



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

#67

Cat \equiv *Fables*

Inside An Enigma

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by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
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INSIDE AN ENIGMA

Pre-dawn Gotham. The Batmobile raced across 58th Street while inside the man at the wheel considered the autopilot. The burn from last night's fiery takedown of the *Cráneos Sangrientos* was sending fiery ripples down the sides of his fingers on his left hand. Beneath the gauntlet, the flesh across the outside of the palm remembered where the flames had licked down to the inner wrist, heating the gauntlet into a weapon that punished him as much as the biker on the other end of his fist. Still, a few days' pain wasn't much to pay compared to what was gained. The fall of the *Cráneos* would send a message. While the biker gang stuck with stealing motorcycles for their principle income with a sporadic sideline in crack cocaine, they were a GPD concern. One truckload of automatic weapons coming up from Atlanta promoted them from a secondary 12th Precinct nuisance to the first item of business on Batman's Thursday Night hit list.

"Autopilot engage. Home," he graveled, releasing the wheel and ripping off the glove. Parts of the bandage came with it, and Bruce's eyes nearly rolled from the new wave of pain as the cool dry air of the car hit the outraged flesh around the burn. He could see now that the bandage had been jostled during that last episode with the jumper, letting in air—the air *inside* the glove, air moist with his perspiration and warmed by his exertions. He popped the first aid box and sprayed it with a numbing coolant. That would do until he reached the cave. There he postponed the logs just long enough to visit the med-lab, apply a new layer of salve and rebandage. There was no point in waking Alfred for such a simple patch-up, though Alfred would insist on redoing it in the morning. Even though Bruce was perfectly capable of patching himself up this way, Alfred always found fault with his efforts however flawlessly done.

Bruce inspected the work on the walk back to his workstation, turning his wrist and flexing the fingers—it was really a fine job considering how long it had been since he'd applied a bandage like that himself. Up until last week, Selina would have been with him in the car on the drive home. Speaking of which—

He glanced down at the console and touched a few buttons to open a certain dashboard on the monitor. An icon was flashing, as expected.

"Good morning, Kitten," he said, tapping it twice. As the file opened, he settled into the chair the way another man might to read a few more chapters of a book he was enjoying before bed. A mystery novel in this case, although Bruce didn't see it that way. She *was* presenting him with a mystery, but for him, the powerful nostalgia of the experience blotted out any other flavor. He was out in the city on his own again, no Catwoman a commlink away. At the end of the night, he simply got in the car and came home. No checking to see if she wanted a ride back. She wasn't padding around the cave now, making cocoa while he typed up the logs, nor was she waiting upstairs in the bed. He was alone in his cave with the bats. And before him was a file, a crime

report from outside of Gotham, where he could read—where he could *sense* with a crimefighter’s instinct—the enigmatic woman in purple behind the actions reported on the page.

Bruce moistened his lower lip as he read, the once familiar sensation rippling through his memory. Interpol’s Aggregator Database, the slush pile from which the International Crime Bulletin for Western Europe would be culled. Three insurance firms, one English and two Swiss, had quietly amended their inclusion on a number of crime reports related to certain art thefts. Any experienced crimefighter knew that meant the stolen items had been recovered privately, usually in exchange for a finder’s fee ranging from one to three percent. Freed of their financial obligation, the companies no longer cared about the thieves being found and brought to justice. Ironically, while a footnote went on to bemoan that deplorable attitude, Bruce’s mind wandered. It wandered from text on the page which had once been his own inflexible opinion, wandered because Catwoman had—yet again—knocked that first principle of Justice from his mind, presenting him with a distraction he simply couldn’t ignore.

What was she up to? That was the distraction this time. *What was she up to?*

Like any detective, nothing riveted his attention like an unanswered question. A mystery waiting to be solved. If only he could uncover the *right facts* and look at them *the right way*.

She’d gone to Europe in the wake of a diamond heist, in theory. But even then, even that first day when they got back from lunch in the city, something seemed off.

Bruce set up a few searches which churned quietly in the background while he wrote up the logs. By the time he’d finished, the search found no common denominators in the art that had been recovered. The pieces were taken from private homes, corporate collections and public museums. One Goya had a shady provenance related to the Nazis, but no other pieces were contested. Some thefts were recent, some a few years old, and some dated back more than ten years. There were no similarities in the security of any of the facilities, or in the way it had been defeated. The thefts were attributed to *Il Fantasma*, *Chacal*, *Der Rote Geist*, *Das Panter* and even The Shadow Thief. They simply had nothing in common—except that they had all, apparently, been recovered since Selina went to Europe. That wasn’t a common denominator Batman could ignore.

What was she up to?

He leaned back into the chair, his fingers interlaced clumsily because of the thickness of the bandages on his left, and he looked up at the low-hanging bat Selina had named Walapang...

Three weeks earlier, they’d had a picnic in the park. Some early riser at the Wayne Foundation scheduled a board meeting for 8 a.m. and because Selina’s NMK projects represented several items on the agenda, she had to attend. She felt *strongly* that charitable giving was fine as long as it was limited to money and real estate, but when it cut into her sleep schedule—and Batman’s—*compensation was required*. It was *after four* when they both got to bed, and if she was going to drag ‘her sweet purple ass’ out of bed only three hours later, *compensation was required*. She had Lucius cancel Bruce’s appointments for the rest of the day, had box lunches waiting for pick-up, and spirited

him from the building after the meeting with the swift and invisible stage management of a kidnapping.

Afterwards, they took a stroll through the Robinson Circle Market. Like the park, the teeming street market offered an invigorating dose of Gotham: the intensity borne of so many people, so much emotion and ambition, anxiety and vigor packed so densely into such a confined space. It made the air tingle and vibrate with possibilities, an essence of pure distilled humanity that both of them found invigorating. The market was packed with vendors offering everything from farm fresh produce and flowers to antiques and artisan-crafted jewelry to flea market oddities and kitsch.

"Scottish Fold," Selina said as they passed a stall of antique buttons.

"The cats with the flat ears?" Bruce blinked. "That's random."

"For the—you know—hm-hm," she said, pointing to her ring finger. "A code word isn't supposed to be dripping with subtext, is it? It should be like 'apple butter' or 'Chinese calligraphy,' not some ancient Aztec word meaning 'We're finally engaged but can't tell anybody until we figure out how to do it without our crazy friends setting the world on fire.'"

"Your crazy associates, they're not mine and they're not friends," Bruce said, examining a box of expired, novelty, and out of state license plates.

"Our friends," she repeated. "One of yours can do more damage than all of mine put together, don't pretend you don't know who I'm talking about."

Bruce's lip twitched.

"You forget that he's all in favor."

"So was Pammy. Given a choice between her 'helping us' again or him, I'd honestly have to think about —hey, stress ball."

"Again: that's random," Bruce said, pretending he didn't realize she was talking about merchandise at one of the novelty stalls. There were bins of the palm-size rubber balls painted in different whimsical ways.

"Check it out, the world is my stress ball," she said, holding up one painted like a globe.

He smiled, though he didn't think it was quite as clever as she evidently did—considering she had her purse open, her wallet out and was holding out a dollar to buy the thing. Bruce shook his head, deciding he would never be able to predict what she would find amusing, but he thought no more about it until she was back at his side, the ball in a small brown bag in her hand and a smile on her face that could only be described as of the canary-eating variety.

"I'm obviously missing something," he said as they walked along.

"Seriously, you don't get it? It's for Ra's, silly."

"For... Do we know another Ra's?"

"Al Ghul," Selina laughed. "The Cadaver, The Hairdo. 'Light of the East, Terror of the West...' Ye that none born since Charlemagne can grasp how in love this guy is with his own manufactured image."

"And you're buying him a gift?" Bruce said, reaching unconsciously for his belt as if he were in costume and the air should be tested for hallucinogens.

"I am going to be handling him now," Selina reminded him. "It's always good to have a few items like this picked out for when the situation arises. You know, to send as a taunt."

"To send as a..."

"That's what villains do," Selina said, leaning in and imparting the information confidentially.

"I'm familiar," Bruce grunted.

"And I'm a bad girl. Always have been, always will be. I think sometimes you're apt to forget that. I'm not a Cape, and even if I do something that's, shall we say cape-adjacent, I'm going to do it *my way*. Which is less like your way and more like, you know, *their way*."

"Are you going to be sending him riddles?"

"For Bast's sake, Bruce, I said *MY way* which is *more like them than you*. I did not say 'like them,' flat out, as if I'm some outsider mimicking rogues without actually being one. I have my own style. You should know that better than anybody. You know what it's like going up against me from the other side."

"You never bought *me* a stress ball," Bruce pointed out.

"I had another idea for ways you could work off tension," she said in her bedroom voice. "You eventually admitted it was a very good one."

Bruce grunted, and they talked of other things for the rest of the afternoon. When they got home, however, she noticed him glaring at the brown paper bag. Saw him following it with his eyes as it sat in the car seat next to her, as she picked it up, as she got out of the car, as they walked into the house, and as she set it on the table in the foyer with her purse. There was no density shift, but she did see that his eyes had that low-browed square shape most often seen in the mask—and always meaning Batman had a grudge against something.

"You're jealous," she said. "Bruce if you get jealous of me and Ra's we're going to be getting into some very weird territory. Even by your standardeowl—Hello, Gorgeous. Where have you been all my life?"

She was looking down at a Gotham Times, and Bruce noted a headline with the word "Millions" and a picture of a diamond necklace. He grunted, seeing that he no longer had her attention—which was fine with him. He had no interest in prolonging a conversation about Ra's al Ghul, and Selina obviously had great interest in the news story. She walked off reading it without saying another word, and Bruce felt there couldn't be a better cue to go up to bed and grab a few hours sleep.

He slept hard, not aware of any dreams until he felt himself on his back on a peculiarly malleable alley floor. He was out of it. Was it a fall? An explosion? Something unexpected. Violent and unexpected. And now, while his senses were still reeling, someone was bending over him... bending down, straddling his hips. A warm someone. A warm body, straddled on top of him, one hand on his chest, the other near his mask. Instinct kicked in and his hand shot up to grab the wrist reaching for his mask. In a rush his senses processed the smell of tearose shampoo, the fingers on his chest were soft and feminine, and the startled "Wha-?" was more than feminine, it was familiar.

"I can hold you like this... all n-night long," he heard himself murmur, though the dream was already receding. The Dream-Catwoman's lips would hover achingly close

to his, never making contact throughout the prolonged encounter. The real one's moved straight through the chimera to bestow a soft kiss. A disappointingly chaste kiss considering the sexual tension of the dream it displaced, but with the undeniable trade-off that, with no identity to protect, his hands were free to release her wrists and move to more interesting locations... When they came up for air, Selina purred.

"Good morning," she said, resting her hand exactly where the dream-cat had done.

"It's not really morning, is it?" Bruce asked, glancing at the window.

"No, I didn't let you sleep that late. You even have time for a bite before patrol. But, I did get you up for a reason..."

It might have been that he was just dreaming about a criminal cat in an alley, but Bruce thought he detected mischief—that feline lust for mischief—flash in her eyes as she moved. She apparently brought the newspaper with her and had set it on the nightstand to wake him. As she reached for it now, there was definitely a... whiff of something... that dream cat reaching for his mask, ready to expose his face. What was she up to?

"I want to borrow one of the planes," she said. "Doesn't have to be Wayne One, but something with a tank. I'm going to Europe for a bit."

Bruce glanced at the newspaper, then at her.

"Why?" he said, feeling he was taking Riddler-bait.

And she smiled—a smile he knew, from the rooftops—a smile that had a radius. He would never understand it, and there were nights it infuriated him after the fact. She had this way about her when she was excited about something, she just *radiated happiness*, and it made you happy too—even when the thing she was smiling about was wrong and criminal and the essence of what you'd sworn your life to oppose. Yet there you were, forgetting to be angry, forgetting to hate, feeling inexplicably... good.

She handed him the newspaper, and he skimmed. There had been an enormously successful diamond heist in Belgium. Two vans with police markings had crashed through a fence at the Brussels airport, sped passed all security checks, lights flashing, and stopped a plane bound for Zurich. Eight heavily armed men got out, their faces covered by police riot gear. They broke into the plane's cargo hold and seized approximately 40 million euros worth of uncut diamonds being transported from Antwerp.

"You know what they say: 'Diamonds are for Stealing,'" she said breathlessly.

"You should check this downstairs," Bruce said, meaning the cave. "There will be more evidence come to light since this went to press, and even more information they're not releasing to the public."

"Already done," Selina grinned. "The big change is the value of the take. Estimates are all over the place, with a low of 37 million euros and going all the way up to more than 300 million. 120 packages of... well, *more*. Point is, they didn't get the whole shipment and *which* 120 packages they picked makes a big difference. But even the lowest estimate divided by eight men isn't too shabby for what was basically a five-minute smash and grab."

"You want to take another vacation?" Bruce said, thinking of their last trip to Paris when a burglary at Cartier prompted a Bat/Cat team-up which they both enjoyed more than they would a crime-free getaway. "I want to do it again too," he said. "*Soon*."

And I can see where this seems like an ideal case. But Kitten, it's not a good time for Batman to leave Gotham. Any day now, the White House will be ready to announce Lawrence Muskelli's appointment to the Justice Department. It will be public knowledge that Gotham's getting a new police commissioner. And I still don't know which way the Mayor is leaning."

She smiled—a different smile, soft and a bit wistful.

"Oh," he said, looking in her eyes.

He hadn't realized, hadn't remembered. After the Cat-Tales stage show closed. Before the mask came off. Those early visits to her apartment after patrol, when their relationship had just started to change. The revolving door of interim commissioners after Jim Gordon retired. It was one of the recurring topics in that strange new world where they talked regularly without a crime between them, without the Bat and Cat roles setting the tone. On two occasions, she was the first person he told when he'd been met by a new face at the Bat-Signal.

"Just as well," she said. "I want a repeat of Paris too, but with this kind of thing, I'm better on my own. We'd just get in each other's way."

"What?" Bruce said, the unexpected words pulling him from his reverie. The kind of thing where she was better on her own? If she wasn't proposing another Bat/Cat team-up like Paris then... what *was* she talking about?

He asked, of course, and her reaction wrapped a new level of mystery around the original question. She seemed surprised that he had to ask. Whatever it was, she *assumed he would know*.

Not only was she *surprised* that he didn't know what she was planning, she seemed *aroused* by it.

Which made the half day before she left very enjoyable, but left him with two layers of Cat-Mystery to unravel after she was gone.

Three weeks later, he had more than twenty variations on five core theories, none of which he liked.

They were all... "Cape theories" she would call them. They all had the flavor of scenarios he came up with when he was like he used to be... As he was right now: alone in the cave reading a bunch of reports written by policemen. They all lacked that topsy turvy perspective Selina brought into his life, and which she always brought to a case. The insider's perspective, the thief's perspective – even the rogue's perspective. The point of view that knew Edward Nigma as a pal and a charming dinner companion, not an unrepentant criminal.

Bruce got up abruptly and relocated to the Data Well, an experimental hexagonal chamber where he could display complex arrays of information in different ways on the semi-transparent wall-screens. With a few swift keystrokes, he set up the #2 side monitors to display the stolen artworks that had, presumably, been returned. #3 cycled through photos and floor plans of the places they'd been taken from. Screen #5 displayed 3D simulations of the robberies as investigators had reconstructed them. The #1 screen directly in front of him listed the names of the suspected thieves, and in Shadow Thief's case, a thumbnail photo from his Justice League file.

He focused on the names... And thought of Selina.

She didn't look past criminal roles the way a detective might, considering personal motives in order to gauge relationships and deduce who did what and why. She just saw people. Not 'personal motives' but *people* who happened to be the planner, locksmith, electrician or muscle on a particular crew. She didn't dismiss their criminal roles, she just didn't see it defining them. Safecracker, fence, forger. It's what they *did*, not *who they were*.

He looked at the names, looked at Shadow Thief's name in particular, and his eyes narrowed.

She saw Edward Nigma as a pal and a charming dinner companion, not an unrepentant criminal. It was one thing to say "Okay, it's what they do, not who they are" when you were talking about a safecracker on the Turin crew. It was another thing entirely talking about Rogues. 'The Riddler' was not something Edward Nigma 'did,' it was, quite literally, *who he was*.

Which meant Selina was wrong. He was right and she was wrong. His way of looking at things was right and hers was limited and murky, marred by the bias of a thief and criminal.

So why didn't he like any of those twenty-odd hypotheses? Why did the five core theories on which they were based all seem so contrived and forced and constipated?

Because they involved Selina.

Not in the sense that he loved her, just in the sense of... of a person. Not a theoretical retired cat burglar and theme rogue with extensive ties in Europe. Not a set of personal motives he could analyze and make deductions from. Selina. Selina Kyle, the Catwoman. She was Catwoman just as much as Nigma was Riddler. As much as Isley was Poison Ivy as much as... as much as he was Batman.

...
...

Bruce found himself staring through the names, through the semi-transparent screen, to a stalactite that hung above the main cavern.

As much as he was Batman.

Batman wasn't something Bruce did, it's who he was. That didn't negate the person.

And Selina had—Catwoman had—She... She'd done it even back then. She'd looked right past the 'role' and saw the man. Jesus, why hadn't he ever seen it this way? From the first encounter, she had never addressed the persona, had she? She had always... she had always treated him as a man.

Bruce let his head tilt back, looked up at the ceiling, and thought... His imagination conjured her. She stepped into the well beside him, looking as she had in the alley in that dream he had before she left. She ran her clawed fingers along the side of his face as if to remind him, as if she were threatening to remove the mask he no longer wore.

"You're not here for play. This is work," he graveled.

I'm always here to play, Stud. You want to look at this the way I would, you've got to get with the program. The world is my yarn toy.

"And Batman was your yarn toy."

She meowed and brushed up against him, seductively.

I did love teasing you. God, how I love teasing you. I don't think there's anything that brought me more satisfaction than getting a rise out of you. You tried so hard not to show it, but I knew... Now I have a new toy. Poor Ra's, he's more uptight than you ever were. Far more full of himself. Genetically incapable of getting the joke. It should be fun. I mean, you know how I unsettle him just by existing. Can you imagine what I can do to him if I actually tried?

"I want to talk about what you're up to in Europe. Not your plans for Ra's al Ghul."

Oh yes, that's right.

She winked. Then looked at the different types of data flickering on the data screens.

Why isn't Igor here? You remembered he lives in Brussels, he figures in four of your five core theories. Why isn't his picture here?

"Because your fence Igor is bothering the hell out of me, Selina. He's a glaring inconsistency at the heart of this mess—the riddle inside the mystery inside the great big headache. His business is art, not jewels. He was the first thing I thought of when the heist happened in Belgium, but there is no evidence, none at all, that he has the contacts to fence anything but artwork. The social connections, the paper trails, the bank accounts, everything says that art is his sole business. Legit and black market."

And art is what's being returned, Phantom-Selina pointed out.

"But before you left, you said 'diamonds are for stealing.' It was the diamond heist that set you off on whatever you're doing. So how can it involve him?"

I know him.

"Well, yes. The personal angle. What's going on starts with you, and you know him."

She nodded.

I steal diamonds.

"Could we use the past tense, please?"

No. You brought me here from your dream, and the bad ass me in that alley was definitely the stealing-diamonds-in-the-present-tense Catwoman.

He grunted.

I steal diamonds and I steal art. It's not that uncommon, there's a lot of overlap in the types of security. Ergo...

"Other thieves that Igor deals with may steal diamonds as well as art, even if he only fences the latter."

Meow.

"They might even include the perpetrators of the Brussels Airport heist."

They might indeed. Even if they don't, they might. Put his picture up.

"VOX Control: Display Fabricant, Igor, file photo screen one, supplementary material screens five and six."

A series of pictures appeared, one could have been taken on the street by police surveillance: a thin man in his late thirties in a winter coat on a pleasant residential street. The others were all posed at a formal event: the man was in black tie, a pretty girl on each arm here, standing with a drink in his hand talking to another pretty girl over there. While Bruce analyzed the image, Selina gave voice to his thoughts.

Nice looking guy, maybe a bit younger than you imagined. Seems to have a very pleasant life, aka a lot to lose. It'd be a shame to beat up that handsome face. And look how thin he is,

tall but thin. The Jonathan Crane type; he'd break like a twig. He knows he'd break like a twig. It would be so easy to intimidate him. If Batman paid him a visit, demanding answers, you wouldn't have to touch him. All you'd have to do is ask if he'd ever seen someone with their jaw wired shut.

"There was another diamond robbery in Belgium, years ago," Bruce said. "The Antwerp diamond district, vault thought to be impregnable. An Italian gang made off with more than \$100 million worth of stones."

They got the thieves, never recovered the stones. That makes for quite the treasure hunt. Other crooks, not to mention cops with noble and less-than-noble motives, all snooping around for somebody that might know something.

"And this Igor was someone who might very well know something. Say he had some close calls..."

Narrow escapes with the kinds of criminals people like him prefer not to deal with...

"He lives through it, but now with this new heist, he's afraid it's all going to start up again."

They said the last words in unison, and Bruce looked at her appraisingly.

"You went there to protect him," he said, a note of pride in his voice that the real Selina would have found infuriating. His phantom cat just smiled knowingly.

You don't imagine I'm doing it for free, she whispered.

"He's paying you in stolen art, which you return. Either pieces he's kept, because he liked them or simply because just couldn't find a buyer..."

Pfft, that's no fun.

"...Or he told you who he sold them to, and you stole them back. The downside of buying stolen artwork is that it can't be insured, and if someone does take it from you, you can't report the theft."

That does sound like more fun. And you like this theory much more than your other ones. It feels so much better, doesn't it? It feels right. It feels like me. But don't get too cocky, Dark Knight. You know there's something you're still missing.

"It's good enough," he said, assuming the instructor tone he used with Robin. "It goes as far as it can, given the information I have. Now we get more, because we have a better idea what we're looking for."

...: Bonjour? :... the sleepy voice said on the phone.

"Good morning, Kitten. Hope I didn't wake you."

...: No, it's fine. I know you're up late;... she said through a yawn. Then after the electronic chirp that meant both parties had secured the line, she asked ...: Did you have a good night? :...

"Extremely productive. Stopped a jumper. Tied up some loose ends on the Cráneos Sangrientos in such a way that the lesson of their downfall will not escape notice. And I cracked a case that's been particularly frustrating."

...: Oh woof, and I missed it. You know how I just love cooling you down when you're all 'frustrated.' :...

“You should come home and do just that, Kitten. Or I do have to come over there and get you?”

...: *Beg pardon?* ...

“You’ve seen Igor through the initial gold rush of Eurotrash criminals coming after him to get a lead on where the diamonds are stashed from the airport heist. You got him out of the last four scrapes in sufficiently dramatic cat-style that word’s gotten around: he’s not the lightweight pushover everyone assumed. He’s as safe as he can be, given his line of work, and I don’t think you can realistically expect to get any more out of him, monetarily, for your war chest.”

She purred. A rich, seductive purr that sent a quiver up Bruce’s spine, around his neck, across his shoulder and straight down his chest into his core.

...: *Well now,* ... he heard in the distance as he imagined himself pinning her—albeit not any pin recognized by any martial art—her arms behind her back, fingers intertwined with his, ass perched precariously on that thin railing around the alarm box.....*tell me more about this war chest, My Dark Knight.....* His hands releasing hers with a will of their own, moving down, brushing the small of her back on the way to cup the round softness beneath her hips.....*because there’s still a thirty million-euro ball of yarn rolling around here somewhere....*

“Not where you are,” he said, channeling the erotic thoughts into a gravelly whisper meant to reduce her to a quivering jelly. “You were never looking to recover the diamonds yourself, Catwoman. That’s why you’re already in Zurich. With your friend Bernard Ducret consolidating your hidden holdings and the new finder’s fees into, I would guess, *Nicht Meine Schleife Holdinggesellschaft*, an international counterpart to NMK.”

...: *How did you know?* ... Selina asked, that tremor her voice that meant, however much bluff and bluster she presented, the gravelly whisper hit the bullseye. Catwoman *wanted* as much as he did, if not more—and the balance could now tip either way.

“You told me. You said you were going after Ra’s *your way*. As a villain. Now, what would that mean to you? Not putting mold into the air filters of his cell in Atlantis. No, to you, it meant being proactive. Not waiting for him to make a move. Picking the battlefield yourself and bringing the fight to him.

“You’ve suspended all the sales of NMK properties in Gotham and converted them to the business incubator and a new program you set up for other non-profits to use rent free. That’s ingenious and I might have taken it at face value, except for a notation Gwen Chatham put in the file—something you should know about Gwen, there is no such thing as a casual aside in her office. She takes copious notes at every meeting. And when you made this change, you said the Foundation could ‘have the properties back *when you were done with them.*’ Now, I’m assuming ‘having them back’ means resuming the original distribution plan. But ‘when you were done with them’ what did that mean? So I checked. You’ve used them as collateral for some whopping big loans. Doesn’t matter what you’re actually charging in rent, the value of all that prime Gotham real estate is based on what you *could* charge. So you’ve effectively quadrupled the buying power of NMK.

“Why? Either you’re building a Catitat on the moon or...”

...: *Or?* ...

“Or... You magnificently wicked woman, you unbelievably acquisitive thief. You’re doing to Ra’s what I showed you with Falcone. You’re buying up, pushing out or cannibalizing all the bits of Demon left splintered and vulnerable by Falstaff.”

...: Something like that. Falstaff’s entry into Gotham was a very expensive operation. They had to have gutted a lot of Demon outfits to make it happen, and I wanted to grab as much as I can so they can’t salvage anything, and then use those resources to take out more of the crippled operations overseas. ...

“And?”

...: And... my dark knight, my dearest love. You were bored. All the Rogues are up the river except Oswald, and he certainly wasn’t going to give you any fun. You needed something to do. You needed a puzzle keeping you up at night. So.....

“Impossible woman. Fine, now that I’ve solved your puzzle, come home.”

...: As soon as we straighten out one thing. ‘You’re doing to Ra’s what I showed you with Falcone.’ Did you actually imply that you TAUGHT ME to steal?...

“This isn’t stealing.”

...: It’s adorable that you think that, Bruce, but what we did to Falcone was absolutely stealing. Justified, but stealing. It was his stuff, now it’s my stuff. Welcome to the party. ...

CHAPTER 2: COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

There was no enigma about Barbara Gordon. She'd thrown Bruce a few curves over the years, and he reacted with shock precisely because they were so rare. The control freak at the heart of Batman had reconciled itself to the mystery of Catwoman, the insanity of Joker, and the cycle of patterns established then broken that was the hallmark of so many others. Barbara was none of those. From her earliest days as Batgirl, he could count the surprises on one hand. From the see-saw of flirting and infatuation with Robin to reinventing herself as Oracle and even marrying Dick, the song might be played on different instruments and in different keys, but the tune remained unchanged. She was her father's daughter. Open and forthright when she chose to be, which was most of the time, but even when she was cagey—as with her hacking—there was a directness, a clarity of thought and directness of purpose reflecting a linear and disciplined mind. It was a necessity for those with eidetic memories, Bruce knew. The larger the library, the more organized the filing system needs to be if you want to make use of it. But it did lend itself to a certain predictability, or at least a certain transparency when established routines were abandoned.

Like this morning when she showed up at the manor with “Bat-business,” Bruce knew she had an agenda. Usually when she brought him something in person, it was to see the look on his face. But today he didn't detect the love of mischief, mentally tagged to an adolescent Batgirl but resurrected in the grown woman on those wait-till-he-hears-this visits.

“Something weird's going on at Arkham,” she began, showing him printouts from her routine scan of their network. “Much as we all like to joke about the revolving door at that place, it's not an original observation or a particularly clever turn of phrase. We keep on saying it because it's true. Since my father's day: they go in and practically before the paperwork is filed, they're on the way out again.”

“The FTRP,” Bruce said with distaste. “I have as many objections as anyone to Arkham's Fast Track Rehabilitation Program, but I do understand the need for it.”

“Yeah, bureaucrats don't want their ass in a sling,” Barbara said with that characteristic directness. “In order to get into the program at all, inmates have to maintain the level of self-control prisons classify as good behavior. Ivy can't green anyone, Clayface can't morph, Croc can't go around throwing orderlies into the wall. *'Jonathan Crane is reformed and safe to rejoin society'* is ultimately a matter of opinion. Regardless of how many degrees that Bartholomew has hanging on his wall, it's still just one man's opinion. If they act on it, then he and the administrator who hired him and the institution itself are in it up to their eyeballs when he goes and fear-gasses Hudson Stadium on game day. But if they can point to this quantifiable thing: 90 days of good behavior just to qualify for the FTRP and then so many days sustaining it while jumping through their hoops, well then, nobody's to blame. All the boxes were checked.”

“It's a little more than that,” Bruce said mildly.

"Oh I know, they also have to 'participate in therapeutic dialogue' and 'give the appearance of being actively engaged in their rehabilitation,'" Barbara said, sounding so much like Dick as she put on a nasal bureaucrat's voice and made sarcastic air quotes around certain phrases that Bruce found himself assuming the old mentor stance he used with Robin.

"I meant the good behavior part. You reeled off that list like it was nothing: Ivy can't green anyone, Clayface can't morph... Without that, they'd need a division of the National Guard up there on permanent assignment, double the staff and at least twice the containment cells."

"Since the special isolation units for Ivy, Clayface and Croc would be in permanent use whenever they're in residence," Barbara nodded to show she understood.

"It also helps with staff morale," Bruce said. "If you have a problem with a particular inmate, you know how long it takes for them to be fast tracked and how long the program usually takes to complete. There's an end date in sight."

As he spoke, Barbara started nodding more vigorously and with a smug smile, like a bobble-head that already knew the punchline to a joke he was telling.

"I know. That's how I got onto this. Churn is way up. Sick days too, and vacation requests. But mostly it's the good old-fashioned 'people are quitting.' Because there *isn't* an end date in sight. The revolving door appears to be stuck."

"How so?"

"Near as I can tell, nobody is in the FTRP."

"What do you mean 'as far as you can tell?'" Bruce asked sharply.

"All this is from the administrative partition in Arkham's network: staff rotas, purchasing, job searches. To learn more, I'd have to go into the medical records and reports. That's an ethically gray area and I wanted your go-ahead."

Bruce's pupils contracted ever so slightly. There was no mystery in Barbara Gordon, and when she fibbed, there was a geometry to it. She wasn't a bad liar; no one with a secret identity could afford that. But if you looked at her lies a certain way, shapes began to form. And, like a man looking at the stars, you had to have some idea what you were looking for if you wanted to pick out the constellations. Anyone looking at the night sky could see Polaris and Castor, but whether you connected them into the Big Dipper, the Seven Sages, the Grober Bear or the Fisher Cat depended on what shapes you were looking for, where you grew up and what stories you were raised on. It depended on outside information, which is what he needed now to project the right shape onto this Barbara mystery.

He stalled, offering her tea, something he knew she was likely to accept both because she liked it and because she was there for some other reason. Whatever that reason was, she would welcome the additional social cover of tea. She did accept, and while Alfred went to make it, Bruce looked around the room casually, his body language suggesting that they may as well talk about other things. They would only be interrupted again when Alfred returned, after all...

Since the cues were all non-verbal, he hadn't suggested a topic. That was left to Barbara and it was she who brought up family dinners. It had been a while since Selina (well technically Bruce and Selina, but everybody knew Selina initiated it) asked Dick and Barbara over for a family meal.

