turn around and say that any case that begins with the eyewitness evidence (or, more absurdly still, the *nose-witness* evidence) of a sexually frustrated whale *should* be left in Atlantis, that would be rude. To add further that, if Arthur was planning to bring this to his own people, any scientist above or below sea level would want more to go on than a third party account passed on from lay witnesses (whales or not) who had no idea what had actually happened, that would be *unforgivably rude*. Bruce had no desire to insult Arthur as an investigator, nor his people, his realm, their science, or for that matter, the whales. So he'd just grunted and said he would look into it. And that very restraint was the kind of behavior the young ones would call “rude.”

Of course, Arthur himself was not in that category of absurd, hyper-sensitive Leaguers. He would never take offense at a curt nod or a grunt. On the contrary, he was just as prone to offer a glottal grumble in response to some West/Rayner/O'Brien silliness as Bruce was, so much so that over the years the two of them appeared to be

ying for the title of Rudest Leaguer. Bruce had always chalked that up to their respective “day jobs.” Unlike the other Leaguers, Bruce and Arthur were just as large and powerful in their civilian personas as they were in their hero roles. That kind of responsibility waiting for you at home brought a low tolerance for certain kinds of personal interaction on the job—the kind that could charitably be termed ‘a lot of damned nonsense.’ That really was the most logical explanation... at least, until you considered “Ambassador” Diana.

This entire chain of thought was all, essentially, background noise, because watching a time-lapse overlay of water currents, atmospheric anomalies, and coastal manufacturing in the southern hemisphere was mind-numbingly boring. All Bruce could do was let his conscious mind drift to some subject capable of occupying it, while his eyes absorbed the patterns of movement waiting for some variance to break it.

“Hey, Bruce” sounded behind him—and while it wasn’t a break in the patterns on the screen, the words did promise something to occupy his attention. It was a distraction, and distraction was welcome...

“Sit down, Tim, what’s on your mind?”

“Need some advice.”

“About that Yakuza gun buy in your log?” Bruce grveled. “I agree there’s a GCPD undercover somewhere in that operation. You should check the police payroll records and see if they have someone classified RH94.”

“No, uh, it’s something personal.”

It was still a distraction. It was still welcome, at first. Bruce’s eyes never flickered from the overlay of ocean maps and motion grids on the viewscreen, but as Tim spoke, the story that was unfolding made him reconsider the merits of boredom.

“So now I need advice from anybody OTHER than Dick. I mean, it’s like he’s jinxed me or something. I’m not a Trekkie, but now it’s like all I can think about is this one episode of *Next Generation* where Geordi is all excited because Leah Brahms—she’s this propulsion expert who designed a lot of the warp engines on the ship—is coming on board. And he feels like he knows her, ‘cause he’d made a holographic representation of her in the holodeck to work on some crisis, and they really hit it off. I mean, he knows it’s not really her or anything, but his hologram was based on the real Dr. Brahms’s personality profile, and they really hit it off, so he’s excited. But then, when she shows up in person, the real Leah Brahms I mean, it’s a trainwreck. She shows up and says ‘Oh, so you’re the jerk who’s been screwing up my designs,’ and it goes downhill from there.”

“Mhm, I see,” Bruce said mildly.

“Look, I am not a Trekkie, okay? But that episode is all I can think of now, and I’m going to meet this woman and I cannot be THAT GUY.”

“Be yourself,” Bruce offered absently.

“I don’t even know who that is anymore,” Tim murmured. “I mean, I know Dick’s whole thing about the identities was just setting up a prank, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. Tim Drake ‘the high school kid’ has run its course, and whatever my alter ego is going to be, I better figure it out soon, don’t you think?”

“Tim, ‘Tim Drake, the high school kid’ wasn’t a role you played, it was you. Just do the same thing you’ve been doing. Be yourself.”

"Bruce, 'what I've been doing' for the last day and a half is obsessing on an episode of *Star Trek*. Day after tomorrow, I'm going to be introduced to this totally hot scientist as 'the student whose been quoting you so much in his papers.' I don't want to fall on my face, that's all."

"Tim, there are a lot of drawbacks to a dual identity, but there are advantages too. For one thing, you can apply the lessons learned in one life to the situations you face in the other. What I'm saying is..."

He snapped a button, pausing the time-lapse motion on the viewscreen, and turned to face Tim.

"We have had this conversation before."

"So not the same thing," Tim said emphatically. "First off, 'Ignore the fact that she's a hot female and just interact as you would with anyone else in that situation' doesn't work. Tried it with Catwoman, tried it with Ivy, tried it with Roxy Rocket. 0 for 3, Bruce, it doesn't work. And if by some chance I'd forgotten that, all I'd have to do is go upstairs and try asking Selina for advice—which I did! 'Cause she was my first choice, Bruce, not you. I came over here to talk to her, and you know what she's doing? Yoga. Every time I go to talk to her, if it's not in costume, it seems like she's doing some kinda yoga stretching and I really can't concentrate."

"Selina was your first choice to talk to?"

"No offense, Bruce. It's nothing personal; it's just the playboy thing. I mean, in one sense, you've logged more man-hours on dates with gorgeous women than anybody I know. But, c'mon, women like that don't really count, do they?"

"Bimbos?"

"Yeah. 'Cause if they just want to get into Lot 61 or go to the Tommy Hilfiger party, it's not like you can do anything wrong. You're their ticket in; it's your name on the list, not theirs, so they're gonna laugh off any dumb thing you say. That's not how it is with real women. You screw up and you get that heavy sigh with the foot tap. Or the 'What's wrong/Fine,' boy, that's a scary one..."

"You've given this a lot of thought."

"I'm *really* considering the playboy," Tim laughed. "I mean, the Spice Girls alone..."

"I wouldn't advise it," Bruce said seriously. "When Dick was your age, he'd had no relationships in the masked side of his life, you've already had two. If you're going to continue having social... *connections* as Robin, you have to accept the trade off. Those women will not care for Tim Drake being the playboy of the western world, and their displeasure is bound to affect their working relationship with Robin."

"Bruce, how can you reduce dating the Spice Girls two at a time to a dry tactical analysis of crimefighting alliances?"

"Being trapped at the Tribeca Rock Club with Ginger Spice while Victor Frieze put all of Warren Street into a deep freeze may have something to do with it," Bruce graveled.

Tim laughed and looked like he was going to ask for details, so Bruce changed the subject.

"What kind of advice did Selina give you?"

"She didn't. I explained how, y'know, this is a really hot woman and I just didn't want to fall on my face when I meet her. And since Selina is, y'know, a really, *really* hot woman, I wanted her to help me not do it."

"And she said?"

"She said 'okay' and then she, like, waved this invisible magic wand at me and said 'Poof.'"

"What were you expecting her to do?"

"I *don't know*, Bruce! Maybe... I don't know, give me a secret password or something—WHOA, what's that? Superman?"

Bruce's head whipped around to face the computer screen again.

"Where?"

"There was a blip, right there around Fiji. Looked like a really small hurricane, except moving the wrong way, and then it just stopped."

Bruce flipped back several screens until he found the blip.

"Except that's not a weather map, it's a sub-oceanic current."

He pushed several buttons and overlaid keyhole satellite images over the other layers of data.

"Interesting," he murmured. "Look, right here. Something *was* released into the water, all right, but it wasn't dumped from the land. Either it was teleported there magically, it came through time, it came up from below the ocean floor, or..."

"It was there already. Opened on a timer or was opened by remote control," Batman announced into the comlink. "I'm sending the coordinates. Assuming it didn't have an auto-destruct, we'll know more when you retrieve the mechanism. If it did auto-destruct, there should be other evidence which may be illuminating."

On the viewscreen, Aquaman made a face.

"You said its coming from below the ocean floor was a possibility," he said, a strange tension in his voice.

"That is one of several highly *improbable* explanations," Batman repeated. "I included it only to be thorough. The simplest explanation is always the most likely, Arthur. Until we eliminate something as simple and obvious as a box dropped in the water by a couple men in a rowboat, it's foolish to jump to the wildest, most exotic conclusions you can imagine."

"I suppose. It's just..." He shook his head, suppressing an embarrassed chuckle. "The childhood impulse to believe in a boogey man."

## CHAPTER 4: WELL THAT'S FUNNY

There were differences between the all-nighters of a cat burglar and those of a crimefighter, and Selina was not enjoying them. She had slept in, that part was the same—better, in fact, in the crisp Irish linen of Bruce's bed. But the breakfast tray, the juice would have been fine, but just the smell of the coffee filled her mouth with a sour aftertaste. She had drunk entirely too much coffee researching Pequena. Entirely too much. She could still taste it, and the idea of tasting more—yuck.

But she did feel the need for some kind of stimulation to convince her body to start the new day, so she went across the hall to her suite and began a vigorous workout. It wasn't caffeine, but it got her blood pumping (despite a brief interruption from Tim with yet another girl dilemma, and you really had to wonder if there was just something in the capes that made the bat boys such a mess with the opposite sex). Then she opted for a cold shower instead of a hot one, and headed down to the cave to resume her research on Eduardo Pequena, the chess set he coveted, and the museum where it was so briefly on display.

She had planned to announce her arrival with a few feline pronouncements about the inferiority of crimefighter all-nighters, but she heard voices. Bruce's but not Tim's. She had to wonder who he was talking to. Whoever it was, she couldn't place their voice until she reached the main cavern and saw Bruce, fully in costume, and Aquaman looming on the big viewscreen.

"The childhood impulse to believe in a boogey man," he said sheepishly.

"Explain," Batman grveled.

"Hey Arthur!" Selina waved. "Kitty's here, but don't worry, I'm not getting cat hair on your conference call."

After the expected greeting from Aquaman and non-committal grunt from Bruce, she returned to workstation 2 to continue her research on the chess set. She hadn't intended to listen to the call, but it did sound interesting...

"The ancient history of Atlantis is far more civilized than surface cultures of a similar age," Aquaman was saying, "but it was not a utopia. There has been turbulence and conflict, even wars, mostly having to do with displaced sea life in the early days of expansion.

"And there is one enemy that stands apart from all the others. We call them the Shadow Deep, a race with coral-black skin, monstrous claws, opaque eyes, and huge jaws filled with razor-sharp teeth, who live in the great trenches that line a particular seamount in the North Atlantic.

"The *Atlantis Chronicles* are not terribly precise about time, but most of our scholars place the Shadow Deep's first appearance about eighteen-hundred years ago. They view light as an invasion, you see, and they first bubbled up to the ocean floor when our expansion into the waters above their trenches introduced light into their world for the first time. They rose to attack us for the intrusion, without any inkling, it seems, of what it was they were going to attack. They made two equally repugnant discoveries: they found the people of Atlantis were sentient beings with a technology equal to their own, and they discovered color. Viewing light as the ultimate evil, they seemed to

view this notion of color as the ultimate obscenity. These three elements—Atlantis, light, and color—seem to be linked in their mind in a most irrational fashion, and a deep hatred developed for all three as if it was one reprehensible thing. They became consumed with the idea of eradicating us from the oceans.

“The first war lasted for nearly two hundred years. The Atlantean people fought long and hard, battling these creatures wherever they surfaced. The conflicts ranged from minor skirmishes to full-out battles, with each side losing soldiers by the thousands. Eventually, the Shadow Deep were defeated, and they retreated back into their trenches. They have resurfaced on occasion, but each time they are defeated and sent back to the depths.

“The problem is that they tend to wait centuries before creeping back up, so several generations have passed between encounters. All that is left are the stories, fables really. Most of my people scarcely believe the Shadow Deep exist at all, hence my remark about a boogey man.”

“I see,” Batman said. “Interesting, but as I said, there is no evidence that the container off Fiji came from under the ocean floor. I merely listed that among a half-dozen other possibilities. The most likely, as you know—”

“Is that it came from the surface, yes I agree. Fiji is far from the Shadow Deep’s territory, and nearly as far from Atlantis. There would be no reason for them to upset whales anyway. I suppose I am just a bit alarmist these days. It’s been one thing after another, as if some cosmic force is keeping me from going home.”

“A diversion?” Batman asked sharply.

“A paranoid man might think that, but no. The oceans are big; it happens this way sometimes. One thing after another, I’m sure you know what it’s like. Like now, I have to go all the way down to Fiji to look for some remnants of this container to follow up on this theory of yours, so if it is a diversion to keep me from Atlantis, it looks like you’re a part of it.”

“It’s the only way to get answers, Arthur.”

“Yes, I realize that. I just meant that... never mind. I appreciate the time you’ve already given this, Bruce. I’ll let you get back to your case, and I’ll be in touch once I’ve been to Fiji.”

One of the persistent misconceptions about Atlantis is that the name refers to a domed city on the ocean floor. To sea dwellers, that city in the Atlantic is Poseidonis, the capital of Atlantis. The word Atlantis denotes a vast kingdom that extends across the Atlantic into parts of the Arctic and Indian Oceans and even includes outposts in the Pacific and southern seas.

Like any society spread over vast distances, there are local variations and peculiarities of culture. In ancient times, each settlement had their own oral traditions, histories, and folklore. In the reign of King Aigaios III, these were compiled into one official history that became the *Atlantis Chronicles*. It was, like similar histories, a royal mess. Scientific fact mingled with old wives tales, legitimate history with local tall tales. A few mythic fantasies made their way in, interspersed with folk wisdom for the proper harvesting of kelp and the construction of city domes. And all of it was slapped together with no real sense of structure, tone, or internal consistency.

No one seemed to mind the contradictions until two thousand years ago, when Atlantis went through a social, artistic, and technological renaissance. Huge advancements were made in the natural and theoretical sciences, as well as in art, music, mathematics, and literature. Philosophy came into its own, and with it, a passionate desire to learn the truth about the central contradiction in the chronicles: had Atlantis begun as a surface island which sank into the sea, or did it rise from a collection of like-minded sea-dwellers clustering together for mutual protection and companionship?

With caution and trepidation, the Atlanteans began making trips to the surface to find out. They discovered a surface world that was nowhere near as advanced as Atlantis, technologically or socially. It seemed mired in an unnatural belief system that linked its science, politics, and religion, slowing the progress of any to a crawl. Early attempts at helping the surface world met with disastrous results. In some cases, the Atlanteans were attacked; in others, they were worshipped as gods. In the end, it was unofficially decided that interaction with the surface world would be kept to a minimum, for the land-dwellers' safety as much as their own.

That remained the status quo for centuries. Atlanteans noticed changes to the man-made vessels above their heads, but they took little interest in the surface world's advancements until they began dumping the refuse from it into the seas. Soon, the shallow water near the coastlines became disgusting, and the inhabitants retreated to the central oceans. When word reached the palace, the unofficial policy became law. King Orlen I decreed that all interaction with the surface was now strictly prohibited.

In the centuries to come, Atlantis would become more insular, focusing on advancements in her own community instead of looking outward. It was only within the last century that she began to open herself up again to the world beyond her domes. Surface technology had progressed to the point where land-dwellers could bring all the air they needed to plumb the ocean's depths as they had once sailed on its surface. Renewed contact was becoming inevitable. And then, a new king took the throne having such strong ties to the surface world that he lifted the ban entirely.

Which led to the particular challenge that king's personal aide faced this morning...

Selina began to chuckle as soon as the viewscreen went dark.

"Yes, Kitten?" came the ominous gravel.

"Oh, it's nothing. It's only that... As League nutjobs go, I always considered Arthur one of the non-fluffheads. Like you."

"Thank you."

"Meow. But now he's bitching about going to Fiji? I mean, sign me up for that case. Better than being up all night with a pot of stale coffee and a fuzzy webcam in Istanbul."

"He's anxious to get home. Is that so hard to understand?"

"My city," Selina graveled in her mocking impersonation. "But I see your point. After the stale coffee, I got to sleep in my own bed last night. That said, I wouldn't say no to some sun on the coral coast when this case is over."

"Did you make any headway on Paquena or the chess set?"

"Wouldn't have to be a tropical getaway, you know. I'd settle for a long weekend on the *Gatta*."

"Oracle was working on a feed from the security cameras so you wouldn't be stuck with the webcam."

"Oh come on now, if I solve the Bruce Wayne kidnapping, you don't think a little reward is in order?"

"Selina."

"I'll wear a bikini."

"Selina."

"I have a new one. Leopard spots, all the way around here."

She gestured, slowly, the edge of her fingers just grazing her chest as she traced the border of the bikini top. The mental picture this evoked finally brought about the wordless scowl she'd been waiting for, accentuated by a barely perceptible stiffening of the muscles just visible through the eye slits of the cowl... Batman's tell, the tell which meant victory. She had, once again, jostled the bat-brain until she jarred loose any thoughts of crimefighting. That task accomplished, she returned her attention to the computer screen with a purr.

"Let's see, I know Barbara sent me something, but I hadn't bothered to open it yet. I was just getting settled in while you finished up with Arthur. Let's see what we've got here..."

Batman's lip twitched as she typed away at her keyboard, babbling cheerily:

"Yep, there it is. She cracked eight different datastreams in and around the museum. You should give that girl a raise. Looks like a bonanza. Datastream 1 is... ah, it's the parking lot. Woof."

She was crimefighting.

"Stream 2... looks like a service entrance. Pfft, who cares?"

In his cave.

"Foyer."

Just as he'd dreamed it.

"At first I was surprised you hadn't make more headway this morning. I knew you'd been up for hours. I guess Arthur's thing kept you busy?"

And she was still Catwoman.

"Hm, that must be the curator's office, I think. Hey look, they've still got my picture up!"

Still completely that impossible woman he'd fought on all those rooftops.

"Come on, guys, get over it. You booked a blockbuster exhibit you did not have the security for, and Kitty picked up the option."

Of all the things the Post got wrong, of all their absurdities she had taken offense at, she never seemed to notice the one that most offended him: their preposterous crimefighter cat had no hint of the vibrant, playful, sexy woman Catwoman was, no hint of the qualities that made her—

"Well that's funny."

Bruce's train of thought was blasted off the track by a tone of voice and a formula of words he'd only heard in the laboratory. Cambridge, twenty-eight months into his years of travel, the Lensfield Road Laboratory, Dr. Frederick Glen. He'd led Glen to believe his interest was research, and he had timed his arrival to be placed on the

Khimii team. Two weeks into the analysis of double oxygen bonds in polymers, Glen mentioned that moments of historic and significant scientific discovery seldom get a "Eureka." The more common herald is a silent, crinkled brow and a barely audible "Well that's funny."

It might have been true, it might have been interesting, and it might have been insightful, but it had no bearing on his Mission. Bruce therefore filed it in the dustbin of his mind under useless trivia... until eight years later, when he actually saw it happen during a surprise visit to the Wayne Aerospace Facility. A League mission with Clark left him in the neighborhood, so he dropped in. Everyone in the lab had snapped to attention, dropped what they were doing, and fawned over him as the head of the company—everyone except for one chubby fellow who was the last to leave his station. He kept glancing back to a stack of papers while he waited for Bruce to make his way down the line. When Bruce reached him and mentioned that the guy seemed distracted, he looked back at his papers again and said "Well it's funny, this one set of numbers doesn't seem quite..."

A month later, WayneTech had fourteen patents on Aerogel and a virtual monopoly manufacturing ultralight materials for space travel.

"Well that's funny," Selina had said.

Batman walked over to her workstation and looked over her shoulder rather than asking her to explain.

"The chess set," he noted coldly when he saw the screen.

"Yeah, screencap from Barbara's new feed off their internal circuit. I zoomed in and cleaned it up a little. Is it me, or does that black king look like Ra's?"

Intelligence reports now. Valerina was too ladylike to storm out of Vulko's office, but she wasn't above giving the door a good slam when she got back to the king's private office behind the throne room. With Arthur out of the palace, there was no honor guard stationed there. With no one at all to hear, she opened the door again and gave it a second slam.

She should have known this was coming, she really should have. Not the specifics. Some problem with the satellite, some kind of "sunspots" making it necessary to cancel the king's conference with Vulko, that she couldn't expect to foresee. But that he would find *some way* to dump the intelligence reports on her desk again, that she really should have seen coming.

It's not like they were delicate state secrets or anything. That was clear the first time Arthur sent for her. He wasn't Arthur back then; he was "My Liege." He was more "My Liege" than he had ever been, because only that morning she'd had to go to his quarters to tell him about an incoming transmission from the Watchtower while he was still in his bedchamber. It was only her second time in the king's private quarters, and the sight of him walking out of the washroom tying the cord around his robe had blasted all his instructions out of her head. She instantly reverted to the "Proper Palace Manners" she'd been taught since the nursery.

She left almost immediately so he could take his call in private, but he called her back a few hours later.

"Did you go pier hopping?" he asked casually.

"Sire?" she managed.

"Valerina, isn't it? You seem young enough. Did you go pier hopping?"

"Yes, sire, once or twice," she said with a shy blush.

