The Batman - The Legend of Gotham City's Dark Knight

by Newt_Flute_Boot

Summary

After witnessing the murder of his parents in the heart of Gotham City at a very young age, Bruce Wayne sets out on a personal mission to war against the criminals that his city has fostered. Many legends and tales have been told about Bruce's war on criminals - and his alter ego as the heroic vigilante known as the Batman - but this is the true, essential and cohesive saga of Batman - from his rise to prominence, through his struggle to maintain justice, and how he and a host of allies ultimately saved Gotham and its citizens from the heart of darkness that gripped it since the days of its original settlement.

Notes

The stories of Batman, and the numerous heroes and villains that live with him in Gotham City, are amongst the most well-known modern folklore. However, this story was originally written for anyone out there who is unfamiliar with the exploits of the Caped Crusader, with the intention that it would introduce newcomers to his world. That said, both longtime fans and admirers of the World's Greatest Detective, as well as those completely new to the world of the Dark Knight can enjoy this cohesive saga about his many adventures in his war on crime.
“I fell,” a young boy’s voice shouted. “Wait!”

“No way!” another responded. “Catch me if you can!” The latter voice belonged to a boy named Tommy Elliot, and his shouts were so loud that they could be heard from across the entire garden. His friend, Bruce Wayne, ran excitedly after him, hoping to catch up quickly. Flowers and other species of foliage flew by his face as he weaved between the aisles of plants in his parent’s enormous garden.

Bruce had always liked the garden. Over the past few years it had easily become his favorite place to play in the vast estate where he lived. It had plants that had been procured from nurseries all over the world, and Mrs. Cooper always did a fine job at keeping them as healthy as possible in Gotham’s oceanic climate.

Breathing heavily, Bruce came to halt, placing his hands on his hips as he looked up at the sky. Brushing his jet-black hair away from his blue eyes, he took note of how warm the windless air was. He was glad to be able to play outside today. It was a record-breaking April as far as rainfall had been concerned, with today being the first stormless day in almost a week and half. The clouds held almost motionless in the grey sky above. The skies were nearly always grey in Gotham. At least, it seemed that way. Gotham had a reputation of being dark and damp year-round, with the exception of the summer months. Being located along the Eastern Seaboard, that was to be somewhat excepted, but for whatever reason weather patterns all seemed to converge right over Gotham, causing for a much cooler climate than could be found in any of the other major East Coast cities.

“You giving up?” Tommy shouted from somewhere in the distance. Grinning, Bruce resumed the chase. Tommy Elliot had been Bruce Wayne’s best friend for the majority of both of their young lives. In fact, the Elliots were friends to the entire Wayne family and had been for some time. Both of the boys’s mothers had been pregnant at the same time, and being neighbors both got to experience childbirth and the excitement of being new parents all at the same time together.

Coming to the greenhouse, Bruce opened the door and called in, “Tommy?” There was no vocal reply but Bruce noticed the sound of shuffling feet inside and, pursing his lips, ventured in.

For as lush and well-kept as the gardens were, Mrs Cooper did not keep the greenhouse in very good condition. She didn’t favor the more tropical plants, and as such a menagerie of tangled vines and gnarled branches reigned within the structure which was perhaps more often appreciated as a storage shed for the gardening tools. Rakes, shovels and trowels lined the walls, with pots, hoses and various bags of fertilizers and soils sprawled over tables and workbenches.

Bruce stopped and strained his ears, listening for any sign of his friend, but he could on hear his own breathing in the humid air. Then he saw, under a wooden table to the left, the bright sneakers that Tommy Elliot was wearing.

“Can I see?” Bruce asked as he leaned over and looked his friend in eyes. Tommy grinned, wiping his sweaty red hair away from his forehead.

“Finders keepers, and I found it,” Tommy taunted.

“In my garden,” Bruce quipped. Though he liked him, Bruce had always felt the need to come up with reasons – feigned logic – in order to outsmart Tommy. Tommy was smug and arrogant,
always fancying that he knew everything. The two usually played board games involving strategy, where Tommy could gloat about his intellect. And if they weren’t doing that then they were playing imaginary games in which Tommy would dictate make-believe scenarios for Bruce to deal with. But today had been different. Today they had opted to play in the garden. It was the only somewhat decent weather they’d had in days, and thus they had taken full advantage of that all morning.

“I’m serious, let me see,” Bruce said. Tommy stretched out a fist and unclenched his fingers, revealing an old Native American arrowhead resting on his palm. Native Americans had inhabited the Gotham regional area for several thousand years prior to its first permanent European settlers. In fact, Bruce’s father had told him that the explorer, Jeremy Coe, had reported Indian Camps in droves in what was now known as the Gotham Heights area only three hundred years ago. And while Bruce’s dad had always told stories of finding old pieces of pottery and other artifacts on the grounds of the manor when he was a boy, Bruce had never found anything until today.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Tommy said. Never taking his eyes off of the object in Tommy’s hand, Bruce struck his hand out as quickly as possible and snatched it up for himself. Before his red-haired friend could entirely register what had happened Bruce was running out of the greenhouse, arrowhead in hand.

“Finders keepers!” he giggled back as the reentered the garden area. Hearing Tommy closing in behind him, he frantically looked for a place to hide. And then he saw a tree off to the right, running up against an old well, which had been boarded up years before Bruce was even born. If he could just climb up into the tree before Tommy got close, then surely he’d be able to hide up there. He ran over to the base of the trunk, and seeing it was too tall, he resolved that he should climb on top of the well to give himself a boost.

He carefully tucked the arrowhead into his pocket and climbed up onto the boards covering the old well’s opening. Bending his knees, Bruce crouched down and then jumped up, desperately reaching above his head for the nearest branch. But he missed.

“Bruce!” Tommy called as he got nearer. Bruce bent down and sprung up again. This time his fingers just barely grazed the lowest branch. Tommy suddenly appeared around the nearest shrubbery and Bruce made one final desperate leap. His palm hit the branch, and his fingers quickly tightened around it. A smile burst across his face as he found himself hanging above the old well from the branch. He had made it.

But suddenly Bruce found his stomach forcing its way up into his chest. The world around him went flying up into the air. The branch had snapped, and before Bruce had even realized he was falling his body slammed hard against the wooden boards below. Pain surged along his back and then scraped along his sides as the boards gave way. A burst of splinters flew before his eyes and then darkness swallowed him as he tumbled down to the bottom of the well.

“Bruce?” Tommy shouted, peering down into the well, but it was too dark to see his friend anywhere down in the depths. Quickly as he could, he ran back through the garden toward the massive mansion calling out for help.

The stone surface had slapped the breath from Bruce’s body as his fall ended. Groaning, and barely able to move, he gazed up at the tiny hole of light from the opening above. It was damp and still down in the hole. He could barely see, or even bring himself to cry out. It was almost soundless, except for a slow and steady dripping and a distant whisper of air.

Straining his eyes, he turned his head and noticed that the well opened up into a tunnel to the right of his body. Barely able to make out the silhouettes of shapes, it appeared as if the tree’s roots had
grown into the side of the well and ripped it apart, giving way to a tunnel leading to a much larger
cavern in the distance. Maybe he could lift himself up and crawl down the tunnel, but he feared he
wouldn’t be able to see.

The distant whisper suddenly changed. It had transformed into something else. Something that
stirred in the darkness. It grew from a whisper into a shuffle and a hiss. And it chittered. And then,
as suddenly as the branch had snapped before the fall, shadows exploded from out of the tunnel.
They boiled from the darkness, flapping, beating, gnawing, and clawing. It was a nightmare of
leathery wings, gleaming eyes and fangs. Bats surrounded him, choking the air and leaving Bruce
petrified with fear. He shrieked, half out of terror, but mostly out of despair. He had never felt such
pure panic surge through his veins like this in his entire life. He had been scared, of course, as most
children had. But this was something entirely different. This was the gut-wrenching panic that
comes from an extreme fear that few people ever truly feel. But here he was, a boy at the age of
eight years old, squeezing his eyes shut and willing himself to be anywhere but here.

That time in the darkness felt eternal. The bats had moved on, but for how long Bruce had no idea.
In fact, he hadn’t ever really noticed when they had left, too consumed in his panic. But though
they were gone, the helplessness and loss Bruce felt had not. Too scared to move and barely
breathing so as to stay as quiet as possible, he wondered if he would ever be free. Dried tears had
caked grime and filth onto his face, his clothes were soaked from the mud, and the cold air seemed
to have pierced through his body and clamped onto his bones. Bruce wasn’t even sure if he was
still alive, unable to see the light filtering in from above anymore. As a weighted lump seemed to
form in his heart, he wondered if he had fallen into Hell.

And then, suddenly, a beam of light stretched through the inky blackness and engulfed him.
Reaching up to shade his eyes, Bruce saw his father, Thomas Wayne, floating down towards him,
flashlight in hand. A rope was harnessed around his body, and though Bruce knew he was being
rescued, he did not feel safe.

“Bruce. It’s okay,” Thomas whispered as he reached down and clasped hands with his son. “Don’t
be afraid, it’s okay. You’ll be ok.”

Thomas carried Bruce up the stairs to the door of Wayne Manor. The house had been in their
family for a long time. In fact, the Waynes had been in Gotham City since it was first settled. And
in the generations that followed they had made themselves rather prominent members of its
society.

Wayne Enterprises was the massive corporate conglomerate that the Wayne family had run from
within the heart of the city that granted them a vast multi-billion-dollar fortune. But fortune had not
caused the Waynes to be decadent. In fact, so determined to be industrious and help benefit the
world around him, Thomas usually didn’t even run his company himself. He left it up to men much
more interested in the corporate world than himself. Instead Thomas had gone to medical school
and worked at the hospital as an accomplished surgeon. He and his wife Martha were both well-
known philanthropists, often spearheading numerous charity events. They were Gotham’s favored
family.

“Will you be needing my assistance Master Wayne?” Alfred, the Wayne’s butler asked as they
ascended the stairs.

“No, it looks like just some bruising and maybe a sprained ankle,” Thomas replied. “But it could
have definitely been worse.”
“Very good, Sir,” Alfred nodded. Alfred Pennyworth was a good man. Born and raised in Britain, in his younger days he attended numerous prestigious academies and eventually entered training to be a military man. He trained specifically in combat medicine, however, he ended up in various jobs as bodyguards, which eventually turned into simple valet work by the time he was hired by the Waynes. He and Thomas had hit it off extremely well, especially due to their shared interest in medicine, and he quickly found himself promoted from valet to head butler at Wayne Manor, growing extremely close to the entire family.

Waiting near the doors of the vast mansion stood Tommy Elliot and his father. Tommy looked ashamed, guilty and worried, while his father stood somewhere between embarrassed and livid.

“I’m very sorry Thomas,” Mr. Elliot sputtered at Bruce’s father. “I’ve told Tommy a hundred times-”

“Don’t worry, it’s alright,” Thomas replied kindly. As they passed, Bruce reached out and slipped the arrowhead into his friend’s hands. It wasn’t worth taking.

“ Took quite a fall, didn’t we Master Bruce?” Alfred smiled at the Bruce as he was carried into the spacious entrancehall of the manor.

“And why do we fall, Bruce?” His father said comfortingly. “We fall so we can learn to pick ourselves up.” Bruce had heard this saying from his father numerous times in his life, but somehow today he wondered how it could possibly apply. He had been petrified down in the well. How could he pick himself up?

“Honey!” Bruce’s mother called as she ran over to meet her husband and son.

“It’s just a little fall Martha, nothing serious,” Thomas assured her.

“Does anything hurt?” She asked, kissing her son on the forehead.

“Just a little sprain, some scrapes and some bruises, right Bruce?” Thomas said winking. “Lets get you up to your room for now.”

As Bruce was laid in his bed, he was glad to back in the arms of his parents, in his nice comfortable home. It was good to be out of the cold and be bathed in the lights of Wayne Manor. But he still didn’t feel safe. As the sun slipped behind the clouds, and the sky began to dim, the shadows seemed to be reaching for him, and there was no warmth or comfort in his heart. The chittering of the bats echoed in his head. Their eyes were watching him blankly, and he could not escape.

“Bruce,” the calm whisper of his father rang out from the darkness as a hand gripped the boy on the shoulder. “Bruce are you alright?”

Bruce opened his eyes. He was tangled in the soft down blankets of his bed, with sweat running down his forehead. Had he just been screaming? He couldn’t remember. All he could remember were the bats surrounding him. Lunging at him. The way they moved and twisted through the air. Their shrieks and hissing. He had been having a nightmare. Pain was pulsating from his heel up through his leg from the sprained ankle which he had only just agitated further as he thrashed in his sleep. He was terrified, but he did not think he could admit it to his father. After all, he was eight years old. Eight year-olds didn’t need their parents to come in and comfort them when they had nightmares. He didn’t even think eight year-olds had nightmares at all. What would his father think? Bruce stared up searchingly at his dad as his mother entered the door behind him and looked down with a worried but loving smile.
“The bats again?” Thomas asked. Bruce nodded. “You know why they attacked you, don’t you? It’s because they were afraid of you.”

“Afraid of me?” The thought seemed preposterous to Bruce.

“Of course they were. They were just sleeping in their cave when in dropped this boy who’s so much bigger than any of them. To them you’re a giant! They were scared. All creatures feel fear.”

“Even the scary ones?” Bruce said, the faint outline of a smile appearing on his face as he imagined those horrible little shadow-like creatures being frightened of him.

“Especially the scary ones!” Thomas chuckled back. Martha moved closer to the bed and sat herself down on the edge.

“Mom, what was that place?” Bruce asked.

“Just some old cave honey. Your father says those caves run all over underneath the grounds. In the civil war your great-great-grandfather was involved in the underground railroad, and probably used them to help people. You remember what that is?” Bruce nodded, remembering what he had learned about good people who had helped to free enslaved men, women and children by sneaking them into the northern states during the war. To think that a place which was used to help so many people had been so scary for him was a bit bewildering, but then again, so was the thought that the bats had been frightened of him.

“Are you still feeling frightened?” Thomas asked.

“No,” Bruce replied quietly.

“Do you need us to stay with you for a while?” Martha asked.

“I think I’ll be alright.”

“Good,” she said as she placed her hand on his head. “But if you need us, you know where we are. You never need to be afraid, Bruce. We’re always here for you when you get scared. And you’re here for us too. We are all going to be here for each other – especially when times get scary.”

“Even Alfred,” Thomas chimed in as he placed his arm around his wife. “He’s already boarded up that hole you fell into. So you don’t have to worry about it anymore. We’re always here for you, Bruce.” And for the first time since he fell into the hole, Bruce did feel better. At least, he felt better inside the house. Outside, in the cold wet night, he knew the bats were still out there.

June 26th. It had been two months since Bruce had fallen into the caves with the bats. His schooling at the Gotham Heights Academy had been out for a few weeks, which, for the Waynes, meant it was time for the usual summer outings as a family.

“Sit down,” Martha patiently told her squirming son. As the train lurched to a slow start Bruce pulled his face away from the window and took his seat across from his parents. It was an exciting time for Bruce, as his parents rarely ever brought him into the interior of the city. In fact, he could only remember traveling downtown on a very rare few occasions, on outings to the zoo or museum.

Wayne Manor, where Bruce’s family lived, was located on the outskirts of Gotham City in a neighborhood of Gotham Heights known as The Palisades. Gotham Heights was located on an outcropping of hills which bordered the western perimeter of Gotham City’s limits. From the
mansion they could see the sprawling megalopolis clinging to the ocean in the distance, but they
did not often all travel downtown together. Bruce had always been content exploring the grounds at
Wayne Manor or visiting the parks and ice cream parlor which were in the more immediate
neighborhood. They only ever took him downtown on special occasions, and today was a special
occasion. Or rather, it was a special occasion for his parents. Tonight was not the sort of night
Bruce would have likely chosen for himself.

The Grande Monarch Theatre, one of the oldest theaters in Gotham City, was performing a limited
engagement of Arrigo Boito’s *Mefistofele*. When Bruce had complained about going, his mother
had explained to him that the tickets had come to them through a good friend and it would be rude
not to accept them. His father had told him that the opera had only been performed on extremely
rare occasions, and in fact had only been put on twice in its original run, so this was an opportunity
that should be taken advantage of. Earlier that month, Bruce’s friend Tommy had visited
Amusement Mile, a massive carnival-like theme park along the water front, and seen a back-to-
back showing of both the 1920 *The Mark of Zorro* and its 1940 remake. Of course Tommy had told
Bruce all about it, and when he had asked his parents to take him, they had told him they would
take him the following month. This month they would take him to the opera.

Alfred had driven them to the train station, and Bruce had been upset for the duration of the ride.
Opera sounded boring to him, and he did not enjoy wearing the little three-piece suit and bowtie his
parents had made him wear. He was nowhere near as comfortable in such fancy clothing as his
father appeared to be. And his mother looked like royalty in her dress, wearing a brand new string
of pearls around her neck that Thomas had given her just moments before they left the manor.

The buildings flew by out the windows of the train, and Bruce’s grumpy mood began to lighten.
The massive skyscrapers and sculptures that lined the streets of Gotham were a sight that people
from all over the world would travel great distances to see, but the awe they inspired was not lost
on the young Bruce. He enjoyed the train too. It wasn’t vastly different from riding in a car, but
something about being on a train was fun. Special. Perhaps it was the tracks elevated so high above
the streets, or maybe it was the tunnels and twists it would take as it squeezed between the
crowded buildings. Whatever it was, there was something special about seeing Gotham from the
train system.

Gotham was an interesting city, architecturally. It was a layered urban sprawl. There were streets
elevated over streets, and streets that ran under the ground. Entire city blocks and shopping districts
were sometimes located on subterranean levels. On ground level the buildings were mostly all old,
brick, with elegant design. Beautiful sculptures erected from marble and even steel could be found
around every corner. They were edifices of the past haunting the present. As one moved higher up
the skyline the buildings would often get more modern in many places. There were even several
examples of newer buildings being built on top of older ones, with updated structural foundations
added to accommodate the changes. It was truly the one of the only cities of its kind in the entire
world. Of all of the major cities in the country, none had a layout quite so packed, towering, or
chaotic as Gotham City. Even on the clearest and sunniest of days, the lowest street levels would
be blanketed in shadows. Only glimmers of sunlight managed to shine in through the tiny spaces
between enormous skyscrapers overhead. As though there had been no planning city commission
involved in its construction, there seemed to be no height restrictions. The skyscrapers were
cantilevered toward the street rather than away, with lots of bridges overhead connecting buildings
and raised sidewalks, streets, and railway tracks. Everything felt dark and claustrophobic.

“Dad,” Bruce asked, “you’re company built this train, right?”

“That is correct,” Thomas smiled.
“Why did you want to build this train, Dad?”

“Well, Gotham has been good to our family… But some people here have been suffering. People less fortunate than us have been enduring some very hard times. So, we decided to build a new, cheap public transportation system to help them out.”

Bruce didn’t entirely understand the economic circumstances in Gotham, but he had heard about it plenty of times. Most people referred to it as “The Depression.” Apparently this sort of thing had happened in the past to other cities, where companies who provided a lot of jobs experienced extreme economic downturns or went out of business entirely. People would move out of the city and eventually the city itself would be nearly a ghost town. The same thing had happened in Seattle during the late 1960s and early 70s during an oil crisis. Gotham was going through similarly hard times. While extremely wealthy residents, like the Waynes, were barely touched by the economic downturn, low-income families found themselves plunging even lower. Crime and sickness was a rampant issue in the inner city, which was a large part of the reason that Thomas and Martha did not often take their son downtown. But they did their part to try and fix things. Both of them worked extremely hard on various charity projects and Thomas had expertly navigated his company through the crisis so that it would be able to provide as much stimulation to the economy as possible.

The train squeeled as it slowed down and stopped at the station nearest to the theater. The Waynes disembarked and walked a few blocks to the Grande Monarch Theatre. The old theater had been built very early in Gotham’s history, and was originally intended to be exclusively an opera house. But in more recent years it had lent itself to various other events, converting sometimes into a stage for dramatic plays, a movie theater, or even a symphony hall. Red velvet chairs with golden accents filled the theater, and enormous elaborate tapestries produced at the time of the theater itself was constructed lined the walls. Bruce and his parents took their seats and waited patiently until the lights dimmed in the auditorium. Spotlights lit the stage as the heavy curtains lifted, and the opera began.

Bruce watched, transfixed, as a heavenly chorus sang out and praised the Almighty God for his power and goodness, only to be met by Mefistofele, the Devil, who scornfully declared that he can win the soul of a man, the elderly Dr. Faust. His challenge was accepted by the Forces of Good, and their struggle over Faust’s soul began. The aged Dr. Faust and his pupil, Wagner, were watching Easter celebrations in the main square of their town, celebrating the anniversary of the resurrection of Christ, when Faust noticed that a mysterious friar, about whom he sensed something evil, was following them. Wagner dismissed his master’s feelings of unease and as darkness fell they returned to Faust’s home. Faust, in his study, was deep in contemplation. His thoughts were disturbed by the sudden appearance of the sinister friar, whom he now recognized as a manifestation of the Devil, Mefistofele. Far from being terrified, Faust was intrigued and he engaged in a discussion with Mefistofele which culminated in an agreement by which he would give his soul to the Devil on his death in return for worldly bliss for the remainder of his life. With the deal in motion and his youthfulness restored, Faust infatuated Margareta, an unsophisticated village girl. She was unable to resist his seductive charms and agreed to drug her mother with a sleeping draught and meet him for a night of passion. Meanwhile Mefistofele amused himself with another of the village girls. Faust sank deeper and deeper into the Devil’s plans, until Mefistofele carried Faust away to witness a Witches’ Sabbath on the hideous crags of the Brocken Mountain.

Bruce’s eyes widened as the Devil mounted his throne and proclaimed his contempt for the World and all its worthless inhabitants. The witches and goblins gathered and began to dance and twist around on stage. The music built upon itself and Bruce found himself more and more engaged. Suddenly, out of the caves and crevices of the set of the Brocken Mountain came a great number of performers dressed as gigantic and horrible bats. Bruce’s heart beat faster as he watched them twirl.
and spin on the stage, reaching up towards Mefistofele with grasping clawed hands. As he watched, sweat ran down his forehead, and it was as if he could see the bats he had encountered from the cave before his very eyes. He could hear their chittering and hissing, and feel their leather wings brushing over him as he sat in panic. His stomach churned and ached. They were surrounding him, swarming over his body, and desperately he looked for a way out.

Thomas glanced down and saw his son’s face drenched in sweat with skin as white as paper. The boy’s chest was heaving. Glancing back at the stage and seeing the bats, Thomas reached down and placed his hand on Bruce’s knee.

“Can we go?” Bruce gasped out. “Please?” With a look of understanding, Thomas nodded his head and took Martha’s hand and whispered in her ear. She glanced down at Bruce and then together they all stood up and eased their way past the rest of the audience in their row. Then, quickly, as they got into the aisle they hurried out to the lobby.

“Sir are you sure you would like to leave? We will not be able to allow you back in until the beginning of the next act,” an usher remarked.

“That’s quite alright,” Thomas replied as they walked through the lobby and out the front door.

“Bruce are you alright?” Martha asked. He just nodded his head while his father patted him on the back.

“A little bit of opera goes a long way, right Bruce? Come on, lets get back to the train station.” Walking arm-in-arm with Martha, they all took to the night streets of Gotham heading toward the nearest train station.

“Here, let’s take this shortcut,” Thomas said, leading them down a narrow street called Park Row. “This is where Leslie works, Martha.”

“Oh, in here?” Indeed one of the doors they passed carved out in the side of the alleyway had a sign that read, *The Leslie Thompkins Medical Clinic*. Bruce had only met Leslie a few times in his life. She had apparently been a student with Thomas in medical school, and even a coworker at the hospital for a while. A lifelong friend of the Waynes and a renowned medical professional in her own right, Leslie had left the hospital to start her own clinic, dedicating her considerable skills toward helping Gotham’s neglected and impoverished population in the inner parts of the city.

They passed the door and continued toward the end of the street, which is where Thomas said the train station was located. Bruce was glad to be out in the cool night air, calming down from his panic attack at the theater. He was so thankful for his parents being understanding and letting him leave, but he didn’t want to tell them for fear that they might tease him. He felt worse enough on his own about his fears.

A man entered the street in front of them and started walking toward them. Bruce noticed his mother’s uneasiness as she clang closer to her husband who looked to have perked up, as if on his toes for the worst. Bruce didn’t understand what there was to be worried about. The man ahead looked like any other denizen of Gotham, wearing a coat, muddy pants, and a cap with the brim pulled low. There was hardly anything to be nervous about.

But as they came into close proximity to each other the man exploded into movement, whipping a gun out from his coat and pointing it directly at Thomas. Bruce stepped back in shock, his heart racing but barely able to move.

“Wallets, jewelry,” the man ordered, muttering as though he were in a hurry. His arm trembled as
he held the outstretched gun, and he added, “Come on. Fast.”

“That’s fine,” Thomas said quietly, his hands up in a submissive gesture.

“Fast!”

“That’s fine. Take it easy. Just take it easy,” Thomas slowly reached into his coat pocket and removed his wallet. The man’s eyes fixed onto the wallet and he reached out with his free hand to take it. Keeping eye-contact Thomas said, “Here you go.” But as the wallet touched the hand of the mugger, Thomas let go and the mugger let it slip to the ground. The mugger’s glare shot up to Thomas, enraged like a feral animal, but Thomas just calmly kept his hands raised and said quietly, “It’s fine. It’s fine.” The mugger slowly bent himself down, keeping his eyes fixed and gun aimed at Thomas, blindly reaching out for the wallet. Finally he clasped it and began returning to a stand.

“Now just take it,” Thomas said as kindly as he could. “Just take it, and go away.” But the mugger’s glance shifted toward Martha along with his gun and he sputtered out, “I said jewelry!”

“Hey!” Thomas shouted, stepping between the barrel of the weapon and his wife. It all happened so fast that Bruce didn’t know what had transpired until well after the shots had rang through the alley. The mugger had panicked at Thomas’s sudden movement and squeezed the trigger, releasing a bullet into Bruce’s father’s body. The bullet hit Thomas in the chest, dropping him to the ground like a brick, and Martha shrieked out a gut-wrenching scream, “Thomas! Thomas!” Bruce looked down at his father, eyes widening, only to hear the second shot ring out. His mother’s shrieks were silenced forever, as the bullet tore through her throat and she fell to the ground next to her husband. Her necklace had burst apart from the impact of the shot, and her pearls flew in all directions, hitting the ground and rolling around loose on the pavement.

Breathless, Bruce gaped at the man above him, who looked down at the boy with a stare as blank and as gaunt as the bats from the cave. It was bestial and blank, completely unpredictable. The man blinked, and then, slipping the wallet and the gun into his coat, he turned and ran back into the shadows. Bruce was alone.

The silence in the alleyway was almost defeating, as it soundlessly pounded against the inside of Bruce’s head like waves crashing on a crumbling cliff’s edge. He fell to his knees, splashing his legs down into the pooling blood gathering around him. On both side laid his parents’ lifeless bodies, and he was entirely alone. He would never hear his father’s comforting voice again, or feel his mother’s warm embrace. They were gone forever.

His gaze followed the flow of blood from the wound in Martha’s neck down to the pool in which he knelt, and slowly he pressed his hand down into it. The pungent smell filled his nostrils, mixing with the Gotham night air. It was a smell he would never forget, like iron and feces. He felt like his eyes had been fused open, staring into the empty cityscape beyond. Tears wouldn’t come, and the pit in his stomach grew only larger and larger. He was alone. His childhood was over. And so was his life.

That night, Thomas and Martha Wayne were shot and destroyed. They would never rise again. But neither would Bruce, because when he finally stood up from the pavement, the child who had played happily in Wayne Manor and studied at the Gotham Heights Academy was gone. He was no longer that boy. He wasn’t sure exactly who he was anymore, but for the moment he was simply vacant. He was an empty vessel waiting for something to possess it.

