

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



# Cat = Sales

*Trophies*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**TROPHIES**



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By  
Chris Dee

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# TROPHIES

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Antonio Cosaglio arrived in Gotham in 1810 from Cerami, Sicily. His emigration documents were incomplete, but Antonio was no fool. He had brought a few baubles to fill in the gaps in his paperwork. A silver ring and a cameo slipped to the sympathetic translator, the latter passed along to the less sympathetic clerk, solved the bureaucratic formalities as they always had and always would. Antonio left the Castle Island processing station as Anthony Cerami, but he walked out onto American soil. He had no sentimental attachment to his new name, so when the time came to set up his own business, he wanted something more meaningful. If he had been born Anthony Cerami, if it was the name of a father whom he loved, maybe he would have felt a sense of pride attaching it to the jewelry he produced. But as it was, Cerami was merely a town that wasn't promising enough to go on living in. One of the largest and most beautiful estates in Cerami was owned by the Falconi family. The name might mean nothing to the wealthy of Gotham, but Antonio knew the aristocratic splendor it implied. For him, that was enough.

The pieces Antonio made were exquisite. Not the costliest jewels in Gotham, he had no means to compete for the largest diamonds and rubies needed to create such pieces, and he didn't particularly want to. Instead, he fashioned more modest gemstones, along with semi-precious corals, lapis lazuli and onyx, into miniature masterpieces set in delicately etched gold. Antonio had two sons, neither achieving his level of artistry but both were competent craftsmen. The business did well enough producing simple variations on the founder's original designs for more than a generation – until the war years. Three of the Cerami heirs were killed in action, a fourth in the influenza epidemic that followed. A fifth came home too scarred and bitter to care about a family business. But the twenties were filled with survivors who wanted to feel alive again after the horrors. There was a heedlessness in the air: women with shingled hair and short skirts, men flush with new fortunes playing the stock market. It was no time for a storefront in the Diamond District to be sitting idle. Every flutter in the highly volatile radio stocks brought a virtual flood of buyers into The Street, and John Cerami's widow didn't intend to waste the opportunity. She had a storefront and a name in Falconi's. What she lacked was merchandise. So she began buying wholesale. It might not be "artistic" but it was faster than trying to make the stuff. And her customers certainly didn't know the difference.

When the final "flutter" of radio shares in October of 1929 ushered in the Great Depression, Falconi might have gone into a decline but for the purchase made on September 3<sup>rd</sup> by Nathan Everidge III. On that day, the Dow reached a record high of 381.2 and Everidge came into the shop to select an engagement ring for his bride. He expressed his view that the situation with the stock market was out of hand, the market could not sustain itself and the speculators were pushing them all to ruin... He looked

around as he said it, and he remarked that shares might rise and fall but diamonds at least would always hold their value. Almost on a whim, he bought a pair of loose stones as “insurance,” joking that he’d probably have them made into earrings for their anniversary. After the crash, when the retail market all but vanished, Mrs. Cerami kept the business afloat making discreet purchases from families that had to sell their valuables and selling the loose stones as a safe and portable, easily-hidden investment to those who still had fortunes to transport and hide.

It was enough to sustain them through the Second World War. The end of the war brought a boom in engagement ring sales—and a refugee named Cesaro Pitronaci. Pitronaci arrived in Gotham with little more than the shirt on his back, but by 1981 when Carlotta Cerami died childless, he had amassed enough to buy Falconi Jewelers from the squabbling cousins fighting over her estate. By the time Falconi Jewelers caught the eye of Oswald Cobblepot, the whole neighborhood was calling him “Mr. Falconi.” Cesaro didn’t mind, it was good for business. For a jeweler, there were few things that added respectability like a brass plaque on the door reading “Since 1823,” but one of those things was a white-haired old man behind the counter who answered to the same name as the sign above the door.

Cesaro was a skilled jeweler, so he renewed the practice of buying loose stones, gold, and silver and fashioning his own pieces. He still kept the Cerami wholesale contracts for watches, pearls, and the like—which is how he came to the Penguin’s attention. In those days before the Iceberg Lounge, Oswald had to rely on opportunistic henchmen, and Vulture was as greedy as they came. He’d somehow got himself a job driving for a delivery service and was trying to work out how to switch IDs with one of the bonded guys who got the valuable payloads. He got as far as Peterson’s route map and saw the regular deliveries to Falconi’s. He was pretty sure a falcon was some kind of hoity-toity bird, and he knew Penguin paid well for any tip that had to do with birds or feathers. It was a lot easier pounding faces for Cobblepot than trying to figure out a way around the delivery service safeguards, so he took the info to Penguin and let the better man do the thinking.

Oswald watched Falconi for three months. He soon realized the wholesale stuff was inconsequential. Falconi admitted a diamond courier every Wednesday morning at 7 o’clock precisely, and he paid in cash. The falcon was a particularly regal bird, and ice was common underworld slang for diamonds, so he felt this was a target worthy of the Penguin’s nefarious attentions. He told Vulture to get himself a conspicuously big gun, the kind that would scare an old man like Falconi and avoid any nonsense.

Unfortunately, before he could act on the idea, Batman packed him off to Arkham—*kwak!* But then fortune intervened: Two-Face, the crusading D.A. turned coin-flipping crime boss was arranging some kind of hearing to overturn his conviction on the grounds that apprehension by a faceless vigilante lunatic violated his civil rights. He invited Oswald to be a second petitioner, which Joker unfortunately overheard and invited himself to be a third. Harvey objected, naturally, three being an odd number, but he was overruled—twice. First by his coin, and then by Joker punching him in the nuts.

The hearing was a wash. The Bat’s existence wasn’t well known at the time, and the judge called “the *alleged incidents* with some *imagined* Bat-Man” irrelevant. Citing overwhelming evidence or some such rot, he dismissed the petition and denied the

appeal. What Oswald objected to most was that word “imagined.” How the judge could look down on a man with a still-broken nose and declare the breaker of that nose an imaginary urban myth—*kwak!*—it was literally adding insult to injury. He was just saying as much on the ride back to Arkham...

“Adding insult to injury—*kwak*—that’s what it was.”

...when the van was liberated. Catwoman had landed on the roof; they heard that much. (Joker thought it was rain.) She somehow incapacitated the guards and drove them all to freedom. She did it for reasons of her own, of course. Oswald didn’t know what they were, and he didn’t care. He was free to pick up where he left off: relieving Falconi Jewelers of all that precious ice, a substance that a penguin had more right to than a falcon, surely—KWAKWAKWAKWAKWAK!

He picked up Vulture and his equally large and imposing colleague “Vinnie.” Oswald wasn’t crazy about the name, but it was already Tuesday night. With a diamond courier heading to Falconi’s in a few short hours, it was more important to have a second goon today than one who would answer to the name Raptor tomorrow. So Vulture and Vinnie it would be, even if it did sound like a live-action Disney movie.

It was hours before dawn when Vulture, Vinnie, and the Penguin arrived in the Diamond District, giving themselves ample time to deactivate the alarm and go inside while it was still quiet and dark. Vulture found the plan hard to grasp, being the sort of scraggly bird who would rush in when the place was crowded with customers, wave his gun around and yell for everyone to get on the floor. More than once Oswald found it necessary to thwack that empty head with the point of his umbrella. It wasn’t a particularly bird-like maneuver, but it was the only way to make the Vultures and Vinnies of the world pay attention: They were going in early, *before the store opened*—*kwak*. They’d get Falconi *first* when he arrived for the day—*kwak*—with the cash payment for the courier. They would then take their time cleaning out his current inventory—*kwak-wak*—and finally, they would wait for the new diamonds to arrive at seven. Nothing about it was difficult to understand—KWAK-WAK-WAK-KWAK-WAK-WAK-WAK!

While Vulture went to work on the alarm, Oswald tried to convince himself that head-thwacks administered *by an umbrella* could be seen as a bird pecking with its beak. That was a common way to exert dominance among the feathered, after all, and correct wayward behavior in the young... Except at that moment, Vinnie went bumbling under the streetlight where anyone looking out the window could have spotted him. Oswald thwacked him once again, and seeing his shadow stretching so far back to achieve an overhead blow on the much taller man’s head, Oswald was forced to conclude that there was nothing ‘peckish’ about it.

Still, they would soon be inside, waiting for an old man to arrive with a briefcase full of cash that would feather his nest for quite some time. And then, before long, a younger pigeon would come along with a case full of ice. That would be enough to make him a happy, happy bird...

It didn’t exactly go as planned. First, Falconi was already there when Oswald and his men got inside. What’s worse, he wasn’t alone. At Cesaro’s age, it was getting harder and harder to get up at five, get dressed, and get down to the store for that 7 o’clock rendezvous with the courier. It was also getting harder to bend down to reach

the lower shelves in the safe. So, in the time Oswald had been in prison, Cesaro had made a few changes to his routine. He left the store before the banks closed on Tuesday, withdrew the cash and spent the night at his store, sleeping on a couch in his office. He'd also hired Stefan, and Stefan was a good kid, grateful for the job. He'd stayed late "to help with the inventory," but really, he was worried about Mr. Falconi being alone in the store with all that cash.

When Penguin's men burst in, Stefan grabbed the phone and took it with him into the storage closet. Vulture spotted the cord and, following it, found Stefan himself. Before the lumbering goon could finish saying "must've called the police," Batman was crashing through the skylight—Batman who should have been busy with Joker and Two-Face still at large, not to mention whatever Catwoman was up to. *Kwak-wakwak-wakwak*.

Then The Cat herself arrived—as if this simple little nest-raid wasn't already crowded with extra beaks—and swung right into the middle of things before Vulture could plug Batman. Oswald was too smart to stand around wondering what had gone wrong. He simply repeated to himself what the Catwoman herself once observed: a penguin can't fly the coop, so it was time to waddle. He helped himself to Falconi's waiting briefcase full of cash and made for the door. A whipcrack later and the hellcat was swinging towards him. Try as he might to slash at her with his umbrella, she vaulted right over his head and past him. Then, with another crack of that whip, something went wrong with his ankle, and he was sailing head first into a 40,000 carat "diamond" of... well, Oswald couldn't say what the display gimmick was really made of, but it was hard and it hurt—*kwak*.

In the years that followed, Falconi's seemed to lead a charmed existence. All of Gotham came to know that Batman was more than a myth, and the places where he was known to have foiled crimes were seen as unlucky by a certain type of criminal. Others noted the similarity between the Falconi name and that of rising crime boss Carmine "The Roman" Falcone. Nobody wanted to risk crossing Carmine, and there were plenty of other jewelers in town...

It couldn't last forever. The yakuza scoffed at Bat-superstitions, perhaps unwisely, and their new boss made it clear that he'd welcome a chance to insult Falcone. One of his more ambitious men took the hint and brought in a specialist to tackle the security at Falconi's Jewelers. It had improved exponentially since that ancient Penguin attempt, but even the best Diamond District systems would crack under Miyamoto's expertise.

It was not "Date Night" and Catwoman was not "patrolling." She was prowling as she always had. Tonight it was the Diamond District. Despite the superior merchandise on Fifth Avenue, the Street had better security. The prize or nostalgia might bring her to Cartier, Bvlgari, Van Cleef & Arpels or Tiffany, but when she wanted to exercise, it was the Diamond District. She took her usual route to the top of Shenoa & Co, which had the best leap over the traffic cameras to her favorite niche between the Gotham Jewelry Center and the Gotham Jewelry Exchange... when she saw some odd scrapes in the concrete. The mark of a traditional zipline... Well, not

quite 'traditional,' but the sort that anchored the line of a cat burglar without her claws, whip and specialized gear.

Whoever it was, their placement was perfect, and Catwoman couldn't help but be impressed. They'd found this optimal spot, which she herself had taken more than a week to pinpoint, and they hit it from the perfect angle. She was curious to see where they were going and followed the trail to the half-dozen blue awnings that made the string of independent stores at the corner look uniform and unified.

Then she sucked in her breath as she saw the Rickart Box on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor window directly above... above... Oh, meow.

It was an average night. Dick had done a good job covering Gotham in his absence. There was no sign that the underworld had noticed Nightwing patrolling instead of Batman, and if they had, they certainly hadn't been emboldened by the change. So it was an average night. A meth lab, a jumper, a lead on the location of Riddler's new lair. Oracle had gone quiet. She'd found a cyber-crime ring operating out of an unlikely location, an innocent-seeming bakery in Chelsea, and she was quite preoccupied with her find. She answered whenever Batman spoke, but he could tell from her tone it was an unwelcome interruption. So he'd let her be. He watched over a pair of undercover making a gun buy. They didn't spot him, of course. He simply watched from distance, making sure the deal didn't go bad, and once they made their arrests, he moved on. An average night, until...

...: *Batman?* ...:

Selina never used the OraCom. She'd answer if you called her, but she never initiated contact that way.

Batman wasn't sure what to expect when he answered, but it wasn't... it couldn't be... a heads up on a jewelry store robbery in progress?

Once she got close enough to see the Japanese cat burglar, Catwoman realized he must be Miyamoto. She could also see he wasn't equipped to leave the way he'd come, not with a briefcase full of cash or a sack full of loot. She guessed he was just there to get in, turn off the alarms from the inside, and admit others who would do the actual burgling: the kind of specialist job she'd be offered twice a year when she was working and had always turned down.

So... three or four locals and an out of town specialist who wasn't even armed... Hardly a challenge. There was no way she could keep them dancing until Batman showed up, and there would be no point taking them all out herself before he got there. The only way to make it work was to delay the confrontation. So she followed Miyamoto through the upper floors of the building next door, rerouting each of his reroutes so he had to circle back. She chuckled as she heard him cursing the timed resets he couldn't find. She wondered if she would be doing the same, searching madly for a mechanical timer instead of considering the possibility of a human player undoing all her careful work.

She sank into the shadows and waited, remembering. *"Yo down there. Tall, dark and handsome! Long time, no see..."* It took them fifty-eight seconds to wipe up Penguin and his men all those years ago. *"...And I told you I could help."* Fifty-eight seconds. *"The Penguin! He's getting away!" "Take over for me and he won't get far."*

And this time, there were no civilians to worry about. She decided she'd wait until Batman was about two-minutes away before she let Miyamoto reach the final alarm. Then he could get into the actual Falconi building from its taller neighbor, and she would use the same perch she had last time, over the skylight.

*"Yo down there. Tall, dark and handsome! Long time, no see..."*

The same skylight he had crashed through, so her entrance wasn't as showy. With all of the glass already broken, none of them heard her coming. That hulking brute pointing his gun at Batman had no idea what was coming until the whip wrapped around his arm and yanked his aim up to the ceiling. Then

*"Yo down there. Tall, dark and handsome..."*

She told him she could help. She told him. And then she proved it.

*"The Penguin! He's getting away!" "Take over for me and he won't get far."*

Damn him.

She watched Miyamoto make his way through the showroom and into the back... let in his men... all *three* of them (yawn)... and get to work on the safe... He was good, might get it open sooner than she expected, but she wasn't worried. Batman had a way of always getting there before the last tumbler clicked into place. So she slipped back outside to get into position on that little ledge above the skylight. Looking down into the showroom, she noted the 40,000 carat fiberglass "diamond" had been replaced by a modest pyramid of gift boxes. It was infinitely less tacky as a floor display, but it wouldn't be nearly as dramatic as a battle fixture. But then, no one in that trio of yakuza would be as dramatic as Oswald had been crashing into it.

She chuckled at the memory and waited until she saw a cape flicker at the end of the street, then she crashed through the skylight—this time with the cacophony of shattering glass that marked Batman's entrance the last time. She snarled at the presumption of these sad little men and snapped her whip like a cat lashing her tail, spoiling for a fight—and Catwoman certainly was spoiling for the fight. Once the tussel began, it commanded her full attention—but the shift when Batman entered the fray was unmistakable. It wasn't anything you saw or heard. It was something you felt: a violent vacuum across the room, sucking away her opponents' focus, pulling the weight from their blows, and... somewhat greedily... pulling the actual *man* from the path of her final swing to deliver the coup de grace himself.

"Show off," she said dryly.

He grunted. And then... a different kind of vacuum sucked the air from the room. The moment crystallized. It was where they'd both stood on that night so long ago: silent, flushed from battle, a crew of unconscious goons at their feet.

*"Fighting together felt good, didn't it?" "It feels good alone." "But it's better to share... Maybe I deserve one more chance."* Then a kiss. And a **"No!"** Now, here they were again.

*"Fighting together felt good, didn't it?"* she said softly.

Silence.

Selina's heart pounded in her ears, unsure why she'd said it and unnerved at the lack of response.

"Fighting together felt good, didn't it?" "It feels good alone." "But it's better to share... Maybe I deserve one more chance." Then a kiss. And a "No!"

She turned, the weight of that old rejection crushing her from the inside, and saw he was gone.

A Bat vanish?

Really?

REALLY?