"I thought so. It's only the young who take advantage of the new freedoms. I expected as much. It's nearly a thousand years since Orlen I and the *Surface Prohibition Decree*." He said the last words in a gravelly baritone, making it sound absurdly dramatic, and then laughed like it was a private joke. "Don't get me wrong, I'm sure it was in everyone's best interests at the time. Surface civilization circa 1183 was not exactly civilized. But that was then and this is now, and we can no longer afford to cut ourselves off from the modern world. So I lifted the ban. I lifted it for the same reason King Orlen made it, for the surface world's benefit as well as our own."

"Sire, why are you telling me this?"

"What did I say about that? Call me Arthur, or at least Orin."

"Orin," she said awkwardly, "May I ask why you are telling me this?"

"Because after a thousand years of isolation, I knew it wasn't going to happen overnight. I knew it would be the young who first took me up on it. It's always the young, Valerina, who will adopt a new idea or hop on board with a new freedom. You seem just about the right age."

In one sense, she was a little young for what he was saying. The first wave of pier hoppers was many years ahead of her in school. But she knew what he meant. In the first years after the ban was lifted, it was only a nebbish subculture that visited the surface, to try this substance called "funnel cake"... until they noticed how much their parents disapproved, and then pier hopping became a right of passage every young Atlantean had to experience, at least once or twice.

"How many times did you go?" Arthur asked coaxingly.

"Ten times," she giggled, sharing an embarrassing secret.

"Always the quiet ones," he laughed, shaking his head.

Selina smiled to herself while Batman raced to his own workstation, closed all the Atlantis files he had open, and began typing with a savagery usually reserved for muggers with handguns.

"I remember the first time I saw you do that," she laughed. "It was about six months after the masks came off, remember? Ra's was in Gotham, fresh out of the pit and completely besotted with Black Canary, making appearances on talk shows trying to clean up his image."

"Your point?" Batman growled without slowing his typing.

"I don't have a point. I just love you and I love watching you do that."

"Do what?"

"Overreact. Just because it's Ra's al Ghul: light of the East, terror of the West, ego of egos and narcissist of narcissists. Yea that none born after Charlemagne can fathom just how in love with himself this guy is."

"Selina, he set Bruce Wayne up to be kidnapped. The portrait on that chessman is no coincidence. Ra's has to be involved. He has to have lent it knowing Pequena would want it and would do whatever he had to in order to get it. He contrived this entire

situation—a museum only you can get into on short notice, lending the pieces for such a short time—all to set that kidnapping in motion.”

“Like a good chess opening. Yes, Bruce, I agree. I’ll go you one better. He knows you’re Batman, so he had to know whatever tracer, fixer, mercenary, or goon Pequena hired would *fail*. Wait, scratch that. ‘Fail’ is what happens when some hack from the Gotham Post tries to break into broadcasting. What Ra’s had to know would happen with Paquena’s goons is that you would *hand them their ass*.”

“Agreed. It’s a diversion.”

“Agreed.” This last said with the naughtiest of grins.

“Agreed,” Batman repeated, uneasy at the air of unanimous agreement. “And I am trying to determine what is happening that Ra’s wants to divert my attention *from*, so if you’ll excuse me—”

“Yes, of course you’re going to do that—in a minute. But first, Bruce, love of my life, stop! You’re already onto him, so take ten seconds and see the funny. He has a chess set... with a portrait of himself... as the king. I mean, he didn’t commission this last week, that thing is hundreds of years old. He *had* it. It was laying around someplace, in some dusty guest room in a castle in Mongolia.”

She laughed and Batman scowled.

Selina walked over to his workstation, took his hand, and led him back to her computer. With the two of them standing before the monitor, she pointed at the closeup of the chess set’s black king.

Then she looked at Bruce.

“Well?”

He glowered at the screen... the king glowered back... and then...

Batman’s lip twitched.

Twice.

“Good. Meow in fact.” And with that, she bobbed up and kissed his cheek. “Now we go get him.”

“Impossible woman,” he grumbled (with yet another lip twitch) as he returned to his workstation.

“My liege, King Orin, sire,” Valerina had teased with a daring she would not have been capable of moments before, “Am I to understand that you called me to your quarters just to ask if I had ever been pier hopping? And you still won’t tell me why?”

“It’s these intelligence reports,” he said, returning to his desk and pointing at a stack of paper with disdain. “A kingdom as large and prosperous as Atlantis can’t rely solely on the rest of the world for information about the rest of the world. It’s called a conflict of interest. Surface governments, surface media, surface corporations, it’s like they’re genetically incapable of telling the truth. We need spies, Valerina. But after a thousand years of isolation, we’re not very good at it.

“A few years ago, General Phriss had the idea that, if his men couldn’t infiltrate a fishing village in Norway or a hot spring in Japan, they could certainly infiltrate a cafe just outside the palace walls. They could find a few men and women who looked

young for their years that could slip into the schools and the young people's hangouts, find out where the pier hoppers have been going and what they'd seen."

"Yes, sire. The narcs."

Arthur looked up sharply.

"Thought so. You know about them?"

"Oh yes, sire. Everyone does, they're very easy to spot when they come around. Although, I don't know why they're called that. Some sort of silverfish with faulty camouflage?"

"A surface term. Long story. Tell me, when you and your pier hopping friends identified one of these narcs, did you have a little fun with them? Tell a few tall tales?"

"Uhm," Valerina grinned sheepishly, "we may have spun a few, yes, sire."

"Thought as much. That will be all, Valerina. Thank you very much for your candor."

Six months later, when she was promoted to the king's personal aide, she learned a position had been created shortly after that conversation: the Minister of Surface Intelligence Evaluation, who would monitor surface media and crosscheck it against the findings of these pier hopper agents. Arthur was forever passing his memos on to Valerina for "her take."

Now he'd sent word through the relay station at Sub Diego that he would be delayed another day, possibly two (no surprise there, the way this trip was turning out)... and that, because of these sun spots, he would miss his scheduled call to Vulko and wanted her to go through the intelligence memos and give him a quick overview.

Valerina knew that, sun spots aside, any excuse to give her the intelligence memos instead of Vulko was a good one, as far as Vulko was concerned. He always complained about Minister Grah and his increasingly depressed, jaded, and bitter reports.

It began with TiVO. The idea that a flash of nipple could catapult an entire technology into the mainstream of surface culture was obviously a pier hopper fiction. Minister Grah spent six weeks trying to determine how far the hoax went. The nipple incident was clearly a whopper, but what about this TiVO technology? Did it actually exist? What about this Super Bowl? What about this Justin Timberlake? Was there really such a thing as a pasty? The realization that every bit of the story was real, followed by the dual blow of Simon Cowell and Hot Pockets... Well, Valerina understood why Vulko no longer wanted to read Grah's reports. The progression in the ones she read was striking, from "this so-called civilization" to "these allegedly civilized beings" to "borderline sentients" to, finally, "land krill."

A chess game consists of three distinct phases: the opening, middle, and end game. In the opening, the goal is to take control of the board and line up your attack, taking care not to expose your king in the process, since he is, ironically, the weakest piece on the board...

Bruce often found himself using chess analogies when studying Ra's al Ghul. It suited the Demon Head's meticulous but plodding nature. The strategies were long range. Intricate and complicated to those who immersed themselves in studying the game to the exclusion of all else, but to a casual, more objective observer, they were all

variations on the same two or three standards: Ruy Lopez, Giuoco Piano, King's or Queen's Gambit, declined or accepted. As a metaphor, it suited Ra's to a tee.

Chess provided a frame, a wire mesh on which to hang the known facts of a case, providing context. Before long, you saw the connections, the associations, the patterns beginning to emerge: fund Gregorian Falstaff's bids against Wayne Enterprises; pawn to king-4. Send Talia to assassinate Falstaff, insuring she will meet the Detective; queen's pawn to queen-3. Assume Talia will tell the Detective about the operation in Maccau, since she's a weak-willed woman who can't keep her mouth closed after her lips have been kissed; castle to protect the king which enables the rook to threaten the bishop, forcing the knight to intervene...

Usually.

In any other Ra's operation, chess was the key to unlocking his strategy. But not today. Somehow in using a chess set—an actual, literal chess set—in his current plan, Ra's had wrecked the metaphor. A chess set on the game board. Chessmen as a pawn in a larger strategy. It was too self-referential. For Mxyzlptk or Riddler, that would be fine. It might even be *helpful*. But with Ra's? No. Ra's was simply not that kind of opponent.

"I can feel you seething from way over here," Selina said mildly.

"It's not going well," Batman spat.

"You'll get him," she said, unconcerned. "Worst case scenario, it'll be dark in a few hours and you can go into Chinatown, shake them up at the White Dragon."

"Negative. DEMON takes 'need to know' to a new level. Ra's seldom tells his own men what's going on until it's already happening. Even those who do 'need to know' don't find out until the last minute, or are given only a fraction of the information at a time, or—my favorite—they're given disinformation, so an individual minion never really knows if his orders constitute the real plan or if he's just part of an elaborate decoy."

"Luthoresque paranoia without the charm," Selina smirked.

"Even if none of that were true, I wouldn't want to question his minions in Gotham. Right now, Ra's should believe his diversion is working. Paquena did try to kidnap Bruce Wayne, and Batman is on the case. As far as he knows, I don't suspect a thing about DEMON pulling the strings."

"I hadn't thought of that," Selina said sadly. "I just saw you sitting there, boiling, and I thought it would do you good to hit something."

"I was thinking of firing up the Strategic Defense Regimen before lunch," he admitted.

"Oh Bruce, not Zogger. I'll fight with you if you want."

"I don't," he graveled. "I don't want to take the time. I just want this solved."

Selina got up from her workstation and positioned herself behind his chair. She started rubbing his neck, and purring.

"Let's see the calendar again," she suggested.

In a flicker, a number of square grids appeared on the main viewscreen, at an angle, as if floating in space within the monitor. They began exchanging position, superimposing over one another, and realigning into multi-colored matrices.

Selina grinned.

"Is there really somebody at WayneTech that does nothing but think up pretty graphic displays like that for 'pull up the calendar?'" she asked impishly.

It was Bruce's turn to grin.

"He needs to be replaced, Arthur. I know it's not my place to say, but it's not my place to be reading the intelligence reports in the first place. If you've got me doing the one, you get to put up with me on the other."

....: *Yes, yes, ... Arthur said irritably. ...: You know I don't mind that. I don't mind 'promoting' Grah to... I don't know, "Counselor in charge of inter-city festivals" or something....*

"After a long vacation," Valerina suggested. "In his current mood, I don't want to go to any party he's planning."

....: *Fine, let him take his wife out to Kapheira for a few cycles before starting his new duties. Warm currents, see the ruins, swim through the fortress. He'll come back a new man. But I'm not ready to replace him yet, Valerina. I hoped the next minister would be one of your generation, someone who's actually been up there a few times, who knows the difference between Rocky Road ice cream and Rolling Stone magazine. But your generation isn't old enough yet, and until then, I can't see burning through the Grah's like White House press secretaries....*

"Arthur, did you see Vulko's shortlist for Sub Diego ambassadors?"

....: *Hm? No, I had to cancel our conference this morning, remember? Why? ...*

"There's a name on it. Litheoi Bythos."

....: *Weasley?! Vulko's got Arthur Weasley on the shortlist for Sub Diego!? ...*

"I don't know why you persist in calling him that, Arthur."

....: *Don't read a lot of surface books, do you? ...*

"Not a big fan of reading, our stuff or theirs."

....: *We've got to fix that. ...*

"No, we do not. I like to do this thing called sleeping, and considering the hours around here, that's more than enough to fill my free time."

....: *Arthur Weasley is a character from surface literature. He's a wizard who possesses an impish, childlike fascination with the non-magical world, quite like Bythos and his enthusiasm for surface culture. ...*

"Ah. Well, yeah. And that's why he's on the bottom of the shortlist. Since those people in Sub Diego have been torn away from their surface lives, it's probably a sore subject, and his curiosity could be—"

....: *Intrusive, I agree, but would make him a perfect choice for Grah's job. I'll talk to Vulko....*

"I really hope you mean you'll talk to him in person when you get back."

....: *One more day. ...*

"Arthur, not another delay!"

....: *I'm onto something with the whales. I want to get it up to the Watchtower for further investigation. The nearest transporter is in Sydney. ...*

"Oh Arthur."

....: *Relax, Valerina. From the Watchtower, I can teleport back instantly. ;;...*

"Mhm. I've heard that before."

....: *And, since I'm coming through Sydney, I'll bring you a funnel cake. ...*

It is the nature of a great city to be the crossroads of many worlds: finance, publishing, fashion, advertising, diamonds, theatre, shipping, these were but a handful of the fields for which Gotham City was Mecca. Batman was proud of his city and its people, but this dominance of so many specialized niches made a comprehensive "calendar of events" a practical impossibility.

So he downloaded calendars from many organizations: corporations, universities, chambers of commerce, tourist bureaus, and newspapers, each listing dozens of events each day with virtually no overlap.

He compiled them into a master document, with data-trails linking back to the source documents for automatic cross-referencing behind-the-scenes. In this way, events appealing to a particular rogue's theme would be automatically tagged and displayed with greater prominence. It was this complex sorting and sifting routine that Selina found so amusing, although what was so funny about a graphical representation of the software's subroutines, Bruce found hard to fathom.

"The problem," he declared flatly, "is that so much goes on in a given day, in so many of these smaller, self-contained worlds: conventions and conferences, movie premieres, product launches, book signings and public appearances. We need some way to narrow it down, but we know nothing of Ra's actual scheme except the timing. He lent the chessmen for this 3-week period, provoking the Wayne kidnapping to occur in this week..." He pointed. "That event was meant to keep me occupied, keep my eye off something else that is happening somewhere in this timeframe."

"Okay, what's that orange one?" Selina pointed.

Batman touched a key, and the shuffling of 3-dimensional data-grids began anew, until the square with the orange text zoomed to fill the screen. Once again, Selina smirked.

"An exhibit on the Crusades at Redding College Museum," Batman read. "There's a gold shield embossed with a lion, that might be of interest to Catman, and a vermeil chalice covered in doves, that might intrigue Oswald."

"Hmph. So orange is for Catman? Gold lion might interest me too, you know."

"You're no longer in the database."

"I feel the love," she said while the screen reset. "Okay then, hang on, if Catwoman targets aren't tagged, why is that line purple?"

Once again, Batman zoomed in, exposing details of the event, the source material from which it was taken, and why it was tagged.

"It's purple for you, all right," Batman said with a faint grin, "but not as a Catwoman target. It's tagged as having an overlap with recent searches on your workstation."

"Paquena?"

"No. E.J. Meadows. Tim's science symposium. You must not have logged out last night; he came in and used your terminal."

"Woof. I thought we were onto something."

Batman looked thoughtful.

"Maybe we are," he breathed. "A third of the conference is papers on bio-fuels. Bio-fuels mean energy independence, which would mean a huge tip in the balance of global power."

“That does sound like Ra’s,” Selina said, a soft almost-sexual excitement in her voice, a predator sensing prey.

“Strategically speaking,” Batman said brusquely, “sixty of the top minds from around the world in a given field in the same place at the same time. Kill them, you set that technology back seventy-five years. Take them, you set the rest of the world back seventy-five years and monopolize the technology for yourself.”

“You can almost see him drooling,” Selina observed.

“It does sound like a perfect fit for a DEMON operation,” Batman admitted, but he didn’t trust this haphazard means of identifying a target. It was nothing but a glorified guess.

Then again, chess wasn’t working.

## CHAPTER 5: MIDGAME

Chess has never been my game. I can play, I just don't particular enjoy it. So apart from learning a few openings for the occasional game with Eddie way back when, I never bothered to study it. I do know the basics. I know the midgame is where you probe for weaknesses. That mostly means soft spots in the enemy's setup, but it can also mean testing their ability to adapt. Some opponents, like say, Batman, are prepared for every contingency they can think of, and if you do happen to toss them something they didn't anticipate, they can strip and reweave their tactics on the fly. Others, like say, Foster and Forsythe Security Consultants, only seem able to reshuffle the same half-dozen tricks in different ways. It's like those Vaudeville magicians that kept the same eight-minute routines, without variations, for thirty-five years. Perform it on the Ed Sullivan Show once and they're out of work. Nothing left in the repertoire, and no imagination to make the existing material fresh and new. The only way to know which kind of opponent you've got is to test them, and that means trading pieces.

And that, in a way, is what brought me to this dinky little bar in the middle of the Azores, demonstrating to the Coast Guard Rescue Team that I still breathe air.

Hmm, trading pieces...

I wonder if we could get them to take Azrael?

The guile and genius of Ra's al Ghul truly had no equal in the modern age.

Ubu realized now the depth of his own stupidity in thinking, even for a moment, that he could understand The Great One's stratagems.

They had not gone to Bugio, nor had they brought the *Žalčiai*. It was all a brilliant maneuver to see that food, fresh water, and similar basic staples were all packed, and in such quantities as to keep the entire 400 of the elite *Žalčiai* Corps supplied for an indefinite period. Only the genius of Ra's al Ghul could devise such a scheme to keep his own bodyguard and his own quartermaster from knowing the true base for the upcoming operation.

Naturally, Ubu knew that F'di, the torturer, had been summoned to the throne room several times before the present plan was set in motion, but he never attached any importance to the meetings. Ubu even knew that the conversation involved the prisoner Vasilevits, but he had no way of gleaning any information from that. Still, Ra's al Ghul had allowed Ubu to overhear certain fragments of his conversations with F'di, so when the Demon's Head then questioned him as they boarded the motor launch out of Madeira, Ubu could not think how to reply except with the unvarnished truth:

"You may have heard a name repeated in my last audience with F'di, did you not, Ubu?"

"Yes, m'lord. The prisoner Vasilevits, though I know not who that is."

“Leontii Vasilevits.” Ra’s nodded. “The prisoner Leontii Vasilevits was captured some years before you were called as Ubu. He was a Soviet defense minister, living in exile. I had him taken in order to learn the status of certain missile silos in Kazakhstan—a subject on which his information was egregiously out of date.”

“As you say, my lord,” Ubu replied carefully. He was unsure if there was some definite reason Ra’s al Ghul was entrusting him with this information, or if the ride on the motor launch was longer than expected, and Ra’s simply wanted to pass the time.

“Egregiously out of date, or perhaps he had been misinformed. The fracturing in those final years before the Soviet system collapsed, Ubu, there are valuable lessons to be taken from it. In any case, Vasilevits knew nothing about missiles, but he did have some curious information about Russian submarines...”

It began in the Batcave. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Science and Humanities Symposium wasn’t the kind of shindig any crimefighter would have on his radar. Like a hundred events that happen every day in Gotham, it was a big deal to the people involved, but not to the world at large. I said how lucky it was Tim just happened to be one of those people, and for once Bruce agreed. “Luck” isn’t something Batman acknowledges, as a rule, so I figured there was more to come. There was. He didn’t mean it was lucky because Tim’s involvement brought the symposium to our attention; he meant it was lucky because Tim wouldn’t need a cover.

“He’s already a student at Hudson, he was already invited to attend, he’s already picked out what sessions he’s attending and what papers he wants to hear. It was all set in motion without our doing a thing, so it can’t arouse any suspicion because it really is a normal part of Tim Drake’s life.”

I pointed out that Tim wasn’t just *invited*, he was preoccupied, if not obsessed, with making a good impression on one of the attendees. He was out to impress a woman, and I’d seen a few of those trainwrecks, up close and personal. They’re not pretty, and if it happened to Tim with this E.J. Meadows, he might not be ready to snap back in a second and take on minions.

Bruce’s response? “It’s crimefighting, he’ll be fine.”

Seriously, that was the basis for his confidence: It’s crimefighting.

“Astonishing, my lord,” Ubu said respectfully (although he saw nothing astonishing or even interesting in the story so far).

“Is it not? The Russians were making hyper-accurate surveys of the underwater canyons on the sea floor in preparation for some tactical nonsense which is not pertinent to our cause. In the course of this misadventure, they discovered something rather strange...”

“Look, Selina, when I said we lucked out with Tim’s involvement, I meant because we don’t have to concoct a story to insert him into the conference. But in a way, he’s lucked out too. He’ll be there as Robin—not in costume, but on duty. Assessing his

surroundings, the people, and the situation *as a crimefighter*. If he is on duty as Robin, he'll be less likely to make a fool of himself. The focus of the crimefighter on his task."

I stared.

The focus of the what on the what?

Again, I'd *seen* the trainwrecks. Men older and worldlier than Tim—some wearing masks and power rings, mind you—reduced to the primal core that can scratch itself and say "Ug," and that's about it. Bruce knew some of those guys, so I didn't name names or go into detail. I just said how, you know, 'crimefighting' isn't exactly a defense shield, and if the worst happened, if Tim crashed and burned in front of the hot scientist...

His response? "Not worried."

I stared.

"Because of the... *focus*... of the *crimefighter*... on his *task*?" I repeated, confirming it piece by piece.