“Hello?” a voice called out in the darkness. “Hello? Are you alright?” A woman approached him, though he didn’t turn to see her. He simply stared. She gasped as she got closer, and muttered a few hushed profanities as she saw the bodies. Bruce thought he heard her say his father’s name. No, he
was sure of it. She had. The woman was Leslie. He didn’t need to see her to know who it was. She must have heard the gunshots and come out to investigate. He wouldn’t look at her. He couldn’t look at her. He couldn’t look at her, or the bodies, or the police that arrived later. He didn’t so much as blink or even sigh when he overheard the police saying they likely couldn’t solve a case involving a random vagrant mugger. He didn’t look at Alfred when the butler finally came to pick him up. Bruce kept on staring, hardly uttering a sound for the entire night. He even felt as if was staring into the gaping darkness in his sleep. The shock would not pass.

It rained on the day of the funeral. People arrived dressed in black and reverently watched as Martha and Thomas Wayne were lowered into the ground of the family plot, which resided near the Manor. Bruce hadn’t bothered opening his umbrella. He just let the rain run over his hair and down his face, though he could hardly feel it. He could hardly feel anything.

People from Wayne Enterprises visited Bruce after the ceremony and wished him condolences, telling him they would help him manage whatever finances his parents had left him. He nodded, but he knew he wouldn’t need help with that. Alfred had been appointed as his legal guardian, and Leslie had offered her help as a sort of surrogate mother as well. Alfred and Leslie were friends, though Bruce was not entirely fond of her. He was especially not fond of the idea of someone filling in for his mother. At least Alfred would know his place. Alfred would never try to be Thomas Wayne. Alfred would be Alfred. A butler. A servant. A fatherly figure in his own right, but a servant at the end of the day.

 Plenty of Gotham’s wealthiest citizens were in attendance at the funeral as well. Bruce knew very few of them. He recognized the Falcones, people Thomas had not thought highly of though he spent plenty of time with them. Tommy Elliot had been there with his parents, but he hadn’t bothered to say much of anything. Bruce didn’t look at any of them though. Not even his parent’s caskets. He just kept on staring.

It wasn’t until the guests had left and Bruce was back in his bedroom in the manor that he began to feel anything. He stood by the window, still drenched in water, and stared out at the family burial grounds in the distance. And as he stared he could see their tombstone rising above the rest.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred said, entering the room. “Are you alright, Master Bruce?” Bruce didn’t respond. Alfred nodded, and said, “I thought I might begin to prepare your supper.” Bruce still didn’t respond. He didn’t know how. Alfred sighed in acknowledgement and turned to leave when the growing weight in Bruce’s core suddenly began to boil and bubble its way up and out of his throat.

“Alfred,” he choked out as he spun around to face the butler.

“Master Bruce?”

“Alfred, it’s my fault Alfred. It’s all my fault!” Tears flowed from the boy’s eyes. It was the first time he had cried since the murder. It was the first time he had really felt anything since the gunshots had rattled his eardrums. Alfred ran forward, kneeling down to Bruce’s eye-level and wrapped his arms around the boy.

“Oh no Bruce. No.”

“If I hadn’t gotten scared-” Bruce cried.

“No,” Alfred said, looking him sternly in the eyes. “It was nothing that you did. It was him, and
him alone. Do you understand me?” Bruce pushed his head into Alfred’s shoulder, burying his face.

The crying continued on and off for most of the evening, but eventually the tears ran out. Bruce had declined dinner. He didn’t have the appetite. In fact, he went back to his lifeless mood, staring out at the loneliness. But he didn’t feel empty. He felt sad. He felt lonely. He felt guilty.

He was put to bed by Leslie that night, and he laid there so still and lifelessly that she thought he had fallen asleep before she even left the room. He let her believe it. It made her happy. She worried about him so much, seeing how he had reacted to everything. She couldn’t imagine how a boy who had grown up as Bruce had could handle watching his parents be gunned down before his very eyes. She worried he’d hardly be able to sleep at all, especially after hearing about the chiroptophobia he had developed after his encounter with the bats. So it was comforting for her to think he had slipped off into sleep so effortlessly. Quietly she snuck out the door, and closed it behind her.

But Bruce was not asleep. He opened his eyes as soon as she had left, and stared into the corner of his bedroom. The sorrow was welling up in his throat, swelling to such proportions that he thought he might burst. And then he heard the gunshots. The two gunshots which had killed his family. He no longer saw the bats scrambling through the air around him, but instead saw the shadowed figure of the gunman and his parents dropping to the ground. His father’s fall, his mother’s screams, and the blood-spattered pearls flying through the air. Again and again and again he saw this. His heart raced faster and faster and faster. He heard the voices of the police saying they couldn’t find the mugger. The sound of the train in the distance. The echo of the steps the mugger took as he came closer. His whining in the opera house.

And then something snapped. It all went away. His entire body shook as he sat up in bed and clenched his fists. The sorrow was gone, and the guilt was melting away. This feeling was new. It was a feeling that would permeate much of the remainder of his life. It was anger. The boy, Bruce Wayne, was gone. And as he stood up out of bed, a rush of newfound power surged up through his body and he shouted at the darkness in the room.

“I swear!” he shouted. “Mother, Father, I swear!” It was all he could vocalize. It was all his anger would allow. But in his head the words swirled around, fluidly, and profoundly fleshed themselves out: “I swear, I will avenge your deaths. I will spend the rest of my life warring on all criminals. All criminals. I swear.”
“Beginning our final descent into Gotham City. Please return seats and trays to their upright position,” the voice of the stewardess came through the speakers in a muffled tone.

It was January 4th, and Bruce Wayne looked out the window and saw the sprawling city below. It had been a long time since he last had laid eyes on it. He was now 27 years old, a far cry from the boy who used to run around in the gardens of Wayne Manor.

Gotham City was built along the shoreline, though it had clearly grown much larger than its original settlers had intended. Along the hills in the west he could see Gotham Heights, and within that he could make out the Palisades, the neighborhood in which old Gotham money had built ancient mansions which still stood today. It overlooked other neighborhoods consisting largely of rundown homes and apartments. As the city stretched eastwards toward the water, the buildings got larger and larger until it hugged the very edge of the ocean and spread off into three major island districts which were the bulk of city. From there, smaller islands and rocky outcroppings dotted the water, each now thoroughly overflowing with buildings. It was like multiple Manhattan Islands, swollen beyond capacity, all connected by a spider web of bridges and tunnels.

From here, Bruce thought as the plane descended, it looks like clean shafts of concrete and snowy roofs. The work of men who died generations ago. From here it looks like an achievement... From the street it looks like a city crumbling into the seaside... and the buildings are like rows of teeth with rotting roots. I should have taken the train. I should be closer. I should see the enemy.

The plane landed smoothly and Bruce picked himself up from his first class chair, taking care to wrap a scarf around himself, and disembarked from the craft. As he left his gate he was met by a baggage carrier from the Gotham International Airport who had already stacked his luggage on a cart.

“Where will we be taking these, Mr. Wayne?” the man asked.

“I’m meeting my butler out in the pickup,” Bruce said, leading the way. As they passed baggage-claim there was a throng of people, flashing lights, cameras, and handheld recording devices. And then came the barrage of shouts.

“It’s Bruce Wayne!”

“Welcome home Mr. Wayne!”

“How’s it feel to be back in Gotham?”

“Any plans, Mr. Wayne?"

“Princess Caroline – any truth to the rumors?”

The paparazzi, Bruce lamented. I didn’t want this much publicity. I should have had Alfred declare me dead. I was gone long enough. Could have slipped back unnoticed, and conducted my business in peace. I wouldn’t have even had to take up residence back at the mansion. Could have just gotten an apartment in the Narrows or something. Been closer to the enemy. That’s what I should have done.

“Bruce Wayne!” a woman darted out in front of him. Her long, silky red hair and beaming smile could have been recognized by anyone in Gotham. It was Vicki Vale, Gotham’s most well known...
reporter. From light gossip to hard-hitting stories, she covered it all with unparalleled eagerness.

“Miss Vale,” Bruce nodded.

“Bruce, what can you tell us about your return to Gotham, and any plans or romances you might have in the pipeline while you’re here?”

“No comment,” Bruce said as he feigned a smile and raised his hand. He briskly passed by, and Vicki returned to look into the camera behind her, shrugging with a grin.

“Well there you have it Gotham,” she said. “The twenty-seven-year old heir to the Wayne billions declined comment on rumors of romance in his life, or on his plans for his return to Gotham after around a decade abroad. We’ll keep you posted on Gotham’s richest – and best looking – native son. Back to you Jack.”

“Thank you Vicki,” Jack Ryder nodded, back at the GCTV studio, queuing up the next story. “Following the disappearance of a key witness, Assistant District Attorney Harvey Dent has withdrawn conspiracy charges against Police Commissioner Loeb –”

“Master Bruce,” Alfred said as Bruce approached his limousine. “I trust you’ve been well.”

“Alfred,” Bruce extended his hand to shake Alfred’s hand, but the butler ignored the gesture entirely and embraced him in a hug. Though it was not the welcome Bruce wanted, and a twinge of annoyance ran through his body, he couldn’t help but smile. They loaded the luggage into the car and immediately set off towards Wayne Manor.

“You know Wayne Enterprises has been doing altogether quite well in recent years, Master Bruce.”

“So I hear.”

“Lucius Fox runs its operations, you know,” Alfred explained. “He was a good friend of your father’s, if you’ll recall.” Bruce barely did recall. Nor did he want to. He didn’t come back to integrate himself in the clockwork of Wayne Enterprises. He had other things to take care of.

“Mmm. Good,” Bruce said dismissively. Alfred sighed, knowing full well how uninterested Bruce would be in any topic he could come up with.

“How long do you expect to stay in Gotham, Master Bruce?”

“Not long,” Bruce answered. I wish I had taken the train…

Gotham City, thought the morose James Gordon. Maybe it’s all I deserve now. Maybe it’s just my time in hell. He looked around at his fellow train passengers, mostly vagrants and degenerates, and shook his head. He could have sworn someone near him had soiled themselves during the ride. The vile smell of filth was almost overpowering. Gotham looked like it was rotting from the ground up through the grime caked onto the windows of the train. A hiss from the rails sounded out through the air as the train started to slow to a halt. The passengers stirred and began standing, readying themselves for the departure.

Twelve hours, he recounted. My stomach has been eating itself for the last five. So hungry… Barbara and Babs are flying in. I don’t care how much it costs. And I don’t care that you’re not supposed to fly when you’re pregnant. The train is no way to come to Gotham. In an airplane, from above, all you’d see are the streets and buildings. Fool you into thinking it’s civilized. He couldn’t
believe he had to transfer here from Chicago, wiping his glasses off as he lamented. Of all the places for a police officer to be sent, Gotham City likely topped the lists of places least desired. At least it was for the good cops.

James Gordon was good cop. He had tried to be, at any rate. It was becoming harder and harder to keep one’s morality in this business, or so Gordon believed. He had noticed a steady increase in corruption in his last station, and had tried to do what he could to take it apart. A few bad cops were taken down, and he received a minor promotion for it, but in the end he had tried to take down the wrong man. Whether or not that man was innocent or guilty, with enough good connections, Gordon had never found out. It had been humiliating. And beyond that, the threats on his family’s safety were growing. At least he felt so. *What was the point of trying to do so much good only to have entirely stagnant progress?* He had wondered this many times until finally he requested a transfer. But there was only one force that requested him. The GCPD, Gotham City Police Department. He hoped everything would be ok, but thus far Gotham had not looked like the sort of city one would want to bring their family to.

Gordon very much loved his family. He and his wife, Barbara, had been married for fifteen years, and they had been mostly great until recently. The stress of his job had heightened, as had the stress in his relationship. Which was a serious shame. And it had gotten all the worse a few months back when Barbara had realized that she was pregnant. They hadn’t planned on a baby. In fact, James didn’t think Barbara could have another baby. Their last child had been through a complicated birth, and that was nearly thirteen years ago. Either way, she’d grown up fairly effortlessly. They named her after her mother, Barbara, though James liked to call her Babs. He had called his wife Babs when they were dating.

“Gordon,” a voice shouted from across the bustling train station. “Lieutenant James Gordon!” The voice had come from a tall blonde man, well-built, wearing a long coat. Gordon had been told someone from the force was coming out to meet him, so he just waved his hand and the man came closer.

“Hello,” Gordon said, offering his hand. The tall man completely ignored it and wrapped his arm over Gordon’s shoulder, pulling him in like a friend.

“Name’s Flass,” he said. “Detective Flass. Commissioner Loeb sent me to make sure you didn’t miss your appointment with him. I like the mustache, Jimmy! Hope you don’t mind if I call you Jimmy. Never could grow one myself.”

“Well I—” Gordon did mind, and he was really pretty tired of hearing wise-cracks from other cops about his mustache.

“Welcome to Gotham, Jimmy. Its not as bad as it looks. Especially if you’re a cop. Cops got it made in Gotham.”

*So I’ve heard,* Gordon thought to himself.

It wasn’t long before they were in Flass’s care, driving to the GCPD. Flass drove like a maniac, acting as if he owned the road. Gordon held on for dear life, and hoped that he would at least get along with the Commissioner. He didn’t think he could handle working with someone like Flass every single day.

*I keep telling myself it’s either this or pumping gas,* he thought. *Then I tell myself I’m doing it for Barbara…* Suddenly the car slammed to a halt. Gordon looked out the window, but didn’t see the GCPD building. He did, however, see a group of teenagers loitering around on a street corner. Flass was getting out of the car, purposefully staring at them.
“Flass, what’s-”

“Nothing I can’t handle solo, Jimmy,” Flass said dismissively as he turned his attention to the boys who all suddenly seemed to be standing on-edge. “Mother know you’re here, Stevie?”

“Oh man…” one of the boys said. “Look Flass, I’m not doing anyth-” Gordon watched in shock as Flass hit the boy across the jaw with a particularly nasty right hook, and then slammed him up against a dumpster.

You had better know your facts, Jim, Gordon told himself. Get all the facts straight this time. Before you try to bring own another cop. Especially in public. Flass has had Green Beret training. I can tell. And he knows how to use his size. I’ll watch this time, not do a thing about it, but I’ll need to memorize his every move. Just in case. For future reference. Crooked cops weren’t anything new to James Gordon.

“Was that necessary?” Gordon asked as Flass slumped back into the car.

“Had this little beauty in his pocket,” Flass said as he tossed Gordon what appeared to be a pocket knife. But it wasn’t. Gordon opened it up and revealed it to be a portable comb.

“It’s a comb, Flass.”

“Heh, I’m only human Jimmy. Gotta keep those punks on their toes, you know?”

It makes me sick to admit it, Gordon thought, but I wish Barbara would have a miscarriage. This is no place to raise a baby.

They continued on their way, and when they arrived, Gordon had to admit he was fairly impressed. The GCPD building was enormous and elaborate, at least from ground level. They walked up stairs and passed numerous offices until coming to one labeled Commissioner Gillian B. Loeb.

“You know, we’re delighted to have you on the team, Lieutenant,” Loeb said once they were in his office. Loeb was pudgy, and wrinkled in the face. His bald head wasn’t smooth and shiny like most bald heads, but rather resembled the skin of a hairless cat. He was constantly popping cough drops into his mouth, over and over and over again.

“You’ll get my best work, sir. I promise,” Gordon told him.

“And we are a team,” Loeb said, ignoring Gordon’s promise. “And a team needs team spirit, wouldn’t you say? Yes it does! And your record shows that you’ve got what it takes.”

“I’ve made my mistakes sir,” Gordon responded. “But I’m grateful for this chance to prove myself.”

“What mistakes have you made, Gordon?” Loeb laughed, with a look on his face as if they were all in on the same inside joke. “Whatever mistakes you’ve made, you kept the media away from it! That’s the bottom line, isn’t it?”

“I swear you won’t have to worry about my honesty, Commissioner.”

“That is the last thing on my mind. Last thing. We’ll have to pair you up with a partner soon, I suppose. I was thinking you and Detective Flass would make a good team.” Gordon tried his best to keep a straight face and not show is disdain.

I guess it’s just my time in hell, he reminded himself.
Wayne Manor. Built as a fortress, generations past, to protect a fading line of royalty from an Age of Equals. It’s good to be back. Bruce looked up at the great majestic façade of the house as he and Alfred entered its now mostly empty halls.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve been here, hasn’t it, Master Wayne?”

“It has, Alfred. Not since I was a teenager.”

“I’ve prepared the master bedroom for your arrival.”

“No. My room will be fine.”

“With all due respect, Sir, Wayne Manor is your house.”

“No, Alfred, it's my father's house.”

“Your father is dead, Master Wayne.”

“And this place is a mausoleum. If I had my way, I'd pull the damn thing down brick by brick.”

“This house,” Alfred replied sternly, “has sheltered over six generations of your family. I don’t see-”

“Why do you give a damn, Alfred? It's not your family.”

“I give a damn, because a good man once made me responsible for what was most precious to him in the whole world. I have cared for you since your cries first echoed in these very halls, and you are as precious to me as you were to your own mother and father.” Bruce felt his own guilt condemning him for how he had treated Alfred much of his life. The butler was right. He had cared for Bruce since infancy.

“I’m sorry, Alfred,” Bruce said. “You’re as much my family as anybody else, if not more so. Sometimes I just don’t know what to do with… the past.”

“I wouldn't presume to tell you what to do with your past, Sir. Just know that there are those of us who care about what you do with your future.”

“You haven't given up on me yet?”

“Never,” Alfred smiled as he moved the luggage into the master bedroom. Bruce followed behind, looking at the walls of the room in which he had so often seen his parents as a child.

“It really has been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“You left Gotham when you were around sixteen, wasn’t it?”

It was. The night of his parent’s funeral, Bruce found purpose within himself. He began applying all of his energies to his mission. He read as many books as he could in the following years, learning whatever he could as an armchair detective. But there was only so much he could learn at Gotham Heights Academy or in the libraries of the manor. He needed knowledge and skills that he couldn’t get that living at Wayne Manor.
There were other reasons for leaving the Gotham as well. There was Alfred and Leslie. They cared, and wanted to steer him down the path of a normal boy. But he wasn’t normal. He was not like any other boy. He had to thwart all those well-meaning people who wanted to care for him. And for all those who wanted to care for his fortune. He was the heir to Wayne Enterprises, and there were a lot of greedy people tied up in that business. Some good people too. But either way, it was a life that Bruce had been chained to that he was simply not interested in. Not anymore. He had to get away.

So he wrote letters. Letters that weren’t exactly forgeries but that weren’t exactly anything else. They enabled him to leave Gotham at age sixteen and begin a global quest to reach his goals. He visited prestigious campuses all over the East Coast, learning under the tutelage of some of the best professors in all of the entire United States of America. But he learned in other places as well. He learned with the homeless, gathered around fires in trashcans. He talked to kids on the streets who roved in gangs.

But wherever he went, he never stayed long.

“It’s a pity you never found yourself concerned enough to finish your education at any of the universities you enrolled in,” Alfred said. Bruce shrugged. Alfred never knew the purpose of his travels. And quite honestly, he was used to hearing criticisms about his college career.

“That Wayne boy’s bright,” his professors would say. “But he’s got no discipline. He skips around and won’t decide on a major.”

“Why are you leaving?” a beautiful classmate once asked when he was about to move on. She was tall, thin, and had a gorgeous head of flowing blonde hair. But she also had a boyfriend, and Bruce knew the life he had chosen was never going to be conducive to romance.

“Because frankly,” he would reply, his voice dripping with arrogance, “I’m bored.” He turned his back and began to walk away only to here her mutter under her breath, “Rich snot.” He continued walking, pretending he hadn’t heard. But he quickly looked back, sneaking a glance as she turned to kiss her boyfriend, and the ache he felt seemed to fill his entire body.

But in time, he learned to ignore the ache, and the pain of loss and isolation. They were the conditions of his life, and he accepted them. There was always another plane, or train, or bus. There was always another city, and another teacher. And to take advantage of that, he had to keep other people at bay.

“You know,” Alfred said. “I mean this with all due respect. I cannot judge your decisions with schooling. Though I had hoped you had at least found your niche when you were with the FBI.” This made sense, seeing as Alfred had served in British Intelligence for a short time.

“I did too,” Bruce said quietly. “But it didn’t really pan out.”

When he was twenty, Bruce decided to settle in the nation’s capital, Washington DC. Once there, he had tirelessly sought out a recruiting officer for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and begged him to be able to test for hiring.

“Well Bruce, these test scores are impressive, to say the least,” the officer had told him. “All except for your target shooting. But between you and me, a Federal Officer doesn’t pull his piece very often.” For all of the skills Bruce had tried to acquire, shooting was never one of them. He truly despised guns, and could scarcely squeeze a trigger without seeing the murder of his parents right before his eyes. He never really wanted to use one. But the officer continued, “Of course, we prefer college grads… usually people a bit older… more mature… and of course we like a law
degree. But honestly, in your case, we can waive the academic requirements.” And as the two shook hands, Bruce entered FBI training.

He trained six weeks and during that time he’d learned much about writing reports, obeying regulations, analyzing statistics, and dressing neatly, but nothing else. The experience confirmed a suspicion he’d long had. He could not operate within a system. The people who caused other people harm did not recognize the system. The people who stepped out of shadows and murdered innocents did not recognize systems, and neither could he. He left the country that night, traveling the entire globe learning everything he could about combat, self discipline, and honing every skill he had, only on occasion letting Alfred know he was still alive and doing ok. And though he felt he had to remain alone to accomplish his mission, perhaps that part was wrong.

“I’m sorry Alfred,” he said, looking his friend in the eyes.

“Master Wayne?”

“I’m sorry I haven’t let you into my life as much as I should have.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Alfred said. “We can put all of that behind us now. You’re back, for the time. Let bygones be bygones.” Alfred’s kindness really only made Bruce feel worse, but he smiled back all the same.

Flass was driving again, and once again Gordon was hanging on for dear life. It had been three weeks since Gordon first came to Gotham and met his new partner. And in those three weeks he had quickly learned what was expected of the cops in Gotham, and Flass may have been the worst.

“So, uh, Jimmy,” Flass said. “The boys… they’ve been asking me to talk to you, Jimmy. Though maybe I could get a word in, knowing how tight we are. They’re worried about you.”

“I’m touched Flass,” Gordon said dismissively. “But right now I’m just worried about getting home safely. Turn left.”

“You’ll never make it in this business if you don’t learn to relax, Jimmy. I mean, we’ve got our own way of doing things, here in Gotham.”

"Please call me Lieutenant,“ Gordon grunted.

“I mean, you came down pretty hard on some of us the other day… I mean, you with a baby on the way and all, I just-”

“Are you threatening me, Detective?”

“No, no, it’s just… you’re so uptight. Just makes some of us guys nervous.”

“I’m not a rat, Flass,” Gordon hissed. “In a town this bent, who’s there to rat to anyway?” Flass laughed as he pulled the car to a stop in front of a worn-down boardinghouse.

“Well, just think about it, Jimmy,” Flass said. “I’ll be by in the morning.”

“I’m driving myself tomorrow,” Gordon said as he stepped out of the car. “Thanks for the ride.” He shut the door and walked around the driveway to the backdoor where he saw his family waiting for him inside. But he could hardly look them in the face. They used to live in a nice little house, and now they were in this rundown apartment. His pregnant wife and his daughter, each with a
matching head of red hair. He just walked past them and sat down at the table.

“Dad,” his daughter asked, “How was work?”

“It was ok Babs, how was your day?”

“It was good,” she said. “But dad, there is something I kind of want to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” Gordon looked up at his wife worriedly but she didn’t return the glance.

“Yeah,” she continued. “I just… I think I’m a little old to be called Babs still. I want to go by Barb.”

“Barb?” Gordon sighed out in relief that the matter wasn’t any more serious. “I think I could get used to that. Well, Barb, is school treating you ok?”

“Yup!” she said excitedly. “I think I’m a little ahead though. The kids here are learning things I learned like… probably four years ago? Five years ago? Some of them still have a really hard time reading.”

“Well maybe we can look at getting you in some sort of advanced program, or skipping a grade or something,” Gordon said.

“Jim!” his wife interjected. “Can’t she just have a normal life without you pushing her in all directions?”

“Calm down,” he replied. “She can do whatever she wants. I’m just letting her know the option is there should she choose to take it.”

“Thanks dad,” Barb said. “I’ll think about it. I might like that actually.” Gordon smiled. He couldn’t believe she was as old as she was. She seemed so grown up, more advanced that many her age, but it also felt like only yesterday that she was just a little girl. She admired him a lot, which worried his wife. The life of a cop was hardly what her mother had wanted for her. It wasn’t what he wanted for her either, especially in Gotham, but he strived to let her make her own choices as much as possible. He hoped he could be enough of a confident parent to let his child be her own manager. Still, the idea of young Barbara interacting with people like Flass and Loeb was one that made him sick. He knew that more likely than not, Flass was already back at the GCPD complaining to Loeb about his new partner.

“So Father Donelley, he slips Gordon a fifty with the handshake,” Flass said as he slapped his hand down on Loeb’s desk. “And Gordon, he just looks at it like his hand’s got a disease. Then he throws the fifty in the Padre’s face! He gave the squad a two-hour lecture. Put Schell on probation. He’s just not fitting in, Gill!”

“I had such high hopes for that boy,” Loeb said as he rubbed his palm over his forehead.

“I could get the boys together and uh… soften him up a bit,” Flass said, leaning in so close that Loeb could feel his breath.

“No,” Loeb shot back. “No, not while I’m in town. There’s enough heat on me as it is. That friggin’ Assistant District Attorney, Dent, nearly had me about a month ago. If Falcone hadn’t put his money to good use, I’d be outta here. No, you’ll have to wait until I’m at the conference in Washington… Two weeks, Flass… Two weeks. Then teach him a lesson.” Flass smiled back,
relishing the thought.

This, Flass thought, is what bein’ a cop in Gotham City is all about.

I requested this night shift off four times now, Gordon thought to himself as he walked down the driveway to his car. It’s Valentine’s Day and Barbara had the whole evening planned… She needs me now, what with the baby on the way. But jeez, four times and no reply. I’m not making friends in this department…

“Goin to work, Lieutenant?” a voice called out from around the corner of the driveway fence. Gordon looked over as four men, all in ski masks and holding baseball bats, jumped out and began to attack him. He was immediately struck on the back of the head and knocked to the ground, being hit repeatedly. He eventually felt his entire body turn into one dull pain. Somewhere in the middle of the beating, he heard them tell him it was just a warning, reminding him of his wife, daughter, and baby on the way. But toward the end, as he laid there bruising over the cold pavement, he heard a familiar chuckle. It was Flass. His body hurt so badly that he might have just laid on the cement until somebody found him, feeling the frigid air numb his pain, but after hearing that chuckle and realizing what had just happened, he could do nothing else beside stand up. This had to end.

Elsewhere, at that exact moment, Bruce Wayne sat in a darkened car parked near the East End of Gotham City. In the darkness the lights of the city glittered. He winced, knowing that to some, Gotham looked like it would be a treat to visit. Down there, teaming on the streets, he knew his enemy was waiting.

Everything is set, Bruce thought to himself, going over the details of his plan one more time. The attendant was even obliging enough to ask for my autograph. My alibi is set. Bruce Wayne has been sighted at the same hotel as a visiting Hollywood sex queen. That should generate sufficient rumors to account for my whereabouts for the next few hours. This is a reconnaissance mission. I must avoid too much conflict tonight. My anonymity is an obvious priority. The murder of my parents is a matter of public record. All it requires is this change of clothing. He was dressed in a grubby coat, and had matted his hair as to blend in with the nighttime street-crowds.

And a single, memorable, distracting detail, he thought as he reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a tiny makeup kit. Using the rearview mirror he quickly went to work, fabricating a long scar down the left side of his face. It looked good. It looked extremely good.

Pulling a cap over his head, he stepped out of the car and left the lot. With his hands in his pockets and trying his best to keep his head down, at least when others were looking, he began a long twenty block walk across Gotham. What he hoped to find, he wasn’t sure. To see the filth. To see someone who deserved punishment. Maybe the man who killed his parents, maybe not.

If I found him, Bruce thought, what would I do? It haunts me to think he is still out there, and I might run into him. What I might do. Regardless, I have devoted everything to stopping that criminal, no matter what faces he may wear. It’s been an educational walk so far. I was sized up like a piece of meat by the boys in Robinson Park. I waded through pleas and half-hearted threats from junkies at the Finger Memorial. I stepped across a field of human rubble that lay sleeping in front of the overcrowded Sprang Mission. But finally I am at the worst of it. The East End. Hard to believe it’s gotten worse.