This is why she told him about the robbery, wasn't it? This moment. This... closure. She could have taken one cat and his three yakuza buddies out *herself*—or she could have ignored the situation entirely, because one crime more or less in Gotham was not now, nor had it ever been, nor would it ever be something she would lose sleep over! She TOLD Batman that Falconi Jewelers was being burgled so he could come, so they could stop it together, here, in the spot where they... where he... where he REJECTED her offer to fight crime with him the first time. What the hell was she thinking? Why the hell would she open herself up to this? And why would he come if he—

*k-tump*

It was the strangest feeling, this sick, cloying tension climbing up the back of my neck, spreading into this dizzy ache along the back of my head. My stomach in knots. My heart pounding in my chest with the same ferocity as this angry pulsing behind my right eye. Reliving this utterly shitty moment, having no one to blame but myself for the memory, but rather than Bruce there to take out the sting and give me some closure, he up and VANISHES on me, and then *k-tump*

Martian Manhunter once told me my thoughts get "rather loud" when I'm worked up. He told Bruce they were screaming when the awful truth came out about the mindwipe. The volume was certainly cranked up in those awful minutes since the Bat-vanish, but no cat burglar in the middle of a closed jewelry store would ever let her raging thoughts drown out the softest noise from the real world. *k-tump* Distant. From the back room. I took a step to see what it was, when it repeated. A light... soft... fiberglass... *k-tump*.

I took more than a step then, I took 14 steps very, very rapidly—by which point I could see INTO the back room and took five or six more at a dead run. There was a weathered wooden door open, with stairs leading down to a basement (presumably), and coming UP those stairs was a 40,000 carat fiberglass diamond with the tip of two bat-ears just visible on the figure behind it.

I know I let out some kind of noise that might not have been too feline. It might have been called a girlish squeal, actually, and I called out for him to let me help. It really looked like the diamond display gimmick was too wide to come up those stairs and fit through the doorway, but since we both knew the thing started out in the showroom, it had to have fit through once.

He pushed, I pulled, and in less than a minute, we had it on solid ground in the back room.

"Nice to see Ozzy's head didn't leave a permanent dent," I said. It was supposed to be playful, but it came out a lot softer than I intended.

"I thought we'd take it for the trophy room," he grveled. And I don't think I have ever sucked in as much air involuntarily in a single breath before—except when I'd been drowning or was being strangled in the moments before. Maybe mistaking my silence for hesitation, he added "There should be something of yours in there."

Technically there was. He had one of my old costumes and a frayed whip handle. But I understood what he meant. Those represented the Catwoman who Batman fought. This would be the Catwoman he worked with, Catwoman the... crimefighter. Technically there was something of hers in there too. The second week I covered for him when he'd hurt his back, I demoted Victor's freeze ray to the back row of a display case and stuck in a souvenir glass from the Iceberg. I certainly earned it that night. But I know Bruce. That's his cave, and if he didn't put it there, it doesn't count.

It was really very touching. More than touching. I knew I had to say something, so...

"I can't think of anything more appropriate to say 'me,'" I declared. "Great big diamond, right?" I said, knocking on the side.

"I can't think of anything more appropriate either," he grveled. He said it so seriously. It was clear he didn't mean it in the sense of 'jewel thief' the way I had. It was very clear he meant...

"That night," I whispered.

He didn't say anything more, just bored into me with that silent intensity of his. Normally I love it. But right then, in that store next to that diamond, it... it had echoes. *"You're just going to let me walk away."* ***"No. It's worse than that. I have to take you in."***

He didn't of course. He just turned away, stood with his back to me while I left. Didn't say a word.

Just like on the ride home—with a 40,000 carat fiberglass diamond strapped to the trunk of the Batmobile like a Christmas tree.

Life is very strange sometimes.

"It's taller than Robin," I mentioned, mostly to have something to say once we got it back to the cave. "It will fit right in."

I meant figuratively—amidst an animatronic dinosaur, 8-foot playing card and 13-foot penny, the giant diamond fit right in. But Bruce looked towards the Trophy Room and shook his head.

"Actually it won't. Literally. We'll have to make some room."

## THE MALAY PENGUIN

Bruce is amazing. There's a smoldering intensity that first drew me to Batman, and it doesn't go away when he gets home and takes off the mask. It does change form. When it's stopping crime, it's dark, angry and powerful. But when he's *starting* something, it becomes sizzling, dynamic, almost playful. He doesn't say or do anything special, but you can *sense* it, that inner core that burns so hot as Batman, all that drive and focus and intensity. It's just being channeled into something more... lifesize. It's really something to see.

At least, it is when your eyes are open. That morning, it started before *my* eyelids were open for business. I was dreaming something about an email from Jason Blood, when that old tingle that used to warn me when Batman was near pulled me right out of the dream into a quick spooning hug—followed by a thigh slap and the morning version of the Bat-gravel tickling my ear and telling me not to sleep in too late. Once I was up, he visited me in the shower, which is always fun, and then suggested I wear a t-shirt. I don't usually go bare-armed in the cave; it's pretty chilly. But with all the work we'd be doing, I'd be sure to work up a sweat.

Something about his quiet excitement was contagious, and for the first time in years I felt a flush: this silly, girlish glow warming my cheeks. His impossibly understated yet impossibly intense focus that was so... so *Batman*, it made me giddy as we went down to the cave. I didn't know why at first, but then, stepping off the final step, it hit me: he'd done this before. That cave didn't build itself; he made it. He decided he wanted a chem lab and a gymnasium and a med bay. He chose what equipment to include. And I couldn't help but wonder if I was seeing into the past, if he was like this on that first morning when he came down those stairs to start work setting up the gym.

"First we'll pick a spot," he said—with a plan, as always. "Then we'll work on clearing the space for it, and once everything is in place, we'll recalibrate the holo-gens."

I just nodded. The first time he brought me to the cave, I couldn't appreciate it. I really couldn't *begin* to comprehend. I was still reeling from becoming lovers, from "my name is Bruce," from the words "I love you," from Batman's voice coming from an unmasked face—from that face being *Bruce Wayne*, no less, from... all of it. It was months—hell, it was years—before I really understood what it meant that first time Bruce brought me into the cave. And now, now he casually mentions recalibrating the holo-gens.

"Of course we wouldn't have to move a thing if we put it there," he joked.

"Between the dinosaur's legs? No."

"Thought not."

And the lip twitch. It was the only sign that he'd been joking (and it's amazing how many people don't get his sense of humor that way).

"What about over there, under the Joker card," I pointed.

"Will make it difficult to get to the emergency generator."

"What if... we put it right here?"

"It will block your old costume."

"Let me finish. Put it right here in place of the costume case, and put my old skirted costume..." I turned, "somewhere over there."

He scowled like he was picturing it, then shook his head.

"I'd rather not move that particular case. There's a nest behind that stalactite. I'd rather not disturb anything the bats are used to."

There was something about that scowl—the rooftop scowl—the *denial* scowl. I looked behind me, up the path to the main cavern and his seat at Workstation One. My costume was hardly in its direct line of sight, but I knew from the nights I'd sat there that the splash of color was clear when you glanced this way.

"Right," I said with a smile. Let's not disturb anything the bats are used to. I could have teased him, watched the scowl deepen the way it always did when I called him on one of those. Instead I decided to ask something I'd always been curious about. "How did you get your hands on it anyway? Did I leave it in the 89<sup>th</sup> Street Cat Lair that time after the Rosenthal Rubies?"

"No, it was in a ventilation duct at the art museum, above the women's washroom, third floor, by the Flemish—"

"Oh... yes," I smiled, and then laughed. "I never did make it back into the east wing that night, did I?"

"No, you didn't," came the booming Bat-gravel. Seeing it come from Bruce, the memories came flooding in with a new perspective: *He was at the party*. Of course. The Foundation must've underwritten the new exhibit, so of course Bruce Wayne was at the party. So of course the director's door was locked again, even though she usually forgot when she was staying late for an event in the galleries instead of leaving at five. So of course the barcodes had been reset on all the staff badges. So of course the guard changed his patrol route. So of course the electric eyes were recalibrated. So of course Batman was in every hallway and gallery ahead of me whenever I found a new vent to try and crawl out of. I was *so pissed* at him that night, but now... now I couldn't hold back the smile. I couldn't keep myself from walking over and kissing him.

"It's funny," I laughed. "I know more about the other stuff in here than where you got my costume. Like that umbrella over there, with the carved handle. From the Malay Penguin heist, right? Langston Reed's answer to the Maltese Falcon."

"Except it wasn't fictional. It was presumably the model for the statue in Dashiell Hammett's tale, an actual silver gilt, jewel-encrusted, ebony sculpture, which Reed stubbornly insisted on exhibiting despite the Penguin being free..."

"I've never seen him that mad at anybody who wasn't a criminal," Dick told Alfred after Batman and Robin returned to the cave.

Alfred didn't think it tactful to say that he wasn't surprised, so he simply brought Master Dick a soft drink.

"I mean, I guess the guy was kind of a jerk," Dick went on. "Showing off all this high tech security he's got all over his gallery. But he did kinda have a point. Penguin

doesn't 'rule the art world,' as he put it. Mr. Reed should be able to exhibit whatever he wants. Just 'cause it's a villain theme."

Alfred allowed that there was some validity to the point, but he also knew Langston Reed, a man whose sense of entitlement was so pronounced, he was the model for aspects of Bruce's Fop performance. Alfred had no doubt how Reed would react to Batman coming into his gallery and challenging his actions. He would become aggressive and obnoxious—and Alfred could guess how Bruce would respond to that. Recognizing the similarities to Fop Wayne, his anger would be, as Dick described, on the scale of that reserved for criminal persons.

All Alfred said to Dick was that a valid point can be argued *well* or argued *poorly*, and perhaps Mr. Reed was not one of those gifted with the ability to express his views in a convincing manner. He then went deeper into the cave and made himself conspicuous dusting behind the workstation, in case Master Bruce wished to unburden himself.

"The idiot is using the same system of lasers and electric eyes the Shadow Thief beat last month, Alfred. The glass housing Catwoman slices open with her claws the way you and I turn a doorknob. *Microphones* and *seismographs* to detect disturbances on the floor or in the air, but *cameras* he dismisses as overkill. He knows best, the arrogant blowhard. He doesn't know how to do anything but write a check to Foster and Forsythe, but he knows what's best and all my expertise is waved away."

"Most distressing, sir. Still, there is an advantage, surely, in knowing an item the Penguin is certain to try and steal. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say."

"Perhaps. But when a target is so obvious, it can work against us. They know we know what they're going to do. It becomes part of their plan, part of their... game."

The next few days bore out Batman's prediction. A series of false alarms at Reed Galleries exasperated the police. Batman traced them to the hypersensitive microphones and seismographs Reed was so proud of. There was a theatre next door to the gallery, rehearsing a musical. The noise and vibrations kept triggering an alert, every false alarm prompted him to set a new baseline. Once the rehearsals ended, the gallery became too quiet. Noise so far below the new ambient level could mean that power or ventilation might be compromised, prompting the system to once again sound an alert. The lynchpin of Reed's brilliant security system had been rendered useless by a line of showgirls.

Dick was ready to learn the ins and outs of forensic accounting, so Bruce assigned him the task looking into the production company who rented the theatre. It took him less than a day to find Cobblepot's holding company among the backers of the ersatz musical. That led to a confrontation and the bizarre exhortation to "Remember: Never pitch rolls at a bank!" Robin latched onto Penguin's parting words and spent all his free time trying to find an association between coins or coin rolls and the Malay Penguin... or perhaps a bank and the Penguin... Savings, money, investments, safe deposit boxes, deposit slips, tellers, on and on with banking and banking terminology.

Batman wasn't interested in the specifics. He was troubled by the clue itself. It wasn't Cobblepot's style to leave puzzling epigrams. He was ready to dismiss it as a red herring, but he allowed Robin to continue simply because some lessons are only learned through trial and error. The price was hearing Dick murmuring about pitches,

rolls and banks while Bruce was trying to prepare for his upcoming flight to Paris. The board of the International Securities Exchange was meeting there Friday, and the American delegation was traveling together on a chartered flight to prepare. The flight was expected to be as much work as the conference, and he simply couldn't concentrate with all of Dick's speculating:

"He backs the musical to mess up the gallery's alarms, right? And the money comes through a *bank*. The dancers – the 'chicks' – are feathered like birds..."

He was ready to tell Dick to let it go, when a final clue was dropped—literally dropped, by a flock of birds flying through midtown. The leaflets were weighted with Double Eagle coins, and all bore an absurd taunt addressed to Batman:

*We need stall no longer! Time is on the Wing!*

*Tonight I shall lift the silver bird—and you will take a dive!*

*Disrespectfully yours,*

*Penguin.*

Refusing to short either Gotham or the Securities Exchange, Bruce immediately appointed Justin Broome to take his place in Paris. Batman and Robin suited up, Dick's triumphant chattering dropping to a background hum as Bruce's mind serpented through the facts of the case. The final thought snapped into place as he snapped the latch on his utility belt.

"...Just like you always said, Batman, the Penguin's weak spot is his vanity! He thinks he can play with us—but we've outsmarted him! Right?"

**"Wrong."**

They raced to the airport, to the plane chartered by the Securities Exchange, and caught the Penguin red-handed, preparing to hijack the flight and kidnap the sixty most powerful men in the international finance community.

With Robin clamoring for an explanation in front of a plane-full of witnesses, Batman couldn't avoid explaining his reasoning: *Pitch, Roll, and Bank*, followed by *Stall, Wing, Lift, and Dive* were all flight terms. There was nothing relating to the Malay statue, not even the bird itself since penguins don't fly. Tossing out the assumption that Penguin had any interest in the statue, Batman considered the taunt literally. A 'silver bird' might well mean an airplane, and as targets that screamed TARGET-TAKE ME went, the passengers of this one flight far outshone any jeweled statue.

Robin still couldn't accept that Penguin could pass up stealing the Malay Penguin...

Bruce stopped narrating, since Selina had apparently been fighting down a SmileX attack since he described the dancers shorting out Reed's security, and since his Right/Wrong exchange with Robin, she was losing the fight.

So he stood, silently scowling while she got it out of her system. He noticed the secret alcove was beginning to show since they moved the long display case with the Mad Hatter's top hat. The stone "wall" in that one area was beginning to look discolored, and the patch next to it oddly unsolid. He knew the effect would become more pronounced as the morning's work continued, until finally the alcove with that secret safe was completely visible. He knew this would happen, of course, once they started moving cases with the hologram generators attached to their hinges. He estimated the alcove would not be visible for more than forty-five minutes, if they

continued to work at the pace he anticipated. If it went longer, he would initiate the DefCon-4 protocols to lock Alfred and the others out of the cave, but he didn't want to resort to such measures unless absolutely necessary.

"I'm sorry," Selina said, once she got her chuckling under control. "It's just... a very different story when you tell it."

"I take it you've heard it before from Cobblepot?"

"Once or twice," she said with a naughty grin. "Would you like to hear his version?"

**"Every detail."**

Selina tilted her head, deciding where to begin. Finally she said, "What are the first words out of everybody's mouth after they hear 'The Malay Penguin?' 'Like the Maltese Falcon,' right? It was the first thing I said. *Summa cum laude* at the Sorbonne and I'd never heard of this thing. So, first time I heard Ozzy mention 'The Malay Penguin,' I asked like everyone else—"

"Is that anything like the Maltese Falcon?" Bruce nodded. That was his experience as well, unless you told the listener before they asked, that would be their first question.

"And the Maltese Falcon, in the novel as well as the movie, was a *fake*. Robin was absolutely right, Oswald would never pass up the chance to get his hands on the *actual* Malay Peng—"

"I know. The statue at Reed Galleries was a fake that he'd substituted for the real one before it came into the country. He admitted that when we caught him, *boasted* about it. He stole it weeks before, right after the loan to Reed Galleries was made public, but he cleverly kept the theft hidden so he could use it as a decoy. It took almost six months to find where he'd hidden the real bird... You're laughing again."

"Bruce, do you really see Oswald waddling around Chatsworth with a 12-inch statue down his pants, hanging back on the tour and swapping it out for one on the mantle?"

"You did it?" Batman breathed.

"I had to go to Europe anyway, was overdue for a stop in Zurich. Why not sweeten the business trip with a little fun. Like we did in Paris."

"Hardly the same thing," he said, a hardness creeping into his voice from a hundred long-ago rooftops. Normally Selina would have ignored it, but today, given their task in the cave, it gave her a pang. She offered a peace offering:

"So I went to this little village called..."

"Hooksiel?" Catwoman asked, more to confirm Oswald's handwriting than her pronunciation. She was reading from the slip he'd handed her, and if he didn't want her to hock a lover's saxophone then it must be Hooksiel...

"In Lower Saxony—*kwak!*"

If only he'd sit down. She'd offered Cobblepot a seat as soon as he arrived at the cat lair, but he only sat down for a minute and then he was up again. Waddling around, scrutinizing each Bast and Sekhmet as if he were appraising them. It gave the impression that he was distracted, not giving the conversation his full attention. But

Selina knew better. Oswald Cobblepot was a lot shrewder than most people gave him credit for.

“A charming village. Picturesque—*kwak*. Not much of a tourist destination for foreigners, but popular with the locals. Hence, there is a comfortable hotel should you wish to spend the night. How’s your German?”