His answer? "I don't want to talk about the Lorrimer Codex."

"But I—"

"And I don't want to talk about the Rothchild Coins."

"I just—"

"Or the Carolinian Crown Jewels."

"..."

"..."

"..."

And that's how I wound up Angelica Laperm, Wayne Foundation suit, attending the 43<sup>rd</sup> Science and Humanities Symposium as Tim's backup.

Ubu blanched as the motorlaunch slowed to a stop with no Desertas Islands in sight, nor any oceanliner to take them further out to sea.

Everyone knew Atlantis technology was far advanced compared to the surface world. Everyone knew they had air-breathers and water-breathers living side by side on the ocean floor, because they could drain their city of water and pump it full of air. Everyone knew that, but it was one thing to know and another to trust your lungs to it.

Everyone also knew what happened to those people in Sub Diego. They might be American infidels and enemies of Ra's al Ghul, but they had been air-breathing infidels who were now water-breathing infidels that could no longer live on the land. Infidels who could no longer live on land though no fault of their own, because they had been exposed to a chemical agent that would cause their bodies to mutate if they were submerged in water.

Ubu eyed his master carefully. He was bodyguard to Ra's al Ghul. It could not be the Great One's intention to alter him unless Ra's al Ghul himself planned to permanently relocate to the ocean floor. That possibility was, of course, absurd.

The water's surface was suddenly broken by a periscope.

"Ah, our ride," Ra's al Ghul said drolly.

I was never the Luthor kind of villain. I'm not an idiot when it comes to science, but I can't sit down with an ounce of kryptonite, a roll of quarters, a car battery, and a square of tin foil and expect to create a vortex that punches a hole in the space-time continuum and hurls Superman back to 11<sup>th</sup> century England. Trying to pass myself off as a world-class scientist among other world-class scientists did not seem practical.

Bruce had the idea of my being a suit. Wayne Enterprises and the Wayne Foundation both funded scientific research, and it was financiers, not scientists, who decided what projects to back.

It seemed a perfect cover—well, not perfect. Nothing about my going undercover was my idea of a purr-anything. But once you accepted that I was going to do this asinine thing, “Wayne Foundation suit” was as good as it was going to get. As soon as the scientists realized I had the power to greenlight their research grants, they would be eager to explain whatever it was they did. And if I did get something totally wrong, they'd politely overlook it.

By the time I picked out a wig, Oracle had my bio and work history all mapped out and documented. By the time I'd memorized it, she had me registered for the conference and booked into the Hudson University Inn. And by the time I was strapped down into Angelica Laperm's body-type and squeezed into her dowdy cocktail dress, Bruce decided how the Fop had hit on me my first year at the Foundation Christmas party.

The sub descended, and so did Ubu's mood.

It would be heresy to suggest that Ra's al Ghul, light of the East, terror of the West, apex of the age of Oneness through One Rule, was “a guy.” Ubu would be the last to suggest such blasphemy. It was simply that Ra's sometimes wished to talk, as non-immortal non-godheads might. Ubu was at hand, so he talked to Ubu. The result was that Ubu was privy to a fair amount of information that would ordinarily be confined to inside the Demon Head's... head. At the moment, on a sub that had been traveling downward for quite some time, that information was not very comforting.

Since becoming aware of Atlantis, Ra's had seen it as the holy grail of world domination.

Its existence—and particularly its king—meant that 3/4 of the world's surface was already united under one established ruler. It was not merely *reconciled* to monarchy, it *embraced* the rule of one man as its own right and true form of government, far superior to those methods experimented with, with varied success, throughout the surface world. It was always easier to supplant a recognized king, to sit on a warm throne, as it were, than to convert a populace from another social order...

The first day of the symposium, there was nothing on the schedule but registration and a cocktail party. I met the same sixty people twice and tried my best to stay focused on them, as a group, rather than the two individuals who were actually interesting. Tim had opted for this preppy urban casual look: broadcloth buttondown, no jacket or tie—but a collar, and that gave him something to fuss with.

And fuss with.

And fuss with.

I hadn't intended to acknowledge him. He was just a student, and Angelica was a Foundation suit on the prowl. He wouldn't really interest her, and they wouldn't have much to talk about. But after twenty minutes of fidgeting, it didn't matter what "Angelica" wanted, *I* couldn't take it. I went over, thinking I'd just briefly introduce myself and then tell him to *find something to do with his hands*. But I hadn't got any farther than "Hi there, I'm An—" when he asked what I thought of his shirt.

"It's nice," I told him, breaking character. "How long did you spend picking it out?"

"Half hour," he winced. "Is that too much? I don't want to seem like I'm trying too hard."

I told him it was fine. I told him *he* was fine. And I tried to remind him, without naming names, that he'd charmed the socks off some of the most dangerous women on the planet. Know what he said when reminded he'd survived an overnight with Shiva?

"Door! Oh man, I thought that was her coming through the door just now, but it's the other brunette with long hair. From Seattle, not Australia. E.J. Meadows is from Australia. Where the kangaroos come from. Oh God, I didn't say that out loud, did I? I'm screwed."

Now, if you can charm Shiva in your boxers at fourteen, you *should* be bulletproof with a random scientist from Down Under, but the poor kid had gotten himself into such a headspace. I had to get his mind off it.

"Tim, your problem is you're not thinking of anything in this room, at this party, or on this planet except for that woman. We need to loosen you up. Little game of Team Larceny, juices up the dullest parties."

"Team Larceny," he said flatly.

"Right. The big surprise this season was the Roth-Beaumont wedding which brought Gloria Beaumont and her canary diamonds over to the South Hampton Team. Since the ruby pendant Lawrence Chandler bought for his mistress doesn't count, since she can't wear it outside Beverly Hills, this could be a game changer."

"What the heck are you talking about?"

"I'm trying to make you laugh, Timothy. Get some oxygen into your face muscles. It will help."

"Okay. Okay, I can do this. Sure, why not. Better than 'be yourself' advice, right? I'll play."

"Good. Who in this room is worth Kitty's time?"

"No one. They're science nerds. Nobody's got canary diamonds and nobody's got a mistress."

"Try harder. What do they have?"

"120-inch flat screen wall units that double as computer monitors, and instead of a password, it detects who you are through proprietary facial recognition algorithms."

"Please tell me you're making that up, because you know B will have to have one in each room."

"Pretty sure WayneTech's making the prototypes now. He'll be—door. New door, I mean legs door, I mean... That one's her. She just came in the door. And oh boy, look at... legs. All the pictures I saw were neck up. Didn't figure on legs."

“Okay then, I’m going to leave you to it. Good luck, kiddo. Remember: Shiva, boxers, fourteen, bulletproof.”

I circulated, filled up my dance card for sessions to attend the next morning, and tried not to notice one of the professors going up to Tim and walking him up to E.J. Meadows. I tried not to notice, it was none of Angelica’s business, but, well, I’m human.

From what I heard, it took him two tries to get his name right. Then he gave the helpful mnemonic that it was Drake like the duck, so it was like “Chuck the duck” except Chuck is from Charles and his name wasn’t Charles. It was Tim. Which rhymes with swim, and ducks do that, so, y’know...

So much for the Shiva-Boxers-Fourteen-Bulletproof theory.

“So it’s really more like not-Chuck the duck.”

First time I met that boy, we were in masks and there was a Vermeer on the line, silent alarm was tripped and I was in a hurry. I clonked him on the head with my whip handle. I was starting to feel very, very bad about that.

Through the second leg of the under sea journey, Ubu recalled Ra’s explaining the second attraction of Atlantis, which lay in the surface world that was his principal goal:

The great cities of every great civilization were, without exception, built upon its trading centers. On a planet all but covered with water, that nearly always meant ports. When Ra’s al Ghul controlled the seas, island nations like England would become infinitely more biddable. “Although that is hardly worth what it used to be,” the Great One hastened to add. “If only we had learned of it—Ubu, put this parchment somewhere we won’t forget it—a hundred years sooner.”

Even the Detective’s city relied on the rivers that first gave it commercial life. Controlling the seas would not guarantee the conquest of Gotham, but it would certainly tip the balance heavily in Ra’s favor.

Of course, Ra’s added lightly, actual conquest of Atlantis was not on the immediate horizon. Before that milestone could be reached, he would have infinitely more power over Gotham and her protector. So much so, that the ability to choke off her river trade would be a superfluous luxury.

...: *Bruce Wayne*,...: the sexy voice graveled in my ear piece.

“Secure the line, Handsome,” I laughed.

...: *That how you talk to your boss, Ms. Laperm?* ...:

“Give it a rest, Bruce. This might be Angelica’s cell phone, but I’m on the roof. Nobody can hear.”

There was a click, and I knew the line was secure. Then...

...: *How were the morning sessions?* ...:

“That’s why I’m calling. This last one was mind numbing. Couldn’t follow a word of it, and with nothing to do but sit there and look interested, I started working through something I heard earlier, the first paper I went to. Working through it from a villain perspective, I mean.”

...: *The villain persp...?...*

"Well look, I'm not the Ra's type, I admit, but I do know the mindset. And I had time on my hands. I really think I've cracked it."

There was a long pause. The bat-disapproval was palpable, which is always fun, but I really hadn't meant to bait Psychobat. I waited, and eventually he grunted.

"Okay, well, they said they had evidence to support the theory that a release of frozen methane from the ocean fifty-five million years ago was responsible for an abrupt warming of the Earth that had a devastating effect on deep-sea life."

...: *This is the paper you couldn't follow?...*

"No, this is the one I DID follow, the first one. The scientists concluded that the escape of methane hydrates caused ocean temperatures to soar by seven to fourteen degrees over a 1,000-year period, a factor contributing to the rapid evolution of more advanced species on land, but causing the die-off of half the deep-sea species."

...: *Granted. How is that suggestive from a 'villain perspective'?...*

"It's not. It's just... Tim got off to a very rocky start with E.J. Meadows, and I spent half the night patting his back: 'There-there, live to fight another day.' In the course of which, he told me about his paper where he quoted this woman's research, and it was methane hydrate too, using it as an energy source. Apparently it produces less carbon dioxide than other fossil fuels, proper production could reduce carbon dioxide emissions blah-blah-blah on a global basis. Except this stuff adds stability to the ocean floor, so drilling to get it out, not such a hot idea."

...: *Enter the villain perspective, take what you want and undersea ecosystems be damned...:*

"No. No, nothing that 'Bwahaha' evil. Are you going to let me tell this or not?"

...: *Go on. ...:*

"It's two reminders of all the resources they have down there. Two reminders in a really short span of time, and in between, I'm being stalked by this Roger Genk, a none-too-clean gentleman that wants you to fund his bio-fuel project. Claims he's a decade up on the rest of the world in—I'm not making this up—pig poop. Now, I get the idea on these bio-fuels, I really do. Whatever the local waste product is, that's what we use. If they grow bananas, it's banana waste. If they raise livestock, it's pig poop. 'Genk's manure methanator is lightyears ahead of anyone else's,' but I was having *breakfast*, and you know what I'm like before coffee."

...: *I do, and I can see where the villain perspective enters the picture...:*

"Quite. Snarl-Hiss-Growl. 'A generous grant from Bruce Wayne could corner the agro-waste market within the decade. No one else can give you that kind of guarantee. I wouldn't even bother talking to that banana-waste crowd if I were you. Oh sure, they talk a good game with their methanol concentrators, but at what cost Ms. Laperm? Ask yourself... at what cost?'"

...: ... ..:

"You can say that again. So I get away, listen to this first session about the hydrates in the sea floor, borderline interesting stuff, fits in with what Tim said last night about Meadows. Fine. I leave that room, have to duck into the ladies' toilet because Genk is there again, waiting for me, and now he's got a brochure. But I dodged him, I made it into the second session, and I... I don't know how to describe it. There were slides, there was PowerPoint, there was Latin, there was a cross-section of a yam, I think. I may have actually fallen into a coma at one point. Anyway, I'm sitting there, bored out

of my mind for over an hour, when the last coherent thing I heard was 'sea floor,' and it... it started me thinking about Aquaman."

...: *Arthur?* ...

"Yeah. Look, we're assuming Ra's is after the research on these bio-fuels from the local pig poop and whatever, right? Well, villain perspective: where's the payoff in that? How do you monopolize something that anybody can make themselves? Well... What if they don't know they can? I'm thinking of all those resources they have on the sea floor. If you had a base in Atlantis or somewhere, you could pass off something like this banana-fuel as a rare commodity you pumped out of the ocean, something only you could mine and supply."

...: *Plausible.* ...

"And Arthur did say there was sort of a confluence of events keeping him from getting home. He didn't think it was a diversion, but—"

...: *But he doesn't know Ra's.* ...

"Exactly. Villain 101: keep the hero busy over here while you do your thing over there. It's Aquaman, so a diversion would be 'just like Batman, except with fish.'"

...: *Hardly. Black Manta or Orca—*...

"No, that's Lex talking. Ra's would never want to involve other villains if he could help it."

...: *Something diplomatic then, that's the best way to keep Arthur occupied. Especially dealing with surfacers. He knows it's a part of the job, but he doesn't like it...*

"Bruce, you're over thinking this. It's Ra's. He hasn't had a new idea since the goatee."

...: *'Just like Batman, except with fish?'* ...

"In my professional bad girl opinion, yes!"

The third feature of Atlantis of particular interest to Ra's al Ghul (as Ra's had explained it to Ubu while taking the waters at the sulfur spring the day of the blood moon): it was remote. The surface world knew little of it, almost nothing, in fact, apart from what it chose to reveal. U.S. and Soviet intelligence efforts—apart from Leontii Vasilevits, who had no inkling of his information's significance—as well as DEMON's own efforts, had all proved equally futile.

This aspect of Atlantean secrecy, so infuriating from the outside, would be the greatest possible advantage from the inside. Since the world knew nothing of its true science and resources, one could pass off whatever one wished as Atlantean rather than reveal a less-savory provenance.

Yes, the time would come to conquer Atlantis and take full advantage of those other aspects Ra's had expounded upon at such length, but for now, this last consideration was all he needed.

Atlantean isolation. Atlantean secrecy. Atlantean remoteness.

And to make use of that, he needn't set foot in the city itself.

The afternoon papers I attended were as dull as the morning's. There was a banquet that night, which I wanted to skip but Tim made me promise I would be there for

moral support. But then he walked through the door *with* E.J. Meadows, the two of them laughing and smiling like old pals. I decided the Wayne Foundation was fiercely interested in the potential of methane hydrate and I drifted over to introduce myself. When I was close enough to get the gist of the conversation (Dr. Meadows just bought a kit to build herself a computer, which she had never done before, while Tim has built three), Tim met my eyes and I understood I was free to go. Moral support was no longer required, and solicitous hovering would not be appreciated.

I left.

Outside the inn, there was a line of busses waiting to take the scientists to Robinson Park after dinner. A special program had been arranged at the planetarium. Now, it wasn't dusk yet and it was at least an hour before Batman would be lurking, so I decided to check the busses out myself. The trip to the planetarium was the only time the scientists would be leaving the Hudson campus as a group, it was a perfect opportunity to—

I felt a light sting in my shoulder. Before I could process *light sting* turning into *sharp pain*, my fingers were going numb and the ground was spinning. I felt my knees buckle. I just worked out there was a needleish dart sticking out of my right shoulder, when it all got too fuzzy to focus.

I remember thinking the one bus driver was at an angle to have fired the dart.

I remember wondering if DEMON had replaced the drivers.

And I remember not being able to move while faces swam above me, one of them bending down to read my name tag, and the words "Wayne" and "Wayne Foundation" repeated in an accent I couldn't identify.

Then... nothing.

The Lazarus Pit, that was the one hope Ubu could cling to. Maybe he could not conquer every last doubt about The Great One's unknown plan, maybe he could not absolutely convince himself if he focused *only* on the absurdity of Ra's al Ghul choosing to become a water-breather. But Ubu could breathe easy, so to speak, if he factored in the Lazarus Pit.

Even if it were possible that The Demon's Head *might*, in a moment of Pit-induced madness, consider abandoning the surface world and focusing all his efforts on conquering the wet portion of the planet first, even if, in the grip of such an idea, he would consider for the briefest second that underwater bases could best be manned by water-breathing minions, and even if for some reason unknown and unknowable, The Demon's Head decided that he himself (and therefore his bodyguard Ubu) should also become water-breathers, he would never, never, *never* abandon the life-giving force of the Lazarus Pit.

Perhaps a few minions, here or there, might be mutated for the cause, but Ra's al Ghul himself must remain as he was. And as long as The Great One remained an air-breathing, land-based lifeform, Ubu would as well.



## CHAPTER 6: FISHY BACK

On the far side of the world, in the walled medieval city that Vlad Tepes once called home, the gypsy fortuneteller Dika Lazarovic knew nothing about a science symposium in far away Gotham City. She knew nothing of Tim Drake, a.k.a. Robin, the Batman's sidekick. She knew nothing of the cluster of bio-fuel experts who were attending this one particular gathering of scientists, held this one particular year at Hudson University where Tim Drake was a freshman. And she knew nothing of the subroutines in the Batcave computers, where Tim happened to be investigating one of the conference attendees in such a way that it brought the event to Batman's attention at the very moment he learned Ra's al Ghul was active in Gotham. Dika only knew that The Demon's Head was a monster who preyed on her people. It was all she needed to know.

Thus, when he came to have his fortune told, she kept silent about the omens that hovered over him like a dark cloud. Ill Chance was hungry and Nemesis needed to feed. The ambitions of Ra's al Ghul had grown proud and plump, a rich ragout for Coincidence and Fate. Ill Fortune was poised to feast on his grandiose dreams, and rather than warning him as a good seer should, she smiled beguilingly. She said the Fates took an eager interest in his endeavors—she did not say they did so the way a wolf takes an interest in a rabbit.

When he was gone, she called forth her father's black magic. The dark arts are not evil, he taught her. That is the misconception of superstitious and cowardly minds. Dark is the power of the night, it can be used for good or ill, depending on the user. Surely, no darkness aimed at Ra's al Ghul could be evil. So she called on the Darkness, on the power of the moon and the stars and the entities of the night, on passion, dreams, and wind.

Ra's al Ghul, and all connected to him, would meet the fates they so richly deserved.

*"When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."*

That's Samuel Johnson. Ra's probably knew him. The quote wasn't exactly on my mind when I woke up in the planetarium, but I would think of it later, when it was over. At that moment though, my waking was the proof of it. A drug hangover isn't something you just blink away—unless you are chained in the base of a star ball with a brick of C4 sitting beside you. If you are, you'll find the ticking of the timer on that detonator concentrates your mind wonderfully.

Now, even before Bruce got chatty one day and decided to explain all he knew about C4, the fact is, I knew a good bit already. I prefer the more elegant ways to open a safe than *blowing a hole in it*, but everyone in the business isn't that high road. And if they do it, you have to know how to do it. More to the point, you have to know how to *undo* it, just in case you're thrown into the path of someone playing with explosives they don't completely understand. So I do know my way around a bomb. Unfortunately, this was a DEMON bomb, which meant there wasn't a nice, digital timer counting

down, like Bruce Willis and Kiefer Sutherland always get. There was just *ticking*, and I had no damn clue how long it would go on ticking before BOOM. So new plan: no defuse, just get free and *run!*

But again, DEMON. So the cuffs on my wrists and ankles were those bracelet things out of a Karloff movie. Not as easy to pick as you might think, and they're a lot smaller than you'd expect. I don't think I have pudgy wrists, and those things were tight!

Anyway, I managed to get my ankles free. Angelica has fabulous taste in accessories, Kittlemeier's best lockpicks stowed neatly inside her barrette. I didn't waste time on my wrists, I just stumbled out of there—emphasis on “stumbled.” Two-thirds of it was the tranquilizer still in my system, I'm sure, but that other third... When I tried to stand, my foot caught soft-and-mushy instead of solid floor, and then it hit small-and-crumbly. I was halfway out when I realized I'd been lying in a rat's nest of shirts, towels, hairbrushes, and plastic cups—Really!

There was no time to work out why, even if my brain was capable of any thought beyond GET OUT! I made it to my feet, balance be damned, and climbed out of the pit. The auditorium was empty, so I ran for the fire door. At least it felt like running. It certainly wasn't feline speed or feline grace, but it was as close to running as I could manage in my condition. I made it outside, and the tour busses from the Inn were sitting there, idling. The one nearest me, I could make out that there were passengers inside who weren't getting out (or who weren't being allowed to get out). And I saw one of those DEMON drivers had the baggage doors open.

It might seem like good news, but it wasn't. As soon as I saw the minions, a part of me realized that the bomb inside was not scant seconds from detonating, and as soon as I had that thought, the hangover hit like a truck. I was dizzy, I was nauseous, my forehead felt very, very heavy—but only on the right side, so it seemed like my head kept tilting that way, pulling me forward and to the side, which made it very hard to work out which way the ground was. Plus, this awful headache was congealing behind my eyes and pushing all the way down into my teeth, which made it very hard to concentrate on anything.