Indeed, it had gotten worse. Rows of strip clubs and peep shows lined the streets, bathing the road in an eerie red glow. And between the buildings, crawling all over the sidewalks, were a throng of
suppliers, pushers, pimps and prostitutes all selling their filth in the name of a fun evening. He must have seen nearly half a dozen cop cars in the neighborhood, but none of them were lifting a finger to stop any of it. And how could they? Taking down an entire district would be like taking on an army.

Still though, Bruce thought, something else must be at work. Druglords, powerful gangs, even crime families and mobs must be controlling much of the illegal activity and paying off the cops to keep out of it. The theory made sense, but Bruce had known himself to be a bit paranoid before. He’d have to wait until more evidence was gathered.

“Cheer you up?” a voice cooed from behind. Bruce turned to see a girl staring up him. She looked young, probably a teenager. Blonde hair, grubby makeup, a loose silk top and one of the shortest skirts Bruce had seen all night.

“I doubt it,” Bruce said. “How old are you?”

“Young as you want me to be,” she said ethereally, obviously trying to seduce him.

“No, no, stupid girl,” a man in a white overcoat and brimmed hat shouted as he approached the girl at a brisk pace. “That’s all wrong, Holly!”

“Did what you said,” Holly replied, taking fast. “Just like – Ouch!” The man grabbed her arm tightly.

“That’s right, Holly,” he hissed. “But you got to pick the types. Got to know what ones want what you got! This one’s not-”

“I haven’t said, have I?” Bruce growled. The man turned over his shoulder and glared.

“That vice I smell? That crazy vet bit? That’s old, man.”

“I’m not the police,” Bruce said. “Believe me.” The man rolled his eyes and looked back at Holly.

“You still here? Told you to go, Holly.”

“Yeah but, he hadn’t said.”

“We’ll talk this over later, Sweet Cheeks,” the man growled as he grabbed her by the hair and began forcibly moving her out of the way. Bruce watched it unfold as if it was in slow motion, and breathed in deeply through his nostrils.

This is it. Years of waiting, and of patience. It begins.

“No,” Bruce growled. “I think you’re finished with her.”

“Man, you’re pushin’. You lookin for a new scar there? That’s right. Just tell me where!” The man pulled a knife from his pocket, and Bruce tensed his own body as if he were contemplating every individual muscle, ready to use them each for precisely what he needed in the forthcoming fight.

Meanwhile, in a second story apartment above, a woman named Selina Kyle had heard the commotion building on the street. Selina had lived in the East End for much of her life. She knew how the streets of Gotham worked. She had tried to make it on her own, but it was hard.

“In Gotham,” she would often say. “The rich get richer and poor get poorer.” And she hated that fact. She hated everything about it. She hated the scum on the streets that made girls like Holly
Robinson grow up thinking they were only worth as much as the sex they were willing to have. She hated the piles of druggies that lined the pavement. She hated the cops who picked on those too unfortunate to get out of their circumstances. She hated the wealthy who acted like nothing was wrong. She hated the wealthy who thought they were philandering, but really amounting to absolutely nothing. And most of all, she hated those who were continually pushing everybody else down. The elite who paid off cops and shipped drugs from overseas. The gangs that ran the show. She hated most things. Gotham City was a disease, and it was well overdue for a cure.

But Selina lived amongst the disease. There wasn’t much she could do about it. She had to make due in the circumstances she had. She was forced to play the game. And to keep from starving, she had to live here, in Gotham’s worst district, playing the part of a dominatrix. There was no pleasure in it for her though. It was all about channeling the rage she felt. She carried a lot of hate.

Walking over to the window, she looked down and saw the man with the scar taking on the pimp.

“Oh jeez,” she grumbled. “Can’t be vice. We’re paid up… Probably just some idiot out to get himself killed.” She recalled a faint time or two when she too had attempted suicide. It just never seemed to take.

“Selina,” a man, drugged out of his mind and tied to a nearby bed called out. “Selina, come back. Don’t stop now.”

“Shut up, Skunk,” she hissed.

“Please Selina. Come back. Tell me why you hate us so much. Oh please.”

“You know what I hate most about men?” she frowned. “I’ve never met one.”

Down on the street the pimp continued lashing out toward Bruce, but he remained calm. Keeping his hands in his pockets he side-stepped over and over, dodging every strike.

*His eyes keep flickering away from the girls to me. He always turns away for a split-second. A dead giveaway. He’s fast, I’ll give him that. Doesn’t stand a chance, but he’s fast. Better wrap it up.*

Bruce stepped to the side as the man swiped at him, and grabbed him by the wrist, quickly twisting it as he used his other arm to elbow his opponent in the stomach. The pimp gasped and stepped back, only for Bruce to spin around and deliver a kick into his jaw. He went sprawling backward, landing cold on the pavement. Pleased with himself, Bruce looked down on the man, when suddenly a sharp pain hit him right in his left thigh.

“Aaah!” he shouted, glancing down.

“Come on you guys, I got him,” shouted Holly Robinson, who was latched onto his leg, sinking a tiny knife deeper and deeper into his leg. He couldn’t believe it, as he stared down at the young girl. He had tried to save her, but she didn’t want it. She was protecting the man who abused her as if he owned her like a piece of unwanted property. Why? And why would she take him on after seeing how he fought? She wasn’t scared or impressed on anything. It had been without impact.

Two more prostitutes, both much bulkier and older than Holly, pounced on him, clawing, kicking and grabbing. Thinking fast, Bruce kicked one of them away, while simultaneously reaching down, grabbing Holly’s wrist, and yanking her and the knife away from him.

“Aaah,” Holly winced as she bounced away on the pavement. “My wrist! I think he broke my wrist!”
“No!” Selina shouted from her window vantage point. “Nobody hurts Holly!” In one fluid motion she slipped out of the window, grabbed the fire escape railing, and launched herself down to the street below, landing on all fours to distribute the force of the impact. Bruce picked up the third assailant and tossed her into the side of the building, turning quickly to block a kick from Selina.

This one’s good, Bruce thought. Hissing like an animal. She’s had karate training. But probably only karate. Blocking a few more strikes from her, he landed a punch across her jaw, knocking her to the floor.

“Selina!” Holly shouted, crawling over to her unconscious friend. “Get up Selina!” The sound of sirens rang in the air, getting closer. Bruce could see the red and blue lights approaching around the corner.

No! No! No! If I’m caught, it’s over! It’s all over!

The car screeched to a halt and two men in uniform jumped out, guns drawn, shouting various orders at Bruce.

How can I explain this? Should have brought some tools. Flash pellets or something. There’s a fire escape to the right. If I jump up to it, maybe I can-

A gunshot sounded, and Bruce felt it hit him in the left shoulder. The force was incredible, knocking him to the ground. Just like his parents, he had been felled. But he wasn’t dead. Not yet.

“Hey, he didn’t even move, man,” one of the cops said.

“He was going to.”

“He needs a doctor. Look at all that blood. Think you hit an artery?”

“Maybe. We can get him help after he’s booked. We’re low on our quota this month.”

“Pfft. How can they expect so much? Too many people pay up for us to make arrests.”

Bruce felt the blood soaking his jacket, and he was fading in and out of blackness. He felt the cuffs go around his wrists, but then the pain seared as they lifted him up and pushed him into the backseat of their car. He blacked out. For how long, he didn’t know. But he was out for a while, coming to as the car was moving.

“Any cash?” one of the cops asked.

“Couple bucks, I’d – ugh, look man, he’s still bleeding,” the other cop up in front said. “All over the seat, too. Sure you wanna skip the hospital?”

“Look, I’m not registering that I took a shot at this guy. If he dies, he dies. I’ve run in a thousand like him. Drifters. Who needs them. Nobody cares.”

I can’t let them take me in. Have to stop them.

Struggling to sit up, Bruce breathed, “You two. Stop the car. Get out.”

“What the?”

"Don’t mind him. Probably hopped up on something fast, you know?”

Carefully, Bruce slid the cuffs down his back and under his legs, bringing them out in front of him.
“I warned you,” he coughed as he threw them over the passenger’s seat and used them to choke the officer.

“Whoa, hey man stop!” the other cop swerved the car which promptly bounced into two other vehicles and then slammed into the trailer of a semi truck parked on the side of the road. Blood flew in all directions, along with glass and other pieces of rubble. Bruce shook his head, knowing if he let himself black out again, he might die. Then he realized what was going on.

_Fire. There’s a fire. It’ll only take seconds to reach the gas tank._

Using all his might, he kicked the door of the car open, and began trying to drag the unconscious cops free of the wreckage. The sound of sirens were gathering in the distance.

_Sirens. More cops. And firemen. Tank will go before they get here. These men, they probably have families._

He pulled them out and dragged them away. The pain was getting worse and his head was getting lighter. The bleeding hadn’t stopped. He had to get home immediately.

“Smoke from the blazing police cruiser can be seen for blocks,” Vicki Vale reported, live. “And, oh, this just in, the two officers who were operating the vehicle have been found unconscious thirty feet away. They are safe, which means nobody died in this strange accident. More details, as they arrive.”

_Made it… somehow… to the car…_

Bruce felt his thoughts slipping as he leaned his head against the steering wheel of his car in the parking garage. Desperately, he tried to get his fingers, slick with blood, to grip onto the key and turn it. He needed the car to start as quickly as possible. He didn’t have much time left.

_Start. Turn… the key… Bruce, it isn’t difficult… Just a little slippery… They weren’t scared of me. I failed… start… I saved her… Why did she have to stab me?… Start!

“Detective Flass?” a voice said over the radio in Gordon’s car as he sped along the road. “Yeah he’s off duty, Lieutenant. You know that. Probably at the poker party over at Chute’s with the guys.”

“Thank you, just checking,” Gordon responded, trying to sound as polite as possible as he hung up the receiver.

_The guys… They did just enough to keep me out of the hospital, but still… can’t let Barbara see me like this._

Covered in bruises and dried blood, Gordon had pulled himself together and was on his way to Bray Ridge, where he knew Flass was. A baseball bat of his own sat in his passenger’s seat. He meant to end this sort of behavior.

Chute’s house looked cozy, surrounded in February snow. The bruises on Gordon’s spine were forming when the first guests started to leave the party.
Wilson is the first to leave. Of course he is. Doesn’t want to make his wife stay up too late waiting for him. Spent the night with the guys rather than his wife. Plus, he still has his girlfriend to see before he goes home… It’s Valentine’s Day for goodness sake...

Gordon’s stakeout continued. Twenty minutes rolled by before more started to leave.

Stannsen next. He’s stumbling out like he just lost his life savings. Then Renny. I can let them both go. Oh! And there he is, finally. Flass.

Flass staggered out, pretty drunk from the look of things. He was wearing his Gotham High letterman jacket. Gordon didn’t expect anything less. Slowly, he swaggered over to his station wagon. It took two tries to get in, but he finally accomplished it. The engine revved up, and he peeled out of the driveway, nearly flattening the mailbox on his way out.

Keeping his lights off, Gordon followed behind. There was a stretch of road Gordon noticed along the way where nearly four minutes passed without seeing any houses. That is where Gordon would strike.

He’s ten over the limit, Gordon thought as they approached the wooded area. It was time. Gordon pressed his foot down on the pedal and sped his car up, swerving alongside Flass’s car. It only took two nudges, but Gordon finally ran Flass off the road, sending the station wagon careening off into a snow bank.

Flass was bewildered at first, but then angry. Drawing his gun, he stumbled angrily out of his car, but Gordon was already there, waiting, with his gun drawn and aimed.

“Jimmy,” Flass smiled as he tossed the gun back in the car and raised his hands. Gordon didn’t say anything in return. He simply glared, and raised the baseball bat he had brought with him. Flass stared him down, knowing that a fight was coming. Slowly, Gordon lowered his gun, and then tossed the bat at Flass’s feet.

He didn’t even try to hide his lack of surprise. He’s big. Green Beret training at some point. But he deserves the handicap. Because this can’t just hurt physically. It has to be embarrassing. I won’t crack a skull. I won’t crush his larynx. I won’t break his ribs. I’ll do just enough to keep him out of the hospital.

Flass smiled, picking up the bat. But he was too drunk to fight really well, even with the handicap. He never landed a single blow, but Gordon did. A lot. Until finally Godon landed his knee in Flass’s stomach, doubling him over, and then kicked him in the jaw. Satisfied, Gordon punched him once more in the face as he went down. Snorting, he tossed Flass’s gun off into the woods, hoping it would be rusty and ruined by morning. Then he cuffed him in his own cuffs by the side of the road.

He’ll never report it. Not Flass. He’ll make up some story that involves at least ten attackers and never admit I did it. But he’ll know. And he’ll stay away from Barbara. Thanks, Flass. You’ve shown me what it takes to be a cop in Gotham City.

Looking back at his fallen foe, Gordon started his car and drove off.

Bruce’s black car was crashed out in front of Wayne Manor, a pool of blood trailing from its open door up into the mansion. And in the darkened study of the late Thomas Wayne, Bruce sat in an armchair, bleeding all over himself.
I failed. I’m afraid... I’m afraid I will die tonight. I’ve tried to be patient. I tried to wait. I failed. The problem is, it’s not just rogue criminals. Gotham fosters them. That’s the problem. Gotham has allowed crime to take over, the cops and politicians have all gone corrupt and been caught up in it. Even the people on the streets defend that status quo rather than rise up and take back their city.

Bruce looked down and at the tiny bell sitting on his desk next to him. His father had rang that bell many times to call Alfred. Now it was a lifeline. Bruce’s voice couldn’t carry out. This bell is what stood between him and death.

*If I ring this bell, Alfred will come. He can stop the bleeding in time. But I’d rather die if I cannot continue the mission. If I have to fail... I have waited years... So many years. So many years since the opera. Since the walk that night. And the man with frightened, hollow eyes and a voice like glass being crushed. Since all sense left my life. What can I do? How can I fulfill my promise?*

And then, as he slipped off into darkness, he heard it. The tiniest blip, like a squeak. Slowly he let his head roll to the side and peer out the window. And there is was. A swarm of bats, rising up out of their caves on the grounds, flying out for their nightly hunt. And then, without warning, it came.

Crashing through the window of the study, one great bat went sprawling through the air and landed on a stone bust of his father across the room. It stared at him. It stared, wanting. Bruce saw before his eyes the day he had fallen into their pit. He saw the bats swarming him as a child. He saw the man with the gun who had scared him just as badly. He saw the people whom he had not frightened in the East End. And then, as he locked eyes with the winged creature in the study, he knew what he must do.

*Yes. Yes, I shall become a bat. It’s time my enemies shared my dread.*

Quickly, he clasped the tiny bell in his hands and began shaking it. Elsewhere in the house, Alfred heard its ringing, and hurried to the study.

*I shall become a bat.*
“Master Wayne, are you certain I cannot convince you to wait until you’ve more fully healed from your injuries? Perhaps we could go back to the mansion and just spend the day recuperating. It’s your birthday, after all, sir.” Five days had passed since Bruce’s first near-fatal escapade in the East End. He and Alfred were currently stooped over the old well that Bruce had fallen into when he was eight. Alfred watched as Bruce strapped himself into a harness so that he could lower himself down into the caves.

“No time, Alfred,” Bruce said. “I’ve been patient long enough. I have to get to work immediately.”

“As a vigilante?” Alfred asked sarcastically. “Sir, I never would have let you move back had I known you were going to try and get yourself thrown in jail – or killed.”

“No Alfred, not a vigilante. Something more… I want to show the people of Gotham that their city doesn’t belong to the criminals and the corrupt. My father used to say that the reason we fall is so that we can learn to pick ourselves up. We can pick ourselves up.”

“That’s all fine and good, Sir, but is this really the way?”

“Alfred, people have tried other ways,” Bruce retorted. “The Assistant District Attorney has made a name for himself trying to take down the crime in this city, and so far he has made almost no progress – but every crime family in Gotham is gunning for him. I cannot work within a system. Systems get corrupt, they get lost along the way…” Alfred sighed. In so many ways, Bruce was still the determined child that he had raised. But unlike before, Alfred knew that now that boy could actually do the things he set his mind to.

“In the beginning of our city’s depression, your father nearly bankrupted Wayne Enterprises combating poverty for that very reason. He believed that his example could inspire the wealthy of Gotham to save their city.”

“Did it?”

“In a way… Their murder shocked the wealthy and the powerful into action.”

“See Alfred, that’s the point. People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy. I can’t do that by being a vigilante… a thug… and I can’t do that as Bruce Wayne. As a man, I’m flesh and blood. I can be ignored. I can be destroyed. But as a symbol… as a symbol I can be incorruptible… I can be everlasting…”

“What symbol?”

“Something elemental, something terrifying,” Bruce said, staring down into the darkness of the well below. “Bats frighten me. I want my enemies to share that dread…”

“And I can’t talk you out of this, Master Bruce?”

“No matter how hard you try.”

“Then I assume that as you’re taking on the underworld, this symbol is a persona to protect yourself and those you care about from… reprisals?”

“Perhaps,” Bruce nodded. “But it could also be more. So much more… While away, I trained with
a skilled master. He taught me that my rage – my need for vengeance – is a destructive path.”

“Then why go through with this?”

“Because he also taught me that if I deny that rage and bury it, it will only fester and burn until I am consumed from the inside. He told me that I must direct the flow of my rage toward serving something outward – something greater than myself. This new path seemed unclear at first but now I understand. I just can’t allow what happened to me to happen to anyone else. I can change Gotham for the better.” Alfred shook his head. He never knew what was stepping too far in his relationship with Bruce. He had never been extremely clear on the boundaries. He’d always just done what he thought was best. But he had to admit that he had always regretted letting Bruce leave home at such a young age. Bruce seemed so distracted and unfocused. But now he knew that Bruce had not been doing things without cause. He had a cause all along. And it was a cause that Alfred did not entirely approve of in the slightest.

“Bruce, with all due respect, when we are passionate about something, it is easy to confuse selflessness with justified selfishness.”

“That’s why I received training. From monks, from martial arts masters, police agencies, psychologists, artists, craftsmen—”

“That’s all well and good Sir, but no matter how selfless your cause is, what happens if you run into the man that killed your parents? What then?” Bruce’s face stared at Alfred like it was stone, not showing the slightest hint of emotional reaction. But in many ways, that showed more of a response than anything Alfred had seen him do yet.

“I will turn him over to the authorities,” Bruce finally replied. His voice was stern, but Alfred found it unconvincing.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred sighed. “I am not your father. But I have tried many times to be a figure of similar caliber. You need to know that I cannot let you go ahead with this in entirely good conscience. I am worried.”

“I knew you would be,” Bruce said as he readied himself to descend into the well. “But I’m doing this with or without you.”

“Very well, Sir,” Alfred said. “But might I suggest a few things? You told me that you originally intended to only stay in Gotham for a short while, did you not? You expected to go out like a martyr. Get retribution and change the streets in a few short nights. That is not the way to do this.”

Bruce looked dejected.

“What would you have me do?”

“This is more complicated that frightening a few criminals. You are talking about a massive social movement, and that takes a great deal of time. It’s not just a few nights out on the street. You’re talking years, Master Bruce.”

“Maybe.”

“Either way, it will take a great deal longer than you originally intended, which means you will need to create a cover of sorts. You need to get back into society. Make a tiny life for yourself here. If not socially, at least try to get reacquainted with Wayne Enterprises. Use it to your advantage. Use it to create real change. You said that people need dramatic examples, but it’s what your father would have done. And who knows, perhaps if you’re pretending to have fun as a socialite, you
might actually have a little by accident.”

“That’s not a bad suggestion,” Bruce said. “Wayne Enterprises would be a major asset in the plan… It could provide extensive resources. Though I doubt I can really get involved in the business. I’m not the majority shareholder anymore.”

“You could be,” Alfred shrugged. “That is, if I relinquished my shares to you. They were, as you recall, your shares to claim when you were old enough in the first place. I’d say you’re well overdue.”

“Hmmm,” Bruce stepped up onto the well and secured the line harnessed around his torso. “We’ll talk more about it this evening. Make sure my line doesn’t break.” Alfred felt the pain of a worried parent as he watched Bruce act so nonchalant about this situation, but there wasn’t much else he could do. This had been brewing within the Wayne’s heir since he was eight years old. It would take a great deal of time to help him choose a safer, happier lifestyle.

“Perhaps someday we can both put your parents behind us,” he whispered to himself.

Whether he heard the remark or not, Bruce disappeared down into the hole. Though it had been decades since he had fallen down here as a child, the details had been burned so thoroughly into his mind that he felt as if had been there only yesterday. Lighting his flashlight, he unharnessed himself and crawled through the hole that he had seen the bats emerge from so many years ago.

It was long, narrow, and damp, but eventually it opened up into one massive cavern, with tunnels and chasms stretching for what looked like forever.

*These caves must run for miles down here, Bruce thought to himself. All of Gotham Heights must have this underneath the structures... Caves, thousands of years old. This could make a perfect base of operations, once I find out how secure it is. It’s hidden, but close enough to the house...*

He walked out into the most open part of the cave and noticed that to the south there was the sound of rushing water. He knew there was a wooded area, an old watershed that doubled as a nature preserve just south of the Palisades. As a boy, Bruce had explored the area pretty thoroughly, and he recalled that there were rivers and waterfalls.

*If a waterfall covers the entrance, I could use that.* He shined his light up toward the stretching stalactites above, and then he heard it. The sound from his childhood.

It started as a distant whisper, but the whisper gradually changed as the ceiling of the cave began to pulsate and crawl. And then the sound turned into something more. Something that stirred in the darkness. It grew from a whisper into a shuffle and a hiss. And it chittered. Then, suddenly, the shadows exploded from above. They boiled from the darkness, flapping, beating, gnawing, and clawing. It was a nightmare of leathery wings, gleaming eyes and fangs. It was the nightmare the he had repeatedly experienced in sleepless nights since he was young.

Bruce threw himself to the ground as the air came alive with flying creatures. The bats surrounded him, choking the air. Bruce took in several deep breaths, trying to calm himself down. Squeezing his eyes shut, and holding one deep gulp of air in his chest, slowly, arms outstretched, he raised himself off of the ground. Once he was standing upright, feeling the air whipping around him as the bats continued gliding through the cave, he exhaled and slowly opened his eyes. His heart rate slowed, and he gradually released his tense stance. Soon he was relaxed.

There, in the dark, Bruce Wayne found himself at ease, surrounded by and immersed within the creatures that had terrorized his dreams since he was eight years old. And there, surrounded by the
hundreds of bats, he knew he was doing what he was meant to do. He had found his purpose.

Rain fell down onto the streets, as if nature itself was trying to wash the filth of Gotham clean. This April day had started early with a call from Sargent Merkel to Lieutenant Gordon about a hostage situation in Brigham circle. He drove along, one hand on the steering wheel and one hand holding a mug of coffee.

“Come in, Merkel,” Gordon said into his radio as he hurried along the route. “I’m two blocks away. What’s the situation?”

“Yeah Gordon,” Merkel’s somewhat garbled voice answered. “Best I can tell, nobody’s sure what this guy wants. He isn’t making much sense… He’s holding three children hostage in a third story apartment. Has a gun and some knives, he says.”

"Anyone hurt?"

“Um, no. Not that we can tell. He’s been in and out of various mental institutions for the past five years or so… Name’s Zsasz? Yeah, Victor Zsasz. Diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. Last time in a hospital was just two weeks ago. No connection to the hostages from what I can tell. Oh hell, Lieutenant you’re going to want to hurry up.”

“Why’s that? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Branden. Branden’s team is rolling in.”

Gordon dropped his mug of coffee, pressing down on the pedal, gripping both hands onto the wheel and rammed his car up onto the sidewalk. His sirens blared as he zipped passed traffic, praying that anybody on the sidewalk would have enough brains to move out of the way.

Hope I don’t hit anybody. Coffee splashed all over my lap… Shame. Barbara made it for me. No matter how quiet I try to be, she always wakes up with me and has my coffee ready by the time I’ve pulled on my pants. But I have to hurry. Branden and his lunatic Gestapo. It’ll be a massacre if they get involved. Last month Branden and his SWAT team calmed down a riot in Robinson Park. They barely even left the statues standing. If he goes in, those kids won’t stand a chance. He’ll push that lunatic right over the edge…

“We’re not here to argue, Merkel,” Branden was shouting as Gordon pulled up to the scene. “We’re here to clean things up. So unless that soft-hearted Gordon shows up, we’re-”

“Here I am,” Gordon shouted back as he stepped out of his car and moved forward.

“Gordon,” Branden groaned.

“Go find your own war, Branden,” Gordon ordered. “Or I’ll have you up on charges so fast-”

“Whatever,” Branden threw his hands up and walked back to his team who all glared at Gordon as if he had just killed their own families.

“I’m a popular guy,” Gordon remarked to Merkel as he caught a glance of the SWAT team.

“You wanna handle the negotiations?” Merkel asked.

“Yeah,” Gordon responded, taking a deep breath. “Keep the blow horn though. I won’t need it.”
Gordon walked past the line of men trying to decide how to best respond and waved his hands in the air until the frightened maniac in the window of the building before him noticed. Once he had his attention, Gordon slowly removed his gun from its holster, held it up above his head like a dead rat, and then dropped it to the ground.

*Please let him understand*, Gordon prayed as he heard Branden cursing behind him. Taking one final breath of rain-filled air, he headed to the front door, knowing hoping that nobody watching could tell that his knees were wobbling. He didn’t care about saving face personally, but he did want to make a statement about the GCPD. The police already had a bad rap in Gotham, and although it was well-deserved, Gordon wasn’t going to add to it.

*Barbara is probably watching on TV... Vicki Vale is here reporting, I’m sure Barbara is watching. She’ll have a lot to say about this when it’s all over and done. She’s asked a million times that I not pull any heroics. This is the kind of stuff that makes my daughter idolize cops.*

Cautiously, Gordon made his way up the rickety and dust-covered stairway. The floorboards creaked far too loudly as he made his ascent, and he tensed his entire face as he felt a sneeze continually threatening to explode. A little girl was crying up ahead, through the half open doorway. Zsasz peeked his head out, and when he saw Gordon only a few feet away, he kicked the door open wide, revealing a young girl in his clutches with a knife held to her throat.

“So many zombies,” the wide-eyed Zsasz spoke emptily. “So many zombies just waiting to be freed.”

“I know, I know,” Gordon said calmly as he approached.

“Stay back! Only I can! Only I can!”

“Of course, of course,” he continued moving forward until Zsasz lashed out at him with the knife. Gordon reached out, grabbing the man’s wrist and snapping it backwards. The little girl fell to the ground and hurried back into the room with the two other terrified children.

“No, no, no!” Zsasz wailed as Gordon kicked him onto the ground and began snapping cuffs onto his hands behind his back. He still squirmed and wriggled, gnashing his teeth towards the knife as if he were trying to grab it with his mouth.

“Nope,” Gordon muttered kicking the knife away. Zsasz reeled and snatched up a gun nearby on the floor with his feet. He frantically fumbling for his toes to get a good grip on it. Gordon quickly slammed his foot down onto Zsasz’s, who screamed, and then lifted him up off the ground and launched a solid punch to his head, knocking him out cold.

“It’s alright,” Gordon said, trying to regain his poise and smile at the children. “Come here, I’m one of the good guys. You’re safe now. Who wants some candy?” He reached into his pocket producing a few pieces of candy, at which the children lit up and ran towards him.

Scooping up one of the little girls in one arm, and holding one of the others by the hand, he brought them safely down the stairs and back out into the open rain as officers flooded the building to take Zsasz into custody.

“Lieutenant Gordon is exiting the building with all three children in toe,” Vicki Vale reported from across the street excitedly. “I repeat, he has successfully rescued all three of the hostages. A happy ending to this hair-raising hostage situation, safely concluded thanks to the bravery of Gotham’s new hero-cop, Lieutenant James Gordon!”
Gordon smiled as cameras flashed and people cheered. He was surprised that even the terrified children were smiling. As officials ran in and took the children, wrapping them in trauma blankets, Gordon looked back to see officers escorting Zsasz to a van where he would no doubt be taken to the Arkham Wing at Blackgate Prison.

Letting out a final sigh, Gordon was glad it was all over. But he knew he still had a long talk with Barbara ahead of him.