Gotcha, the inner-detective's mind snapped around the clue like a bear trap, and Bruce covered with a foppish grin.

"Selina's plane is in the air right now," he said lightly. "Maybe you could pick her up at the airport for me. Drop a few hints. And I'll take this Arkham puzzle off your hands, so you don't have to worry about going into the medical records."

It was Barbara's turn to put on a foppish grin.

"Busted," she said. "Was I that obvious?"

"Yes," Bruce lied, then amended the judgment. "Barbara, the Justice League files are filled with tidbits from your pharmacy hacks. King Snake takes sumatriptan for migraines, Professor Ivo is on a cocktail of blood thinners, Blockbuster can be traced by the anti-rejection drugs he needs after every transplant. So when did this 'gray area' spring up?"

"When Selina's plane took off," Barbara said, amused but embarrassed at how easily he saw through her ploy.

"You do sweep the aeronautics databases and get a notification whenever Wayne One files a flightplan, so..."

"Elementary," she said grimly. "I see why Selina pokes you so much about the great detective thing. It's really annoying."

"If you wanted to pick her up for a private chat, why not just tell me?"

"I guess I'm embarrassed," Barbara said. "What I want to ask her is kind of screwy. What I want her to do is kind of screwy. The whole idea is—Or maybe I just think it is. I can't tell anymore. I'm too close to it and I need another opinion before I get you involved. But look, as long as you know this much, you can tell me one thing. Just how amenable is Selina to... Bat-business? I know she's changed, but hardcore Team Batman law enforcement still seems very—"

She cut off when the tea came and didn't know how to resume. She noticed Bruce wasn't drinking his tea but fingering the rim of the cup in an unusual way. On the one hand, it seemed thoughtful; on the other, it seemed almost like the movement of a cat pawing at something that intrigued it. It was clear he would be the one to speak next, and when he did, the subject would be Selina.

"You said she's changed. I can understand why you might think that, but she hasn't really. Remember when we needed help after the quake? You suggested Huntress, and—"

"—And you said that she'd been fired from the League for cause. That she could call herself a heroine and superficially be working for the good guys, but she consistently did the wrong thing for the wrong reasons. Then you contrasted that with Catwoman, a criminal who made no bones about being a criminal, yet always seemed to do the right thing. You got in touch with her, and..."

"It wasn't an isolated case," Bruce said earnestly. "I never once asked for her help as Batman that she didn't give it. She hisses and snarls and scratches—and does the right thing. She gets the job done, she does it with a professionalism and ingenuity most heroes can't match, and then she hisses and snarls again, and reminds you she's a bad girl. Ideally, if there's something for her to take on the way out, she'll grab it just to push the point home."

I couldn't leave Zurich without picking up a little something to wave under Batman's nose. A Chagall lion, very meow, which I set on the seat across from me to admire on the flight home.

My last trip he told me specifically—*ordered* me in that deliciously arrogant gravel—not to bring home a souvenir from a certain vault. Naturally a souvenir was obtained, and the resulting homecoming was... very meow. I've considered a brass plaque in that particular cat lair to mark the occasion, if only I could figure out the wording.

This trip there was no vault out of legend to plunder, but there was a particular Swiss bank that was happy to accept the property of wealthy Jews throughout the 20s and 30s, then refused to let them or their heirs claim anything after the war because they couldn't produce the proper paperwork. I had time on my hands while Bernard sorted out the NMK details, so I did some digging. There's an international database meant to flag items like that when they come up for sale, and I found this wonderful Chagall watercolor, a study of a lion for his 1931 *Solomon sur son Trone*. It had been the property of one Joshua Reitlinger of Vienna. He survived the war, immigrated to the U.S., to Gotham in fact, and his widow now lived in Southern California with their children. Which meant they could have their painting back after I'd had my fun with Batman's nose.

Until then, that regal but hungry-looking kitty was a reminder that I had several episodes of Big Cat Diary to catch up on. I'm not sure when Bruce had the show added to the Wayne One entertainment center, but since I noticed it on the menu, I always watch an episode or two whenever I fly alone. So I began my usual routine: went to the kitchenette, opened a bottle of Dom, spooned out a portion of those delicious scallop rolls topped with crab and caviar... and mouthed a word of thanks to whatever benevolent spirit prompted Batman to make Bruce Wayne's plane a performance venue for the fop. It was stocked as it had always been, so he could stage a scene for the clean-up crews with empty champagne bottles and tins of caviar. Throw a pair of silk panties spritzed with Shalimar under the coffee table and another spritzed with L'Heure Bleue in the flower arrangement, and the Legend of Playboy Wayne writes itself.

With the happy epilogue that I could now sit down with the most delicious lunch to watch my favorite leopard hunt hers.

Happy meow.

Much as I loved Bruce calling me an unbelievably acquisitive thief, I didn't really see what I had planned for Ra's as stealing. It was more like what was happening on the screen: the predator and the injured fawn. Falstaff had left parts of Demon weak: undermanned and underfunded. The slow and the stupid separated from the herd, what self-respecting cat wouldn't snap up as much as she could?

Being proactive, Bruce called it. To me, going after Ra's as a villain meant being proactive, not waiting for him to make a move, picking the battlefield and bringing the fight to him... I guess he's right. I didn't think of it quite that clinically. I thought of it as... just letting the cat lead. Like my spotted friend on the screen, following instinct. The problem with capes and cops, apart from their annoying qualities, the real core level problem is that... Oh, hello.

My thought was interrupted by an incoming message: a change in itinerary once we touched down in Gotham. I'd still be landing at GIA, going through customs there, but

then, rather than grabbing a helicopter to the Bristol air strip where Bruce wanted to pick me up (he hates the traffic at Gotham International even more than Eddie and will do almost anything to avoid it), Barbara was going to meet me at GIA.

Now what could that mean?

As one of the busiest airports in the world, Gotham International was also the most efficient and streamlined for wheelchair access. It was designed to accommodate the widest possible array of assistance vehicles from all parts of the world, some of which were assumed to be larger, chunkier, and less sophisticated than the standard American wheelchair. Barbara Gordon was equipped with the very highest level of accommodation Wayne Tech and Bat-Tech could provide. Her van, for example, switched from pedals to hand controls at the touch of a button. The front seat moved at the same button-touch to accommodate either her or Dick as driver, and the driver- and passenger-side doors were both equipped with motorized lifts and ramps. The combination of such cutting edge resources and a venue optimized for her needs made for an incredibly hassle-free travel experience. As much as it's possible to enjoy any trip to the airport, Barbara enjoyed the trip to GIA. She had allowed far more time than she needed and found herself with time to kill in the little lounge outside the customs gate... At which point, she ceased to enjoy her trip to GIA.

A Gotham Post had been left lying on a chair, and Barbara took one look at the cover and sighed—for Selina, who had certainly put up with enough crap from that paper and deserved a better homecoming, and for herself, because Selina had put up with enough crap from that paper and that picture would not leave her in a receptive mood. She turned the newspaper over, revealing an innocuous ad for a department store on the back, and decided she would just have to hustle Selina out of the airport as fast as she could and hope they didn't pass a newsstand.

Time passed, and Selina duly appeared. She had the relaxed, easy manner of those who traveled on their own time in luxurious solitude and unburdened by luggage that was being sent along behind the scenes. She had one bag only with her, which she set down to greet Barbara and bestow an air kiss—after which, she saw the ad on the back of the Post.

"Oh, shiny!" she said, reaching to pick it up. "Don't you just love Diane von Furstenberg? We should go shopping one of these days, Barbara, that jersey would look great on you."

"No!" Barbara said, practically knocking the tabloid from her hand. "Awful color."

"It's black and white."

"With peach splotches."

"That's a belt."

"We're going to hit traffic. Let's get out of here."

"Um, okay," Selina said, noting the emergence of a tone that made the most powerful members of the Justice League shut up and do what they were told.

"Anything happen while I was gone?" she asked cautiously.

"No," Barbara said—without the Justice League dispatch tone, but called over her shoulder as she turned and started for the main concourse.

"I just wondered because of the last minute change of plan," Selina said, grabbing her bag and hurrying to catch up. "If Bruce couldn't make it or—"

"No, nothing like that!" Barbara said without slowing.

"Or if he needed the helicopter for something—" Selina continued.

"No, no, nothing like that."

At last they reached the elevator to the parking garage... the garage itself... and eventually, the cloverleaf. Selina waited until Barbara negotiated the Gordian knot of onramps and merging lanes, then she picked up as if she'd never been interrupted.

"Or if he was lying unconscious somewhere, getting fondled by a Playboy bunny in a Catwoman mask."

"Oh hell, you saw it!" Barbara cried. "How? When?"

"We passed, like, three newsstands on the walk out, Barbara. One in particular I can't help glancing at whenever I pass it, even with you hurrying me that way. It's where Bruce and I saw that famous cover with the rooftop kiss, the one they use in all the advertising. It was when I got back from Paris that time. He picked me up at the gate, we rounded the corner and Boom! There we were. Frenching on the cover of the Gotham Post."

"Today I pick you up and you see that," Barbara said sympathetically. "Welcome home."

Surprisingly, Selina just laughed.

"Well, their photoshopping has improved," she said. "And apparently they've overcome their aversion to tits, hallelujah. Is any of it real?"

"There is a new costumed player running around," Barbara said. "But not a bunny."

"I figured. That part is way too 'Postal.'"

"All that's real are the hair and mask. Not the tits, obviously. No ears, cat or bunny. And her outfit is more like something you'd wear to a nightclub."

Selina considered this, then asked if the newcomer had a name. At first, Barbara offered only a catty smile in reply.

"Oh come on, it can't be that bad," Selina teased.

"Cognitive Dissonance."

"Excuse me?"

"*Cognitive Dissonance*. You can see why the Post boys' heads exploded."

"I can," Selina laughed. "I really can. Cognitive Dissonance as in the mental discomfort we feel when all our beliefs, values and behaviors don't agree and the mental gymnastics we go through to resolve it, that's a tricky concept. It's not easy to wrap your head around, and any woman who would choose that for her *theme* probably does the Times crossword in ink."

"Smart Woman – Fire Bad," Barbara quipped.

"Post Boys scared. Make her a bunny," Selina smirked.

"Alleviating the dissonance," Barbara cheered.

"Yes," Selina nodded with a quick laugh which then softened into the slow smile that curled her lips at wine tastings. Her next words were spoken slowly, as one savoring a particularly spicy pinot. "Oh my yes. In the very act of misrepresenting her, they're acting out her name."

"Illustrating her name," Barbara said. "As they're calling her something else, they are literally putting 'Cognitive Dissonance' on their cover. If that's what she was after, it's like performance art."

"If that's what she was after, I don't think 'art' covers it. It's goddamn genius. But who would do that? I mean, *playing* on the Gotham Post's screwed up attitudes about women to make them *call themselves out* on their screwed up attitudes about women *without realizing they'd done it*. Who would do that? Who would even think it?"

"You're the one who said she's wearing a Catwoman mask."

"Hey, I was in Belgium and then in Switzerland, I've got a pretty good alibi."

"I know, I'm just teasing," Barbara said, slowing with the traffic. "It really does look like your mask though. So not only did she pull off this incredibly intellectual joke at the expense of the Gotham Post, she kind of put Catwoman's face on it. Think you've got an admirer?"

"No, I think we're stuck in traffic and reading a lot into this that isn't really there."

"You sure?"

"Barbara, I'm the best thief in the world and I spent the better part of my professional life in love with the world's best crimefighter. I've got a pretty good handle on cognitive dissonance."

"I never thought of that," Barbara said, switching lanes to get onto the expressway.

"So, Post-baiting aside, what does this newbie do? The usual murder and mayhem, or something more in keeping with the sophistication of 'Cognitive Dissonance.'"

"Oh, seems to be in it for the money," Barbara said dismissively. "Went after some Faberge and old movie memorabilia, I think. Look, I really didn't want to talk about her, although I am kind of glad she raised the specter of the Gotham Post. Are you in a big hurry to get home or would you be up for a little trip through town?"

Noticing that Barbara had already changed lanes and her finger hovered over the turn signal, Selina said she didn't mind the detour. Barbara turned onto the expressway and, thanks to an enhanced GPS meta-linked to four traffic-mapping stations and run through her custom projection matrices, they were soon in Midtown Gotham. Barbara turned into an alley Selina recognized with a puzzled pang, and came to a stop outside the stage door of the Hijinx Playhouse.

"You know it's official Commissioner Muskelli is leaving," she said before Selina could react. "Like definitely. They're probably hammering out the wording of the official press release as we speak."

Selina nodded. She said she did know and was surprised the official announcement hadn't been made yet. Bruce was expecting it weeks ago.

"Right," she said. "I'm pretty sure the delay is so they can announce his replacement at the same time. They're stalling because that decision hasn't been made, and that's why I brought you back here. Selina, my father hates retirement. He pretends, but I can tell. He says all the right things about being relaxed and all the free time he has, and then when I'm shutting down my Oracle station and heading to bed, I see he's still up and playing some click-game on Facebook. He's *miserable*. His ulcer cleared up and his blood pressure is down and he's as miserable as he's ever been in his life."

"I'm... sorry to hear that," Selina said, taken aback. "But Barbara, what's that got to do with me?"

"You stood on that stage in there every night for *months* and said he was the worst peace officer in the Western Hemisphere."

"Well, I didn't exactly say it, Barbara."

"And that he ran the most incompetent and corrupt police force in the country."

"Luthor *said* it, the Times *quoted* him and I *read from the Times* to make the point that—"

"Yes, yes, I don't care about that," Barbara said impatiently. "But don't you see, that was the last word after he'd left the force. 'I'd retire too if the President said that about me.' Selina, don't you see, that was the epitaph on his term as commissioner. And with that history and where you are now, I mean you're practically Mrs. Wayne—"

"WHAT?!"

"—you're the one person who could go to the Mayor and really be listened to."

"Hang on a second, stop, rewind."

"*Oh come on, Selina!* Going back to the rooftop days, you don't mind if we call you thief, criminal, villain and bitch. Those are all considered bad things. Can we *please* stop tiptoeing around the fact that you're Mrs. Batman, with or without the ring, 'cause there's really nothing wrong with that!"

Selina's eyes assumed a sharp, gimlet quality which Barbara assumed was shock, or possibly the aforementioned criminal villainess bitch awakened from her long slumber and sharpening her claws while she decided on an appropriate punishment. In fact, she was replaying Barbara's words, not this last outburst but the whole of their conversation since meeting at the airport, her general manner and tone, and her history of romantic fancies about secret engagements. Deciding that Barbara's words meant nothing and there was no reason to believe she had guessed, Selina's eyes softened and she assumed a tone of patient condescension.

"I meant the part about going to the Mayor," she said gingerly.

"Well not literally. It'd be more like bringing him to you. All the entertaining you were doing for the Foundation before you left, it would be just like that. Except for me, as a favor, and for my dad, because he didn't deserve the bill for all those stupid stories in the Post, saying you shot him and all the rest."

"Barbara, I'm not disagreeing with you, but I'm also not going to agree to a plan that *I don't understand*. Would you please explain—slowly and making allowances for jetlag—exactly what it is you want me to do?"

Barbara's idea wasn't '*HA-HA-HA Harley, get the shotgun*' crazy. She wanted me to revive family dinners, add her father to the guest list, pretend we'd been doing it all this time without interruption, and invite the Mayor. He would see that former Commissioner Gordon and the woman who once called him the worst peace officer in the Western Hemisphere were all part of one big happy family now. Gordon would then take the Mayor aside and intimate that he'd be open to the idea of taking his old job back. Then Bruce would take him aside and voice his support, which as the deepest pocket in his reelection campaign and the voice of the civic-minded Wayne Foundation, carried a lot of weight.

So it wasn't *Harley, get the shotgun crazy*, but it did have some rather large *Gee, Mistah J, I don't think a paper airplane can support the weight of a banana* gaps in its thinking. For one thing, Barbara hadn't spoken to her father or to Bruce. I was reasonably sure Gordon would be Bruce's first, second and third choice for police commissioner, but like every other rogue in Gotham, I had learned the hard way that with Batman you can never be *completely* sure of anything. I would certainly ask before assuming his help—and naturally the moment I said that out loud the job was mine. Which was fine, but it would have to wait because we hadn't been in the same room together for weeks. I had plans for that reunion that wanted candles, champagne, Nina Simone on the CD player, vanilla cream, chocolates and a batarang. Chit-chat about Gotham law enforcement was decidedly *not* on the menu.

The second hole in Barbara's plan was more serious. She hadn't confirmed that Gordon wanted the wretched job back. She only had a hunch that he wasn't enjoying his retirement. I was prepared to believe that; Barbara is very perceptive about that kind of thing. But if it were true, there's fly fishing, photography, biking, ham radio. Any number of alternatives to going to back to a job that stacked headaches on top of ulcers wrapped around high blood pressure.

Then again... I found myself looking at a cat claw.

Since I was in town anyway, I had Barbara drop me at the SoHo cat lair to unpack a few things. I had just taken an emergency set of claws from their secret compartment when I had that thought about Gordon's blood pressure, and it occurred to me that *Catwoman* was also a job most people wouldn't take on a bet. The dangers I found thrilling would send most of them screaming for cover. The knowledge that Two-Face had their phone number would keep them up at night. (The fact that he'd call before every Harvard/Yale game expecting them to bet against his beloved Crimson wasn't even worth discussing.) And *Catwoman* retired from thieving not long after Gordon retired as commissioner. I can't say I enjoyed it much more than he did, and I didn't turn to fly fishing or photography. If anyone suggested such a thing, I'd break out the bullwhip. What did I wind up doing? Crimefighting. "Mrs. Batman" as Barbara put it. Anything less would be unworthy of *Catwoman*. Anything less would be painfully dull.

Maybe Gordon felt the same? It wasn't the masked life, but he did write the SOP for official personnel partnering with capes. James Gordon's GPD and the Dark Knight, it was the gold standard of Cape/Police partnerships.

So it was just possible that Barbara wasn't crazy, that Gordon would welcome the chance to come out of retirement and be that commissioner again. Still, somebody had to *ask* him. My first thought was that Bruce should do it, but then I thought how much it would mean to him if it happened. Commissioner Gordon back on the One-PP roof, standing there at the signal ready to brief him, it would be the best present anyone had given Batman in a long, long time. If I talked to Gordon and he went for it, then I could bring the whole plan to Bruce as a done deal. And if he said no, Bruce would never have to know the idea was on the table. Well, no, Batman always finds out, but it would avoid raising his hopes with a very iffy proposition.

I was leaning towards asking Gordon myself when Harvey's pal Fate gave me an extra nudge: When I got to the manor, Bruce was out. Not one of his coy disappearing

acts so Bat and Cat could reunite before Bruce and Selina. One of the 'kryptonite-infused kelp washing up on Playa Mansa' disappearing acts that leaves you wondering how the demigods of the Justice League would get through the year without him. Sometimes it pisses me off, but today it just made me proud. Superman, Aquaman and Flash had a problem they couldn't handle between them, and Bruce was their first call.

I decided to take the hint and talk to Gordon myself. Catching up with Alfred, Whiskers and Nutmeg passed the time until dinner. I suited up, headed into town, knocked on Jim's door—and only realized when he opened it that I should have come in civvies. We'd seen each other countless times since Bruce and I got together, but this was the first time he'd seen me in costume since things changed. The first five minutes were as awkward as they could possibly be. "Hey, what's that on your boot" It was salt from his own stoop—or the residue of it from months before when it snowed, which was corrosive and he didn't want me dragging it onto his carpet. That led to a trip outside the door to the front mat, where I gave my boots an extra scraping while he pointed to all the spots where the concrete was discolored from ancient saltings.

Then nothing. He looked up and down the street and sniffed. He asked if I thought it was going to rain. I said I didn't. He said he did.

Then nothing. We went back inside. He had a pair of faux candles, battery powered. A door prize from "some damn raffle" at "some damn fool thing" he'd gone to. They burned for eight or ten hours, then shut off automatically so you didn't have to worry about leaving them overnight.

Then nothing.

More nothing.

It was definitely going to rain.

And more nothing.

The strained conversation had finally ground its way down to absolutely nothing. Big empty silence just sat there in the middle of his living room, like a puppy that wandered into a formal party and pee'd on the carpet, when suddenly we each had a brainstorm. Independently and at the same instant, I took off my mask to ease the tension, he offered me a glass of whiskey to ease the tension, we looked at each other... and burst out laughing. It was just too silly, feeling the same strain, reacting at exactly the same moment.

I accepted the whiskey, mostly because I wanted him to have one, and I accepted that rocky start as a gift. It gave me a very direct route to a very delicate subject:

"I don't think I've had a more uncomfortable five minutes with you since that time you came to my apartment wanting to hire Catwoman," I said.

Another time, I never would have alluded to it. He hired me to break into the police evidence locker. He hired me to steal photos Joker had taken of Barbara after the shooting. He'd used his position as commissioner to have them misfiled and lost. After he retired, he was afraid his political enemies would expose the effort and make a stink.

"Not my finest hour," he said, taking a drink.

"Maybe commissioning a theft isn't the best codicil to your term as commissioner," I said, pretending to drink but opting out of alcohol (particularly bourbon which isn't my thing) before a prowl.

He looked up sharply. He's not Batman but he's not a stupid man, he might have had a whiff of where things were going.

"Maybe it's not," he said cautiously.

"For that matter, maybe curling up your toes and quitting in the midst of a smear job by a muck-racking newspaper wasn't a very dignified end to an otherwise distinguished career."

"Maybe," he said—with this twinkle in his eye that left me *convinced* he must have dressed up as Santa when Barbara was little.

"Want to go again?" I asked gamely.

He sniffed, a long deep inhale that pulled his head back a touch, and at the end of that sniff, he looked ten years younger.

"By 'go again' you mean...?"

"You know very well what I mean," I said with a twinkle of my own.

I filled him in on Barbara's plan, assured him twice that it really was her idea and not Bruce's, and he admitted he'd been bored out of his mind since retiring. He showed me what he was really doing all night. "Facebook" was apparently camouflage for Barbara. He had a police scanner that he monitored whenever he couldn't sleep, and a map of the city where he traced certain patterns of activity that interested him. I noticed those patterns were predominantly related to Bat-Family and theme criminals. It was easy to guess that "when he couldn't sleep" was synonymous with reliving his old life, his old schedule, staying at the office late into the night when Batman was active.

Partly to satisfy a cat's curiosity and partly to let him show off his hobby, I asked him about the new costume: Cognitive Dissonance. He showed me what he had logged: location of the Faberge, the movie memorabilia, encounter with Batgirl, encounter with Batman, and even the intersection with the traffic camera that would have snapped the picture the Post had photoshopped. It was fascinating. I never had Gordon pegged for this kind of data-hound, but now that I saw his set-up, it was so similar to Oracle's. It was simpler, stodgier, low-tech and borne of boredom, made with no real goal in mind but to pass the time, but the similarity of mind was as clear as could be.

Then he surpassed her, pointing to an unmarked pin on his map.

"I have a hunch this is her too. Earlier tonight dispatch reported a silent alarm tripped at End Papers, the rare book dealer on 43rd. No word on the details."

Now, I am not, never have been, never will be and don't aspire to be the crimefighting encyclopedia that Batman is, but I had just come across End Papers in my Zurich research into valuables displaced during World War II. I knew *exactly* what they had on their shelves right now that a smart thief would go for, and here I was, standing next to the man who in a few short weeks might be commissioner again. I *was* working with Batman now, on and off, which could mean working with the commissioner from time to time, and I had a chance to impress him. I took it.

"Of course, she'd be going for the incunabula," I said thoughtfully. I waited for the raised eyebrow, and when it came, I elaborated. "The Esterhazy family, Austrian nobility. Had a huge collection of rare books, 15th to the 18th century. The Red Army took it in 1945 and the Russian parliament recently voted to return it. The collection includes 11 incunabula, those are books printed in the first 50 years after the invention

of the printing press, incredibly rare, and the family are selling two of them to build a new library to house the rest of the collection. End Papers is handling the sale."

He gave me that look we all give Bruce when he reels off a speech like that, so I figured I'd done it just right.

"Maybe you should check it out," he said – and there was that twinkle again. Yep, he definitely played Santa once or twice.

I wouldn't have considered it normally, but I couldn't resist the idea of having it in my back pocket when I told Bruce: "Of course I'm happy at the prospect of Gordon coming back, Kitten, but now with our regular date night team-ups, do you think you two will get along?" "Pfft, of course we will, we've already had a case together." It'd be worth it just to see the look on his face.

When I got to End Papers, the uniforms were long gone. I went in my way and found the evidence they missed having come through the front door. In the vent where I tucked in my own hair as a precaution, I found a single strand of platinum blonde caught under the screw. Now, Cognitive Dissonance may not be the only woman with that color who dabbles in crime, but it was enough to confirm Gordon's hunch for me. I had a hunch of my own, a thief's instinct for loot, and incunabula weren't the kind of prize any gutter trash burglar would go for. It was the choice of a woman who did the Times crossword in ink.

On a hunch, I snapped on my OraCom and called Barbara. She had an update on the League; Bruce would be back before morning. Then I asked about Cognitive Dissonance's other targets:

"You said she'd gone after Faberge and some kind of movie memorabilia. What kind in particular?"

...: Oh, that. It was a Garbo collector. There was a silk robe she wore in Grand Hotel and a pair of gloves from Ninotchka. ...

I thanked her but blew off her questions after that. Faberge and books taken by the Red Army might have been a coincidence, but now costume pieces Garbo had worn playing a Russian ballerina and a Soviet official. Mother Russia appeared to be a recurring motif.

I knew all the fences in Little Odessa, and one in particular owed me big time. Korsakoff set me up during the Rogue war, delivering information for Bane as if he himself was giving me the tip. I *do not* let those things go unpunished. It may take me a while to get to you, but if you play Catwoman for a fool, you will make it up to me or you'll pay in *pain*. I explained this very nicely to Korsakoff, and like a smart man, he chose making it up to me. Coughed up all he knew on a blonde hottie who'd gone to Andropovich with a Faberge egg to unload.

That intel brought me to the type of rooftop not associated with caped vigilantes or masked bad girls. The type with rows of sofas and elegant little tables. Some are all about brunches, some cater to the after-work happy hour crowd, and some go late into the night. All have primo cocktails and killer views. The one atop Roff West has a live DJ from midnight 'til two. Gave me time to stop by the lair, exchange the cowl for a smaller, more discreet mask, and grab a silk trenchcoat to cover the top of the catsuit. I hit the Roff roof, scoped out a table central enough to be seen but remote enough for a private conversation, and made my way to the DJ's pit. Korsakoff said I should request "Without You," go back to my table and wait, but I hadn't taken ten steps

towards the DJ when I saw that I didn't have to. A platinum blonde was already there, leaning over the rail talking to the DJ. She had the same hairstyle as the bunny on the cover of the Gotham Post, a mask similar to Catwoman's in color and style, and as Barbara said, that's all the Post had kept of her actual costume and appearance. Her costume was "like something you'd wear to a nightclub," specifically Herve Leger. A designer her flat chest and pencil-thin frame showed off to perfection.

I knew that because we'd talked about it. Our body types and coloring are as different as can be, and naturally I covet the styles she can wear that I could never pull off, and vice versa.

I went up to her, mind reeling at the implications. *Cognitive Dissonance*, the new costume in town, *Cognitive Dissonance*, the newest theme criminal in Gotham.

"Selina!" she said just loud enough to be heard over the music. "Been a long time."

"Yes it has," I nodded. "How have you been, Doris?"

CHAPTER 3: THE HAIL MARY PASS

Three Weeks Ago

People were a horror. A tree-killing pox that spread like an infection over the beauty of Mother Earth. Anything that was good, they ruined. Anything that was pure and perfect and lovely as it was, they got inside like a corn borer and infected it. Fouled it with their human stench so you could never really enjoy it as you did before. Even once the smell faded, there was the memory of it. Their humanity infesting it, rubbing against the leaves, tearing the petals and blocking the sun. You could never really relax and be easy without the fear that some whiff of it might return.

They took that which came from nature and made it *theirs*. The flower couldn't be a flower, it had to be pulverized for its scent, crushed to its sweetest essence to mask their filthy human stench. Or else *cut*, sliced from the very fibers connecting it to the life-giving Earth. And why? To give to *each other* as *love tokens*, scent and love tokens for their mating rituals—as if there weren't too many of them already. Ruining everything for every other species! Fruit, vegetable and grain were nothing but food to them. Trees nothing but wood and paper. They took and they took, fouled the air and fouled the Earth, gave nothing back in return—and then *congratulated themselves*. That was the worst of it. They way they encouraged each other. Praised each other. It was disgusting. Ivy hated them. *Hated* them.

Harvey and Harley worst of all. The alluring buds used to entice—to draw you in close where you could be disarmed, grasped high above the thorns and snipped into irrelevance. She hated humanity and those twin monstrosities made her lose sight of it. They *disconnected* her from that fundamental part of her being. She was Poison Ivy. She didn't hate Batman or logging companies or florists, she hated *PEOPLE*. And those two... those two cursed non-plants managed to get inside, like a corn borer and a cutworm, and infect her with this human stink, this loss of purpose, this, this... The two of them, Harley and Harvey, like a flea beetle and a root maggot, got inside and stopped her being true to herself, to her nature. She was Gaia's Chosen, Warrior Goddess of the Green. She never cared what people thought of her—*PEOPLE* of all things! Then, at some point, that awful flea beetle Harvey Dent went and liked her without pheromones—Yes, *that's* where it started—with a *man*, of course it started with a man! A stupid man who thought he was clever, always the worst kind. A man who thinks he's clever, who thinks he knows best, will always let you down. Harvey had a very presumptuous way of looking at her, talking to her, as if he knew things. As if he *understood* things— about her, Poison Ivy, Gaia's Chosen. Who was HE to have a thought of any kind, let alone dare to speak it, let alone speak it to her face?

At least Harley had no such pretensions. Except for that one very brief period where the weed of Dr. Quinzel threatened to choke out the flower of Harley Quinn, the root maggot didn't have a thought in her head. Unlike the flea beetle, there was no presumption that Harley was in a position to *understand* Poison Ivy. Of course that didn't prevent Ivy from caring about her regard just as much as she did Harvey's. Harley had found Ivy's kindness surprising. *-thit-thit-thit-* Ivy had been nice to her in

that jaunt to Philadelphia and Harley found that surprising *-thit-thit-thit-thit-* suspicious *-thi-thut-* and out of character. Of course Ivy found that unacceptable, wildly unacceptable, who wouldn't? *-thut-thut-thut-* It was worse than when Harvey saw her behaving rationally and found *that* surprising and out of character.