It wasn't feline stealth, but I managed to hide in the baggage compartment of Bus #3 before the door closed. There wasn't a lot of luggage in there, but there was enough 'stuff' of an indiscriminate nature to wedge myself behind and get some cover. I sat there for about a minute before I started to fade. I was lurched awake when the bus began to move. Not sure how much time had passed. Then I was lurched again later, must've been fading again, when I heard this distant explosion. Still not sure if that part was real or if I dreamed it.

A plague of coincidence. That's what the power of Dika's ancestors called down on the Demon's Head. Anything that could go either way would go against the interests of Ra's al Ghul. It was not the most satisfying of curses. It was not seeing his penis wither, his bones crack, his houses burn, and his legions drowned in their own blood. Yet it was an appropriate curse for a man who would make himself a god: A plague of coincidence. Anything that could happen by chance would happen against the designs and interests of Ra's al Ghul. It would seem as though the gods themselves were against him. Fate, Chance, Destiny, whatever glories he had tried to drape himself in

before his followers must now, surely, be seen to have abandoned him. Could there be a worse torment for a man who would lead men? Abandoned by the gods. Would his followers notice? And whether they did or did not, surely Ra's al Ghul would fear their noticing.

No, it was not seeing his penis wither or his houses burn, but it would do.

When I came to, my first priority was to get those *Bride of the Mummy* cuffs off my wrist. There wasn't a lot of light in that baggage compartment, but fortunately, picking a lock is about touch and resistance. It's instinct more than anything. I got my wrists free and then, for a long time—for what seemed like a long time—I tried to figure out what was going on out there. It did feel like we were moving, sorta, but it didn't feel like it had before. At first I thought it was just the lack of a hangover, but eventually I realized that, not only was the movement different, I didn't hear an engine.

It was a risk, but I worked on springing the door. When I got out... well, "free wrists" didn't seem like such an accomplishment.

"Arthur, the fact is that they're GONE, all of the scientists attending the symposium and Selina and Tim! The last communication I had from Selina, she thought your diversion was connected to ours."

The face that formerly looked down from the oversize viewscreen in the Batcave now looked up from a tiny one in the Batmobile.

...: *Bruce, I appreciate that you're upset. I just don't understand what you—or she—are basing this on...:*

"Neither do I," Batman admitted wearily, slowing the car before it turned onto the access ramp. "She works differently, Arthur. She thinks differently. She gets an idea, god knows where: 'just like Batman, except with fish' and she runs with it."

...: *Just like...except with fish?...:* Arthur repeated incredulously.

"Don't ask. Look, the point is she's GONE, and under the circumstances, I'm giving her theory the benefit of the doubt."

The ramp between the Sterling garage and the subway station wound downward, leading eventually to the satellite cave's hangar under the Wayne Tower. Batman muted Arthur while he gave the VOX commands to transfer the call to the cave's workstation. There wasn't much that could be called evidence at the site of the planetarium explosion or at the university conference center, but he'd harvested all he could and brought the samples to this cave instead of the manor. He told himself it was the better choice because it was closer. But he knew the extra minutes of travel time were irrelevant. He simply didn't want to see Alfred. With Selina and Tim both missing, he really didn't want to face Alfred.

Arthur's image was waiting for him on the satellite cave's viewscreen as he mounted the stairs from the Batmobile hangar.

"Unmute," he barked.

...: *Well, it's true that circumstances kept me from returning to Atlantis for several weeks...:* Arthur continued as if there had been no interruption. ...: *But I'm back now, and I'm*

telling you, the city is fine. There is no DEMON incursion, no mysterious incidents that happened in my absence. There is nothing happening that could possibly relate to your case. If what happened with the whales and all the rest of it was a deliberate attempt to keep me occupied far from Atlantean waters, there is absolutely no evidence that it was Ra's al Ghul behind it....

"What about the box you found off Fiji?"

...: *Electronic...*

"So it's surface made. Sea technologies are based on magnetic and gravitational fields, not electrical ones, correct? If the box uses electricity, then it's from the surface."

...: *That doesn't mean it's DEMON, Bruce. It doesn't even mean it was intended to upset the whales, or if it was, it doesn't mean the purpose of upsetting them was to bring me to that part of the ocean. My experts are looking into it, and I've left samples for you at the Watchtower, but—...*

"Later. Arthur, I know it's not logical. I know it's not hard evidence. But I know in my gut that Selina was right. I know these events are connected. The timing of it, your diversions began soon after the chess set was lent, initiating the Wayne kidnapping. It all fits."

...: *If it does, if you're right, Bruce, what was the point of it?...*

"Ask me again in ten minutes, once I've confirmed this material from the planetarium debris is what I think it is."

Most scientists know far more about the world beyond the petri dish than popular culture gives them credit for. Those who were currently the prisoners of Ra's al Ghul realized the notorious terrorist had taken them for their expertise. And they realized that an unlucky non-expert who happened to be among them when they were taken would likely be seen as having no value and killed, so they banded together to pass Tim off as a prodigy.

Raised in a think tank, according to Dr. Matthews.

Got his first PhD at fourteen, added Dr. Hernandez.

Had a research grant on the mutation of E.coli before most kids get a driver's license, Dr. Pelligrew mentioned.

Tim could have done without E.J. Meadows's contribution that she had worked with his parents at the Finston Institute. That really seemed to put them on equal footing, and a woman who palled around with your mom wasn't a good ask for the Beyonce concert. But that little worry was backburnered for the duration. Right now, E.J. Meadows was just another hostage, and his job was to keep them all alive. It was odd that they had the same attitude about him... and that was really the downside of living the kind of life he had lived.

Anyone's first time in a life-or-death situation, their focus is entirely on it. Once you've spent as much time in peril as Tim had, there is room for background thought. In this case: E.J. Meadows, the irony of the scientists circling round to save him with this teen prodigy story, and the growing evidence that he was destined for the alter ego of "The Trekker."

Ironically, it was the minions themselves foisting the last thought on him. He was trying to determine exactly how many DEMONS there were guarding them. There

were between twelve and sixteen in the room with them at any given time, but they had passed three along the rail and two on the stairs as they were marched down from the busses. Tim couldn't work out if any of those three were now in the room, and therefore one of the fifteen—no, now it was sixteen—that he'd already counted. He also couldn't be sure if certain minions who came and went were the same ones he'd already counted, or if they represented additional troops elsewhere.

The problem was that they all dressed alike. There were only three variations in the uniform, which was how he began classifying them. Yellow checkered head dress leaves, blue one returns, you can at least be sure it's a different guy.... It was when he realized he was classifying those slight variations in the DEMON uniform as "command, support, and *red shirts*" that the dejected non-crimefighter in the back of Tim Drake's brain resigned itself to the ugly truth: he was a Trekker.

The last time we fought Ra's, Bruce rigged up a shipping company to intercept the minions the Hairdo was trying to smuggle into Gotham. One of the sillier terms I learned in the course of that adventure was "fishy back." Most merchandise ultimately reaches its destination by truck. If the trailers are pre-loaded and sent by train, so all they have to do is come off the flatbed and hook up to an eighteen-wheeler, it's called piggy back. If the pre-loaded trailers are sent by air, it's birdie back. And if by sea? Fishy back.

The three Hudson University tour busses I'd seen idling outside the hotel were all there, along with several shipping containers on the open deck of a carrier. Where we were was anybody's guess. Lots of water in every direction—and absolutely nothing else. The good news: there didn't seem to be any minions nearby. The bad news: the scientists were nowhere in sight, either. I checked the busses anyway, since there was no one around. Sure enough, there was a spent gas canister in each. No real surprise there. Presumably they loaded everybody onto the busses and left the Inn as planned. Continue to the expected destination by the expected route, nothing to raise anybody's suspicions or cause any commotion in the middle of the Gotham streets. By the time they reached the planetarium, everybody is out. Unload Angelica Laperm and leave her there chained to a bomb (that part I couldn't quite figure out yet), and then drive your sleeping prisoners to the dock and load them, busses and all, onto the escape barge. It was totally Ra's. For the rest of us, a crime in Gotham is just that. For him, it's an assault on The Detective's City, and he tends to go all Blofeld with the over-plotted stratagems.

After the busses, I searched as much of the ship as I could without being seen. Would have felt better in costume, but I managed. I finally found the scientists in what looked like the crew's mess. Tim was with them, and from what I could see, they were passing him off as one of them. It occurred to me that they probably left Angelica for dead because she's not a scientist. No use to Ra's plan, so they left her behind in an explosion to be a definite BODY—bits of a body—in all the debris. Scientists go to the planetarium, planetarium blows up, scientists dead. Detective won't come looking...

No, scratch that last part. Ra's has to know "scientists dead" in Batman's city, Batman WILL come looking. And will find, and will stuff every bit of planetarium shrapnel down his demon throat.

Unless... Unless he underestimated Bruce, which would not be unprecedented, and thought he was going to take us where Batman couldn't find us. We *were* in the middle of an ocean, and I felt that sick nausea all over again as I thought back to my last conversation with Bruce. What if Ra's wasn't just planning to pass off some pig-poop miracle fuel as a substance he mined from the ocean floor? What if he planned to actually make it there? What if we were all headed for an undersea work camp he'd cooked up, thinking there's no possible way to escape?

"As I thought," Batman bristled, turning from the particle analyzer. "There's a conspicuous amount of plastic, soap, and cotton fiber in the debris, consistent with the towels and toiletries at the Hudson University hotel."

...: *I don't see the significance*,... Arthur said blandly.

"Ra's has an 8<sup>th</sup> Century mindset, but he is aware the modern world exists. It's one of his principal complaints. He doesn't like it, but he is aware. He'll have heard of trace DNA from the rubble of explosions used to identify the victims. He'll have heard of the microsamples that can be harvested now, from just touching a railing or sipping from a glass."

...:*I'm familiar with it*,... Aquaman spat viciously.

"I apologize," Bruce said, veering from the painful subject. "My point is, the technology exists. Ra's will know of it, but that doesn't mean he understands it. So he has his men go through the hotel and take things from the scientists' rooms: the towels they've used, shirts they've worn, soap, cups, toothbrushes. And he thinks if they leave these items in an explosion, it will look as if the scientists were killed in the blast. Now you should ask the question you had before."

...: *If Ra's is behind my diversions as well as yours, if he was the one sending me all over the Pacific that way, presumably to keep me away from Atlantis, what was the goal?* ...

"And here's our answer. It's not simple holding onto one captive for more than few days, let alone sixty. Sixty leading scientists from almost thirty different countries? Thirty different *governments* to fend off, all demanding their release? It's impossible. It can't be done—unless the world believes your prisoners to be dead. This DNA dodge has accomplished that, he thinks, but that illusion can't be sustained if his prisoners show up on Google Earth. Think about it, Arthur, think about it from a 'villain perspective': where can you hide more than fifty men where they will never be seen, will have no possible means of escape..."

...: *And will be dependent on you for the very air they breathe, which would certainly make them more cooperative as a work force. Yes, I see your point. Atlantis would be ideal for the purpose, but Bruce, like I said, he isn't here*...

"Can you be sure?"

...: *I'm as sure as you would be if we were talking about Gotham*. ...

Batman grunted.

It was official: Ra's had gone fullbore Blofeld on us. And heading for an undersea base with no possible means of escape was now the *best-case* scenario.

There were about two dozen minions guarding the scientists now. Two dozen that I could see from my vantage point, anyway. Four of them bothered me. They had that twitchy look, like Joker when he's got a ha-ha-larious idea. And one of them had a box, a little larger than a paperback, hanging from his neck by a thick, braided cord.

Two of the non-twitchy minions left and returned a minute later, rolling in a television on one of those squeaky-wheel dollies. On the lower shelf of said dolly sat the cutting edge of badguy tech, circa 1974: a VHS player. The minion with the box came forward, the rest of them parting like the red sea before him as he moved. When he got to the television, he took the box off his neck and handed it off to the head minion, after which, no sea-parting for him. Head minion opened the box like it's the holy-of-holies, and out comes... yep, a VHS tape. TV on, tape goes in the machine, and—predictably at this point—there was the Hairdo, scowling just like the king on his chess set.

He introduced himself like he was the new host of Masterpiece Theatre, and then proceeded to welcome the scientists to the service of the DEMON. The world believed them dead; they could entertain no hope of rescue. Indeed, in a sense, they were dead, for their lives as they had known them, up until this very moment when they beheld the countenance of Ra's al Ghul, those lives were indeed over. But just as he triumphed over death and lived again on emerging from his Lazarus Pit, they too were now born again into new lives in the DEMON cult.

I hate to speak for sixty strangers, but I think it's fair to say we were all equally horrified. But except for me and Tim, everyone else's horror seemed to crescendo on the last words, and then relax. Everyone who didn't know Ra's thought he had finished. Tim and I knew better.

"Were any of you the product of civilized societies," he wheezed, "it would not be necessary to mar this glorious day with the making of unseemly threats. You will eventually come to understand that the ways of the DEMON are not the ways of the thug. Alas, you are all, despite your superior intelligence, tainted by the diseased West. The Demon's Head must therefore proceed with you as he would with a fine thoroughbred who has known only the whip of inferior trainers.

"Among your own people, there have been visionaries who recognize the defilement of this planet by your countrymen. In the city you just left, Poison Ivy, though a woman, has made great strides in avenging the wrongs to your environment. On the far coast of that same country, one Anton Geist recognized that your global warming is melting the ice caps, the oceans are rising, and in time, the land will be gone. 'One way or another,' as he put it so succinctly 'we will all be underwater.'"

I don't know which was more pathetic: Ivy and Geist held up as the visionaries of the West, or Ra's singling out anyone's oratory as "succinct."

"Knowing that man would become extinct with the new deluge, Geist introduced a genetic anomaly into the water supply of San Diego, a self-replicating strand of DNA that converted the respiratory, auditory, ocular, and muscular systems to a marine-based model. In other words, he changed the people of Sub Diego into water-breathers.

“Mr. Geist has recently come into my employ, much as all of you have just done, and at my bidding, he has reproduced his earlier efforts. You have all ingested the mutating agent, just as the people of San Diego did, and like those who were submerged during the earthquake, should you breathe in water, you too will find yourselves permanently altered and unable to return to the land.”

Ra’s paused. The twitchy minion who had the box around his neck now stood apart from the other three. The three produced what looked like seltzer canisters and emptied the streams into his face. He just STOOD THERE, taking it, and when it was over, he proceeded to fall onto the floor and flop around like a dying fish. He spasmed, he convulsed, he gasped, he screamed, and then... he just stopped.

“Pray, keep this demonstration in mind as you contemplate your futures. Cooperation will bring rewards. Escape is not only impossible, it brings the risk of certain death, as y—”

Benefit of the doubt, “...as you have seen” and Ubu was a little fast on the stop button.

Then again, knowing Ra’s, it’s quite possible he never grasped that the video tape was a fixed length and no minion would dare tell him he’d run out of time.

## CHAPTER 7: GAMBIT DECLINED

Fun fact: a DEMON minion that needs to take a leak has exactly the same tells (and exactly the same narrowed focus) as a museum guard in the same position. There's this little torque in their stride when they start to walk. Once you've seen it twice, you can't mistake it for anything else. Starts in the right thigh if they're right handed, left if they're left handed.

I had followed the body once the seltzer-squirting minions dragged their ex-colleague out of the mess. I guess I hoped the dead-fish minion would jump to his feet once he was out of view of the hostages, dust himself off, and have a laugh with the others about their poor marksmanship with a canister of fizz. I hoped the whole grisly scene would be proven a hoax, a demonstration for the scientists' benefit and not the gruesome murder-suicide it seemed. Wishful thinking, I know, but... But there was something more than that, something I couldn't put my finger on. *Something* bothered me about the whole thing, beyond the obvious horror.

The body did not jump to his feet, however. The minions went on dragging him until they came to the stairs, and then they picked him up and carried him out of my line of sight. I abandoned my air duct and got to the top of the stairs by another route, caught up with them coming up out of the hatch. There, they promptly crossed the deck and tossed the corpse over the rail without so much as a "we commit this body to the deep."

I really thought my opinion of Ra's couldn't get any lower, but that did it. I mean, okay, Joker is worse. Today, tomorrow, and always, Joker is worse. It's not like anyone can unseat him on the dangerous, mean, and downright evil throne. Jack wouldn't need a reason half this practical to off a henchman—or half a dozen henchmen, for that matter. Snuffing a single one for something as practical as an "obey or die" demonstration to keep the hostages in line, that would probably strike him as constipated. Pathetically in-the-box thinking, unworthy of the name of villainy. But at least Joker would a) have the balls to do it himself instead of staffing it out to the guy's *buddies*, and b) once he did go on a "Just 'cause it's Thursday" killing spree, any henchmen who survived the slaughter would bow their fucking heads for a minute before tossing the bodies overboard. And even if that last is technically a bit of conjecture on my part, I know for a fact that they'll take that minute to raise their glasses to the deceased the next time they hit the Iceberg. They'll call for a moment of silence and ask everyone to drink a toast to Hilarity Hank, Wide Tooth Tipling, Smiley Stevens, or Dental Plan Dan. They would NOT toss those men over the rail like a used sandwich wrapper.

Or, in the case of the minions of the *SS Hairdo*, toss them overboard like a sandwich wrapper with a good half of a Katz pastrami still inside. That's judging by the *fins* I saw approaching the ship once the late minion's body hit the water.

I looked away, disgusted, and that's when I noticed one of the Demons doing that little torque walk that means my visit to the Impressionist wing is about to get a whole lot easier. I couldn't believe my luck! I was looking at a Ra's flunky that, within a

minute or two, was going to separate himself from his buddies and be walking alone with no more awareness of his surroundings than a museum guard with a full bladder. I followed, I waited, I cursed the lack of drugged claws in Angelica's hair barrette, and then, deciding the minion was a little tall for a traditional sleeper hold, I opted for a bokator variation Sensei taught me. I hadn't used it in years, the claws are just more efficient, but it's like riding a bike. Once you've done it twice, it comes back before Abdul can get to his dagger.

Minion dispatched, I took his clothes and left him tied up in Angelica's baggage compartment in bus 3. Then I headed back to the mess. I was still taped down into Angelica's double-A Victor/Victoria body, so for once, my lack of complexity wasn't an issue. The headdress covered enough of my face that I could risk it, and I'd noticed the minions didn't talk among themselves in front of the hostages, so I wouldn't have to worry about my voice. The only worry, amazingly, was my thin, hairless wrists, which I hid as best I could by carrying a box. I worked my way slowly and quietly to the back of the room, and in my peripheral vision, I saw Tim was doing the same. I was dying to know how he made me, but we had little time and other priorities. I figured I'd find out later.

"Boy, glad to see you," he whispered as soon as I was close enough to hear. "I didn't know if you'd made it out of Gotham, and it seems like we're too far out to use O-Com without a booster. But look, if I can get some alone time in the radio room, I know I can rig something up. Bounce off the satellite or even tap into the League system in Atlantis, 'cause assuming this is the Atlantic, we should be close, right?"

I blinked. Alone time in the radio room to bounce an OraCom signal off a satellite? What did he think this was, Mission Impossible?

"Look, if you can get to a radio or something before me," he babbled on, "we've got to find out if a guy called *Anton Geist* is still in custody. I think if he'd escaped I'd have heard something about it. But y'know, I don't always, eh... I'm not exactly B, and I don't always keep up with *every* report and read through every single bulletin as thoroughly as I should."

That's the mythos in action. Even someone like Tim can buy into it: The Uber-Bat, Batman the omniscient and infallible. "I'm not exactly B" because it is theoretically possible that Ra's broke Anton Geist out of prison and I didn't know about it.

"Tim, I saw the demonstration," I told him, so he wouldn't have to explain about Geist. "I'll find out what I can, but in the meantime, do you have any idea when you—or *we*—were exposed, assuming it's true that we were?"

"I dunno," Tim said darkly. "If the stuff is ingested, it would have to have been at one of the banquets. We were on our own for breakfast and lunch, and everybody drank something different at the cocktail party. The dinners were really the only chance they had to get to all of us putting it in food. But if it's airborne, then they could have got us at any time, although my guess is they would have done it on the bus rather than expose a bunch of hotel staff with us. Not that Ra's cares about waiters and bus boys, but it'd be a trail that could expose what he'd done. Couple months from now, one of them goes swimming and all of a sudden they stop breathing air, that's gonna be noticed."

"I agree," I said quietly.