“Lieutenant Gordon is exiting the building with all three children in toe. I repeat, he has successfully rescued all three of the hostages. A happy ending to this hair-raising hostage situation, safely concluded thanks to the bravery of Gotham’s new hero-cop, Lieutenant James Gordon!” the soundclip of Vicki Vale played over the radio for probably the tenth time that morning as Alfred drove Bruce to Wayne Tower, located in the heart of Gotham City.

“Big news,” Alfred said.

“Glad it was resolved,” Bruce commented. “Gotham’s Finest don’t necessarily have a good track record for solving these sorts of situations.”

“True, Sir,” Alfred sighed. “At any rate, we are here. Would you like me to come in with you?”

“I’m not five, Alfred.”

“Very well, Sir.” Bruce stepped out of the car and, without looking back, headed forward through the massive doors to the Wayne Enterprises headquarters. Over the past few weeks he and Alfred had exchanged their shares so that he was now the 50% shareholder in the company, giving him control over everything. Yet, in spite of being the heir to the company, Bruce had actually never set foot inside of the building. Even as a child. He had imagined it for many years, but now that he was here in person, it was more enormous than he had expected, with lavish marble floors and fountains in its main lobby.

“Welcome, Mr. Wayne,” a smiling, thin, olive-skinned secretary smiled as he entered.

“Hello,” Bruce said, flashing a smile as best he could so that he could keep up the planned charade he had described to Alfred as a billionaire playboy. “I have a meeting with Mr. Fox?”

“He’s expecting you,” she replied. “His office is on the top floor. Board and Administrations. His secretary will meet you there. I can go with you, if you… you know… don’t want to get lost.”

Another girl looking to get comfortable with Bruce Wayne. Annoying, but I’d better let it slide.

“I think I’ll be alright,” he said as he strolled toward the elevator. “But if I get lost, I’ll come back for you. What was your name again?” The woman looked as if the hair on the back of her neck was standing on end at his request.

“M-m-my name is Helen… It’s Helene.”

“Well thank you, Helen,” Bruce waved as he got aboard. The elevator was just as elaborate as the lobby. Green velvety floors, golden paneling, and even the doors were carved out of beautiful oak with brilliant craftsmanship showing scenes of industrial artwork.

At the top, Bruce found himself in a hallway, outfitted with the same green carpeting and small water features lining the hall. On one end he saw a room with a large antique wooden table,
obviously a meeting room for the board. On the other end were rows of offices, one of which was labeled CEO. Bruce approached the doorway and raised his hand to knock on it.

“Excuse me, do you have an appointment?” Bruce turned to see another secretary at a much smaller desk. She looked at him harshly at first, but as she recognized his face her expression turned to complete shock.

“I do, actually,” Bruce smiled. “Technically this will be my-”

“Oh Mr. Wayne!” she said frantically. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t recognize you! Of course you can knock. Mr. Fox will be expecting you. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Bruce waved his hand, knocked, and then slowly opened the door to peer in. “Mr. Fox?”

Sitting at the desk ahead of him sat Luscious Fox. With dark skin and graying waves of hair, he had a warm and welcoming face. Slowly, his eyes rose from the paper on the table in front of him and locked onto Bruce, at which point a warm smile spread wide across his face.

“Bless my soul,” he said in a deep, calm, soothing voice as if he were reciting poetry. “Bruce Wayne. Welcome.” He stood up and outstretched his hands, clasping Bruce’s with both of them and giving him a vigorous and friendly handshake.

“Mr. Fox,” Bruce nodded. “It’s good to be welcomed.”

“Please, call me Lucius. It was only a matter of time, I suppose,” Fox smiled.

“Until?”

“Until you came back, looking to see what this company was all about!” Fox grinned. “You know, you look an awful lot like your father – except no mustache. I always quite liked your father. Helped him finance that train project when you were only a little boy. I always quite liked your father.”

“And he liked you, from what I can gather. I honestly don’t remember much about his professional life.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, Mr. Wayne,” Fox responded, becoming very serious, yet no less pleasant. “He never did much with the company. Preferred to work at the hospital. But if there’s one thing I can tell you I knew with absolute certainty about Thomas Wayne, it was that he was first and foremost a family man. You and your mother, Martha, meant more to him than this company or his job as a doctor ever did. If you only remember him as your father, Mr. Wayne, by my calculations I’d say you remember all you’d ever need to.”

“Sounds like you knew him pretty well.”

“Oh I’d like to think so. I always liked him… Well, Mr. Wayne, as I understand it you are now the official new majority owner of Wayne Enterprises. That’d be due to Mr. Pennyworth’s contribution, I’d wager.”

“It was,” Bruce said.

“Well, that’s fine. I’m assuming you’d like a rundown of things before you take over. Could take a while. And maybe, I was wondering, if you’d allow me to request a new position in the company for myself.”

“You don’t want to be the new CEO?”

“Not at all,” Bruce smiled. “I want to be CEO in title. I’d like to be in on board meetings and help run things where I can, but like my father, I have different interests. I need an acting CEO, and Luscious, I’d be honored if you stayed onboard and be the Acting CEO and Vice President. Kind of a partnership, but with very little changes.”

“Well, well, well,” Lucius laughed after a minor pause. “Thank you, Mr. Wayne. That’s quite an unexpected treat. I’d happily oblige that.”

“Thank you.”

“No, thank you. I’d somewhat worried about whether or not I’d even have a job come tomorrow morning. But, with that out of the way… Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Wayne?”

“What I do need, for now at least, is a quick rundown of everything going on and how it works. I’d like to, if nothing else, get to know the company my family built a little better.”

“That’s a lot to tell,” Lucius said.

“Just keep it simple. Divisions, purposes, big projects. I can go over the details and reports later – oh, which reminds me, I’d like an office.”

“We’ll whip one up for you, certainly.”

“Great. But yeah, just the basic stuff, if you wouldn’t mind?”

“Certainly,” Lucius nodded as he sat down. “Take a seat, take a seat. Now let me think… where to begin?” He pulled out a few files and laid them out on his desk before continuing. “If you don’t mind the history lesson, Wayne Enterprises was founded by merchant ancestors of the Wayne family – your family – in the 17th century as a merchant house. Although the company changed when the heir of Judge Solomon Wayne, Alan, utilized his father’s wealth and established the Wayne Shipping Company and also the Wayne Chemical Company deeper in the city. So it was officially established in the 19th century. By the beginning of the 21st century Wayne Enterprises reached a new annual income average of over $98.5 billion. Now, as one of the world’s top ten multinational conglomerates, Wayne Industries continues to achieve excellence across a wide range of industry sectors and markets, employing some 170,000 people in 170 countries.

“Let’s see… let’s start with Wayne Foods. Wayne Foods is one of the smaller subsidiary of Wayne Enterprises, with its headquarters based in downtown Gotham City. The firm was started in 1872 by an Irish immigrant, Patrick Toole, under the name, Toole & Sons Food Merchants. The business was successful in importing Irish products that could be sold at a higher cost in the US economy. By 1905, there were five Toole & Sons stores throughout Gotham City. Patrick Toole died at the age of 72 in 1919, leaving the business to his eldest son, Thomas Toole. Thomas was keen to expand across the US; however, the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 severely impacted trade lines from Ireland to Gotham. At the end of the war in 1918, Toole & Sons Food Merchants was near bankruptcy. Thomas, unable to carry on his father’s legacy, committed suicide in 1922 at age 43. The second youngest Toole brother, Rory, took over the business and immediately set about selling all company assets in favor of entering liquidation. The business was bought in 1925 by the Wayne family, who wanted to preserve an important part of Gotham’s retail history. The business returned to profit in less than a year, and by the end of the second World War, Toole & Sons stores controlled over 60% of all food retail across the city. This was achieved by diversifying the product
range and opening up stock to new markets outside of Ireland and within the US. The company changed its name to Wayne Foods in 1956, and today Wayne Foods focuses on the high-end market and specialty goods. Although it no longer has the dominance across Gotham as it did in the 1950’s, Wayne Foods continues to generate significant revenue for Wayne Enterprises.”

“You know your stuff,” Bruce said. “I’m sincerely impressed. I was expecting you to immediately start throwing numbers and charts at me.”

“Oh Mr. Wayne,” Lucius said quietly, “I’m afraid you’ll find me perhaps a bit of a different type of CEO. I started out in small trusts. Little charities and so on. I’m excellent at turning a profit but, you know, the reason isn’t because I’m some sort of a math-wiz. I don’t just see numbers and dollar signs. I see people. I see the application of what we are doing. Where we’ve been and where we are going. History. I joined on with your father when Gotham started taking an economic downturn. He wanted me to help him try to help people in need during those hard times. And the way I see it, those hard times aren’t over. Wayne Enterprises is a business, but it’s a business we use as an asset to help people. That’s my motivation, and it’s a vision I think that most of the board shares. At least since your father was around.”

“I’m sure he’d be proud,” Bruce said. “Please, continue.”

“Very well. Wayne Shipping. Wayne Shipping owns dozens of freighters and handles three-and-a-half billion tons of freight each month. In the early 1980s, Wayne Shipping merged with the PAAL Ship Corporation, creating the world's largest commercial shipping operation for precious metals. The former PAAL CEO, Andreas Milanic, successfully floated Wayne Shipping on the New York Stock Exchange in 1981. The Wayne Family – you – currently owns 57% of the PAAL, with Milanic's second son, Dragoslav, owning 20% with the remaining 23% in public ownership. Despite a lack of investment in Wayne Shipping since the merger took place, the company still remains an important player in world ocean transportation, so we’re rather proud of it.

“Then there’s Wayne Yards, which is responsible for the building of a large number of naval warships, commercial and private ships, and is currently building a Nimitz class aircraft carrier. Wayne Steel and Wayne Yards facilities repair a large number of cruisers and destroyers, and also have contacts within the upper echelons of the Navy and the global maritime business.

“Wayne Industries is probably one of our more prominent factions. Wayne Industries is a research and development company used for industrial purposes. The company studies, researches, and develops cleaner, mechanical fission and fusion power plants; and also owns many factories and standard labor units. The company is heavily involved in the industrial circuit, developing industrial machinery and manufacturing heavy engines, motors, pneumatic systems and large-scale systems. Additionally, Wayne Industries is also involved in textiles and plastics. Wayne Mining is also a part of Wayne Industries, along with the few power stations the company owns. Wayne Mining mostly mines and produces gold and some precious stones in Africa. Pretty exotic. Although we’ve stcaled back production in that sector for sociopolitical reason – there’s a file on hand if you want to read over it.

“Then we have Wayne Medical, a favorite of your father’s, which is Wayne Biotech’s sister company, but each has different fields of study and work. Wayne Medical handles most of the healthcare systems in Gotham and also studies cancer and other debilitating diseases and syndromes with Wayne Biotech. Wayne Medical is focused more on researching illnesses than treating them. It maintains and runs many hospitals in Gotham City and helps the Wayne Foundation with the orphanages. Biotech’s concerned more with the treatments and application of what Medical learns.
“Wayne Electronics is a large consortium that manufactures portable music devices, video players, cameras, measuring devices, scanners, surveillance equipment, security, microchips, computers and just about any other electronics device you can think of. Pretty much, you name it, and we probably have our fingers somewhere in it. Its other branches of business include information technology, wired and wireless networks, and space exploration systems and satellites – all contracted through aerospace, nautical, and military industries at the moment.

“And then of course there’s Wayne Entertainment which owns many arenas and stadiums in Gotham, and has leased out the Sommerset Stadium a little further north. Wayne Entertainment also has working partnerships with several modeling agencies and multimedia houses. That about covers the major sectors of the business at Wayne Enterprises. But then there’s probably one of my personal favorite sectors which is the more philanthropic stuff.

“The Wayne Foundation used to be a smaller wing of the business, in charge of managing charitable donations and so forth, but it is the holding company for the Thomas Wayne Foundation and the Martha Wayne Foundation, which was started in memory of your parents. The Wayne Foundation, in addition to providing charity, funds scientific research and helps people with said research by providing facilities and training. The foundation has its own building a few blocks south of here where I have a second office, and we can set one up for you too. Through the Wayne Foundation we address more social problems that encourage things like crime and assist the victims of those problems through as a number of viable charities, soup kitchens, shelters, and so on.”

“You expanded it after my parents died?”

“I’d hardly accept so much credit,” Fox replied. “Your father had been gradually expanding the Wayne Foundation for a few years prior to us losing him. I simply saw his vision through.”

“You said it has two subgroups?”

“Yes, one for each of your parents. The Thomas Wayne Foundation is a foundation for medicine and medical aid. It gives annual awards for medical breakthroughs and lifelong commitment, similar to the Nobel Foundation. The Thomas Wayne Foundation is also responsible for funding and overseeing dozens of free clinics all over the city and in other trouble cities, like Blüdhaven. I believe you know Ms. Leslie Thompkins who now runs the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic in Park Row, near the scene of the tragedy.”

“I do…”

“Yes, well, and then we have the Martha Wayne Foundation, which is a patron and supporter of arts, families, education, and tolerance. The foundation supports and helps maintain a number of orphanages and schools, and provides teachers for those who have learning difficulties. Artists can apply for grants from the foundation to help support them in furthering culture. The foundation sponsors companies like Family Finders Inc. which is an organization directed at finding lost people and uniting families and the Gotham City Heritage Library. Just general – though liberally applied, I hope – charitable causes. And to be honest, Mr. Wayne, that’s about as basic as I can get without getting into the finer details. I can provide you with a few files of things like annual revenue and specific projects and contracts going on within each sector.”

“That would be great,” Bruce said.

“Is there anything… specifically, that you have any questions about? Anything you might be interested in?”
“Actually there is,” Bruce replied. “There’s a division that caught my eye when I was looking over things on my own the other day.”

“Oh?”

“Applied Sciences. It looked like research and development? Specialized fabrics and other materials, electromagnetic gyroscopic navigational satellite systems, antihemorrhagic agents, radiation stamping technology, rotor blades, metal composites... Which division does that fall under?” Fox scrunched his face but provided a fond smirk along with it.

“Well… Applied Sciences is sort of its own thing. A catch-all, if you will. On paper it looks like some sort of super-laboratory but, Mr. Wayne, it’s really more of a… a mausoleum. A dead end. A better name for it would probably be Unapplied Sciences.”

“Unapplied? You mean, none of it is use?”

“All prototypes from Wayne Tech and Wayne Industries. Rejected ideas for full-scale production, all consolidated under one roof as a sort of archive in case we needed to ever look back on anything for a reference point.”

“And where is that one roof?”

“The Wayne Foundation building,” Fox’s grin grew wider. “It’s in a sort of warehouse for storage underneath the actual building… You wouldn’t want to go see it, would you?”

“You seem to want to.”

“Well, for a mausoleum, it’s a lot of fun. I’ll grab my coat. You have a car?”

“Alfred should be waiting for me.”

“Haven’t seen Alfred in years! He stopped coming to the Christmas parties after you left. Come on.”

“He humiliated me in front of my men,” Branden shouted in the office of Commissioner Loeb. “Absolutely humiliated me!”

“Nothing but trouble, that one,” Loeb responded gruffly. “You do know I sympathize with you, don’t you, Branden?” Loeb waved the latest edition of the newspaper in the air. On the front page was a picture of Gordon, smiling with the three children he had rescued earlier that day. The headline read in huge bold letters, HERO COP.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Of course you do. And you know that I’d like nothing better than to remove him from service. Detective Flass has made numerous requests along those lines. But we have to be patient now. Gordon has the press on his side, and I can’t risk another firestorm with the press. Not now. We just have to be thankful that he hasn’t done anything yet to cross the mayor, or Falcone. Right now he’s a hero, so we’ll let him stay in the limelight. Right where we can see him.”

A few levels below, Gordon was using the shooting range. He was a great shot. Rarely used his gun if he could help it, but it could never hurt to keep his skills at their best. With the noise-cancelling headset over his ears, shooting was actually almost therapeutic for Gordon. Almost. He
couldn’t forget the horrors of that morning. This was only a momentary respite.

_Hero Cop_, he thought to himself. _It’s a nice sentiment, but far from the truth. I’m no hero. I’m just a guy. I never wanted to be in the spotlight. Just wanted to stay under the radar._ He fired off another round.

_It kicks. The gun. I can feel the gunpowder burn my eyebrows and fill my nostrils with every shot. If that target were a man, his spine would shatter, and he’d feel his legs go dead as his heart exploded. The kick again. The bullet would leave a clean round hole and I’d see the expression of horror in his eyes as it pushed half his brain through the back of his skull. I hate the gun. I hate the job. But I keep practicing. I keep seeing that man. Zsasz. And the children. What if that were my Barb? Or Barbara? And the baby. Oh the baby… I pray that he’s strong. And smart enough to stay alive. How did I let this happen? How did I screw it up so badly!? To bring an innocent child to life in a city without hope…_

“There’s no real staff here at Applied Sciences. We just have a board member, usually myself, oversee a product’s transfer from wherever it originated, like Wayne Industries for example, to here where it gets catalogued and archived. Usually never see half this stuff again. Ah, here we are,” Fox said as he pulled out a drawer. “Kevlar utility harness. Gas-powered magnetic grapple gun. The three hundred and fifty pound test monofilament. Pretty neat.” Bruce was fixated by the trove of misfit inventions. They were the forgotten byproducts of years worth of Wayne Enterprise funding, filling a massive warehouse-like basement underneath the Wayne Foundation tower. It was a literal gallery of experimental technologies that were sitting completely unused and almost virtually off of the books.

“Most of these work, don’t they?” Bruce asked. “I mean, why were they held back from production?”

“Most work,” Fox answered optimisitcally. “We don’t tend to archive complete failures, beyond a few records so that we don’t repeat mistakes in the future. There are varying reasons as to why a product never passes the prototype stage. Usually it’s contractors backing out for not having enough funding.”

“Interesting,” Bruce responded. “A lot of failed army contracts, I’ve noticed.”

“Our most faithful customer here in Applied Sciences. Take this.” He opened a nearby crate which held some sort of full-body suit of armor.

“Foot infantry survival battle suit,” Fox said. “Crummy name, but pretty impressive piece of hardware. Light-weight kevlar bi-weave. Extremely tactile.”

“Breach resistant?”

“This sucker will stop a knife.”

“Bulletproof?”

“Anything but a straight shot. But even that was due to be rectified once we developed past prototype.”

“Why didn't they put it into production?”
“Army didn't think a soldier's life was worth more than three hundred grand. But, what's your interest in it, Mr. Wayne? All of this, I mean. Why does it catch your eye?” In truth, while Alfred had suggested they use the company as a front to protect Bruce’s identity, Bruce truly wanted to utilize its resources for his mission. Applied Sciences offered the perfect reservoir of gadgets and gear for his use.

“I wanna borrow it,” he said bluntly. “For, uh, spelunking.”

“Spelunking?”

“Yeah, you know, cave diving.”

“Cave diving…” Fox eyed him over. “You expecting to run into much gunfire in these caves?”

“Look, I'd rather the board, or anyone, didn't really know about me borrowing...”

“Mr. Wayne, the way I see it, all this stuff is yours anyway.” Bruce nodded, and then noted a massive spool of black textile materials.

“What’s that?”

“Oh that’s pretty neat. It's called memory cloth. It has shape-memory that has the ability to return from a deformed state to another pre-specified shape when induced by an external stimulus. So right now, it’s regularly flexible. But, you put a current through it and the molecules realign; it becomes rigid.”

“What kind of shapes can you make?”

“It can be tailored to fit any structure based on a rigid skeleton.”

“Too expensive for the Army?”

“Eh, I don't think they tried to market it to the billionaire-spelunking crowd.” Fox shot Bruce an uneasy look.

“Look, Lucius-”

“Yes?”

“If you're uncomfortable-”

“Mr. Wayne, if you don't want to tell me exactly what you're doing, when I'm asked, I don't have to lie. But don't think of me as an idiot. And like I said, the way I see it, all of this stuff is yours anyway... I always liked your father.”

“Fair enough.” Bruce smiled. “Well, I’m going find something to do with this stuff. Put it to some use.”

“It’s all yours,” Fox said. “Anything else I can show you?”

“Lets head back upstairs,” Bruce said. “I think I’ve seen enough here.” They returned to the massive industrial elevator that took them back to the main floor.

“You think this’ll be a confortable fit?” Fox asked as they stepped out into the Wayne Foundation lobby.
“Honestly, Lucius, only if it will be for you. I have no intentions to step on your toes or change everything about this company. I just…”

“You want to use it to change things in this world,” Fox said. “Just like me.”

“I do,” Bruce said, a twinge of guilt in his voice. “But the thing is… Fox, the ways I want to do things are different from what you would do.”

“And I really don’t care, Bruce. When your father was here, he nearly bankrupt this company trying to create real social change. And the last time we accomplished any of that, honestly, ended shortly after he died. Sure, I’ve been able to grow the company’s reputation and keep revenue flowing, but it’s not enough. I’m not here to make money, Bruce. I’m here to help the world. And it’s time we got back on track.”

“Bruce Wayne?!” a voice excitedly exclaimed from elsewhere in the lobby. Bruce and Fox turned to see a man approaching them. He looked to be about Fox’s age, sporting a thick mustache and wearing a brightly colored shirt and tie with rolled up sleeves.

“Ah, Bruce,” Lucius said. “This is Norman Maddison. He runs a lot of the coordination between the Wayne Foundation and other smaller charities. Excellent philanthropist.”

“Ah,” Bruce said, extending his hand which Norman then grabbed so enthusiastically that he might have torn it clean off.

“Bruce Wayne,” Norman chuckled. “Pleasure to meet you! When I heard you were coming back to Gotham I got so excited at the prospect possible working with you here. The billionaire orphan – you beat the odds! You inspire people, you know?” Bruce really hated being called that. It was a moniker that the tabloids at the time of his parents’s murder had bestowed upon him, and he was not at all pleased with it.

“Glad to be here,” he feigned.

“Bruce, we are throwing a charity ball this weekend at the Royal Towers Hotel. We absolutely need you to be present. It’s for a good cause, Bruce! What do you say?”

This was absolutely the sort of thing I’d hoped to avoid, Bruce groaned within himself. But I can’t resist… I need to maintain this social cover.

“Certainly,” Bruce said. “Why don’t you send a memo with all the details to my secretary.”

“You have a secretary already?”

“Same one as Fox’s,” Bruce said, trying his best to hurry Norman off on his way.

“Excellent, I will do that. Welcome back to your Empire, Bruce!” And with that Norman took off, strutting as though he had just won the lottery.

“That’s Norman for ya,” Fox said. “Always enthusiastic about parties with the rich and famous. He means well. He’s really a good man at heart. He just has a different set of priorities from myself, I think.”

“Me too, I think,” Bruce said. “Big social events aren’t really in my set of interests.”

“I’m beginning to find most of what the papers would have me believe about your set of interests isn’t entirely true, Mr. Wayne. Though, you seem to want everyone to believe it is… I’m excited to
see what lies ahead in our future. I really liked your father. And so far, I’d say I really like you as well.”

“Thank you.”

“Now,” Fox said. “Let me see what we can do about getting you in charge of the Applied Sciences department.”
“Ok, give it a try,” Bruce said as he finished nailing down one last line of cabling. Alfred stared up at Bruce who was hanging from a harness fastened to stalactite on the cave ceiling, and then turned to flip the switch on the generator to his side. It hummed and buzzed, and suddenly a row of lights Bruce had just installed lit up. The cave became illuminated in a cool blue light.

“Charming,” Alfred said as he gazed up at the bats which had seemed to be agitated by the lights. “Well, at least you’ll have company. What’s that over there?” Alfred asked as he pointed to a section of the cave which had beams of metal and columns of bricks.

“That’s where I want to wire the power from,” Bruce said. “It’s an extremely low foundation on the South East wing. My parents told me that my great-great-grandfather had been involved in the Underground Railroad, secretly transporting enslaved people to the north. I’m hoping there’s some sort of entrance over there that leads from here to the house. If not, I’ll build one.”

“Looks like the rigging is in place for an old service elevator,” Alfred said. Bruce agreed and then headed back to the piles of crates that they had lowered into the cave. Excitedly he began opening them and pulling out their contents which mostly consisted of various things he had taken from Applied Sciences, as well as various charts, notes, books, and so on.

"Alfred, did you finish my costume?"

“Just this morning, Master Bruce,” Alfred said as he began pulling a grey full body suit out of a box. “It’s extremely mobile, but I doubt it will keep you very safe from harm.”

“Just a prototype, Alfred,” Bruce said. “I’ve got some Kevlar body armor in one of these boxes that we can modify in the next few days. Ultimately I’d like to build something much more custom from Kevlar thread and carbon nanotube fibers. We could put sensors in it and tailor it specifically to my body. But that’s another project for later. Might be a good idea to get a heavy-armored version in the works too.” He walked over and looked at the suit. It was grey and black, like a suit worn by speed skaters, only with flack jacket pieces inserted in the chest area. Bruce stared at it, and then took it over to a backpack he had brought with him and began producing a few items from it.

“What’s all this?” Alfred asked.

“Combat boots,” Bruce said. “For Arctic terrains so they’ll be water resistant and durable. We’re going to eventually need to customize the footwear for a few things. I’d like them to carry a few pieces of my arsenal, like a blow gun or lock pick. I need it to still follow the basic design of any tactical boots, but they should be made from lightweight rubbers and be much more flexible to allow for full extension when kicking. There’s a design in the Applied Sciences warehouse with a slingshot ankle reinforcement system that acts as both armor and as reinforcement for the ankle joint when kicking or landing from high distances. The bottoms can have a flexible split sole design – Alfred, are you taking notes? I already have most of this written down in one of these notebooks. Anyway, we can come up with a unique texture design on the souls for a variety of surfaces. These boots have steel toes, which we should keep. Much more effective when on the offensive.”

“Naturally,” Alfred remarked sarcastically.

“Then here are some gauntlets and arm bracers I picked up during my travels. The attachable
gloves have been modified with a few things Applied Sciences had laying around. The gloves have been specially treated to be both shock-proof as well as radiation-resistant. I’m thinking we should also work on variations to the design that incorporate fingertip blades, and also have joint armor-reinforcement in the glove – from the wrists and knuckles to the fingers. The gauntlet has blades on it, in the style of some traditional ninja arts. I also added a few little places for storing other tiny arsenal pieces. Oh, there are electrodes in the fingertips here, which are used to send out electrical currents so I can control the structure of the cape. Did you finish the cape?”

“It’s with the suit, Sir,” Alfred nodded. “Scalloped bottom edge, as per your specifications.”

“Excellent,” Bruce smiled. “When I run electricity through the glove to the cape, it should open up like a pair of bat wings that can double as both an intimidation tactic, and as a sort of glider apparatus. This is good stuff.”

“Though I’m not certain about the radiation-resistant gloves,” Alfred said. “What exactly are you planning on needing those for?”

“You never know,” Bruce said dismissively. “But it’s best to be prepared for anything.”

“And which martial arts master or doomsday cult did you train with to teach you that?”

“The Boy Scouts of America,” Bruce said flatly. “Oh and here’s the utility harness. It can carry the rest of my arsenal. Smoke pellets, and stuff like that. It also will carry the grapple-gun and has an attachment for the cables. I’m going to look into finding an biometric security system so that it can’t be removed from my body by anyone but me. And last but not least, these.” He held out a stack of tiny metallic objects with razor edges, cut into the shape of little bats.

“Bat-a-rangs?” Alfred mused.

“Shurikens,” Bruce said. “Variants of the Chinese throwing star. Sort of a signature weapon. A personal touch. These ones are fairly crude but we can come up with a whole line of variations. Some with gyroscopes inside that can keep them spinning, maybe even have some remote control involved. I don’t know yet. There’s a lot of possibilities. But I needed a special weapon, and I know how to use these. Precise, painful, but nonlethal. I won’t use guns. I won’t take lives. I won’t cross over that line like they do. But I won’t hold back either… And how about the cowl? Can I see the cowl?”

“Ah, right here, Sir,” Alfred said, handing Bruce the cape made of memory cloth, and an attachable cowl made of fabrics he had stretched over a modified helmet. All black, and with a mask attached, the cowl would cover Bruce’s entire face except for his mouth and jaw. On the sides there were two points, appearing like horns or ears. Alfred couldn’t believe that the boy he had raised was now a grown man asking him to fabricate giant bat costumes. It all sounded so strange, but Bruce had said it was to be something more than mere human. To strike fear into the hearts of criminals.