She needed to think. *-thi-thut-thit-thit-*

In a perfect world, she would do it in Robinson Park, or Riverside Park, or even her greenhouse. Nothing helped her think like the loving embrace of her flora. *-thit-thit-* But if plant company was preferred, it wasn't absolutely necessary the way time and solitude were necessary. In Robinson Park (or Riverside Park or the greenhouse) she would be too accessible. Batman, the flea beetle and the root maggot would all know where to find her. *-thut-thit-* Any of them might come and *bother her*. And if she left Gotham entirely and found some nice patch of greenery elsewhere, they would notice. They might even wonder why. *-thut-* Ivy had a sense, a unique and special sensitivity like that which allowed her to commune with her plants, and it whispered to her now, whispered that down the line she would not want this period of reflection be known, *-thit-* that whatever came next should not be foreshadowed in any way. *-thut-thut-* There should be no hint, *-thi-thut-thut-thit-* no bulbous knots on the branch of the tree, *-thi-thut-thit-thit-* visible through the snow and promising the great new shoots that would come with the spring thaw. No, she would stay here at Arkham, where they all knew where she was. *-thit-* They would suspect nothing. Nothing at all, while she closed up her petals tighter than any rosebud to wait out—WHAT WAS THAT NOISE? *-thit-thit-thit-*

-thit-thit-thit-thit- -thi-thut- -thut-thut-thut- -thi-thut-thit-thit-

Ivy smashed her fist into the wall nearest the annoying muffled *thi-thuts* and was rewarded with silence for about ten minutes. Then Saul Vics, the slimiest and most corrupt or the most useful and approachable of the Arkham guards depending on how you looked at it, rapped on her door and announced that he was deactivating the outer lock shield in ten seconds. Ivy was to "stand at the back wall of the cell facing the door, with both her hands in clear view, arms extended, palms in contact with the rear wall." Ivy mouthed this familiar formula along with Vics, like a high school freshman mocking the principal, and once she was in place, she stuck her tongue out at the camera to indicate she had complied.

The door opened, and Edward Nigma entered.

"Ten minutes," said Vics brusquely, and Nigma tilted his head. The move looked submissively quizzical, like a dog questioning why you weren't getting his leash for his regular walk, but somehow it wasn't. "Okay, fifteen," Vics amended. "But that's really the best I can do this close to chow time."

Nigma pursed his lips, an expression Ivy recognized from the few times they'd played poker. Coming up on a raise that was probably a bluff.

"I'll call when we're finished," Eddie said amiably. "If you have to go off and make the dinner rounds, I'll wait here and you can take me back to my cell after. We'll order from Squids tonight."

Vics's brow knit, fear battling greed behind his dull brown eyes. As usual greed won, and he nodded, grunted, and left. Once the door closed behind him, Eddie smiled at Pammy:

"He doesn't like stacking that many special requests in a shift. Afraid he'll get caught, I guess. But in the end, my green works just as well as yours."

"What do you want?" Ivy sighed, the annoyance of the interruption coupled with the annoyance of Nigma thinking he was so clever *and* that crack about the green combining, not into a heightened sense of fury but into an oppressive weariness.

"That was kind of childish, the way you played to the camera just now, don't you think, Pammy?"

"What a sad little creature you are, Edward Nigma. Was it really so important to insult me that you actually *failed to answer a question*?"

"I was getting there," he said. "Here I thought gardeners were supposed to be patient."

"Goddesses aren't," Ivy glared.

"Some are; some gods too," Eddie said conversationally. That was met with a more hostile glare and Eddie opted for a faux-conciliatory jazz-hands gesture. "Sorry," he said. "I only meant that, well, it's not like starting a brawl in the common room, but enough of those petty little exhibitions, sticking out your tongue and giving Nurse Chin the finger the other day, it *will* keep off the fast track list for early release." She said nothing and he added "Maybe that's the idea." Again she said nothing, and Eddie changed tone entirely: "Okay, okay, we'll do it your way. You riddled me thus: 'Edward: What do you want? Why did you pay off Guard Vics to come see me? Why are you taking up my valuable time?' Answer: Glad you asked, Pammy. I came to tell you I know what you're doing."

He reached the wall directly underneath the fire sprinkler and wrapped it with his knuckle, producing a louder and more distinct version of the earlier muffled sound: - *thit-thit-thit- -thit-thit-thit-thit- -thi-thut- -thut-thut-thut-*

"Shaolin Temple," he said, translating the Morse code as he continued rapping. "You're using Arkham as your own remote monastery. It's really very clever. All you have to do is not qualify for the fast track and you can stay as long as you like. Off the Bat-radar precisely because he knows where we are."

"We?" Ivy mouthed, an awful thought pulling her lips into a teeth-bearing snarl that wouldn't normally accompany the word. It was a rare thing for Edward Nigma to say anyone else was clever. Rather than take it as a compliment, Ivy had the sick presentiment he was about to pocket her idea.

"I've been doing the same thing. Haven't you noticed? As soon as I saw what you were up to, it seemed like a MANIA DEFINED! (That's 'a damn fine idea' in case you can't work it out, Pammy.) There are some things I need to think through too after that war business."

"Oh I knew it," Ivy hissed to herself, but Nigma was too busy preening himself to notice. "Back to the original question, what do you want?" she asked, exasperated.

"I thought we might help each other out," he said gamely. "You've already realized that if you and I are the only ones not fast tracking, it will draw unwanted attention. But if nobody is making the cut, then it just looks like they've done some bureaucratic sock pulling-up, raised the standards a little, closed some loopholes."

"Way ahead of you," Ivy said with a wistful smile. "You don't think Blake, Lynns, Wesker and Strange all started those 'common room brawls' on their own?"

Nigma laughed.

“What do you call a poker no-no that’s also a legendary marksman?” he asked happily. “A Tell. Pammy, you are just like the dame in those moth-eaten old mysteries who says she didn’t *shoot* Mr. Milquetoast when all the cop told her is that he was found dead in his car. No mention of him being shot or even being murdered... Nobody knows *who* started the last brawls in the common room, Pamela. At least nobody but *you* knows, apparently. And now me. Wesker and Strange, well, well... I did have my suspicions, mind you. Not with the first one. Blake alone could have been anything. He hasn’t been himself since that Bane beating. But after the second and then the third fracas, each keeping five or six of us off the FTRP list for another eight to twelve weeks, it was a pattern. A pattern that suited me; I wasn’t complaining. But I wasn’t the one doing it. Somebody else had to be benefiting, and I couldn’t figure out who. I hate not being able to figure things out; it gives me a headache. So I came at it another way. Nobody could’ve started all the fights personally, so it had to be someone who could manipulate. That’s me, you, and on a good day, Strange or Crane. I figured I’d try you first, since those mouth breathers haven’t had a good day since 2006.”

“They’re always on alert for my greening the staff,” Ivy boasted. “But another patient can pass unnoticed, as long as I make it clear that they mustn’t express their devotion to me in any way.”

“And if they squawk later, when they’re in isolation for having sent two or three others to the infirmary, ‘I did it for Goddess Greenleaf’ will only get them an extra helping of haloperidol.”

“Exactly,” Ivy chuckled wickedly.

“Nice. But in case you missed the list that went up after breakfast, Jervis, Roxy and Croc are all starting the fast track, as of noon today.”

“Root rot.”

“You’ll take care of it?”

Ivy’s eyes narrowed.

“The war is over, Nigma. You don’t give me orders.”

“Do Errs? *Moi?* Pammy, I merely pointed out that we are in the same boat. We want time to think. This is an excellent place to do it. It’s in both our interests that nobody gets fast tracked until we ourselves are ready to leave, and three are on the list. You’re already set up to do something about it. If you don’t want to, I’ll take care of it myself. As long as we’re agreed and don’t *both* do something—”

“Alright, alright, aphids are less of a pest than you are, Nigma. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, Blossom.”

The media outlets that depicted Gotham as a kind of Mordor with streetlights were equally ludicrous in their depictions of Arkham as a hell pit inside the Tenth Circle wrapped around a nightmare. Those who imagined filthy cots and walls with missing tiles streaked with rust, graffiti and blood wouldn’t be able to process the neat Japanese-style room that was Edward Nigma’s cell—even less the man himself. Stretched out on his cot, hands behind his head as he leaned back against the wall, his

feet up, he was a picture of contentment, the lord of the manor seated before a great roaring fire after the hunt.

The furnishings hadn't always been this elaborate. Before his rise in status, he had only a low desk ordered from a catalogue of traditional Japanese furnishings, chosen not for aesthetics but because it could be folded even lower and hidden in the dark recess under his cot. Since his elevation, flush with an obscene amount of untraceable Falcone cash, Saul Vics was practically his butler. Batman had his Pennyworth, and The Riddler his Saul Vics. It wasn't necessary to keep the desk hidden, taking it out only when he wanted to use it. He could leave it in the open all the time—at which point, it seemed silly not to get a chair to go with it. He liked the lines of those low chairs... and as soon as he added one, the Spartan walls and floor began to look like a design choice rather than institutional mandate. He replaced the cot with a futon, added tatami mats, a lamp, a shelf... and found he had a very elegant abode to sit and think.

He knew he was at a crossroads. The war with Falcone had brought out the best in him. He felt better than he had in years and was better thought of than he had been in years. In the eyes of his peers he was King Rogue. What he did next would be critical in confirming him in that position, or undoing it. He had to consider his next move carefully... His next move, that reminded him.

He got up and went to the desk. Vics mentioned that he had a letter from the Metropolis Penitentiary, and Eddie's hands nearly trembled with anticipation as he opened it. Rook to Queen's Rook 5 – YES! Bane was still working on that two rook mate. He could do it in three moves. He had to think Eddie didn't see it or that he miscounted. Eddie would promote a pawn in three moves – one move too late by Bane's reckoning, because Bane was a fathead. It would never occur to that mountain of bulk that anyone would promote a pawn to something less than a queen. She was the most powerful piece on the board—except for right now, where promoting that pawn to a knight would put Bane's king in a check from which he could not escape. Mate.

Eddie moved Bane's rook as specified, advanced his own pawn, and scribbled the move onto a note card.

Then he paused. How to disguise the clue in a bit of meaningless social twaddle. He glanced through Bane's remarks underneath his rook move. Hm, he mentioned that the Metropolis Penn would be screening *Excalibur*. Just the sort of sword-bashing nonsense Bane would go for, and as Eddie recalled Helen Mirren was in it. Helen Mirren would go on to play Elizabeth II in *The Queen*. Perfect!

He tapped his pen excitedly and wrote:

Enjoy Excalibur. Good flick. Did think Helen Mirren overrated.

Two Weeks Ago

A plant of some kind would have been helpful – a *real, living* plant. The one downside of Ivy's plan to use Arkham as her 'Shaolin Temple' was the absence of plants. Not a single crocus to help her meditate. Not so much as an aloe stem for company. Of course she could have greened one of the guards to bring her one, but

greening guards was exactly the kind of thing the special measures set up around her were meant to detect. Greening a guard *to bring her a plant* would trip every alarm and safety check they had. The otherwise useful Saul Vics, so responsive to 'the other green' as Nigma put it, presented a similar problem. It was the one thing he wouldn't get her, not for any price, precisely because it was the one object that would be searched for. In her cell, in the vent above her cell, in any space she had access to.

Ivy had wracked her brain trying to come up with a solution. She wanted to misbehave enough to stay out of the FTRP, but that misbehavior had to be discovered to be effective. Being discovered with a plant would only get that plant removed. ARGH! Finding she couldn't come up with any shred of a solution on her own, she'd turned to Nigma. The condescending, arrogant microdick called her "Blossom" at the end of their last meeting, but it had to be admitted, he did come up with frightfully good ideas sometimes. Not knowing any Morse code, she just knocked a random pattern on the wall where Nigma had, and before long, Saul Vics came a-knocking to escort her to Riddler's cell.

Unfortunately, his best idea was nothing more than an electronic picture frame that Ivy could load up with photos—beautiful photos, it was true—but nothing truly alive. Nigma, that arrogant little shit, was forbidden electronic gizmos just as Ivy was forbidden plants, but unlike her plants, staff like Saul Vics could walk around with gizmos and nobody thought anything of it. Any gizmo discovered in Nigma's vicinity could be claimed by Vics as his own, forgotten in the lunch room or even taken from his locker. He risked a day's suspension at most, for which Nigma would compensate him. It was so unfair. Gizmos were doable, but plants? There was no credible reason for a man to bring a plant in to work with him or have one sitting in his locker, and what kind of sad commentary was that on the mess humans had made of the world.

So each day, Ivy was given an hour's 'gardening time' to surf the net on one of Eddie's gizmos, cleverly disguised as "Saul Vics's phone." She acquired a few more photos: extreme close-ups of flowers and fruits, and sometimes less sensual images of still-pretty flowers that reminded her of particular babies in her greenhouse. She would load them into her picture frame and be able to contemplate them for the rest of the day while she meditated. One of today's new pictures was a fine specimen of *Orchis Italica*, the Naked Man Orchid, and needless to say, Ivy focused more on the tiny—the *very* tiny—protrusion between its lower leg-like petals than the upper portion resembling a face and hair. Naturally, she had named it 'Eddie' – for the first ten minutes of her meditation, at least. After that it became Harvey, and finally it faded into a less specific representation of the detested universal man-thing. It had happened again. She didn't have a soft spot for Nigma the way she did Harley and Harvey, but even so, he had pushed his way into her consciousness and pulled her whole thought process off course. Just like the time Harley watered the plants while Ivy was up the river. She forgot to open the curtains, and every plant in the greenhouse had grown DOWN instead of UP, stretching towards the little shaft of sunlight coming in under the door. Like those noble stems and stalks, she had been pulled in the wrong direction entirely, she was supposed to be reconnecting with her native and natural hatred of the human race.

She switched to a different photo. Spiky Arbutus berries ripened into a deep Harley-esque red, and an extreme close up of dew drops condensed on a pair of tulips. Two-

lips. Harvey and his little *joke*, why did she ever laugh at that. Why did she ever encourage him... because it felt good? Because it tickled? How they got inside. The pair of them. The flea beetle and the root maggot. It was really quite simple. She was a goddess. The idea of a goddess not getting what she wanted was nonsensical. Yet she was reduced to a state of shocked bewilderment when she found Harley and Harvey were both available to her—not even surprise but *shock*. She had come to *expect* disappointment. To expect *failure*. That's what those two had brought her to.

Now, clearly, if she – a goddess – was not getting what she wanted, had not been getting what she wanted for so long and with such frequency that she'd come to expect disappointment, then she wasn't wanting the right things. Nature had endowed her with whatever she needed to get what she wanted. She had the lure to enslave any man she pleased, yet this *perversion* had formed in her where she *wanted to win a man without using it*. That was sick. It was *perverse*. He had done this to her. He had perverted her natural gift to the point where she couldn't get any satisfaction from a besotted love slave kneeling at her feet. No! She wanted the free-given love of a man who was surprised when she was rational and a woman who was amazed she was nice!

Ivy let out a long, labored breath, as if she'd been running up stairs.

It was monstrous.

It was monstrous.

It was monstrous.

She had to fix this.

Had to.

Nature had been messed with. Messed with to the point where it no longer worked. That's what people did! Of course that's what happened. It's what people did. They fucked up nature. She hated people. Hated them, and this was why. This was a perfect illustration of—This was bigger than Harley and Harvey—Bigger than Batman and Joker—It was all of them—All of them.

People

Had

To go.

Eddie sat looking through the delivery menus available to him. Vics had added Gridiron Mike to the stack, a sports bar that had takeout but did not deliver. It didn't take an Edward Nigma to solve that riddle: Mike was a bookie and Vics was happy to pick up an order in person so he could place a bet while he was there. That was fine. He wouldn't want Vics getting so rich from a steady diet of bribes that he could pick and choose which ones he wanted to take. A gambling habit seemed like just the thing.

"We'll give these a try," he said, circling a few items on the menu. "Remember, two portions of everything tonight. I'm expecting a guest."

"She finally said yes?" Saul asked, surprised. For the last few days when he brought Patient Isley the phone for her photo-gardening, he was told to extend an invitation

from Patient Nigma to join him for dinner. And every day when she handed it back, she told him to tell Patient Nigma where he could stick his invitations.

"Tonight's culinary masterpiece from the Arkham kitchens," Eddie announced, reaching into his desk and waving a memo with a flourish. "Pea soup, oatmeal rissoles and potato substitute, Fig Newton. I can only surmise another one of those 'Victory recipes' Great Grandma Arkham held onto from when German U-boats were blockading the British Isles. Order two portions of everything, Vics, she'll say yes tonight."

Vics nodded, turned to go, paused at the door, turned back, shifted his weight, and bit his lip.

"Something you want to say?" Eddie guessed.

"Well it's just that... Patient Isley is nice to look at, Mr. Nigma, don't get me wrong, but... there's a *reason* there's six pages on her in the Employee Handbook."

"Meaning you wouldn't want me to fall under her spell and put an end to this very nice stream of income you enjoy doing me favors. Don't worry your pretty little head, Mr. Vics, my interest in Pamela Isley is about as far from romantic as you can get and still be the same species. I'd have a go at the flytrap before I'd touch the lady herself."

"I've heard you call her 'Blossom,'" Vics said.

"Oh that," Eddie laughed. "That's how I thought of her, just in my own head, during the war with Falcone. Like a code name, when I was planning. 'Blossom' will take the warehouse. It's an anagram, for Mob Loss. Nifty that!"

Vics smiled like he wasn't convinced. "Then why dinner?" he asked.

Eddie's lips pursed into a thin peevish crease.

"Six pages in the handbook, you say?"

Vics nodded. "That's more than anybody except Joker," he added.

"Let me explain Dr. Pamela 'Poison Ivy' Isley, Ph.D. to you, Mr. Vics, better than any of the over-accredited morons who wrote those six pages can ever do, if they'd stoop to speaking to you instead of hiding behind the 'Employee Handbook.' She likes to think of herself as a goddess. She's not a goddess, she's a scientist. Observe, draw conclusions, test, collect data, draw more conclusions. It's a nice little way of thinking, if you're not smart enough for puzzles. Logic, scientific method, it gets the job done. Eventually. And our Pammy has amassed quite a lot of data over the years, then this war with Falcone dumped a lot more on her, faster than she could take it in. She's sifting through it now. It's past the point where even she can ignore it. The conclusions are there, they're forming right in front of her, clear as day, and she's got to either face them... or run like hell." Eddie paused his dissertation when he heard a trill of musical notes. He glanced at Vics and saw his head at an odd angle, facing his hand at an odder angle, and poorly concealed within his hand, a phone. "Mr. Vics, are you playing Fruit Ninja?" Eddie asked peevishly.

"Angry Birds," said Vics.

"You can go. Dinner for two from Gridiron Mike's."

Vics left, and Eddie silently reexamined his motives. He certainly didn't have any tender feelings for Ivy, he didn't even like her much. But she had done everything he asked during the war, put her considerable powers at his disposal, and did it with an amazing lack of backtalk and bullshit, considering. There was a certain obligation. *His war* had presented her with a set of circumstances that opened her up to, for lack of a

better word, soul-searching, and he could guess where it was leading. This solitude in her Shaolin Temple. She'd been in stasis for years, a stubbornly unchanging person whose life changed around her, until now—largely as a result of his war—she was at a place where she couldn't do that anymore. She had to go forward, or back.

She was Ivy, she would go back. It's why scientific method was only fit for minds that weren't up to the wonder of puzzles. What had the scientist learned from all that data she'd been amassing? Answer: With plants, she knew where she was. Follow steps A through E with tulips and daffodils and hyacinths, they bloom. Let loose with the pheromones, men fall her feet. Time after time, trial after trial, the theory holds. Daffodils bloom, men fall at her feet. Tulips bloom, men open their wallets. Hyacinths bloom, men write her sonnets. She knows what she's good at. She also knows what she sucks at. Stray from that sure process with plants and men, and what was the result? Answer: Bad decision-making, bad karma and bad luck screwed it up for her time after time, trial after trial. She would never see the *possibilities* of the unknown before her, she would see only dismal projections based on a flawed understanding of the past. People who dealt in periods and not question marks, you had to wonder how they found the strength to get up in the morning.

In any case, it would cost him nothing but a few Falcone dollars to have her to dinner a few times a week, talk to her like a fellow seeker in this Shaolin retreat, and sniff out whatever loony plan her panicked retreat was hatching.

What then? an inner voice asked. When the riddle of Poison Ivy was solved, what would he do then? Did he care if she was self-destructive? Did he care if she was Gotham-destructive? Did he merely want to know, or if he found she was plotting something truly nasty, would he intervene?

One Week Ago

Ivy sat on the edge of her cot, her foot tapping impatiently, her fingers locked to prevent their doing the same. Of all the ways Nigma unnerved her, this waiting for Vics to bring her to his cell for dinner was the worst. It felt like a date. It felt like *waiting to be being picked up* for a date—something she had done so rarely in her life, the details of each time were magnified into exponential significance. In high school she was awkward, a late-bloomer physically, a non-bloomer socially. She had rewritten those memories to an extent, but the forgotten truths still shaped her: She was a trainwreck with her own species, unable to work up an interest in would-be friends or the things they cared about, storming off when they didn't find plants as fascinating as she did. Waiting for those early dates was done in the greenhouse, clinging to the flowers that appreciated her, using them to fortify herself before going out among the humans who never would. Then came college. Meeting here or there for an outing was more common than waiting to be picked up at her dorm—until she discovered her pheromones and her life changed forever. Waiting for a summoned slave to arrive was nothing like waiting for a date. Then there was Harvey. He picked her up a few times, but even they met more often at a hotel near the courthouse, handy for a matinee or to meet for a quick drink... Harvey. He wasn't a Rogue then; he was a district attorney,

in Gaia's name. So there was no reason, absolutely none, for *Nigma* to be reminding her of that one meaningless episode in her life.

But he was. From that first dinner, he was hitting that *Harvey* nerve in ways she found hard to understand. He said... He said she was his MVP in the war against *Falcone*, and he appreciated all she'd done. Ivy didn't know what to make of that, but rather than make her feel like a social reject when she didn't know what to say, he explained that MVP stood for Most Valuable Player (which she knew) except at the place he ordered dinner from, where it stood for Most Valuable Potato... *Skins*. Ivy tried *very hard* to give that revolting bit of butt-scratching man-brain stupidity the scowl it so richly deserved, but the impish little frown that *Nigma* was already giving it was just too... funny. She found she was unable to give it or him the scowl they deserved and she laughed instead, in spite of herself.

Then he asked how she was doing, not as a riddle he planned to answer but as an actual question. She wasn't sure what to make of that either, so for lack of anything else to say, she told him about the flowers she'd picked out in her latest photo-gardening sessions. He seemed to listen (which was the strangest thing so far) while he opened up the dinner cartons.

"Now I'm pretty sure you eat meat," he said, pointing to her sagely. "So I got a few options: chicken strips, fried shrimp, and if bread is allowed, the bacon cheeseburger is a religious experience."

Ivy couldn't believe it.

"Everyone assumes I'm vegetarian," she said, reaching for the shrimp.

"'Everyone' can be pretty dumb, haven't you noticed?" Eddie answered, taking a burger. "I mean, it seems pretty obvious: if you love the plants so much, you wouldn't want to chow down on them. You'd want to take revenge on mmmm mmmmmm you want revenge on this vicious cow that ate them. Seriously, Pammy, this is a good burger. You've got to try this."

She did try it, and if it wasn't exactly a religious experience, it was a very good burger. They spent a few minutes discussing the butter and egg that made up for the wheat flour in the hamburger bun. There was sugar too of course, but that didn't count because sugarcane was a nasty ill-tempered plant—in Eddie's view. When she asked how he came to such a conclusion (not stopping to wonder why she was playing along with this idiocy), he said it was because it was jealous. *Honey*, after all, is made from *flowers*—this said with an exaggerated grin to show he knew he was laying it on thick. It was quite... odd. He was *funny*, he was *good company*, and it was *all quite odd*.

When he invited her again a few nights later, Ivy assumed he was bored with Arkham solitude. When he invited her again, she assumed he was lonely. Now he'd invited her again, and Ivy was beginning to think—ludicrous as it sounded—she was beginning to wonder if his interest might be more personal.

Was it possible? Apart from a greened one night stand (that he seemed to resent afterwards), he'd never shown the slightest interest in her as a woman. It was true they worked well together during the war, and he brought the war up a lot... Oh! And then there was the cheesecake. The first night, while their fellow Arkhamites dined on meatless rissoles and a Fig Newton, Eddie provided a slab of chocolate fudge with walnuts that Gridiron Mike dubbed "The First and Ten" (for the ten pounds you were sure to gain if you ate it, Ivy thought, but she nibbled a piece just to be nice.) The next

meal he ordered from Squids, and dessert was their famous red velvet cake. The last dinner it was toffee swirl cheesecake, which she managed to avoid entirely until it was time to go back to her room. She was halfway to the door when he said "Oh wait, you didn't touch your—Here, take it with you" and without even thinking she whirled on him and shrieked "In Gaia's name, Eddie, look at me! Do I LOOK like I go around scarfing down thousand-calorie slabs of cheesecake three times a week?"

He... looked at her body. She had *told* him to and he did. He was obviously taken aback so he looked, and then he kept looking. His eyes darted around a lot at first and then they kind of... *settled* on her abs. Her abs where not an ounce of fat could be seen, and she knew that, and now he did too. He admitted that no, she did not look like she went around scarfing cheesecake on a regular basis, and there was, perhaps, a hint, or more than a hint, of admiration in his tone.

What if it was true? WHAT PESTS PEOPLE WERE! Here she was voluntarily staying in Arkham to keep away from Harvey and Harley, Darth Distraction and Ditz Diversion, and now this *Nigma* came along.

Although...

Although...

It was a simple rule of plant husbandry, if you have three stems growing in a line, planted at the same time in the same soil, enjoying the same water and sunlight, and one grows taller and hardier than the others, you should cultivate the superior strain. She had shut herself away from Harley and Harvey, and neither of them came looking for her. She turned away Nigma numerous times, but he kept at her and kept at her until she started accepting his invitations. As a plant, he was taller, hardier and more robust than any other stem sprouting from the same seeds. His buds were beginning to flower when the others were not.

"Patient Isley, I will be deactivating the outer lock shield in ten seconds..."

She would feel him out tonight.

"Please move to the back wall of your cell and stand with both hands in clear view..."

And if he really did seem interested,

"Arms extended, palms in contact with the wall."

She would know how to proceed.

This was Robotic Keg Tying (aka 'going to be tricky') but a puzzle that wasn't Robotic Keg Tying wasn't worth doing.

Hence the flower. It cost him \$200 and the last filament of credibility he had left with Saul Vics. The guard was now *convinced* Eddie was smitten with Poison Ivy, but Vics's confidence was a queen-side rook pawn Eddie was ready to sacrifice. (Note to self: Do not trade rook pawns with Bane in the future) The confidence of henchmen was a luxury. Getting Ivy to let her hair down, that was a necessity. Hence...

"A freesia! It's a freesia! How? How? Where did you come from, you beautiful freesia alba?"

Eddie almost said “Good evening, Pamela” but seeing that she hadn’t registered anything in the room besides the flower, he decided to take another approach.

“Good evening, Edward. Thank you for inviting me,” he said, stepping to his own left and addressing his right shoulder. “Good evening, Pamela, nice to see you to. Thank you so much for coming,” he replied, hopping right and facing his last position. “I hope you’re hungry. *Famished, and I must say you’re looking well. Oh look, there’s a freesia on the table. How pretty.*’ I hoped you’d think so. I got it just for... you.”

He stopped, finally, because she was staring at him.

“Joke,” he explained. “Because you came right in without—never mind. The flower’s a bribe, because I need a favor. Don’t get too excited, it’s just for tonight.”

“The flower or the favor?” Ivy asked, an artificial lightness in her voice as she turned back to the freesia and stroked its petals.

“Both. The flower goes home with Vics as soon as we’re done eating.”

“I’ll make sure it’s watered properly before I go,” she said... again too casually, absorbed with the plant and not turning to look at him as she said, “And the favor?”

“I’m celebrating. Tonight. It’s an anniversary I like to commemorate, and I splurged on a very good bottle of Glenundromm. You have that freakazoid metabolism that isn’t affected by alcohol unless you let it. I want you to let it tonight, because this is the best scotch money can buy. It’s not cheap out there, getting it in here is like, we’re getting into Bruce Wayne territory. To drink it down and not let it affect you would be—”

“Drue.”

Eddie blinked.

“Was that an anagram?” he asked.

“Yes. Rude,” she said earnestly.

“You know that’s not a word, right?”

“You’re an ass, Nigma, pour the whisky.”

The meal began, and of course he had to explain what exactly he was celebrating. He combined the details from three of his early Batman routs, fudged the date of the first time Batman failed to solve a riddle and declared today the anniversary. Ivy naturally responded with a story of her first victory over the Bat, and the time passed very pleasantly. After dinner, more than half the scotch remained and neither had put a dent in their tales of criminal victories. Ivy edited Selina out of her visit to the Sinister Citadel; Eddie omitted her from his theft of the Einstein Notebooks. Both narratives became less tethered to the actual facts of the events as the liquid in the bottle dipped below the one-third mark, though Eddie sobered up considerably when Ivy told—and embellished considerably—the episode of her greening the Wayne Foundation board. Her head rocked back with a hoarse, high pitched laugh and then rolled to the side as she looked at him. The hoarse laugh became a giggle, then a whinny, then a snort. “Waaaaaay-Waynewaynewaynewaynewayne,” she recited deliriously, then hinted in a conspiratorial whisper at ‘things she would never tell Selina.’ She giggle-snorted-whinnied again, but Eddie said nothing. The gut punch of the name was enough to restore his focus, and as soon as it was his turn, he steered into the more recent victories—their most recent, in fact, his and hers... The War.

Ivy’s eyes were glassy as she peered at him, as if it took effort to follow what all he was saying. The war, yes, she was staying with Harvey certainly (though she never

would have described it as ‘playing house’ the way Eddie had)... The day he came over with Harley to send her to Philly for Mollatova... then there was something about the dinner they’d eaten.

“Sports bars are weird,” Eddie said with the sophism of a drunk. “Give weird names to all their food. Like that sandwich you had tonight, anywhere else it’s called a Monte Cristo or a Croque-monsieur. Order it from Mike’s, it’s a Hail Mary Pass. You know what that is, Pammy? Hail Mary pass? It’s when you’re losing, and there’s only two seconds on the clock. ‘ts the last play of the game, and you are going to lose. And in a last act of desperation the quarter back throws a long, long, loooong forward pass. Hail Mary pass—and depending on who you ask, it’s called that because you’ve got time to say a Hail Mary while the ball is in the air, or because it would take an act of God for that ball to be caught and score your points to win the game.”

The glassy eyes cleared a little, and Ivy adjusted in her low chair, pulling herself a bit closer to Eddie, intentionally or not.

“What are you getting at?” she slurred.

“I know what you’re doing,” he said with sudden, sobering lucidity. “And it’s a Hail Mary Pass. You’re very good at convincing yourself that you’re happy when you’re not, Pamela. And you’re very *bad* at noticing when you actually *are happy*. You had a good thing during the war, a very good thing, and some screwy little part of you knows it, and knows it means the end of crazy narcis-narcisisisicily—that’s a hard word to say. But screwy little part of you knows it’s the end of crazy leafy-bitch. And whole Shaolowowin Temple thing you’re doing, the whole plot you’re cooking in your Shaolaol, that is the crazy leaf bitch’s Hail Mary pass.”

He nodded emphatically. And Ivy blinked.

“I did have it good during the war,” she declared, just as emphatically as he had.