I'll admit I'm a selfish bitch. Worried as I was about Tim and the others, my first concern was for myself. I had attended the first dinner, but not the second. I hadn't been gassed with the others on the bus, but I had been in that baggage compartment for part of their journey, and I had no idea how much air it might share with the passenger section. If an airborne agent was introduced in the buses once I was inside, it was possible I'd been exposed. If it was in the food at the first dinner, it was a certainty. I admit it, I'm selfish. The risk of becoming a water-breather blotted out every other consideration, for a moment. Suffer some little mishap, suck in a little water, and be torn away from my life in Gotham? From Bruce and Alfred, from the Catibat, from prowling... For a moment, it just seemed too awful to even contemplate. All I could think of was Lorena, the woman I'd met in Sub Diego when I made that delivery for Aquaman.

And that's when it hit me: Lorena. That's what had been bothering me since Ra's demonstration with the dead-fish minion!

When I went to Sub Diego, they were racing the clock. The first wave of women who had been pregnant when they became water-breathers were starting to give birth—to normal, non-mutated, air-breathing babies. They had rigged up two pressurized rooms in the old navy base where they could accommodate an air-breather for about three hours. It wasn't a long-term solution, Lorena stressed. It took them almost four days of prep time to achieve those three hours. I waited in one of those rooms while my mini-sub was unloaded and refueled, and I was shocked when Lorena joined me there.

Aquaman had asked her to greet me personally, and it became clear that he was grooming her to take over leadership of the community. That part wasn't surprising at all. The shock was that she was breathing the same air I was. She said she could take it for a few minutes at a time. But after those few minutes elapsed, she hadn't reacted anything like the minion. Her breathing became a bit labored, which she ignored for nearly a minute while she went on talking, the way you would over a mild cough at a dinner party. She put a hand to her chest then, still talking, the same dinner party performance, but now it was like something she'd eaten hadn't agreed with her but she didn't want to let on and offend the hostess. Then she swallowed a little and excused herself, very politely and articulately, before stepping outside for a breath of not-air.

No gasping, no flopping, no screaming or convulsing. Even allowing for the fact that she'd had months to adapt and the minion was taking his first non-breaths as a non-air-breather, it was completely, off the scale wrong.

"Tim, did anything strike you as suspicious about the minion dying that way?" I whispered.

"Yeah, in fact, that's why I'm not all that panicked about my future life as a fish," he answered. "If you're not getting oxygen, you should turn blue. That guy was bright pink. And I remember that from when B had me studying poisons. It's what happens if the oxygen is building up in your system because your cells can't absorb it. It's a sign of cyanide poisoning, not asphyxiation. Or, considering where we are and who we're dealing with, probably something a lot older than cyanide that nobody uses anymore. But, y'know, poison."

"And not the Geist mutation like Ra's is pretending," I added hopefully.

"Right. On paper, makes sense. I just don't want to gargle to test it, y'know?"

"Yes. I do."

"So I was thinking, if we can get a piece of the body before we get out of here, we can confirm it. Any poisons he ingested will be in the tissue, and—"

"Um, no, that's not going to be doable," I told him.

Although... I remembered those fins I saw breaking the surface around the body, and I started to wonder just what would happen to a shark that ate a poisoned minion.

"Good, you're together," Arthur announced, finding Vulko and Valerina in his office. "That will save time. Valerina, pull the domestic intelligence reports this time, we're going over them together, line by line. Vulko, I want you to prepare for a League visitor. No *fuss*. At this stage, it's not even certain he's coming, but if he does, it will be all business and no ceremony. Understood?"

Vulko took a deep breath, as he always did before reciting a well-known rubric:

"Your majesty is well aware that agreements were made and assurances given before all that Justice League equipment was installed in the palace. The only way to justify such an utterly foreign presence in the very heart of Atlantean government was to recognize the League as though it were a sovereign nation; its teleporters, an embassy; and any who come into Atlantis via those teleporters, as a species of ambassador. Even so, to have the embassy of a foreign power within the palace itself is unprecedented, and still controversial among many of your ministers. To deviate from the established protocols..."

"Yes, yes," Arthur interrupted. "I am 'well aware,' Vulko, but I would like to put the rules aside this time. If it's a League emergency, we can toss all that whale shit. And if Batman comes to Atlantis, it will be on a very serious matter, even if it doesn't fit the strict definition of a League emergency. So I would like us to... pretend."

"Very well, sire," Vulko nodded. "A League emergency."

"Good. Arrange quarters with full diplomatic access and have a plasma sub at his disposal. Drain the sit room, the communication center, and at least one meeting chamber next to the barracks. And put a squad of my personal guard on stand-by."

"Are we expecting military action, sire?"

"It's not a certainty, but I want to be prepared. Which bring us to..."

He trailed off, his finger pointing absently to his desk. He froze, his eyes following the line of his finger and staring at a stack of papers.

"Sire?" Valerina prompted.

Arthur just stood there, riveted on the backlog of intelligence reports as if frozen.

"Majesty?" Vulko tried.

"*Weasley*," Arthur breathed.

Valerina glanced at Vulko.

"Kapheira," Arthur hissed.

Vulko glanced at Valerina.

"Weasley replaces Grah, Grah goes out to Kapheira."

"Your majesty, King Orin, my liege," Valerina said with a certain impatience.

"She's trying to bait me, Vulko." Arthur laughed, snapping back to his usual manner. "But that's alright, because were it not for a brilliant idea of hers... Vulko, we



"No," Batman agreed. "Particularly against an enemy that wants to wipe out the population. You said that was their aim."

"Correct. They would slaughter civilians as readily as soldiers. Old men, women and children. After the first massacres, our ancestors built Kapheira, close enough to the city that the entire population could be moved there quickly, with enough provisions to withstand a prolonged siege. You can see there's only the one keyhole entrance to defend against invasion."

"Impressive," Batman said curtly. "Does it have—"

"Atlantis technology? Yes. Not the creature comforts of the modern city, but the crucial tech, from a surfer's point of view, the one that would make it an ideal work camp, prison, or base for Ra's al Ghul. Even in ancient times, we had the ability to drain or flood enormous regions and provide a sustainable atmosphere of breathable air. Kapheira can't isolate individual rooms like the palace, but as one great chamber, the central core can be drained and filled with air. It was made to be a second Atlantis, after all, and the choice of atmospheres is simply a part of our culture."

"How do we take it?" Batman asked.

"With some difficulty."

There's this thing that cats do whenever it's feeding time or playtime and we stupid humans aren't getting the message. They'll go right to the feet and nudge, poke, and steer around the ankles until they get us moving in the right direction. All cats do it, even the big ones. And it can be a little disconcerting the first time a full-grown leopard gives you the nudge.

It's even more disconcerting when a *hammerhead shark* does it, but that's what was happening now. A shark, a swordfish, something else big that might have been a tuna. That's really all I could see, but I think there were more snouts down there, giving me the feline nudge-and-bump.

Before hitting the water myself, I'd heard you flash on every movie you've ever seen when you see that fin coming at you. Based on my own experience, however, there is only *one* movie and only one scene in that movie: the nude chick at the beginning of *Jaws*. No violins, though, no mood music of any kind. So it doesn't seem like a movie you're remembering, it seems like a premonition. No violins, just that image of her being pulled under, playing in a loop in your head. And then, fin disappears under the water and... nudge-bump.

Right under the soles of my feet. Nudge-bump. Then another one behind my knee, bump-poke. And then simultaneously, under both feet pushing up and behind my ass pushing forward. I was being hoisted up to where I was on my back, about two-thirds out of the water most of the time, and being propelled in some very definite direction.

Now, on dry land, it's easy to see this was Aquaman's handiwork, but at the time, in the moment, it takes a lot longer to get past that what-the-hell reaction than you might think. I was in the water, being propelled that way for what seemed like hours, and in that time, my clearest thoughts were the third-degree sunburn I was getting on my forearms as I held them up to shield my eyes, and yelling at the swordfish to please be careful what part he pokes with.

After several hours of this, the fishy-back transport slowed, and a few minutes later, I began to hear a different kind of noise mingling with the surf... Boats! I heard BOATS!

Valerina had met several Justice League visitors to Atlantis, but she had never greeted one before. Usually the king himself met any colleagues at the transporter, and if he couldn't do it in person, the job fell to the Prime Consular. But today, since "all that whale shit" (a.k.a. formal diplomatic protocol) had been set aside, Valerina was sure Arthur would meet this Batman in person. He certainly intended to, but then the messages started arriving over the sonar web, and since neither she nor Vulko could hear the dolphin's report, one of them would have to meet Batman and bring him to the com center.

Vulko was the Prime Consular, so his going would have kept the very protocols they were setting aside—at least, that was the excuse Arthur gave. But there was an exchange of looks with Vulko when he said it, an exchange that made Valerina roll her eyes. It was quite obvious they thought Batman would simply like her better, and as she waited, she hoped he would confine his "liking" to leering, like Plastic Man did, and not be a grabber like Green Arrow.

I washed up in the quaintest harbor town you ever saw: Horta. I knew it was called Horta because right there on the dock was this sprawling mural where visitors would leave pictorial signatures. On the sidewalk, there was a cute little map left by "Toby, Geraldine, Roger, Kevin, Rebecca, Gene, and Don," indicating they had left Norway, represented by their flag, heading for Antigua, indicated by a flag, with the dotted line of their progress broken at a little dot with an arrow pointing to it, labeled "Horta."

Other drawings, graffiti, and flags made it clear that the island saw its share of English-speaking visitors (so it was going to be a lot easier communicating with the locals than it had been with the fish) and also that Horta was on the island of Faial in the Azores, and that Pete's Café Sport was the place to go for the best gin and tonic in the region.

I figured a bar was also the best place to go for a phone, and a sailor's bar, the best place for a girl without I.D. to get a little assistance without a lot of bureaucratic entanglements. I was quite right. Pete's Café Sport is one of those places with twin brothers all over the world. All over the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and right up into the Keys, anywhere boats dock, there's a little spot like this, the walls plastered with flags and signed dollar bills—signed so you know it's yours, and left here when you're flush, so if you're broke the next time you're in port, you can take your dollar off the wall and get a drink.

The bartender was a sucker for a dripping stranger with a winning smile, as expected. His phone wasn't a candidate to rig up the OraCom and bounce a signal over the satellite (or whatever that nonsense was that Tim was spouting), but it was perfectly capable of reaching the manor. I could tell Alfred I was safe, and he could get a message through to Bruce.

Well... he looked. As soon as Batman's form solidified, his eyes scanned the room incredibly fast, from the door to the light fixtures to the technicians at the control console, and then they zeroed in on Valerina. Standing apart from the equipment, she was the one person in the room who did not seem to have any obvious function, other than, presumably, to greet him. He looked her up and down with a vague air of... something. It wasn't quite judgmental, but Valerina had a definite sense of being "sized up"—and against a very strict measure. Yet the words that followed were polite enough:

"Good afternoon."

Valerina hid her amusement in a welcoming smile. It was the gravelly voice Arthur used whenever he quoted Orlan I, the ponderous gravel that made everything sound so deathly serious—but it instantly put her at ease about the possibility of being leered at, drooled over, or pinched.

"Welcome to Atlantis, Batman," she pronounced with the punctilious elocution of her school days. "I am Valerina, personal aide to King Orin. His Majesty is sorry he couldn't meet you himself, but a message is coming in that he has to attend to personally."

Batman fell into easy step alongside her, and they talked without social pleasantries as she led him to the communication center.

"A legitimate message or another diversion?" he asked in that deep gravel. "So far, Ra's al Ghul has been quite successful devising ways to command Aquaman's attention without his realizing."

"Resourceful he may be," Valerina mused—in a tone that was strangely reminiscent of Selina's whenever she dismissed "the Hairdo." "But I doubt he can pass himself off as a dolphin. King Orin placed the sealife in the mid-Atlantic on alert as soon as he became aware of your situation, Batman. The report His Majesty is now receiving is the first word we have received from them. And the phin-to-phin sonar relays have kept Atlantis informed in this way for thousands of years before your inefficient surface communications. Our dolphin sonar is four times faster than your satellites."

"Under water," Batman conceded, the edge of his lip twitching in an odd manner at the conclusion of the statement.

"Yes... under water," Valerina replied with a coy smile. "That's a given here. As I said before, 'Welcome to Atlantis.'"

And on that perfectly-timed line, they stepped through the doorway into the communication center.

"We found them," Arthur announced without acknowledging Batman's arrival or turning from the giant viewscreen he was facing. "Bring up the sea map again," he told an aide, and then only half-turning in Batman's direction, he said "A ship in this region, roughly 35 ¼ 32 north by 28 ¼ 26 west, is tossing off bodies, one alive and one... not. The fish are bringing them to the nearest populated island—Can we zoom in on that region?—Here, in the middle of the Azores."

Batman grunted. As Aquaman continued, Batman subtly placed a finger to his belt to silence the vibration of an incoming message, and just as subtly, placed his hand to his ear to concentrate on the in-cowl receiver. Instantly, an indicator light on the console flashed discreetly. The aide next to Aquaman reached out to hit a button under it, but Aquaman grabbed his wrist, a smirk creeping over his otherwise fixed features.

The light was a warning that a foreign transmission had infiltrated the com center, which Arthur immediately surmised was Batman's. Such a transmission should not have been possible inside the palace, especially in the fortified core of the communication center; but, Arthur thought as his smirk widened, this *was* Batman. He tapped a series of controls to tell the system to ignore the transmission, and continued his report.

"We're trying to make contact with the local law enforcement to inspect the body. The sharks aren't able to provide meaningful detail for purposes of identification, naturally, but the local authorities shouldn't have much trouble once we can get them there to take a look. But so far, we've only been able to reach the Coast Guard and—"

"The dead body is a minion of Ra's al Ghul," Batman interrupted. "Executed as a demonstration to frighten the hostages."

Arthur turned slowly from the map to face Batman. A brief, silent moment passed between them, and Aquaman knew that there was more to come. Batman's eyes flicked almost imperceptibly to each of the room's inhabitants, then back to the sea king. Aquaman cleared his throat and glanced around the room imperiously.

"Everyone, let us have the room, please."

The aides and technicians at the various consoles glanced at each other in a moment of communal hesitation, but one look at their king's face and they all silently stood and exited the room through various doorways. Valerina moved toward the archway where she and Batman had entered, but was stopped by Arthur's hand gently touching her elbow. Once the rest of the crew had filed out, Batman glanced at Valerina again, then back to Aquaman, the hint of a question passing over his stoic face.

Valerina had been present for enough trade negotiations and cultural summits to realize what was happening. Often, the most intense debates were carried out in complete silence, each participant staring at the others for minutes—or hours—as a battle of wills was waged without words. Arguments were offered, decisions reached and concessions made, all in absolute silence. She'd seen her king reduce titans of Atlantean industry to puddles of acquiescence in these silent confrontations, but she also sensed this Batman knew the battlefield as well as Arthur did, and was, perhaps, just as adept with its weapons. She began to wonder just how long these giants would stand face to face, battling in utter silence... when it stopped.

The whole thing lasted all of two seconds. After that brief moment, Batman returned his attention to the screen and continued as if there had been no interruption at all.

"The live one is Selina. She's on the island of Faial, in Horta, the port city. She needs some transportation."

"You're talking to her now?" Arthur asked.

Valerina was shocked to see no change in King Orin's demeanor. Usually, after one of those staring contests, a satisfied air settled over the throne room, now that the industrialist, ambassador, or minister accepted the wisdom of the crown's position and agreed to stop being such a stiff-finned perch. But not with this Batman. Arthur simply turned his attention back to the viewscreen, all business. She guessed, from the speed of the altercation and the lack of an aftermath, that the confrontation she just witnessed must be routine for these particular Leaguers.

“No, she was able to call home,” Batman was saying, “and Oracle is relaying her message.” He turned slightly to Valerina before adding, “We non-dolphins can sometimes manage to—”

He stopped suddenly, his face frozen in a mask of shock, and the fingers over his ear shifted, as if trying to tune in another frequency.

“Oracle, repeat that last part,” he said finally.

There was a pause, and Valerina saw something she never expected to see on the face of a man who so obviously rivaled her king in intensity and focus: Batman’s mouth dropped open slightly. It only happened for a moment, and just as suddenly, the jaw snapped shut and the stoic intensity returned. But Valerina knew she had just witnessed something that few on the entire planet had ever seen: Batman had been surprised by something.

The pause continued.

Valerina glanced at Arthur, wondering if this was normal or if something should be done, but Arthur didn’t see. He was simply watching Batman and waiting.

“Well?” he asked finally.

“She says... Ubu is there.”

## CHAPTER 8: KOBAYASHI MARU

One advantage to being captured with scientists, they all knew their Star Trek.

On the ship, Tim had realized that when they got to wherever they were going, his cover was blown. DEMON was a big operation and Ra's al Ghul couldn't oversee everything himself, but it was a good bet that anything he did *involving Gotham*, he did personally. As soon as Ra's saw Tim Drake among the prisoners, he was busted.

So Tim had segued from looking for an opening where all the scientists could escape, to one where he personally could get away, reasoning that he could come back for the rest of them more easily if he wasn't dead. No opening came, until the ship came to a halt at a big platform, like an oilrig. Tim and the others were ushered off, and there was this big set of double doors inside some kind of pressurized tube, like the Martian dechyon chambers he'd seen at the Watchtower. A few of the scientists speculated that it was a *hydrolator*, an *aqualator*, or a *mare superficies submergalator*—which all amounted to an elevator to take them under water. That guess was confirmed when the doors opened and Ubu stepped out of them, swallowing hard like his ears had just popped. Ubu standing around with the reception committee... Tim's fears multiplied by the minute. Where Ubu was, Ra's couldn't be far behind, and that meant his time was running out.

Fortunately, Ubu didn't seem to be interested in the prisoners. He had a few words with one of the guards, and looked the scientists over in one sweeping glance. Tim had the impression of a preoccupied foreman on a loading dock, pulled away from his crap game to sign for a delivery of crates. "Whatcha got here? Manifest says you got three busloads of scientists from Gotham... check." He wasn't taking time to count them, he just signed the clipboard and went back to his game behind packing crate thirteen... Or in Ubu's case, ordering the minions to gas up a service boat from the ship.

As long as Ubu's focus was there, it was easy enough to keep from being spotted. But Tim knew that was only a temporary reprieve. As soon as his boat was ready, Ubu would probably turn back and give the Gotham prisoners his full attention, so Tim maneuvered, and maneuvered, until he was in the first group to be loaded into the elevator. It worked, as far as avoiding Ubu, but it was not cost-free. E.J. Meadows had maneuvered right along with him.

One *disadvantage* of being captured with scientists, they're a little too observant. Dr. Meadows certainly was, and Tim was beginning to wonder if keeping Robin a secret from her might be a bigger challenge than keeping Tim Drake's presence a secret from Ra's.

Her logic, given the limited data she had, was flawless: it was not a good idea to be in the first group corralled into that elevator when they had no idea what was in store for them on the other side. She wanted to know what Tim thought he was doing—which he couldn't exactly tell her, since he was trying to keep *Ubu* from recognizing *Tim Drake*, when Tim Drake should not even know that particular minion was called Ubu, let alone be in any particular danger from him, like, oh, say, Ubu recognizing him as BATMAN'S SIDEKICK. It was a no-win situation, the ultimate no win situation for

a crimefighter, and in a moment of desperation—while a minion shoved his back to get him moving forward into the elevator, a seagull squawked overhead and Ubu turned to look at it, and Dr. Meadows said “Well?” expecting an answer—Tim blurted the first words that came into his head: Kobayashi Maru.

Meadows’s eyes flashed up at him for a second, blazing with recognition. What she thought he meant, Tim had no idea. But she took the blurted phrase as an explanation (and a good one!) She thought he had a real plan. As the elevator pressurized, it took Tim a moment to figure out what he had actually said...

Kobayashi maru. It was a no-win situation. (But no-win because of the way it was set up, not because a megalomaniac had kidnapped you alongside the smokin’ hot lady scientist you were trying to impress.) The Kobayashi Maru was a test at Starfleet Academy, introduced in the second movie, *Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan*, Paramount Pictures, 1982... Starring Ricardo Montalban as Khan Noonien Singh, who could best be describe as a ham-tastic, centuries-old megalomaniac that Ra’s would recognize in the mirror... Okay, maybe that’s why it popped out of his mouth just then. But none of that would have brought a twinkle to E.J. Meadows’s eyes, so what *else* was it?

A no-win situation... a no-win situation... The Kobayashi Maru was a no-win because it was designed to be, because of the way the rules were set up, and the only way to beat it was to change the rules... to cheat... Dr. Meadows thought that somehow Tim had a plan to *cheat* that involved being the first ones on (or off) the elevator?

Okay, well, he’d think of something. The elevator had only started to move, after all...

Burj al Bahr al Ghul.

Burj al Bahr al Ghul... It didn’t exactly trip off the tongue, but it would do. They had to call the new sea base *something* to distinguish it from the other castles and compounds DEMON maintained around the world.