“A little silly up close,” Bruce said. “But it will do for now. I’m not sure where I put the modified designs, but when you find them lets go over them together, ok?”

“Very well, Sir.”

“Ok,” Bruce said as he set up an easel displaying a large chart he had drawn out. “This will have to do until we can get some computers down here. Paper notebooks and charts. Alfred, this is the basic flow of corruption in Gotham. Crime families. Mobs. People and… industries… that are continuing to foster crime in this city.”
“It’s a pyramid,” Alfred said, looking over the chart.

“In a way,” Bruce said. “Obviously on the bottom there are a bunch of street gangs and random thugs. Gotham had a huge upsurge in crime during the depression. Create enough hunger and desperation, and everyone becomes a criminal. Not to mention the almost nonexistent middle class in Gotham. Either way, most of the punks on the street come from the lower class. But then we have members of the upper echelon – mob families – who control what is going on down below, either by supplying weapons, hiring muscle, moving illegal money, shipping drugs, weapons… you name it. At the bottom, we have a few wealthy thugs. Rupert Thorne, Fish Mooney, Joe Coyn, Elliot Caldwell, Zachary Gate, Ned Creggan, Ray Sallinger – they control small operations, but the strongest amongst them is the Sionis Crime Family.”

“Sionis?” Alfred said. “As in, Sionis Steel Mills?”

“Yes. The Sionis family made their name with the Sionis Steel Mill in the industrial sector of Gotham. They also own, from what I could gather at a recent board meeting at Wayne Enterprises, a fair share of stock in Janus Cosmetics.”

“Didn’t you know their son?” Alfred asked. “They only live on the other side of the Palisades.”

“Roman Sionis. No. He’s my age, but I never really knew him. Tommy Elliot did though. They were friends. Either way, Sionis has mob ties, though not very deep. Mostly runs money laundering schemes and corporate buyouts for the more prolific crime families. Kind of a lackey in the business. Probably came into it fairly recently. Maybe borrowed money from someone and decided to join up with his creditors once he’d paid them off.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me, Sir. The Sionis family has been known to be rather self-obsessed and preoccupied with wealth and status. I recall tale that when young Roman was born, a doctor actually dropped the newborn infant but the parents refused to press charges for fear of being caught in what they termed a commoner’s lawsuit. Your father had told me that around the time of your own birth.”

“Gossip Alfred,” Bruce said. “Ultimately unimportant. They’re low on the criminal food chain. Bottom tier. On the tier above them, however, are three crime families. The Sabatino Crime Family, the Riley Crime Family, and the Odessa Crime Family. Italian, Irish, and Ukrainian. The Sabatinos were the first crime family in Gotham, followed by the Rileys who are arms dealers mostly. They had to come to peace with each other when the other families started moving in during the depression. Competition got too thick. They all run the typical criminal activities you’d expect. But ultimately they are grunts in the grand scheme of things.

It’s the tier above them – the second tier – that really has a lot of influence. The Galante Family are Italians. They have a strict hold over most of Gotham’s East End with the exception of the Amusement Mile area. Then we have the Maroni Family, also Italian. Tough guy, Maroni. Probably the second most powerful man in Gotham right now. Pretty stereotypical mobster. But unfortunately for him, his family is constantly scrapping with the Dimitrov Family, the final piece of the second tier. Yuri Dimitrov runs them. They usually just call him The Russian. I’ve actually seen him in person. Sleazy. Prostitutes and drugs look like his main racket.”

“Master Bruce, how did you come by all this information?”

“These men are all pretty well-known, Alfred. But the hierarchy was something I had to get from all those reconnaissance missions over the past week or two.”

“All those nights dressed as a homeless man?”
“Hey,” Bruce scowled. “Matches Malone is a con artist. He’s not homeless.”

“Bloody well dresses like it.”

“Anyway, those are all the main families, and they all operate under the permission of the worst of the worst. The man who runs Gotham and has since the time of the economic downturn.”

“Carmine Falcone.”

“Correct. They call him The Roman. It’s not exactly a unified crime family, but Falcone is the undisputed Mob chieftain here. His people equal all the other families combined, by my estimates. And he makes most of them pay him tribute. Ruthless, cunning, and extremely wealthy. Possibly even more wealthy than me, and with far more connections. He virtually runs the city with the entire city council, GCPD, and the mayor all on his payroll. He more or less owns all of the politicians, judges, and lawyers. Falcone floods the streets with crime and drugs, preying on the desperate every single day. Everyone knows who he is and where to find him, but as long as he keeps the bad people rich and the good people scared no one will touch him. And he’s pretty careful to cover his tracks. Any evidence connecting him to criminal activity gets wiped away or paid off pretty fast.”

“You know,” Alfred said. “Carmine Falcone was a associate of your father’s.”

“Maybe so… But he’s no friend of mine.”

“What’s this?” Alfred asked, pointing to a corner of the chart where a name was written that didn’t have any lines drawn connecting it to any of the other crime families. “Penguin?”

“Not entirely sure yet,” Bruce said. “It looks like there’s only one major operation which openly opposes The Roman Empire that Falcone runs. A crime lord who calls himself The Penguin. From what I can tell, Penguin primarily deal heavy arms, and is rapidly encroaching on the Odessa’s niche. Pretty gutsy to take on the mob. But as far as I can tell, Penguin is an outlier. It’s not a faction that plays a major role.”

“Well then what do you intend on doing with this information?”

“I’m going to strike at the head. Carmine Falcone.

“What about organizations that could be possible allies in your plight, Master Bruce? Police officers and so forth.”

“The police are crooked,” Bruce said. “Weren’t you listening? Gillian Loeb is a personal friend and employee of Faclone. And the guy who heads the SWAT team is as much a thug as any drug dealer… Branden is his name, I think.”

“But certainly there are some civil servants you could rely on? This Hero Cop for example. Lieutenant James Gordon from Chicago. How about him?”

“No thank you, Alfred. I work alone.”

“Do I not count for anything?”

“You know what I mean, Alfred.”

“Oh, Master Wayne, the blueprints for your cowl,” Alfred pulled out a sheet of paper showing designs for the next cowl they would fabricate, reinforced like a helmet, with the same bat ears and
opening for a mouth. The eyes were molded into a permanent scowl, making for a particularly imposing appearance.

“Ah, there is it.”

“Now, we’d already decided to order the main part of the cowl from Singapore,” Alfred said.

“Via dummy corporation,” Bruce said.

“Indeed. But I put some thought into this, Master Wayne, and I figured, quite separately, we could place an entirely separate order to a Chinese company for these.” He ran his finger over the pointed ears.

“Put it together ourselves.”

“Precisely,” Alfred said. “I suspect they’ll have to be large order to avoid suspicion.”

“How large?”

“Say, ten thousand.”

“Well, at least we’ll have spares.”

“Indeed.”

“In addition to concealing my features and contributing to the imposing appearance,” Bruce explained, “we should outfit it to serve a few other purposes. Once I get the mechanism figured out for the security on the utility harness, which I think I’ll turn into more of a belt, the cowl can have similar defense mechanisms. Electric shock or stun gas in order to prevent unauthorized removal. That sort of thing. I’d also like to put lenses in the eyes, mirrored with an opaque white surface. Masking my pupils. Just two white eyes in the dark.”

“Lenses? Master Wayne, this sounds more and more ridiculous as you go on.”

“No Alfred, this is a good idea,” Bruce shot back. “This cowl will contain shifting lenses that can identify a suspect's through a linkup to a criminal database, as well as highlight their weak points through medical records or by reading out quick bio-scans of the environment. They’re practically, while simultaneously avoiding the possibility of identifying me as the wearer through eye identification. The lenses can have special modes, like infrared sensors, night vision, and ultraviolet vision. We could even link it wirelessly to a computer so that it could help identify clues at crime scenes and other forensics data. It could be really useful. Just need to get Wayne Tech a contract to produce something similar, and we can modify it ourselves.”

“You’ve really thought this through, Sir.”

“As for the ears, one of them will carry a high-gain antenna for an internal comm-link on the left side of the cowl, allowing us to stay in contact with each other. The comm-link can also scan police radios and other communication frequencies. It will also carry an inertial navigation unit to keep me in balance, as well as to link the cowl up with a global positioning system. The cowl's Kevlar panels will provide a level of protection for my head against firearms. The front of the skull and the sides of the temples should also have small armor inserts to increase the effectiveness of skull strikes and protect from concussive blows.”

“You’re preparing yourself for a war,” Alfred said. “What sort of situations are you expecting to get yourself into? Do you have any idea how much all of this will cost?”
“A lot,” Bruce said. “But I’m going up against The Roman. Falcone has more men, connections, hiding places, and money than I do. But I can be better equipped. I need every advantage. Now, what time is it?”

“Ten minutes passed nine,” Alfred responded.

“Then it’s time.” Bruce said as he set out what gear he had and carefully put it all on as best he could. The dark body suit, the gloves, gauntlets, boots, and harness fit better than he had expected.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred said. “One more suggestion, if I might. I suggest you find the time to see Leslie Thompkins at some point. She did try her best to fill in for your mother, you know.” Bruce ignored the comment. Leslie was a nice woman, but she had always seemed to rub him the wrong way. Maybe it was her endlessly carefree outlook on life, or the philosophies she had tried to instill on him when he was younger. Whatever the reason, the two of them shared a mutual respect, but did not seem to often be on good terms with one another.

Methodically, he wrapped the cape around his body, letting it drape down to the floor. Without saying a word or turning his head, he reached over and picked up the crude cowl that Alfred had made for him. The butler watched Bruce, whose back was turned toward him, and felt endless worry welling up in his stomach. Slowly, Bruce slipped the cowl over his head, and turned.

“My God,” Alfred exclaimed nearly silently under his breath. There before him stood a being he barely recognized. Tall, large, and black, Bruce was gone and in his place was the shape of a demonic bat, glaring at him in the darkness.

Alfred had known two Bruce Waynes in the recent months. A public persona that behaved as normal as anybody else, smiling and acting as carefree as he possibly could. And then the private Bruce Wayne, reserved, thoughtful, quiet, and troubled. But this was someone else entirely. It was as if for the first time every Bruce had stripped every one of his walls down and was showing off all of his pain, loneliness, and anger in plain sight. He was literally wearing it all in the open. Even the way he carried himself was different. It was animalistic, stoic and threatening. For the first time since that night his parents died, Bruce was being who he felt he was. He was being true to how he felt. And without a word, he pushed his way beyond Alfred and disappeared in the darkness of the cave.

Perhaps this is going to work after all, Alfred thought to himself. Oh Bruce, what have you become?

The room was lit by the warm, red glow of candles. Soft music played, and Gordon groaned on the floor. He was shirtless, and felt pain shooting through his back and shoulders. But for once, it was a good pain. He laid on his stomach, with his wife kneeling overhead, massaging his back as best she could.

“You could use a jackhammer on this back, Jim,” she said. “How’s it feeling?”

“It feels great,” he responded, trying his best to sound grateful.

It’s the first night off I’ve really been able to enjoy since I got to Gotham, Gordon thought. It’s been pretty good for the most part. My daughter is off in her room with strict orders to leave us alone for our date tonight. Barbara made lemon chicken. A special treat for the two of us. And her fingers kneading into my shoulders feels absolutely heavenly. The soft music playing was her idea, but hey, it works.
“Dad!” Barb’s voice called as she peaked into the dark room. “Dad, I saw something weird.”

“Barb, we told you not to bother us unless it’s important,” her mother said.

“I know, but I just saw a monster or something out the window. Honest!”

“Barb.”

“Honest! It was a giant bat or something! Just flew across a roof out my window and jumped down into an alleyway. Honest!”

“Well that’s great, but tonight’s our date night so you have to leave us alone unless it’s an emergency, ok?”

”Ugh, ok whatever,” Barb groaned. “Goodnight.” Gordon could only smile. He liked being a father. And he liked that his daughter looked up to him so much. Even when the “emergency” was a giant bat, it was nice to feel wanted.

The phone rang out.

“Jim, you said you’d unplug it,” Barbara grumbled.


“Don’t worry, I’ll get it,” she muttered as she stood up and answered the line. “Hello?... Yes Sergeant… Maybe you should call the Gotham Zoo… Ok… All right, all right. I’ll get him.” She turned and looked disappointingly at her husband laying on the floor.

*That look,* Gordon thought to himself. *I hate that look. Why does she have to do that? She knows I don’t choose to be interrupted at home. It’s not my fault.*

“It’s Merkel,” she said. “Says he needs to talk to you. Says it’s something about a giant bat. Don’t worry, the chicken will keep…”

The three punks looked up in horror. One screamed, one let his jaw hang open in awe, and the last one dropped the enormous speakers he was carrying. All three of them jumped back an inch or two. The three thieves stood on a fire escape landing, and had been carrying a load of electronics in their arms when he found them. Bruce was pleased at how frightened they were upon seeing him.

*The costume works better than I thought. Better than Alfred thought too. They freeze, stare, and are giving me all the time in the world.*

He stepped off the edge of the rooftop above, and with his cape flowing out like two demonic wings, he slammed down onto the fire escape with them. But as he landed and let out an intimidating growl, suddenly everything went wrong. The guy to his left screamed out for help. On the right, one of them leaned into a fighting position, ready to take Bruce on. But it was the last guy that was the problem. Bruce had pegged him from the roof as being the strongest of the bunch, but he hadn’t counted on him being the most frightened. He spat out a few frantic curses, stumbled back, and was falling over the railing backwards by the time Bruce had landed among them.

Quickly, in one fluid motion from the crouch he had landed in, Bruce swung up, reaching over the railing, and grabbed the thief by the leg with his right arm, bracing himself against the railing with his left. The thug screamed, dangling upside down from his leg. It was a twelve-story drop at least,
and Bruce couldn’t help but notice how young he was.

_Fifteen. He can’t be a year older than fifteen. Just a child._

Suddenly, the one who had been ready to fight took his shot and kicked Bruce on the back of the head. His helmet took a lot of the blow, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt.

_Idiot. He’s gonna make me drop his friend. Either he doesn’t know or he doesn’t care. This has gone all wrong._

Suddenly, Bruce felt the world spin around him as the third boy lifted up the television they had been stealing and slammed it down onto Bruce’s back. He heard it crack and felt gravity pull it down over his side. As his vision blurred back into focus he could see it falling past the boy he held in his hand and go tumbling down to the street below.

_Held on_, Bruce thought as he confirmed that he had retained his grip the entire time. He kicked back into the chest of the one who had landed the television on his head. The boy groaned and Bruce felt a few of his ribs break with the blow. Then he shifted his weigh back, anchoring himself on the platform, and reached back to grab the boy who was still trying to kick him. He grabbed, and then yanked the boy down, bashing his head on a metal railing. Sighing as the boy stayed down, Bruce painfully pulled the dangling boy back up onto the landing and dropped him flat. He must’ve blacked out sometime while handing upside down.

_Good thing he blacked out. If he’d kept thrashing, I don’t know that I could have held on. Lucky. Lucky amateur. This could have been a disaster. And with them all knocked out, now none of them can offer any information. No matter, I have a few other leads to check tonight._

He’d spent the night going from user, to dealer, to supplier, trying to get to the root of a drug shipment. That’s how he’d found these punks, but there were others to hit before the night was through.

Bruce lay in his bed, curled up in the blankets like a child. Alfred had let him sleep as long as he deemed possible, but with the afternoon turning to evening, he didn’t think he could let it go much further. Alfred walked over to the large windows of the room, and threw the curtains open. As light strewn in from outside to the bed, Bruce flinched and complained.

"Bats are nocturnal!"

"Bats may be,” Alfred said. “But even for billionaire playboys, three o clock in the afternoon is pushing it. The price for living a double life, I fear. Your theatrics last night made quite an impression.” He held a newspaper in his hand, the sight of which caused Bruce to leap out of bed and snatch it from the butler’s hand.

_DOZENS HOSPITALIZED BY THE BAT-MAN_, the front page read in large bold lettering.

“Batman,” Bruce smiled. “This is a good start.”

“Is it, Master Wayne? It says that this bat-man sent dozens to the hospital, and who knows how many that leaves who hadn’t reported it.”

“There were only thirty in all.”

“Thirty in one night? Bruce, I knew you meant to go around like some masked pulp detective, but I
hadn’t suspected you intended to bludgeon the entire city out of its wits!”

“I got plenty of information. This isn’t just a night of me running around and beating people. I’m doing detective work.”

“And beating people.”

“I have to send a message. They need to know that Gotham is no longer a safe haven for criminals. Nobody else will have to watch their parents get shot.”

“Very well, then what sort of work did you do beyond leaving trails of human wreckage in your wake?”

“I’m getting leads, trying to link them to Falcone. If we can link Falcone to a ring of crime, we can start getting him prosecuted.”

“You said nobody would touch him.”

“I have leverage,” Bruce muttered.

“Leverage? What? You’ll threaten a judge?”

“No, I collected some dirt on some of them a while ago. I’ve got photos of Judge Faden out with his mistress. They’re down in the cave.”

“Bruce, this is out of control.”

“How? I’m not a child! Fox has been helping and-”

“Fox doesn’t know what he’s facilitating.”

“Not yet, but he will. When the time’s right.”

“And when will that be?”

“I don’t know, Alfred - but soon! Look, I’m not afraid of what I am doing. I’m not ashamed. I’m serious. This proves it! One night out there as the bat, and I’ve made the main headline in the paper. Gotham needs something like this, and it’s needed it for a very long time. I spent years preparing for this, Alfred. Years. Doctors spend less time studying. Cops and soldiers spend less time training. And you are both a doctor and a soldier. I am qualified to do this.” He stared at Alfred in the same way he had since he was a boy. Determination and confidence was etched into his face with the permanence of a granite statue.

“You always were remarkably bright in a debate,” Alfred said. “But you often came home with your share of blacked eyes, as I recall. You’re covered in bruises.” Bruce looked down at his arms and chest, and Alfred was right.

“Part of the job, I guess,” he shrugged as he pulled himself out of bed and immediately launched into a routine of pushups.

“Well, if those are to be the first of many injuries to come, it would be wise to find a suitable excuse.”

“We could say I was playing polo or something.”

“Do you know how to play Polo? Would you have comrades to play with who would vouch for
you? Strange injuries, a nonexistent social life – these things beg to question as to what exactly does Bruce Wayne do with all of his time and money.”

“What does someone like me do?”

“I don’t know. Drive sport cars? Date movie stars? Buy things that aren’t for sale?”

“I’m going to a charity ball tonight at the Royal Hotel,” Bruce said. “An employee, Norman Maddison, invited me.”

“There you are,” Alfred said. “That will be a good start. And who knows, Master Wayne? I’ve said it before. You start pretending to have fun, and maybe you’ll even have a little by accident.”

“Maybe,” Bruce said. “But I won’t be there all night. Found out about a shipment of drugs coming in tonight. I need to be there.”

“Bruce, how great to see you again,” Norman said as Bruce entered the grand ballroom of the Royal Hotel. Paparazzis clamored outside for a shot of what was going on beyond the doorway, but Bruce thought it was hardly anything worth photographing. A massive spread of food, and a bunch of elites standing around gossiping to a serenade of string violins. Ultimately pretty dull.

“What is tonight’s event for?” Bruce asked.

“We’re raising money for children in Africa,” Norman said. “The proceeds will go toward building schools, buying supplies, and so forth.”

“Do we make many proceeds with a spread like that?” Bruce said, nodding towards the enormous table of food. Norman stuttered, looking as if that were the last thing he had expected Bruce Wayne to ask.

“Well, you know, Bruce, you have to spend money to make money.”

“Certainly,” Bruce said. “I was just curious as to how much we actually will make compared to what is spent.”

“Well… I will tell you when it’s over,” Norman grinned awkwardly. “Now if you’ll excuse me.” He quickly shuffled off, leaving Bruce standing awkwardly in the throng of wealthy guests.

Great. The only guy here that I know has just run off.

Then he heard it. From across the room there were was a man arguing with a server. He was shouting rather indignantly. And he was with a woman.

“Alex, there’s no need for that,” the woman said.

“Relax, Julie. Don’t get yourself all worked up.”

“You treated that waitress like she was subhuman.”
“You’re saying she isn’t? Lousy slut probably gets off work and turns tricks in the back of some minivan.”

“Give it a rest. Your brain’s obviously bent out of shape due to lack of use. I’d like to go home.”

“You little shrew! You think I’d leave here, in front of everyone, over your concern for some servant? I should-” He was cut off as Bruce grabbed him firmly on the shoulder.

“You should be on your way, my friend,” Bruce spoke gruffly. “While you’re able to still walk.” Alex shook his shoulder free of Bruce’s grip and began walking away.

“And don’t ever call me ever again, you creep,” Julie shouted at him.

“I wouldn’t hold your breath waiting, sweetheart,” he called back. “Bleeding-heart witch! And you keep your hands to yourself, mate. Or I’ll call the cops.” Bruce sighed as Alex walked away, letting himself relax.

“Sorry about that, miss,” he said. “I hope I didn’t intrude.”

“Are you kidding? That guy was a bad mistake I don’t intend on repeating.”

“Glad to hear it. My name is-”

“Oh I know who you are, Mr. Wayne. Everyone knows who you are.”

“Well, it looks like we’re on uneven terms then. You are?”

“Julie Maddison,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Maddison? Any relation to Norman Maddison?”

“There is, yes. He’s, uh, my father. Do you know him well?”

“Hardly,” Bruce laughed. “Met him once and he about twisted my arm off to get me to come to this thing.”

“Not your scene?”

“Oh, it’s very much my scene,” Bruce lied. “Just haven’t really met anyone I’ve clicked with so far.”

“Oh.”

“So, tell me, Julie, what uh… what do you do?”

“You’ve never seen me?” Bruce looked confused. “I’m… I’m a model, actually. Pretty prominent. Or at least, I thought I was.”

“No, I’m sure you are,” Bruce awkwardly chuckled. “I’ve been abroad for a long time, and I guess a lot of the world just sort of… passed by.”

“Ever make it as far as Africa?”

“Sure. Even further.”

“Oh wow,” Julie said. “My mother spent years in Africa. I think she visited every country there.
Lots of charity and social work. That’s why my dad has a particular eye for these events that benefit causes in Africa.”

“Oh,” Bruce said. “Well… is she here tonight, or?”

“No, no, mother passed. A long time ago. It’s kind of in her memory I suppose.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“It’s really fine. It was a long time ago and I’m pretty much at peace with it all… You know, Bruce, you’re not quite as socially proficient as I might have guessed. You seem nervous.”

“Just caught off guard,” Bruce said. “That whole thing with your boyfriend.”

“Ex. But yeah, ok.”

“So, you like modeling then?”

“No not really.” Again, Bruce looked entirely caught off guard. “I prefer law, actually. I’m a law student. Modeling is something I got into in high school. What high schooler doesn’t want to be supermodel? So I still do it to pay for school, and my life, but being a District Attorney is sort of the dream these days.”

“District Attorney? I sure read you wrong.”

“Ha, what’d you think I was? Just some empty-headed socialite? Don’t answer that. I know, the chances of being a DA are probably pretty slim… And who would vote for me? Daughter of one of Gotham’s elite, and a supermodel.”

“Do you mind my asking, why a DA?”

“Big topic.”

“No, I’m interested. I’ll listen.”

“It’s just this city. I’m tired of it. I’m tired of seeing the desperation… People talk about the depression as if it’s history, and it’s not. This city is rotting. Things are worse than ever here, and every day there are men like Carmine Falcone, or Salvatore Maroni who fill our streets with more and more garbage – it just makes me sick. I think it’s time for somebody to do something about it. And if I can help… well, I guess I’d like to.”

“You sound opinionated.”

“I am.”

“Ah, Bruce,” Norman returned, looking much less nervous than before. “I see you met my daughter. Great girl. Her name is Julie.”

“So I’ve heard,” Bruce responded.

“Er… right,” Norman stuttered. “Well, can I offer you two a drink? Julie, where’s uh… Allan?”

“Alex,” she corrected. “He left. I don’t think I’ll be seeing him anymore.”

“Wait, what?” Norman said. “Did something happen? Are you ok?”
“No, dad, I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

“Well ok,” Norman snorted. “Drinks?” Bruce and Julie both nodded. Norman snapped his fingers toward a waitress who quickly came over with three cocktails on a tray. Norman and Julie both started into theirs and while Bruce acted like he was occasionally sipping from it, he took special care not to consume any. He had to be operating at full capacity for his later endeavors.

“So what about this bat guy?” Norman scoffed. “You heard of him, Julie?”

“I have.”

“And?”

“I think the bat-man is just one good citizen who’s been pushed too far by the corruption in this city.”

“Oh, and you approve?” Norman laughed.

“He’s done something the police have never done.”

“You can’t take the law into your own hands,” Norman replied. “I mean, you’re a law student. You must understand that.”

“At least he’s getting something done.”

“Awe, Bruce, help me out here?”

“Well…” Bruce said, trying to look like he found the whole situation entirely ridiculous. “I mean, a guy who dresses up like a bat… clearly has issues.”

“But he’s made an impact,” Julie countered. “People are talking, and you have to think that some of the criminal element on the streets is a little frightened now. Might think twice about going out and robbing, or selling drugs, or whatever tonight.”

“And now the cops want to bring him in,” Norman waved his hands. “What does that tell you?”

“They’re jealous. I think the bat-man deserves a medal.”

“And a straight jacket to pin it on,” Bruce laughed. “All the same, I really have to get going. Lovely party, Norman.”

“Oh so soon?” Norman whined.

“Bruce,” Julie said.

“Yes?”

“Don’t hesitate to call sometime,” she smiled, winked, and walked away.

“My daughter,” Norman shook his head.

“She’s an intelligent young lady,” Bruce said. “Goodnight Mr. Maddison.”

“Night, Bruce.” Bruce, however, was not going to go to bed. The night was still young, and there was work to be done.
At the Gotham Shipping yard, a gang of thugs were unloading crates upon crates of unmarked cargo.

“Excuse me,” Detective Flass said as he approached the men, holding his badge up. “Let me see what we got here.” One of the men looked nervous, wondering if he should run, or pull out the knife in his pocket. Flass passed him by, examining the crate and pulled out a shabby plush rabbit toy.

“Just rabbits, officer,” one of the men stuttered.

“Just rabbits?” Flass laughed as he ripped it open from its seam, revealing a tiny bag filled with drugs. Everyone froze. They could overpower this cop, but was it worth it? Someone would come looking for him, and assaulting an officer was a worse charge than moving drugs.

“Ha,” one of the men laughed. “Good one, Flass. Had em going.” Flass laughed back and threw the rabbit back into the container.

“Wait, you’re?” One of the men who had been nervous was now entirely confused.

“I’m your enforcer tonight,” Flass chuckled as he put his badge back into his jacket.

“Haven’t seen you at one of these in a while,” the man who had recognized him remarked.

“Haven’t been able to,” Flass grumbled. “Had a pretty bad injury a while ago… And I got saddled with lousy partner for a few months, but we’ve recently opted to go our separate ways. Working alone for now. Which means I have much more time for these extracurricular jobs.”

“Good to have you back, man. Everyone, this is Detective Flass. Good man. He’ll treat you right as long as you treat him right. Right, Flass?”

“Right.”

The nervous man shrugged, a bit disgruntled at the fun they’d had at his expense. Picking up his box, he carried it back to the truck, loaded it, and then headed back to grab another from the crate. Suddenly, he felt his feet he yanked out from under him as he was pulled into the air. His head swung down, hitting the cement as his body ascended up into the darkness of the rigging above. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was the dark shape of some horrifying creature, hunched over and watching him.

“Hey, where’d Vick go?” One of the men said. “Heard a noise, and now he’s gone?”

“The nervous guy?” Flass asked. “Probably tryin to play a joke on us after we got him.”

“I’ll go look,” another man said. “Yo, Vick? Vick, you there?” Suddenly two of the lights above them exploded, going dark.

“What the!?” One of the jumpier thugs exclaimed. “Vick, this ain’t funny man.”

“What’s this?” Flass walked directly underneath one of the lights and picked up a little jagged piece of metal, cut out in the shape of a bat. “This thing hit the light or something?”