“Damn right,” he said, the drunken satisfaction at hearing his argument echoed blotting out everything else, like the significance of Ivy being next to him. Closer than he realized, *much* closer than he realized. Cool, green, only slightly glassy eyes peering into his. Fingers on his collar pulling his face into hers, and a soft but resolute mouth parting his trembling lips. There was no scent of honeysuckle or leafy jungle matrix, only Glenundromm and the faintest taste of a Monte Cristo sandwich Mike’s Gridiron called a Hail Mary Pass. Eddie bent her head back across his arm, wrapped his other around her waist, and kissed her back.

CHAPTER 4: FRENEMIES

Batman's razor-focus predated Batman himself. It was the first skill Bruce mastered in the dojo, sensing when his anger would be useful and when it would impede his technique. When it was useful, he would tap it; when it wasn't, he blocked it out. He found the discipline invaluable when he returned to Gotham. Bruce Wayne's life was complex and multifaceted, there was more to balance and manage than the fury he brought to the mat, and when he acted as Batman, the disciplined focus served him well.

In Playa Mansa, for instance, he thought only of the Water Demons, the Triad who conjured them, and the kryptonite-infused kelp that left Superman helpless against both. He spent his layover at the Watchtower writing up a log entry on the incident, and it was only when he returned to the cave, when he stepped off the transporter and onto the hard stone floor, that he remembered Selina would be home. He bypassed Workstation One on the way to the costume vault. Another night, he might have checked to see that the log transmitted from the Watchtower had been properly received and indexed, but there was no reason to think it wouldn't be. He shed his costume, donned the kimono that had been Selina's gift, and hurried up the stairs to the manor—until he reached the wine racks positioned immediately inside the clock passage.

They were camouflage originally. In the early days when the Batcave was little more than an in-progress workshop, when he strained to foresee and provide for every possible eventuality. If someone stumbled onto the clock opening by accident, they would see nothing but a row of empty wine racks and dismiss it as a long-abandoned wine cellar... The idea was soon abandoned, but passing the empty racks now did give him an idea. Straining to foresee and provide for every possible eventuality was not a skill from the dojo; it was a habit he'd picked up from Alfred. Detouring through the kitchen, he found a bottle of Pouilly-Fuisse chilling in the refrigerator. He grabbed it and headed to the bedroom. Even with the time difference, Selina would be back from her prowl. If she was asleep, no harm done, but he was sure she would still be awake. For once, Bruce and Selina would have the homecoming Batman and Catwoman so often denied them.

At least, that was his thought until he reached the bedroom. Then it was as if a spirit-form of Batman stood beside him, pushed him aside as clearly as if a physical entity was taking the bottle from his hand and stepping forward in his place. It wasn't a romantic impulse, it was... an instinct. A deeply ingrained instinct that said this was something for Batman to handle.

He looked. Selina was seated in the bed, her knees up, reading a magazine. Nothing about her said "Catwoman." She wore a silk camisole and tap pants – apricot, not even a Catwoman color. Yet his instincts kicked in, he felt every inch of his body on hyper-alert as if he had come upon a rogue.

"Welcome home, Kitten," he managed, fighting to keep the gravel out of his voice and overcompensating with a foppish lilt.

Catwoman didn't notice the oddity in his manner. She tossed her magazine aside, launched at him with a girlish squeal, kissed him, pressed against him, kissed again, readjusted, kissed... and started muttering into the kiss that there was something *cold*... broke the kiss, realized she'd been pressing her chest into a chilled bottle of wine, giggled like a good sport who just lost a snowball fight, and led him back towards the bed.

Or rather, Selina did those things.

"I missed you so much," she cooed.

Not Catwoman. Selina.

"I missed you too," he said, trying to figure out *what he was responding to*. Was it just that she'd been gone for a few weeks? They spoke on the phone, but he hadn't seen her. If his mental image was more Selina and less Cat, and now here he was suddenly confronted by an original that was more Catwoman than he remembered... A dubious theory, since Bruce was pretty sure that when his mental image erred, it was in the other direction, more Cat and less Selina. But she was home and happy to see him. He was prepared to accept a dubious theory.

Love making, backrubs and cuddling co-mingled with updates on European art thefts, a counterfeiting operation shut down in Chinatown, and a Black Triad learning the hard way that coming at the Justice League with Water Demons is not something you even want to consider.

Dozing followed, and Bruce's dreaming mind returned to the problem his waking self had abandoned: what in that first glimpse of Selina was so evocative of the long ago criminal Catwoman? He saw himself at the wheel of a third or fourth year Batmobile, returning to the cave, writing up the log on a second generation operating system... Going to a costume vault with no pressed kimono waiting for him, removing Mark III body armor and changing into the sweater and trousers he'd worn that afternoon... Climbing the stairs to the manor, climbing the stairs to the bedroom—and coming to a screeching halt in the doorway as he saw a fully costumed Catwoman posing on his bed like some Delacroix odalisque.

"Ah, the man at last," she purred. "What hours you playboys keep, I've been waiting forever. Almost gave you up as a lost cause. But since you did manage to get here, I heard a whisper that you like Van Gogh. A buyer has fallen through—well, not strictly true, Luthor commissioned the theft, but then he crossed me, so now he doesn't get it." She stuck out her tongue on the last, and Bruce felt... conflicted. Her eyes shone and sparked and danced with vengeful excitement as she continued. "I figure the best way to stick it to him is to offer it to someone he really hates."

Her cheeks warmed with delighted anticipation...

"And Superman isn't likely to buy a stolen painting, so it's your lucky day if you want it."

And her nipples were hard.

"Oh Bruce, it will absolutely kill him," she said, rolling onto her back, her costume fading away to reveal the naked body he knew, with only the mask remaining, seeming to merge into her skin... and the claws, no longer connected to gloves but growing naturally from her fingers, digging into the bed the way her nails sometimes did during sex. "How he hates you..." Her voice gurgled wickedly at the thought. "And the painting *he wants* will be *yours*."

Water Demons intruded, and the dream dissolved into a methodical rearrangement of the Playa Mansa affair, his thoughts cementing certain parallels he'd noticed to past demonic threats and recapitulating the strategy that had been so effective against them. An abbreviated Crime Alley dream followed that, and he awoke as he often did with only the vaguest recollection of any of his dreams and no desire to examine the wispy cobwebs for insight. Selina was still asleep. He caressed her calf briefly as he turned to get out of the bed... when he his eye fell on the magazine she'd been reading when he came home. The whole thing—puzzle and solution—flashed in his mind with crystal clarity. She had looked *villainous*. Wickedly, savagely villainous... No, not savagely, it much more thoughtful and controlled than that... *Vengefully*, that was it. The heat was long passed, and it was the cool, calculating reprisal she was thinking on.

He turned back to the bed and watched her sleeping. The target of those villainous machinations was presumably DEMON, and Bruce thought ruefully of her words before she'd left: "If you get jealous of me and Ra's, we're going to be getting into some very weird territory."

No weirder than if I start feeling sorry for him, he thought.

Eddie sat before the food tray Saul Vics had placed before him as he had every morning since that last Poison Ivy dinner, waiting, fingers interlaced, as if expecting it to speak. Monday morning at Arkham meant rolled oats cereal, milk and sugar, bread and butter, grapefruit juice, and coffee. Unchanged since 1971. The Board of Trustees did not like change. They never removed 'Asylum' from the name. It was a perfectly good word, they said, meaning refuge or sanctuary. If there were old-fashioned connotations of horror house loony bins from an earlier time, there were even older connotations as an inviolable place of safety—a place of safety offered to outlaws and criminals, no less. As such, it was the best possible term for the position Arkham occupied in the Gotham ecosystem. Naturally, an institution so resistant to meaningless cosmetic change was even more resistant when it came to its operations. Monday morning breakfast meant rolled oats cereal, milk and sugar, bread and butter, etc, unchanged since 1971.

Vics stood by, though he had no need to remain. Patients in special circumstance isolation (i.e. Rogues not in the FTRP) were brought meals in their cells because of the heightened risk any time they left those cells. They were not considered at-risk themselves and did not require supervision while they ate. But Vics delivered Patient Nigma's tray last precisely so he could stay. Previously, he did it so he could receive Nigma's instructions for the day. Since the Poison Ivy incident, he stayed because—well, obviously, because there was a great deal to be said. He didn't think he should be the first to speak, however.

Apparently neither did Nigma.

Nor did the pat of butter he was staring at as if he expected it to apologize.

The silence continued.

Tense and unbearable to a man like Vics who had never locked eyes with Batman in January.

Gratingly obstinate to a man like Nigma who had.

He was the injured party. He had *not* been greened. He might have been a little drunk, but his judgment had been no worse than that of a thousand others in bars and nightclubs that same night who had all been allowed to complete their alcohol-fueled misadventures without a pair of guards in riot gear storming into the room and tearing them apart. He was a cerebral man whose chief pleasures were intellectual. He enjoyed sex, but he did not assign it undue importance. Nevertheless, he'd had a woman *literally ripped from his arms*. Before an item of clothing came off, before anybody reached under the clothing still on—he *was* the injured party! Vics may have meant well, and Eddie wished he could be a little more the true Arkham loony and fail to see that. He would like to be less rational, blame Vics for the *act* and not care that the stupid ass thought he was rescuing Eddie from a pheromone-induced 'worse than death.'

Unfortunately, he did see it. He could see clearly the way it looked to Vics: Eddie was about to become the boss in name only, merely a functionary and mouthpiece for Queen Chlorophyll. The money would be the same, for a while, but the orders would really be coming from Ivy. Even Vics knew that meant disaster sooner or later. Ivy wasn't a long game player. Even when she wasn't in the emotional throes of 'soul-searching,' she would only go so long before she let her passions get the best of her. She'd act without considering the other guy's move in response. Eddie had seen enough of her tactics to know she planned in a straight line, in great detail along the path she expected things to follow but becoming murkier the farther she strayed from that path. When she branched out with 'what ifs'—if Batman intervened at this point instead of another, if the CEO's wife came to the door instead of the butler, etc.—her foresight and responses became murky. The further you got from her preferred path, the more she fell back on a vaguely defined sense that she could always use her attack plants and pheromones. At Arkham, systems were in place to prevent her using those abilities, and rather than take that as a delightful *challenge*, an exhilarating puzzle to be solved, she beat her head against it over and over.

So, yes, if Ivy took over as Queen Rogue, it would mean an end for The Saul Vics gravy train, and Eddie could understand how Vics wouldn't want that. But he had not been greened! He was in complete control of himself, and for Vics to expect a *reward* for both himself and his colleague—for ripping the woman out of his arms—No! He had no intention of paying Vics, not one penny. He had no intention of reimbursing him the \$500 he'd paid to Guard Kreng either, and he wasn't paying anyone for their silence. They were all—Vics, Kreng, Ivy and Nigma himself—bound in an undeclared mutual destruction pact. None of them could rat out the others without bringing unwanted consequences on themselves. Eddie had no desire to get the guards fired, end the bribery underground, and be imprisoned at Arkham with some draconian special measures without the FTRP on hand for easy release whenever he wanted it. So he would stay silent.

But he would not—repeat: he *would not*, New Holdout, Wound Hotel, Ed Howl Until—resume a cordial business relationship with Saul Vics until he received an apology. He didn't expect tears or even a handshake, but he did expect Vics to man up, state unambiguously how he'd misjudged the situation, and arrange another meeting with Ivy. There was no telling what was going on in that screwed up head of

hers since their kiss had been so rudely interrupted. Vics and his associate had somehow, without involving the Arkham administrators, fixed it so Nigma and Ivy were never admitted to the common room on the same day, or even when the same guards were on staff. He hadn't even been able to find out when her sessions with Dr. Bartholomew were scheduled, so there was no chance of getting a message through whoever had the appointment before or after.

On the one hand, this new situation had given Eddie time to devote himself fully to his plan for the Post-War Riddler's crime wave, which would certainly cement his position as King Rogue. He'd made more progress in the last week than in the previous eight. Nevertheless, somewhere in the bowels of Arkham a weed was growing, and if he didn't find some way to talk to it, there was no telling what it might cog up, strangle, poison or suffocate.

Long before Selina came to the manor, Alfred learned that the a costumed nightlife brings a particular schedule and that the passionate and volatile personalities who choose such a life can react unpredictably when that schedule is altered, as for an extended trip abroad, and then recalibrated again on their return. He knew better than to enter the Wayne bedroom the morning after Selina's return from Europe. He simply placed one of Master Bruce's sensors on the wall in the Blue Room which shared a wall with the master bath. When it detected water flowing through the pipe, it signaled him in the kitchen. Judging that it was Master Bruce who was up, he prepared a tray with a carafe of juice, one glass, and the morning newspaper. Sure enough, he was just reaching the top of the stairs as Master Bruce was entering the hall and closing the bedroom door behind him.

"Selina's still asleep," he said, taking the juice from the tray. "Best not to disturb her. I'm going for a run, then I'll work out in the cave for an hour or so, and we'll get her up then."

It was nearly two hours later when he returned. Coming from the cave, bruised and perspiring after a punishing session on Zogger, he felt more like 'Batman returning from patrol' than he had on the previous night. Perhaps that's why the moment struck him so forcefully as he stepped into the bedroom and, standing on virtually the same spot as the night before, he saw Selina in the bed in virtually the same position. Again she was awake and reading, this time paging through the tablet Alfred programmed to digest the morning news.

"Ah, there you are," she said, stretching—a feline stretch, but by now Bruce knew it wasn't that creating the powerful aura of 'Catwoman' around her.

"You're waiting to spring something on me," he grveled. And she laughed.

"Not exactly. More like I'm waiting for you to spring something on me," she said, turning the tablet around to display yesterday's Post cover depicting a heavily photoshopped Cognitive Dissonance. "When were you going to tell me about her?"

He grunted.

"Now don't get me wrong, I never expected to be the only female to break a law in this town, but rrrrrreally now." She raised an eyebrow. "Just look where she has her hands."

It was obvious that she wasn't serious, and it was also obvious that, not having an opening to tease him this way in years, she was having a ball. For her enjoyment as much as his, he responded the way he used to: by ignoring all subtext and innuendo.

"She's not bad," he said crisply. "Her abilities as a thief are quite modest, so she has to be smart choosing her targets. In each case she's found a place with average or below-average security."

"Making her appear much better than she is," Selina said, completing the thought. "Doesn't explain how she got away from you and Batgirl. This nonsense on the cover is creative license, I know; they didn't even get the chest emblem right," she said pointing to the unconscious Batman in the cover image and letting her own fingers flutter over her favorite spot where the oval should be. "But there were two encounters, one with you and one with BG. I got that straight from Gordon."

Bruce's eyes flickered at the name, and Selina's answered *I'll tell you later* as if he'd said it out loud.

"Her 'escapes' were luck," he said. "Or else incredibly smart stage management. Neither Batgirl nor I had an encounter with her. We were each in pursuit of another felon, less colorful felons. The witnesses—and in my case, the Post reporter who hacked the traffic camera—assumed we were there for the costumed, masked figure."

"Who got away," Selina said thoughtfully. "Damn, that is smart. That is *smart*."

"I was preventing the head of that counterfeiting ring from murdering the sculptor who made the counterfeit plates," Bruce went on. "Batgirl was working on a smuggling operation in the garment district. There was a crate of blouses with drugs sewn into the beading. She couldn't let that out of her sight to pursue Cognitive Dissonance."

"Oh of course, I understand your priorities," Selina said quickly. "I would have taken advantage of them too—to *escape*, but not to promote myself as Bat-worthy in the press. That's... *She's* really good."

"It probably wasn't planned, Selina. Most criminals are simply not that smart. That's why they become criminals in the first place. They—"

"This lady *is* smart, Bruce. Did you even see this picture. Look at this, look at what the Post did to her, with the bunny ears and that silly outfit. That's why she called herself Cognitive Dissonance, because she knew those morons would turn her into something like this. It's an elegant joke. An elegant and very intellectual joke. You don't think someone capable of *that* would be up to timing her crimes so she'd be a low priority."

"And therefore free to show up where the action is, be seen and mistaken for someone 'cape-worthy,'" he murmured, approaching the bed to have a better look at the image on the tablet. He considered it in light of the 'joke' as Selina interpreted it. "Perhaps," he said. He wasn't convinced, but if she was right, if Cognitive Dissonance was *that* media-savvy, then there could be something more going on. The thefts and the faux-encounters could be more than they seemed. He would grab a quick shower, then go back down to the cave—he *and Selina* would go back down to the cave—and go

over the case together. The corner of his lip twitched at the thought, that perspective she brought to a case, he was *glad* to have her home.

He turned to say so but the words froze on his lips and the thought flew from his mind as he saw her, saw the eyes looking up into his. She had been studying him studying the picture but...

"You notice anything else about her?" she asked.

...and the way she asked. That voice, those eyes and that voice. Was she jealous? No, that was preposterous, but there was *something* about her. What was it about this subject that made her seem so...

"I noted the similarity to your mask," he said cautiously. "And her eye make-up is similar to yours, enhancing the resemblance."

"She's not trying to look like me. It's just the nicest style of mask she knows. And the way I make up my eyes for the mask is also the way she knows, from seeing me up close a number times."

He looked down at the picture again in light of this new information and scrutinized the facial features that were visible.

"It's Doris," he breathed at the same instant Selina said it.

"And suddenly the Post angle snaps into focus," she said sweetly. "When Doris and Eddie were together, they went to the Iceberg and she came to the parties, but she was never a Rogue. She was never even a henchwench. She was a nice ordinary girl, a civilian who never did anything 'bad' – except once."

"Helping you and the others strike back at the media."

"Precisely," Selina purred. "The Post's screwy attitude towards women and how they get everything wrong because of it is—"

"Is the aspect of Rogue Life she knows," Bruce interjected, his mind snapping at the insight and beginning to race ahead with the implications.

"I think it's more than that," Selina said, recognizing Batman's mind about to race off in a crimefighting direction and trying to catch the train before it left the station. "It's not just that the press is her one insight to Rogue life, it's that she got a little tingle being bad—maybe not a 'little' one. And a few weeks later, she and Eddie had split. I never put it together before, but now it seems so obvious. She must be like those people who have a few drinks in college, enjoy it a little too much, figure they've got a predisposition to alcoholism and swear off it forever."

"And now she's 'off the wagon,'" Bruce said grimly.

"Eddie's been miserable since they split. Maybe she has too."

"But if what you're saying is right, and she's the one who ended it—"

"Bruce, you and I could have gotten together a lot sooner than we did. Falconi Jewelers, to name but once. Don't tell me you never thought about it after: What if I did this, what if I hadn't said that... Did I make a horrible mistake?"

"Nigma's performance in the war was impressive," Bruce admitted.

"Yes, the war," she said, that glint of Cat from the night before beginning to gleam in her eyes.

"If she did have regrets, and then saw what the media picked up of his marshalling the rogues... Decided to come back... Yes, it's possible... And all Nigma's birthdays come at once."

“Or they *would*,” came a voice from the past—and a glimmer of the Bat sparked instinctively in response. It was a dark voice, a dangerous voice, the voice of the villainess who recognized no law, commandment or lawman that stood between her and the object of her passion. “All his birthdays would come at once... *if* he hadn’t crossed me,” she said.

Bruce’s jaw stiffed, the precursor to a shift that was instantaneous and involuntarily. His entire demeanor changed suddenly and abruptly, the jaw clenching, the eyes darkening, and his whole body seeming to grow denser.

“**What are you talking about?**” Batman asked in the tone used for criminals planning some dastardly plot.

“You know very well what I’m talking about,” the unmasked Catwoman answered in a low, pleased, seductive drawl. “The *war*... *Bane*... You *know* what I’m talking about. I said I was a patient cat; I am. I said I would wait, I did. And now Fate, friend of cats, has laid the key to his happiness at my feet. Doris is back. Suited up to play, as he put it. He betrayed my friendship, betrayed my trust. He tried to make trouble between us. And now... he is going... to *pay*.”

The last time Oswald saw Catwoman she was upside down—or so she appeared to him, strung up by his heels to explain the part he’d played in the destruction of Anthony Marcuso’s wedding to Susannah Pelacci. It was considered uncouth in Rogue circles to hold onto such grievances for long, for unless the participants forgave and forgot, nobody would be speaking to anybody and there could be no more fresh quarrels. Nevertheless, Oswald had only attacked the Marcuso-Pelacci wedding in the mistaken belief it was Bruce Wayne marrying Selina Kyle, and he sensed she would be holding onto that particular offense a little longer than usual. It made his present mission somewhat delicate. He had no doubt that the Cobblepot Charm would win her over if he could speak to her face-to-face, but it was rather a lot to expect from voicemail. Yet voicemail was all he encountered, day after day as he tried her cell phone. In desperation, he tried calling Wayne Manor and was told she was out of the country. KWAK!

The choices before him were limited: he could answer Ivy’s summons in person, he could send someone else, or he could wait for Selina’s return. He had sworn never to set foot in that awful place again voluntarily. The others available consisted of Harvey Dent, Matt Hagen, and Harley Quinn—all out of the question considering it was Ivy. She hated Hagen, and if she wanted to see Harvey or Harley, that would have been the message. They might not have a phone number as permanent and publicly accessible as the Iceberg Lounge, but she could have had this Guard Vronska call him, just as she had done, and say ‘Tell Harley to come see me, I have a job for her.’ Instead, she’d asked for Oswald.

He didn’t want to send civilian staff like Sly or Raven. And Nigma had already poached Saul Vics, who had previously been Oswald’s man at Arkham, so there was no way he was risking Talon or Crow. That left waiting for Selina, which he had done. Checking his calendar, he saw that the day had finally come. She was home. He waddled into his office, patted the Golden Finch for luck, and dialed her number.

...: *Meow, meow, ...* she answered. And Oswald could have sung out in joy. Instead, he cleared his throat and put on the smooth, affected tone he reserved for the telephone.

"Selina, my felonious feline, please don't hang up. I know our last meeting was not altogether felicitous, but even so, you were good enough to prevent the Iceberg being blown up. An act that demonstrates a largeness of mind in keeping with your very fine—yes, of course, I will come to the point. It's Eddie. As you know, he's up at Arkham with so many of our friends, and it seems there's been some trou—Hm? Oh, about a week ago, I believe. Our dear Pamela got in touch with me, through one of the guards. It seems she's having trouble getting a message through. She asked that I go see her, and then go see him. Be their go-between, as it were. But I'm afraid my schedule is so very *busy* these days, I simply haven't managed to make the time, and I wondered if—what? You will? Thank you *so much*."

And with that troublesome duty discharged, Oswald scratched it off his list, patted the Golden Finch again, and left his office.

Ivy accepted long ago that, as a class, men were screw-ups. She gave what she thought were very clear instructions, and a greened man in particular must certainly want to please her, yet they often found some way to screw it up. No matter how clear and adamant she thought she had been, no matter how obvious she thought it was which elements were vital and not subject to change, they didn't know what was important, took it upon themselves to make little alternations, and viola: Screw-up! Going through a *chain* of men as she had last week: greening Jervis to bribe some guard other than Saul Vics to call Oswald at the Iceberg... well, she knew there was a good chance something would go wrong. She knew entrusting something like this to not one, not two, but three of the clueless tripods, *somebody* was bound to mess up *something*.

But even so. Selina! How could they possibly—how could they be so incomprehensibly lacking in comprehension that they decided to change that? *Selina!* When a week passed and Oswald never came to see her, she naturally assumed the plan misfired. But now, to be brought to the interview room after a week to receive a visitor, finally after a week of waiting, only to find that visitor was not Oswald but *Selina*? She nearly had a hyperventilative fit right there in the doorway. It was lucky there was a chair waiting for her, and she sat with a heavy plop that in no way evoked the dignity of a goddess. Fortunately, only Selina and Guard Raskin were there to see, neither of whom had an elevated opinion of Ivy's dignity.

"Well, this is unexpected. How nice of you to visit," Ivy said, producing a light smile which Selina mirrored until Guard Raskin left the room. As soon as the door closed behind him, both smiles broadened into the hungry frenemy variety.

"I know, you were expecting Oswald," Selina said casually. "Sucks to be you."

"Maybe... not," Ivy said thoughtfully. "For all your faults, Selina, you're not a man."

"How observant," Selina said, adjusting a bra strap that didn't need it.

“And your very presence here shows that men can’t be trusted to get the job done. Maybe you could help me more than Oswald.”

“Probably,” Selina said, “if I had a reason, little *quid pro quo*. Since you need me to take a message to Eddie for you, maybe you could start by telling me what you did that you can’t get a message to him yourself.”

Ivy’s eyes shot daggers at the mention of a *quid pro quo*, but once she saw that what Selina was asking was something she’d have to give anyway—there was no way to frame the message that didn’t reveal the pertinent facts—she settled into a petulant pout.

“Very well, I suppose that’s not too much to ask,” she said. “As you know, Edward is still the Big Bad since the war, and there are certain perks that go with it. You can guess what the food is like in a place like this, he’s able to order take out, and, well, he is a man. It’s understandable he’d want company... He started asking me to have dinner with him, and now it seems he’s quite smitten with me.”

“Oh Pammy, you didn’t green him again,” Selina said, rubbing her brow.

“Why does everybody always assume that any man who touches me must be greened?” Ivy said indignantly. When Selina offered only a deadpan eye-raise in reply, Ivy deflated a little and astonished her by saying “Yes, okay, I know why.”

Well that’s new, Selina thought, but she hid her surprise well enough that Ivy continued talking, her narration taking on the rambling quality of an inner monologue.

“There may have been a *little* scotch involved, or 4/5 of a bottle, actually. Perhaps 5/6 or 7/8, I don’t know! The point is there was still liquid left in that bottle when I kissed him, we weren’t that drunk.”

“Wait a minute, *you* kissed *him*?” Selina blurted.

“He kissed me right back. I mean, *boy* did he kiss me back. Real Rhett Butler stuff. You know he—”

“TMI, Pammy! Stop right there, some pictures I don’t want in my head. I assume we’re coming up on the reason you now need a go-between to talk to him?”

“Two of these jackbooted guards,” she said through clenched teeth. “Jumping to the same conclusion you did. No man in control of his faculties could possibly be putting his tongue in my mouth of his own free will.”

Selina shook her head reflexively, trying to break free of the mental image. “I asked you not to do that,” she said quietly.

“They burst in, pulled us apart, dragged me back to my room and I haven’t heard from Edward since. The guards—the whole staff, in fact—are being ridiculously uncooperative. Bribes, threats, absolutely nothing works, and if I resort to, you know, the pheromones, it trips all kinds of failsafes. Much as I want to get a message through to the poor besotted fool, I’m not about to go into solitary for months and months to pay for it.”

A softer version of the frenemy smile returned to Selina’s lips.

“Well, Pammy, since the ‘poor besotted fool’ is a friend of mine, I guess I could do you both a favor and take a message to him. What exactly do you want me to say?”

Poison Ivy assumed Selina Kyle, Arkham visitor, who had signed in at the front desk and was issued a visitor's badge, would simply return to the front desk, ask to see Patient Nigma, sign the book again and be escorted back to the visitor's room. She had no way of knowing that as she was being taken back to her cell, Selina was on her way to the parking lot. If she had, she would have assumed the perfidious feline let her down—and would have been all the more astonished when Catwoman returned after nightfall, in full costume and with a loaded loot sack.

It wasn't the first time she'd broken into the fortress that, with so many controls in place to keep the inmates from getting *out*, had an astonishing array of blind spots allowing the unauthorized to get *in*. In the past, her visits were unwelcome, like hauntings. She visited Jervis to punish a hatting, Scarecrow to avenge a dosing with fear gas, and to Joker she had appeared holding Batman's cape and utility belt. She told him that he was right, that she *did* obsess too much on the Dark Knight but no more than Joker did himself, so she had killed him. They were both free!

Tonight's visitation was therefore unique in that the visatee waking in his cot and seeing a cat-eared silhouette stretching ominously across the floor did nothing but smile.

"Lina?" he whispered. "I never expected to see you here. Come in, come on in. What are you doing here, beautiful?"

"Evening, Eddie. I wish I could say that I simply realized I owed you a visit and decided to drop in, but—"

"Has been a while since the war ended," he said, sitting up and fussing with his futon to make an extra sitting space. "What a triumph, faking out Bane with that little game to get him monologuing. Snip! there goes his plans for Arkham—Snip! there goes his plans for the Iceberg. We sure did get 'em, didn't we, 'Lina?"

"Yes," Selina said, showing a bit more teeth in her smile than is usual in a non-tigress. "We did."

"Silly ass didn't belong in Gotham. Outsiders with no panache."

"Like you said, 'Suit up to play, or get the fuck out,'" she said, bypassing the futon and appropriating the seat from his desk.

"Damn right," Eddie nodded.

"Well as I said, I *wish* I could say I was just dropping in, but the truth is I'm here as a favor... for Pammy."

"Pammy?" he said flatly.

"Pammy," she repeated. "Seems you two are getting along quite well these days."

"I..." he began, then swallowed. "I swear, 'Lina, it wasn't pheromones and it wasn't even the scotch, it was just one of those incredibly stupid things you see yourself doing but you can't quite find the brake pedal. You never had that happen?"

"I guess," she laughed. "Not with a man, but there was a pair of Byzantine bracelets—gold, lapis lazuli, glass and pearl, 5th-7th Century A.D. the owner kept in this... never mind. Point is, I have your sentence handed down from Queen Chlorophyll herself. You ready to hear your fate?"

Eddie assumed the look of a martyr prepared to ascend the pyre.

"Hit me," he said.

Selina assumed the grim resolve of a judge ready to pronounce a death sentence and decreed:

“You must prepare to wrestle with your affections and fight against your passion—she’s dumping you.”

Eddie’s frozen stare remained frozen though his mouth suddenly popped open in a half-formed smile... his stare remained fixed as his head tilted, remained fixed as his tongue moistened his lips, and then... his head snapped upright, eyes ablaze with joy and the now fully-formed smile spread across his lips.

“She’s dumping me?!” he asked-cheered. “And ‘wrestle with affection’ ‘fight my passions’ that’s... Shakespeare?”

“At her request,” Selina confirmed. “Creepiest part of this whole thing. She wanted me to let you down easy, with ‘something brainy and poetic, like he likes.’ You must have some magic lips on you, Eddie, she’s never shown that kind of consideration for anybody who wasn’t a plant.”

“Well, she’s going through some changes,” Eddie said modestly. “So that’s it? I’m off the hook?”

“Unless you want to send a message back,” Selina said, “which I wouldn’t recommend.”

“Hear hear, let sleeping goddesses lie.”

Selina smiled. Eddie smiled. A pleasant exchange at first, until the silence continued just a few moments past what was comfortable.

“What’s in the bag?” Eddie said, merely to fill the social pause before any real tension developed.

Selina’s smile widened, again showing just a little more glint off her teeth than is quite usual for a non-tigress before the hunt.

“A present,” she said, opening the flap of her loot bag and reaching in to withdraw its treasure. “What you did in the war, Eddie, marshalling all the Rogues, stepping up to lead, surely you must feel some sort reward is due.”

“Lina, what did you bring me?” he said, his eyes fixed on the point where her hand disappeared into the loot sack, but his brow knit as if trying to work it out from a clue.

“I know it’s bothered you, my ‘going white hat,’ as you see it,” she said as if supplying the second line of a riddle. “You’ll be happy to know I have a new project that’s anything but.”

“You’ve brought me something he wouldn’t approve of, eh?” Eddie grinned.