“Good enough to meet your...” she squinted at the paper. It was either Hemp Knight or “Herr Kniphaus...” to peck a flesh birch “...to pick up your fake bird.”

“A work of art, Catwoman. A forgery so exact, made by a true genius of the craft, I am assured it will pass the most vigorous visual inspections. Supplied as he is with all the medieval equipment for caving the wood, applying silver, and inlaying the gems, Herr Kniphaus assures me the statue which arrives in Gotham will be indistinguishable from the original—*kwak*.”

At least, to Mr. Reed’s eyes, Catwoman thought. But there were too many different materials involved to fool chemical testing, carbon-14 dating, or the myriad of non-visual techniques to determine authenticity. Passing a “vigorous visual inspection” might be a great selling point for a forger in 1902, but today...

“Oswald,” Catwoman purred, “why do I suspect what you really like about this Kniphaus is that he’s cheap?”

“There is no point in paying for more service than one needs,” Cobblepot sniffed. “The Malay Penguin remains the property of the Duke of Devonshire, in whose collection it now resides—*kwak!* It is merely on loan to the Reed Gallery for the period of the exhibition, and Mr. Reed will have no authority to risk damaging it with chemical testing.”

“I suppose,” Catwoman said, biting her lower lip thoughtfully. The Duke’s country house was called Chatsworth, one of the most famous in England. Selina had been there twice. The art collection was *so* large, it contained so many old master drawings that could not be put on display, *and* a great deal had been sold off in the 1950s when the 10<sup>th</sup> Duke died ahead of schedule, producing a £7 million tax bill. The result was that even the curator didn’t know exactly what the collection contained. The first time, it was fun: taking a Fragonard that nobody reported stolen because nobody even knew they had it. The second time, going back for a Tintoretto, it didn’t seem quite sporting. Besides which, the Dukes of Devonshire all seemed to lean towards that horsey kind of English gentry that liked dogs in their pictures rather than taking up a healthy interest in Egyptian artifacts.

So that was her last visit to Chatsworth, but knowing the house was a great advantage. She knew their security was... well, it was as good as could be expected for a house built in 1554. They were so limited in what they could touch, in terms of the physical structure. The installation of modern wiring, plumbing and heating—without disturbing the historical base—had provided any number of holes for the modern cat burglar to exploit. And like all of those historic houses, they were dependent on the revenues from public tours. All Selina would have to do was pay her £16 admission, and she could walk through the halls and see if anything had changed. If they’d found a way to add thermal cameras or motion sensors to make a theft challenging, she might even pick up a piece or two for herself.

"I'll do it," she told Oswald, reaching for a pen and scribbling a number on his paper. He was standing by a waist-high silver Sekhmet, running a gloved finger over its ear as if testing for dust. Catwoman showed him the paper.

"KWAK!" he wailed, stabbing it with a chubby finger. "You cannot possibly expect me to pay such an amount."

"No, that's my account number," Selina assured him. "This number is my fee."

"KWAAAAAK!"

Hooksiel. Kniphhaus. Selina saw Bruce's eyes register the information, and while he didn't actually say thank you, it was implied in the bat-grunt.

"Then it was off to England. It was nice seeing Chatsworth again. I waited until the insurance inspectors had authenticated the bird and saw it safely packed up for shipment to Gotham, then I made the swap and stashed the original in a cargo bay at Gatwick. Oswald already had the shipping arranged."

"I never knew," Bruce said quietly.

"Naturally, I don't figure into the story when Ozzy tells it. *He* stole the bird weeks before it came into the country... All the same to me. He stole it, he had it stolen. I got my fee. He can say whatever he wants. But anyway, the fake bird was on its way to Gotham, and Oswald knew Reed would push your buttons. He's so *obnoxious*. He's so *certain* about everything he says, and so *wrong* most of the time. Ozzy knew the more Reed boasted about his wonderful precautions, the more you would be focused on all the areas where they fell short—and while you were focused on Reed being wrong, it would keep you focused on the biggest wrong of all: the idea that the Malay Penguin was his target."

"Subtle," Bruce said admiringly. "If he'd left it at that, it would have worked. But he overplayed his hand with all those extra clues."

"Didn't it ever bother you? Oswald leaving you clues like Riddler? It's never been his M.O., before or since. Didn't it make you wonder?"

"It's an unanswered question of the case," Batman graveled, willing to admit the debit in want of a credit in that particular case log, but rejecting that word "wonder" that made it sound like he was a poet contemplating the stars.

"Eddie knew a lot about what was going on," Selina explained...

"Lina's birthday's coming up," Eddie told Oswald tersely. "We made plans to go see that revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Lanced Cone Elm, she canceled on me. Off to Europe to pull a job!"

"Wasting your time there," Oswald observed. "The Felonious Feline is unequivocally unavailable."

"Don't believe everything you hear about her and Batman," Eddie said peevishly.

"Pshaw," Oswald agreed. "I would not dream of repeating that prattle of the proletariat..." And he wouldn't even if he believed it. Catwoman made it clear that insinuations about her and the Bat would bring an unsheathing of claws and shredding of Penguin plumage. Quite apart from his desire to live unbruised, he could tell when

a woman was unavailable, even if she herself seemed blithely unaware of that fact. He himself had made overtures. And any bird who could resist the charms of Oswald Cobblepot would clearly not be tempted by inferior specimens like Batman or The Riddler.

"Anyway," Eddie said, heavy on the dignified hauteur. "I want to call and wish her a happy birthday. Question: Where to call? Answer: Unknown. But the query begins "Where," which rhymes with lair. Who did 'Lina say only last week was stopping by her lair?"

Oswald cleared his throat, annoyed by the unnecessary whimsy in what was clearly becoming a straightforward business transaction: the Cat's location in exchange for a wad of cash.

"I figure it must be you that hired her," Eddie concluded. "I just want to know where she is."

Oswald named a price—which Eddie resented. Questions should be answered based on *knowledge* and *wit*. Intelligence was the currency he valued, not simple cash. But Oswald was firm, so Eddie grudgingly paid up.

"So Ozzy told him about Hooksiel, and almost immediately he regretted it. You know what Eddie is like, it's a puzzle. What's Selina doing in Hooksiel? He made it his business to figure everything out—and Edward Nigma knowing the details of what you're planning is never a good thing. There's no telling what might set him off. FAO Schwarz puts a giant Hello Kitty in the window and six months of work goes down the drain because he's sending you haiku about the Katz collection.

"Oswald figured the best way to avoid the explosion was to detonate the bomb himself. So he gave you a couple Riddleresque clues himself, pointing where he wanted them to."

Bruce's lip twitched. And Selina grinned.

"It obviously backfired."

It was a little early to break for lunch, but Bruce didn't want to risk Alfred coming down to the cave to prod them while the alcove was visible. He didn't say it, but Selina guessed he also wanted to update his files on the Malay Penguin "in light of new information" (grunt). So she went upstairs to talk to Alfred about lunch, planned to hang around the kitchen without making a big deal out of it, giving Bruce time to tweak his logs, and then bring the sandwiches down herself when they were ready.

To pass the time, she told Alfred about the robbery at Falconi's the night before and Bruce's extraordinary gesture bringing home the diamond from their first encounter there.

Alfred knew the particulars of that first crime they foiled together—not because Bruce had ever mentioned it, but because the subject was raised quite recently when he asked her to take over for him while he was injured. Alfred did not like admitting he overheard private conversations between the master and the mistress, so he was quite happy to allow Selina to tell him the story now. It gave him an alibi, so to speak, for knowing all the details he did.

"There we were, back in the jewelry store on the very spot where it all went down all those years ago... I would have settled for a kiss. Instead, it was that broody bat-silence, you know the one where he's like a black hole sucking in light. I didn't think I'd even get the kiss, and instead... diamond as big as the Ritz, almost literally in this—Cassie?"

Alfred turned, and Cassie gave her quiet fingertip wave that made her seem shy if you didn't know she preferred gestures to speech.

"Case go bad. Last night," she said. "Thought woman killed for purse. Find thug use her credit card. Pawn her jewelry. But say no kill. Say dead already when he find. Believe him. He is right hand. Kill strike with left hand, and taller like Alfred."

"Indeed," Alfred said mildly.

"Turn out she doctor. Office in Gainsly. Lots OCs come out of Gainly."

"OCs are OxyContin," Selina explained.

"Last six month, lots OCs," Cassie continued. "Percs, Paulas, Blue Dynamite, 512s. Wonder if connected. OC is prescription drug, schedule one. Doctor write prescriptions. Maybe for all OCs, Percs and Blue Dynamite coming out of Gainly. Maybe write too much. Attract attention. If get investigated, mob want silence her before she can cut deal."

"So you need to do some research?" Selina guessed.

Cassie nodded. "See if police investigate. Or DEA, anybody. If investigate, maybe have theory who work with, which mob involved."

"Why not go to Barbara for something like that?" Selina asked.

"Might not be. All guesswork. If no find police report, next step research is medical. See about prescriptions writ and filled. If need do medical research, Sensei better. Sensei father was doctor. Much better teach."

Selina smiled. "Well, we're doing some work downstairs so you won't be able to use the cave workstations today, but I'll send Bruce up and he can help you from the laptop in the library."

Predictably, Bruce kicked at the idea. Updating the logs while Selina brought lunch, now helping Cassie, they were falling behind schedule. If they didn't finish in time to recalibrate the holograms before he left for patrol...

Selina's response was simplicity itself. "She knows five street terms for OxyContin, but it's only one time in three she'll bother with 'he' 'she' and 'is.'"

"You still could have sent her to Barbara. She can learn as much about human interaction there with Barbara and Dick—"

"Bruce, she says she came here because your father was a doctor."

"..."

"C'mon, you're too good a detective not to see it."

"She hopes I'll talk about him," Bruce said softly. "She wants insight into...fathers."

"Yes, the regulation kind who read you bedtime stories and teach you to throw a knuckle ball. Can you blame her?"

"I'll go up and talk to her," he said, looking towards the alcove.

“And I’ll move the weed,” Selina said, glaring at the overgrown orchid preserved in pressurized argon.

## PREDATORS AND PREY

Catwoman stretched out on a gargoyle across from One Police Plaza, as she always did when Batman answered the signal and she opted to wait rather than end the evening early. It had been a strange afternoon, hearing Batman's side of the stories she knew so well.

Jervis's St. Patrick's day escapade, for instance. His version always began with Rosetta Leesburg, a typist in the Mayor's office. How he hatted her from above as she climbed the stairs at the 19<sup>th</sup> Street subway station and, through her, infiltrated the Parade Planning Committee. How she brought him the name of the Grand Marshall as soon as he was chosen, and added his dummy corporation as a local sponsor supplying 5,000 paper bowlers to be given away to the crowd. How he labored over the master hat to be worn by the Grand Marshall: the richness of the velvet, the careful selection of the dyes, the conductivity of the underlying electro-mesh, and the delicacy of the algorithms that enabled him to control only the Grand Marshall's hat, which in turn would control the 5,000 puppets in the crowd.

Batman's story only began when the patrolmen working crowd control stopped reporting in. He focused on their placement along the parade route, recognizing them as surgical strikes around cash-rich targets. Cash-rich targets near bars, where anomalies like the pockets of radio silence would be attributed to disturbances by rowdy drunks. How, testing his theory, he discovered the nearest missing patrolmen had not gone silent because she was occupied with the patrons of Flannagan's Ale House but because she'd been subdued by a quartet of hatted drones. How attempts to warn police were futile, since the gimmicked hats were distributed all along the parade route and there was no way to determine who or how many might "go off" at a particular time. How Batman himself had to fight his way through a pack of powerfully strong drones at the OCB and another at the Empire Bank before he was able to trace the signal controlling them to the Grand Marshall's float, and from there, track *his* controller in Mad Hatter's own location...

Jervis had never mentioned that he ran his magnificent operation from a Porta-Potty behind the sponsor's tent, and Selina was still giggling at that revelation.

Sitting on her gargoyle now, watching Batman on that far rooftop talking with Commissioner Muskelli, she felt a little... out of sync. He seemed like the Batman who first started dropping by her apartment after patrol. Before Xanadu, before "My name is Bruce." At least he did until he finished with Muskelli. The way he fired a line parallel to her gargoyle, expecting her to swing into place beside him as he passed her roof, it restored the easy familiarity of the present.

"Anything big?" she asked when he was close enough to hear.

"Possibly," he graveled.

Selina would have to admit, there was an excitement in that period, a thrill of discovery she never got to savor. They had so many years of desire and denial behind them, when the dam started to burst, there was no time to dwell on the details. She wouldn't trade the comfortable partnership they had now for anything—but she couldn't deny the tingle she felt from these stories of his behind the trophies.

"They lost a CI last night," Batman reported, unaware of her thoughts and focusing on the case Muskelli just brought to his attention. "Second in a year to die in... this particular way. The first was attributed to Joker. 'Wrong place, wrong time,' was the thinking, no connection to his being a confidential informant. But now..."

"Two is more than coincidence," Selina said, completing the thought. "'Course Jack doesn't care about anything as normal as silencing informants, so it must be someone trying to hide in his shadow? That doesn't make a lot of sense. You kill a snitch to send a message to other would-be snitches, right?"

Batman shook his head.

"The killer wasn't intentionally mimicking Joker. It wasn't a SmileX attack. And Muskelli didn't call me just to ask my opinion. He knows I have samples of Bud and Lou's DNA."

"The hyenas? I have a feeling I don't want to see the crime scene photos on this one."

"They're very efficient killing machines. Ate everything except the hair and bling, left enough spittle on the latter for a DNA match. Let's go back to the cave."

What they found on reaching the cave was that they had a wait on their hands. Batman's samples of Bud and Lou's fur were pristine. The organic matter from the crime scene was anything but. Batman predicted it would take the computer thirty-five minutes to isolate the genetic code from the hyena's saliva from that of the victim's blood, bile, sweat, and other contaminants. While they waited, Selina went back to the Trophy Room. Bruce assumed she was planning to do more work on the display cases, but he found her looking up at the dinosaur.

"Speak of the devil," she said softly.

Bruce hugged her from behind, saying nothing. He knew what she meant. If it wasn't Joker, then 'murder by hyena' could only be the work of animal smugglers.

"Speak of the devil," he repeated softly into her hair...

When he'd returned to the cave that morning after helping Cassie, Selina had Ivy's orchid moved to a dark corner, between a fake football trophy Scarecrow made to infiltrate the Hudson U athletics department and a straitjacket from the private hospital where Hugo Strange tried to imprison Bruce Wayne. But it was clear the move wasn't vindictive, since she was now moving the track lights to spotlight the orchid in its new location. Catlike, she hadn't bothered with a ladder when there was a perfectly good overhang already available. She had swung up to the dinosaur's head, secured her leg and lowered herself upside-down over the orchid case as she would in a museum to avoid sensors in the floor.

When she saw him, she pointed up to the T-Rex and called out "I want to know where you got this guy!"

It wasn't that cold as Batman approached the roof of One Police Plaza, not cold enough for the overcoat Jim Gordon wore, but it was blustery. Batman arched his back to counter a final gust as he landed, and Gordon suggested they move inside to his office. Batman could now see from the drape of the coat that Gordon was holding a file folder inside. He agreed to move indoors. Looking through papers on the roof was an obvious impossibility.

When they reached the office, Gordon tossed the folder onto his desk, but rather than referencing it, he pulled out his wallet and pointed to a photograph on the wall. Four young officers in uniform, including a very young Jim Gordon, posing in front of a podium.

"The one on the right is Matthew Fohn. Now Lieutenant Fohn. Heads the 28<sup>th</sup> Precinct. We came through the academy together. This is his son Robert." Gordon had removed another photo from his wallet and handed it to Batman. It pictured Gordon and Fohn, several years older but still young, dressed in flannel shirts in front of a small boat. A boy of about ten stood with them. Each man held up a small trout while the boy held out a large one cradled in both his hands.

"Must be in his twenties now," Batman said, handing back the picture non-committally.

"Twenty-five. Was going to follow in his father's footsteps, but Matt wanted him to go to college. So I suggested he aim a bit higher, get a degree before applying to the Academy, then consider his options, maybe the FBI—which is exactly what he did."

"What's happened, Jim?"

"He's gone missing, near a game reserve in Botswana," Gordon said crisply. "Matt asked me to find out what I could, which wasn't much. 'Poaching,' of course. You know what a nasty business it is over there. Poachers murder game wardens and vice versa. But that's local: their local law enforcement, nothing to do with our national security."

"Until the animals are shipped," Batman interrupted. "Poachers have a network of customs officials and airport personnel already on the payroll. You couldn't pay them enough to transport military grade ricin, but if they think it's just another shipment of tiger's bones heading into China."

Gordon nodded soberly.

"Or Gotham's Chinatown, or San Francisco's or Hawaii's. I suppose that would warrant the attention of an Agent Fohn."

Bruce broke off the story and glanced at Selina.

"Tiger's bones aren't half of it," she said bitterly. "The live animals, the most beautiful cheetahs and leopards and lions, brought into Texas for caged hunts. There better be a special hell for those bastards, because nothing we can do to them here is bad enough."