Ra’s accepted the completed inventory from N’lvar and wrote the new name portentously across the top. Burj al Bahr al Ghul, the sea fortress of the Demon. N’lvar would make it known to the others. It was a pity he had not selected the name before Ubu left, for Ubu could have spread the word to the other bases. For now, there would be another cycle of messages coming in for “Atlantia al Ghul,” “Aquatica al Ghul,” and “East Ghul,” but soon, the official designation would be circulated and there would be uniformity once again.

Ra’s looked over the inventory of the base, as they had found it...

He had seen worse. The fortress had been abandoned for a hundred years, at least, and when Ra’s moved into castles empty for half the time, he did not expect more than cobwebs. Underwater, he fully expected the salt to have corroded anything of value that the Atlaneans left behind. So he was quite pleased to see that a small armory remained, with six score of spears and eight score of armor still intact. Clearly, what Atlanteans built, they built to withstand the sea, but even Ra’s had not expected an arsenal of this quality.

After several minutes of creaking decent, Tim still didn't have any ideas, but Dr. Meadows started crying out, bending and unbending her knees and elbows, and intermixed with the cries of pain were the syllables "Ko... Ko, ko, ko... ayashi... ma, ma, maru."

Tim followed suit, at least as far as bending and unbending his joints as if he was in considerable pain. Another of their fellow passengers told the DEMON guards that Doctors Meadows and Drake were afflicted with compression sickness, similar to the bends, and would need medical attention as soon as they reached bottom.

Maybe it was luck, maybe they just happened to get assigned the two most gullible minions in the history of DEMON to escort them down in the elevator, or maybe the minions weren't all that comfortable with their own ears popping as the elevator pressurized. Maybe they liked the idea of visiting whatever medical facility was set up down below and having a few candid words with the doctor.

The doors opened, and the guards seemed to have a whispered argument about who was going where. Eventually, the loser marched the other scientists off to Location Unknown, which Tim guessed would resemble every other DEMON dungeon he'd been in over the years. The winner marched "Doctors Drake and Meadows" to the med facility.

It was a risk, being *that* good a fighter out of costume and in front of a civilian, but it wasn't the kind of opportunity Tim could let pass. There hadn't been an opening as they walked through the halls, there was always another minion or two in sight who would notice a prisoner breaking away from a guard. But once they got to the med lab and Tim saw it was cut out of a cavern, with nobody there but their one guard and the doctor in sight, no cameras, nobody in the hallway looking in. It was too good a chance to pass up. After the initial probings, the guard actually left them alone with the doctor—or whatever passed for a doctor among DEMON minions. It was way too good a chance to let pass, so Tim made his move as soon as the guy's attention was on Dr. Meadows knee.

He grabbed a shoulder, spun the doctor around, and gave a sharp throat-poke to keep him from crying out. But then, before he could land a knockout punch, Meadows was kicking the guy in the back! Made him forget Tim completely and turn back to face her, after which, she kicked him twice in the stomach and slammed her fist into his nose.

Tim stared.

Swallowed.

And figured at least he didn't have to explain why an ordinary kid like "Tim Drake, Hudson freshman, was such a good fighter.

"Here, we can gag him and tie him up with this," she said, tearing the lining out of her skirt.

Tim's eyes widened.

"That was a great escape plan!" she said admiringly.

"What was?" Tim squeaked.

"Kobayashi Maru. Head into the neutral zone, even though it seems like the wrong move, far too dangerous, total suicide; that explained the elevator. You'd only do

something that cocky if you had an ace up your sleeve. And they went into the neutral zone to answer a distress signal... beam the injured into the med lab... Voila."

She gestured around the med lab like this must be what Tim had in mind the entire time.

"Oh, yeah, right," he nodded dully.

Put that way, it did sound like a pretty good plan, and he puffed out his chest a little as if it really had played out just as he envisioned it. They were hardly free, but he wasn't looking at a face-to-face with Ra's al Ghul any time soon, and he hadn't exposed Robin. So far, so good.

"And you! Great moves," he grinned. "I mean, wow, big guy like that, Seven of Nine versus The Rock."

"Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. I was on sabbatical there a couple years back, didn't like to waste my free time on samba lessons."

"Whoa," was all Tim could think to say.

"Seven of Nine," Meadows said sourly, "Seven of Nine got her ass kicked in that episode."

"I stand corrected," Tim said quickly. Her tone was one he'd heard before, in that team-up with Lady Shiva. Robin had inadvertently ruffled Warrior Pride, comparing her to an Amazon "lightweight" she found far inferior. Tim threw in the same "excuse me" expression that made Shiva smirk, but E.J. Meadows's attention had moved on.

"Hey, look at this scanner," she said, tipping it on its side to look underneath.

"I don't think you should do that," Tim said—sounding exactly like his former self when Shiva opened the casket full of ghost-ninjas.

"It's not electrical. Some kind of magnetic field generator. Gibson was playing with this idea a few years ago, but he couldn't produce enough power to boil water let alone... this is some serious computer gear, all powered by magnetronics!"

"Uh huh, but we're still prisoners," Tim noted.

She waved him away like "Who cares" and started poking the magnetic field with her fingernail.

"Recovering the scientists is the immediate problem," Batman declared, "but it's not the only one. Ra's has to be cleared out of that fortress before he can do real harm."

"Define 'real harm,'" Arthur said sharply.

"This is a warlord mentality we're dealing with. A warlord of another era, and he's taken a fortress."

"Strictly speaking, he's 'moved into' a fortress. It's not like there was anything in his way but some coral and saltwater trout."

"That's not the point. It's not that he'd be flush with victory, it's that he will find himself in surroundings built around the siege and conquest mentality he understands. I believe that right now his only interest in Kapheira is as a prison camp. It's a way he can keep those scientists in his power, hidden from the world, and pass off anything they create as his own invention, mined from the sea floors. But it won't end there."

"You're saying he'll attack Atlantis?"

"Before long, he'll look around and realize you don't build a place like that unless you have enemies. Every wall of every room will remind him, everything he touches will whisper it in his ear: *Atlantis has enemies*. He's surrounded by your technology, worlds better than anything he has at home, but even at that, he knows it's the ugly stepsister. The real prize is here. And you have enemies. Enemies strong enough to chase you into that fortress."

"So not only has your 'Demon's Head' taken up residence in the local mountain fortress, but you're saying he's also moving toward the Shadow Deep with the equivalent of a long pointy stick?!"

"'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' He'll consider it. He won't know who or what they are yet, but he will have the thought—the chain of thoughts—as certain as death: *I'm in a fortress built by the people of Atlantis to protect themselves. Atlantis is a great power. I would like to rule it. Atlantis has enemies, I will find them and form an alliance.*"

"You don't just send a text message down the Mariana Trench, Bruce. Even I wouldn't know how to contact the Shadow Deep, if they even exist anymore."

"But if you wanted to find out, you have people you would put on it. Ra's is no different—and he is much more patient. He won't have found the hole yet, he won't even have thought about it, he has other irons in the fire... but very soon he will get the idea. And once he does, there will be some third tier DEMON squad assigned to research it. Two squads, actually. One to find the hole and one to sharpen the stick."

"..."

"..."

"My least favorite part of the job," Arthur said hoarsely. "Saving the villainous fools from themselves."



## CHAPTER 9: TRADING PIECES

“Come again?” Barbara asked, rescrambling the signal for the fourth time since Catwoman dropped the last bombshell.

*...:Oracle, this is getting ridiculous;... the hushed phone-voice stated without a hint of static or white noise obscuring the weariness of the speaker. ...:I've told you everything I know, and I can't find out anything more if you keep making me repeat what I've said already;...*

“There are procedures, Catwoman. B asked me to confirm your report. On the OraCom, in the city, it's no problem. I'd have the traceback signature, I'd know it's you. This is a... what did you say it was? A public telephone in a sports bar?”

*...:Close enough. But it's not a public phone, it's Pete's phone, and he's letting me use it, in his office, to call home and tell you all I'm not dead. He didn't figure on you calling me back—neither of us figured on you calling me back ten minutes later for this inquisition. Now, I'm in a little office in back of the bar, and there's just a small half-window where I can see out to the tables, and that's where I can see—yep, that's Ubu. Looks like his drink order came. So if you don't mind, I'd like to get out there and find out what the hell is going on;...*

“Catwoman, wait! No! It's a trap!”

*...:You know what, O? If Ra's knew I'd be here—if he actually planned on my being undercover at the conference, getting captured and winding up on that ship, being discovered and forced to jump off at the precise point where this island was the nearest place for a school of rescue fish to bring me, and he had Ubu here waiting, so as soon as I found this bar and came into the back room to make a phone call, they could spring the trap on me—if that's the situation, he deserves to win. I'll call you when I know more;...*

I could understand Barbara's disbelief. “Ubu walks into a bar” is the start of a joke, not an aside during a frantic call from the boss's girlfriend to send a plane, a boat, or a caped colleague to pick her up in the middle of the Atlantic. But Ubu *DID* walk into the bar while I had Barbara on the line, and it just seemed like the sort of thing Batman would want to know about.

Of course, from Ubu's point of view, “Catwoman walked into a bar” is probably the start of a joke too.

Some cosmic force was definitely having fun with one of us, and I wasn't sure who was going to be the punchline. Although our relative dampness argued that I was there to plague Ubu and not the other way around. Pete had supplied me with a Café Sport t-shirt and let me make a wrapskirt out of a beach towel, so I was able to jettison the last of the DEMON threads, and the only part of me that still dripped was my hair. Ubu, on the other hand, was a walking puddle machine.

He'd settled at a square table near the wall, a small chair on one side that would have been toothpicks if he tried to sit in it, and a sturdy booth on the other where he could sit and drip-drip-drip a little river along the edge of the sloped floor and out the door. Pete brought him several small plates of local delicacies, and he was

concentrating on his food a little too much to notice me strolling up to the table, until it was too late:

“Hey, Ubs,” I said cheerily, settling into the rickety chair across from him.

He looked startled but far from hostile. Wearing the bar t-shirt, he might have thought I was a particularly friendly waitress. I decided to jog his memory a little, so I peered into the plate nearest him.

“What have we got there, fried songbirds? Looks tasty.” And then, even though I don’t stretch the theme to the point where crispy canaries are a tasty snack, I picked up one of the fried birdies and had a nibble. Then I purred.

“You are the Detective’s feline concubine,” he said finally.

“Meow,” and a twiddling fingertip wave confirmed my identity, and that was it for a minute or so. I got the impression Ubu was a lot more comfortable standing behind Ra’s like a floor lamp and letting the cadaver do all the talking. I obviously had to take the initiative.

“Is there any possible way to file a name change with you guys?” I asked seriously. “Couldn’t I be, I don’t know, ‘She with whom locks are pointless’ or maybe ‘the lumpy purple one with the ears’ or ‘watch out for those claws?’ Something that’s more about me than him.”

“What do you want, woman?” Ubu asked (a fair question, actually, but not one I intended to answer).

“Oh, nothing much. Run into somebody you know in a place like this, far from home, middle of nowhere, it’s natural to come over and say ‘Hi.’” I looked around the bar theatrically. “Anybody else I know in the neighborhood? I mean usually wherever you are, old man Ra’s is flitting around, isn’t he? But I don’t, uh... Nope, I don’t see him. You ‘gone rogue,’ so to speak?”

He just stared at me. If I didn’t know he spoke English, I would have thought he didn’t follow a word I was saying.

“No, what am I saying?” I laughed. “DEMONs don’t go rogue! The loyalty of the Ubu is absolute, right? Rather like the focus of the crimefighter on his task.”

There I paused to grin wider. It’s not often I get to go all Jervis, spouting nonsense that way, but this was a very particular type of cat-and-mouse game: the more playful I was, the more confused he would get, and the more confused the mouse, the sooner it runs into a corner where it shouldn’t.

“Any order, no matter how hare-brained, is your happiest duty to perform, right? No matter how paranoid or ego-driven or infomercial-inspired... If His Greatness demands that 10,000 lots of Oxyclean be dumped into San Francisco Bay, Ubu shall oblige without question. If celebrity chef Rocco DeSpirito must be slain for the glory of the DEMON, he shall be slain and Ubu shall not question why, right?”

He was still staring, but it was a different stare. It was the stare of a mouse that feels the hard crease of a corner at his back.

“There were several errands to be run on land,” he said abruptly. “Rather than dispatch many men and weaken the undersea contingent, I volunteered to see to them myself.”

“There’s an undersea contingent,” I noted curiously. “Now that’s interesting.”

I helped myself to another of his fried canaries, and again I meowed. Ubu sputtered, but not because I was eating his lunch.

"I revealed nothing you did not already know, Feline Concubine of the Gotham Detective. I stated only that my being here is no act of desertion. I am on this island on the Master's business."

"Riiight," I said with a wink. "Pete, could we get a few more gin and tonics over here? And maybe a plate of those conch fritters? Protesting too much is thirsty work, isn't it, Ubu?"

He definitely had that cornered mouse look now, and I thought it was time to let him run a little, thinking he'd found an escape. I assured him that I was never there, he was never there, what happens in Horta stays in Horta. I let him eat the rest of his lunch without stealing any more of his canaries, and I even gave him one of my fritters when they arrived. He didn't exactly relax, but he wasn't on high alert either—which made the whole episode with the aqua-cops pretty sad.

There I was, letting the Ubu mouse feel he'd maneuvered out of the corner and start scurrying around until he would drop more crumbs like "the undersea contingent" and "errands to run on land." There was something about a hot spring on a nearby island, but before I could press for details, the whole bar got darker. The light streaming in from the open door was suddenly blocked by a phalanx of them: six figures all together, four in the uniforms I'd seen in Atlantis, and two that looked like the local coast guard. Pete's isn't the biggest bar in the world, and six men coming in *in a pack* fills the space in a very intimidating fashion. Ubu freaked.

I'm not even sure they intended to capture him when they came in the door. They might have just been sent as my ride, but once Ubu started fighting to NOT get captured, well... aqua-cops are just like the regular kind: If you toss a stick and say "Fetch, Rover! Go get it, boy!" they're going to chase that stick.

I stayed out of it. Normally I like getting in on the action, but this one was such a mess. I don't know if it was the Atlantean fighting styles or Ubu's bulk, but it just didn't look like fun. I figured I'd fight later. And if I didn't get a chance by the end of this little adventure, Bruce is always ready to accommodate me with a little sparring in the cave... although, after a DEMON case, chances are he'll have had his fill, in which case, we'll just have to find some other way to work off the physical tension. Meow.

By the time my thoughts progressed that far, the Atlanteans were dragging Ubu into what they called a plasma sub, and the coast guard guys were trying to sign me up for a battery of tests before I went with them. I'm not sure how Barbara managed to mangle the Anton Geist information, but it should have been perfectly obvious to everyone that I was still breathing air. Even if there was still an asterisk on Tim and the scientists, and even if the jury was still out on what killed the minion, I was standing right there, watching the aqua-cops pummel Ubu. I was *breathing air!* Case closed, let me sign your little paper and get me on that sub.

Ubu stared ahead, modulated his breathing, and appeared to zone out. To the Feline (one of those elements in his surroundings he was finding it difficult to tune out) it must appear he was separating himself from any awareness of his surroundings. He was a prisoner preparing himself to undergo whatever tortures his captors might bring, for nothing, but nothing, could compel him to betray the name of Ra's al Ghul.

The very suggestion that he could have defected was an obscenity. There *was* a need for one at the sea base to go to the surface and supervise the delivery of the captives. There *was* a need to call the compound in Sri Lanka, and The Great One decreed it should be done from land and not from the arriving ship, for nothing should be left to chance, no stray transmission that could be intercepted by the Detective and lead him to Ra's present location. There *was* a volcanic caldera on the nearby island of San Miguel rumored to be a mystic, life-giving spring, and The Demon's Head wished it to be surveyed, should it be suitable for a Lazarus Pit. There *was absolutely no need* to send three men when these jobs could all be completed by a single one, and there was no reason Ubu could not be that man. Once he was on land and found the fabled hot spring to be a nothing but a fetid blowhole whose waters and steam vents reeked of sulfur, it was certainly his duty to seek out alternatives. There were a dozen islands, after all, and the sun that shone down on them was so very warm. The air was so clean and unfiltered. And the walls of the little pub where he stopped for lunch had windows that did not bend in noticeably as you approached crush depth.

It was no act of disloyalty to prefer a room where the walls did not creak and groan with the weight of an ocean. It was no act of disloyalty! He preferred walls that did not have the weight of an ocean pressing them inward towards his head. He preferred air that didn't reek of salt water and algae, where every breath didn't coat his throat with a film of mossy slime. He may have dallied a bit longer than absolutely necessary, but the walls did not creak and bend! He would have to eat whether he returned to the sea base or not, so what was the harm in taking a last meal on land, with the warm sun and the unfiltered air and the non-creaking walls?

The harm, obviously, was the accursed Feline who sat across from him now.

Of all the accursed luck! If the Detective *had* somehow gleaned Ra's al Ghul's plan and was actively searching the Atlantic, and if the Feline Concubine had, like any sensible being, found an excuse to make her way to land and there found the warm sun and unfiltered air a good enough reason to delay her return, what were the chances they would seek refuge in the same bar?! What were the chances?! And now, because of that vile woman, another thrice-damned submarine was taking him back to the ocean floor.

At least this vessel seemed better built for the purpose—though it was sacrilege to think so, and Ubu immediately chastened himself for preferring the infidel Atlantean sub to that provided by Ra's al Ghul. In order to squelch these traitorous thoughts, Ubu once again lunged forward to strangle the Feline.

Catwoman's arrival in Atlantis was very different from Batman's. The plasma sub was no transporter, and there were no formalities to be observed (or set aside) for its arrival. As far as the Atlantean Guard was concerned, it was an ordinary vehicle returning from a mission. Batman wanted to meet it, so Vulko directed him to the docking bay, where he went unescorted.

He waited alone while the receiving crews did their jobs, professionally, efficiently, and without acknowledging the visiting surfer in their midst. Before long, a sub docked... The hatch opened... An ensign stepped out and then turned back to assist a shorter figure emerging behind him...

Batman's eyes flickered up and down, inspecting Selina's form as she came into view. All vestiges of her disguise were gone, the wig, the tape distorting her figure, the clothing. Not unexpected. She wore the kind of improvised getup typical for shipwreck rescues—except for the tears and pulls around the top of her t-shirt, and the matching bruises around her neck.

Their eyes met for a long moment, which was as demonstrative as either of them were comfortable with in a docking bay full of strangers.

"What happened?" Batman asked finally, indicating the bruising on her neck by pointing to his own.

"I brought you a present," she said with a half-smirk. "He got a little rambunctious in the car."

On cue, the Atlanteans were carrying an unconscious Ubu out of the sub, a fresh bruise on his head, and his left eye going black.

Batman grunted.

He really is the sweetest, most thoughtful man in the world. Nobody understands that about him, which is how he wants it, naturally. Batman is not supposed to be sweet—but he is. He really is.

He had Alfred send my costume through the League teleporter so it was waiting for me when I got to Atlantis. Since we'd learned about the symposium, it seemed like the whole adventure had degenerated into a series of costume changes. And now, here, finally, was the costume that mattered: *MINE!* My catsuit. I was home again.

Getting to peel off that last t-shirt and slip into my own skin... meooooooooow. I felt like *me* again. For the first time since the Batcave, I felt like me. No Foundation suit, no DEMON minion, no tight waitressy t-shirt from a waterside bar... *Me*. Catwoman. Catsuit-Purple-Purring-Hissing-Scratching-Enough with the water already—I'm a cat goddamnit-Meow.

I had just pulled my hair out through the back of the cowl when the secretary came in. She said Batman and King Orin were in the situation room and I should join them as soon as I was ready.

I was ready, but I stalled for a minute, fussing with the gloves and patting down the wrinkles, just so I could talk to the new girl. That's when I learned her name was Valerina, she was the king's personal assistant, and, since formal protocols had been set aside for Batman's visit, she was our unofficial guide and go-to girl for the duration of our stay.

She seemed to think I was her equivalent in the Bat Family, and while I'd normally shut down any assumption that I was a sidekick or subordinate, I didn't in this case. When I was working, I'd always found support staff—assistants, chauffeurs, and whatnot—ready to open up to an equal. I learned about more backdoors and blindspots by letting people like Valerina think I was one of them. So, just for today...

We hit it off immediately. For someone attached to a Leaguer, even a comparatively sane one like Aquaman, she seemed amazingly grounded and sensible. She said this was her first contact with Batman, and when I asked what she thought of him, she said he seemed "a lot like King Orin." No nonsense, as she put it. I could only guess what

kind of “nonsense” she’s encountered with the other Leaguers, but preferring Batman’s manner to it certainly indicated more taste and intelligence than I’ve come to expect in places like this.

“Normally, Vulko would have the job staffing a visitor of his stature,” she told me as she led me through the maze of corridors. “At first, I thought maybe I was assigned as... Well, I shouldn’t say this, but judging by your costume, I suspect you’ll understand. I thought perhaps I was given the assignment to be a species of...”