“Not exactly,” she said, taking out a pawn—an ordinary white pawn. “I said a *project*, and I didn’t say anything about uptight Cape standards of what’s naughty and nice. I was talking about you. I think even *you* will look at this as the act of a bad girl.”

“I’m intrigued,” Eddie said, taking the pawn. “Hey, I know this piece, it’s from—”

He trailed off as Selina pulled out a rook with a bulbous Mr. Freeze head and pink glowing eyes, then another wearing the formal top hat, monocle and cigarette holder that identified it as Oswald Cobblepot.

“The Rogue Chessmen you showed Batman that night at your Repo & Houg lair,” she explained, taking out the Clayface knight. “You see, the Z have been doing a lot of work for me, stripping all those places you took from Falcone and converting them to... well, whatever I tell them to.” The Mad Hatter knight was next, and he joined his colleagues replacing the ordinary pieces on Riddler’s desktop chess board. “When

they got to that R&H lair and dug these out—well, look at them—they were simply too wonderful to throw away,” she said, moving on to the Joker and Harley bishops and giggling as she gave a Harley-tassel a light flick. Finally she set out the Poison Ivy queen and Two-Face king and looked down at the board approvingly.

“It was very nice of you to return them,” Eddie said sincerely. He brought the pawn and helped her replace the black pieces. Then he offered a game.

“Next time,” she said. “You already have one going.”

“Pfft, we just got started. Four moves into a queen’s gambit declined. I can easily remember.”

“Next time,” she repeated.

They chatted about the weather, the Brussels diamond heist, the Cannes jewelry heist that followed, the latest dessert at d’Annunzio’s, and the reaction to the Red Wedding finally airing on *Game of Thrones*. Finally, Selina was ready to go. Eddie hugged her, thanked her again for the chess set and for delivering Ivy’s message. They both reiterated that he was a lucky man who had dodged a bullet. Selina touched the white pawn sitting before the Ivy queen, carelessly with just the tip of her claw. She turned to go, took a few steps towards the door and then turned back, head tilted at a too-casual angle, lip curled into an offhanded smile, giving the impression—as Nigma once had—that her next words were a complete afterthought:

“Oh, by the way,” she purred, echoing his parting words to Batman the night of his visit to the R&H lair, are you *at all aware* that Doris is back in town, in costume and committing theme crimes? Ta!”

CHAPTER 5: ZOGGER, ZOOPHILLY AND ZEITGEIST

STARS! Breath gone. Pain. A white flash of pain in the center of his chest and a duller throbbing one shooting down his hip. Batman shook it off as he had a hundred similar blows over the years, his awareness catching up with his body's instinctive block, block, and counterstrike.

There were those who considered him too cautious, too driven, too cynical, and too obsessed with planning and contingencies. But not once did he entertain that silly admonition to 'Be careful what you wish for.' As if lying back and dreaming of bliss was a serious matter that should not be indulged in without prudent weighing of all the consequences that might occur if the wished for thing came true.

He punched, using that pain in his hip to propel more power coming off the leg, driving more momentum into the hit, but—damnit!—not getting all he could from the follow through.

Selina, the woman he had always wanted, was no longer a criminal. She fought crime at his side, shared his bed, his home, agreed to be his wife... and had turned the full force of her considerable intellect and creativity on the destruction of Ra's al Ghul. The Rogues were nearly all in Arkham, freeing him up to do the type of crimefighting he initially imagined. With the Falcone family already gutted, he had made spectacular inroads in less time than he would have believed possible in the early days. So had the police. No city would ever be crime-free, but Gotham was becoming safer than it had been in a lifetime. It wasn't a dream come true, it was a wish inside a hope wrapped around a dream come true.

He kicked, not to bring his powerful thigh muscles into play and force his opponent backward, but to spite that hip pain which he refused to acknowledge if it wasn't going to do him any good.

Bruce had to assume the disquiet he felt was a natural reaction. When *so much* was going *so well*—there was even a chance of Jim Gordon returning as police commissioner—it was natural to look for a blemish simply to prove to yourself it was real.

Zoophilly was like most Gotham businesses: located in a building that had once been something else. With one plain black door and one garage-door-sized opening in a blocky, one-story brick box, there was no telling what it had been originally. And when it was closed up with only a simple black awning reading Zoophilly over the 'garage door' entrance, there wasn't any hint what it might be now. At six o'clock every morning that would change. The garage door opened to reveal a half-dozen bistro tables inside. Two shrubs trimmed like Tuscan cypress trees in terra cotta pots were set up on each side of the wide garage door, a menu board was set out with the day's selections written in chalk, and a very low, weathered table was set in the middle

of the sidewalk with a single purple orchid in an antique silver pitcher. In under a minute, the ugly brick box squeezed in between its three and four-story neighbors was transformed into an inviting little café with more charm and character than the most glaringly ornate facade could provide.

So long after the morning rush subsided and before the lunch rush began, there was surprisingly little pedestrian traffic as Doris made her way down the street. Like any sensible Gothamite, she had taken the subway to Canal Street and, unburdened by a car or the need to find parking, made her way on foot. She passed a food cart, a half-dozen paintings for sale on the sidewalk propped against a non-descript brick wall, and finally the artist himself. He was sitting on a stoop without so much as a brush or a tube of paint to justify the easel set up before him. It was clearly a prop, just so you knew who to talk to if you wanted to buy. Doris didn't slow her step, not until the corner where there was a boutique selling bath products. She didn't stop, but she glanced in as she passed. She was flush as she had never been before now that Andre had brought the payment for her first scores as Cognitive Dissonance. An indulgence or two didn't seem out of line. She might drop in later, but for now, she rounded the corner and continued down the block, past the graffiti'd space for rent, past the construction wall and scaffolding, past the Spanish restaurant that looked like it used to be a dentist's office... until she came at last to the spot Selina had named for their meeting.

It was a small space, easy to take in at a glance. Counter with a display case full of baked goods in the back, and a sign over the counter that made her laugh. Selina was already there, seated at the only occupied table, and Doris went to greet her with a smile.

"I see why you picked this place," she said, indicating the sign that spelled out the name *Zoophilly* in beautifully-carved wooden script letters, and underneath in equally well-carved block letters it read: *Worth 25 points in Scrabble. No definition found.* "Can't possibly be true though. Definition should be love of animals or some kind of pollination where birds and bats transfer the pollen, right?"

"That would be my guess," Selina said, thinking how this woman was truly Eddie's soul mate. "In ancient times before there was a wifi hot spot every thirty feet, this was an internet café, one of the very first. Probably seemed clever at the time, something to look up. When it folded, new owners kept the name, presumably because that's an expensive sign. One less thing."

They went to the counter and ordered. Selina said the scones and croissants were terrific, the muffins not so great, and all the nut breads were worth the caloric hit of that thick cream cheese icing. They took their coffees and scones with them and strolled down the street, window-shopping to the casual observer.

"Cognitive Dissonance was inspired for a one-off," Selina said, getting down to business. "But it doesn't exactly trip off the tongue. Long term, you're going to need a better name and theme."

"I know," Doris winced. "I never thought about it fitting neatly into a sentence like 'Last night, Riddler and Blank had Batman and police running in circles as they yadda-yadda'd the yadda-yadda.' And yes, I know before you say it, never yadda-yadda the crime in front of him. He gets hysterical and it'll be a day and a half of 'Add Daddy' anagrams."

With a renewed sense that Doris was truly Eddie's soul mate (and perhaps a soul mate whose intake of caffeine and sugar should be monitored), Selina asked if Doris had a new name in mind, and when she said she was open to suggestions, Selina offered Game Theory.

"Economic game theory? Like in *A Beautiful Mind*? Hot blonde enters a bar with a bunch of her less hot friends. If all the guys hit on her, at most one gets laid and the rest are shit outta luck. But if they all ignore the blonde and pursue the other women individually, everybody gets paired up for the night?"

"Essentially, yes. It's the mathematic study of strategic thinking, how people make decisions in anticipation of other people's actions. You only showed up at a Batman crime scene when you knew he'd have other, more dangerous criminals to pursue. That's textbook game theory."

"I like it," Doris said. "Anagrams?"

"Ah Geometry' and 'A Theme Orgy,'" Selina offered.

Deciding Eddie would be content with that, given the name's suitability in all other respects, Doris agreed. Faux window-shopping became real window-shopping as the conversation turned to costumes and they looked for inspiration in the window displays of Michael Kors, Mango, and Louis Vuitton...

STARS! Breath gone. Another flare of pain at the center of his chest—again shaken off—again the block-block-counterstrike that was a learned second nature, and this time his full weight, driven by momentum and twisted with an extra torque of his fist into a punishing downward thrust...

Selina was cutting that last tie with her old life, the sentimental attachment to Nigma. He should be overjoyed. That friendship had been a thorn in his side since their relationship began. He never gave the personal lives of his enemies a second thought until Selina came along, and he hated this heightened awareness that, beneath the costumes, most of them had the same dimensions, senses and passions as anybody else.

...the follow through.

The hand-to-hand trainer which Bruce called Strategic Self-Mutating Defense Regimen VI and everyone else called Zogger penalized itself 6.4 seconds to recover, and with only 4 seconds left on the session, it pinged and shut down. Batman rubbed his knuckles, stretched his neck and shoulder, and grunted.

At the height of their "Be My Own Man" tensions, Dick posited the theory that if you charted Zogger use over the course of Batman's career, the spikes would correspond point-for-point with Catwoman encounters. He never went so far as to test it, but if he had, he would have been proved wrong. The spikes were caused by many things, most of them atrocities: crimes witnessed by children, muggings gone wrong when guns were involved. The percentage tripped off by Cat encounters was relatively small, as was the percentage of Cat encounters that ended in Zogger bouts. There were those that fired his emotions to the point where a physical release was needed, those that wound him to the point where complete exhaustion was necessary and driving

himself to near muscle-failure was the surest way to achieve it, and there were those nights he simply couldn't get out of his mind. Without the primal instincts that kicked in to block out everything beyond the fight, he simply couldn't get his mind to LET IT GO. The first two were no longer an issue. Selina was available in person for both the physical release and the exhaustion to resolve any tensions she stirred, through sex if he wanted it, through aggressive sparring, and occasionally both. It was the last he faced now, fueling his fourth session with Zogger since the night she returned from Europe.

He paused, his finger on the reset button... He could easily resume. His heart rate, breathing and body temp weren't elevated to workout levels yet... But the old stalactite beckoned him. It had been a very long time since he meditated there.

He shrugged his cape to the side as he assumed the lotus position, took a few preliminary breaths, then removed his cowl and let the cool air of the cavern drive his meditation. He focused on the sensation as that cool air met his heated brow, the hair moistened with sweat... molecules of cool, dry air weaving through his hair, coming into contact with his scalp, heat meeting cool, transference, evaporation... his thoughts evaporating with those droplets of sweat on his brow, in his hair, and finally... Clarity. Selina had looked wicked. More cruelly calculating and villainous than he had seen her in years. At first he saw it subconsciously. It may or may not have added something to their reunion sex. Then he saw it consciously but attributed it to her maneuverings against Ra's al Ghul. But no, that assumption was wrong. She was really plotting against Nigma. She was plotting to avenge herself for that Bane business during the war. She was going to use Doris to do it. She was... in the cave.

Bruce inhaled deeply, the stalactite above him coming into focus as the part of his mind that heard the distant clip of her heels pulled the rest of him from the meditative state. He found her in the Data Well, as she had been several times since her return. In her day clothes perhaps, but as much in Catwoman-mode as he had ever seen her.

"Hey Kitten, need anything?"

"I don't need it, but I welcome it," she said over her shoulder.

The second time Doris and Selina met at Zoophilly, they took their coffees and croissants no farther than a corner table so Selina could take advantage of the wifi to show Doris what she'd found.

"I know you want something special for your debut as Game Theory, something... cat-worthy. Looking at the stuff you went for as Cognitive Dissonance, I assume it has to be Russian (and I don't need to know why). I found it; I found the perfect prize. But we will have to up your game, if you'll pardon the pun. This place isn't Cartier or the MoMA, but it will be a lot more challenging than the paper sacks you've been breaking into."

"That's why I've got you," Doris said, her eyes gleaming with delight. "Teach me."

Selina leaned forward. "I know you understand the basic principle: no risk, no return; the greater the risk, the greater the return; etc. And I know you're the crossword queen. Doris, I want to be absolutely clear that you understand what that four-letter word beginning with R means."

"Selina, I've gone as far as I can with the things I could figure out myself. Now we're into the territory where somebody's got to show you how to do it. Teach me."

"Doris, four-letter word, beginning with R. It means you could fail. The consequences of that are not good. Do you understand?"

"Show me what you've got," Doris said emphatically.

Selina sat back, arms crossed, with the same 'I can wait' expression she directed at Whiskers and Nutmeg when they sniffed her suitcase while ignoring her the day she got back from Europe.

"Risk," Doris said finally. "Noun: a situation involving exposure to danger, peril, jeopardy or loss. Verb: to expose someone or something to danger, peril, etc. Specialized use/Finance: probability that the actual return on an investment will be lower than the expected return. Specialized use/Insurance: a situation where the probability of a variable, such as the burning down of a building, is known but when a mode of occurrence or the actual value of the occurrence is not known. Specialized use/Toy Store: A strategic board game produced by Parker Brothers depicting a political map of the world divided into territories the object of which is to occupy every region on the board and in so doing, eliminate the other players. Shall I go on?"

"You are a freak of nature," Selina said admiringly.

"Little known fact, the game of Risk was invented by French film director Albert Lamorisse in 1957 when it was called *La Conquête du Monde*. Now tell me about this Russian cat-worthy thing!"

"Okay, get us a couple of coffees and croissants," Selina said, getting out her laptop. "Lesson begins when you get back."

When Doris returned, video of a silent movie was playing on the screen. A bejeweled dancer, then the words "Pearls beyond Price." Selina narrated:

"From 1906 to 1908, the Russian ballerina Katalya Nolzhenko toured the world playing Salomé. The tour concluded in the United States where the fledgling film industry captured her performance, as you see here. Those pearls she's wearing are real, a gift from the Czar when she danced at the Winter Palace at Christmas. The fact that she wore them whenever she performed was the chief means of promoting the tour. In every new city, the newspapers would run a story on the pearls and there would be quotes from the chief of police on all the special measures being taken for their security. Nobody ever went for the pearls, but there was a robbery of three private homes in Buenos Aires the night of her performance—"

"Because all cops were off guarding the pearls," Doris laughed. "Talk about Game Theory."

"In the 1920s, they were sold at auction in Paris for three hundred thousand francs," Selina concluded.

"You have my attention," said Doris.

"I thought I might. The pearls wound up in the collection of a Lord Chalfont and are on loan to the Zeitgeist Gallery right here in Gotham. It's a sort of 'History of Design in other arts' kind of place: the ring worn by Anne Boleyn's seventh lady-in-waiting on the far edge of some court painting, a ceramic dish with the same pattern depicted in a Dutch still life, a candelabrum from the set of Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. If it sounds boring, it is. Not the first stop on the tourist trail."

The next day, two students that looked nothing like Selina Kyle and Doris Ingerson entered the Zeitgeist Gallery at the same time but not together. Selina sported her red Georgina Barnes wig, a Sorbonne sweatshirt, denim headband, backpack and jeans. Doris had her hair tucked into a ballcap and, with her height and flat-chested frame accentuated by an unflattering flannel shirt worn over an oversized Hudson U t-shirt, she could have easily been mistaken for a man. Both wore glasses and both, being students, whipped out their phones to check in at the new location as soon as they walked in the door. The action synced the tiny units in their glasses to each other and to the receptor in Doris's "phone."

They split up, moving independently through the gallery and around the display case with the pearls. Occasionally Selina coughed. Occasionally Doris scratched her ear or rubbed the side of her neck as she looked up at a security camera, touching the back of her glasses and causing the lens in front to snap a picture. But mostly she was content seeing the space with her own eyes, knowing the precise dimensions and contents of the room were being mapped with greater precision and accuracy than any photographs could provide.

After about fifteen minutes, their amblings brought them close enough to speak.

"Nice shirt, Hudson," Selina said, meaning *'I'm done; ready when you are.'*

"You too, Sorbonne," came the reply, meaning *'Ready. Let's do it.'*

Again they separated. Again Selina coughed. This time she took a lozenge from her pocket and unwrapped it as she wandered into the next gallery. Appearing to put it in her mouth, she palmed it as she settled before a trio of Noh, Korean, and Chinese opera masks—and within shouting distance of the security guard she had judged the least stupid. She sat on one of the benches before the exhibit and read how all of the masks had appeared in James Bond movies. She surreptitiously crushed the lozenge against the slats of the wooden bench and rubbed the residual powder into the crevice. She got up again, resumed her disinterested ambling through the room—there was a case of tarot cards, also from a Bond movie, that looked interesting—until two minutes later when she looked back towards the masks and saw an incense-thin lines of smoke rising slowly from the bench.

"Oh, oh my goodness," she said in an odd but adorable accent. "Somebody?!" She looked around in alarm, and as the incense-thin line widened to that which came from the end of Oswald's cigarette, she found she was looking directly at the security guard. "Excuse me, somebody," she said, running up to him. "This is something bad here!"

She pointed to the bench, which was now smoking enough for other visitors to notice. The guard called for everyone's attention and had just begun the spiel to evacuate the gallery when the fire alarm sounded. While the full security staff mobilized to assist the evacuation and keep an eye on the exhibits during the crisis, Doris was able to slip into the empty security office and flash the drive of the unattended console onto a memory stick.

"Now we'll have complete specs off their computer," Selina said, taking the stick and Doris's 'phone' when they rendezvoused. "Along with a our own 3-dimensional model of the layout. Come to the SoHo lair tomorrow and we'll see what we're up against."

"Hey Kitten, need anything?"

"I don't need it, but I welcome it," she said over her shoulder.

This had become their standard call-and-response since the first day when he found her trying to calculate the shortest amount of time it had ever taken 'a rogue who wasn't Joker' to plan and execute an escape from Arkham. He told her, it was thirty-eight days, and her eyes gleamed like it hadn't occurred to her to use him as a resource. She asked how much Eddie could beat the record by if he was really motivated. Bruce thought about it (noting that, however pissed she was, she still called him Eddie) and decided he could do it in thirty-one. For safety sake, he knocked off two days and told her twenty-nine. She immediately put a countdown calendar on the top-center screen and marked off twenty-nine days. Then she asked for all the details of that night he met Riddler at the Repo & Houg lair...

"What's today's project?" he asked, looking at the data screens she had displayed and restraining the lip-twitch on the one tagged '*Pheromones Is Finally Good For Something.*'

"Subway schedules," she said, pointing to that first. "Street musicians, DIY perfume, the Royal Russian Ballet circa 1908." The last included several newspaper clippings and stills from period newsreels of a triple strand of pearls. Perhaps sensing (wrongly) that Bruce would have an aversion to the subject because of the pearls, she indicated a worktable a short distance outside the well. "I've also got toys," she said, pointing.

Curious, he went to look and found a WayneTech tablet displaying a five-by-five grid of what appeared to be animated gifs, and something very like a Rubik's Cube with a microscreen on each square instead of the colored decal. Each of those displayed an animated gif as well.

"Which of those would be the bigger headache?" she called without leaving the well.

"To do what?" he asked, examining the video screens on the cube to determine if they were WayneTech.

She left the well and sauntered up to him with that old, rooftop cock of her hip.

"C'mon, Dark Knight, don't be dense. You answer the signal, no commissioner and this is sitting there waiting for you. What's it mean?"

"This is the clue to a crime?" he asked, holding out the cube like a baseball.

"Yeah," she said with an aroused into-it wiggle of her shoulders and hip, "like a jigsaw puzzle that fights back."

"Wonderful," he said, as if he was making an appointment for a root canal and the receptionist suggested a time that fit his schedule.

"Little shit thinks he likes puzzles; he won't when I'm through with him," she said, returning to the well.

By which point it was clear that Nigma and not Batman would be faced with solving these technological terrors, but that did nothing to dispel the nagging sense of... something... a troubling, undefined something that sent him to Zogger in the first place.

Doris didn't know if there was an established etiquette for going to a Rogue's lair to plan a crime, but she figured brownies are always welcome. So she stopped at Zoophilly, bought a half dozen and a packet of chai. Selina was thrilled, said plotting

always made her hungry, and she left Doris alone in the main room of the lair while she went to prepare the tea. As one who had only seen a Riddler hideout, Doris was fascinated. Like Eddie's place, there was a lot of themed bric-a-brac, to the point of being tacky if you looked on it as an individual's home. If you looked on it as their place of business, then the determined messaging began to make sense. Selina liked cats in the same way Eddie liked puzzles, but all the Bast statues and animal prints weren't meant to be an expression of her personal taste, they were meant to convey Catwoman Enterprises, the lobby of a high profile, high concept operation. So the amount of theming didn't surprise her. What did was a different similarity to Riddler's lair: it was the high tech. Eddie was a gadget-head, a technophile and a coding fiend. Selina didn't seem the type. She used her laptop as much as any other busy person, and the specialized gear she'd supplied to scope out the gallery was certainly very advanced. But somehow Doris never connected the kind of gizmo a cat burglar might tote around to crack a safe or to reprogram a keycard with the kind of NSA tech bunker she saw here.

She told Selina as much when she returned with the tea.

"NSA tech bunker?" her hostess laughed, breaking a corner off a brownie. "Doris, before we go any farther, is there anything you want to tell me?"

"Oh you know what I mean," she said impatiently. "In the movies, on TV, our heroes are investigating something, they don't know what it is, but it's starting to look bigger and scarier than we thought. All of a sudden they get jumped and they've got black bags on their heads. When the bags come off, they're in some secret bunker. The maid from Act I is there, it turns out she works for the CIA, and everybody's sitting in front of a 9-screen tech wall that looks just like this. So, yeah, this is like a secret agency underground bunker... if the secret government agency really liked cats."

Selina blinked.

"Okay," she said as if accepting a dare. She punched a few buttons, and in a flash the smaller screens began to fill with images: a city map, another city map, an underground map, a close-up of the pearls in their display case, the gallery floorplan marked off with the location of the cameras, and so on. The center screen showed a structure Doris had noticed in a back hallway near the restrooms. About three feet square, two feet high, very old brick with an ancient grate on the top, it was obviously a remnant of whatever the building was originally, and she sensed at the time that it would be important.

"Here's the good news on your prospective heist," Selina said. "The Zeitgeist building, like most in that neighborhood, is more than a hundred years old. That brick *thing* with the grate, in that one hallway by the stairs, connects to the original furnace in the original basement. And that means you can get in through the old catacombs, which you can get to from a utility tunnel in this underground parking garage. Now, underground is darker, smellier and more cramped than the high-flying cat burglar on a zipline stuff you see in the movies, but it is an awful lot easier to master. It is much, much safer. And there's another perk we'll get to later."

"Why do I suspect that's the end of the good news," Doris said flatly.

"Because you're very perceptive. You can get in through the brick chimney-furnace-thing via the catacombs, you can get out through the chimney-furnace-thing via the catacombs. What you can't do is—"

"Take the pearls out with me," Doris said, anticipating the problem. When Selina raised an eyebrow, she explained, "Basic puzzle structure. The way you were leading up to it, I figured that's where you were going."

"Right," Selina said. "And that's just how you need to approach this. Every lock is a puzzle, every security measure is a puzzle. In this case, the next puzzle before us is that the pearls, and every other item in the gallery, have been treated with an invisible chemical that reacts with the infrareds on the doors. It will set off an alarm if the pearls are taken through any of the thirty-six internal doorways."

"So I can get in through brick chimney-furnace-thing. Go through the one, two, three... four doorways to get to the pearls, but then I've got no way to take them with me as I go back?"

"Correct," Selina nodded. "The stuff is called Olactra-Prystaline, came into vogue about four years ago. Very popular with facilities like this that are repurposed buildings, stately homes and other historical structures. Anything with a lot of nooks and crannies that are difficult to secure. Anything that's a landmark, where they're very limited in what they're allowed to touch."

"Like my brick-chimney-thing," Doris said, smiling.

"Like your brick-chimney-thing," Selina said, pleased with her apt pupil.

"Okay, assuming I solve 'Olactra-Prystaline,' what's the rest of the bad news?"

"The camera coverage is not the work of a moron. Have a look at this layout. To get from brick-chimney-thing here to the pearls here, you have to move through cameras 19, 21, 24 and 39. That perk I mentioned coming in from underground: pneumatic tubes. The old network of pneumatic tubes that used to be for communication are now filled with coaxial cable—meaning basically, you have access to the gallery's network at the same spot underground where you access the physical facility. I give you a tablet with the software, show you how to hook it up, you freeze those four cameras before you go up."

"What's the catch," Doris said grimly.

"The cameras are on three separate circuits that reboot on staggered twenty-minute cycles. Your window is only six minutes from the time you freeze the cameras."

"To go up the brick-chimney-thing, remove the grate, get across three galleries and four doorways to the pearls, get them out of the case, go back across the three galleries—somehow without going through the doorways—and back down brick-chimney-thing far enough to replace the grate before one or possibly two of the cameras reset. Sure. No problem. Then we tackle feeding India and world peace, right?"

"For what it's worth, Eddie couldn't pull off a job like this."

"Could you?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell me how?"

"I'm going to give you a week to work out a solution to the Olactra-Prystaline on the pearls setting off the infrareds," she said. "And while you're doing that, I will show you how to do the rest."

Bruce went back to the well and watched Selina multi-task across six screens of data on multiple subjects, multi-task with a focus and intensity that surpassed any sidekick who ever used the cave systems... an intensity and focus that reminded him of himself. At a glance, you would think it was one of his multi-tiered Justice League operations being planned—except for the snacks. The first time he watched her planning a theft—in the morning room, at his mother’s desk—he’d been morbidly fascinated by that little plate of cold cuts. The way she’d stare into space with a curious head tilt, twiddle her finger from time to time as if solving an equation on an invisible chalkboard, and after a minute or two, pick up a piece of turkey and nibble. Now she was *in the Batcave*, hard-linked to every data bank on the planet, displaying dozens of windows across multiple data screens. But lest anyone think this was no longer the mind that planned the theft of the Juanpur Ruby, there was a little bag of those wasabi crackers she liked attached to the base of screen 3 by a cat burglar’s Filmore clamp. As if snacking wasn’t enough (Batcave munching wasn’t completely unprecedented; Batgirl and Spoiler had both been known to leave a powdery Cheetos residue throughout the satellite cave that was unworthy of a Batman operative.) But Selina was different—as always, Selina was different. Her little bag of crackers was resting in a cat burglar’s collapsible coolant pack *used as a cup holder* attached with a Filmore clamp.

“I take it we’re planning a crime,” he half-graveled, taking a cracker.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said with a soft smile that was almost a promise.

“I think I liked it better when you’d tell me the museum operating hours are just suggestions.”

“No you didn’t,” she said.

“No, I didn’t,” he admitted. “Selina, what are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Doris’s next visit to the Cat Lair (lemon bars and french hazelnut roast), she went straight for the “NSA tech bunker” computer, which Selina said she could use in order to keep her personal search history, IP and the desktop in her apartment free of all things Olactra-Prystaline. It was that or the public library, Selina was quite insistent. When she was back with Eddie, Doris could do as she pleased, but while she was Catwoman’s student, she would take all sensible precautions. As a thief who did not find it necessary to leave the authorities ‘love notes’ stating her intentions before the fact, Selina did not believe in creating ties, however circumstantial, between your unmasked life and your crime. If Batman did not catch her in front of an open safe with the stolen article in her hand, she could remain perfectly calm and confident through any amount of police questioning—as she had when a cat burglar went after all those Wayne Foundation guests earlier this year—knowing that there were never going to be any charges pressed because there simply wasn’t any evidence to be found. It was a reasonable argument, but Doris would have accepted a ludicrous one because she really wanted to play with the NSA tech bunker!

She only got a lemon bar and a few sips of coffee into the research, however, when Selina whistled and told her to leave it for now. She led Doris down to the basement—which looked more like a sprawling underground warehouse, empty except for... an obstacle course. There was a ladder at one end actually labeled ‘chimney-brick-thing,’ the outline of the pertinent galleries were measured out in purple ribbon, milk crates and cardboard boxes represented the various display cases, and in the farthest “gallery,” a triple strand of opera length pearls sat enticingly under a covered clear-glass cake plate.

“This is where you’ll practice,” Selina explained. “Climbing up and navigating the three galleries, getting to the pearls and getting back to brick-chimney-thing in time, it’s all very doable, as long as you score it.”

“Score it?”

“You find a piece of music you like, cut it to the right length and rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. With that same piece of music, always. You bring it with you on an iPod, start it on cue, and you will always know where you’re supposed to be. Now, some cats use movie soundtracks for this type of thing. I personally prefer classical, one or two instruments, not a full orchestra. Whenever I can, I go with Yo-Yo Ma.”

“Oh I love Yo-Yo Ma. Damn! I wish I could use him too,” Doris enthused.

“It’s not an Inception totem, Doris. You can use the same music I would. I’ve got a six-minute piece from the Bach Cello Suites on this iPod. But this is the last gift. Next time, you edit your own music file.” She winked, and Doris began practicing.

On the sixth day (pumpkin-walnut bread and Zoophilly’s signature Italian roast), she had a solution to the infrareds on the doorways problem:

“I couldn’t find squat on Olactra-Prystaline, chemically, and that only made sense if it was the trade name of something else. You said it showed up around four years ago, so I did some digging into the patents from five years ago. Star Labs holds the patent, and they put out a slew of academic papers in that period that... well, the details are over my head, but the gist seems to be soaking different Thanagarian metals in salt water to see what properties it might take on. Star researchers authored more than two-hundred papers on different metals and alloys in different levels of saline, and there are eight patents that seem to be the result. Including Olactra-Prystaline. I’m fairly confident that this stuff is just salt water that’s had a lump of Thanagar copper sitting in it for a month under a sun lamp. And if I mist it with more salt water and then expose it to black light, it will temporarily change the refractive index.”

“How long is temporarily?” Selina asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Any special requirements on this black light?”

“I don’t know.”

“Good, you’re human,” Selina smiled. “It’s a fifteen-nanosecond pulse of black light that you need, applied for nine or ten seconds—will easily fit in your six-minute window the way you’ve been doing—and the effects last for nearly an hour.”

Doris beamed. Then she tilted her head.

“I assume a flashlight that emits a fifteen-nanosecond pulse of black light is something you already own and would be prepared to lend me as part of the Catwoman scholarship program?”

"Call it a gift," Selina said, "None of the places I hit use Prystaline anymore, and you're going to have a big list of things to get from Kittlemeier when the time comes."

"Selina, I really can't thank you enough."

"Then don't. Doris, don't thank me at all, not now, not ever. I like you, but the truth is, I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it for Eddie."

Batman predicted it would take Edward Nigma twenty-nine days to engineer an escape from Arkham. On the twenty-eighth day after Catwoman told him Doris was back, Selina appeared in the Batcave humming *La Donna E Mobile*. She went to the Data Well, pulled up the calendar and touched her finger to the square representing the day. A large, black X super-imposed over the square, and she acknowledged it with a few lines sung outright:

*È sempre misero, chi a lei s'affida,
chi le confida, mal cauto il core!*

"**Talking about me?**" Bruce grveled, the ominous Bat-voice and his posture blocking her exit from the well indicating the challenge of crimefighter, but his eyes betraying an amused affection that was quickly confirmed by a lip-twitch.