She'd finished with the lighting and they were emptying out one of the long cases prior to moving it. Riddler's cane was in her hand, and she set it down, opting for the longer and more lethal weapon behind it: Ra's al Ghul's "Dragon Blade." She pointed the tip at a stalagmite, which Bruce guessed represented a poacher or hunter. Her eyes

went cold and hard, and stepped through her limited but flawless repertoire of sword kata.

Then she gave a pleased smile and delicately replaced the sword in the case.

"Go on," she said sweetly.

"Well, Gordon called me in on this case because a man named Chase was coming to Gotham," Bruce resumed—or he tried to. He got no farther than that when Selina's eyes widened, her mouth dropped open slightly, and her breath froze mid-inhale.

"Not Stephen Chase?" she said, barely audible.

For so many years, Batman and Catwoman had spoken without words. What they did say out loud seldom matched the message in their eyes or what they said and felt with their bodies. Now the years fell away, and words gave way to that old rooftop telepathy.

*~That was you?~* Selina asked, while Bruce berated himself *~Of course, smuggling wildcats, I should have realized you'd know all about it.~*

"What can I do?" Batman asked, as the wind continued to whistle outside the Commissioner's window.

"Stephen Chase, one of the... 'celebrity hunters' in the region, is coming into Gotham next week," Gordon said, finally handing over the file on his desk. "You've probably heard about this Dinosaur Island that Murray Hart is building out past Laney Point in Bludhaven."

Batman grunted. Bruce Wayne had received a prospectus on the theme park in the earliest stages when Hart was still looking for investors. He didn't think much of the park's economic potential, but he did note that the animatronics Hart was commissioning were a good three generations beyond anything Disney had come up with. He estimated the park would fail in three to six years but those animatronic dinosaurs would raise the bar for all other theme parks in that time.

"Hart is an old school showman," Gordon continued. "He's invited a group of big game hunters to a special dinner, as a publicity stunt prior to the park's opening. He's allegedly feeding them steaks from a woolly mammoth discovered in a glacier last year. Nonsense of course, but—"

"But Hart knows there is no story so stupid that some paper won't run it," Batman said. *Probably the Gotham Post*, he thought, considering the sensational but preposterous nature of the idea.

"And someone will always take it seriously if they see it in print," Gordon continued. "They'll talk about it, their friends will tell them what idiots they are, and at the end of the whole thing, Hart's event is on everybody's lips."

"And this Stephen Chase is coming to the dinner," Batman said, trying to get the conversation back on track. "What's his connection to Folsom?"

"I wish I knew," Gordon said. "If I had some proof, even a circumstantial tie, anything to justify detaining him while he's here. He's delivering himself right into my backyard, damnit, and there isn't a thing I can do. I'm the one who talked Robby into the FBI. I owe Matthew, owe them *both* more than 'nothing I can do.'"

Batman appreciated Gordon's feelings, but it wasn't much of an answer, not from an experienced policeman. He tried again.

"Tell me more about Chase," he asked. His own research would probably turn up more than Jim could tell him, but he wanted to draw him out:

"Most of these guys aren't big game hunters anywhere but on book jackets," said Gordon. "Let's face it, the Great White Hunter was a cliché twenty years ago. They write books or lend their names to books that other people write, give lectures at the big resorts and make public appearances. Stephen Chase is the 'face' of one of the smaller safari lodges over there. They run all their expeditions in the Central Kalahari Reserve, where Robby was last seen. There were reports of a stampede that day, started by a gunshot, but it was one of the guests on the driving tour that heard the shot. That's on par with a tourist in Gotham saying they saw Batman's cape silhouetted as he was swinging past the moon."

"Anything else?" Batman graveled.

"His income. Chase's seems higher than this simple lodge can possibly be paying him."

"Unless they're more than they seem as well."

"Could be," Gordon admitted. "The place is aptly named Deception Valley. And there's a souvenir business, nothing large and none of the merchandise is patently illegal but it's one of the few gift shops where the 'native' goods aren't made in Taiwa—"

Gordon stopped when the whistling of the wind outside his window shifted to an abrupt, silent chill. He turned, knowing the chair in front of his desk was now empty.

"I hate when he does that," he remarked to the open window.

The next day, Bruce Wayne returned to the Empire Club. It was his first visit since Poison Ivy got to him there, pulling him and other board members into a nightmare of secret control that nearly destroyed the Wayne Foundation. It was understandable that he'd been reluctant to go back, even all those months after escaping her control. But it was the only place he was likely to run into Murray Hart without deviating from Bruce Wayne's typical routine.

It wasn't difficult making the meeting seem accidental. A glance at the seating chart told him Hart was having lunch with Clive Holbrook, who had a passion for racehorses. Bruce waited near the coat check, bumped into Clive when he came in, and prattled on about the three-year old from Grenville Farms heading for the Derby this year. Clive was completely absorbed correcting all Bruce's misconceptions about the horse when Hart showed up for their lunch, so of course Bruce was invited to join them.

For once, Bruce learned quickly, and by the time the soup was served, the conversation could move on to Hart's plans for Dinosaur Island—and particularly the dinner to kick off the promotional campaign.

Bruce deftly planted the idea that hunters alone weren't all that interesting—not to Gothamites. The paper *might* run the story if nothing better was going on, but a bunch of safari guys from South America (South Africa, Hart corrected, but Bruce didn't seem to hear him) could easily get upstaged if Batman and Robin took down that plant lady or something like that. Now, if he could somehow get Batman involved, he'd have Page Six locked up for sure, maybe even get a secondary headline on the front page.

Hart thought for a minute, and as Bruce babbled on about Batman's exploits, it occurred to him that Batman and Robin were hunters too, in a way. They hunted criminals, which were more cunning than any animals...

An invitation was dispatched through the GCPD, which Gordon naturally passed along to Batman, who naturally accepted. Any sane Gothamite who wasn't Murray Hart would have been astonished, but Hart simply viewed the double miracle as the kind of reward that comes to the man who thought to ask what no one else would dare.

The size and scope of the miracle began to sink in when the man walked into the dining room. There he stood, Murray Hart, in his new and scrupulously tailored tuxedo, welcoming his guests: some in black-tie as he was, some in business suits, some in less formal jackets and ties—when in walked this figure from a Bosch painting. The Batman who loomed on rooftops, silhouetted against the night sky, the Batman who swooped into alleys to decimate a nest of criminals before they even knew what had happened, that Batman had just *walked into his dining room*. What looked like a hundred pounds of body armor, cape and mask shaped like a giant bat... was shaking his hand and wishing him a good evening, because he, Murray Hart had *invited Batman to dinner*.

And he came. He spoke, he said "Good evening" like any other guest, he thanked Hart for inviting him like any other guest. He accepted a drink, sat down at the table, and chatted like any other guest. It was all quite surreal.

At the dinner, Batman took every opportunity to provoke Stephen Chase, making eye contact as he discussed the trafficking in exotic animals:

"The third largest criminal enterprise, second only to narcotics and guns."

"But far less deadly," Chase said with a light dinner party laugh he would use at the Lodge.

"Hardly," Batman said with a feral glint in his eye that belied the light conversational tone. "Estimates vary, but most put it at an eight to ten billion dollars business. Eight to ten billion a year going into the coffers of organized crime. I consider that very deadly."

"Not to mention the number of animals who die in transit, many if not most endangered species to begin with," another chimed in.

The conversation took a more "environmental" turn, but as the others chattered on about extended droughts and shrinking rainforests, Batman's eyes bored silently into Stephan Chase.

"The fines and prison sentences aren't nearly severe enough," Batman graveled, barely audible and ignored by the others, but heard well enough by the man to whom it was directed. "Unless of course it's a RICO case, or there are... more serious felonies attached."

Chase panicked, as expected. He didn't dare challenge Batman himself, but he didn't have to. Gordon was quite right about the divide between the dinner guests' Great White Hunter image and the unvarnished reality of their daily lives. The gap was exacerbated by the dinner. Gather so much faux-machismo in a room filled with leather and tiger skins and well-oiled guns, feed it steak and ply it with 30-year scotch and you can pretty much lead it where you please. Chase had no more difficulty manipulating his fellow diners than Batman had manipulating Chase. He found a Mr.

Breech the most suggestible: The romanticism of the lone hunter against the wilderness. The elegance, style and grace of the old ways: Man against beast. Both predators, both cunning, both worthy... After a few deft turns of the conversation, it was Breech who issued the challenge:

"With all respect to our guests of honor, I don't buy Mr. Hart's rationale for inviting them. A modern manhunt in the concrete jungle is one thing, but there is no comparing the 'beasts' of civilization with those of the natural world. Those we hunt are far more dangerous, and would make short work of you."

Rather than respond himself, Batman allowed Robin to rise to the bait and the other guests to join in, taking sides. Encouraged by their support, Breech went on:

"I propose a challenge: 36 hours on Dinosaur Island. I will rig up a number of paint ball-style traps, and if you are able to survive in the 'primeval wild' of Mr. Hart's park for 36 hours, I will donate \$50,000 to the charity of your choice."

There was no hint that Batman suspected Chase's involvement, no sign that he welcomed the deathtrap as a chance to put Stephen Chase in a vice. With two counts of attempted murder hanging over him and no choice but to turn over the rest of the African operation...

"Seriously?" Selina exclaimed. "He *seriously* did not think you suspected. He... he thought *you* were that dumb."

Bruce raised an eyebrow, looked down at a microchip from Brainiac's failed attempt to hijack the Batcave systems through the Watchtower uplink, and straightened the freeze ray next to it in the display case.

"But you're Batman," Selina said, stating the obvious under the circumstances, but Bruce pretended to adjust the batwing-shaped latch on the display case, simply to underline her point.

"Unbelievable," she said, shaking her head.

"All Robin and I had to do was survive. It was easy to determine where Breech would situate himself to stage manage his 'traps,' and I stationed Robin where he would see Chase coming. The only concern was that Chase would actually try to kill Breech rather than simply incapacitate him to take over control of his traps. If he had, Robin would have had to intervene. We'd still have him on one count of attempted murder, but with Breech as the victim and Robin as the witness... I felt our chances were better to pressure him if he succeeded far enough into his plan to where he tried to kill *me*."

"Yes, I'm sure," Selina said—and Bruce started. An undercurrent in her voice pulled him out of his own story, and he noticed a slight warming of her skin and a shift in her weight, which he confirmed with a glance at her nipples. She was turned on.

"It must have been wonderful," she breathed. "All that... *Bat*... I can just see you, boring into him, burning away whatever little pocket of vapor lock that monster mistakes for his soul. I bet he still has nightmares about it. The eyes, the voice... Oh, Bruce."

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight.

Bruce hugged back dully. He would never understand how she could look on that darkest, angriest part of him and remain unaffected and unafraid, but now she was actually turned on by it? Reveling in it?

He pulled her head back from the embrace and looked deeply into her eyes. Unable to read what he saw there, he continued the story, hoping for a clue.

“Even with an army of robotic dinosaurs at his disposal, there was nothing Chase could come up with to pose a serious threat.”

“Of course not,” Selina smirked. “Joker, Luthor, Ivy, Scarecrow have all taken their best shots and failed. Stephen Chase? Give me a break.”

“The worst it got was a sort of sea monster, held me in its jaws and pulled me underwater in this artificial lake in the center of the island. Getting free was more like an underwater straitjacket escape than fighting an actual opponent when you can’t breathe. Clayface has had me in far worse holds. Once I got free, I drew Chase out into the open, positioning myself where he thought I was vulnerable, and sprung a trap of my own. He came out ‘riding’ that T-Rex like a stallion.”

“That can’t possibly have been as silly as it sounds, because the picture I have in my head right now...”

“I don’t know about that,” Bruce said, “but strategically, it was as *stupid* as it sounds. I had the trees, the ‘wings’ of these pterodactyl kites the park had positioned around the entrance, and a world-class acrobat. I don’t think I ever saw Dick have more fun in costume than in the two minutes it took him to knock Chase off that dinosaur. Once he fell, I finished him.”

Selina was rubbing her fingers slowly over his knuckles as he said the last. “You did a lot more than that,” she said softly.

“Naturally nothing about the dinner or the challenge was ever released to the public,” Bruce said in a brusque ‘summing up’ tone. “Chase made his deal with the authorities, and Batman was never mentioned. We thought the best case scenario would be finding Agent Fohn’s body and giving him a decent burial, assuming the desert left anything to bury, and sending the perpetrators to jail. As it turned out, they found him alive. Badly dehydrated, arm broken, legs broken, near death, lost his one leg up to the knee. But he was alive, he still is, and Jim’s friend Matthew is now a grandfather. All in all, a satisfying conclusion.”

“Except that wasn’t the conclusion,” Selina said, a tiny tear forming in the corner of her eye. “I had just bought the land for the Catitat. I’d been saving, and the Bjornbar Jade put me over the top. I had a serval, pair of caracals, and a lynx. That was it. No big cats yet, but I had a contact at the World Wildlife Fund who had a lead on a jaguar. The poor thing had been in a magician’s act. Crammed into tight spaces, cage too small, abused, hated men... but he responded to women with long dark hair. We figured one of the magician’s assistants who had been kind to him.

“I hadn’t met him yet. I went over to the fund office to pick up Sandra and go meet the jaguar. I found her in tears. They’d been tracking forged documents. It’s not illegal to own exotic animals, just selling them for profit. So fraudulent ‘donation’ documents is a business. That’s what Sandra had been working on. She’d followed the paper trail of these four tigers to a ranch in Missouri, and just learned they’d been slaughtered. Sent on to someplace in Illinois to be ‘distributed.’ She was naturally very upset.”

Bruce could tell that she wasn't the only one, but he said nothing.

"With tigers, people think it's the hide," Selina said, barely controlling the pain in her voice. "But it's not. The gall bladders, skulls, teeth, there's a market for... everything. The poor things are worth more dead than alive, and... Well, I knew all that, but it's one thing to *know* and another for a weepy, overworked bureaucrat to be telling you between sobs.

"I guess I'm a soft touch," Selina said, and Bruce couldn't restrain the lip twitch. She said it like it was a character flaw. "I wanted to help. It's not like Fish & Wildlife has any kind of budget to go after these bastards. Ninety agents watching the borders, I'm shaking. And even if they had the manpower, putting a sting together is a lot more complicated than pulling a seized Ferrari out of impound to pose as a drug dealer. I actually *had* a huge plot of land earmarked for a wildlife preserve and a lot of money to spend on cats. I could pose as a buyer better than any undercover. So I put out some feelers."

"Which led you to Chase."

"Eventually. It led me to a Mr. Sanders and a Ms. Hardy and a Mr. Bruel... They were scum but nothing I couldn't handle. Bruel's the one who got greedy, after I'd been outbid on a panther by some Texan. I was feeling around for the name of the buyer—of course what I wanted was the location of the cage hunt, but Bruel figured I was just one of those rich people who can't stand to lose. He didn't want me making a better offer on *that particular panther* when he wasn't going to get a cut, so he suggested I write off that cat and use the extra money to make sure I never lost out again. Cut out the middle men and go straight to the source."

"Chase."

"I don't think I'd ever hated anyone so much in my life," Selina said. "He talked to me the way I'd talk to a collector. That... was very hard to take." She looked up at Bruce with an expression he had never seen in a thousand vault-front confrontations, an expression that almost looked like guilt. "There is *no comparison* between a diamond or a painting and a *leopard*," she said emphatically. "A diamond is nothing but compressed carbon that we've all agreed is valuable. It's not a living thing. You're not taking it away from its *mother* and there's no chance of it *dying* in a loot sack."

"**No, there's no comparison,**" Bruce agreed.

That minor concession (in Batman's ominous rooftop gravel) was enough to calm her down and redirect her focus to the story.

"He faxed me satellite photos of the preserve like it was a catalogue. I could order three tigers, two cheetahs and a lion the way you'd order a Cobalt Blue Porsche from a specialist car ring... And it got worse when I checked the fax number. It was sort of a 'craft market,' and they had a website: 'exotic local goods.' Nothing that interesting, a lot of copper and straw—until you read the testimonials. There it was quite clear: ivory, tortoise shell, coral, indigenous hardwoods, animal skins. Nothing was too 'specialized.' Nothing was too rare, endangered or illegal. If you asked for it, they'd get it."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. Sandra's agency was useless. They couldn't do much with the leads I gave them on Hardy, Bruel or the cage hunts, and those were all within U.S borders.

So I kept Chase to myself. I hadn't come up with any kind of gameplan yet when Chase went silent. The fax number disconnected and the whole operation shut down. I never dreamed that you had anything to do with it, or even that Chase had been in Gotham. But Sandra did contact me that a number of big cats were seized from a dismantled smuggling operation and stuck in legal limbo. I took them in... and that was the starting population of the Catitit."

"Oh," Bruce said, inexplicably embarrassed by that last twist in the tale.

"Yeah," Selina nodded, her voice just above a whisper.

It was unusual for Oracle to summon Robin to the co-op in costume. She used the comm if it was urgent, the rest of the time she'd call and offer to meet Tim on campus or ask him to drop by after class.