“Eye candy?” I guessed.

“Yes, exactly. But as soon I met him, I could see that wasn’t the case. He’s very no nonsense, rather like the king in that respect. Now that he’s been with us several hours, I realize it was just... I am saying too much, but...” She paused, looked around, and continued in a whisper “From what I’ve seen, Batman scares the krill out of Vulko.”

Like I said, I liked Valerina straight away.

Ra’s looked up sharply, and made a swift gesture for the minion Denni’ to be silent.

The lights had flickered again. That was the second time in an hour, although this time, at least, they had not gone out completely. If his engineers made any error connecting his equipment to the base’s Atlantean power grid, someone would have to be flogged.

“Continue,” Ra’s said at last, once the flickering ceased.

“The prisoners are exhibiting all the expected behaviors, going through the motions of work but doing little when not directly supervised. We have identified three who seem the least resistant and are rewarding them in small ways. A pillow, an extra ration...”

“A beginning,” Ra’s said coolly. “There will always be collaborators, Denni.’ There will always be those whose ambit—”

Once again, the lights flickered.

“Whose... ambitions...” Ra’s droned on with less certainty, “will quickly override any... princip—”

This time, the lights went out completely.

I could tell we were approaching the situation room when Valerina’s easy manner faded. There were a pair of guards standing at attention at the end of the hall, but even without the closed door coming into view behind them, I would have known from her change in stride.

The guards let her enter on sight, no passwords or badges or entry of keycodes. The first thing I heard when the door opened was Batman’s voice:

“If you don’t think your men can hold him, I can make other arrangements.”

Followed by Aquaman’s:

“I didn’t say that. It is true that Atlantis has very little crime and what there is has never warranted the equivalent of a surface type of jail, but we are perfectly capable of—”

“Then what’s the problem?”

"When I got back from that *endless* relay swim around the Pacific, I told you—and kept on telling you every time you asked—that Atlantis had not been invaded. THIS, this is how you invade. Not storming the dome with a thousand men that can't breathe inside a flooded—Oh, hello, Selina, good to see you again—could never get into Atlantis as an advancing army. But get a man captured! Ubu was just brought into the heart of Atlantis!"

"Hey, that was your guys' idea," I chimed in. "It wasn't mine and it certainly wasn't Ubu's."

"Can we be so sure?" Arthur asked. "Can we absolutely certain his 'capture' was not a staged event to give him access to the inner sanctums of the palace?"

"Oh hell yes," I laughed. "You didn't see his face in that sub. He is not loving the underwater experience. I'm still not sure what he was doing in that bar, but I know he was happy there and I'll bet all the catnip in my wallet right now against all the kelp in yours, he would still be there if your men had left him alone. Ask the ones that kept pulling him off me in the sub, if you don't believe me. He was not happy to be back underwater."

"You're *sure*?" Arthur asked—and before I could answer, Batman echoed him. Rather than put up with the Jackass Crimefighter routine in stereo, I turned to the one I knew best and answered Batman directly.

"How many times have you seen Ubu, and on how many of those occasions did he strike you as a gifted actor?"

He grunted, and in my peripheral vision, I saw Arthur grimace.

"Assuming you're right, Ra's al Ghul still has upwards of sixty prisoners to our one, including Tim. And he doesn't seem the type who would part with a single one in any type of prisoner exchange."

"Not... the way you mean it..." Batman said slowly. I could see his wheels turning, then his eyes went square and I knew he'd reached a decision. When he spoke again, it would be a new tone, the "this is what we're going to do" proclamation.

Except he didn't say anything, he just looked at me.

"It is," Arthur said, also looking at me.

"NO!" I said. I'm not in on the Justice League telepathy channel, but I could tell that whatever they were talking about, it involved me and I would not like it.

"No," I repeated.

We were back in our quarters, alone, and by now I had said no approximately four hundred thirty-seven times. One hundred in the sit room with Aquaman and Batman, one hundred more to Aquaman alone when Batman left to make a phone call, thirty more when he got back, one hundred a piece to Valerina and Vulko while they took me the long way back to our quarters, and now seven—"No!"—eight since Bruce joined me in our suite and, in a particularly transparent maneuver, took off his cowl to "reason" with me, face-to-face.

Four hundred thirty-eight nos. It should have been enough for anybody, but not for Batman.

“Aquaman is right,” he’d stated (in exactly that ‘what we’re going to do’ tone I predicted). “The quickest and *least bloody* way to invade is to be captured and let your enemy escort you into the heart of his operation. With Ra’s, it’s always been the most efficient way to get inside whatever he’s doing.”

“I’m familiar with the Trojan Horse protocol, Bruce. I’m also familiar with the Ra’s history and I’ve been biting my tongue not to say her name. I know you’ve always found ‘getting captured’ to be the quickest way inside with that DEMON crowd, and the absurd indignities you sunk to, pretending to let that transparent harpy manipulate you. A man with 1/1000 of your intelligence would have seen through her act in a Gotham minute. And anyone who allegedly *knows* you the way that DEMON crowd pretends to *should fucking know that*. But no, apparently they actually are as gullible and stupid as they think you are, and they open the gates every time and roll that wooden horse into the throne room. Fine. They’re idiots, I accept that.

“But does anybody really think that lucky streak would extend to me? Can you honestly stand there and say that preposterous, already-straining-credulity-to-the-breaking-point chain of deluded DEMON *stupid* would survive The Prodigal Ubu marching me into the throne room trussed up like a Christmas turkey?”

“Selina, we have two distinct advantages right now. We have Ubu, and we have Ra’s. The Demon’s Head thinks he’s pulling this off. He thinks I’m off investigating Pequena’s designs on you, the world believes his scientists are dead, and Aquaman is blissfully unaware he’s moved into the neighborhood. We can shatter all of that in one devastating second with you marching into his throne room and saying ‘Meow.’ I know Ra’s. His plans are all predicated on an assumption of success. He doesn’t have fallback strategies or contingency plans, and while he’s reeling, trying to find a flee square on three fronts at once, we open the keyhole for the Atlantean troops and rendezvous with Tim. He’ll be free by now, and looking for a—”

“Wait a minute, ‘we?’ Who’s we?”

“Selina, you can’t think I was going to send you in there alone. I’ll be Ubu.”

It’s one of those statements that, if anyone else says it, you laugh. You know they can’t be serious and you laugh. If *Batman* says it, you know he can’t be joking and you should take it seriously, but... Ubu?

“You’ll be Ubu,” I said flatly.

“I probably can’t fool Ra’s for very long, up close,” he said, almost casually. “But the rest of them won’t be a challenge. I made up as the last Ubu and got away with it for nearly a day, and he only spoke Farsi. This one speaks German, Romanian, and English. Plus, Arthur’s people have this wearable hologram unit they’re still trying to develop for covert ops. The tech is fine, but their agents don’t have a lot of undercover experience. Who better to give it a shakedown cruise than someone experienced with infiltration, stage make-up impersonation, and—”

“Yes, yes, I get it. Who better than *you*. It’s a tech toy, who better than you to try it out.”

I was trying for a lip twitch, but all I got was a grunt, so I decided to stop teasing and think it through.

“Well, we will be doing Ubu a favor,” I said, thinking out loud. “Even if it is you, as long as they think it’s him, he benefits. He was playing hooky on land, not a doubt in my mind. And now that we’ve got him, he’s been gone even longer. There’s no way

he can really explain where he's been or how he got captured without admitting to... to the kind of indiscretion I don't think they let you admit to in DEMON. If he *doesn't* show up with a prisoner of at least my level of 'interesting,' then he's going to be flopping around for air that won't come, just like that dead-fish minion."

"'Will be doing him a favor,' that means you'll do it?"

"Ubu may not be my favorite person in the world, but I wouldn't want to see him deadfish, particularly when it's partially my fault."

"Welcome to the least satisfying aspect of crimefighting, saving the bad guys. And they never say thank you."

I laughed.

"You saved me a few times. I always tried to thank you, and *you* didn't want to hear it."

"I can tell Arthur to proceed with the plan now?"

Mr. Denial, just like old times. He even had that stiff jaw he always pulled whenever he declined to be thanked. I decided another reminder was in order. Occasionally the ass-saving had gone the other way, and...

"You, on the other hand, what was that phrase you used instead of thank you? How did that go again? Was it... Oh yes, 'Put the Storm Opals from Rann back on your way out.'"



## CHAPTER 10: THE FOCUS OF THE CRIMEFIGHTER ON HIS TASK

One of the reasons I don't enjoy chess? The endgame. At some point in the midgame shuffle, after so much probing, trading of pieces, and battling it out for an extra pawn, the balance of power tips. The final result is then a foregone conclusion, at least on paper. There is nothing left but this pointless chasing and maneuvering until you get the doomed king trapped in a corner: menaced where he stands, menaced on all sides, with his own pawn blocking his only square for escape. It's a snooze. You might think a cat would like the idea. The outcome of the classic cat and mouse contest is a foregone conclusion too, nine times out of ten, and we enjoy that. Maybe mice are just intrinsically more interesting than chessmen; I don't know. But I can say from personal experience that, winning or losing, I put the end of a chess game right up there with a big turkey dinner, a lullaby, and a snortful of chloroform.

The chess players in my life obviously disagree. Eddie likes the endgame because (and I'm quoting) "No ace routs Brainiest Ed." I shared this with my traveling companion, who I had dubbed Brubu. It was Batman inside the Atlantis spy corps's holographic shell, and while it might reproduce Ubu's physical appearance perfectly, I had seen its brow knit with all of Bruce's figuring-out-the-new-gizmo expressions while he got it up and running. After that, no matter how much it resembled Ubu, I kept on seeing Bruce. Particularly now, since I was talking about Eddie.

We were in another plasma sub, heading for the surface. Aquaman had the fish searching around Kapheira, and they'd found the elevator system Ra's set up to get his people and prisoners into the sea base. I'd been chatting to get Brubu's mind off the fact that he wasn't driving. Normally, he could have piloted the sub just fine, but from inside the prototype Atlantis hologram, it was "an unnecessary layering of unfamiliar technologies." Too many unknown variables, risk multipliers, etc. So the control freak gets to sit in the passenger seat next to Kitty. I know he hates that kind of thing, so I was doing my best to lighten the mood. You can't go too far off "the case" at this point with Batman; he likes to stay focused. Usually I like breaking his focus, but that's *my* fun. This was an anti-brooding exercise for *his* benefit, so I stuck to Ra's-adjacent subjects like chess. Going up to the surface in a sub just to come back down in an elevator, it was the kind of tedium you find at the end of a chess game, and I said as much.

"No ace routs Brainiest Ed?" Brubu repeated with a scowl. "That's an anagram for?"

"Bean counters are idiots," I smirked.

"He's referring to the academic chess players' attitude that there comes a point where you have to accept the inevitable and resign the game once you realize your position is untenable."

"Right. If you're down four pawns, both bishops and the queen, you're screwed so..."

"So you concede. But Nigma prefers to play on, because resigning ignores the possibility of your opponent making a mistake."

“Or a lot of mistakes,” I corrected, “which in his experience they’re inclined to do. Let’s face it, present company excepted, most people Eddie takes on are a lot dumber than he is. No matter what their technical advantage, if he keeps them dancing long enough, they’ll screw up.”

Brubu grunted.

“I’d think you’d feel the same,” I guessed. “I mean, forget chess. Real life, if you played the percentages, we would all be dead years ago. You, Eddie, Hagen, Joker—even Kitty packing the old eight-life advantage. We all know from personal gun-in-your-face experience that a foregone conclusion *on paper* is no such thing in reality.”

“Y-yes,” Brubu agreed, “and no. Chess is a war game, and playing an almost certain loss through to the checkmate is the equivalent of making an enemy burn every farm and kill every peasant in the kingdom. Of course they *may* make still make a mistake before it comes to that, but at what cost? A wise king will sometimes surrender, make peace for the good of the kingdom, knowing in a year or two circumstances will change, there will be opportunities to reclaim what’s lost.”

“Okay, nice metaphor, but the actual *game* stops at the board’s edge, right?”

“Says the jewel thief on an undercover mission to take down Ra’s al Ghul?”

Selina never had a chance to find out what that last remark meant. The sub had reached the surface, and from that moment on, Bruce was gone and Ubu would remain in character until the mission objective was complete. There were no guards to take out on the platform, and nothing but buttons and levers inside the elevator. Ubu was stoic, and Catwoman was... unsatisfied.

From Bruce’s POV, it was a fine performance he was giving. It was Ubu as Batman had always seen him, a few steps from Ra’s al Ghul’s side: serious, watchful, disciplined, and alert. As the elevator descended, Selina couldn’t help contrasting this Ubu with the one she’d ridden down with earlier. She decided that it wasn’t out of character for her to give Batman an acting note. After all, the real Ubu had tried to strangle her four times in their earlier trip to the bottom. If this was that Ubu, she would get even by tweaking his nose. So... acting note as nose tweak:

“You’re doing a lot better this time, Ubs,” she said with a teasing smile. “Last time we approached crush depths, you were positively green.”

“Silence, woman,” he snarled. Then, under his breath, he added “Last time, I was the one in chains.”

Despite this internal pep talk, Ubu’s pallor whitened and his rigid, disciplined expression wavered momentarily. He snuck occasional peeks at the ceiling...

Tmcra’s panel alerted him as soon as the elevator began its descent, but he let it reach the bottom of the shaft before taking any action, so that those inside, if unauthorized, would have no hope of reaching the surface when ejected. Only when the pressurized car reached the receiving chamber did he check the receiving docket. He knew from the beginning of his shift that no arrivals were expected, but he followed the prescribed procedures all the same. Confirming that no arrivals were scheduled, he flicked on the camera to demand authorization—and saw Ubu.

Ubu required no authorization, for every DEMON down to the lowliest pit-stirrer knew that Ubu's word was only a half step from Ra's al Ghul's own. The doors were opened at once—and Tmcra noted the bodyguard's imperfectly concealed dread. He noted it without judgment, for he shared it. Officially, a man had no past before DEMON. He had no country, no family, and no name but the one The Great One bestowed on his unworthy head. But even so, there were those whose non-existent pasts included water, and those that knew only sand. The ones from sand were... *honored* that they could add overcoming abject terror to the services they rendered in the DEMON's name. And they all recognized others who were equally honored.

Tmcra's colleague H'qai offered to take Ubu's prisoner to the brig, but Ubu refused. He announced her status as though she were a person of some interest to the Demon's Head: The Feline Consort of He Whose Name Must Not Be Spoken. A prisoner such as this must be delivered to The Presence without delay.

Tmcra accepted the statement at face value, but once Ubu and the prisoner had left, H'qai snickered.

"Any time there is a prisoner from Gotham, they wind up escaping," he said cynically. "And that one is the Illustrious Ubu's alibi. He wants to make sure The Great One sees her, in the flesh, before she can get away."

Arthur had shown us schematics of Kapheira before we'd left Atlantis.

Well, "schematics" is a bit generous. What he showed us first were more like oil paintings, artists' renderings from the days when Atlanteans actually used this place as a military base, and a few sketched floorplans that were so old and faded that you could barely make out the lines separating the base from ocean, let alone marking off hallways or individual rooms. I could feel Bruce seething. Mount Psychbat was about thirty seconds from erupting when Arthur laughed and said "But it isn't every day we have the World's Greatest Catburglar working for us, and I thought something flashier was called for. So I had the historians use the data from those pictures to make up this."

He stepped through an archway into a room out of Star Trek. In the center, on a raised platform, was a three-foot hologram of Kapheira, a 3-D model we could slice open, rotate on any axis and view from any angle.

"World's Greatest Catburglar is duly impressed," I said kindly. And then, sensing that Arthur only started with the oil paintings to needle Bruce, I added, "This is *almost* as slick as the holograms in the Batcave."

So anyway, thanks to Arthur, we'd gone in with a fairly good idea where Ra's would have set up his throne room, and that's where Brubu was taking me now. Strategically speaking, there were about twenty war rooms that would have made better sense, but this is Ra's we were talking about. If he has a weakness (and at last count, he had eighty-seven), it's that kink for set dressing. He doesn't care about practical or strategic, he wants something Ra's-worthy. In Kapheira, that was the top tower with a wide port view of the whole base.

We were less certain about the location of the brig, which was our priority for freeing the hostages. I knew Brubu didn't want to stay too long in one place or get too chatty

with any one minion, so we left the elevators as soon as we could, and he stopped the next minion we passed in the halls.

“I was obliged to go topside before the prisoners were installed,” he said brusquely. “Which location was finally decided on for their storage?”

It was a bold move, just flat out asking that way. If he was disguised as anyone less than Ubu, it might not have worked. But given the disguise, and a certain knack Bruce has for being bossy and domineering in the most casual circumstances, we got our answer. The prisoners were in the West Tower, Level Three.

We went on our way towards the probable throne room... when the lights went out.

Batman was too experienced to be “pleased” or “satisfied” at this early stage. The mission was proceeding as expected, and they were roughly one minute ahead of schedule as far as learning the location of the brig. It was nothing to begin congratulating themselves over—and, in fact, a less mature crimefighter who did indulge in self-congratulation at that moment would have had his thought interrupted by a tell-tale buzz a split-second before the lights flickered out.

It did not escape Batman’s notice that the buzz began when he’d walked exactly six paces into a hallway in which there were no other minions, no doors, and no sightlines from the hall they’d just left. He shifted his weight to deflect the attack sure to come, but was startled when it came from four-degrees off the expected angle. It was—ouch—just off enough that his shifted balance worked against him, and rather than hurling his attacker over his shoulder using the thug’s own momentum to propel him into the floor, he wound up...

“Ho, ho, ho. Now I have a scimitar.”

Losing his weapon.

“Yippie kay yay, He who triumphs over death and grave.”

To Tim.

Before Batman could process this development, he was tackled at the waist. Propelled forward and towards the floor, he registered several details in the split second it took to twist out of the new attacker’s chosen trajectory and backhand her into the wall:

- the second attacker was female, about Selina’s height, and had some training
- in one style only, possibly muay thai, and not particularly good
- all of which argued against her being DEMON, which did not train women (with one unfortunate exception)
- and anyone they did train (with the same unfortunate exception), they trained exceptionally well
- she wore a mask, although not the kind he usually glimpsed on those he backhanded as he twisted out of a waist tackle. It was more improvised, from a black cloth tied around her head like a kerchief, like something a pirate would wear.

In the second it took to turn back and intercept Tim’s coming attack, he noted that Tim was wearing a similar mask...

And a block later, that Tim had finally recognized his fighting style...

They sparred for a few seconds while Tim’s partner, who must be Dr. Meadows, picked herself off the floor and (presumably) looked for an opening to mount a fresh

attack. In this leisurely period, Batman noted that Selina was smirking, and that, while the hallway seemed free of cameras, Tim was not calling off the attack. That meant they were either maintaining the charade for watching minions or for Dr. Meadows. Either way, he couldn't drop the hologram until he could talk candidly with Tim.

Rather than wait for Meadows to make her own move, he gave her an opening and defended with the snapback punch normally reserved for bruisers, pulling back for momentum and channeling the full weight of his body into the throw, then shifting the forward motion upward the split second he hit her jaw like snapping a wet towel.

Down she went... and in some guilty recess of Bruce's mind, he decided the Foundation would underwrite her research for the rest of her career.

"Thank you," Tim said hoarsely. "First freedom I've had for days."

"It's safe to talk?" Batman asked.

"Oh yeah, these four halls see almost no traffic. That's why I picked them to, uh, make our move... rescue Cat. The surveillance and tactical has been really easy. Demon 101, they're doing everything like they always do. The hard part has been convincing E.J. that we're just that lucky: finding food unattended, isolated minions to pick off, power drops n' stuff."

"This isn't your first escapade?" Batman grveled.

"No. Upside: I found an alternative to the Trekkie. *Die Hard*."

"I figured," Catwoman chimed in. "Ho, ho, ho, now I have a scimitar?"

"Yippie kay yay," Tim answered, waving the scimitar at her.

Catwoman laughed.

Brubu scowled.

"Okay, I know I shouldn't joke," Tim said, "but you have any idea how many times I've heard the 'oath of loyalty' in the last few days."

I could feel for the kid, but Brubu obviously didn't.

"That mask isn't the best idea, considering," he grveled.

"Well that would be the Dread Pirate Roberta's idea over there," Tim said, pointing at Meadows's limp form. "I don't think you appreciate how nuts that woman is, and how challenging the last few days have been."

"Actually I can," Brubu said grimly. "Even in an empty hallway, the two of you taking on Ubu was far from prudent."

"We figured Catwoman would help," Tim murmured.

"Enough," Brubu barked. "We now have four operatives instead of the planned three. When Meadows wakes up, you'll brief her on her part. Now, here's what we're going to do..."

Tmcra returned to his station with a grilled seahorse impaled on a skewer.

"You want?" he asked H'qai.