“One over here too,” someone called from under the other light that had gone out. “Musta come from up-” The man looked up, squinting to see better in the dark. There, above him, was the
massive shape of an enormous bat, hanging upside-down from the rigging above and staring down at them. The man could barely let out a scream before the enormous bat dropped down from above, pouncing on him, knocking him to the floor.

“Whoa!” Flass shouted, pulling his gun in the time it had taken for the bat to grab his comrade’s head and slam it down onto the pavement, knocking him unconscious. The bat suddenly lunged toward him, and he fired, but the bullet seemed to just pass through the shadow’s enormous wings like it was nothing. Flass stumbled back in shock as several of the other men ran forward. The bat rose up, standing straight like a man, and then lashed its hands out, and from them flew more of the tiny jagged metal projectiles.

“Think it’s time to bail!” Flass’s friend shouted as he took off into the maze of cargo crates ahead. Flass scrambled to find his gun and quickly followed, only glancing over his shoulder to see the shadow leap down and take on those who had stayed behind. It moved so fast, seemingly knocking people away with every movement it made. What was it? There was no time to stop and decide. Flass ran and did not look back.

The bat used its entire body like a weapon, attacking from all ends. No matter how anybody approached the beast, it would lash out and either knock them down, or cut them. It moved through them, as if every attack it made was slingshooting it to the next victim. Skin split and bones cracked as the brawl continued, but it was over in a matter of seconds. Every man was scattered like rubble across the pavement, bleeding, unconscious, or moaning in pain as they clutched whichever area the monster’s blows had hit. It looked down at them, silently, and glided into the maze of crates ahead.

“Wait up!” Flass shouted. His friend frantically moved between the crates like a snake in the grass, whipping his way passed each obstacle.

“No way,” the man shouted, but as soon as the words had escaped his mouth, Flass watched as a massive black shape shot by, grabbing his friend and dragging him away. He stopped running, now completely alone. Sweat ran down his brow as he raised his gun up close to him, ready to use it at a moment’s notice. The sound of his panting against the silent night was almost deafening.

Suddenly there was a scrape across one of the crates to the left. Flass spun in that direction; his weapon outstretched, but he saw nothing. Silence again. And then suddenly another sound as he saw a shadow move out of the corner of his right eye. He span back around, this time firing three rounds. But when his hand had stopped shaking from the shots, there was nothing there. Slowly he rubbed the sweat from his eyes and started inching his way backwards. A sound rang out again from the direction he was staring and he felt panic seize his entire body.

“Where are you!?” he bellowed, spit flying from his lips as he tried his very best to cover his fear by sounding intimidating. And then he felt it. The warm air of a breath ran along the back of his neck as he felt himself back into something behind him. But before he could even register what he had backed into he heard the creature whisper in a deep, quiet, raspy voice, “Here.” Flass screamed, turning around to shoot but it was too late. The bat was behind him, hanging upside-down. Its wings burst open and wrapped there way around Flass who felt his gun get wrenched free of his hand as he became engulfed in darkness. And then he felt his legs fall out from under him, and his stomach lurch up into his throat. Before he could tell what was happening at all, he was dangling from the rigging up above.

“Whoa!” He shouted, looking down and seeing his feet hanging helplessly beneath him, and the twenty foot drop below. However, his fear was nothing compared to when he looked up and saw the face of the monster staring at him. It was the bat-man. The bat-man was standing on the
rigging, holding Flass over the edge by the lapels of his jacket.

“Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me!” Flass pleaded. The bat-man’s expression was frozen in a scowl as he shook Flass and pulled him in close so that they could look each other directly in the eyes. Flass tried to divert his gaze by turning his head, but the bat continued staring with blank eyes.

“I’m not going to kill you,” it growled. “I want you to do me a favor.”

“What, what? Anything!”

“I want you to tell all your friends about me. Tell them to watch out.”

“What are you!?” Flass exclaimed, unsure of if he was in the grips of a monster or a psychopath in a costume. The bat-man shook him one more time and pulled him in extremely close.

“I’m Batman,” he roared back, and then without hesitation, Batman flung Flass away from his body. The detective screamed as gravity caught ahold of him and felt himself go into a free fall. But his scream was cut short as his body jerked, and his head snapped out. The fall had suddenly ended, and Flass realized that he was attached so some sort of harness and was now hanging in the air. His neck ached from the whiplash of the line going taught, but he craned it as best he could to look up at his attacker. But Batman was gone. He had moved on.

The next day, Flass showed up to the GCPD building with a neck brace on. Though most of the officers were laughing at him, there was an overall nervous feeling throughout the department at the growing number of attacks from Batman.

“It’s not the bat-man,” Flass protested. “It’s just Batman. That’s its name!”

“What, he’s a guy in a costume?” Merkel asked.

“I heard it was boogeyman,” Gordon smirked.

“No, it’s a little girl in a costume,” Officer O’Hara laughed. “Aint that right, Flass?”

“He’s just a lunatic vigilante,” Detective Sarah Essen retorted. “And with the number of people he’s hospitalized I’d like to organize a massive task force to go out and get him.” Gordon liked Detective Essen. She kept to herself mostly. Very hard exterior to her personality. The way her blond hair was always so perfectly done, and her clothes so neatly pressed, she was one of those women who had spent much of her life trying overcompensate for the fact that she was a woman. It was a sexist world, and she wanted everyone to know she had the drive to prove the sexists wrong. She didn’t fear her femininity. Gordon liked that. Barbara had always seemed to struggle a bit with those sorts of things, and Gordon rarely knew how to respond. But Sarah wasn’t like that. She was strong. She was smart. She was capable. She wasn’t as tender as Barbara, which was a drawback, but she was better than most of the other cops on the force. And best of all, she wasn’t crooked.

“If we can stop from being hysterical for a moment,” Gordon said, sipping his coffee and looking at pictures which had been plastered all over the office walls of eye witness descriptions of Batman. They were all fairly ridiculous, ranging from pictures of demonic monsters, to men wearing capes, to a picture of a businessman holding a briefcase with a bat’s head on his shoulders.

“What do we know?” Merkel asked.
“Well,” Gordon started as he adjusted his glasses. “Our Batman has apparently committed somewhere around seventy acts of assault in the past week. Maybe a few more from last week. And during this time, I think it’s fairly safe to rule that he is operating as a vigilante, like Essen said. During this time, certain patterns of timing and method have emerged. It is clear that he possesses extraordinary physical skill and—”

“Not he,” Flass muttered. “Not he. It.”

“You have something to contribute Detective Flass?” Gordon groaned.

“He’s not human. I’m just telling you he’s not human.”


“Thank you, Detective Flass,” Gordon said, ignoring O’Hara’s comment. “Anyway, while the vigilante has been careful to remain unpredictable, choosing the neighborhoods for his assaults seemingly at random, he most consistently operates between the hours of midnight and four in the morning. He’s working his way from street level crime to its upper echelons. From junkie mugger, to pusher, to supplier. And along the way, to any cops that might be—er—in his way, it seems… Now, Flass. Tell us what you know about Batman. Try not to exaggerate.” Flass’s scowl only grew, as he glared at the cops surrounding him who all stared at him with humorously amused expressions.

He looks like he’s hating this, Gordon thought to himself. That look is absolutely priceless.

“Well, it’s like I said in my report, Lieutenant,” Flass began. “I received an anonymous tip leading me to an East End cocaine delivery. I was in the process of single-handedly apprehending the felons when I heard giant wings flapping. It flew down from the sky, and its wings were about thirty feet across. It bellowed and hissed— I’ve never heard anything like that. One of the felons I had not yet disarmed produced a 357 magnum and fired— at point blank range— at the creature. But the bullet passed straight through the thing, like it wasn’t there. Other members of the gang tried to fight it but something flew from the creature’s hands. Little knives or something… I remember noticing it had claws.”

“Claws. Right,” one of the cops chuckled. Flass gave her a look as if he was challenging her.

“It was little dart things,” Flass tried explaining.

“Dart things?”

“It was! He paralyzed the felons, but me he singled out!”

“Yeah right, Flass,” O’Hara laughed.

“Gentlemen, Gentlemen,” Gordon said as he raised his hands trying to calm everyone down. “Please, Flass, go on.”

I can’t seem to stop enjoying Flass going redder and redder. Maybe this Batman isn’t so bad.

Just outside of Gotham City, in the countryside which was directly west of Gotham Heights, was the country home escape of Carmine Falcone. It was a mansion, built on grounds that were very purposefully purchased several miles outside of the city limits. Outside of Gotham’s jurisdiction in unincorporated land. It was a well-known retreat for Carmine, who would often use his visits there
as an alibi when he had been implicated in anything unpleasant.

It was dark, but the house’s warm glow lit up the surrounding field in a way that honestly felt welcoming. One would be hard-pressed to see such a cozy mansion out in the middle of nowhere and assume the owner was a ruthless crime lord.

Cars lined the driveway of the mansion, all housing chauffeurs, half of whom were either passed out from snorting coke while their employers were inside enjoying the dinner party, or were about to be.

_The costume, the weapons_, Batman thought to himself. _The hideout. I have it all. It’s time to get serious._

Earlier that evening Alfred had bestowed upon Bruce the newest upgrade of the cowl. It was much more solid, fit better, and blended in to the cape far better. The lenses weren’t capable of much other than enhancing the light filtering in for a sort of sub-par night-vision, but it was a start. He had modified the utility harness into a utility belt of sorts and outfitted it with everything he would need. He had even recently come into the possession of new transportation, in the form of a new unmarked black vehicle with no registered make or model, completely equipped with remote control capabilities, compliments of Wayne Tech.

Slowly, keeping to the shadows, Batman crept up to the cars in the driveway and began incapacitating the remaining conscious drivers, one at a time, using a tiny injector to introduce a knockout compound to their bloodstream.

_Chaffer by chauffer, I make my way toward the mansion. Only a few of them are awake. Only half of them are armed. There’s a guard with a machine pistol in the yard. Need to get to the outer wall of the banquet hall, set the charges, and cut the power._ He slunk off toward the house.

Inside the mansion, a massive feast was underway. In attendance were multiple of Gotham’s most powerful, and most decadent, all eating under the brilliant light of a set of massive crystal chandeliers.

“Commissioner Loeb,” one of the waiters said, holding a handset. “You have an urgent phone call from the Police Department.”

“Sure, sure, hand it here,” Loeb said as he grabbed the set and put it to his ear. “Hello?... Oh Lieutenant Gordon, what a pleasant surprise... Batman? I am eating, Lieutenant... No I have not filled your requests for personnel yet, I find them ridiculous... Yes Lieutenant, I’m well aware of how many crimes the vigilante is committing, but there are two side to everything, aren’t there? Yes there are. And the Batman is having a positive effect on public spirit. Or have you declined to notice the drop in street crime over the past few weeks?... Right, well, I am not exactly in the habit of having to explain myself to my Lieutenants! I hope we understand each other, Gordon... Goodbye.”

_Lieutenant Gordon_, Batman thought, listening in from outside the window as he glued some explosive charges to the side of the wall. _I’ve been hearing his name a lot lately. More often by the day. All the right people seem to hate him. Alright, charges are set._

“Have you seen the Batman, Commissioner?” the mayor’s wife asked as Loeb handed the phone back to the waiter. “They say he’s huge!”

“You shouldn’t pry,” Carmine Falcone said softly, sipping a martini from the head of the table. Wearing a pristine white suit like always, with his hair perfectly slicked back and his thin pencil
mustache similarly groomed to perfection. “Gill has his hands full, these days. We’re trusting him to cope with Batman, and with the Hero Cop, on his own.”

“And I appreciate that trust,” Loeb huffed. “I really do, boys. Good to see you all, by the way. It’s been far too long.”

“Heck, Gill,” a swaggering councilman said as he leaned over the mayor and got in the commissioner’s face. “None of us were gonna come close to you until the polls were in on this whole Batman thing. That, and the whole situation with Dent always prosecuting you lately.”

“Well I-” Loeb started.

“The councilman is blunt about his concerns,” Falcone interrupted. “It’s an election year, after all. My organization is likewise concerned, commissioner. Batman is costing us money.”

“Two side to everything, friends,” Loeb said confidently. “Look at the long term. A few street operators are put out of action, yes. But the people of Gotham City have a hero. They like this Batman guy. He makes em feel safer. And the safer they feel, the fewer questions they ask.”

“I don’t like stirring things up, Gill,” Falcone hissed. “And if it’s not Batman, then it’s that Hero Cop you’ve got chasing him. And then there’s the real problem – that kid, Harvey Dent. Word is, Dent is pushing Internal Affairs to go after Detective Flass, Gill. Not only would Flass be difficult to replace if that went through, but if he talked-”

“Dent is a problem, you’re right about that. He – What the hell?” A window near the head of the table crashed open as a smoke grenade came barreling into the room and bouncing across the table. Falcone immediately lunged to the ground, taking cover, while the rest of the room went up in an absolute panic.

“The lights! What happened to the lights?” the mayor’s wife shrieked as the room went entirely dark, filling up with smoke.

“We’re all gonna die!” a voice shouted.

“Stay calm,” Loeb was gruffly repeating over and over again.

“Where’s my guards?” Falcone was shouting, cursing occasionally. Then, amongst the already mounting chaos, the entire wall exploded, filling the room with smoke and debris. People were crying, injured, and screaming. And suddenly, they saw him.

In the hole leading outside, a massive silhouette of black against the nightscape appeared. Entirely enshrouded in darkness except for his two glaring pupil-less white eyes, the room went deafly still as Batman glided into the room and growled out a ghostly warning.

“Ladies. Gentlemen. You have eaten well. You have eaten Gotham’s wealth. Its spirit. Your feast is nearly over. From this moment on, none of you are safe.” And with that, he threw down a handful of smoke pellets that removed almost all visibility in the room, and slipped back out into the night.

It’s liberating. They looked frightened. For all these years, since I was eight years old, I haven’t felt like myself. Nothing made sense when my parents died. Every day was painful. Still is. But now… it all comes so easy. The way I move. The way I think. My voice! Those growls and whispers are not the voice of Bruce Wayne. Bruce died decades ago. I finally know who I am. I’m Batman.
“No excuses, Gordon,” Loeb shouted the next day. “You, Essen, Merkel, O’Hara, and whoever else you want! That vigilante goes under – instantly – or it’s your job! I want him found, you understand?”

“Yes, sir…” Gordon responded dismissively.

*Just last night he’d acted like he didn’t care. Wonder what changed?*
By the time March was well underway, Batman was the hottest topic in Gotham City, particularly under the reporting of Vicki Vale who seemed to constantly be debating on air with her fellow reporter, Jack Ryder, as to whether or not Batman even existed. According to the official statement by the mayor and Commissioner Loeb, there was not now, nor had there ever been, a Batman. But to the legions of crooks who were encountering him night after night, or the small task force headed by Lieutenant Gordon, Batman was very much a reality.

Gordon’s team had tried numerous ideas to catch him. Consisting of Detective Essen, Officer Bullock, Officer O’Hara, Officer Merkel, Sergeant Feck, and Sergeant Montoya, his team had patrolled the city in wide net-like patterns for weeks, but the most anybody had to report was Bullock who claimed he’d seen the Bat on rooftops on two separate occasions. But as far as catching him, they only ever seemed to get to crime scenes as soon as he had left. Because so little headway was being made, Gordon and Essen had decided to start setting traps. They would stage crimes in progress and when Batman would show up to interfere they could subdue and arrest him – though even this strategy had yielded nothing so far.

All the same, Batman’s effect was being felt throughout the city. People were all abuzz over his purported activities, and the streets were slowly growing more and more empty every night. Criminals were becoming less bold. The youth in town were even showing their support by making shirts with bat insignias on them, or decals for the bumpers of their cars. And Bruce was slipping more and more comfortably into the role.

But at the same time, he was also slipping comfortably into the public social cover of Bruce Wayne. He and Julie had been out on a date since they first met, and it had gone fairly well. In fact, it had gone better than he had planned. Julie did not seem to want the night to end when he eventually left, which was both good and bad. While he was glad she was falling for his public persona, and people were seeing him out on lavish dates with supermodels, he also felt somewhat guilty. With each passing night his Bruce Wayne persona was becoming more and more artificial, and more and more perfected, while Batman was becoming his truer identity. He even began to find himself thinking in Batman’s dark and raspy voice.

Light rain fell as the sun began to set and the shadows grew, stretching over the streets in Gotham’s oriental neighborhood known as Little Japan. Though tourists often simply referred to it as Gotham’s Chinatown, Little Japan had been predominantly founded by Japanese immigrants in the early 1900s. It was the largest such settlement of Japanese immigrants on the East Coast, which made its inhabitants prime targets to be rounded up for internment camps during World War II. During that time, other cultures from the larger Asiatic region moved in, and it had since become a melting pot of Eastern Asiatic cultures and ethnicities. But to locals, it was still known as Little Japan, a neighborhood built like a spider’s nest, with tangled roads intersecting beneath a canopy of glowing lights and decorative architecture that capitalized on its hollow Asian theming.

Bruce Wayne sat at a table in a tiny shop on the street level, sipping a warm cup of tea. This was the only neighborhood in Gotham where he could obtain some of the foods his increasingly strict diet required, and Alfred stood at a nearby counter haggling over the price with the store manager. The manager handed him a tiny styrofoam cooler, and Alfred handed over a wad of cash. Bruce had instructed him not to use the credit cards on things that he needed for his crime fighting. Only cash.

“Pardon me, Master Bruce,” Alfred said as he joined Bruce at the table. “But what exactly did we
“Hormone-free bovine glands,” Bruce said. “I’m experimenting with my body’s need for sleep. I’m currently down to four hours, but I’d like to get it to two. Certain glands are rich in adrenals. A musician I lived with for a short time in Oslo used them to help him stay awake to perform in clubs all night long. He didn’t do it every night, but he didn’t have access to such high quality products.”

“Ah. Very good, Sir,” Alfred said, raising an eyebrow as he eyed the smelly styrofoam container. “I look forward to blending them up for you. But do you really think it’s such a good idea to remain so sleep deprived? You need your brain working at full capacity in order to perform your nighttime activities properly and without incident.”

“My brain is as sharp as ever Alfred,” Bruce quipped. “Better, in fact.”

“Are you quite certain? It wasn’t long ago that you insisted on sleeping until nearly dinnertime. You’ve been quieter – more reserved – since changing your sleep schedule, which I would interpret as a sign of being tired.”


“Very well. I just worry, Bruce.”

“I’m better than fine,” Bruce said. “I promise. Want proof? Look around Alfred. Tell me what you see. What you observe.”

“Sir?”

“Just tell me what you see.”

“Um… Well, I see that we’re in a tiny oriental shop. Your tea is almost gone. It’s raining. So I suppose you’ll be done soon and require an umbrella for the trip to the car?”

“Ok,” Bruce nodded, an amused smirk on his face.

“What do you see, Master Wayne?”

“Everything,” Bruce replied. “A constant influx of information. Over at that other table there’s a couple on a date. Their relationship won’t work though. She wants him for his money. She constantly glances at his watch, which appears expensive, but he’s only wearing it to keep up appearances. After all, what wealthy citizen of Gotham goes on a date to a bodega in Little Japan? No, he’s cheating on his wife and is wearing the watch to impress younger single women looking to be taken care of. You can see the faint outline on his left ring finger from where his wedding ring usually sits. He’s removed it for the night.”

“That’s fairly impressive, Master Bruce. How long did it take you to come up with those deductions?”

“It’s becoming second-nature,” Bruce said as he sipped his tea some more. “I learned to always try to take in as much information as possible – see everything and every possibility – from a ring of con artists in Berlin. It’s what helped me rise through the ranks in my martial arts training as well. I know where every exit to this shop is located, as well as where I could make an exit for the two of us should an emergency situation arise. I know how many people have walked by the shop since we arrived, as well as distinguishing characteristics of each. I know the man behind the counter, sweeping in the back, was stealing money out of the register while the manager is in the back. The manager won’t ever notice; he’s a distracted man. But if he did notice, he’d be afraid to confront
the thief directly, because the thief is a recently returned war veteran with combat training.”

“You can tell that by the way he is sweeping?” Alfred asked.

“No,” Bruce said. “The United States Military focuses recruiting efforts in Gotham City on neighborhoods like Little Japan. It’s a relatively poor neighborhood with less opportunities available to people, so joining the military is more enticing. But this neighborhood isn’t as poor as the East End, meaning there’s some amount of discipline that can exploited. So the probability of a man his age having military experience in Little Japan is higher than in other neighborhoods in Gotham. Furthermore, the man’s haircut is clearly a military regulation cut. Plus, he carries himself like you do. That walk. It indicates a military past.”

“That’s a lot of conjecture,” Alfred noted.

“Maybe, but there’s more. He has a tan. It’s faded, but still there. It’s unusual to see a tan on someone living in Gotham City in March, meaning he’s been traveling. But as he sweeps you can see that the tan ends directly above his wrists, meaning he wasn’t sunbathing or enjoying the sunny weather wherever he was. Furthermore, for such a distinct tan line, he would have to be wearing the similar clothing every day. A uniform. A military uniform. He was serving in the Middle East, fairly recently, but returned here after being discharged earlier than expected. His head is cocked to the left, indicating partial deafness in one ear, likely from a blast, and it’s that loss of hearing that sent him home. Now he’s down on his luck, took a job in this shop, and is stealing from the register. He’s also likely taken to drinking since his return, because although he maintains a military walk, there’s a slight swagger to it that he can’t conceal. Plus, he smells like sake. So, should Batman ever decide to confront him for stealing, I would first land a blow to his bad ear, heavily disorienting him. Then, a quick jab to the throat would lock up the vocal chords, stifling any screams. A blow to the liver would likely hurt since it’s been working overtime since he returned to Gotham. Doubled over, confused, and unable to scream, it would only take a quick sweep of the legs and a fist to his patella to have him unconscious in less than twenty seconds.” Bruce returned to his tea.

“You’re this way… all the time, Sir?”

“Increasingly,” Bruce said.

“You never stop?”

“I can’t. Even if I wanted. I see everything, and sometimes it’s all I can do to appear normal and placid. But lately, it’s been easier. I developed these senses for most of my life, and I finally have something to do with them now. It’s easier to be Bruce Wayne.”

“You are Bruce Wayne, Sir.”

“No Alfred,” Bruce whispered. “It’s the other way around. This is the first time in my life I’ve been able to be myself. When I wear that costume, and feel that energy… that voice that comes out of my mouth is me. Pure and unrestrained, for the first time since the murder. I just… Alfred, all these years I’ve been trying to bring mom and dad back… but I can’t…”

“None of us can, Sir.”

“And that’s the point. I don’t have to anymore. This isn’t about revenge. This isn’t about healing. This isn’t about closure. This is about never allowing what happened to me to happen in this city ever again. Gotham needs to pick itself up. I believe in this city, Alfred. It can do it. I believe in Gotham City.”
Not much action tonight, Batman thought as he stooped atop a gargoyle, watching a helicopter pass by over the shadowy skyline. Less punks taking risks these days. They’re scared.

"Hello, can you hear me, Master Wayne?" Alfred’s voice came in loud and clear through the tiny headset they had placed into the cowl.

“It works perfectly, Alfred,” Batman said back.

“Excellent Sir,” Alfred’s voice buzzed back. “You are coming in clearly at headquarters as well.”

“Just call it the cave, Alfred. We aren’t spies.”

“Very well Sir. You’re coming in loud and clear at the Batcave.”

Batcave. I like that. The dark dwelling where my nighttime persona dwells. A place to think. To plan.

"We might as well just be spies though,” Alfred retorted. “The men I knew who worked with MI6 did less spying than you seem to.”

“That may be,” Batman snorted. “But we have to be proactive.”

“Aggressive. I would think aggressive is a better adjective for what you do, Sir.”

“Enough cheek, Alfred. Let’s go silent for a while. There’s not a lot of action tonight.”

“As you wish.” The radio went silent and Batman found himself contemplating what course of action to take next.

Quiet night. Could go pay a visit to The Roman. Keep him on his toes. Keep him looking over his shoulder. Haven’t been able to pin anything on him yet. Nothing that would legally hold up in court, at least. Need something big. Like a large shipment of drugs. A whole crate… There’d have to be records for large shipments that I could trace back to him. Just have to stay patient.

He leapt from his perch and glided down into an alleyway, sinking into the shadows. As he slowed his breath and listened, the sound of footsteps echoed off of the crumbling brickwork towering around him.


He slid across the alleyway and out toward its opening. It was a dark street, but one he knew he would find activity on tonight. He had seen the police cars checking it out previously. Slipping between a dumpster and a large cardboard box for a television set, he peered out and saw Detective Sarah Essen walking down the street.

Detective Essen. Good record. She’s by the book. Very by the book. I’d have a rough time if I ever came to a head with her. She knows how to walk in heels. So few women do these days. It’s practically a lost art. She tossed her long volumes of blonde hair behind her back, revealing a ruby red purse slung over her shoulder.

Red purse. Nicer than anybody in this neighborhood could ever afford. Obviously meant to attract attention.

Suddenly a man leapt out from a doorway only a yard away from where Batman was crouched. He
wasn’t surprised though. He’d seen the man’s shadow. Heard his breathing. The man rushed at Essen, grabbing the purse and tearing it from her shoulder. She let out a scream. The man smirked and continued running down the street.

*She knows how to scream. You could practically hear it from the rooftops. But that was the point. Normally screaming wouldn’t help. Not in this neighborhood. Here on the East End, a midnight walk constitutes attempted suicide. Lucky for her that there are so many cops around. That’s Officer O’Hara playing the crook. There’s Sergeant Feck playing a street bum down the road, acting passed out. And up the street, hunched in that sedan is Detectives Bullock and Montoya. There are six more officers waiting, crouched in stoops and garbage dumpsters down the block. I’ll give it to Gordon, he’s certainly going to creative lengths to capture me. But he’s wasting a lot of manpower on these traps. Loeb has put every good cop on this task force to catch me – keeping them out of his hair and unable to do any real good on the streets.*

He waited about five minutes, and then crept out of the alleyway, produced his grapple gun, and shot a line up to the top of a building across the street. It connected, tightened, and pulled him up to the ledge of the rooftop. Pulling himself up, he couldn’t help but smile. While a lot of good cops were being pitifully wasted, it was nice to know that Loeb was worried. If Loeb was worried it meant that Falcone must have been breathing down his neck to stop this Batman business.

Suddenly he noticed something back toward the west. A beam of light was cutting through the midnight air, reaching straight up into the darkness. Clouds passed by overhead, and as the beam of the light bathed the grey above, Batman thought he could make out the silhouette of a shape etched into the light. It was a shadow of a bat in the center of the light. Scanning the skyline, he could tell that the helicopter from earlier had moved on.

*Waited for the choppers to pass to light it up. Most of the activity is over here on the East End. Whoever lit that up doesn’t want people checking it out. That district is dead this time of night. Better check it out.*

“Alfred,” Batman said as he headed toward the searchlight’s beam. “Come in, Alfred.”

“Hello, Sir,” Alfred’s voice crackled back.

“Alfred, keep an ear on the police scanners. Somebody has set up a searchlight somewhere near the Gotham Courthouse that’s projecting a big bat shadow-puppet into the sky. Just evaded one of the GCPD’s traps for me. Don’t want to get caught in another one.”

“I’ll be monitoring that right away, Sir.”

“Thank you, Alfred. Notify me if anything comes up. Batman, out.”

The courthouse was one of the oldest buildings in Gotham City, built by Judge Solomon Wayne in the early days of the settlement. With grand pieces of architecture surrounding it, it often felt like a dwarf among giants. Nonetheless, it was one of Gotham’s most famous landmarks. Standing in the front courtyard was the well recognized Statue of Justice. Better known by its nickname, Lady Gotham, the statue stood taller than the courthouse itself. In the shape of a beautiful woman, her arms were outstretched on either side, with her flowing robes dropping down creating the silhouette of angel wings. People had often called it a cross between Manhattan’s Statue of Liberty and Rio’s statue of Jesus Christ. Lady Gotham, however, had a blindfold stretched over her eyes, holding a sword in one hand, and a pair of scales in the other, signifying the old saying that Justice was blind. Within the city, the statue was almost a symbol of blasphemy. Justice was not blind. Not
in Gotham. Vicki Vale’s cohost, Jack Ryder, had once lifted a quote from some obscure piece of literature, repurposing it for his now well-remembered words.