Tonight's job was time-sensitive, but it didn't require a face-to-face meeting. Batgirl had nailed a Maroni capo for the murder of Dr. Rita Desantis. She'd tracked Tony Buffon to his hangout above the P-Lounge on West 55<sup>th</sup> and made short work of him and his crew—but the location meant the Major Crimes Unit for the West Side would be taking the perps into custody and writing up the case. They were used to the evidence packs left by Batman, Robin, Huntress, and occasionally Nightwing, but this would be their first packet from Batgirl. Cassie's communication skills being what they were, Oracle wanted Robin to go to the P Lounge and keep an eye on things: *...: Watch, eavesdrop, and if you see any signs of confusion, get in there and clear it up before anything gets written down. I monitor these things, but by the time I pick it up, it's in the system, part of the official record and a defense attorney can use it...:*

All clear enough, just another episode in a night of Gotham crimefighting, until:

*...: Then come by when you're done...:*

Tim liked Barbara (although he was still a *little* bitter that she made it so difficult for him to download those Roxy-Ivy catfight vids), but going to see her in person seemed like a waste of time. He could report back over the OraCom. As it turned out, the cops finished with Buffon and his men quickly and he had time to finish patrol and still make it back to the dorm in time to get five hours sleep before class. But Barbara was insistent: she didn't want to hear his report over the comm, she wanted to see him in person.

What could he do? He knocked on the window as requested, because a "request" from the All-Seeing Oracle wasn't something you refused unless you were bleeding. He gave his report: it seemed like Cassie did a really good job, considering the complexities of the case. The only ambiguity concerned the pharmacy Buffon "controlled." He didn't own it or have any hold over the owners. It was run by an older couple drifting towards retirement, and their son-in-law worked one day a week in the dispensary. He's the one Buffon owned, through a combination of payoffs and intimidation. Cassie's evidence pack didn't cover any of that, but it was easy for the cops to piece together from the pharmaceutical logs and inventories.

Barbara made a note, and Tim waited while she typed away on her keyboard. He knew whatever he was there for, it had nothing to do with the mob hit on Dr. Rita Desantis. Now that Babs stopped typing and wheeled her chair around to look him in the eye, he hoped he was going to find out what was going on.

## OPPORTUNITY COSTS

The Oracle console behind Barbara wasn't as impressive as the Batcave workstations, but it could display the results from an equal number of data streams on an equal number of monitors. All but the three primary view screens were small, and Tim found himself trying to figure out what they were showing while Barbara was in the kitchen.

"Traffic camera, 911 Call Center, GCPD Dispatch, Wall Street Heliport," he said as she returned, pointing from top to bottom at a column of screens down the side of the console. "But I can't work out those bottom two."

Barbara smiled and handed him a can of Pepsi.

"Took me a while too," she said. "It's the camera hub for a Bludhaven casino."

"Why would it take you a while to figure out what it was?" Tim asked.

"Because it's not my hack. I like to keep an eye on the best efforts coming out of the MIT dorms. This year it's him."

"Hudson's got some good hackers," Tim said defensively, and Barbara laughed.

"Not this year. CalTech might have one worth watching, but she's still a freshman mucking around with Facebook hacks. She might get interesting next year, but I'm keeping my eye on Harvard for next year's candidate and Ms. Porter at CalTech for the year after that."

Tim scowled.

"You're seriously underestimating Hudson hackers," he said.

"Nah, the best Hudson has to offer is sitting here," Barbara answered, short-circuiting Tim's ability to complain further—something he obviously realized since he smiled, drank his Pepsi and asked why Barbara wanted to see him.

"Have you noticed anything strange with Bruce or Selina since they got back?" she asked directly.

"Strange how?"

"C'mon, Tim, you know what strange means. Anything unusual, out of character, not quite adding up."

"No," he said with an 'of course not' shrug.

"You patrolled with B a few times since they got back from Paris, didn't you? Nothing odd on the Bat side of the equation?"

"No. Babs, what's going on? What are you getting at?"

"Cassie has this crazy idea. She says something happened in Paris."

Tim rolled his eyes.

"This is a body language thing?"

"Nothing that pronounced. Just looks, voice timbre, skin tone—"

"Skin tone? Bruce and Selina don't blush, Barbara. And I don't think their eyes look to the left when they lie either. They both know all the tricks. Look, Cass gets those

ideas now and then. And if it's a banger or a wiseguy she's sizing up, she's usually right on the money. But the further you get from street fights and the more it's personal stuff like Bruce-Selina-Paris, the more likely it is she's way off base."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too, at first. But it's not just 'Paris.' Tim, when she first brought it up, she said Paris *and* Cartier."

"Well duh, their logo is panther. Catty's crazy about Cartier, always has been. And those cat pins were, like, the first present he gave her."

"Yeah, but then Cassie says she was over at the manor this morning for help on this Desantis thing, and she overheard Selina telling Alfred that *Bruce gave her a diamond.*"

Tim's head dropped to where his chin touched his chest.

"And you both went all girly 'cause you think that means he proposed," he mumbled, his eyes closed, contemplating the horror.

"No, Tim, listen, you're not listening," Barbara said, her eyes glistening with excitement.

"I am listening, Barbara. He gave her a diamond. He does that, he's *Bruce Wayne!* Even before Selina, he was always giving them little pendants and tennis bracelets and stuff—"

"Cassie didn't jump to any conclusions," Barbara interrupted, pronouncing each word slowly and distinctly. "She asked Bruce about what she'd heard, and he said it wasn't a real diamond at all. It's a floor display from a jewelers that they took for the trophy room."

"See, there you are," Tim said emphatically. "Diamond for the trophy room. That sounds just like them, doesn't it?"

"Exactly. A little too much like them, don't you think?"

"Huh?"

"You said it yourself, Tim. Bruce is a terrific liar who knows all the tricks. That's exactly the kind of cover story he'd come up with, something totally plausible."

Tim stared.

"Let me get this straight," he said finally. "You think that Bruce and Selina got secretly engaged in Paris, and that Bruce is making up this story about a big diamond in the trophy room as a cover. And the reason you think it's a lie is because it's just the sort of lie Bruce would tell... because putting something like that in the trophy room is just the sort of thing Bruce and Selina would do."

"Right!"

"Right?! It's a lie because it makes sense? That's crazy. It's like the people who say Lee Harvey Oswald is the kind of guy you'd *frame* to shoot the president because he's exactly the kind of guy *who would shoot* the president."

"Ah, Rhetoric 100," Barbara chuckled. "You're up to Kennedy/Oswald. Professor Geffen's still using that for reversal arguments?"

"More like Occam's Razor," Tim said, sounding a bit like Bruce refusing to let an investigation be pulled off track by wild speculation. "You're making this complicated for no reason. Cassie heard something, she asked Bruce what it meant and he told her. Why not believe him?"

"Because we can't get into the Batcave," Barbara said instantly—and Tim's mouth dropped open. "Cassie said there were tells if she even looked in the *direction* of the clock entrance when she was talking to Bruce. He repeated twice that she couldn't go

down there today. And he's running a diagnostic so I can't access any of the cave systems or the camera feeds. Now you tell me why?"

"I don't know, Barbara. It's Bruce, there could be a hundred reasons."

"Including that there's no big diamond down there to back up the story he told Cassie. He hasn't had time to get one, and until he does—"

"You want me to break into the Batcave," Tim said gravely.

"Just see if you can get in," Barbara said lightly. "If you can, no harm no foul. Check your email while you're there and get a fresh reel of tungsten. But if the lockouts are in place, then we'll know where we are, won't we?"

Once the DNA established that it wasn't either of Joker's hyenas that killed the police informant, Batman checked the other contaminants in the sample. He determined that the hyena had drunk untreated river water as well as tap water that passed through old, little used, industrial pipe. Not conclusive on its own, but given the trace metal shavings the police lab noted elsewhere at the crime scene—the kind of shavings an animal might pick up in its pads walking near railroad tracks—the warehouse district seemed likely.

It wasn't a large area. Too big to search blind, but small enough that the Batmobile would be quickly spotted passing through. Its slow, eerily silent pass through the warehouses between the river and the railroad tracks provoked the usual response from guilty but naïve criminals who assumed that Batman was actually in the car: one ran out the back of Warehouse 7 to secure the locks on the loading dock doors while one on the inside called his boss. Stationed on a roof at the north end of the district, Batman intercepted the call. He notified Catwoman, waiting at the south end, and they closed in on Warehouse 7 from opposite sides.

It was a short fight: One silent takedown (his) and one whip crack version (hers), and they both retreated to the rafters. The first man to investigate the whip crack and find his fallen comrade was alone, so Batman took him out with a batarang. Then three more arrived which he took out with a concussion grenade. The last he knocked over with a 'rang, swung down, and finished with his fist. By then, Catwoman was on her way into the loading bay and, finding the hyena was caged, gave him the high sign.

Warehouse secured: thirty-nine seconds.

Catwoman pocketed the gas pellet she didn't need for the hyena, removed her rebreather, and began a cursory inventory of the animals. Then she joined Batman in the main room.

"Three macaws," she reported. "A couple parrots, a bear cub, monkey, iguana, at least dozen turtle eggs..." Then she looked down on one of the unconscious smugglers, put her boot on his hip and rocked his body forward onto his back. "No cats," she said, looking down on him grimly. "So they lucked out on that one."

"Maybe not," Batman said, handing her a phone he'd taken from the man under her foot. She glanced down at it as he said "That's the one who made the call I intercepted as soon as they spotted the Batmobile. Check the number and read the texts."

She did, and saw the phone had since received a text message from the same number since the last phone call. It read only:

Well?

That came in during the fight, apparently. And it had been answered only a minute ago. As in: since the men were down. As in: the thug under her foot couldn't have sent it. As in: Batman must have. That text message read:

*All clear. False alarm. Bat not here for us.*

*Mustve followed new customer. Catwom.*

She looked up at him.

"You sent this," she said, noting the obvious, and he nodded. "Handsome, I can tell when you're following me."

"Of course you can," he grveled, turned, and walked out.

She followed, and the conversation resumed as they reached the Batmobile.

"Wait a minute, this message is telling *their boss* that Catwoman came by to see about buying a tiger or something, right?. And Batman followed her. That's why you were in the neighborhood, that's why they saw the Batmobile. False alarm on their part, you weren't after them, you were only here because you were tailing me."

"Correct."

"But I wouldn't be that dumb. I don't go leading tails I'm unaware of into the heart of a criminal operation."

"You also wouldn't be buying from scum like that. Selina, let's say we never got together and you discovered a smuggling operation like this, the way you did with Stephen Chase." The car turned onto the main road and passed a police car and two vans heading for the clean-up at Warehouse 7. They were keeping their sirens off as requested, but the lead car flicked its lights as it passed the Batmobile, and Batman flicked his in return before continuing: "You said you 'hadn't come up with a gameplan' all those years ago with Chase. This is your gameplan. Tonight, this is how you should have proceeded."

"Getting you involved?!" Selina exclaimed. "Get your attention and let you follow me thinking you're clever. Let you have *all the satisfaction* taking him down, what fun would that be?"

"I had all the satisfaction anyway," he noted, and then pointed to the smuggler's phone in her lap. "In any case, Catwoman, we can make up for it now. It will be hours or even days before the ring leader on the other end of that text can find out what happened at the warehouse."

"In the meantime, we can set him up," she smiled, pressing the redial.

Since the original team-up after the Sue Dibny murder, Dick had often taken Tim back to Bludhaven for a few weeks' partnership whenever he needed a change from Gotham. So tonight, Robin figured he would be able to find Nightwing without resorting to the OraCom. Between midnight and two, he'd be somewhere between the Red Line and The Spine. And any late arrival at the St. Eustace shelter should be able to tell him where Nightwing had been spotted since midnight, or at the very least where the night's hot spots were in The Spine...

Batman had few chances to hear his exploits described by someone who had been there. Bruce Wayne sometimes heard the stories: Bunny Wigglesworth regaling the others at the Country Club about a robbery he foiled at her dinner party or Richard Flay telling his golfing foursome about Batman's recovery of a stolen Rembrandt. Bruce always reacted in character, producing a glib smile or a foppish laugh while he privately noted what he could about the way the non-criminal public perceived him.

Such stories were seldom told in front of the masked man himself, however. On the rare occasions when police or bystanders discussed his actions in front of him, he assumed a fixed expression of focused and righteous determination. On the equally rare occasions when he and Robin overheard criminals discuss a "Bat encounter," his expression was similar—but with a dark satisfaction simmering just under the surface, a malicious contentment in the fear he could instill.

That was the expression Batman had assumed soon after Catwoman began her phone call. She had hit the redial on the smuggler's cell and introduced herself with purring politeness when his boss answered. She could have told him anything to explain why the notorious Catwoman was calling on his flunky's phone, but she opted for something very close to the truth. When Batman realized she was giving a rogue's eye view of his assault on the warehouse as if she'd been watching from the shadows, his jaw automatically stiffened into that grim scowl of focused determination... The Silent Takedown. Grapnel to the rafters. Batarang Takedown. Triple Takedown with a concussion grenade... But then he heard that old charge in her voice as she added these little *details*: the way he stretched his neck and shoulder after the last man was down. The way he adjusted his gauntlet "calm as you please, not even out of breath." The way his cape fluttered over one of a downed henchmen's legs after he'd stepped over them and he gave a slight sneer as his shoulder flinch-adjusted the cape, as though he resented the accidental contact.

Bruce's glib country club smile threatened to shatter Batman's mask of grim reserve, so he permitted his lip to twitch to relieve the pressure.

"Yes, everything at the warehouse is lost," Catwoman continued, and Batman could tell by the rise and fall in her voice that she was playing the man like a Stradivarius. "Pity. Those turtle eggs must go for five-thousand a pop. But Bat-losses are a cost of doing business in this town, after all. And I understand you keep your men in line *very well*. None of them will talk. They know what happens to stool pigeons, right?" Then the wickedest laugh he'd ever heard from those feline lips. "So you're safe. So is any other merch you've got stashed away. Briggs did say you had some big cats that might interest me..."

Robin intercepted Nightwing near a crappy motel off the Interstate Bypass and joined him in breaking up a poker game run by a nobody Pelacci associate. 'Wing's contact in the organized crime task force said that Tony Russo, a Pelacci underboss, had pulled strings to get a special guest in tonight's game. Word was that Russo would be there in person, maybe even sit down for a few hands to get his friend off to a good start. That alone made a raid worthwhile. But 'Wing also heard a whisper that the special guest might be Luke Gold from Keystone. Luke Gold who was poised to

take over when Old Man Fiacchi finally kicked—and since Fiacchi just had his fourth heart attack, that day could be coming soon.

Breaking up the card game was easy, the kind of exercise Batman had started Tim on his first week as Robin in order to assess his abilities. Letting Gold escape and tailing him back to his hideout was more like his second week in the cape.

“What about the penny?” Catwoman said abruptly.

“What?” Batman asked.

“Well, here we are waiting again. Malenkovik won’t get here for another hour with the jaguar. It *is* date night. And after the dinosaur story, I’m kind of curious where you got the penny.”

“Oh,” Batman’s lip twitched.

“I know it was made here in Gotham,” Selina grinned. “And I know it wasn’t Harvey. Tim thinks it is, by the way. He mentioned it in passing one day. ‘Two-Face’s big coin in the cave.’ I didn’t think it was my place to correct him.”

“Joe Coyne,” Batman graveled.

“Coyne? The guy’s named *Coyne*? You’re kidding.”

“It’s not the coincidence it seems. As a result of the name, Joseph Coyne hated pennies. Taunting on the school bus or something. Some childhood association he wasn’t even aware of until he woke up after a drunken spree with the words ‘I HATE PENNIES’ tattooed on the side of his neck.”

“On his neck? Oh, *ick*.”

“Up until then, he’d been a small time con,” Batman sighed. “Picked pockets on the subway. Robbed a bodega, a fast food place, a grocery store... All of a sudden, he was noticeable and memorable. No one on the subway lets a man with a *tattooed neck* get close enough to pick their pocket, and Coyne realized that if he didn’t start killing everyone he robbed, they’d be able to give the police a very accurate description of a unique and prominent feature he couldn’t easily hide. Witnesses can’t always judge height, weight, or ethnicity, but ‘I HATE PENNIES’ in big block letters... A smart man would have simply reformed at that point, but a smart man wouldn’t have gone that route in the first place. He decided to move up to theme crimes. The ‘Penny Plunderer.’”

“That’s tragic,” Catwoman said flatly. “All the heists in town for a dime or under?”

“No. Reasonably lucrative targets with pennies as the gimmick. Taking a collection of antique penny banks from a collector and ransoming it back. A gimmicked roll of pennies that released gas to incapacitate a bank teller. Coin collectors were a bit obvious, but he indulged in those occasionally, and any stamp collector with valuable 1-cent stamp was an easy target.”

“This is still incredibly lame,” Catwoman noted.

“Compared to you, sure. Compared to the other rogues, but not compared to what Coyne had been doing before.”