H'qai nodded, but rather than handing it over, Tmcra flicked the seahorse off the end of the skewer with his thumb. H'qai caught it and, as he munched, he saw Tmcra wrap the end of the stick in a napkin and run it along the ridges of his keyboard.

"Not again," H'qai grumbled.

"M'twa and F'gar always eat at their stations," Tmcra complained. "I don't like the crumbs under the keys."

"Like it matters," H'qai said, shaking his head. "They have anything else down there? Starfish? Crickets?"

"Chuanr. Scorpion. Broccoli."

"I might go down later." H'qai said.

"You shouldn't eat at your station," Tmcra sniffed.

The only answer to this blatant hypocrisy was a meaty thud. Before Tmcra could turn to look, he found himself in a boa hold. He just managed to glimpse H'qai's unconscious body before he himself fell to the floor.

As soon as the elevator was taken, Batman touched a button on his utility belt, and a second on the hologram control. The first sent a pulse to the two OraComs within range; the second sent a signal to Atlantis...

With Tim's help, Dr. Meadows slipped in among the other scientists and began quietly spreading the word: the rescue was coming, be ready to move...

Aquaman smiled wickedly. His part in this Batman-Demon endgame was the kind of clash he loved. If it wasn't a duty, it would be a pleasure. If it wasn't a crucial diversion, he would do it just for fun. Batman claimed he would need ten minutes, eleven maybe, twelve at the most, but Arthur knew he could keep it up for hours if necessary...

Catwoman smiled too, but it wasn't a wicked smile like Arthur's. It was a sublimely contented smile. Using her criminal expertise to help Batman, if there was any richer cream, she couldn't imagine what it might be.

Okay, it wasn't exactly stealing. Opening the keyhole for the Atlantean shock troops wasn't exactly your high-grade B&E on Fifth Avenue, burgling Tiffanys and coming away with something sparkly. But it was like opening a safe, a very large, rock, tulip-shaped safe.

Step 1: get to the ~~safe~~ tulip. Wasn't too hard. Six guards to be evaded, one taken out with drugged claws.

Step 2: getting *into* the tulip. I won't sugarcoat it. I had to contort. I had to suck in, I had to stretch up, and at one point, I had to do this thing with my hips that should only be done around a stripper pole—by somebody *else's* hips around a stripper pole. But I got into the center of the thing, and after that, it was just a matter of matching these carved marbles from Atlantis with the corresponding symbol...

Batman disabled the Ubu hologram and took a deep, satisfying breath as the lumbering bodyguard vanished, revealing his normal shape and costume. The disguise had been effective as far as it went, but now that he had to take out the phalanx of minions guarding the scientists, a different mode was called for. He needed to become proactive, a predator...

"Thermal imaging lenses engage," he ordered softly, and at once, the lenses snapped into place inside the cowl, allowing him to see the heat signatures of men moving behind solid walls. One advantage of the Atlantean base: built into the side of a mountain as it was, there were countless outcroppings from the original cavern walls extending over the man-made ones. They weren't as smooth as a Gotham gargoyle, but they were more plentiful. Batman grappled up to the largest one to scan the area from an optimal vantage point.

As he counted up the minions, Batman's lips eased into a thin, satisfied crease that, in another man, might have passed for a smile. As well trained as DEMON agents were said to be, they shared one trait with the common street thug: they seldom looked *up*. He watched their movements for several minutes, noting the patterns: where they walked, how quickly, and where their blind spots were as they moved. As in Gotham, as soon as he gleaned their patterns, he could predict which man would soon be isolated.

When he identified one, he leapt down quietly, crouched, and at the ideal moment, took the minion down with a silencing chokehold...

His Majesty, Orin, by the Grace of Poseidon, of Atlantia, Pacifica, and Dominions beyond the Reefs, King and Defender of the Seas, Duke of Poseidonis, Sovereign of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of Pontos... breathed.

"Valerina," he said with a hauteur his aide had never heard before, "place the call."

Valerina took a long, deep breath herself. The mechanisms before her had not been used in over six hundred years. She swallowed, and painstakingly placed the first power stone on a raised pedestal until the symbol cut into its surface began to glow. Then she removed it and set it into the recessed bowl in the com panel marked with the same symbol, and with a delicate white hand, she began charging the next power stone.

Batman grimaced. The last minion managed to bite him as he placed his glove over the guy's mouth, which didn't slow the takedown or do his hand any actual harm, but it had torn the glove and exposed bare flesh. Another bite, while unlikely, could bring more trouble than it was worth. A new approach was called for.

He'd picked off about a third of the guards, which was not enough to risk free combat, not in a DEMON compound where they could summon a hundred reinforcements. He needed to continue thinning their numbers silently and unobtrusively. He hoisted this last minion, the biter, up to another outcropping big enough to hold him, and draped him over it... Just in time. The pudgy one was just coming around the corner. Batman leapt from his perch, using his cape like a glider, sailing straight for the guy's chest. Swinging both feet forward, he slammed into the minion, knocking him out cold. Once again, he grappled up to the outcropping with an unconscious minion in tow.

Normally, Batman would allow the remaining henchmen, guards, or thugs to find their colleagues unconscious. It spread terror and led them to make stupid mistakes.

But not here. Not with DEMONs. If any one of them sounded the alarm, it could bring a hundred minions from throughout the compound. A hundred extra minions between the scientists and the elevator. No, he had to keep picking them off quietly.

Perhaps he could hide under that floor grate...

Step 2-1/2: scraping. This place was ancient. There were rings of recessed egg shapes inside the tulip, each carved with the Atlantis equivalent of a rune. Theoretically, all I had to do was place the carved marble-gems from Atlantis into the recess with the same symbol. Except the niches were encrusted with dried slime and who knows what. If I didn't have claws, I would have been screwed. As it was, it still slowed me down. Painstakingly scraping this corroded rock gunk until I found the symbol.

That brought me to Step 3, at last, placing the first marble-gem. The rune on the stone and the rune in the recess both started to glow as they came into contact, which I interpreted as the first "click" finding a combination. Back to step 2-1/2, scraping away at the next recess. One down, five to go...

This time, the best part about getting the safe open wasn't going to be getting anything out, but what would be coming in...

Batman hung inverted on the zipline from one of the higher outcroppings, like an oversized version of his namesake. He waited silently until the tall minion was directly below him, then zipped down, grabbing the man by the throat, and zipped back up to his perch. A nerve pinch put an end to the struggling, while Batman wrapped several lengths of Batline around the minion's feet.

Thus secured, Batman lowered the minion to dangle upside down in the path of the remaining guard, who naturally rushed to see what had happened, what that minion-garbed man-size cocoon was *hanging* in the middle of the hallway. As soon as the conscious guard was directly underneath the unconscious one, Batman cut the line, dropping the latter onto the former...

Ra's al Ghul examined an antique globe, squinting at two islands in the Pacific.

"Palau or New Guinea?" he mused. "New Guinea or Palau?"

Before long, his scientists would have produced their first fuel alternative. Since it was supposed to be mined from the ocean floor, he wanted a spot far from his present location. So, should his shield corporation be located in Palau or... No, Palau became a little too chummy with the United States after World War II, and was a little too chummy still for his liking. While Ra's intended to sell to other countries first, there was no telling at what point exactly the Detective would interest himself in a developing technology on the far side of the world. In Indonesian-controlled Misool in the Raja Ampat province of New Guinea, it would be considerably harder for him to glean information to connect an emerging energy consortium to DEMON.

Ra's smiled contentedly at the globe, when the light in the room changed abruptly as a panel on the wall, that he had not even recognized as a viewscreen, suddenly sprang

to life. A royal crest of seashells held aloft by dolphins filled the screen, which then, abruptly, was replaced by the scowling visage of Aquaman.

*::Ra's al Ghul,:: he pronounced with a commanding air Ra's found annoying. ::You are trespassing on the sovereign waters of Atlantis. Anything short of immediate withdrawal will be deemed an act of war.::*

Ra's al Ghul smiled. This was the kind of confrontation he liked best. Master to master, king to king.

"You noticed our imperial presence sooner than we expected, King of Atlantis. Your position, though it comes sooner than anticipated, is, nonetheless... expected."

The Demon's Ego swelled to fill the grandeur of the occasion, matching wit and wills with a monarch who ruled four-fifth of the globe. The contest would be gratifying under any circumstances, but today Ra's had every tactical advantage, the position he liked best when addressing any opponent of any rank.

"Your position is clear, concise, and well presented," he declared smugly. "My position: this base is mine. It has my troops all over it, that makes it mine."

*::By what authority, the tip of a sword? You'll find that carries no weight down here, Demon's Head. The rule of LAW applies under the seas. My law. Atlantis law.::*

"Unenforceable 'law,'" Ra's sniffed. "Which is to say, a quaint local custom, like a folk dance performed at peasant weddings. It is the inevitable error of the inherited monarch: mistaking authority that fell into your lap by genetic accident for true power. The admirable design of this base is such that taking it by force is a practical impossibility. Your claims of 'law' are therefore meaningless. You are not in a position to make demands of any kind. You may, of course, tender a *request*, king to king..."

*::King to... BECAUSE YOU SIT YOUR ASS ON A VELVET CUSHION?! You don't know the first thing about leading men, Ghul, let alone ruling. A school of bluefins has a better understanding of leadership, a lead tuna is born with a better grasp of the job than you.::*

As Orin railed on, Ra's caught an unexpected flicker of movement in his peripheral vision. Not wishing to appear distracted, he shifted his weight and twisted his shoulder forward, as if adjusting his cape. That gave him a momentary glance at the strange movement, which turned out to be nothing more than...

*:: Against three pods of killer whales controlled by an alien intelligence... ::*

Catwoman.

*:: So don't think any so-called leader of 'minions' can intimidate me. ::*

Strolling into his throne room.

*:: Pitting each man against ten tons of Brainiac-controlled orca, with nothing more than a shield and a sea-spear... ::*

STROLLING into his room with the studied casualness of a... of an actual CAT wandering around looking for amusement.

*:: Compared to ordering a dozen brainwashed drones against one man with a utility belt. ::*

She waved.

*:: And losing every time, I might add. ::*

The look on his face was priceless—what little I could see of it, anyway. At his best, Ra's looks like he's covering some serious acid reflux. When he actually does have his nose out of joint, not a pretty picture.

*:: I'm talking about what it MEANS to be a leader, Ghul, the tacit obligations that go with the 'sir, yes, sirs.' ::*

Arthur had obviously built up a head of steam. Which was the idea, of course, but I think he'd transcended the role he was playing, and now he was just riding that wave of righteous-crazed hero indignation.

*:: My men know their lives aren't put in danger to gratify a whim or make a point, and that's why I command their loyalty and respect. I don't give a damn what a trumped up prawn like you thinks about kings and kingship— ::*

Ra's, in a fit of grandeur befitting Shatner, swished his cape and turned to the side. From Arthur's point of view, I'm sure it was supposed to look menacing, sort of Dracula *ala mode*. From my angle, it just seemed like he didn't want to look at me. Which meant the real diversion was working. Meow.

*:: You're not as good at this as I thought you'd be, Ghul. After the first exchange of bellows, you fall back into huffing and making faces. I don't think you have the stuff to speak for a kingdom. ::*

Arthur's part was great, as far as it went, but even with Ra's ego, there were limits. Holding his attention in a king-to-king bluster-off might be enough when it was just Batman picking off minions, but once I'd opened the keyhole and aqua troops started storming the base, it was iffy. A king-to-king bluster-off alone probably couldn't hold his attention, but trying to keep up appearances in a king-to-king bluster-off while the hated arch-nemesis's girlfriend wanders around your throne room... Even now it makes me laugh. If he wasn't such a creep, you'd almost feel sorry for him.

It didn't really matter what I *did* while I was wandering, so to amuse myself, I looked for the swords. Bruce has mentioned that, hype aside, the one thing that actually does distinguish the hairdo from other villains is that Batman never gets to punch him in the face. Joker, Two-Face, Scarecrow, Hatter, eventually they all reach the end of the line, the henchmen are all lying on the floor, and Batman gets to take out his righteous crimefightery anger on their teeth. With Ra's, every damn time when it gets down to just the two of them, it's *fencing!* Batman would love to punch him in the face, but no. Ra's gets up, out come the swords, and everybody's on the deck of an 18<sup>th</sup> Century pirate ship. So it occurred to me that, since I was right there in the throne room, it would be a nice gesture. Early birthday present for Bruce: find the swords, lock 'em away in a drawer, and just this once, Ra's al Ghul, the self-proclaimed greatest Bat-foe, gets to find out what it really means to take on Batman and lose. Hee hee.

*:: Which means you'll never be able to hold on to anything you 'conquer,' Ghul. Oh, I've seen your type before, dozens of times. Going to redefine the world and decree everything to your liking. This is this, and that is thus, because I have declared it to be, the end. A high tide later, nobody even remembers you. And all your decrees and declarations are nothing but a rancid puddle of sand. ::*

Finding the swords was no problem. Cat burglar's instinct. I knew they had to be in easy reach of the throne, so he could be posed in all his "Ah, there you are, Detective, how pleasant to see you again" pomposity. So I wandered over to the throne, which

brought two more magnificent cape-swishes as Ra's seemed determined to hide me from Arthur...

*:: Atlantis could surrender right now, Ghul, and it wouldn't change a thing. In two migration cycles, you'll be gone. In four you'll be forgotten. In ten, it'll be as though you never existed. ::*

...and there they were in a jewel encrusted footstool that was too low for anyone sitting on the throne to rest their feet. It had no business being there unless it was a box for something.

Ra's was doing his best to ignore the defilement of his throne room by the infidel feline abomination. He could not allow a mere woman to inhibit his performance in front of a rival monarch. He simply had to maintain an appearance of... sword. She was... she was *sharpening her claws* on the blade of his... this was intolerable.

*:: I don't feel I have your full attention there, sir,::* the viewscreen scoffed. *:: I would think that with something as important as this discussion that your full attention would be on the task at hand. I see now the kind of 'leader' I'm dealing with. ::*

Catwoman let out a low whistle, and Ra's flung himself forward on what he assumed to be the mute button.

"Look, it's not my place to say," Catwoman shrugged as the screen went dark. "But if you let him get away with all that pontificating on a first encounter, that's going to define your relationship. I mean, c'mon, Ra's. We're talking about Justice League heroes here. You don't break their rhythm when they start laying down the law that way, you're always going to be the overhyped goatherd that let *Aquaman* take him out for a ride." She smiled pleasantly, and then pointed to the panel behind him. "I think you hung up on him."

Ra's sputtered, but before he could say more, the viewscreen hummed, and once again King Orin scowled down on the throne room.

*:: I see, so that is how you play things, eh, Ghul? That is the best answer you can muster when your sham philosophy is challenged and your paltry intrigues are exposed for the sorry efforts they are? I begin to think Batman and the Justice League have been giving you too much credit over the years. ::*

"Hairdo," Catwoman agreed in a barely audible sing-song.

*:: Egregiously overestimated, that will be your epitaph, Demon's Head. My armies will make short work of this little invasion of yours. You can expect them at the gates any minute now to wipe you from the ocean floor. ::*

"Door's open!" Catwoman called out happily. Then she whispered confidentially at Ra's, "that's where I was before I came here. Doors are my specialty," and concluded with an impish wink.

*:: Although truthfully, sending an army is overkill for an outdated cliché like you. One well-trained squad will do. One squad of my best men, kicking in the back door and taking you right there in the throne room. ::*

On cue, the doors opened and two lines of elite Atlantean Cetea marched into the throne room, weapons drawn. As the first pair reached the middle of the room, they fanned out slightly, as did the pair that followed and the pair following them, forming

a perfect arrowhead formation by the time the first two reached Ra's al Ghul. As the last two separated, perfectly framed at the very end of the line stood... Batman.

## EPILOGUE

Catwoman stretched out luxuriously on the lush sofa in the diplomatic quarters she shared with Batman.

"You look happy," he noted with a liptwitch.

"Oh I am," she purred. "So far, for a girl used to coming away with Catherine the Great's emeralds at the end of the night, crimefighting has been a bit light on the perks and prizes. This was new. Seeing Ra's face at the very moment of 'checkmate?' Meoooooow. That'll hold me for a while."

"It's much more than checkmate," Batman said seriously. "In the past, Ra's has always holed up in these third world principalities or old Iron Curtain states where it's impossible to arrest him. The local law enforcement is either too inept to hold him or too corrupt to even try. But here..."

"Here, 'local law enforcement' is Arthur," Selina smiled, completing the thought, and Batman nodded. "So unlike when you catch up to him in East Turduckenstan, it doesn't end with shutting down his plot against NATO. You got to actually haul his ass into a jail cell to pay for his crimes like any cheap thug."

"I sense mockery in the choice of words," Batman said, raising an eyebrow under the mask.

"Some phrases will never trip off my tongue, Lover. But where Ra's is concerned, I do support the sentiment. He was going to blow me up, he kidnapped sixty people and murdered one of his own in cold blood. I don't want to see him get away with that: 'Oh, no harm done,' and we all just pretend it never happened. No way, not good enough, not even close. I want to see him *punished*. Partially because I'm a villain at heart, I hate his guts and I would enjoy seeing him suffer. But mostly because if we make an example of him, then maybe we don't have to do this again three years down the line."

Again, Bruce's lip twitched. She was more of a crimefighter than she knew, and he would have told her so if only she'd take it as a compliment. Since she wouldn't, he just kissed her cheek and told her to finish packing.

He said I could take a plasma sub to the surface and return to Gotham with Tim and the scientists, or go back with him in the teleporters. Now, I'm no fan of the Justice League, but a ten-minute layover at the Watchtower with Bruce versus a slow boat to Gotham with Mr. Manure Methanator, "just one Foundation grant away from making jet fuel out of pig poop?" No contest.

Valerina walked us to the transporters—by way of the detention area being reoutfitted for a new, long term resident. She said Atlantean jail cells were opulent by surface standards, but with King Orin strolling in a couple times a week to "adjust the pressure settings" personally, Ra's was in for a rough couple of years.

"His Majesty has told me of an ancient surface ruler, a Julius Caesar, who would shame his defeated foes with gestures of mercy and friendship when he had every

right to order their deaths. This is the course of punishment King Orin has decided upon for Ra's al Ghul. Atlantean law does consider his crimes a capital offense, but the king has never handed down a death sentence and says he will not consider breaking the precedent for that... what is the term... 'hairdo?'"

I could feel Batman's eyes on me, so I avoided them and changed the subject.

"Well, I certainly agree with that," I said brightly. "Death is really too good for him. But living the rest of his days as a pet poodle when he used to be a man, that's a punishment that fits the crime, in Ra's case at least."

We were approaching the teleporters, and I knew Arthur was waiting there to meet us when I heard his laugh.

"A pet poodle, eh? That's good. I wish I'd thought of that. I went with 'Clemency is the prerogative of a true king.'"

"That's good too," I winked. Batman glowered, like he always does when I wink at other heroes.

"Plus, once a week, an attaché will visit him in his cell," Arthur stated, in a brisk moving on/summing up tone. "To talk about how he learned about Kapheira's existence in the first place."

"To Atlanteans, every conflict is a learning experience," Valerina explained. "This crisis passed without casualties, but if there had been Atlanteans injured or killed, we would owe it to them to learn all we could from the experience."

Batman's head pulled back suddenly, as if he'd been physically struck.

"You know, that's one thing Ra's has never done," he murmured. "Learned from his mistakes. You'd think anyone who's lived that long would... but no."

"I imagine that's what makes him a hairdo," Valerina said happily.

We said our goodbyes, and I could tell there were a few telepathic exchanges going on behind the verbal ones. When we were home in the cave, I asked Bruce what it was about.

He told Arthur he should hang on to that new assistant. She "had a lot more going on than the previous ones."

And Arthur said... Ditto.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I'm not dropping any classes, but I am definitely changing my major. Science just isn't for me."

"Tim, you haven't declared a major," Professor Milpini said mildly.

"I know, but you and my advisor had me on a science track, picking all these electives that would dovetail into an applied sciences major, and I'm just saying I'm not doing that anymore. My next elective is going to be a history of American film."

"Tim, this is a mistake. You're making a very rash decision based on a, a one in a million happenstance. Scientists do not routinely get kidnapped by international terrorists."

"Yeah, I get that, Professor. But what I saw of Dr. Meadows and some of the others, I just don't think it's my thing."

"But you have a real aptitude!" Milpini cried.

"A history of American film," Tim said happily, reading through the catalog of freshman seminars available exclusively to honors students.

"To have delivered a paper to the junior symposium your first semester!" Milpini wailed.

"Or maybe Introduction to Journalism," Tim read eagerly.

"An honorable mention as a freshman. Invited to the senior symposium and introduced to the very researchers you footnoted..."

"Hey, look at this one—the Sociology of Superheroes. 3 credits. Afternoon lectures, I'd get to sleep in. And no prerequisites."