"Have you packed?" Selina replied as she leaned in for a Good Morning kiss.

"No," he said, "since we're not actually leaving, I'm not packed."

"Weird. I always figured you'd be more committed to those 'Bruce Wayne is out of the country' covers."

He grunted, and she smiled.

"When Bruce Wayne is playing baccarat in Monte Carlo so Batman can pursue Scarecrow without distractions, I'm committed. When Bruce and Selina are off to the Italian Riviera—"

"The Amalfi Coast. It's Positano, not Portofino. Bruce, did you even read my note?"

"—so Nigma can't use the knowledge of my identity as a backchannel to get a message through, I find it hard to believe it matters."

"Look, I know I'm not Riddler and it's not exactly a clue, but it is the closest thing to a pre-crime communiqué as you've had in some time. As a courtesy, you could read it and grunt."

"Or I could pack for Porto Venere," Bruce said foppishly.

"Jackass," Selina said.

"I'm sorry, Kitten," he laughed, hugging her from behind. "I just don't think it's going to be an issue. I think you seriously underestimate how intimidating Batman is to other criminals."

"But I don't," she said. "Unfathomable as it is to me personally, I do grasp that they all look on you as something out of an Edgar Allen Poe story. I just don't think that will matter. I think you're the one underestimating how *desperate* he's going to be. Trust me. He'll come knocking on the devil's door."

"Well if he does, the devil's butler has read your note and will inform him that the devil and devil's bride-to-be—"

"Girlfriend."

"—girlfriend, are vacationing in Positano."

“Meow.”

A few hours later, Wayne One took off for Italy.

A few hours after that, it transmitted an email to Bruce’s secretary Caroline, to Lucius Fox, to Fox’s secretary Monique, and to Gwen Chatham at the Foundation. It was more sober and lucid than similar messages they had all received over the years, but the upshot was the same: all Bruce’s appointments cancelled; no reason given. Mr. Wayne unavailable until further notice.

A few hours after that, the Zeitgeist Gallery was burgled. The empty case was discovered when the staff opened the doors at 8 a.m., just as Nigma was dabbing his lips after another Arkham breakfast that had been unchanged since 1971.

At 8:20, when Detectives Schmidt and Ramirez arrived at Zeitgeist, Saul Vics was sneaking around the lockers and break rooms at Arkham to make sure Kreng, Oliver and Briggs would cover while he “made some phone calls.” Knowing the code for running a profitable errand for one of the patients, they each quoted him a price, and after a little haggling, Vics returned to his post.

At 8:45, he was pricing hotels in Atlantic City. He was going to have a wad of cash by the end of the week, and it seemed a shame to blow it at the OTB when there were casinos full of free drinks and strippers to be had. At Zeitgeist, Detective Schmidt was feeling patronized, marginalized, and finally ignored. His partner was in the security office viewing the tapes from the night before. His partner who bullshitted as if he understood all that gobbledygook about special chemicals treating the exhibits. What it amounted to was this: the gallery brainiac spouting that stuff said it was impossible to get the pearls out of the room without setting off an alarm. But the pearls were gone, no alarm had gone off, and none of them could explain how. So who was really the idiot, that’s what Schmidt wanted to know. He took a final turn look around the gallery, telling himself it was old-fashioned police work even if there was nothing to see. The photographer took pictures, the videographer took video. A technician in a white plastic hooded poncho was doing something underneath the cameras, and Schmidt simply walked the perimeter of the crime scene as it was marked off by police tape. He walked clockwise, turned around and walked counter clockwise, feeling like a tiger in a too-small cage. Then he decided to take a leak. A few steps from the men’s room door he saw it—a little slip of paper on the floor. *Cafe Zoophilly*, it read.

At 9:18 the two detectives stood at the counter at Zoophilly, Schmidt leaning over the clerk aggressively while his partner looked like he was humoring an aging uncle with antiquated ideas.

“Look, there’s a time and date on the slip,” Schmidt said in a bullying tone. “So all you’ve got to do is tell us who paid for two coffees, a crescent roll and a blueberry scone here last Thursday.”

“It’s a cash sale,” the clerk said miserably.

“Hey, what about that,” Ramirez said, pointing to a camera above the counter.

Schmidt swore under his breath, and the clerk called her manager about pulling the tapes for Thursday.

At Arkham, Saul Vics was lying unconscious at the bottom of a laundry chute, his phone smashed, uniform stripped, keyring and keycards taken, and a note in his wallet

in Eddie's handwriting saying the title of that song he asked about was "Hey, Look Behind You."

At 11:30, Ramirez froze a still from the Zoophilly video that revealed the best angle on the customer making a purchase at the time stamped on the receipt. Ignoring Schmidt's observation that "she's hot," he touched his cursor to the top of each eye, the top of each cheekbone, the tip of her nose and chin. He fired up the face recognition software, and as it loaded, he selected ten secondary points for comparison. At Arkham, Amanda Pikes received an angry call from her building manager that six 40-lb bags of dog food had been delivered and were currently stacked outside her door. He had no choice but to report this to the landlord, she knew the rules when she moved in. She was frantically trying to explain that she had no dog when a guard appeared in the lock chamber from the high-security wing. She was trying to explain that she hadn't ordered any dog food—it wasn't time for a shift change, but she opened the door—*trying to explain* that she hadn't ordered dog food because she *had no dog*—the guard's face did not match the picture on his badge and he signed the book *Alpo Einstein*, but she noticed neither as she went on to explain that she had no dog, never had a dog, didn't like dogs...

At 11:53, the GPD's Face Recognition Program matched the driver's license of Doris Ingerson with the customer from Zoophilly. At Arkham, Eddie shed Vics's uniform shirt to reveal a broadcloth button-down whose quality, he hoped, would pass for a doctor's (to the indiscriminating eye of an auto mechanic, at any rate). The tow truck from Marty's Garage, summoned by Dr. Deidrickson's car insurance, was pulling through the gate and he went out to meet them. He put on the smile of a board-certified psychiatrist who doesn't know a thing about cars but is going to fake it in the hopes of not being cheated. He explained, as if repeating verbatim what some car-savvy acquaintance just told him, that it must be the alternator. It was the third time in as many months that a battery had up and died on him, so it really must be a problem with the alternator. He smiled again as if to assure the driver that he knew exactly what all those words meant, and whatever an alternator was and however much it cost, he wasn't going to pay any more than that, so don't get any ideas. The driver told him to get in the truck. There was a bus stop not far from the garage, or he could call a cab from there...

At 12:39, with the cab ordered, Eddie stood in Marty's tiny office while a grainy news report on a muted black-and-white TV taunted him with the cryptic headline: HEIST AT ZEITGEIST. The crawl underneath was almost impossible to read, but he definitely saw the word priceless and that was all he needed to confirm his instinct. He asked Marty if he could make another call and started dialing without waiting for an answer. He closed his eyes and prayed she hadn't changed her number. It rang, rang, then picked up...

...:You have reached Doris Ingerson,;... a woman's voice began, a voice that was not Doris but which Eddie recognized just as well. ...:I can't come to the phone right now as the police have just picked me up for questioning. If you'd like to leave a message, that's really not going to do me much good. If you want to make yourself useful, then listen carefully: Evidence is the key to my freedom. I can't escape like some Arkham loon. Reason is going to be important. She's going to give you the runaround. And if you still need to hear Robbie or the liar, then I am really in trouble. Start at the hotel;...:

CHAPTER 6: SAWDUST

People who only knew Gotham from the movies usually thought of the midtown streets clustered with yellow taxis. In the city proper, it was easy to get one. Unless it was raining, of course. Or rush hour. Or the hour when tourists lined up to travel the few blocks between their hotels and the theatre district that any sensible native would walk.

That was Gotham-proper. In the surrounding boroughs like Mifflin where Marty's Garage was located, you had to call and order one. If the call came in before 3 pm, Juana would be the dispatcher, and since Marty's wasn't that far from Arkham, she would offer the fare to Mahmoud first and only put out a general call if he was busy. Most drivers didn't want to go anywhere near Arkham. What if the fare turned out to be an escaped lunatic? It was a problem. For Marty's more than for most businesses and residents within a twenty-mile radius of the asylum it was a problem, since the nature of a *mechanic* is that his customers were stuck there because *their cars didn't work*. Mahmoud was always happy to take those calls. His son had an overbite and an interest in chemistry. His daughter was a prodigy who would cry when she was ordered to put away her viola for the night and go to bed. The orthodontist, the college fund and the viola lessons were realities. The notion of Hannibal Lecter getting into his cab one day was nothing but an extremely improbable what-if. That was his thought as he pulled into Marty's and saw a nervy man with thinning hair waiting in the parking lot.

"Times Square," he said, getting in.

The voice did have an anxious high-pitched crackle, but that didn't mean a dangerous lunatic. A broken down car could be a traumatic experience, particularly if you were looking at hundreds or thousands in repair costs. The guy was having a bad day, that's all.

"Times Square," Mahmoud confirmed, pulling out of the lot.

The destination was unusual. Native Gothamites avoided the Square if they could, and those who didn't actually work at the Gotham Times, the Disney Store, or passing out leaflets to the line outside the TKTS booth could be remarkably inventive finding ways to avoid it.

"Got people in from out of town?" Mahmoud guessed.

"Hm?" the passenger said, distracted.

"Times Square. You got someone in from out of town you going to meet there?"

"Yes, someone to meet there," the fare muttered.

At first, Mahmoud took the snappish tone as a dismissal. One of those who didn't want to be bothered with chitchat from a driver. He planned to say no more, but then the fare spoke again and Mahmoud guessed it was the out-of-town visitor the guy was irked at.

"There's a hotel with robots, isn't there?" he asked.

“The Yotel Hotel,” Mahmoud said, announcing the name with the faux-enthusiasm he used when delivering tourists there from the airport. Then he resumed with between-us-natives good humor. “Not directly in the Square, but close. Wait ‘til you see it, looks like the Mir Station mated with an Apple Store.”

You couldn’t devise riddles that had a chance of flummoxing Batman without knowing a thing or two about solving them. Edward Nigma knew as much as any man alive. He knew how to approach a conundrum, and more importantly, he knew the mistakes all but the cleverest were apt to make. Consider: *A man lies dead in a circle of sawdust. Beside him are two pieces of wood...* The sawdust was there to tell you the scene took place at a circus. That’s all it was there for. Once you’d done “*Are we at the circus?/Yes*” you could forget the damn sawdust. Yet the brain-teased would always continue: *Is there a saw nearby? Did he kill himself with a saw? Did the sawdust come from the pieces of wood?* On and on, with the poor fool who posed the query unable to answer anything but Yes or No. The poor fool who only wanted to sit around a campfire enjoying his s’mores without hearing about another maniac with a hook for a hand or the ghost of the Civil War deserter known for snatching souls from this very wood.

Eddie knew it was a trap all but the cleverest riddlees fell into, yet there he was, replaying the message from Doris’s answering machine over and over in his head:

Evidence is the key to my freedom. I can’t escape like some Arkham loon. Reason is going to be important. She’s going to give you the runaround. And if you still need to hear Robbie or the liar, then I am really in trouble. Start at the hotel.

Evidence, Escape, Reason, Runaround, Robbie, Liar. All stories from the Isaac Asimov collection *I, Robot*.

That’s it. He solved the riddle; he got the clue those words were meant to deliver. He could forget it now. “*Forget the goddamn sawdust!*” his inner puzzler screamed. He had an interminable cab ride ahead of him—driving into Midtown at this time of day—he had an interminable cab ride when there was absolutely nothing he could get done. Just like those weeks since Selina, the hellacious hellcat, had come to him at Arkham and thrown down the gauntlet. How many times had he replayed *that* conversation? Dissected each word, each pause, each inflection? The chess set, the Repo and Houg lair, it was all setting the stage to deliver the blow “*Are you at all aware that Doris is back in town*” repeating his exact words to Batman. That’s all it meant. It was payback for that night. Payback for Bane. There was no hidden meaning in the order she’d taken pieces from her loot sack: Mr. Freeze first, Poison Ivy last. There was no significance to her mentioning the Z. She had to explain how she came into possession of the chess set, that’s all it meant.

Maybe. He still wasn’t sure.

“The Z have been doing a lot of work for me, stripping all those places you took from Falcone and converting them to whatever I tell them to.”

What if she dropped the name intentionally? The Z. Was it the first round of what he considered an Iocane Powder Puzzle? An I-know-that-you-know-that-I-know-that-you-know mobius strip that is the true test of the gaming intellect. She dropped the

name of the Z; she said they were doing a lot of work for her. So on the surface, he shouldn't use them to set up a lair before escaping. They would tell her, and she would know when he was planning to escape and where he would be as soon as he was free. He *could* use the Z to set up a decoy lair, so she would think she knew where he was, but she really wouldn't. Except she knew she dropped their name, so she would *guess* the lair was a decoy. That would actually make the decoy lair the safest possible place to go. Unless that's exactly what she was expecting, since she knew that he knew she dropped the name intentionally and would therefore be using them to set up a decoy... Definitely an Iocane Powder Puzzle.

The only response he could think of to say "Z's Gambit Declined" was to have them set up a store front with the name **Io Canes and Walking Sticks**, using his own signature cane as the logo. Underneath that sign would be an actual store, not a camouflaged lair, and that store would sell nothing but scratching posts, cat bowls, cat collars and catnip mice. It was an expensive gesture, more than he would have spent on Batman if he'd been the one to come to Arkham and throw down that gauntlet, but then Batman never would have done that, would he? Guys don't.

Now the whole question of his non-lair was academic because the precious puss was giving him the runaround.

And if you still need to hear Robbie or the liar, then I am really in trouble. Start at the hotel.

STOP THAT!

Evidence is the key to my freedom. I can't escape like some Arkham loon.

He had to get his mind off of this or he would be apoplectic by the time he reached that hotel.

"Driver," he said in desperation, "You like riddles? A man lies dead in a circle of sawdust, and there's two pieces of wood lying next to him..."

Selina found Bruce in the library, reading. Whiskers was curled on the sofa next to him, leaning against his leg, while Bruce pretended not to notice but petted the cat absently between page-turns. Whiskers appeared to be keeping time with the tip of his tail: back and forth, back and forth, and every ten cycles... petting stops, page turn...

Selina smiled, taking in the scene before shoving the cat away and taking his place.

"It's started," she announced. "Arkham doesn't know he's gone yet, but the message on the answering machine has been played. Eight times." She beamed. "Now we'll see how long it takes him to figure out the hotel. I can see why he enjoys this. I don't know why you never thought of it!"

"I have, I just wouldn't do it for his benefit," Bruce said mildly.

"I'm not doing it to entertain him; it's payback. Dreaming up puzzles that will make him pull what's left of his hair out. It's not too late if you want in."

"No thank you," he said with a lip twitch.

"You'll enjoy it," she said enticingly, letting her fingers walk around his shirt collar as she continued. "How many times have we done this? I invite, you refuse, I suggest, you scowl, I propose, you dig in... and when you *finally* come around and try it, you wind up *loving* it."

“Oh, like you and crimefighting,” he said, anticipating the ‘Jackass’ and smack it would provoke and intercepting her wrist, using her momentum against her to draw her hand up and behind her to pin it finally at the small of her back without either of them moving from their seated position.

“Selina, how long after Arkham discovers the escape do you expect Batman to ignore the situation?” he asked without releasing her. “It’s true that I don’t always answer the signal if I’m busy on a case or off-world with the League. But knowing the dangerous escaped lunatic—”

“Eddie?”

“—doesn’t pose a threat because you’re running him all over town on an insane scavenger hunt?”

“Might just be good for him. You know ‘Payback’ may not have the high moral resonance of ‘Justice,’ but it has a lot of the same moving parts and sometimes it gets the job done. Bat-fists and Arkham haven’t been much of a deterrent, so why not give this a try?”

“Selina, you’re not wrong, but... Doris. It’s really hitting him where he lives.”

“I know. That’s why I’m doing it. Bruce, I didn’t start this fight and neither did you. I didn’t pick this battlefield and neither did you. He did. He made it personal. If he can’t take what he’s been dishing out... Now, I’ve tried it. I’ve committed ‘riddle.’ And I’m telling you, it is fun. I can see why he enjoys it. I think *you* would enjoy it. So I am asking, partner of mine, if you would like to play. He’s done it to you enough times. See what the view’s like on the other side of the question mark.”

Mahmoud Molokhya. Eddie pocketed the card as he walked into the hotel, deciding he’d rather use the driver again than take his chances hopping into the first taxi that stopped when he was ready to leave. The guy was a find, one of that rare and precious species he liked to call *non-idiot*s. Not only did Mahmoud play along with the circle of sawdust riddle despite having heard it before, the reason he’d heard it was because he had a kid who liked puzzles. A kid who liked puzzles *and* chemistry *and* knew what he called a chemistry riddle: *What do you do with a sick chemist? If you can’t helium and you can’t curium, you might as well barium.*

Mahmoud, on the other hand, actually knew that was a *joke* and not a riddle, and that a real chemistry riddle—this guy who was *driving a cab*—knew that a real chemistry *riddle* would be something like the atomic structure of quasicrystals. “The puzzle that boy in Sweden helped his father solve a few months back.”

Eddie was beside himself. Here was a man who had heard of Linus Hovmöller, the 11-year old son of a University of Stockholm chemistry professor who noticed he had a talent spotting patterns when he played Sudoku, who gave his son a chemistry puzzle that had been stumping him... for... for... Eddie’s excitement vaporized. He realized any non-idiot picking up a stranger ten miles from Arkham who then proceeded to talk about puzzles the whole ride into Gotham would have to realize that passenger was the Riddler. Facing the danger head on, Eddie asked what Mahmoud meant to do about it.

His answer? “My name is Mahmoud Molokhya. My skin is brown, I have a beard, I speak with the accent of my father who was Egyptian and I’ve been talking about advanced chemistry. You afraid of me?” Eddie shook his head and Mahmoud shrugged. “You don’t make assumptions about me; I don’t make assumptions about you.”

Definitely a non-idiot, and Eddie needed all the non-idiot allies he could get right now. So he gave Mahmoud a generous tip, asked for his card, pulled a few more bills off the roll and told him to consider himself on retainer. Mahmoud could hang out at a pizza joint down the street—**Joe’s Favorite Slice** (which anagrammed into a number of phrases that included ‘Solve it,’ a good omen if ever there was one—and Eddie would call when he was ready to go. Mahmoud left. Eddie turned to face the imposing doors before him and returned his mind to the task at hand: *Evidence is the key to my freedom... Start at the hotel.*

There was no human staff in the lobby. There were check-in kiosks to the left, elevators straight ahead, and to the right: a robot bellhop. That’s why Eddie was here. “Yobot,” the Robotic Luggage Concierge, had been in the news briefly when the place first opened. The large, white robot arm resided behind a glass wall, with another wall of compartments behind it that looked like oversized safe deposit boxes. Next to the glass was a station with a touch screen and a big rectangular opening framed by neon lights that looked like an oven on the Starship Enterprise. When prompted by a command at the touch screen, the robot arm came to life, swung this way and that until it had retrieved a storage bin from one of the coded compartments, and placed it in the glass wall side of the starship oven. The hotel guest stored or retrieved his luggage, and with another prompt from the touch screen, Yobot returned the storage bin to its compartment.

Hmph.

Eddie pursed his lips. *I, Robot* to come here, deliver clues through that, it was a clever idea and he really wished he’d thought of it. He spent a few minutes deciding how he would do it better. Selina thought she was so clever, but she did nothing with the fact that “I” rhymes with “Why,” which is a question. So if you punned the clue and made it “*Why, Robot*” which is phonetically Y-Robot or Yobot. Yes! That’s how a truly clever gamester would go about it. Stupid cat.

By which time he’d watched a few guests come and go, storing and retrieving their bags, and realized a bar-coded receipt or Name/PIN combination was required to retrieve a bin. So that was the next puzzle.

He looked around, and took a ride up and down in an elevator just to eliminate it. There were three things in the lobby: the Yobot, the check-in kiosks, and the elevators. He was fairly sure the check-in was the place to go next, but it would be just like that scheming little hellcat to put the clue in the elevator so he’d spend hours at the kiosks trying to solve a puzzle that wasn’t there. It was worth two minutes of his time riding up and down in the elevator to avoid that...

Like everything else in the Yotel, the elevator looked like something from a science fiction set, but there was no clue to be found there. He went back to the lobby and approached a check-in kiosk like a gunslinger at the OK Corral.

-Do you have a reservation?- It began, and Eddie couldn't help imaging the voice of the HAL 9000 reading it aloud. Yes and No appeared on the touch screen, and it only made sense to try yes.

-Name?- It asked, and a keyboard appeared on the screen.

Isaac Asimov, he tried.

-It would fill my robot soul with joy to check-in the great Isaac Asimov as a guest, but it is a pleasure I will never know since he died in 1992.-

-Name?-

Figures. They had a programmed response for the most likely name a prankster would enter.

Karel Capek, he tried.

-It would fill my robot soul with joy to check-in Karel Capek as a guest, but it is a pleasure I will never know since he died in 1938.-

-Name?-

That was a little more impressive. Any barely literate geek knew Asimov, but how many knew the Czech playwright who coined the term 'robot' in the first place? It was beginning to look like robot-themed science fiction guesses wouldn't work. Perhaps he was looking at it the wrong way. This nightmare was Selina's doing. What name would she use to... Hm, maybe.

Bruce Wayne

-No reservation exists.-

Okay, progress. At least now he knew what a regular non-joking response looked like.

Bane

-No reservation exists.-

Albert Einstein

-No reservation exists.-

Fate's Bitch

-No reservation exists.-

Vince Turner

-Reservation Found. 2 Nights Prepaid. Please select the number of keycards needed.-

It worked! On only five tries. Oh, 'Lina, you didn't really think you could challenge the prince of puzzlers and win, did you?

He touched the square for one keycard. The mechanism whizzed and whirred and eventually slid out a thin wedge of plastic.

-You have 1 bag checked with YOBOT. Would you like to retrieve?-

"Yes," he said aloud as he touched the word with a flourish.

-Enter PIN-

"Bitch!" he barked at the screen, bringing looks from one or two people, and causing a tourist-mom to clamp her hands over her son's ears.

"Yeah, like you don't have HBO at home," Eddie grumbled, returning his attention to the kiosk. He tried a few pins: the last digits of Doris's phone number, the last digits of his own, and then gave up and took the keycard. The next puzzle would be in his room.

"Vince Turner, that was obvious," Bruce said.

At first, he and Selina had cuddled on a sofa in the library to follow the action on her laptop, but when they saw what Barbara had set up for them, they decided to go down to the cave to watch on the big screen. All Selina had asked for was a simple hack to notify her when the Turner reservation was accessed. Instead, Barbara hacked the lobby cameras as well as the hotel mainframe, *and* the kiosk cameras, *and* she rigged up a subvert to display a transparent mirror image of the kiosk screen superimposed over the camera feed, so it would appear to Bruce and Selina like they were inside the kiosk looking out at Nigma typing in his guesses.

"Why would she do all this?" Selina had asked. "It's not like Eddie is the Joker, she has no grudge against him that I'm aware of."

Bruce's lip twitched.

"You really don't know? I should probably let Jim tell you himself, but that dinner with the mayor went even better than we realized. He got the call Tuesday."

"Well that's great and I'll act surprised when he tells me," she smiled. "But credit where credit is due, it was Alfred's leg of lamb and half a bottle of Chateaufort-du-Pape that put him in such a good mood. All I did was send the invitation."

"You did a lot more than that. He said you were *very* charming."

"I listened to him talk about the Belmont Stakes and being the butt of all those jokes on the Daily Show, the horrors of oversized sodas, and how we should all go back to calling it Knights Stadium because 'Live from Gotham Stadium in Gotham City' sounds stupid. Announcers don't like to say it and we get short-changed on the network bumpers on every home game."

"Selina, look where we are and remember who you are talking to. Imagine the mask on if it will help, and think about how many times I've been on the receiving end of your charms. You went to work the moment that man walked in the door, and by the time the soup was served, you had him eating out of your hand."

"Well, I'm glad it worked out," she said. "But even so, Barbara didn't have to do all this—oh look, here he comes."

They had watched on the lobby camera as Eddie worked out the mechanics of the hotel's operation, then switched to the kiosk-view as soon as he started trying aliases.

"Vince Turner, that was obvious," Bruce said dryly.

"It wasn't supposed to be hard," Selina laughed. "I don't want him spending all day on the preshow. Even so, he guessed *you* and then *Bane* before he got it. Gotta wonder what's going on inside that brain of his."

You had to wonder what went on inside the brain of the guy who built this place. That was Eddie's thought as he went down the hall to his room. He couldn't decide if it was meant to resemble an airport or an airplane. It was undeniably cool, but undeniably strange. He reached his room, opened the door—and realized why all the hotel literature referred to the rooms as cabins. It was small. Ship's cabin small. Airplane toilet small.

There was an appropriately futuristic “Techno-Wall” (otherwise known as an LCD TV with shelves around it and its remote sitting on the bottom shelf in a special cradle). Eddie took this and turned on the TV, although he didn’t think it was likely to broadcast a special message just for him. He did it to check the remote, examined the buttons for some clue that might reveal the pin, and even went so far as to remove the battery. That would be a great place to hide a message.

The bed folded out—automatically, at another button touch—taking up what little space remained to move from the door to the window. He looked in the folding mechanism, then searched the pillows and sheets. Finding nothing, he folded it up again.

There was a desk to plug in a laptop. Free wifi. A small bathroom, shower, sink, a little ironing board and iron, hairdryer, and... *Hello, Selina*. There was a *safe*. A laptop safe according to its label. It also wanted a PIN to open. Eddie cursed and continued his search. The ‘closet’ was a free-standing bar with a few hangars positioned over a drawer for clothes. Nothing there but a bible. He was about to check the toiletries in the shower to see if there was a hidden message on the labels... when he froze. He looked slowly back at the drawer with the bible, opened it gently as if he was afraid of waking the sleeping book, and looked down, unable to suppress a smile. It wasn’t a bible, it was a leather-bound copy of *I, Robot*.

“Evidence is the key,” he said aloud, opening the book and running his finger down the table of contents. Evidence... page 144. That couldn’t be right. The Yobot wanted four digits, but—Eddie’s eyes snapped up with rat-like cunning as he looked towards the laptop safe.

“1-4-4,” he said aloud as he pushed the keys. The display bar above the keys lit, he heard a click, and the door opened. Inside sat a Wayne Tech laptop.

“Evidence is the key? That’s cute,” Bruce said when she told him.

“You don’t think it’s too easy?” Selina purred.

“It’s not like I have years of Catwoman riddles to measure it against,” he graveled.

“But if it were from him?”

“Too easy.”

“And too easy means?”

“It’s a trap.”

THAT CONNIVING HELLCAT!

Absolutely nothing happened when Eddie powered up the laptop. It was dead the way they shut down at the core for safety when the battery is completely drained. There was no power supply or a/c cord, and he couldn’t believe he was simply meant to go out into Times Square to pay 6X retail at some tourist trap electronics store. If this was The Revenge of Cluerissa, the Idiot Groupie, that would be the answer. But this was Selina. And Selina’s ideas of revenge—as he knew from the very Bane episode that got him into this—were more elaborate, passionate, poetic and painful.

“Are you *at all aware* that Doris is back in town...” Repeating his *exact* words to Batman.

Followed by weeks to do nothing but wonder. How he tried to hope *that* was her revenge, the torture of not knowing, day after day from waking to sleeping, as he raced to get himself free. How he tried to convince himself that was her plan, that he would spend those days analyzing every nuance of her visit, dreaming up far worse scenarios in his imagination than anything she could think up on her own.

“In costume and committing theme crimes...”

He reached for the remote, thinking to turn on GCN and hoping he could get something from that HEIST AT ZEITGEIST story when it cycled around—when he stopped and looked down at the laptop. The laptop which was *lighter* than the TV remote. He worked furiously to open the casing and found it—That Conniving Hellcat!—empty.

Except for —That Conniving Hellcat!— an envelope of pale, lavender stationery. Scented. He opened it, and the faint tickle of vanilla and honeysuckle grew stronger as he slid out a thick, perfumed notecard.

You didn't think it was going to be that easy, it read in Selina's confident, flowing hand.

“Sure, *now* you act like a Rogue,” Eddie said, glaring down at the taunt. Then he stopped to consider... Selina was a Rogue. She *wasn't* some airhead like Cluerissa, she knew the rules. She knew them better than anybody, because he had *explained them* on *numerous occasions*. The intricacies of his personal rules in leaving clues for Batman—she knew! She knew you had to cover the check. “Evidence is the key.” *I, Robot* in the room and Evidence is the key. It wasn't enough to let that lead to a false trail, it had to in some way lead to the actual...

He dove across the bed and tore open the drawer, clawed at the book until he reached page 144.

He breathed.

There it was. She knew the rules, and there it was. Wedged into the very center of the crease on page 144: a thin receipt on onionskin paper bearing the Yotel logo and the word YOBOT.

“Aha! Take that you Voltage Beggar Lout,” he said, racing for the door. In the elevator he repeated to himself “Yobot the *robot luggage valet* is a voltage beggar lout.” When he reached the lobby, he varied it to a Voltage El Gag Turbo, but that didn't make any sense, so when he reached the claim kiosk, he merely said “Good evening, Yobot,” and ignored the stare of the same tourist who had clamped her hands over her child's ears.

He fed his receipt into the little slot beneath the touch screen, and the robot arm sprang to life, swinging into position in front of the appropriate bin, clamping onto the handle and pulling it out. It contorted to lower the bin and slid it out through the access pod for Eddie to retrieve its contents. A large, canvas suitcase in Riddler green.

“Lina, you shouldn't have,” he said, lifting it out. He touched the kiosk to tell it he was finished and didn't bother watching Yobot returning the empty bin to its place. He practically skipped back to the elevator, and even the specter of the tourist woman getting into the car with him couldn't dampen his spirits.

“Isn't it a lovely day?” he announced brightly, hoping to scare her.

“Mhm,” she said, with a wary look.

“You really must go see *Mamma Mia*,” he said, remembering the last time he laid low at a tourist hotel. He had no idea if *Mamma Mia* was still playing, but that didn’t stop him from humming *Dancing Queen* until the woman got off on her floor.

Returning to his room, he opened the suitcase...

“I imagine he’ll be feeling pretty good about himself by then,” Selina mused.

She had that look, from the rooftops. The way her breath parted her lips on the words “just this once.” The way her eyelids dipped as she blinked. The way her head tilted ever so subtly hinting at the kisses that could be his. He had an impulse to touch those lips, but he squelched it as he had then. She could be... so wicked.

Eddie’s breath escaped him in a quick, ragged pant, as if he’d been sucker punched.

He had opened the suitcase and had the contents unpacked on the bed. There was a change of clothes, a WayneTech tablet (which powered up fine) and a file folder that looked like a police file, except instead of manila or dark brown cardstock it was made of thick, black plastic. Though he’d never been in the Batcave, Eddie had no doubt, he was looking at a Batman file.

He opened it—and there was Doris staring up at him. Doris in a mask. Doris in a mask and Playboy bunny ears. Doris in a mask and Playboy bunny ears with her hands on some Gotham Post artist’s idea of a Batman costume and ICK! ICK-ICK-ICK-ICK-ICK!