“Well,” he had said, with venom in his breath at the close of a trial in which Falcone had been acquitted from murder charges. “It rains on the just and the unjust alike. Except in Gotham City.”

Batman sat atop a building which looked down into the courtyard surrounding Lady Gotham. Amongst the dilapidated gardens which were meant to adorn the courthouse property was a massive floodlight blasting its beam up passed the statue and into the night sky. A cutout of a bat, crudely hewn from some sheet metal was hanging over the front of the light fixture, its wings spanning the entire length of the contraption.

Standing next to the light was a man wearing a long, brown overcoat. He wrapped his arms around himself, clearly shivering. His breath was visible as he continually glanced back and forth, on the lookout for anyone who might be watching. As Batman had surmised, this man did not want anyone knowing what he was doing, but he now felt he was also waiting. Waiting for Batman.

“Alfred, I’m at the courthouse. The signal is emanating from a floodlight at the foot of Lady Gotham.”

“Any clues as to who set it up?”

“There’s a man standing next to the light. I think he’s expecting me. Could be a trap. Any word on the scanner?”

“Nothing, Sir. But Gordon’s handywork rarely is. I fear they know we’re listening to their chatter.”

“They suspect it. They don’t know anything about us, or how we operate.”

“Well, are you going to greet your fan then?”

“Too dangerous. Might slip in closer when he moves. See if I can identify him. He’s a fairly tall, caucasian male. Looks like he’s young. Late twenties or early thirties at most. Brown hair. Not much to go by. I’ll let you know when something happens.”

The man stood there for about twenty more minutes, shivering and looking around in anticipation. Every five or minutes or so he would check the time and gaze up at the beam, perhaps checking to see if his shadow-work was actually working. It was, and he’d continue waiting. But finally he checked the time, shrugged, and flipped the light off. Slowly, its blazing glory faded out into a warm glow, and eventually turned to darkness. He removed the bat cutout from the top of it, and began wheeling it back toward the courthouse.

By now Batman had slunk over to the roof of the courthouse. He watched the man struggle with the massive spotlight, and finally, as he approached the courthouse’s back doors, he got a good look at his face. And he knew him.

“He’s packing it in,” Batman said into the radio. “And I’ve identified him. It’s Harvey Dent, a Gotham City Assistant District Attorney.”

“The name rings a bell.”

“It should. He’s been in the news a lot. Always barking up Falcone’s tree, trying to take his people down. He must have wanted to meet with me.”

“And will you?”
“Not here,” Batman said. “He’s got the kind of reputation I like, but the courthouse isn’t secure enough. There are security cameras everywhere. He could get in enough trouble if anybody saw him out there with the floodlight, I wouldn’t want to make it worse by appearing with him on tape.”

“Do you suppose he wanted to bring you in?”

“Perhaps. Hard to say. He’s a lawyer. I’m probably on his wanted list. But the people like Batman, and the people like Dent. Perhaps that says something too.”

“Will you be looking into this further?”

“Already am. Going silent.”

Harvey Dent walked up the walkway to his front porch. He was lucky enough to live at the foot of Gotham Heights, in the shambled neighborhood of little houses that sat on the rim of downtown. Carefully, he quietly opened the rickety front door, and slipped inside. His fiancé, Gilda, would be asleep in the bedroom by now, and he wanted to try his best not to wake her. Slowly, he shut the door behind him, locked it, and began creeping over to the kitchen to have a glass of water, and perhaps a snack. These late nights were not uncommon for him, so it was pretty likely that Gilda wouldn’t question where he’d been. At least he wasn’t out cheating on her, like a lot of his office seemed to be in the habit of doing.

He opened the refrigerator and let its cool glow stretch across his face as he peered in. There was some milk, an apple, and a few sticks of butter, but otherwise nothing of interest. Disappointedly, he pulled away and shut the door. And then he leapt backwards and felt his heart lunge up into his throat. There, next to the refrigerator, was a tall, dark, shadowy figure standing as still as the Lady Gotham statue had stood all night, and just as silent. The figure glared at him with terrible white eyes, completely devoid of pupils.

“Dent,” the figure growled at him.

“Batman,” he responded, regaining his composure but still awestruck. “How did you get in here?”

“What were you doing tonight at the courthouse?”

“So you did see,” Harvey let out a sigh. “Why didn’t you-”

“The location wasn’t secure.”

“Well you can’t come to my house! What about my-”

“Your girlfriend is sound asleep.”

“Fiancé.”

“Why are you trying to get my attention?” Batman stepped forward, and Harvey stepped back, clearly still nervous.

“I needed to get in touch with you. Wanted to meet.”

“Why?”

“You’ve got Falcone and his thugs all nervous these days. I’ve been trying my hand at that ever
since I got this job. Nearly had him a few times, but he’s slippery. Whatever you’re doing is working, and I want in.”

“What can you offer?”

“You get these guys, and get the evidence, and I handle the rest. The court process. All of that.”

“You’d need an uncompromised judge. A clean jury.”

“I can handle that,” Dent dismissed. “It’s evidence that I need. Witnesses that won’t disappear.”

“You’d be collaborating with a wanted man.”

“The Police Department works for Carmine Falcone. I think you’re pardonable by comparison.” Batman glared, but Harvey could tell he was simply thinking.

“I can get you people,” Batman replied. “But our partnership can’t be much more than that. Not now.”

“That’s it? You just keep doing what you’re doing and I do what I’m doing?”

“For now.”

“No,” Harvey said, this time stepping forward. “No, I have watched this city crumble long enough. Gotham is the definition of urban decay. We are only inches away from literal warfare on our streets. You can stop that! You already have been. You know how many people have been shot this month compared to the beginning of the year?”

“Far less, but there’s a reason for that, Dent. We both want to stop this city from failing, but I work outside of the system. I am upholding law, by working outside of it. You work within the law. If you and I become… crusaders… together, then we’re just as bad as Loeb, or the mayor, or half the city council. We’re corrupt.”

“Vicki Vale and Jack Ryder are calling you Gotham’s Dark Knight. A knight! A protector! People like you. They need you. It takes a little corruption to fight corruption, you know that. These men don’t have rules and neither do you.”

“I have plenty of rules,” Batman lurched forward, making Harvey back up against the wall. “I don’t break the law. I bend it. There are lines that can’t be crossed. But even my bending makes me nowhere near as powerful or influential as a man like you could be.”

“Me?”

“You’re a legitimate ray of light. Of hope. That legitimacy makes you a symbol that I can never be. I have stood up and am showing people like Falcone that we’re not all afraid. And it’s making other’s stand up too. But I can never be what you are. You work within the system and that makes you more inspiring and stalwart than I can ever be.”

“My system doesn’t work.”

“It can.”

“How? It rains on the just and the unjust alike, except in Gotham City.”

“A tired sound bite from a tired public figure,” Batman growled. “I’ll break Falcone. Mark my words. What the police aren’t doing, I will. But everything else is on you. You can’t be quoting
Ryder’s jaded remarks. You can’t give up hope, and you cannot give up faith in this city. I do what I do because I believe in Gotham City. What do you believe in?” He reached into his cape and felt around for a compartment on his belt.

“Falcone owns this city,” Harvey said. “Or at least everyone I need to get through to get to him.”

“This is a start,” Batman handed him several photos. Harvey held them close to his eyes, trying to make them out in the darkness.

“What’s this?”

“Leverage at Judge Faden,” Batman said. “Him out with three different girlfriends. I know you usually get put in his courtroom. He’ll be fair as long as you have these. There’s more where that came from, but in the future you will not try to contact me. Do you understand? I contact you. You just do your job. I do the fieldwork. Understand?”

“Yes,” Harvey nodded, unable to take his eyes off of the photos.

“You’re in the spotlight. You can’t afford to do much more than just work with what I give you. For now, that is all our partnership is.”

“Excellent,” Harvey said. “I can’t-” He stopped as he looked up, but saw that Batman wasn’t standing in front of him anymore. In fact, Batman wasn’t in the room at all. Harvey was completely alone. He didn’t know where he’d gone, but he didn’t really care. A wide grin spread across his face. He stuffed the photos into his jacket pocket and began heading into the bedroom.

Gilda lay on the bed, sound asleep. She looked peaceful, and for the first time in a long while, Harvey felt peaceful as well. Batman’s words echoed in his head, **What do you believe in?**

“I believe in Gotham City,” Harvey whispered to himself. “I believe in Gotham City.”

“And how did things go with Mr. Dent?” Alfred’s voice crackled in as Batman headed back into town for one more sweep before calling it a night.

“He was amiable,” Batman responded.

“A friend?”

“He wants to be. I gave him leverage for Judge Faden so that more of his cases will be put to fair trial. It won’t last forever. Falcone will catch on and get after him. It won’t keep the juries uncompromised. But for now, it’s the best I could offer. We need Harvey keeping his hands clean, not getting tangled up in our business.”

“He could be a great asset.”

“And he will be. But within the legal system.”

“So this is an alliance, then?”

“You could say that.”

“Master Bruce,” Alfred said, his voice sounding more urgent than more. “There appears to be some activity on the police scanners. I’m patching you through now.” The radio crackled as the voice of a woman read, “All officers in the area, we have a possible homicide in the Bowery. 875
Jezebel Plaza, I repeat, possible homicide. Victim appears to have fallen from a nearby building."

“That’s close,” Batman said. “I’ll check it out before the GCPD arrive on the scene, then head back.”

“Excellent, Master Wayne.”

Sure enough, as had been reported, a body was laying in the middle of Jezebel Plaza, splattered on the pavement. Blood oozed from every escape point it could find.

Fresh fall. Looks like whoever reported this didn’t stick around to watch. Possible mob hit, but who knows. Need to check the identity. Might shed some light on a few things.

The victim was male, and well dressed too. As Batman reached down to check for a wallet or other identification, he made note of a few quick observations.

Mid-forties, I’d think. Pretty badly splattered but the greying on the hair seems to match. Buttons of his suit coat have been torn off from the impact of the fall, meaning he was likely about to leave wherever he fell from right before he died – preparing to go outside. ID says Brian Murphy. Business card. An accountant at the Gotham National Bank… A mob bank, so a death connected to organized crime is likely. No signs of strangling or any other wounds – meaning he died from the fall. The spatter of the blood indicates a pretty high velocity fall. Better check up above.

Shooting the grappling gun up towards the roof, Batman found himself quickly ascending through the air, trying to quickly scan over all the windows to see if he could find a place where Murphy had been dropped. But nothing stood out until he reached the roof and pulled himself up.

No broken windows. Some may have been opened but the railing up here has been broken, meaning he no-doubt broke through it and fell. But was it an accident or was he pushed? Scuff marks indicate he was pushed, and there are papers scattered around… it’s paperwork. Scattered paperwork means he likely had a briefcase of some sort. Need to find that.

Peering over the edge Batman spotted an air duct, which jutted out from the building only a few stories down. And laying neatly atop it was the case. Without a moment’s hesitation, as he saw the lights of police vehicles gathering below, he stepped off the edge and glided down to where the briefcase was.

It’s scuffed up from the fall, but it appears to have been rifled through… fingerprints…

Quickly he pulled out a fingerprint dusting kit from his belt and began frantically searching for prints. And there were plenty.

Too many prints. Most are near the handle or on the edge… but there’s one set – a whole hand, nearly – set off from the others. Murphy likely held the case up as defence and was shoved by an assailant. These prints don’t match the ones elsewhere so… these are the prints of the attacker.

“Alfred. I have the fingerprints of the victim’s attacker.”

“Very good sir, but what are you planning on doing with them?”

“Can’t do much without hacking into the police databank… make a note that we need to devise a way to do that.”
“Will do, Sir.”

“Police are on the scene. Send them an anonymous tip that Murphy’s briefcase is on the seventh story airduct, and that the attacker’s fingerprints can be found there.”

“Pretty specific.”

“They’ll know it’s from me. They won’t admit it, but they’ll know. And then they’ll take care of the rest.”

“Indeed. Very good, Sir. Now, are you on your way back to the uh… The Batcave?”

“I have one more quick stop to make. Murphy worked for the Gotham National Bank. Several of the Roman Empire’s organizations run money through that bank, though its connections to Falcone always seem to disappear by the time warrants are granted. Murphy seems to have been chased to the roof from the inside and then pushed off. This was a mob hit. They’ll probably never find the evidence to connect it to Falcone, but nobody orders a hit in this organization without him giving it the green light. I need to pay him a visit. Then I’ll be home.”

“Sir, your Rolls – it’s gone,” a panicked bodyguard shouted as he barged into the bedroom of Carmine “The Roman” Falcone. Carmine had an important meeting with Salvatore Maroni later that day, and as soon as the sun had risen his valet had gone down to Carmine’s garage to make sure everything was in order. But the car was missing.

“Sir?” a second bodyguard gasped as he saw Falcone on the bed in front of them. He was naked, laying on his stomach, with his feet raise up and bound to both of his hands behind his back.

“I’ve been screamin’ out to you idiots all night,” Falcone shouted. “When I get out of here, you’re all fired! Your job is to keep me safe, and that freak got in here like the door was open!”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” they apologized as they quickly began untying him. “How can we make this up to you? Who did this?”

“It was him! It was Batman!” his face went a dark shade of purple as he spat with anger. “Said the Rolls is in the river! Even told me which pier. Thinks he’s some kind of a damned Robin Hood! He. Dies. He dies!”
“I saw the schematics earlier,” Bruce told Lucius Fox as they perused the aisles and aisles of mothballed prototypes in the Applied Sciences storage facility. “They were glasses that worked like a computer screen.”

“This is the best we got, Bruce,” Fox said as he handed Bruce a piece of gear that looked like a massive set of bulky headgear. “Infantry goggles. It alternates between normal vision, to night vision, to infrared and so on. It does link to a computer terminal elsewhere that sees whatever the wearer is seeing, but as far as linking up to other programs… you’re talkin’ something much bigger.”

“No, I know I saw some schematics,” Bruce said. “Nothing fabricated. Just the plans. They would target moving objects so the wearer could be aware of them… Target potential threats giving off a lot of heat… And operators at the remote terminal could upload information like building floor plans so the wearer could have maps or whatever information he might need. It had more home front applications for search and rescue, SWAT or bomb squad—”

“Mr. Wayne, my apologies,” Fox said, his eyes lighting up. “You are entirely correct. I had forgotten about that. Yes, those would be… somewhere near… ah, over here.” He walked over to a cabinet and pulled out some folders and disks in cases.

“That’s it,” Bruce said. “Any chance we could get a prototype of this made?” Fox gave him a look of amusement.

“It would take a few months, but it looks like a lot of the R&D is already completed. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Doesn’t have to be perfect. Just enough to do the basics.”

“Very well.”

“And I’ll be taking these in the meantime,” Bruce said as he held up the goggles in his hand while distractedly searching the rest of the facility to see if anything else caught his eye.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” Fox smiled. “A man like you no doubt spends a lot of late nights at clubs and so on. I would expect you to need night vision goggles. And all those nano-sonar transmitters last week. And the radio receiver.”

“Naturally,” Bruce said as his eyes locked onto a section he had not yet perused. “What’s over there?” He briskly began walking in the direction in which he was staring.

“That is all that’s left of Wayne Motors,” Fox laughed. “My project, actually. Thought we could do some good getting into the motor industry. The boys in Detroit aren’t the best at handling money so I figured we could offer people a more reliable motor company.”

“It got shelved?”

“Not enough board support. Cars all work fine though. And we worked with all types, of course. Fancy cars, basic cars, big trucks, even a few Humvee-type vehicles. All-terrain stuff. Motorcycles even.” Bruce stared at it thoughtfully.

“What sort of all-terrain cars were in the works?”
“Let me see,” Fox said as he tried to remember. “We had some armored carrier vehicles for combat zones. Lots of large armored stuff… This blue print was for a bridging vehicle. Two of these would jump over a gap or a chasm of some sort, towing a cable. Then you could build a bridge. We designed this system of independently moving wheels on individual axels so that they could go over most anything. It was impressive, but it just never panned out.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Maybe four years after your father died,” Fox replied. “And we have toyed with it at least twice since. The bridging vehicle, for example, was only about six or seven years ago. All the blue prints are dated, I believe.”

“Think we could get it running again?” Bruce asked.

“The car?”

“Wayne Motors,” Bruce smirked. “Scrap all of this fancy stuff and focus on affordable, durable vehicles? The sort of thing the every day person will drive. No luxury lines. Nothing army-grade. Just normal stuff.”

“If you can pitch it right and get enough people interested,” Fox shrugged, smiling.

“I’ll write a pitch if you present it to the board.”

“Nothing would please me more. And I suppose while we’re scrapping most of these more extravagant vehicles… you’ll want to utilize them?” Fox laughed, indicating that he was entirely joking, but Bruce just threw him a very amused yet entirely serious look.

“I want all the schematics, yes,” Bruce said. Fox stopped laughing, but his smile stayed.

“You’re a busy man, Mr. Wayne.”

“You as well, Lucius. I’ll have that pitch to you by next Monday.”

Cold April rain showered down from the grey sky above as Bruce left the meeting with Fox, carrying a bag filled with files and various pieces of hardware that he had acquired from Applied Sciences. After his experience the previous month with finding Murphy’s murderer’s fingerprints, and having no way of doing anything with them, his primary objective had been to start working on a way to link the lenses in his cowl to a criminal database in the Batcave so that he could do more. Facial and voice recognition, forensics analysis, city maps, and so much more could be fed to him directly in real-time once they figured out how to get the system running smoothly. But for now he’d have to be content with just being able to switch to various modes of vision. The upgrades would come soon enough.

Once at the Batcave, Bruce got to work on installing the new cowl with the goggles he had acquired from Fox. His workbench was full of random tools to help him work on all of the little gadgets he was creating, and to Alfred it all looked like a big mess of clutter. But Bruce knew every inch of the surface of that table and where every single thing was located.

“And what did Mr. Fox say?” Alfred asked.

“Gave me some new goggles,” Bruce answered. “I’m putting them into the new cowl. Looks like it has infrared and a few other vision options. He said we can get something closer to what I was envisioning in a few months.”
“Excellent, Sir,” Alfred replied. “Do you think Lucius suspects what you are up to?”

“I know he does,” Bruce said as he continued to work. “I’m pretty certain he knows exactly what I am up to.”

“He knows you’re Batman?”

“Probably. I haven’t spent a lot of time worrying about it. If he knows, he hasn’t done anything to discourage it. Fox told me once that he encourages movements that incite social change. Pretty likely that he sees Batman as something of a social change.”

“Well at least that’s a relief.”

“In more ways than one,” Bruce said. “When I bring him into the fold, he’ll be a great asset in helping us set up all of our systems here. I know computers well enough, and you’ve caught up quickly, but he’s a bit more of an expert. He can help us become self-sufficient.”

“So you are still planning on telling him eventually?”

“Eventually.”

“When?”

“Soon. Oh, he also gave me some plans for building cars. It’s time I had a better mode of transportation than just the unmarked black car I’ve got… Plus the extendable bridge through the waterfall takes a long time when I need to get in here. Fox said they had an all-terrain vehicle that could jump across chasms. Wouldn’t need the extendable bridge anymore. So I think I’ll get to work on building a vehicle soon.”

“Do you have the experience for that?”

“I do. You know that.”

“I knew you knew how to fix them up. I was unaware that you could build a car from scratch.”

“Haven’t done it before, but I know how. We’ll be fine.”

“And what about Miss Maddison?”

“Julie? What about her?” Bruce stopped working and turned to face Alfred.

“You’ve seen her a few times recently. Will she ever play a greater part in your life?”

“Maybe,” Bruce said, his eyes growing sad. “I honestly have avoided thinking much on the subject. She is excellent right now in helping my cover as Bruce Wayne. Dating a socialite and being seen with a model at big events is helpful. But as far as being something more… I don’t know, Alfred.”

“You like her, don’t you?”

“I do. She’s interesting. And bright. Law school. She and I could be happy together. But not now… I don’t know… She’s intelligent enough to be interesting but vein enough not to care whether or not I’m around all the time, and she doesn’t question much.”

“She undoubtedly has plenty more suitors than just you, Sir.”

“She does,” Bruce said. “But for how long? I need to make sure I keep her at a good distance… I
can’t get her too embroiled in this…” Bruce went back to working on the cowl.

“I see… And what might be on the agenda for this evening?”

“Harvey Dent has been getting a lot of guys on possession of illegal weapons lately, but hasn’t been able to connect them to anything. As far as I can tell, these are heavy weapons – military grade – and I have nothing to connect them to Carmine Falcone.”

“If not from The Roman, then where are they coming from?”

“The Penguin,” Bruce replied. “Penguin is an arms dealer – though I still don’t know who he is or where he is getting his supply. I’ll need to look into it. We can get the street level guys behind bars, but beyond that the trail goes cold. So Penguin is tonight’s target, along with anybody who might be able to lead me to him.”

“He knows when and where we set our traps for him,” Gordon explained. “And night after night, he terrorizes the most powerful men in Gotham. You heard what he did to The Roman’s car last month?”

“I did indeed,” Harvey Dent chuckled. “Laughed myself silly over it, lieutenant. A Rolls Royce in the Gotham River…” Harvey was leaning against his desk in his dimly-lit office on one of the upper levels of the courthouse, his sleeves rolled up and his arms folded casually. Lieutenant Gordon stood across from him, much less casual, and much more tense. He hadn’t even bothered to take his long trench coat off. Gordon had been trying for weeks to get a meeting with Dent, but the Assistant DA was hard to reach these days. In the past few weeks he had been winning cases right and left, and was quickly gathering a bit of a name for himself in putting away people who had evaded convictions in the past. But why he suddenly was able to win so many cases seemed suspicious – at least to Gordon.

“Yeah,” Gordon said as he nervously touched his mustache and glanced over at a bench press set which Harvey had set up in his office. “You’ve been after The Roman for years, from what I hear. Is that right?”

“It is,” Harvey smiled arrogantly.

“Actually came close to indicting him, once or twice. Isn’t that right? I heard some of your witnesses change their testimonies.”

“And the rest just vanish,” Dent snorted.

“Must be frustrating.”

“It is.”

“I understand he’s used his muscle to keep you an Assistant District Attorney,” Gordon said as he walked over to the bench press and lifted the bar up and down twice. “You keep in shape, don’t you, Mr. Dent?”

“What are you driving at, Lieutenant?” Dent asked with a shade of annoyance in his voice. Gordon took a deep breath and produced a notebook from his jacket. Bringing it up close to his face he fiddled with his glasses and then cleared his throat.

“I need to know where you were on the following dates,” he said. Harvey rolled his eyes, but
Lieutenant Gordon rattled off nearly every single evening for the entirety of the past month, but Harvey had seemed to know where he was for every single one of those nights. He’d been busy every night working on the massive influx of cases he’d been winning. He was an excellent lawyer. One of the best. And seeing as how well he had done when the system was working against him, his job had become extremely busy and even easy now that he was being given fair trials. Finally Gordon read off the date of the previous night.

“I was right here,” Harvey said. “You can ask the secretary outside. Now is there anything else I can answer for you?”

“No,” Gordon sighed, extending his hand. “Thank you for your time. I’m a pretty big admirer of what you’ve been trying to accomplish, Mr. Dent.”

“Harvey is fine, Lieutenant,” Dent said as he shook the police officer’s hand. “Hope I was helpful.”

“Well if you’d have been anymore helpful we’d probably be having a much less pleasant conversation right now,” Gordon said as he put the notebook back in his pocket and headed for the door. “Have a goodnight, Dent.”

“You too,” Harvey waved. The disgruntled Gordon headed out the door, moving toward the secretary – obviously planning to check that Harvey was indeed in his office the night before. Harvey let out a sigh as the door closed and leaned back over the desk.


“I need the leads you have,” Batman growled, avoiding pleasantries as usual.

Elsewhere, Lieutenant Gordon and Detective Essen sat in his car, driving away from the courthouse. Gordon was in a sullen and frustrated mood, though Essen seemed calm in her disappointment.

“Alibis? Sure, he had plenty,” Gordon said as he drove. “He’s been busy lately. And when he wasn’t at work, he says he’s been at home with his fiancé. No point in questioning her.”

“You still think he’s Batman?” Essen asked.

“It’s possible. Dent certainly is passionate enough. And built. Even has a little work out area in his office. The bar he had set up was pretty heavy too. But it would take more than muscles to fight the way Batman does. Or get around the way he does. And those weapons… I mean, he’s got an arsenal. Hard to afford on Dent’s salary, I’d think.”

“Money—Lieutenant… Bruce Wayne is the richest man in Gotham. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this. You’re from out of town so you didn’t know, but as a little boy his parents were murdered. By a mugger, if I remember right. He left Gotham but came back around the time you got here.”

“And only months before Batman,” Gordon smiled. “I could kiss you, Essen.” He glanced over. She was smiling at the remark. He wasn’t sure if she was smiling about the kiss or about his approval of how clever she’d just been. Either way he was happy too. But also a little guilty.
Truth is, I really could kiss her. She’s smarter than Barbara. More fit. Prettier even… Why am I thinking this way? I’ve never even thought twice about another woman all these years. Why now?

“Hey look, lets go sweep the East End again,” Sarah said optimistically. “Maybe he’ll turn up this time.”

“Ok,” Gordon nodded.

It won’t do any good. We have patrolled around the clock for months. We’re never going to just stumble onto Batman. He’s too smart. So why am I doing this? Just because I like her?… Just to spend a little more time with her… How can I not like her? She’s one of the best things about living in this city. And I don’t even care! Even with Barbara on my mind, I don’t even feel guilty anymore. Barbara has been so nagging and distant… I know she’s pregnant, but it’s true. She doesn’t get how hard it is… But Babs… Barb… my daughter… now she makes me feel guilty. And suddenly I’m back. I’m a family man. I have to set a good example for Barb.

“Penguin!” Batman shouted into the face of a crook he was dangling over the edge of a building’s roof. “I want him. You know where to find him.”

“I don’t! We meet with a middle man,” the crook was crying and frantic. “Nobody knows who he is.”

“Somebody knows!”

“I don’t! I swear! He’s just some guy with enough balls to not be scared of Falcone. Like you.”

“I’m not dealing illegal weapons,” Batman growled as he pulled the thug back onto the roof. “Tell me how you got this.” He lifted up the automatic shotgun that the crook had been carrying so flagrantly when he found him.

“We meet up with different people at different drop points,” the man said, shaking with nervousness. “They always contact us, not the other way around. Whoever Penguin is, he knows he has to keep himself safe. Secret. Falcone’s got his eyes out for him, and the moment the secret is out, Falcone is gonna get him.”

“But you’re not in a gang?”

“Naw,” the man said. “I mean, I have a crew… This whole neighborhood is a crew. A family. But we don’t do crime, man.”

“You were arrested just last week.”

“For public disturbance is all, I promise!”

“Why would Penguin contact random people and deal them weapons?”

“Dunno.”

Neither do I. To make a point, maybe? Just to stand up to Falcone? The thrill of acting tough in the face of such a powerful adversary?

“Who else have his middlemen met with?” Batman asked.

“Just a few other people on my street that I know about,” the man said.
“No crime affiliations?”

“Nothing major.”

“I need to know who.”

“Look man, I have those people’s backs—”

“It’s either you or them.”

“I aint talkin’!”

“Fine.” Batman threw a smoke pellet to the ground and haze enveloped the two of them. The man’s eyes widened. He felt Batman’s hand cover his mouth. And then suddenly there was a blinding light, followed by blackness.

The smoke cleared as Batman dragged the unconscious man over to an exposed pipe and began cuffing him to it.

“This Penguin is gutsier than I had anticipated,” Batman spoke into his comm. “He might be a bigger problem than we originally estimated. Might need to reprioritize him.”

“Agreed,” Alfred’s voice came back sounding worried. “Why do you think he’s selling such big weapons to random citizens?”

“To make a name for himself, probably. Marketing. The more he gets his name out, the more people know him. Respect him. Want to join him. Maybe it’s so he can rely on them for favors later? Either way, he’s waving his activity right in The Roman’s face. Whoever he is, he has to know what he’s doing. He’s too calculating to just forget something like that. Randomly shifting meeting places and middlemen. It’s interesting.”