“No, it’s still lame,” Selina insisted. “Compared to being the night manager at the Times Square Wendy’s, it’s lame. Compared to doing PR at the Gotham Post for the past twenty years and then getting replaced by some new kid out of UCLA and having

to take the job as night manager at the Times Square Wendy's, stealing a 1-cent stamp and calling it a theme crime is lame..."

"Possibly. But whether Coyne saw it that way or not, he had to see Congressman Aringa's penny for the opportunity it was."

"Opportunity cost," the congressman announced to his visitor. "Every dollar we spend, we could have spent on something else—a computer instead of a television, a book instead of a hamburger. And everything we *do*, we could have spent that time *doing* something else."

"I remember the lecture," Bruce laughed. "Do you miss teaching? Your Macro Economics 400 was the only morning class I bothered going to."

"I miss the students, but not Princeton. I can do more good here."

"By eradicating the penny?"

"It costs the U.S. mint 1.7 cents to make a penny, Bruce. It's worth 1 cent exactly and costs 1.7 to make. That means we're spending 70 million a year, 70 million taxpayer dollars spent every year *subsidizing* the existence of the penny. That would be one thing if the bacteria-laden discs of suck actually facilitated the exchange of goods and services, but they don't. No parking meters or vending machines take them. None of the places we use coins, not even gumball machines take them. All pennies do is keep Americans busy dealing with them. Estimates say a billion a year in opportunity costs. That's paying 70 million a year in cash to lose a billion in productivity costs, it's insane."

"Well, good luck with it," Bruce smiled, rising and shaking his old professor's hand. "When reelection time comes around, you know who to call, right?"

"I may need you before that," Aringa said impishly. "1.7 cents to make a 1 cent coin, 70 million a year to incur a billion in opportunity cost, it's pretty dry stuff. I need a stunt, something theatrical, something that will get this thing off the Beltway and grab the national media's attention."

"What can I do?" Bruce shrugged foppishly.

"I see your name in the paper more than the President's, Bruce. Arriving at that nightclub opening by helicopter with *six* Alitalia stewardesses as your escorts?"

Bruce laughed it off. He wasn't proud of that particular episode. Fop stunts were meant to camouflage Batman, not to indulge his private grievances. But after that stupid bimbo spending an entire limo ride on the phone, describing the Iceberg Lounge as 'run by some weirdo that used to be a gangster—but not a *cool one like the Joker*,' Bruce decided that group dates would be a lot less irksome—and so would a method of transportation so loud that the women couldn't make phone calls.

Luckily, Congressman Aringa found another way to be 'theatrical' when he was ready to introduce his bill on coinage reform. He commissioned a giant penny to be built as a prop for his speech. The scene shop at the Gotham Opera was making it, since their reputation for large set pieces was unsurpassed in the country. Naturally, the Feds didn't bother informing Commissioner Gordon, but Batman's overnight downloads alerted him to the contract: an item being manufactured in Gotham heading for Washington. An item *pre-tagged* with every delivery clearance necessary to

be taken directly to the secured loading dock underneath the Capitol Building and rolled straight onto the House floor.

Gordon was livid when he found out, naturally:

"The thing is big!" he screamed into the voicemail of some Junior Assistant to the Deputy Director of Capitol Security. "It's not like it can go to this congressman's office in a Fedex envelope. Men have to pack it, load it onto a truck. Have they been checked out? I don't know because nobody told me any of this was happening. And all the paperwork to take this thing straight into the Capitol Building. For heaven's sake don't give the Gotham police a head's up that information like that is sitting in some tech director's desk drawer at the opera house."

Batman understood the concern, but he was less worried about the clearance documents being copied than the cleared item itself being used as a trojan horse. His suspicions were confirmed when he discovered one of Coyne's associates working off a 30-day community service sentence cleaning at the opera house. A temporary janitor in the education wing didn't technically have access to the scene shop, but Batman wasn't taking any chances. He kept an eye on the situation. When Coyne made his move, he followed the penny to Washington.

"It was a judgment call," Batman said, breaking off his narration while Catwoman resettled on the roof. At first he thought she was reacting to his mention of the bimbo, but now it was clear her foot was asleep. After a minute of stamping it out, she decided to stretch.

"A judgment call," she prompted to show she was still listening.

"I could have stopped him at criminal trespass here in Gotham," Batman resumed.

"But you let him cross a couple state lines, get all the way into DC, he just keeps racking up the years. Let him make all the way to the House Chamber, and they'll throw away the key."

"Not exactly," he said with a lip-twitch. "Coyne had never been violent. If he'd been a genuine threat to the congressmen or the Capitol, I never would have let him out of the city. But I wanted to see what his goal was, since it certainly wasn't terrorism or mayhem. This was an unprecedented opportunity to study the criminal mind—the *theme criminal* mind—at work. Coyne was 'The Penny Plunderer' and chance had given him—not a target, but a *method* to commit a crime that he simply couldn't ignore: a giant penny, built in his backyard and heading right into the well of the U.S. House of Representatives. But there wasn't a *theme target* attached. He *had* to somehow use this thing to commit a crime. What crime would he commit? He had no say in where it was going, so what would he choose to get with it when it reached its destination?"

A soft, secret smile began to dance on the corner of Catwoman's lips, but she said nothing as Batman continued.

"His M.O. as the Plunderer frequently involved taking valuable objects from collections: antique banks, coins or stamps, and then ransoming them back to the owners. The Speaker of the House at that time had a letter of John Adams framed in his office, and the Minority Whip had a piece of the lunar module from one of the Apollo missions..."

"*The Surrender of General Burgoyne*," Catwoman interrupted quietly. "One of the big paintings in the Rotunda. John Trumbull, 1821, oil on canvas. But he wasn't going to ransom it back. He had a buyer lined up."

"I thought you didn't know anything about this," Batman said.

"I didn't. But buyers are funny that way. Sometimes when they're expecting a piece and the theft doesn't go through, they'll hire someone else to get it. Or try to. It's pretty funny, really. A painting they didn't know existed three months earlier, and now their lives won't be complete until they get their hands on it. There's this woman in Philadelphia called Chambers, pipes up every few years trying to commission the theft of Trumbull's *Burgoyne* from the Capitol Rotunda. Never gets any takers. The damn thing's 12 by 18. If you don't have a giant penny to roll it out in, who's going to bother?"

"Well, now you know where the penny came from," Batman concluded. "Not an especially exciting case, but with an intriguing aftermath. My apprehending Coyne exposed some serious flaws in Capitol Security. The Washington authorities could have responded in one of two ways: with gratitude, or—"

"Or throwing their feces like howler monkeys," Catwoman nodded. "In my experience that's how sad little men generally behave when you show them they're not very good at their jobs."

"I was going to say 'with hostility,' but yes, that's basically the way things were going."

"Let me guess, they wanted to punish the self-appointed amateur for exposing their shortcomings rather than, God forbid, behaving like men and fixing them... And yet, you have the penny."

"Congressman Aringa intervened. It was something to see. He didn't big-foot them like a typical politician. He had exactly the same 'Aw Dad' manner I remembered from Princeton. After about ten minutes, the head 'howler monkey' shook my hand, thanked me for my help, asked some fairly intelligent questions about the methods I'd used in Gotham and asked my opinion on one of their new procedures. At the time, I assumed it was because Aringa was still in the room, but later that year, the League had a showdown with Starro in D.C. and that same agent was our point man with the Capitol police. Directed all of his comments to me, not to Superman or Wonder Woman. That's... very unusual."

"Sounds like it. So that's why the penny's a trophy. Not because of Coyne but what happened later."

"That's why I kept it. Aringa gave it to me as a memento of Coyne."

"Ah. Well it does fill the space nicely with the T-Rex and the Joker card."

"Yes, it does... Can I ask how you knew it wasn't a Two-Face trophy?"

"You can ask but you'll have to wait for an answer. Because I'm betting that's Malenkovich's truck coming in at 3 o'clock. Look big enough to hold a jaguar cage to you?"

*Cigars* was a bar that would have been called seedy in Gotham, but in Bludhaven, it was considered only slightly below average. Not the type of place that would care if an underage kid entered, in a mask or not. But Bludhaven was Nightwing's town.

Robin knew that Dick had been in contact with Detective Porpora of the organized crime task force, and since Luke Gold was from Keystone, he suspected that Nightwing might also be working with Flash. Robin didn't know enough about either angle to get involved in the case, so he waited once he'd trailed Gold to the seedy bar. And then, once Nightwing arrived, he waited some more.

One thing that Batman had taught him was that 'waiting outside' doesn't mean being useless. He waited near the men's room window, where he could scare the one guy who always tried to sneak out the back when they saw someone like Nightwing come in the front.

The guy was smalltime. He just had a little pot and a roll of twenties in his pocket, so Robin let him run off. Then he went back to the Central Business District to wait for Nightwing. There was a department store roof where they always used to meet after splitting up on those joint patrols.

Malenkovik had no reason to suspect Catwoman. She was a criminal with a cat theme, exactly the sort you'd expect to be in the market for a big cat that could rip somebody's throat out. She wasn't picky, she'd take whatever type of big cat he had on hand: cougars, panthers, pumas, it didn't matter. She had the cash, didn't need time to get it together, and agreed to his price without haggling. Just the kind of buyer Malenkovik liked, as a rule. But even if he had no reason to suspect her, he'd lost a warehouse, men and merchandise tonight. He wasn't going to take any chances. He brought a modified TEC-9 in addition to his favorite Glock, and just to be doubly safe, he slipped a hunting knife into each boot. If that stinking Bat thought he'd sting Serge Malenkovik twice in one night, he had another—

...

"That was way too easy," Catwoman said, standing over him.

She bent and delicately picked up his keys from where they had fallen, while Batman once again stretched his neck and adjusted his shoulder.

"You could have waited two seconds," she noted. "Let him get a word out."

"You didn't see the crime scene photos, remember? I didn't want him getting a word out. I didn't want him talking to you, I don't even want this filth in my city."

"See, this is why bringing you in on the case still wouldn't be my gameplan with Stephen Chase. How much fun did I have tonight? I whipped one guy back at the warehouse and made a phone call."

"You saved a jaguar," Batman said, pointing to the truck.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Catwoman said, unlocking the back. Then, from inside "Oh, look at you, you handsome guy. What beautiful markings you have! Did that awful Malenwoof feed you enough? How would you like to go to a reserve in Mexico with all the white-tail deer you can eat?"

Batman glared down at the unconscious Serge Malenkovik and cuffed him. Then he glanced at the truck and hesitated for a half-beat before touching the button on his belt that alerted the police. The man had murdered two CIs. That wasn't a criminal he would leave cuffed to a streetlight until a squad car came by to collect him. He'd wait until they arrived and took Malenkovik into custody, hand over the evidence pack personally... Which meant 'date night' would be ending early.

He climbed into the back of the truck and told Selina, and a strained silence descended. It was the same tension that often marred the end of their team-ups in the early days. He always assumed it was the transition from *ad hoc* partners back to adversaries, but now... It's not like he had to worry she would expect special treatment the next time he ran into her emptying a vault at Tiffany's. The next time he ran into her would probably be getting out of the shower. So where did this strange tension come from?

Catwoman looked back at the jaguar before moving.

"It's the Chamela-Cuixmala Reserve in Jalisco," she said pointedly.

"I'll remember."

"And there's no reason to move him to another cage. He's used to this one."

"He belonged to a smuggler. I'm sure the authorities will dismantle the cage."

"Idiots."

"Catwoman, go."

She hesitated for another second, and then left.

"Thanks for the assist," Nighting said, landing on the department store roof and glancing past Robin to the Gotham skyline in the distance behind him. "What brings you to 'Haven?'"

Robin also glanced towards Gotham, then back at 'Wing.

"Bit of a situation with Batgirl and Oracle," he began, then reconsidered. "With Barbara and Cassie, actually. I'm thinking I should tell B, but I wanted your opinion." He briefly related the Paris Proposal Theory and the mission Barbara sent him on to check his access to or lockout from the Batcave. "The thing is, Bro, I *am* locked out. Electric Eye Omega does not recognize the Red Bird. It wants a keycode from my personal transponder, like we're at DefCon4, but..."

"But we're not at DefCon, so your transponder hasn't received any keycode," Dick noted.

"Right. I'd have to go into the house and through the clock passage to reach the cave."

"Did you?" Dick asked, fascinated.

"No way. Maybe Barbara's right about all this, but maybe she's not. If it's a real DefCon, I'm not going to go marching into the manor in costume. I just won't do that to Bruce."

Dick nodded, wondering if he was so conscientious at Tim's age—and suspecting he wasn't.

"So, you want to just tell Bruce what's going on," Dick nodded. "Why come to me?"

"Second opinion," said Tim. "Crossing both Babs and Cassie—and potentially honking off Selina if it's an estrogen solidarity thing. Wanted your take."

"You are wise beyond your years, Timothy," Dick declared sagely. "You had the right idea."

"Going to Bruce?"

"Coming to me. I'll go to Bruce."

"Huh? Wha?"

“Nothing in the women’s story sounds like Bruce. It sounds like *them*. If there is something going on with the cave and DefCon protocols, it might be really serious. We should talk to him, but... it should be me.”

“Whyyy?” Tim asked, dragging out the word for three syllables.

Dick didn’t answer for a long minute, he reached to his belt, switching off the OraCom tracker, and looked towards the Gotham skyline and its highest peak: the Wayne Tower.

“I have my reasons,” he said finally.

## THE SECOND HALF

After a typical Date Night, Bruce and Selina slept in the penthouse rather than returning to the manor. It was easier to sort out the cars the next day, and he knew she liked going home to a highrise terrace now and then. A taste of her old life to balance the crimefighting.

Tonight, he would have preferred to return to the manor, get up early and finish recalibrating the hologram generators. He could have the alcove hidden and triple-checked from multiple angles before breakfast... But they parted ways when he stayed behind to guard Malenkovik, and he assumed she'd be headed for the penthouse. He could always call her on the OraCom, of course, but after that strange tension before she left, he didn't think the OraCom or Batman calling with a change of plan would be well-received. So he reached for the grapnel launcher, thinking back to a simpler time when he didn't care how his orders were received. When he teamed up with Catwoman in the early days, it was a given that she would chafe at the judgmental jackass telling her what to do, and he didn't ca...

He felt an echo of that strained awkwardness as his hand brushed against something *extra* behind the grapnel. His fingers curled around it and he pulled out a slip of paper. It read simply: *Lair tonight*. His lip twitched involuntarily, wondering if she'd been thinking of those old team-ups too. He set off for the Cat's Cosmetics Warehouse, thinking how the new location was preferable to the penthouse. They were always up early after a night at the lair, and he'd be back at the manor in time to get the holo-gens triple-checked by ten.

Whatever nostalgic whim prompted the invitation to the lair, it seemed to have passed by the time Batman arrived. She'd opened a bottle of wine and had two glasses out with a wedge of brie. She looked up into his eyes as she handed him the glass and thanked him as if he'd brought her a Christmas present. It took a moment to realize she meant for pummeling the animal smugglers, which of course he'd done because they were criminals. It had nothing at all to do with her... It took him another moment to realize maybe this was nostalgia after all. Some feline logic version: the way those early team-ups could have ended, if only... It took him several moments and a sip of wine to realize that his hesitation with the OraCom—and all it implied, giving a damn how his orders were received and bending a little to avoid ruffling kitty's fur, there was a definite upside.

"The penny," he graveled. "You were going to tell me how you knew it wasn't from Two-Face."

She curled up on her sofa with a purr, smiling at the abruptness as if it was exactly what she wanted from him.

"It was very soon after Harvey and I broke the ice. Oswald was just getting the Iceberg up and running, and Harvey... well, he wasn't exactly crying in his beer, but

he was feeling sorry for himself. Hugo and Jervis were betting on, I don't know, whether or not they could hypnotize a waitress with the glint off the gold foil on a beer bottle, or something equally asinine. And I guess Harv was missing the Harvard club. Having one of those moments when you look around and say 'This cannot possibly be my life.' I heard him say something like 'hang out with the vilest scum Gotham has to offer or die of loneliness like a heroine in some eighteenth century poem. And we sure ain't the fucking Lady of Shalott.'

"I laughed. And he turned and looked at me. He looked like he hadn't heard a woman's laugh in quite a long time. We talked for an hour or so. Somehow or other he'd got the idea that I was *afraid* of him, I'm pretty sure that was Jonathan's doing. Once we cleared that up, he'd invite me to his hideout now and then, just, you know, Chinese takeout and a movie..."

"I brought Ginger Prawns, Orange Chicken and Sichuan Beef," Selina said, unpacking each carton.

"Sichuan again," Two-Face said, a lecherous glint in his eye for just a second before he redirected it towards the food. "You really like it hot."

"Gotham-Sichuan, yes," Selina laughed, ignoring the innuendo and taking a large spoonful onto her plate. "Sichuan-Sichuan, not so much. Leaves me curled up in a ball, whimpering like a kitten."

"You've had the real thing?" Harvey asked. "What were you doing in Sichuan Province?"

"Sanxingdui Museum, what else? A Han Dynasty bronze, circa 200 B.C. Very meow."

"Ah. Of course. We keep forgetting all our new friends are in the same *line of work*."

"You know another cat burglar?" Selina asked innocently.