His long ago words to Selina had never seemed so uselessly stupid and hollow. “It’s a tabloid. Nobody with an ounce of intelligence believes that shit... At the end of the day, it’s just another What-The-Fuck Moment from our Friendly Neighborhood What-Fuckers.” Bullshit!

She looked good. Boy did she look good. He started wondering if she’d lost weight or if the Post shaved off an inch here and there the way they do magazine ads—then he started hyperventilating at the thought of some artist asshole at the Gotham Post PHOTOSHOPPING DORIS! Rubbing his CURSOR over her HIP and deciding there was too much of it and he’d just SHAVE A LITTLE OFF!!!!

He reconsidered Selina’s righteous and just ideas about revenge. What was it she said that one time at the Iceberg—if she ever got “the tap” from the Star Sapphire—the Gotham Post enveloped in a big Catwoman-Purple mushroom cloud, that was it, YES! RIGHT! But not Catwoman purple. A nice Riddler Green mushroom cloud that would then rise up and reshape into a question mark and drip nice yellow dots down onto the atomic shadow of whatever nincompoop of a Gotham Post asshole decided Doris wasn’t absolutely perfect the way she was.

He huffed.

He puffed.

He panted.

And he went to the sink to splash his face off before continuing.

Then he dried his hands, returned to the folder, and primly refolded Doris, placed her gently on the left 'read' side of the folder, and continued with the pages on the right.

There were a series of crime reports... Hey, she was calling herself Cognitive Dissonance, wasn't that cute? And she scored a Faberge her first time out. Good girl! And a silk robe Greta Garbo wore in *Grand Hotel*...

His eyes continued to skim the page, but his mind took a little side trip, imagining Doris arriving home at the lair after that particular score and modeling the robe for him. He liked Garbo, and Doris had much the same coloring...

He realized he hadn't the slightest idea what he just read and had to go back and reread... oh my. She also took the gloves Garbo wore in *Ninotchka* and incunabula seized by the Red Army.

Eddie looked around the room with a pleased-but-embarrassed smile which slowly morphed into a broad Just-Got-Laid grin. Faberge, Grusinskaya, Ninotchka, the Red Army—all Russia.

"That's my Puzzle Muffin," he said, barely able to hold back the tears.

"But you didn't give him a real file from the cave," Bruce said in a just-checking tone that meant it wasn't really a question.

"Of course not, I just used one of your file-folders. To rub salt," Selina said with a smile. "Then there's a handwritten sheet in my writing analyzing CogDi like a crimefighter, noting her preference for Russian items and speculating—"

"No," he winced. "Please tell me you didn't go into why she's going after Russian things."

"No, I just listed other targets she might go for."

"Ah," Bruce said, looking relieved.

"Forget what I said about analyzing her like a crimefighter. Bad choice of words, I concede that I have no idea what that means. I approached it like the database I made for the Foundation Bandit, identified three things she could go after. Item 1 is ballerina Nolzhenko's pearls and they're a little out of her reach. She'd have to get help from a much more accomplished and knowledgeable thief. And then there's a still from a traffic camera Barbara snagged for me with the two of us window shopping in SoHo."

"After that, there's nothing for him to do but examine the tablet."

The video began with an image that should have surprised him, but didn't. Catwoman in a cat lair, sitting at her desk with the Rogue chess set between her and the camera. She was playing black, her queen was mid-board, threatening a lone white pawn.

"Hello, Eddie. I won't insult your intelligence by explaining the obvious. The police are holding Doris for the Zeitgeist robbery. They haven't charged her. Yet. Which means if you get to the evidence before they do—or before they convince her to do

something silly like confess—then you get to be the hero of the hour. Otherwise I'm afraid it's theft of cultural property, a federal charge and a stint in a federal prison far from Arkham."

She leaned forward and scowled into the camera before concluding:

"Riddle me this, riddle me that. Expect to get scratched if you fuck with a cat. This vid will self-delete in five seconds. Four. Three. Two..."

Rather than going dark, the image froze, shrunk slightly, and broke up into twenty-five squares on a five-by-five grid. These began to flicker, displaying other images—partial images—that did not make up the same whole. Eddie's eyes widened as he realized he was looking at a jigsaw puzzle where each piece was perfectly interchangeable, the same size and the same shape – and a *slideshow*. Square A-1 of Image 1 might be C-5 of Image 2 and D-2 of Image 3—worse! It might be D-2 of Image 3 on a 90-degree angle.

His head tipped back and he took a deep breath. He could do this. It was for Doris, of course he could do this. He had been training his whole life for this. No *cat burglar* could present him with a puzzle he couldn't solve. He took a few more deep breaths, rubbed his hands together and quickly mastered the mechanics of the puzzle. One tap and then slide into position to swap with another piece. Two taps turned it in place 90 degrees. Once he got two pieces aligned that contained slides that belonged side by side, tapping the seam between them froze them on the matching frames. Ha! In twenty minutes he had an image—and almost wished he hadn't.

Tarot cards. An unpleasant reminder of an episode that occurred right after he figured out Batman's identity—though of course Selina had no way of knowing that. It seemed even luck was on the hellcat's side—an ironic twist in that he thought luck was on his side when he learned Bane was in town before anyone else knew.

Tarot cards, of all the—Luck was certainly NOT on his side when he took refuge behind Madame Keila's green door that time. The advertisement that had seemed so promising "Got questions?" leading to nothing but a bargain basement horoscope & palm reading outfit. The place stank of sauerkraut, incense and weed, but Keila did make a pun when she asked if he wanted a fortune and there had been such a mix of good and bad whirling around him since he figured out Batman's secret, he thought he could blow twenty bucks on a reading.

The deck before him now was very different in design, but The Devil still had those bat wings that plagued him at that first reading. There was an Emperor card as well—wearing *purple*. The High Priestess was pleasingly in green, a detail he would have enjoyed more if there wasn't a *cat* sitting beside her. There was a Chariot, Magician, a Seven of Cups that had a heart in the center with an arrow through it, and (predictably) The Lovers.

Eddie's heart thumped. He was no expert in tarot. He used the imagery twice in riddles, and both times he had to look up the meanings and promptly forgot once the crime spree had run its course. All he remembered now was that Death meant change, not literal death, and that the Two of Wands should have told Batman to search for hidden options (but that idiot Robin wouldn't give up the idea that it had something to do with the second book of Harry Potter introducing the character Tom Riddle.)

And neither of those cards were here.

He jotted down a few notes and started rearranging the pieces again. As soon as he separated two, they flickered and resumed the slideshow. It took him another twenty minutes to discover a second image, and he hurriedly dialed Mahmoud and ordered a pick up in front of the hotel asap.

Mahmoud was a non-idiot, so when they reached the South Side train station, Eddie decided to confide in him.

"Two sets of eyes are better than one and I'm fighting the clock. I have to find this exact spot."

He pointed to the jigsaw picture, solved and frozen on the tablet. It was certainly a boarding platform. The name of the station was clearly etched on the railing.

"No number visible," Mahmoud said. "It's not going to be easy."

"The graffiti on the back wall," Eddie said. "We can match that, easy."

"We can match it, sure, but I wouldn't say it's easy. If the place were empty, sure, but with the trains passing in front of the walls, it's going to take some doing to spot those particular letters."

"That's why I'm asking for help," Eddie said, though it seemed to Mahmoud that he wanted to say more.

They split up and searched. Most people came and went. Those who didn't became landmarks: the homeless guy, the street musician, the gal dealing three-card monte and the guy looking to pick up runaways. It was Mahmoud who found the graffiti between the second and the third.

"There, on the back wall," he showed Eddie. "I and a space, T and a longer space, then the A O L A evenly spaced, just like in your picture."

Eddie nodded and moved around to find the spot where he had the exact view to match the photo. He had to pause while a train passed, but then satisfied himself that he was standing at the very point where the picture was taken. He looked around, and a train passed going the other way.

The musician collected the money tossed into his open case and started a new set.

There were no anagrams to be had from the letters, he knew that already. He looked around for some clue to add from the surroundings. Or something here that referenced something in the tarot cards.

Another train passed—a long one—and while Eddie waited, he looked around irritably and saw Mahmoud throwing away part of that indecently large tip into the musician's open violin case.

Eddie stormed over to berate him as he would a dumb henchman, but before he started, Mahmoud started talking excitedly:

"Look at this, electric violin. First, he lays down the chords, plays it back in a loop, then he taps out a rhythm, adds the percussion base. You hear that? The layers. Playing all alone, he has three layers."

Eddie's face fell.

"Layers," he hissed, looking back at the graffiti wall with the train passing in front. "Layers," he repeated. "It's a time puzzle. We only have one-third of the message."

The other two are on *trains*. Don't you see? That's why the letters are spaced so strangely. It's not enough to know where to be, we have to know when. Only at the exact moment when both trains are passing in front of us, one going east, one going west, will all the letters line up."

"Hey, that's pretty good," Mahmoud chuckled.

"Yes, it is," Eddie said under his breath. "That bitch."

"How do you know what time?"

Eddie sighed, walked to a spot behind the musician where the performer blocked pedestrian traffic, and tuned out his surroundings until he had solved another picture. A still from a black and white movie of bejeweled Katalya Nolzhenko playing Salomé in her pearls... useless. Then a picture of a clock! Aha! A fine old mantle clock set to... (he squinted) ... 5:17.

Rats. It was a long time to wait around a crowded train station and do nothing. It wasn't much time if he wanted to leave and get the photographic equipment necessary for safety. High speed camera, test it on a few other trains to make sure he had the angle right—it was going to be only a split second, after all, when he could see through the windows of the first train to the second and through the second into... wait a minute... how would that work exactly? The front train would obscure the second and both would block the back wall. It wasn't a timing puzzle, it was an impossible puzzle. There was no way to see all three sets of letters at the same moment when they were all together. There was no way...

By now, the musician was on his fourth set, and Mahmoud had taken over the looped percussion and was tapping out the rhythm on an improvised drum as he chatted on and off with the musician in the periods when nobody was stopping to listen to them play. Eddie watched for a second, his focus narrowing on Mahmoud's hands. Long-short-long-long—He knew this—Short-long-short-short—Short-long-short-short—YELL, o should be next—long-long-long—YES!

"Yellow what? Yellow what?" Eddie cried, charging at the violinist and grabbing him by the shoulders. Chaos ensued while Mahmoud pulled Eddie off the musician, the musician coddled his violin and checked for damage, the three-card monte gal tried to take the tip money from his case, Eddie tried to kick her in the face while yelling frantically at Mahmoud that the drumbeat was Morse code and the *real* message hidden at this location.

When the dust settled, three-card monte gal had been driven from the platform—into an oncoming train, the musician hoped—and Mahmoud hurried Eddie outside in case the incident brought any police. When they got back to his cab, Mahmoud tapped out the percussion on the side of the car, just as he had learned it. The full message consisted of two words: Yellow Iris.

A part of Eddie's mind began dissecting the word—there was the obvious; it was a *flower*, there were anagrams containing "Lie," etc. The rest of him considered Mahmoud the way he would a henchman who was just a little too lucky or a little too curious, or for some other reason, beginning to look like a Bat-plant.

"Lucky how you just happened to click with that guy," he said suspiciously.

The reaction was not like that of a henchman, planted or otherwise.

"I was curious about that instrument of his," Mahmoud said. "Electronic violin. I asked what it cost, if there's an electric viola, if a little girl who played the viola could pick up the violin."

"A little girl?" Eddie asked, noting a hand moving to Mahmoud's pocket that somehow he didn't think was going to be pulling a gun. Sure enough, out came the wallet, and then the picture. A little girl with a viola that seemed nearly as big as she was, and then a few years older joined by the boy who knew chemistry jokes that he thought were riddles.

"Now you know why I don't call the police," Mahmoud said, meeting Eddie's eye. "Femi will go to Juilliard. She'll need a much better instrument than she has now."

Eddie wished he had a wallet with Doris's picture. Some nice snapshot of the two of them sitting together at a table at the Iceberg, even dancing at Jonathan Crane's Halloween party. Instead, all he could do was unfold a weeks-old copy of the Gotham Post and assure his new friend that bunny ears and the rest were the embellishments of newspaper pinheads that just couldn't help themselves."

"She has very nice eyes," Mahmoud said, picking the one detail that seemed safe.

"Help me save her and we'll get your daughter a Stradivarius," Eddie said.

Mahmoud smiled. "My friend, she's as good as saved."

An hour later, they stood beneath the sign for *Yellow Iris: A DIY Perfumery*. They looked up at the sign, they looked at each other, they looked at the sign again.

"Edward, do you remember earlier when I said 'She's as good as saved'?"

"I do," said Eddie.

The door opened, a woman came out and walked between them, smelling like a sugar cookie.

"I may have jumped the gun," said Mahmoud.

CHAPTER 7: TAROT

When Joan Pittman got the job at Yellow Iris, she thought the owner was joking when he asked if she wanted to use her own name. It wasn't until she forgot her nametag and borrowed the one left by her predecessor—called Ginseng—that she realized why. She made almost 30% more than she had on her best day as Joan. So she remained Ginseng for a few weeks, just as a test, and since the improvement in tips and commissions continued, she kept it. After month she started to experiment. She tried Merlot and then Chablis but found no improvement. Anise, Anisette and Chevril were all better than Joan but not as good as Ginseng. Silver, Pearl and Ruby were failures and soured her on the idea of jewelry. Finally she returned to the spice rack, so it was “Saffron” who shot a Be-With-You-In-A-Minute Smile at the unlikely pair of customers who had come through the door with such determination and now looked around so uncertainly.

“It could be worse,” Eddie said gamely.

“How do you figure?” asked Mahmoud.

“Tea rooms, lingerie stores. There are more... *frilly* places she could have sent us.” He said this touching a display counter carefully, with just the tip of his finger, as if testing that it wouldn't emit billows of candy floss genii smoke and transport them into some nightmare of pink and pastel feminine frippery and other alliterations meant to make a man's eyes bleed.

No such transformation occurred, and Eddie repeated his assertion that it really could be worse. If Selina's aim was to make him uncomfortable in an embarrassingly feminine place, she could have done a lot worse than Yellow Iris. With its highly polished black floors and counters, black and white shelves stocked with rows of clear, uniform bottles, it was really quite chic. More like a space age apothecary or an upscale mad scientist's lab than a perfumery. Even the salesgirl who greeted them seemed on the normal side.

“We'll see,” Mahmoud said, peering suspiciously at a shelf marked MUSK with a row of small bottles reading White, Bronzed and Egyptian and a printed card detailing in pale, hard-to-read calligraphy the many overlooked benefits of the scent.

“Welcome to Yellow Iris,” said the salesgirl. “Is this your first time?”

Now that Eddie was close enough to read her nametag and saw that her name was *Saffron*, he might have revised his opinion, but she had opened with a question. Today he would take any good omen he could get.

Mahmoud said yes, it was their first time, and Saffron went into her spiel: Yellow Iris strove to provide “the highest quality couture scents...” which were “hand crafted in the traditional methods of artisan perfumers,” “properly aged and poured in small batches” and “available in an alcohol base or fractionated coconut oil.”

Eddie was so busy analyzing the sales talk for hidden messages, he missed the nuts and bolts explanation of how the place worked. When Saffron went to help another customer, he asked Mahmoud to fill in the blanks.

"It sounded good at the beginning, but then it kind of fizzled," he said, rather than admit he thought *highest* might be a clue and was making up anagrams for *quality couture scents* to go with it, except he couldn't find one that had the word *quest* that didn't also involve a *unicycle*. "I know there was something about hand-pouring, and plantains came into it somehow."

"She says they have recommended blends, suggested combinations that go well together, but we're free to ignore the advice and choose whatever we want."

"Hmph," said Eddie. "And the plantains?"

"If we want tuberose, white pepper and plantains, that's what they'll mix."

Eddie looked thoughtfully at the ceiling, considering *tuber*: YouTube, tube as shorthand for the London subway, white, plantains, White Plains, taking the subway to White Plains... then he gave up.

"That's not helpful," he declared. "I don't think we're going to get anywhere just looking around. We need more data. More clues. We'll have to go through the process."

When Saffron returned, they said they wanted to buy a fragrance. She asked if it was for a man or a woman—and they looked at each other in panic.

"Excuse us," Eddie said through a forced smile, and he pulled Mahmoud away for a huddle. When they returned, they said they would *each* mix a fragrance. Mahmoud would make one for his wife, and Eddie would make one for himself. That way they could examine all the ingredients available for women's, men's and unisex fragrances.

Saffron's lips morphed into the *very gracious* smile of a salesgirl who didn't want you to think she was only smiling because you'd just turned into a giant bag of money. She led them to a special sampling counter with side-by-side stations. Before each, she set out a pad and a thin gold pencil to take notes, as well as a small, soy sauce-size dish of coffee beans. Eddie immediately began examining his pencil, and once again missed the explanation, although he could figure it out easily enough. The coffee beans were to sniff and 'clear the nose' between scents the way sorbet cleansed the palate between courses.

He wished he had something like that for his brain. The robots, the bat file, the tarot cards, the thought of Doris modeling Garbo's silk robe, the thought of Doris languishing in some horrid interrogation room...

"Grassy, Fruity or Earthy?"

"Excuse me?" Eddie said, shaking his head as if evading a fly.

Saffron smiled patiently.

"I was saying that even though men avoid the floral notes, there are literally hundreds of base scents available, so to narrow it down, I like to ask a few questions."

"Hundreds?" Eddie said, thinking he had never been so turned off by the idea of answering questions.

"More like thousands on my side," Mahmoud said, looking at the menu of florals.

"Excuse us," Eddie said with a forced smile, and again he pulled Mahmoud away for a huddle.

"I don't think 'going through the process' is the answer here," he said in an urgent whisper. "Hundreds if not thousands of scents. We'll never be able to brute force it."

"There must be some way to narrow it down," Mahmoud hissed back, just as urgently. "What else have you got in that tablet besides the picture of the train station and the clock."

As if it occurred to them at the same moment that Saffron was watching, they both turned to her in perfect sync, as if they were mirror images. They smiled at her with identical smiles, nodded identical nods, and received a joint, patronizing nod-smile in return.

"That's just the way they smile at us at Arkham before calling for the jacket," Eddie said through clenched teeth.

"Just the way the wife smiles before her mother comes for a visit," Mahmoud commiserated.

By then, Eddie had produced the tablet and displayed the pictures he'd decrypted: the silent film star wearing pearls, the platform at the train station, the clock and the—

"Tarot cards," Mahmoud said, intrigued.

"You know anything about them?" Eddie said hopefully.

He shook his head. "Not a thing. But this card says it's the Emperor. And one of the scents on my list... there were like six kinds of Jasmine and one in particular was called Emperor's Jasmine."

"Emperor Jasmine," Eddie said confidently, returning to the counter. "We want to start with *Emperor Jasmine*." He didn't exactly wink, but he did pronounce the final words like a code phrase. Like he expected Saffron to utter a counter sign about the rooster crowing at midnight, produce a lacquer box with a special key and tell him to meet a man in with a bowtie at Café Moulin.

"Our jasmines are really better for a top note, it's not ideal for a base," Saffron cautioned.

Eddie's eyes narrowed.

"Say that again," he ordered.

"Jasmine is better for a middle or top note."

"Note," he repeated the last word with her.

"Yes, as I explained, it all has to do with the layers that are revealed as a scent evaporates. The top notes—"

"Note," Eddie said, again repeating the word with her.

"A-are the first thing you smell and they evaporate rather quickly," Saffron continued. "As they dissipate, the middle notes—"

"Note," Eddie said again, this time his head snapping to the side like a dog who heard a sharp sound in that direction. "That bitch," he breathed.

Saffron pursed her lips. She didn't want to resume her talk only to be cut off again, but she was unwilling to abandon sales mode. Eddie no longer seemed to be listening to her, so she turned to Mahmoud as she continued.

"The base and middle notes together are the main theme of a perfume. Base notes bring depth and solidity, particularly the animal and musk notes."

"C'mon, we need to go," Eddie said briskly. That brought a less gracious look from Saffron as she saw not one but both her sales going out the door. Eddie ignored her, thinking only of that perfumed note he'd found inside the dummy laptop—

You didn't think it was going to be that easy.

He'd dismissed it as a taunt. He dismissed it. He—he—he tossed it into the wastepaper basket! He had to get back to the hotel before some damned robot maid cleaned his room!

"We have to go," he repeated emphatically, and when Mahmoud looked confused, Eddie reminded him about that episode of the Amazing Race they watched together last week when he laughed out loud and said "Oh, you're going to regret leaving that thing behind at the clue box." Mahmoud smiled in a bemused, playing along fashion, and Eddie went on. "Then I said 'At least they only *left it at the hotel*. Not as bad as leaving the thing in Mongolia.'"

"Ah, right," Mahmoud said, nodding at last.

Despite a miserable two-person fugue assuring her they would be back, Saffron did not expect to see the two strange customers again. She waited an hour on principle, then started cleaning their stations with a grumble. She had struck everything except the coffee beans when the door opened and the two men returned, arguing about the traffic.

"I told you we should have taken Featherbed Avenue." "Do I tell you your business?" "It's not like some secret specialized knowledge. You see a one way street with construction, you go the other way."

Saffron interrupted to apologize. She had thrown away the strips with the scents they had sampled earlier. She was afraid the news would escalate their quarrel, but they made identical Don't-worry-about-it gestures. They produced a piece of lavender stationery as they returned to the counter and said they wanted to work together to 'match the scent.'

"He has to *what*?" Bruce said, equally impressed and appalled by this latest puzzle.

"Reverse engineer the scent," Selina said, spritzing her wrist and holding it out for him to sniff. "Names of the components will give you the clue."

"So *French Lavender plus Mandarin Oranges plus Oriental Honeysuckle* would mean you're going to kidnap the French ambassador staying at the Mandarin-Oriental," Bruce said, making up names to fit the hypothetical.

"Right. In that case, I would certainly expect Bat company, because if you've got Orange, there are maybe a half dozen possibilities on the scent menu, and once you see 'Mandarin' on that list, how hard is it to guess Oriental?"

"I take it what you've given him is more challenging," Bruce said, sniffing her wrist thoughtfully, as if at a wine tasting.

"Just a tad."

"Okay," Eddie said, taking multiple deep snorts of the coffee beans as if he was hyperventilating into a paper bag. "We've got the violets. It's either Sugared Violet,

Violet Petals, or that essence called 300 Flowers, and I say it has to be that, because it's a street address. 300 somewhere. We agreed?"

Mahmoud nodded dully, like a man who had a few too many and was deciding if he was sober enough to drive home. Saffron nodded like she was past caring.

"We're agreed that *Vanilla Bean* is useless. The vanilla has to be *Bourbon* Vanilla, *Reunion* Vanilla or *Prince's* Vanilla Orchid. And I say that means either the 300 block of someplace where there's a bar called Bourbon OR 300 someplace that's a hotel with a reunion going on, OR ELSE it's 300 Prince Street, and whatever this bitch of a third note is, it's going to tell us for sure. Who's with me?!"

"Edward, my friend," Mahmoud said calmly, "I will take you to 300 Prince Street, East or West. I will drive around at random looking for a place called Bourbon, I will even take you all the way to New Orleans and see what's at 300 Bourbon Street there. But I will not sniff that piece of paper one more time."

Eddie looked at Saffron, who said her name was really Joan and she was quitting as soon as the two of them were out the door. Then her eyes narrowed, she looked at the paper in Eddie's hand and pointed at Mahmoud without taking her eyes from it.

"Say that again," she said. "About Prince Street."

"There's two, East and West," Mahmoud said. "They don't meet, causes a lot of confusion."

"So the third scent is an East or West," Eddie said, his eyes gleaming.

They all dove for the list of available oils and began reading out names at random.

"Could it be Oakmoss? There's a Western Oakmoss." "How about Bergamot?" "Amber" "Neroli" "AMBER! That's it." "There's a Western Amber—There's a Western Amber—300 Prince Street West!"

Eddie grabbed Joan by her shoulders and kissed her on the lips. Then he turned—to see Mahmoud's index finger pointing at his nose.

"Don't even think it, my friend."

Barbara could tell her father hadn't come over for a casual visit. His voice on the intercom, the small talk as he came in the door, the way he sat, even the way he accepted Dick's offer of a beer said there was something on his mind. It wasn't like him to beat around the bush. She gave him five minutes to come to the point, and when he didn't, she asked.

"Things have changed since I've been off the job," he said severely. "Going back, I'm going to have to manage things differently. Figured you two were the best place to start."

Dick and Barbara glanced at each other. It was true Jim Gordon knew more about the Batman side of Gotham law enforcement since he retired than he had when he was commissioner, but he had always been the best ally costumed vigilantes had among the police, any police in any city. He was the ideal by which such partnerships were measured. There wasn't any reason to think he'd be any less a friend to the Bat-Family as he had always been... was there?

"What do you mean, Dad?" Barbara said.

"Yeah, what do you mean, Dad?" Dick echoed.

Barbara shot him a look like he was laying it on thick, but Dick didn't notice. He was too busy smiling too wide, like he was waiting for her father to approve a loan.

"It's these blasted cell phones for one thing," Gordon said bitterly. "When I retired we still used faxes. Maybe a quarter of the detectives bothered with email. I had Isabel print mine out so I had a piece of paper I could file. Now everybody has emails going straight into their phone, only sometimes they're called texts. And I'm still not clear on the difference between that and Twitter, and until someone explains to me how that congressman wound up 'tweeting' his private parts, I'm not touching a phone that has a camera in it."

"That's, like, all of them," Dick said unhelpfully.

"It's okay, Dad," Barbara said in that harsh tone of one trying desperately not to laugh in her father's face. "We can teach you all of that."

"It's all paperless reports now," Gordon pronounced grimly.

"But you still have printers, right?" Barbara asked brightly.

"I cannot be the old fossil they dug up from the tar pits who has to have everything printed out, not after the Mayor made a big deal about all the city offices 'going green.'"

"I can walk you through it," Dick assured him. "When Bludhaven went paperless, all the old guys—*veterans*, I mean, seasoned experienced veterans picked it up easier than they expected."

Gordon grunted.

Shadows were stretching by the time Mahmoud's cab reached 300 Prince Street West. When Eddie saw the building, he considered sending his new pal home. The street and the building had an air about them. It felt like a hideout: a Cat Lair or even one of his own. He didn't *think* Selina would have an electrified perimeter or a deathtrap set up to drop intruders into a locked cell with one of her tigers who had missed breakfast, but... there was that gas trap he laid for her at Objects of Desire. She hadn't sprung it but she knew about it, knew it was meant for her.

"I better go in alone," he told the cabbie. "You're double parked. Drive around, see if you find a space. If you can't, take off and I'll call in the morning."

As a Gotham cabbie, Mahmoud looked on double parking the way Rogues did punching Batman: it was *the natural way*. To suggest he observe that particular law and *drive around looking for a space* was frankly insulting. He left grumbling, but Eddie thought it was better to let him be insulted than to explain that his nemesis was in a position to receive man-eating tigers as a gift from the Justice League.

Eddie inspected the front door, the back door and the windows. Finding no sign of Kittlemeier gadgetry, he picked the back door lock and went inside. He moved cautiously at first, until he was certain there were no trip wires. He examined each light switch before satisfying himself it was safe to turn on. Once he had light... hm... the real puzzle emerged.

It looked like a hideout on the inside too, a hideout without theming. A Cat Lair with the cat stuff removed, or a Riddler Lair before the question marks were installed. A *very nice* workstation at the center. Despite its being Wayne Tech, his fingers itched to take it for a spin. He powered it up and was... fascinated. There was a newsreel

from which the still was taken of that dancer with the pearls, oodles of research on something called Olactra-Prystaline... more information about leather pants at French Fashion Week than a sentient being needed to know... and a traditional floor plan and 3-dimensional wireframe of a gallery he presumed was this Zeitgeist.

Eddie looked around, a surge of adrenaline that was either thrill or panic making him want to move—indeed run—around the room, waving his arms, jumping and skipping. This was it! This was it? Yes, of course this was it. The prep work for the crime, the evidence to seal Doris's fate if the police found it before he did. Her fingerprints must be all over the keyboard—probably throughout the lair, but that wouldn't matter if he destroyed and dismantled the workstation. Without that, it was just an improvised Gotham living space like a thousand others.

He set to work taking apart the main unit, removing the hard drive and motherboard, and smashing them to pieces. He did a quick search for anything like a crowbar or a baseball bat to make the process easier. Not finding one, he resorted to jumping up and down on them with both feet. He was in the middle of that when Mahmoud walked in, not quite as silent as a Bat but quiet enough that Eddie didn't hear him until the chuckle.

"They got ways to put those things back together, don't they, man?" he said lightly.

"I'd drop them in a bathtub full of acid, but I don't have any acid and I don't think this place has a bathtub," Eddie said—then kicked himself for not wording it as a question. Query: how do you destroy a computer in a bathtub full of acid when you have neither the acid nor the bathtub?

"Place like this might have an incinerator in the basement," Mahmoud said, looking around at what had clearly been an industrial space before it became a de-themed hideout.

Eddie looked at him with an appreciative grin.

"Remind me again why I don't think you're a crazed fanatic building bombs to blow up the city," he said, looking around for what could conceivably be a basement door and adding "This way" when he spotted it.

"Because my beautiful daughter is going to make her debut at the Gotham Philharmonic and she can't do that if some madman blows it up."

"Good point," Eddie said, flipping the light switch behind the basement door without any of the caution he showed when he first entered the lair. "Uh oh," he added once he saw what was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

It was an obstacle course laid out like the Zeitgeist, and at the far end, on a pedestal that was clearly meant to designate the target, an imposing black and chrome lockbox under a clear Lucite case.

"What if he doesn't think to check the basement?" Bruce asked, the spark of curiosity asserting itself through the soothing calm of a back rub.

They had left the cave and returned to the manor, to Selina's suite, to be exact. Despite a lingering but undefined sense of unease, he was enjoying her revenge on Nigma, the untempered villainy of it. Today he had the bad girl that Batman first began dreaming of, had her right there within arm's reach. He was allowed to reach

now, to touch, to take—but not in the cave. That didn't seem right. In her suite. From the day she moved into the manor, she wanted one spot that was her territory "like an embassy is foreign soil." At first it irked him, her obsession with her independence. Then he fell under Poison Ivy's spell and that bit of 'foreign soil' gave him the means to escape. He was able to circumvent Ivy's orders precisely because they had agreed those rooms were not a part of his house.

It felt just right. Taking her upstairs, thinking of it as a cat lair. It was the bad girl he was thinking of, after all.

"Then Doris is screwed, isn't she," she said. "That's what he thinks, and that's why he will think to check the basement."

Such a bad girl. Even if she was reciprocating the back rub, she was such a bad girl.

As Eddie approached the pedestal, he saw there were a few other items under the cover with the lockbox. A tiny silver cat statue and a green slip of paper, which turned out to be a twenty of Monopoly money with a riddle scrawled on the back.

A better game it is at that,

Though they closed the lead when they added the cat.

The combination I'll give you free:

The amount on my face, repeated three.

But where it will work, that is the game.

Not who but why is the crux of a name.

"I heard something about this," Mahmoud said. "Monopoly retired one of the old playing pieces. They had people vote on a new one and the cat won. This must be it. It's cute."