"We meant you're all criminals."

Selina's eyes narrowed.

"When you were D.A. you considered yourself in the same line of work as a shoe salesman because neither of you break the law until you fudge your taxes?"

"No, we did not consider all law-abiding citizens to be in the same line of work," Harvey said bravely, although a single year of married life was enough to recognize the tone Selina had used and to know there was more to come no matter what he said.

"All lawyers then? You consider yourself in the same line of work as some whiplash shyster that advertises at 3 o'clock in the morning between Bonanza reruns?"

"We recognize the error of our ways," Harvey said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "We were completely ignorant of the distinctions between criminal persons and we deeply regret any offense we have given..." Then his lip left eye opened a bit wider and he added in a coarse, husky voice "Unless you'd like to get out that whip and teach us some manners. In that case, we don't regret a thing and you'll just have to punish us."

"Behave," Selina said, poking a chopstick at him.

For a moment, Two-Face glared at it with a low, menacing growl, like a guard dog who had identified an intruder but whose owner called him off before he could attack. Then his eyebrow raised as if a new thought had just occurred to him.

"Granted, we are not a cat burglar, but we are both theme criminals," he said finally. "Perhaps we should ask your opinion on a professional matter..." He told her he had information that the Gotham Opera was building a giant penny, and he was torn: "On the one hand, it is a giant coin. But it is a penny. One cent. That is only half of two."

"Y-yeah, thanks for clearing that up, Harv," Selina said slowly.

"But doesn't that ruin the whole thing? Would it really be a pleasure to see that enormous coin toppling over and crushing Batman flat when the words ONE CENT would be staring up at us from the lid of his copper tomb?"

Selina set down her chopsticks and touched her napkin to her lips as if thinking it over. This was her first exposure to just how crazy Two-Face could be, and she hid her surprise in a delicate sip of sake.

"Why not flip for it?" she asked finally. "That is how you decide this stuff, isn't it?"

"NO!" Two-Face roared, slamming his fist down on the table. "That is NOT how it works, you half-wit alley cat!" He stopped, closed his eyes and swallowed. When his eyes opened again, he seemed calmer. He offered the apologetic smile meant to charm the female jurors after he'd been severe with a difficult witness. And his tone, when he spoke, was civility itself. "Forgive us. We... *He* is apt to lose his temper when someone else suggests flipping the coin. We've noticed those who make the suggestion are almost always trying to stop us from doing whatever we came for.

"The fact is, Selina, the coin does make the decision for us, but that's only when we're of two minds. 'I' never want to break the law. I *believe* in the law. It's only time to toss the coin when *he* decides we should do something abhorrent. In this case, he isn't sure. The one cent angle is bothering him. I'm dead set against taking that penny on *principle*, can you understand that? I believe in what Batman is doing, and I object to the idea of luring him into a deathtrap and squashing him flat with a giant penny *because it's wrong*... Two-Face isn't sure because the one messes up the theme... That's why I need your input. This isn't about right and wrong, it's about the theme. I can't help him—you probably can. Let's say the 2000 year old Chinese bronze was a dog instead of a cat, do you still go for it?"

"I'm leaving," Selina said crisply. "Enjoy your *Body Double/Double Indemnity* double feature."

"He struck a nerve," Batman noted.

"Maybe," Selina shrugged. "'Against taking it on principle, *if you can understand that*,' who did he think he was talking to?! I'm a thief, I make no apologies for that, I am completely unconflicted, and it would *never once* occur to me to squash you flat under a giant Bast."

"You were an atypical foe in many ways," Bruce said, hiding his lip twitch in a sip of wine.

"Meow. Anyway, that's the story. 'Scarred side' couldn't go all in, so there was no coin flip. Harvey didn't particularly like watching movies alone, so he knocked on my door a few weeks later with some kung pao, *Cat People* and *The Theft of the Royal Ruby*."

It was the first time Edward Nigma returned to the East End since abandoning his old lair there. He set up the place with the best of intentions: Because of the Gotham Post's lies about Catwoman having ties to the area, Selina wouldn't go near it. If she was going to dabble in crimefighting, however rarely, a hideout on the East End was one way to guarantee that no matter what vigilantes came knocking on his door, Catwoman would never be among them. It would have worked too. She obviously appreciated the gesture, because when she noticed what he was doing, she sent him a riddle. A slight Asian girl began appearing every morning at his favorite breakfast place wearing a *Cat-Tales* show jacket and ball cap. The girl never spoke to him. Never looked at him. And if there was a message in what she ordered each day, Eddie could never figure it out. Feline subtlety. She was such a class act.

Unfortunately, while Catwoman never had a reason to visit him as a crimefighter, Selina had plenty of occasions to drop in as a friend—and dragging his friend into a sewer that she hated was really asking too much. So he moved. But the old location was still unoccupied and could easily be converted to a new lair for a new occupant.

Speaking of which, a taxi pulled up and Eddie saw a familiar chiseled profile and the top of a revoltingly expensive and well-tailored suit riding in the back. The figure leaned forward to pay the fare, then the door opened.

"Looking good, Harv," Eddie said brightly.

As Harvey Dent turned to get out of the cab, he revealed the acid-scarring on the far side of his face and the hideous burlap that made up the left side of his suit.

"Half," he said simply. "This the place?"

He looked at the sign above the door skeptically, and Eddie happily explained that Akros Stitchery was a take on the "ákros" the greek word for top and "stíchos" meaning verse. The two together akros-stichos were the root terms for "Acrostic" a poem where the first letter, syllable or word of each line spelled out a hidden message. He was about to give an example when he noticed the coin had come out, which meant Harvey's dark side was losing patience.

"Sounds like a sweatshop," Harvey said irritably. "Not much good having a secret hideout that Batman doesn't know about if the INS is going to burst in looking for Mexicans handcuffed to sewing machines."

"It was either that, ARCTIC SO, which Bats might well think is a Freeze hideout, or COCA STIR, which sounds like I'm making coke spoons," Eddie said testily. "The Z can always change the name to something twoier while they're re-theming the inside. They might even cut you a deal since everything is already set up in there. All you need is new window dressing."

"The Z, you mentioned them on the phone. How does it work exactly?"

"Start with a call to Zach's Diner. The number changes, but Sly always knows and so does Saul Vicks up at Arkham. Say you want a Blue Plate special. I already called to have one delivered here. So if we go inside, one of the Z should be coming by any time now."

Once again, Selina had secured her leg to the dinosaur and hung upside down in the middle of the trophy room.

"It looks perfect," she declared, swinging a bit. "We've checked it from every angle possible. If you don't know, there's no way to tell that's not a solid wall."

Bruce grunted and touched a button on his belt, deactivating the DefCon lockouts. Rather than dismount normally, Selina accelerated her swing and pitched her legs to land atop the Joker card. It was thicker than it appeared from the ground, allowing the full width of her foot to rest on the flat surface-top. She was pleased she didn't have to 'balance' in anyway, but revolted by the layers of guano encrusted on it.

"Your furry friends have taken their revenge, I see," she said, scraping her boot off after she landed.

"It is their cave. He's the intruder." Bruce noted, and Selina laughed.

"So what about this one?" she asked, pointing to an item in the case.

"Feadag," Bruce answered. "A Gaelic demi-god I fought with Hal. Wind and whistles were his most dangerous weapons. He was very creative with sound, movement, vibrations. Jordan couldn't get the upper hand."

"He needed you to out-think him," Selina whispered. Bruce said nothing, and Selina blew him a kiss. "And that one?"

"Chess crimes. In London. Scotland Yard asked Commissioner Gordon if they could 'borrow' me."

"Aren't cops cute when they're confused," she giggled. "And this sphinx head? It's certainly not as old as it looks."

"Good eye. The glaze is so smooth and perfect on the bottom, it was obviously fired in a modern furnace and the wear marks created artificially with sandpaper."

"What were they smuggling inside it? Jewels? Drugs?"

"Kryptonite."

"Ouch. So... have we been through all the Rogue stuff?"

"All but the Joker card," Bruce said modestly.

"I don't have to ask about that," Selina grinned. "God, the headlines."

"He was in the habit of sending joker cards to his intended victims," Bruce said grimly. "At the time I thought it was calculated: people who are terrified will do very stupid things, make all kinds of mistakes they never would when they're thinking clearly. As the years passed, I came to realize Joker's not that calculating. He didn't see it as a warning or a challenge; it was more like he was... opening up a dialogue. 'Do you want to play? I want to play.'"

He said the last with a malignant smile, and Selina felt a shiver.

"PLEASE!" she exclaimed in a sudden, shrill voice, "Don't *channel* Joker. If you're going to tell the story, just... stick with your point of view." She swallowed and collected herself. "Now then. He sent joker cards, I remember. The regular, playing card-size ones. He liked bicycle decks as I remember."

"Not really. The Times reported that detail after the first few cards and it stuck, but he had no real pattern. But you're correct. They were always regular playing cards. Until that one. Until Leonard Roff."

"Roff Place, Roff Tower, The Roff World Towers, The Roff Palace, Roff Park Avenue. Before Trump came along, Leonard Roff was the Big-Bigger-Biggest of Gotham real estate."

"Yes, and the man who had to build demonstrably bigger, taller and grander than the last guy—even in cases when he *was* the last guy—he had to receive something more than the ordinary playing card."

"A preemptive f-you, delivered in language Leonard Roff would understand," Selina noted. "Any idea what set it off?"

"You grew up in Gotham. Do you remember Riverdale Confectioners?"

"Oh," Selina said, surprised. "Yeah, we had a school fieldtrip to the factory."

Bruce nodded.

"So did I. It was a landmark. And because it was a protected historical building, Roff was able to buy it very cheaply. Since the land couldn't be developed, the lot had no commercial potential even when the whole area around it was exploding in value. The owners were glad to get what little they could, never guessing that the strategic application of money and power could easily get a historical building de-listed so it could be torn down. Particularly when it was nothing but an old confectioner that nobody really cared about."

"Except somebody did care," Selina guessed. "Their logo was a... silly looking squirrel or something, right? Big smile, one missing tooth."

"Correct. Joker took offense when the building went down. Then the signs went up: Coming soon Roff Towers. That night, Mr. and Mrs. Roff were at a cancer benefit. A couple protesters got in disguised as waiters. Made a little scene, ruined her dress, got his hairpiece wet. It was over very fast. Embarrassing for a minute, forgotten in ten. 'Some neighborhood group, someone is always upset about any construction or change...' No one thought anything of it."

"Except you," Selina said pointedly.

"I wasn't there," Bruce said guiltily. "I had been; I left early. Didn't see it happen. But the accounts I heard later sounded suspiciously like Mrs. Roff was sprayed with seltzer, and whatever they threw at Len's hairpiece was whipped cream."

"As in 'hit in the face with a cream pie.'"

"I couldn't be sure until the following week when the crew and equipment arrived on the construction site: cement mixers, girders, Porta-Potties, playing card."

"Hello."

"Yes. There were a few Maroni boys there to fill out W-2s for no-show jobs. One look at that card and they decided even a weekly appearance to pick up a pay check was more than they bargained for. They left, leaving the others to decide whether to call their bosses or the police. They foolishly decided on the former, and the 'suits' were reluctant to involve the authorities."

"Of course. Those construction projects wind up budgeting things pretty tight. They don't have the money to pay for the piping that's net/30. They're counting on Roff paying them before the 30 days for reaching certain benchmarks. With Gordon's boys running around the site for a couple days, they're not going to get the foundation poured in time. No money coming in, obligations due, credit drying up, workers getting paid top dollar to stand around explaining to yet another Detective Monotya that they didn't notice anything unusual about the driver who delivered the joker card..."

Bruce stared.

"Did you spend some time moonlighting as a general contractor that I'm unaware of?" he graveled after an awkward moment.

She laughed.

"I spent some time that week doing exactly what I always do..."

Catwoman didn't like the lower floors of Roff Park Avenue. Glass boxes were boring. She didn't mind the absence of ledges from a burglary perspective. The window washing gear was always first rate. If she couldn't get in through a service entrance or the roof, she could always go that route. But aesthetically, they were just... dull. At least Roff Park Avenue gave up on shiny boxiness after ten stories. The top was crowned with a neo-deco tower with a half dozen free-standing units on its base. The effect was almost like a modest condominium with a small village on its roof.

The tower units were considered the most desirable, but rather than set himself up in the penthouse, Leonard Roff had taken the largest of the free-standing units: 5400 square feet, 6 bedrooms, dining room and library, family room, 8 baths, powder room, and of course, a large terrace with an unobstructed Park Avenue view.

It was the last which interested Catwoman, naturally. Roff had provided her with a floor plan and details of his security, assuming she'd come in that way. She had no reason to distrust the information: men who wanted you to steal from them so they could collect the insurance were, as a rule, very accommodating. They wanted you to get away with it, not get caught. *However*, Roff had supplied her contact with detailed information about *his wife's jewelry*. That was the usual bait dangled by men who wanted to lure her into their homes, imagining they would catch her red-handed and blackmail her into their beds. Those brainless wonders had never gone so far as to commission a theft the way Roff had. In all likelihood his offer was exactly what it seemed: he was over-leveraged and needed the cash. Nevertheless, a smart kitty was a cautious kitty. She would case the place herself and make her own determinations about the security and how to defeat it.

So far, all of her paper-chasing confirmed Roff's intel. Roff Management staffed its own security force for all its residential buildings, hotels, and business offices, but the actual design and equipment they staffed out to Foster and Forsythe. He had a Bennet-Parke safe in each of his homes. Whenever he bought or built a new one, he got a new safe for it. The size and model varied, but it was always Bennet-Parke. So far, so good—on paper, but there was only so much you could learn that way. Tonight she was going in to case the unit with her own eyes.

She knew from the society page that Mrs. Roff would be attending the benefit at the museum, while a peek at the doorman's schedule that afternoon had told her Mr. Roff was hosting a cocktail party at the same time in their suite. He'd got rid of the last straggler over an hour ago, then sent home the staff. It was as good a time as any to go in and see what the night held in store...

The terrace itself was easy: one camera to evade then disarm, one simple lock on each of the sliding glass doors. She had a choice of those doors, one leading to each of two guest rooms. Roff said it didn't matter which she used, since both bedrooms opened out onto the same hall. Since her mission tonight was checking on Roff's story, she decided to try both. She would also pick the lock the regular way rather than cut a hole in the glass with her claws. That might do when she returned, but tonight's mission was intel, not a signature Catwoman theft.

It was an easy lock to pick. The bedroom on the right was apparently used as a TV room. A bit small, bathroom attached, no motion detectors, electric eyes or security or

any kind. And yes, it opened onto a hallway where she saw another bedroom door. Rather than open it, Catwoman retreated noiselessly into the first bedroom and shut the door. She would return to the terrace and go into the other bedroom that way as if she was just coming in—

Or not.

Her heart raced.

As she'd approached that glass door to the terrace, she could have sworn she saw the edge of a bat cape disappearing inside the other door.

She froze.

She closed her eyes, and in her mind, she stepped through another room the size of this one... Silently, as any cat burglar would... And as she reached the hallway door in her mind, she heard the near silent brush of that other bedroom's door opening onto the hall.

She opened her door and saw the back of that cape moving down the four short stairs at the end of the hall. She knew from the blueprints that the master bedroom (her destination) was on the left, and another hallway the floorplans euphemistically labeled a "Gallery" was on the right. That led to the rest of the condo, and Batman—obviously as familiar with the layout as she was—went right... past two more guest room doors towards the living room, dining room, and library. She followed, breathless, and then heard that delicious Bat-gravel:

**"A Joker-threat is not something to be ignored, Mr. Roff."** That was met with a yelp, a quiet curse and a tinkle of glass, providing a vivid sound-picture of the scene: Roff started at Batman's sudden appearance and spilled a glass of whiskey into his lap. Whiny denials must have followed, because Batman then said **"I'm talking about a ten-foot playing card hidden under a tarp on your Water Street lot."** The whiny denials become huffy ones, followed by the unmistakable sound of a bat-fist thumping a table for emphasis. **"A madman doesn't need a reason,"** Batman said... and it occurred to Selina that, interesting though this radio drama was, she would be wasting a priceless opportunity if she went on listening to it. Batman was right here in Leonard Roff's condo. And so was she. She'd come to steal—Well, technically she was here for intel and was planning to come back for the actual theft, but you don't pass up the opportunity to steal a thirty-five-emerald necklace right out from under Batman's nose.

**"You can't be serious,"** Bruce snarled.

**"Do I look like I'm joking?"** Selina grinned.

**"You were THERE, you were IN THE ROOM, you HEARD THAT, you STOLE—"**

**"Not in the room, but yes there, yes heard, yes stole. Beautiful piece, really. Seventy emeralds as it turned out. Thirty-five small and thirty-five... smaller underneath them, and each one surrounded by these tiny diamonds. It was really—"**

**"CATWOMAN!"**

**"Present. Right here. No need to bellow, darling."**

**"This is completely unacceptable."**

She laughed.