To Eddie, the voice faded into muffled cotton as his mind flooded with ideas. "A *better game*" than Monopoly was Go. That's how he began that first riddle to taunt Selina when she turned White Hat. A riddle left with a Monopoly piece similar to this one. *A better game it may be, minus three* meant to move back three squares from Go on a Monopoly board. This rhyme meant something very different, but the pointed allusion to that earlier clue was inescapable. What did the little bitch think she was doing?

They made up after that episode. They made up. He overlooked her turning traitor, stabbing her friends and colleagues in the back all because she found someone who made her happy and was willing to change her life to become a part of his—oh.

"Looks to me like the combination is 202020," Mahmoud said behind that wall of cotton. "Number on the slip, repeated three times."

"Yes, that's the combination," Eddie said dully. "But it won't work here. That's a barometric lock. It will only open at the same altitude where it was locked. We have to 'GO' to the right location to make it work. 'That's the game.'"

"Oh," said Mahmoud. "So how do we know where go take it?"

"Riddle tells us," he said miserably. "There's one building in the city with a name on it that has a Y right smack in the center."

"Wayne!" Mahmoud announced happily.

"Wayne," Eddie sighed miserably.

“Kitten, I’m afraid you’ve overplayed your hand. You and Clark can get to the top of the Wayne Building without using the elevator to the penthouse. Anyone else—”

“Unless they have precision skydiving training or access to magic, I know, and in both of those cases, you have countermeasures. Bruce, he doesn’t need to go anywhere near the penthouse or the roof. The hot spot is on the Wayne Enterprises sign, the crux of the Y in Wayne. It’s not even halfway up.”

“Ah. So if he can eyeball it accurately enough, he could open the lockbox from the safety of a room at the Hyatt. Not have to rappel down from the HIZ-MRK box above the sign.”

“As long as he’s on the proper floor, yes, he’d get the box open. But I’m betting he’ll do it on the sign. You would if you were tackling the riddle, right? There might be something you can only see standing on that spot at that specific angle. Remember when he went to Metropolis and Spiccurl tried to cut corners, using his eyes instead of the binoculars provided with the riddle. He missed the real clue completely.”

Bruce did remember, and grunted.

The sign reading WE in enormous gold letters with the words Wayne Enterprises beneath was, as Selina said, less than halfway up the building’s face. The wind was still considerable, and Eddie was in no hurry to leave the niche where he stood. Now that he got the lockbox open, he decided to examine the contents where he was, with the bulk of the sign blocking most of the punishing wind. It was a thumb drive. Plugging it into the tablet, a video began to play:

It was a close-up of the workstation he’d dismantled at the Prince Street lair. A manicured index finger that could have been Selina’s touched a button on the keyboard and the central monitor began to play a video. It showed the oblique angle of a security camera in the Zeitgeist Gallery hanging high over the room with the pearls. It didn’t match any of the camera locations Eddie remembered from the blueprints. Could the plans have missed one? Or was this from an extra camera having nothing to do with the gallery’s own security?

Suddenly there was movement in the arched doorway at the far end. A figure that... oh *my* she looked good... a figure that could only be Doris in a perfectly wonderful mask and costume moved quickly and gracefully through the gallery, then removed the Lucite case over the pearls. She took a light pen and appeared to ‘scan’ the pearls for several seconds, then took them and ran out.

Black and white evidence. The camera caught the whole thing. ‘Lina must have tricked her into thinking—Wait, what was that? The video began to rewind. He saw the whole robbery replay in reverse, and keep going. Without a timestamp, he wasn’t sure how far it was going back, but after some time on an unchanging image of the pre-burgled gallery, there was another blur of movement in the light beyond that doorway. Then another blur of movement that looked like Catwoman coming in backwards through the same doorway Doris had, doing something to the case with the pearls—*How many different ways did that Traitorous Bat-bitch from Hell have to set up his Puzzle Muffin!*—and then, then she, and then she, she—**SHE WAVED AT THE CAMERA!**

The image froze on her horrible little wave, and then resumed playing forward at a normal speed. But she was already holding pearls—she was already holding a strand of pearls while she opened the case. She switched them. They were copies and she switched them. She—She just—she waved and then she—What was going on?

Doris didn't take the real pearls?

Doris didn't take the real pearls.

Catwoman took the real pearls.

Catwoman took the real pearls.

Catwoman took the real pearls and was letting him know she took the real—heart thumping.

Heart thumping very hard.

Head throbbing very hard.

Stomach churning very hard.

Eddie made a nervous, pushing down gesture with both his hands, as if ordering his individual body parts to calm the hell down. He had to think. He had to think. He had to think.

He stretched, looked up (half-expecting to see the Bat Signal because that's just the way his luck was running) but instead, he saw something on the underside of the utility box he'd rappelled down from. Heart thumps and head throbs forgotten, he scrambled up the rope to get a closer look. There was something wedged into it, something light, something paper, something... a brochure. An advertising brochure for Zeitgeist Gallery. *"Advances the understanding and appreciation of design as the critical component of other artistic endeavors..."* yadda yadda whocares *"Not art for art's sake but a convergence of creativity and functionality"* yadda yadda whocares *"Such as the James Bond 007 Tarot Deck otherwise known as The Tarot of the Witches featured in the James Bond film Live and Let Die!"*

His eyes bulged. It was his tarot deck—the tablet tarot, the tarot from the tablet, from the jigsaw on the tablet, the, the—THE CLUE THAT HADN'T SERVED ANY PURPOSE YET!

The Zeitgeist opened at nine o'clock and Eddie was the first in line. Unlike many Rogues, he had no trouble blending in when he wanted to. He wasn't scarred, green, scaled, confined to a cold suit or a gorgeous woman with a killer bod. He was older than the college students and younger than the seniors who made up the majority of the gallery's visitors, but two days after a robbery that made the news, a larger and more diverse crowd was expected.

He tried to make his way through the rooms at a natural pace, not racing from a room as soon as he saw it contained no tarot cards. Finally he spotted them, one gallery down from the one where the pearls had been taken. He went into that gallery to confirm it, saw the doorway from the video through which Doris and Selina had both come and gone, and then he returned to the cards.

He read the description on the case: the cards were painted with oils on canvas, accounting for the rich and vibrant colors and the depth and solidity of the images... Characters with a dark, almost camp wit and a slightly sinister edge, wildly out of proportion and ethereally colored, making them particularly well suited to the Bond

environs of the 70s... Meh. There was nothing in the labored description that stood out as a clue. No phrase that screamed HERE BE ANAGRAMS. All he could think to focus on was the Devil with his bat wings and the High Priestess with her cat. Neither seemed so significant now that he knew Selina didn't have the cards specially made. They appeared in a film in 1973. She had nothing to do with the Emperor wearing purple or the High Priestess having a cat. She had nothing to do with the Roman Numerals on the top of each card that he hadn't even thought to analyze or clock...

He looked.

Standing where he was, facing the case with the tarot cards, he could see a clock—a fine old mantle clock from the set of some movie or other—the same fine old mantle clock set to 5:17 which was NOT the crucial time to be on that train platform to see a message come together because the message at that location had nothing to do with time or trains! The clock, like the tarot cards, *had not provided any viable clue until now.*

And Selina knew the rules. She was a Rogue and she knew the rules. He went up to the clock and peered at the original—which matched the jigsaw photo he had studied in every particular but one.

He tried to control his smile. He should not be pleased or amused, he should be perplexed. He should be puzzled—ironically, since the puzzle was now solved. His first unpuzzled moment since the whole affair began, and he had to pretend.

He glanced around the room and spotted the guard who seemed the least stupid. He made eye contact until the guy came over, and put on his best amiable-but-puzzled pout.

"Excuse me, sorry to bother," he said as the guard approached. "But are those *meant* to be in there?"

He pointed to the clock, and in the lower half of the glass-front filigreed cabinet under the clock face lay the magnificent triple-string of pearls the Czar had given Katalya Nolzhenko when she danced at the Winter Palace at Christmas in 1903.

Selina's laugh echoed, strident but musical, on the highly polished floor. She was looking at an expression so familiar...

"You're telling me Doris was never in any jeopardy," he said.

...Once familiar, anyway, on *Batman*, but one of the few she had never seen until now on Bruce's unmasked face.

"What I'm telling you, handsome, is what I told you then: There are some serious limitations to that whole law and order kink of yours. This is one of them: It is practically impossible to convict someone of stealing something that hasn't been stolen."

He scowled.

It would be unfair to say Eddie was hysterical. His first thought was to call Zeitgeist pretending to be Doris's lawyer and confirm that they'd notified the police that the pearls had been found. Then go to the precinct pretending to be her lawyer, secure her release, take her back to the Yotel, and screw like bunnies until November. Then he

remembered he was an escaped fugitive, so marching into a police station maybe wasn't the best plan. Next he thought of Harvey, who knew how to impersonate a lawyer without drawing on half-remembered TV shows. Only problem there was that half his face was scarred. And also that he might ask how Ivy was doing up at Arkham. Next he thought of Hagen. Matt Hagen could walk in wearing any face that got the job done. He wasn't the best at ad-libbing, so Eddie would still have to get Harvey on board. They could wire up Hagen just as they had during the war, Harvey would feed him his lines, Matt would deliver them, and once again Doris would be free to return with him to the Yotel and screw like bunnies until December. (Matt's presence would even keep Harvey from asking about Ivy, since everyone knew they didn't get along.) The only problem now was finding him.

"Harvey should still be living over the Wild Deuce or else gone back to his old digs at the Flick Theatre," he told Mahmoud. "But Hagen could be anywhere. I'll have to ask Oswald, but the 'Berg won't be open for hours and he doesn't get up before noon. By the time we get everybody together, who knows what will have become of Doris. They'll have released her into the wild and I'll never see her again."

Mahmoud calmly took a business card from the four Eddie held like a poker hand.

"This is the number of the precinct?" he asked calmly.

Eddie nodded.

"And your lady's name is Doris what?"

"Ingerson."

As he dialed, Mahmoud said casually, "However much coffee you are drinking, Edward, you should cut it in half—Hello? This is the car service for the law firm of Edward Mahmoud; he is a lawyer currently at your precinct. I was sent to pick him up. I know this isn't your job, but I'm caught in very bad traffic, running very late. Can you tell him please that I will be half an hour yet if he wants to wait. If he has an urgent meeting like last time, it's better if he takes a cab... Edward Mahmoud is his name... No? He's there for a client, eh, pretty woman, Ingerson might be her name. Very pretty, tall and blonde. Dorry Ingerson, I think it is... Oh she has? Well that would explain why Mr. Mahmoud isn't there. There must be some mix up at his office; it happens more and more often these days. Listen, since I am already on my way, tell the lady to wait and I'll give her a ride back. Otherwise I am sitting in traffic all this time for nothing... Yes, thank you very much... You too."

He hung up, looked at Eddie with a patronizing smile and said "She's been released, she's still there finishing the paperwork. If she's half as smart as you say, she'll know to wait. If we make good time, we could be pulling up to the curb in front of the precinct as she's stepping out the door."

Eddie pointed to Mahmoud's nose with a bouncing motion as if wanting to say something but couldn't find the words. "I would love to sick you on Batman" was the thought in his head, but sensing this probably wouldn't be taken in the spirit it was intended, he settled for "I... am going to get your daughter a Stradivarius."

Selina didn't bother changing into costume before going down to the Batcave, but she did stop in her suite to find the simple domino mask she'd worn to the opera ball.

"You know the rule when Catwoman has intel Batman needs for a case," she announced with a sexy drawl. She held up a thumb drive triumphantly, and as Bruce reached for it, she moved her hand back with an "Eh-eh-eh."

"You mean when you're perfectly willing to help, but pretend you're not and make me convince you?" he asked.

Her lips parted.

"I mean when you know I'm going to make demands before I give you what you're after, and as much as you scowl and grumble, you secretly welcome it—mmm. Mmmmm."

Her teasing was cut off by a kiss which might have lingered if it was still a rarity. As it was, it continued only until he could snatch the drive from her fingers. Then he smacked her bottom playfully and said "Because it's only when you force the issue that I can acknowledge how I really feel?"

"Jackass," she grinned.

"I take it this means Nigma still has the tablet with him?" Bruce said, segueing to Batman's gravel but not the gruff manner of the crimefighter.

"Yep, you can track him with that on Channel 14."

"Thanks," he said casually, sliding it into his pocket. "Hey, could you bring that 5/16 back to the workshop. I think we've just got time to tweak the new cat ears for your cowl before we get washed up for dinner."

"Dinner?" Selina repeated.

"Alfred mentioned it's that pork recipe you brought from Rome."

"It is, but... I guess I figured dinner was postponed and you'd be off to apprehend the escaped Arkham lunatic."

"I thought I'd give them the night," Bruce said simply. "Now that he's run your gauntlet and saved the girl, you don't think a reunion is called for?"

"Okay, who are you and what have you done with Bruce?"

Having reached the work table, he turned the cat cowl around to face her as he asked "Selina, what is Russia?"

"You answer mine first, because so help me, if I have to dimension hop into goggle-world again I—"

"Relax. I'm the same crimefighter I've always been, the one who had only 'Cape Theories' about the new criminal in town until you came along with that rogue insider's perspective and feline logic."

"Okay, that *sounds* like a compliment, but—"

"Selina, the items Cognitive Dissonance was going after meant nothing to me. I saw the Russia angle, of course: Faberge, Ninotchka and so on. But until you saw she was Doris, it didn't seem to have any significance. Once you pointed out who it was, the meaning is inescapable."

"It is?"

"Selina. What is Russia?"

"A country, a proper noun; Bruce, what—"

"According to Winston Churchill in 1939, what is Russia?"

"A riddle wrapped—oh," she stumbled on her own laugh, then continued. "A *riddle* wrapped in a *mystery* inside an *enigma*."

Bruce nodded—or rather, Batman did. There was something about him suddenly, not the old rooftop brusqueness, but something from their old rooftop encounters. With a start, she realized it was *disapproval*.

“It’s a bedroom joke,” he said severely. “I don’t know the details and I don’t want to. But you tell me Riddler’s ex is back; she regrets losing him, found his recent performance in the war impressive. She wants him back and is committing crimes in costume to do it. And she’s stealing Russian things. Russia that’s a riddle inside an enigma. It’s very clear this was a... very personal and intimate message between them. And it’s bothered me that you were interfering.”

For a moment, Selina said nothing, taking it in. Then:

“Wow. Bruce, since when do you care about Edward Nigma’s personal life?”

“I don’t. Selina, I really don’t. But I’ve found myself... a part of me, at least, *rooting* for him in all of this. Rooting for *them* against *you*. I didn’t like it. And I finally realized why.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear this,” she breathed.

“Do you remember the message I had you bring to Bane to neutralize his knowledge of my identity and make him accept his fate getting shipped out of Gotham?”

“Every word: Gotham belongs to the Dark Knight and the Gotham Rogues. A demon pushed his way in and tried to break, eclipse, negate or replace those who belong here, all to gratify his own ego, and true Gothamites rose to expel him. That’s the story and you knew he would respect it.”

“That’s the story,” he repeated. He had mouthed those words with her as she recited and now he said them again. “Bane isn’t the only one predisposed to accept ‘the story.’ He was hardwired to accept one framed as a narrative out of Luca Libre, but we all do it. There are stories we know, they saturate our world, and we know how they’re supposed to play out. The boy becomes a man. The detective solves the crime. The lovers overcome the obstacle. Nigma stepped up during the war. He went a long way to making a bad situation less volatile.”

“He earned his happy ending and along comes Doris. You didn’t like seeing me as the evil queen turning into a giant snake to come between him and his lady love in the final act, is that it? Nice.”

“No Selina, I didn’t. But that’s not why I’m letting them have the night together before I haul him back to Arkham. I’m doing it because, after all the riddles, he’s finally given me an answer—the answer to a problem I’ve been wrestling with. How to make you my wife. Selina, this is it. This is the ‘Scottish Fold’ Protocol: *Play into a story that’s hardwired into all of us*. The lovers meet, fall in love, and they’re tested. Something happens that splits them up. Sometimes it’s a wicked person who inserts themselves into the situation; sometimes it’s a different challenge. One of the lovers rises up, beats the odds and slays the dragon. They reunite.

“If we have a fight or... or I don’t know, go through some ordeal that separates us, and then I make a fool of myself with a grand gesture to win you back. Selina, don’t you see, they’ll be on our side and they won’t even know why. The few that aren’t will still *accept* the situation. They’ll accept it as a *fait accompli*, because of that narrative that is everywhere. It’s embedded in us at the cellular level. It’s the way story is meant to go.”

“I must admit I like the sound of it,” Selina said, just above a whisper.

"You can say it a little louder. It's a protocol. It won't break."

"It doesn't sound like it's a 'protocol' yet, it's just a germ of an idea you have, but... it's a really good one."

He grunted.

"By the time Nigma is back in Arkham, it will be a protocol."

After every escape, Arkham tightened their security—in some ways, at least. In all the ways they could think of, in all the ways related, even tangentially, to the latest breach. The efforts reduced security in other ways. Staff were occupied with new procedures, their attention was drawn to certain areas at the expense of others. After a few weeks of heightened vigilance fatigue would set in, and before long it would be as if nothing at all had changed.

The enhanced precautions after Patient Nigma's escape were still in effect six nights after his return, but it didn't affect any of Catwoman's routes inside. She made her way to his cell, just as she had before, opened the door as she had before, and allowed the backlight to project her silhouette across the room. The only change from her first visit was that the cat ears of her silhouette were animated and expressive. Also that Patient Nigma was awake.

"Why did the actor think he was a shoe-in to play Quasimodo?" he asked, sitting up on his futon with his back to the wall, arms crossed.

"He had a hunch," Selina said flatly. "I guess that means I'm expected."

"You're expected," he said, reaching behind him and producing a bowl of salted almonds. "Welcome to the nuthouse."

She entered, sat tentatively on the edge of futon, and pointed at the bowl.

"I take it that means your trained guard has gotten over the escape attempt and it's back to business as usual? Nice he doesn't hold a grudge."

"He likes the ponies, basketball, college football. Blackjack and craps in Atlantic City. What choice does he have?"

"I see," she smiled and took a nut.

"At least I can be comfortable. Going to be a while until I can fast track after the escape." He looked at her accusingly, and in the way of cats, she ignored his disapproval. He tried again. "An escape I never would have made if you hadn't—"

"Thrown away the white hat? Here I thought that's what you wanted."

She clicked her tongue in a tsk-tsk fashion. Eddie got up, walked over to his desk, and brought the chess set.

"Maybe because I don't remember your black hat being quite as black as that," he said, holding out his closed fists for Selina to pick one. She pointed to his left which he opened, revealing a white pawn.

"Rats," he said, and she laughed, turning the board so the white pieces were lined up in front of her. "Even Irony's against me."

She moved her king's pawn, and he mirrored it. Nothing was said as they progressed quickly through the first moves of a classic Giuco Piano opening, which was the norm when Selina played white. Once Eddie brought out his second knight,

he paused, turning it to examine its profile before putting it down on its square. Then he spoke.

"How much harm did it do, anyway? Telling him about Bane. I figured I'd buy myself 48 hours, 'Lina. Two days, *tops*, he'd be off his game until the two of you smoothed it over. It's not like anything's going to do permanent damage between you. But what you did to me with Doris—"

"Eddie, I'm surprised at you. I wasn't going to put her in any real danger. I *like* Doris. And I especially like the idea of another woman around who isn't Ivy psycho, Harley insane, Roxy crazy, or henchwench dumb. She had a few bad hours in a police station, that's all. She's in for a lot worse being Lady Riddler, you know that. A few bad hours I prepped her for so she wouldn't do anything stupid like confess. In exchange, I taught her burglary tricks less than two dozen people know, worldwide. Believe me, she came out ahead on the deal. *You* came out ahead. You're going to be able to get into places with Game Theory you never could have managed on your own."

"She did tell me 'Game Theory' was your idea," he said, taking her pawn. "And I take it there's a new costume underway at Kittlemeier's. A Max Rio jumpsuit or something I didn't quite follow."

"BCBG Maxazria runway collection," Selina said, rattling off the words like she was reading a resume. "Wide-leg, colorblock jumpsuit with peek-a-boo mesh bodice and three-quarter sleeves, it's just darling. Knock off will be in your colors, of course, and more durable fabric than the silk crepe."

"Uhuh," Eddie said dully as Selina took his bishop though it would cost her a second pawn.

"Better get used to it, she's no cheap henchwench."

"No, she's not," Eddie said proudly. "And when the time comes, well, if she's caught with me in a costume like that, we won't have to worry about being separated with her being sent off to Blackgate. Spectacular woman like that, traipsing around town in a mutilated Maxy Zarin jumper for the love of me, she must be crazy, right?"

"A BCBG—that's for 'Bon chic, bon genre'—Max Azria jumpsuit, Eddie, get it right. And yes... she is crazy about you. Congratulations."

Eddie beamed, then looked at the chessboard, then frowned.

"I guess that's what a friend should say, huh? I never did. Protect your rook."

"No, you called him an idiot," she said, moving a knight.

"I thought he *was*. And a woman like you shouldn't throw herself away on a moron that refers to Houdini's Tome of Secrets as 'that Hoodily book.' Check."

Selina moved the knight again to block the check, and Eddie took her rook.

"Would have been better to protect it with the pawn," he said. "And I don't know if it's occurred to you, but there's another side to all this that affects you and him."

"Would have been better to take the knight instead of the rook," she said, moving her queen. "Checkmate."

Eddie blinked.

He stared at the board.

Then laughed, flicking his king over with a dramatic thwap.

"I was preoccupied," he said amiably. "Anyway, as I was saying, there's another side to this Game Theory business that affects you. Ordinary henchmen or wench in

the room, I can't allude to... certain subjects. Makes some Bat-encounters more 'old school' than others, if you see what I'm saying."

"Yes, Eddie, I think I've cracked your code."

"And like you said, she's not a henchwench. Not somebody I'd send to buy all the bing cherries from every fruit stand in the East Village and not tell her why. She's going to be in on all the plans, so, well, that means I can't utilize certain information the way I once did. Beyond making conversation when he shows up at the hideout, I can't use it at all. Any advantage I had is gone."

"It's not like it's done you a world of good, Eddie. How much of an 'advantage' has it really been?"

"Tell me about it," he grumbled. "But uh, you should let him know. In case he wondered."

"I'll let him know," she said, restoring the board. "Is it my imagination or are you softening a little bit on that front?"

"At the moment I like him a lot more than you, 'Lina."

As bitter as his tone was, he'd turned the chessboard so the white pieces were now before him and he moved his knight's pawn to begin the second game without asking. That they would play best of three was understood without being stated, just as reconciliation was understood.

"You'll get over it," Selina said, mirroring his pawn. "You'll figure out how to repackage the slideshow jigsaw, he won't solve it in time, you'll get away with some gold bullion and Kitty will be forgiven."

"Oh, it's going to take a lot more than that," Eddie said in a charged tone that was equal parts foreboding, intensity and sincerity.

She looked up from the board, and he broke into a bright smile and chirped "But I'm betting you're set up to do it in much less time than you think."

There were plenty of bars in Gotham where the police weren't exactly welcome, but there was none as brazenly criminal as the Iceberg. Mobsters and low-level associates had frequented the place before Carmine went to war with the Rogues, and it was only a matter of time before they returned now that the war was over. Batman knew the test runs were beginning, and he spent the hours between his early and late patrol on a nearby roof to monitor the situation.

It was happily boring work. He wanted to be nearby in case violence erupted, but he wasn't expecting it. With so many Rogues incarcerated it was in Oswald's interest to take what business he could get. It was in the decimated wiseguys' interests to be welcome in the nightclub that served as the hub of the underworld. Like rival predators at a watering hole, they would behave for the common good. It made for a boring night, but Batman couldn't bring himself to wish it otherwise. Not until he saw how the monotony was broken, at any rate.

"Meow," she said, landing on the far edge of the roof. "Figured I'd find you here, being all watchful and gargoyley."

He grunted, not turning his attention from the Iceberg sign as she approached. He still noted the provocative walk as she crossed the roof, noted the felinity of her pose

on the gargoyle beside his, but only in his peripheral vision. To one who didn't know the rooftop dynamic, it would seem like he was ignoring her.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Do I have to want something to keep you company?" she purred.

"Not always. But the way you're behaving now, you've certainly got your hands on someone else's property—I'd estimate nothing less than the Juanpur ruby—and you want me to let you keep it."

"Well, you're half right," she admitted with a appreciative laugh-moan, her head tilted back as if a demonstration of his detective skill stimulated her physically. "I do have something with an outrageous price tag. What was my tell?"

"It's not like you ever bothered with second-rate merchandise, but the way you positioned yourself on that gargoyle, you're facing the Sterling Building and you've glanced that way twice. That was a king's ransom in bearer bonds. Your biggest score that wasn't art or jewels. So..."

"That is so hot," she said, rearranging her pose on the gargoyle. "Better?" she asked, and he grunted. The moment held for a comfortable time as they watched the Iceberg sign in silence. Then she went on in that assured sexy-but-smug drawl. "Pity you're wrong about the rest of it."

"How so," he asked, still not turning his attention from the 'Berg.

"I have something alright, but *keeping* it isn't the thing. I want you to help me give it back."

Batman's head snapped to the side to face her, his guard up instinctively. He scanned her up and down as if looking for signs that she was a shape-shifter. It took only a split second for his mind to adjust—the Selina before him wasn't the Catwoman he thought he was talking to, but she wasn't a shape-shifting imposter either.

"You're serious," he said, the shift to his day voice the only sign that he'd abandoned the roleplay-foreplay.

Selina noted it, noted his obvious (to her) assumption of why she'd come, and resolved to make it up to him at the first opportunity. She wasted no time on it now, however.

"I'm serious. The nice thing about those bearer bonds is right in the name. They belong to whoever's attached to the hand that's holding them, same as cash. Something like a Vermeer, each one is known, each one is famous. If you don't have a collector lined up who wants that particular piece, you have to settle for pennies on the dollar when you fence it."

"Mmm, 'Crime doesn't pay,' seems I've heard that somewhere before."

"Gee, you're going to be a jackass about this, I never would have guessed. Crime pays very well when you're smart and you know what you're doing. I am and I did. But even I got bit now and then. In this case, I got stuck with a Stradavarius. You probably know the one."

"The unknown 18th Century viola that was being authenticated at Metropolis University, believed to be the 'Castello Sforza' made by Antonio Stradivari in 1703 for the Duke of Milan?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Selina said miserably. "I had a buyer all lined up, but by the time I got my hands on the Strad, Arrow and Canary had busted him for some nasty sweatshops his company used in Bangladesh or somewhere."

“Not one to settle for ‘pennies on the dollar,’ you kept it.”

“Right. And now I’d like to un-keep it, and I want to know how that works. All the extant Strads are owned by corporations or foundations that *lend* them to the musicians who play them. That’s the kind of thing I need to set up for the Sforza, but I... can’t figure out how. I mean, it’s not like laundering money. You can’t ‘wash’ a Golden Age Strad.”

Batman looked at the skyline beyond the Iceberg as he thought, the solution to the present coming together quickly, though it had to fight for his full attention against the memories of that week long past when the viola went missing in Metropolis. After a minute, he grunted.

“If an unknown 18th century viola surfaced,” he said, “like those artworks recovered in Europe, it could be ‘acquired quietly’ by a wealthy individual who wanted to remain anonymous, authenticated at some institution like Hudson where that individual—or his foundation—had a long-standing relationship.”

“And if Hudson determined this newly discovered viola was the Castello Sforza, that doesn’t mean it’s the one that was stolen in Metropolis, because that ID was never completed.”

“Correct. And whatever it’s found to be, the Foundation could act on the anonymous patron’s behalf to facilitate a loan to whatever musician they named.”

“Would it raise flags, the whole thing going down before anyone in the art or music world knew anything about it?”

Behind the mask, Bruce’s eyes flickered, an all but imperceptible nod of admiration. The way his sensei blinked to almost subliminally acknowledge a bow. There was a reason she’d never been captured, a reason her name wasn’t suspected until she allowed it to be, and it had nothing to do with how she looked in purple leather.

“There is a plausible explanation that those in the know will easily arrive at,” he said. “On their own without anyone drawing them a picture. The only way the anonymous patron could act so quickly when the instrument surfaced is if they had feelers out all this time. The only reason for that is if he—or she—felt guilty about the original theft. U Metropolis was chosen for the authentication because they were courting a Luthor purchase. They hoped he would buy the Strad once it was authenticated and lend it out in the way you described, a conspicuous act of corporate philanthropy.

“And the reason they turned their hopes to Luthor was because Bruce Wayne couldn’t let an opportunity pass to make a spectacle of himself. He got drunk at Andre Kessler’s birthday party—that was the conductor of the Gotham Symphony Orchestra at the time—spilled champagne on his wife, tried to get the first violin to take him into the music room for a ‘private recital’ knowing she was Kessler’s mistress, and on the way out, he made sure at least two members of the board heard him boasting about the medical grants the Wayne Foundation was writing—*important* grants for things that actually mattered, not all the pishy artsy stuff.”

“Wow, what a guy,” Selina said softly.

Bruce swallowed.

“I toned it down after the early years,” he said casually.

"After the ship had sailed on the Strad," Selina noted. "So you're the one they'll imagine the Foundation is fronting for because you're the one who feels guilty. Weird, when you first dropped the g-word, I thought you meant me."

"Aren't you? What else could be behind this?"

"Great detective my ass, where did I just come from?"

"You're doing it for *Nigma*?"

"Yep. In his view, it's his price to kiss and make up."

"And in your view."

"It's his reward. It's a long story, but the girl we're arranging this for, the one who's going to be playing this viola, he's never even met her. He's doing it because he's got a debt and he wants to pay it. That's rather cool. It's also more than a little 'white hat,' as is my giving it back without making a dime. And the irony of *that* sticks it to him in about seven different ways he's not even aware of. And that makes me purr long and loud."

Batman said nothing. It was feline logic, what else was there to say?

She was a mystery, wrapped in a woman, inside a cat.

Ivy wasn't sure what the Red River Rivalry meant or even what sport was involved, but she knew the Longhorns winning in overtime the week before a horse called The Greater Fool beat one called Zack's Comeback had returned Saul Vics to the amiable gofer role Nature intended. He was once again knocking on her door each day to deliver a gadget dressed up as a phone, and she was once again able to refresh herself maintaining a virtual garden of flower pictures. Today's find was a spectacular Bull's Eye Shrub Rose, an exotic Grenadilla, and a *Dartura* that wasn't any less beautiful for being purple. She did have to make room, and she knew just what inferior specimens to snip. The anemic rosebush and bonsai tree she added in the early days assembling the collection before she saw what wonders were available. The day's selection made, she chose a simple spray of plum blossoms to meditate.

People were not a horror. Some of them were quite pleasant. Harley and Harvey were, at least. Even *Nigma* made a contribution to the world beyond the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. Some people were ok, and this business of them not liking her had to be addressed. A goddess not being liked without pheromones, it simply wasn't acceptable. If people weren't going to be gotten rid of, she'd have to fix it another way. She could learn to be likable. How hard could it be? She just needed the right person to start with. Mistakes were inevitable, and she wouldn't want to risk making them on Harley or Harvey.

She thought. She thought. Swapped the plum blossoms for an English daisy and thought some more. Finally it came to her. Give the history, he was the perfect choice. She would learn to be likable, and she would use Bruce Wayne to do it.