**"That I did it or that you didn't know about it?"**

**"You helped Leonard Roff defraud an insurance company."**

"I also kept him alive, same as you did. The Masuccis might not have been as creative as Joker in their reprisals, but I think we both know what'd happen if that cement wasn't paid for on time."

"..."

"Bruce, you know perfectly well what I did back then. Why do you always have to go all batty when you find out the particulars?"

He glanced at the case with her old costume, and then looked back at her. *She* was looking at the new diamond trophy, and then looked back at him. Neither actually spoke the word 'sorry' but the silence became more comfortable.

"You must have convinced Roff," Selina said finally, "because the tarp came off and the papers got the story right after that."

"I made him understand that Joker wouldn't simply go away if he was ignored, and to sit and wait, letting Joker decide where and when to act was suicide. The only hope for survival was to be proactive. Go to the papers, control the story—and lead Joker into acting at a time and place of our choosing. We gave the press a story that made it seem like the card had only just been discovered at the construction site and that Roff had been out of town, supervising another project in Metropolis. That he was only now returning to Gotham in response to the threat, he would be at the construction site at one o'clock the next day to inspect the joker card, and then—in consultation with Batman and the police who would also be present at the site—he would make the decision how to proceed."

Selina shook her head slowly, as if anticipating the slow, inevitable descent to disaster in a favorite opera as Bruce continued:

"I took Roff's place, disguised of course: on his plane flying in from Metropolis, in the limo from the airport to the construction site. Roff was already there with Gordon. We debated what sort of disguise would be the safest: one of the construction workers or a uniformed patrolman, even the limo driver. The problem with Joker is that he doesn't distinguish between victims. He'd just as soon kill a civilian as a cop. The more innocent the bystander, the better. In the end, we decided the safest disguise was the one most people would assume was the most dangerous."

"You dressed him as you," Selina murmured. "As Batman, I mean."

Bruce nodded.

"Roff and the police were convinced it was a perfect disguise, but I knew better. Look at that thing," Bruce pointed at the giant card, since they were standing right in front of it. "You don't send your victim a ten-foot warning and then pretend they don't know you're coming. Joker knew we would try something, he was prepared for trickery. The card had been rigged with confetti canons. As soon as Joker saw fake-Roff had arrived, he took his cue. The barrels popped out the sides and along the top, shooting squares of brightly-colored tissue paper over the crowd.

"There was a slight... tingly sensation when they touched the skin," Bruce said, moving his fingers slowly over the back of his hand and wrist. "But while everyone in the crowd came into contact with one of those squares and was exposed to whatever they were treated with, only the man in the Batman costume began to convulse."

"The second half of a chemical cocktail," Selina guessed.

"Correct. Part two is a harmless catalyst."

"Only somebody exposed to part one goes off like a cackling hyena," Selina nodded. "Breaking out the greatest hits."

Batman grunted. While it was true Joker had used the primer/catalyst method before to isolate a specific victim, Batman would hardly have described the SmileXing of an innocent in those terms.

"Fortunately, I was also prepared for our deception to fail," he said, ignoring the 'greatest hits' remark. "I had an antidote ready, an ambulance disguised among the construction vehicles, and a lightweight costume on under my Roff disguise."

"Like you do with Matches Malone," Selina grinned, taking a step closer. "Always prepared, always thinking three moves ahead."

"Six with Joker. His rage was predictable."

"Of course, he doesn't like having his plans wrecked, particularly by Batman. Meow. So he goes charging in."

"Dressed as Willy Wonka for the occasion. That was the only real hint that it was demolishing the old confectioners that drew his ire."

"How perfectly Jack."

"His fallback also centered on the playing card. It emitted an ear-splitting tone, worse than Canary Cry. The whole crowd was incapacitated, enabling Joker to pull a cabby out of his car and try to run me down with it. I fired off two batarangs, one into the taxi's front tire and one into the card's main speaker, then grappled to the top of the card and leapt down onto the car and through the windshield."

"Face pound. Game over," Selina purred.

"Two pounds," Bruce said with a lip-twitch.

"Meow."

"And?"

"Meow."

"We like him," Harvey declared as he and Eddie left the hideout.

"Zoiks?" Eddie asked, looking behind him at the door. "He's okay. They're all okay until you get their bill. Find out your new lair comes equipped with a snowcone machine, tiki bar, and \$1400 in pay-per-view charges for boxing and zombie porn."

"Our better half doesn't like 'liking' henchmen," Two-Face explained. "When they screw up—and they always screw up—we want to punish them. If we win the toss, it's easier for our better half to stomach if they're more like the crass ignorant low-lives he used to prosecute."

"Well the Z aren't henchmen, not anymore anyway. They're independent contractors. So it shouldn't be a... problem."

Eddie faltered midsentence because he saw Two-Face wasn't paying attention. He was leering with a lustful grin towards—oh hell, at Selina. At Selina's playful, teasing eyes from the Cat-Tales logo, seemingly staring at them on the back of the Asian girl's show jacket.

"That's a good sign," Harvey noted. "What better omen could we hope for to welcome us to the neighborhood," he said happily.

"Big whoop, somebody that worked on Cat-Tales," Eddie said, trying to pass it off. "But that place she came out of, great breakfasts. Waffles to die for."

"Let's follow her," Harvey said impishly.

"What? Why? Some techie from Selina's old show—"

"No, we want to do this. We're out of practice," Two-Face said earnestly. "We can't tail someone inconspicuously anymore. With the scars, we don't exactly blend in. The only way to hide is the walk, the attitude. We can't hide that we're Two-Face. The trick is to give the impression that our walking up the street behind you is just a coincidence."

"Count me out," Eddie said firmly.

He didn't know who the girl was, but he knew she was a message from Selina. If she was still in the neighborhood after he left, that meant that either she didn't know he'd moved, or she just liked the waffles at *Petite Abeille*. But either way, she had some tie to Selina, and trying to follow her could bring some epoch-making payback. He tried once more to divert Harvey's attention, but when he refused to be dissuaded, Eddie said he'd see him later at the Iceberg.

The first thing Dick heard crossing the Great Hall was Selina's musical laugh coming from the long hallway leading to Bruce's study. A moment later, she and Bruce came out of the study, arms around each other's waists. She was still laughing, Bruce was smiling, and for that fraction of a second, the image was so idyllic and intimate that Dick began to rethink his doubts about the proposal theory.

"Hey, guys," he said brightly, just to let them know he was there.

That cheerful greeting was met by a double volley of startled glares. Selina's morphed almost instantly into a playful smile and Bruce's into a tight-lipped scowl. Dick felt like he'd returned too soon after being sent to "find some evidence" while Batman accosted Catwoman. The feeling crept into his body, and he knew he looked and sounded all of ten years old as he gestured feebly to the door behind him, saying that he didn't want to bother Alfred so he'd let himself in with his key.

Then the time warp closed just as abruptly as it had opened: Bruce said Dick should at least stop in the pantry and visit with Alfred before he left. Selina said *pfffft*, he should stay for lunch. He would, wouldn't he?

Dick smiled and nodded, short pants and confusing rooftop Bat-orders forgotten. Selina said she'd go tell Alfred they'd be three for lunch, and Dick watched her walk off and disappear into the morning room before turning to Bruce with a 'down to business' air. He asked if they could talk in private, and Bruce said sure. He turned back towards the study, and Dick practically held his breath as he followed. If Bruce was interpreting 'in private' as 'in the Batcave' and leading him there without a fuss, that put a definite end to Cass and Barbara's theory.

"Sorry for interrupting before," Dick said casually, just for something to say to cover his suspense as they walked into the study.

"You didn't. We had finished," Bruce said, opening the glass cover of the grandfather clock and setting the hands to 10:47.

"Looked like you and Selina were having a good time."

"Let's just say Poison Ivy's version of that orchid caper has some astonishing embellishments, and Selina really enjoyed hearing the true facts of the case."

"Ah," said Dick.

On the one hand, they *were* going down to the Batcave. On the other, if Dick was already suspicious, if he thought Bruce was covering some secret about his relationship with Selina, the suggestion that the moment of perfect, delighted synchronicity he'd witnessed was the result of a story about *Poison Ivy's orchid* would seem like the biggest whopper yet. Although...

Reaching the cave, Dick looked down the ramp towards the trophy room, as if mention of the orchid had reminded him. He saw that the flower—and several other things—had been moved to make room for a new object.

"Whoa, that is one big diamond," he said, *KICKING* himself for having the right answer from the beginning but allowing himself to doubt it.

"Cassie told you?" Bruce said instantly, detective's instinct rejecting coincidence and searching for a cause and effect. While Dick could have innocently looked into the trophy room and remarked on the very item he and Selina had just finished installing, it was far more likely he'd been pre-informed.

"She told Barbara," Dick explained. "She doesn't believe you, Bruce. Falconi Jewelers. She thinks it's a story you made up on the spot to cover... giving Selina a different kind of diamond."

"Ah." Bruce didn't exactly chuckle, his lip didn't even twitch, but Dick could sense that of the two possible reactions: patient amusement or Psychobat monsoon, they'd lucked out with the former.

At least... so far. But Dick had something more to say, and unleashing the Four Psychobats of the Apocalypse was still a distinct possibility.

"She pulled in Babs, Babs got to Tim, Tim came to me," Dick went on. "It'd be a zombie movie if I played my part: I go to Wally, he tells Kyle, Kyle spreads it throughout the galaxy. Martian Manhunter's broadcasting it telepathically, Garth and Aquaman telling all the fish... Classic comedy of errors stuff.

"I guess it's lucky for me you didn't 'play your part,'" Bruce said with a belated lip-twitch.

"To be fair, Tim didn't either. He's not thinking marriage, he's thinking DefCon: covert operations in the Batcave for reason or reasons unknown... But I'm thinking something else."

"Such as?"

The sudden emergence of the Bat-gravel was not encouraging. It harkened back to those old rides home in the Batmobile: "Gee, Batman, it sure is funny how Catwoman keeps getting away every time you send me off to find evidence, even when you had her pinned." "**Maybe you should concern yourself with that unit on codes and code-breaking you've been working on for more than a week.**"

"Such as..." Dick repeated—relieved that this time his voice didn't betray his mental flashback. "That's two. See, the girls are so dazzled by the romantic aspects of Paris, they seem to have forgotten why you went there in the first place."

"The town halls—"

"Yes, the town hall meetings for Wayne Enterprises. But that's not why you brought Selina along. You took her as damage control after that rumor at the Financial Times. Saul Drescher sees Selina in Cartier's and all of a sudden Wayne stock is down half a point."

"It was three-eighths of a point and the price corrected by 9:45 the next morning. It's a non-issue, Dick."

"Bruce, you started that rumor. Not intentionally, I know, but I've heard the story a couple times now: from you, from Alfred, from Babs and from Lucius Fox. They all agree it was you saying something to Lucius in front of a reporter that started the dominos falling. That's *one*. Now there's this thing with Cassie... getting the wrong idea... after she talks to you."

"You think I'm, what, testing the waters?"

"Maybe subconsciously, yeah."

"Noted."

"That's it?"

"Thank you for the observation," Bruce said, moving to the nearest work station and fiddling with the settings on the auto-downloads.

Dick couldn't contain the old 'Gee, Batman, it sure is funny how Catwoman keeps getting away' smirk. He turned so Bruce wouldn't see it, and looking around the cave, he marveled at how little had actually changed—particularly the man at the heart of it.

Fine. If he wanted to be all-Batman, Dick could oblige. It was *Catwoman* they were talking about, after all, not some civilian.

"I have a request," Dick said with an air of formality.

Bruce didn't speak, grunt, or look up from his Bat-busywork, but Dick knew from the shift in the silence that he was invited to continue.

"Zogger Summer," he declared with the slightly stilted delivery of a public speaker opening an official ceremony. "That's when I learned what it really meant to be a detective. You taught me to notice everything. Detail. Nuance. To distinguish between those things that could be placed deliberately in order to mislead and those that couldn't be staged because the parties involved weren't even aware of them. You taught me to weigh evidence objectively and to draw studied, rational conclusions."

Dick then swaggered over to Bruce, like a drunk picking a fight in a bar, and stepped into his personal space, forcing Bruce to look up from his work and give Dick his full attention.

"But there were observations and conclusions you didn't want to hear," Dick said with an edge that was challenging without quite crossing the line into belligerence. "That summer was all about the sight of her legs in that skirt, whether you want to admit it or not. You sent me to 'find some evidence.' Well, I found it, Bruce. You told me a detective notices everything—but what I learned that summer was that means noticing a lot of stuff they don't want you to. And you can either get in their face with it, or you go through life with a head full of other people's secrets."

"Your request?"

"Don't bash Tim... or Cassie... for doing exactly what you taught them."

"Have I done anything that would lead you to believe I would 'bash' Tim or Cassie for a simple misunderstanding?"

"No," Dick said, a smile breaking through his confrontational demeanor as he was caught out.

"Then what's this about, Richard?"

Dick wanted to remain grim. He imagined himself in costume, staring down the vilest scum in Bludhaven in an effort to keep the untamable grin from growing wider and wider across his face.

"It's about those tiger scrolls at the Japanese gallery. Wearing the new cape and buffing scratches off the armor before we set out that night. Being sent to find some evidence in an empty parking lot."

**"If you get near a point, make it."**

"Bruce, she's upstairs right now telling Alfred we'll be three for lunch. I want you to admit I was right."

The atmosphere at the Iceberg was tense. The place always saw a brawl or two each week, but this was different. Clayface had become a regular, since he was practically Catwoman's bodyguard at Vault when she reigned as queen of the underworld. When the social center of Roguedom transferred back to the Iceberg, he came with it. He and Poison Ivy gave each other a wide berth, but everyone still felt the barbs of hostility flying back and forth when they noticed each other. Now, rumor had it, Two-Face was coming back. Eddie confirmed that he was actually back in Gotham and should be dropping by the 'Berg some time tonight.

Ivy in a room with her Ex and Clayface? Powder keg. Green, leafy, lemon-scented powder keg.

Eddie didn't feel like being a big shot in the dining room tonight, so he'd made his way to the bar, nodded at Hagen—who was wearing his old Monarch of Menace face to tell some story that Sly and Jervis found hysterical—and hunched over his glass of Glenudrom, which Sly had poured and set out for him without ever turning his attention from Hagen.

"...told Harley that I'm only going to say this one more time: that's not a scepter; it's a golf club. I don't need either, because I'm a shape shifter. And if I did want to use a club for this, it'd be a putter and not a ladies' nine iron."

Everyone laughed, and Hagen morphed back into his usual clay form. Sly came over to Nigma and set the bottle of Glenudrom down in front of him, asking if Eddie's meeting with the Z came off okay. Eddie was non-committal. He didn't think it was his place to go spreading the word that he was acting as a go-between for Two-Face, but once Harvey arrived, he patted Eddie on the back and thanked him for making the introductions. He declared the Z to be the finest innovation in Gotham Roguery in the time he was out of the game.

The announcement was met with a communal cheer—which was less for the Z themselves and more a celebration of Harvey's return (as well as a certain anticipation of what crazy new things they'd find to spend his money on in the course of setting up his lair, and how much their fun would cost him). Even before the cheering began, Harvey was in a good mood. Now the party atmosphere made him downright euphoric.

"Followed that cute Cat-Tales kitten for almost thirty blocks," he told Nigma. "More than an hour. Guess where she went. Scully and Scully. We always liked them, for obvious reasons with a name like that, so we watched through the window. She was looking at the bridal registry. She pointed to something in the book, salesman showed

her this cutesy bit of painted porcelain, looked like a pink goat. She made a face, said something, and they showed her a cat in the same style. How about that?"

"How about what?" Eddie said, looking as if, for once, the thought of an unanswered question made him positively ill.

"Wouldn't it be something if Catty was getting married?"

"I hardly think—" was as far as Eddie got when Jervis piped up. "What's that? Catty getting married?"

"C.W.'s getting hitched?" Hagen said.

"That's what Mr. Tetch just said," Sly reported.

"No, no he didn't," Eddie said—though nobody listened because Two-Face was standing between him and everyone else, saying "Yes, we saw one of her friends picking out a gift."

"No!" Eddie cried—but unfortunately his No, meaning literally "No," was said simultaneously with Jervis and Sly's, meaning "News!" The trio of excited Nos brought a flutter of excited chattering from everyone within earshot—which brought everyone who had been out of earshot into the vicinity. Ivy arrived from the dining room at the same time Oswald came out of his office. Both asked what was going on, and the thrilled "Selina's getting married" shouted at the one crossed with the equally agitated "Catty's getting hitched" aimed at the other.

"Oh," Oswald said, not entirely pleased at the prospect. Even though he himself was never in the running, the idea of a bird like that flying about freely, "available" if only in theory, made a man... happy.

"Oh!" Ivy said, cheered at the removal of a rival and hoping Wayne might take her to Bermuda or someplace for a long honeymoon, buy a second home there, and stay forever.

"We'll have to do something for her," Clayface said. "Unless we could put a stop to it," Penguin murmured. "Yes, we really must do something," Hatter echoed. "I'll see to her bouquet," Ivy said firmly. "Selina's looks would certainly be improved by the addition of a few flowers, but none of my babies are going to die to make that alley cat look good..."