Suddenly, a car screeched somewhere on the street below. Batman leapt to the ledge and looked down. There was a police car swerving out of control onto the sidewalk, and a large moving van speeding ahead directly at a derelict drunkard who was swaggering across the road. It was the type of thing one would expect to see in an old movie, but yet here it was. And it was time to act.

That truck! Gordon thought as he quickly cranked the wheel and swerved his car out of the way. Nearly killed us! What’s it doing!? Was the driver passed out!? Maybe it’s pills. Maybe it’s a heart attack. Maybe it’s both, but that doesn’t matter. He’s out of control, his foot must be pressed to the accelerator. Gordon sped the car up alongside the large truck, clearly seeing the driver in the cab, limp in his seat. And up ahead, a drunk vagrant was plodding along the road, dragging an empty shopping cart behind her, barely taking notice of the oncoming chaos.

“That woman!” Gordon shouted as he put one hand on his door handle. “Can’t let this happen. Take the wheel!” He swung the car door open as Sarah Essen leaned over from the passenger’s seat and grabbed the steering wheel. Gordon leapt out, hanging onto the open window of the truck’s passenger side. He reached in, grasping desperately for the wheel, but he couldn’t reach.

Damn it! No time! No time! Can’t reach! No time! I’ve blown it!

Suddenly a dark shape slammed onto a nearby lamp post and swung directly out in front of the truck. It hurled itself into the drunk woman, tackling her out of the way of the truck. The truck crashed into the shopping cart which flew up and smashed the window, shocking the incoherent
driver and causing him to jerk the wheel and slam on the brakes all at once. The car swerved and lurched up onto the sidewalk and into a mailbox, and then through the mailbox and into a wall. Gordon went sprawling as soon as the truck hit the cart and swerved, but as he twisted and flailed in midair, right before he scraped across the pavement, he saw what the shape was that had moved the drunk. It was Batman.

“Batman!” he shouted in a shout that came out as more of a mutter, right as he slammed onto the street. His face went hot, and then he blacked out.

How long have I been out? Gordon thought as everything came back into focus. His head throbbed and he felt blood caking onto the side of his face. He glanced over and saw a swirl of yellow between him and the large black shape of Batman in the distance. Slowly it came back into focus.

“Batman,” he coughed. “Essen you got him.” Sarah stood tense between Gordon and Batman, her gun drawn and aimed directly at the vigilante. The drunk was sprawled out on the sidewalk a few feet away, still looking stunned.

“Don’t move,” Sarah shouted at Batman. She turned to look back at Gordon and called, “You alright right, Lieutenant?”

“Never mind me,” Gordon wheezed back at her, trying to get to his feet. “Don’t take your eyes off him!”

“I called for backup,” she responded as she began turning her head back toward Batman, but it was too late. He was only inches away from her, and his palm hit her directly in the forehead. She was knocked out cold and fell flat to the floor. Gordon grasped for his gun, whipping it out and firing as best he could. Batman darted into the nearest alley as two bullets flew past him. The street lit up in shades of red and blue that melted into a hot purple as four or five cop cars pulled up.

Officers leapt out, guns drawn, shouting a plethora of things at each other.

“What happened to Essen?! She said she had Batman! And Branden, he-”

“Batman,” Gordon pointed toward the alleyway. “He’s down that alley. There he is!” He began saying that he saved the old woman who was still sprawled out on the sidewalk, but nobody cared to listen. Gunshots rang out as officers opened fire on Batman.

They think I attacked those cops, Batman thought as he ran, a bullet hitting his leg. He ignored it. No time to aim the grapple. This is a blind alley. No way out. Except this window. Only chance. Buy me a moment. Springing off of nearby wooden box, Batman hurled himself through a boarded up window and into an abandoned, dilapidated building. Splinters of wood stabbed at him from all over, but there was no time to think about it. His cowl quickly switched to night visiom, and he scanned his surroundings. The building was old and falling apart, but not abandoned. Winos and drug addicts were passed out all over the floor. At least six. There wasn’t anytime to count. Clutching the wound in his leg, Batman limped his way to the stairs, stepping over the lost souls passed out on the floor.

Need to get to the roof. I need to reach it before they do. Before air support arrives.

“Stop!” Gordon was shouting outside. “He saved that old woman! Nobody fires without my order. Now hurry, get the front of that place covered. I want this building completely surrounded. Merkel, you and Bullock take a squad to the roof.”

“What?”

“Watch that tone Lieutenant,” Loeb’s voice returned. “You ought to sound a bit happier. You just treed Gotham’s most wanted for us! And now Branden and his men are coming in to bag and tag him.”

“Branden!” Gordon angrily spat back. “Commissioner, there’s no need for – I mean, Batman hasn’t attacked anybody! Commissioner, you can’t let Branden-”

“It’s already decided, Lieutenant,” Loeb interrupted. “Can’t miss this chance. Branden is our best bet.”

“He’ll massacre the place!”

“I checked the building. It’s due for demolition. Nobody will be hurt. Nobody except for a derelict or two, and of course Batman.”

“Commissioner you – No. Oh no.” A helicopter came into view, with great bold lettering across its side reading SWAT. Something small dropped from it as it sped by overhead. Everybody stepped back, running for cover. The charge fell down lower and lower, and when it finally hit the roof it exploded. Shrapnel, smoke, and flames flew in all directions as the entire roof got blown off the building.

Inside, Batman felt the heat from the blast as a barrage of debris slammed up against him and he began falling into the darkness below, staring at the blinding light above. Somewhere next to him a flaming piece of wood flew down, skewering one of the men who had been asleep on the stairs. Stairwell collapsed. Falling. Need to stay away from the fire. That old man doesn’t stand a chance. Nothing I can do to help him. Can’t help him. Screaming. Can’t help him. Suddenly a bright light caught his eye as he tumbled down. It was from his hip. Sparks flying from his belt. No! Thermit in my belt is catching fire. Get it off! He quickly unhooked his belt and tossed it away. Still have weapons in the cape and boots. I’ll need them if I survive.

Flaming debris fell all around him as he frantically searched for an escape route. Then he saw it. He was standing on top of a metal hatch in the floor, padlocked shut. It read, Danger. Electricity. 80,000 Watts. He snorted.

Metal. Trap door’s metal. Might be enough to protect me. Provided that warning is a lie. Lucky I keep the pick in my glove. Lucky. He slipped a tiny lock pick out of his left glove and inserted it into the padlock. A few quick jiggles and it sprang open. Frantically, he threw the lock and chains aside and leapt down the hatch and into the darkness, shutting it behind him.

Another explosion sounded as smoke flew into the air. It was the helicopter’s fifth pass over. The building, or what was left of it, was completely surrounded by police officers. Gordon sat on the ground, his head bandaged, watching as paramedics loaded Sarah Essen onto a stretcher and carry her over to their ambulance.

That was the fifth explosion, Gordon groaned within himself. I pray it’ll be the last. If anyone was in that building, they are certainly dead. And if they aren’t dead, they will be soon. Branden and the collection of sociopaths he calls a swat team will see to that. Commissioner’s orders. That what
Branden told me when he got here. The Commissioner wants a corpse. Batman. He’s made enemies of every criminal in Gotham. And nearly every elected official. They’ve got him now because he got hurt saving an old woman’s life. They – I mean we… we shouldn’t be doing this.

Branden and his men ran by, knocking into Sarah’s stretcher. The paramedics wobbled, nearly tipping her over.

“Watch where you’re going!” Gordon shouted at them, standing to his feet.

“Lieutenant, you shouldn’t be standing just yet,” a paramedic said.

“I’m fine,” Gordon huffed angrily. They hadn’t even bothered listening. They were anxiously preparing to charge into the building.

“No prisoners!” Branden shouted excitedly.

“What do you want? You don’t eat for an hour,” Selina Kyle groaned, rolling over in bed. A cat licked her shoulder. Then another. Then another. Soon, all eleven of her cats were standing on her bed, staring at her anxiously.

“Whole crew now?” She said as she stretched. “Ganging up on me. Why? It’s too early. Holly, where are you?”

“Selina, I’m at the window,” Holly’s voice called.

“What the hell time is it?” Selina asked as she sat up and rubbed her eyes groggily. “Sun’s not even up yet.” Selina hated getting up when she didn’t have to, and tonight she knew she didn’t have to. Stan had given both she and Holly the week off.

Her apartment was a mess. The bed was nice, with lavish bronze head and foot boards. It was the nicest bed she’d had in a long time, but of course, to her chagrin, it was provided for work. Work at a job she detested. But it was the only thing keeping her alive, and had been for years. Her chest of drawers was about the only thing in order, otherwise she had left her weights and clothes scattered all over the floor. And the couch was, of course, always a mess. Holly had been sleeping on it for the past thirteen months, but now she was over at the window, looking out at the sky, which was glowing an eerie shade of red.

“Selina, look outside,” Holly said. “There are explosions outside!”

“It’s five in the morning!” Selina exclaimed angrily.

“I’m being serious! Selina, it’s blowing up over by Robinson Park!”

“Probably just Branden. Seems to be behind all the explosions lately. Probably cornered a jaywalker… Ugh, turn on the TV Holly. Got to have something on about it.” Holly ran over to the TV set and flipped it on. Sure enough, the screen flickered into focus and showed and image of an old building on fire, surrounded by police officers. A crowd of onlookers was gathering as well, and Vicki Vale stood in the foreground reporting.

“-report that Batman has been surrounded by Gotham Police after he attacked two officers, one of them being Hero Cop, Lieutenant James Gordon,” Vale reported. “Batman is now trying to hide in an abandoned tenement off Robinson park. Gunfire has been heard, and explosions have been seen, but now there is tense silence as heavily armed members of a SWAT team of eighteen men has
“entered the building.”

“Selina!” Holly gasped. “It’s Batman! Can we-”

“What the hell?” Selina shrugged. “Week off. Grab your coat. We’ll head down.”

“We have entered the lobby,” a swat officer said in a hushed tone into his radio. “No sign of him yet.”

“Unit one reporting,” a voice returned. “Second floor is a mess. Nothing alive up here.”

“Unit two reporting,” a different voice came in. “Found a body under the water heater. Just some bum.”

“Keep it tight,” Branden said as he lead his unit through the lobby. “Keep it tight.”

“Over here,” one of his men said, standing near the west wall of the lobby. “Shine me some light.” One of the men complied, turning his flashlight over towards the wall where the crumbling remains of a chimney sat, broken like an open wound within the building.

“It’s just a chimney,” Branden snorted.

“No, no,” the officer responded. “Down there. Over there on the floor. It’s a big metal trapdoor. If he got down there, I mean… it’s metal. He might’ve survived.”

“So perforate it, Soldier,” Branden ordered. The officer aimed his automatic weapon at the door and began firing at it, then pulled it open, and continued firing down into the darkness.

“Units one and two, stay where you are,” the man with the radio said. “Continue your search. This is just precautionary fire.”

“If he’s down there, he’s trapped himself,” Branden smiled. He grinned, knowing how happy Loeb would be with him once they brought out Batman’s dead body. The Roman would probably a pay him a bonus, too.

“Think that’s enough?” the man firing the gun asked as he halted his barrage.

“Yeah,” Branden nodded. “Let’s head down and check it out. Praeger! Fenton! Sussman! Downside with me! Move it. You two, stay topside and guard the door.” He pointed to the man who’d shot down the trapdoor and the one with the radio. They nodded as the rest of their team headed down the stairs while they leaned up against the open chimney.

“Checking the basement area. No trouble yet.”

“Steady burst if you find him,” Branden said as they closed the door above them. “No matter how dead he looks. Go for the chest. We’ll need his face for identification.” The door closed.

The basement was a tiny room with a toilet, a sink, and a mattress. A bible sat on the floor next to a small figure of Jesus, likely purchased at a smokeshop or corner store. Crucifixes lined the wall.

“Super must’ve lived here,” Branden shrugged.

“Nobody home now,” one of his men replied.
Another wino up here,” the voice of the man they had left behind came in over their radio. “He’s
cold… Wait! We got something!... No. False alarm. It’s just a stray cat. Still living though… Jeez,
another stiff hobo. Branden you said this place was deserted. There are—” There was scrambling
noise from somewhere up above and then the radio went silent.

“He went up the chimney!” Branden shouted, looking at a fireplace next to the stairwell that
obviously lead to the open chimney above. “Everybody, back up!”

“No use,” one of his men replied as he pushed on the trapdoor. “Something is on top of it.”

“Branden,” Batman’s grizzled voice crackled in over the radio. “I’ve placed a large support beam
over the door. I like you right where you are. Hold your fire, you’d only kill your own men. Too
many people have died already. Have the other squads withdrawn, I can’t guarantee their safety.”

Branden angrily grabbed ahold of his radio and nearly screamed into it, “Units one and two –
Converge on the lobby! He’s here! Shoot on sight!” Suddenly a hissing noise reached his ear. He
turned as a small canister fell back down the chimney and bounced into the basement, spraying gas
into the room.

“Gas masks! Fast!” one of the men shouted.

Outside, Merkel and Gordon leaned against their cars, surrounding the building, calmly listening to
the radio chatter.

“I think Branden needs some help,” Merkel said with an air of boredom. “Lieutenant?”

“We can’t help, Merkel,” Gordon shrugged carelessly. “Orders. Loeb told us not to enter the
building. Breaks my heart…” A few yards away, the gathering crowd was pressing passed the line
while officers tried frantically to hold them back.

“Keep back, please. Get back,” they were shouting. Holly Robinson leapt up onto the hood of one
of the vehicles, listening to the chatter ringing out of Officer Merkel’s radio.

“Batman,” she said with awe. “Selina, someone said Batman is in there. He’s alive! Maybe we’ll
see him.”

“Yeah,” Selina said, her arms crossed. “We’ll see his corpse, maybe.”

“Stand back,” Merkel said, waving for Holly to get down and back behind the police line. “Let us
do our job, please.”

A helicopter hovered above the wreckage of the smoldering building, with a marksman hanging
out from it, his sniper rifle pointed down at the shell of the building. Inside the copter,
Commissioner Loeb sat and watched tensely.

“Sir, he’s taken out unit Three,” the pilot said, listening to the radio. “The whole unit,
Commissioner.”

“This will not do at all,” Loeb said, barely keeping his cool. “What’s wrong with our marksman?
Is he blind?”

“No, sir,” the pilot said. “He’s our best man, as you asked for. But there are hundreds of places to
hide in there, as you can see. Until the sun is up, it won’t be easy. Even our snipers on the two
adjacent buildings aren’t seeing much. Sun will be up soon, don’t you worry.”

*The only other survivor of the attack shares a shrinking shadow with me,* Batman thought, looking down at the stray cat which sat next to him. He tore a piece of the memory cloth from his cape and tied it tightly around his bloodied wound on his leg. *I owe this little guy an apology. I’ve made a mess of things. Let it all get out of hand. And the sun is rising – relentless and unstoppable. With my belt, I lost my rope, my thermite, my tear gas – even the batarangs. I’m down to the blowgun in my boot and anything else I steal from an officer when I get close enough.*

“Step it up!” a voice called from up above. Batman shrank into the shadows beneath the staircase, followed by the cat who sat dutifully next to him.

“Careful, the stairs are giving way,” another voice called as the remaining units clambered down the stairs, aiming their weapons into the lobby and frantically searching for any sign of their target. As the first man hit the bottom step it let out an exceptionally loud creek, which frightened the cat. The cat let out a yowl and scampered out from the shadows.

“Whoa!” a startled officer exclaimed.

“Calm down,” another said. “It’s just a cat.”

“It’s a bat we’re after,” someone else said.

“Keep any eye out.”

*Knew he wouldn’t keep quiet. Siamese,* Batman thought as he carefully reached for his boot. *Down to the blowgun and its three darts – Oh, and an unofficial invention of Wayne Electronics.* He lifted his foot up and reached for a tiny transmitter placed in a hollowed out part of his boot heel. He pressed the button on the devise, and then went back to reaching for the blowgun. *Haven’t tested it for this great distance. Or for use in daylight. The Batcave is miles away, but it’s filled with bats. Hundreds of them. They are sensitive to a range of sound far beyond our hearing. Took me weeks to find an ultrasonic frequency that attracts them. All of them. The cave is miles out from here, so it will take them a few minutes to get here – should things go well.*

The cat yowled and ran by one more time, and the skittish officer yelped and angrily aimed his weapon at the tiny animal.

“Whoa,” an officer next to him said, knocking his gun down. “Steady man! It’s just that cat again.”

“It’s getting on my nerves,” the other replied. Suddenly a sound of scraping came from the open chimney near the west wall. A hand reached out, and Branden pulled himself up out of it.

“Hold your fire! It’s just me. Dropped that beam on the door;” he said, angrily looking at his two men knocked out on the floor. “These guys were supposed to guard the door. They weren’t quick enough though. Useless! We’re lucky he didn’t *kill* them! Now, fan out. You’re leaving yourself wide op-” He cut out, gagging as he reached for his throat. A dart was sticking directly out of his neck, which he scraped at and then fell to the floor unconscious.

*The slightest dose of poison on the darts,* Batman mused to himself as the panicked officers began swinging their weapons in his direction as they realized what had happened. *It’s enough to put a man to sleep for hours. Two darts left, but twelve men remaining. No good. One bullet will make all the difference. They’ve got thousands.*
Gunfire rang out in the lobby, tearing the stairway to pieces as Batman rolled out of the way, across the room, and behind a stone support beam. Then, as fast as the could, he ran along the wall, followed by a steady stream of gunfire. As Batman passed each beam, the fire of bullets would follow, shredding and crumbling the beams one at a time. The stray cat ran ahead of him, trying its best to escape the gunfire. Seeing it, Batman dove forward and grabbed it. He summersaulted, with the cat in his arms, and when he came back up he tossed it out of a nearby window which had been blown open so as to keep it safe from the onslaught of gunfire. But as he reached up to the window and released it, a bullet caught him in the arm.

“Tagged him!” someone shouted. “Close in!”

The cat ran away from the building and leapt up on top of the nearest cop car as Gordon shouted into the radio and ran for cover.

“Commissioner,” he bellowed. “For God’s sake, come in! Those idiots are firing out the windows! Commissioner – Merkel!” He dropped the receiver and ran to catch Merkel who had just caught a stray shot in the shoulder. The cat leapt off the car and into the crowd of people who were all ducking for cover, directly into the arms of Selina who caught it and held it close to her chest.

Back inside, Batman crouched next to a pillar, taking cover while he clutched the wound on his arm.

“Get in close,” an excited officer shouted as he an his comrades ceased fire and closed in on the wounded vigilante. “Cut the bastard in half! We’ve got him!”

Groggy. Losing too much blood. Arm hurts. Took another bullet in my good leg too. Need to stall. Crumbling support beam. But my leg... Forget it. Put what’s left into it! From his crouched position he sprung up and kicked his foot into the crumbling beam with all of his might. Success surged through his body as he felt the beam give way to his force, and the beam completely split in half. The entire wall shook as whatever was left of the floors above along the west wall came crumbling down. Smoke and debris filled the room as Batman leapt to safety. The room was a dark murkiness, with limited to no visibility. Batman tapped the side of his cowl as his vision switched between night vision and infrared.

No good. Too much debris in the air. He tapped it again and suddenly it was as if all of the dust was gone and he saw all of the officers, scrambling in the dark, highlighted orange in his lenses. Excellent.

The man nearest to him flinched, looking up in horror as Batman stood up and began shaking the dust off of his shoulders. Batman noticed him, and looked down, his glaring white eyes piercing into the man’s core.

“You’re the one,” Batman growled as he grabbed the officer and lifted him up to eye-level. “You’re the one who tried shooting the cat!” He punched the man in the gut, and then with all of his might, he hurled the man against the wall which crumbled as he hit it and bounced out in front of the onlooking crowd. Started screams rang out from the crowd at first, but as they realized Batman had ejected one of the officers from the building, they began cheering.

“It’s Batman!” Holly shouted, “Selina! It’s Batman!” Selina looked up and saw the hole in the wall, smoke billowing out, and in the darkness he stood as a grim statue. Tall, silent, and defiant, his eyes glared out of the darkness. Then, as their eyes met, he disappeared back into the darkness.

“Batman,” she muttered to herself. She had barely gotten a good look at him, but there was something moving about seeing him. He was bigger than she had imaged. Taller, and definitely
much more muscular. And frightening. Tall, dark, and terrifying, he was taking on all of Branden’s men – one against the whole team. And he was winning.

“What’s that roaring?” Merkel muttered, holding his shoulder.

“Those idiots,” Gordon muttered, looking over the police car at the unconscious officer who had been used as a human wrecking ball to take out the wall. “The crowd is cheering, Merkel. Those idiots have made a hero out of him.”

Then, slowly, the cheering began to die down. The sun was rising over the horizon, but was being blotted out by a growing swarm of darkness. People looked on at the dark swarm, murmuring at first, but as it grew closer they began shouting – screaming – as the streets were engulfed in a swarm of chittering bats.

They converged on the demolished building, blanketing the crowd in a frenzy. People ducked in terror, both civilian and police officer alike. The bats came into the building through every opening available, and as the swat desperately tried to find their bearings, Batman made his move for the opening in the wall.

Gordon was helping Merkel into the police car, shielding his face with his arm from the swarm of bats, when the entire car bounced with a loud thudding noise. He glanced up just in time to see Batman’s boots scurry across the roof of the car and leap away, obscured by the cloud of wings and fangs.

“My Lord,” the helicopter pilot gasped, his jaw hanging wide open.

“There!” Commissioner Loeb began shouting. “There! Down there! He’s got a motorcycle! Get after him or I’ll have you shot! Get after him!” Sure enough, Batman was down below, covered by the swarm of bats, racing away on a stolen police motorcycle. They could barely see him in the cloud of darkness, but they pursued nonetheless. Cop cars, cycles, and helicopters chased the clouds of bats as it moved through the city, but they eventually reached the waterfront and dissipated, with no Batman in sight.
Lieutenant Gordon sat at his desk, staring at his desk lamp sitting next to his World’s Greatest Dad coffee mug. The mug had ben given to him as a Father’s Day gift by his wife. Somehow it meant less to him from his wife than it would have had his daughter gifted it to him. 

*Why do I have to be like that? Always thinking negatively about Barbara. She married me, didn’t she!? It’s all this time with Sarah. Essen, I mean. Jesus, when did I start calling her Sarah?*

He picked up the mug, and took in a long sip of warm coffee. Putting the mug back on the desk, he glanced over at Detective Essen who was leaning on the other end of the desk thumbing through papers, deep in thought. Gordon rubbed his head, feeling the bandages he had been wearing wrapped around his skull since the incident with Batman.

*Commissioner Loeb chased the cloud of bats for over twelve blocks in that helicopter. When the cloud broke up, he found out that was all he’d been chasing all along. Somewhere along the way Batman must’ve taken a turn – and told his pets to keep going. Always eager to please the Commissioner, Detective Swanson pursued the bats to the bitter end. Drove his car off the pier into the river. And speaking of bitter ends, every member of Branden’s team, every cop, and everybody in the crowd had to be vaccinated for their bat bites. Never have so many had so much trouble sitting down. I know I haven’t. The owner of a nearby men’s store opened up his shop four hours after the incident and found a three-piece suit missing – and payment for it sitting on his cash register. Work of the Batman? Maybe... Four of Branden’s men were hospitalized with broken bones. Pratt – who Batman had punched through a brick wall – suffered from five broken ribs and internal bleeding. The dead homeless in the building had no relatives to complain about their firebombing. Everyone who would’ve ordered Branden and Loeb with charges remains unavailable to me by appointment or phone. As has my prime suspect in this case – Bruce Wayne. Wayne is the richest man in Gotham City. Sarah – er, Essen, informed me that Wayne’s parents were murdered by a mugger when he was just a kid. That’s enough motive, I suppose, to make a man dress like Dracula and assault criminals. And save cats... Wayne’s butler informed me that his boss has been skiing in Switzerland for six weeks. I squeezed permission for an international call from Captain Pierce. I’ve had easier root canals. You’d think Pierce was paying for the call out of his own pocket. Spoke to somebody in Switzerland who said he was Bruce Wayne. Told me he’d taken a nasty spill on the slopes and had broken one arm and both legs – but he assured me he’d be back in the country in a month. Said he’d be happy to talk with me. Laughed when I mentioned Batman. Even asked me for his autograph.*

“You know,” Essen spoke up. “Wayne could hire an impersonator. He’s rich enough. And casts on his arms and legs from this supposed skiing accident would cover up the bullet wounds – exactly where Batman had received them.”

“What?” Gordon pulled himself from his stupor and looked up at her. “I’m sorry, Essen, did you say something?” She held up her wrist, displaying her watch, and smirked at him.

“Yes, sir. It’s quitting time. Share a cab?”

*Think of her as a cop, Jim. Think of her as a cop.*

Elsewhere, Bruce Wayne stared up at the night sky above. He hadn’t seen night skies this deep and black since his return to Gotham. In Gotham, the lights created such a hazy glow, the sky was a
permanent tint of light pollution. But here, atop the snowcapped peaks in Switzerland, the sky stretched on in dark, fluid, silkiness dotted with stars. In a way, it was almost brighter out here, away from the lights. The light from the moon and the stars sparkled off of the snow, creating an eerie luminescence in the landscape.

Bruce ran his gloved fingers through his hair, and looked down at his feet. They were securely strapped into a pair of skis, with two ski poles laying in the snow next to them. He extended his arms, and shifted his weight from side to side feeling his healing wounds stretch.

_I leave the casts and sleeping alibis back at the lodge. They were so eager to support my story with Lieutenant Gordon – all I had to say was that a woman was involved. One of them even pretended to be me, just for laughs before I arrived. Julie is arriving in the morning, joining me for the weekend. That will corroborate my story with both the GCPD and back up my claims of involved women here in Switzerland. I need to keep my relationship with her in tact, but in the loosest way possible. I need her for the mission. She creates a good cover. But I also like her… Have to keep her at bay long enough for this to be over. Another year or two maybe, then I can see where it goes. But for now I have to keep myself close enough to keep her with me, but distant enough to keep the relationship from moving forward too fast. Figured I’d better take advantage of at least one night of skiing before she gets here. The air is cold, and sharp, and hard to breath. It’s good. It’s good to be alive. But I don’t deserve to be alive. This isn’t a game. I can’t afford mistakes. I have to learn to make it work. Step by step. Method by method. But that won’t be enough… Too many people want me dead. I can’t do it alone. I need more allies. Someone on the scene. Dent is good, but I need a field man. Someone on my side._

He stooped down and picked up the poles next to his feet. Shifting his feet one more time he looked down into the snow below. Bruce had not been skiing in many years, but that wasn’t a reasonable enough excuse not to try. He would have to recall on the technique from his memory. Master his body. The slope before him was short, and then stretched up and cut off into a gaping chasm. He would slide down, jump over the chasm, do a backflip, and land it. Soon, he would act. Soon, he will shift forward and fall through the darkness. Just as he had night after night as Batman, falling through cold darkness in an explosion of movement – swiftly, and efficiently smashing the greedy dreams of those who would pretty upon the helpless.

_I’ve done this before. Falling. How many times? A thousand? How often… A thousand times gazing at death alone. A thousand tense moments. A thousand refusals to believe that I might err – might judge badly for just an instant – might slip and fall._

In the back of his mind, he knew he might fall like he had all those years ago. Falling, he had shrieked in terror, and then suddenly was silenced as the stone surface slapped the breath from his body. It was damp and still down there. Soundless except for a slow, steady dripping and a distant whisper of wind. And something else. Something that had stirred in the darkness. Something that hissed and chittered. And then they boiled from the blackness, flapping, beating, clawing, a nightmare of leathering wings and gleaming eyes and fangs. Again, he shrieked – not in terror, but in despair. And long after his cry had echoed through the tunnels, the arm curled around him. His cheek rubbed against the harsh wool of his father’s jacket. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to be away from there.

When he opened them, he was in the area behind the mansion, in the pale light of the evening. And his father’s words pounded in his skull, “Why do we fall, Bruce? So that we can learn to pick ourselves up.”

“She…” Bruce had asked in the haunted nights that followed, as he saw the wings in his nightmares. “Was I in Hell?”
“No, honey,” she said, snuggling close. “That was just some old cave. You’re safe now.” But he
did not feel safe. Even his father’s words of inspiration were not comforting. They were
confusing. Why do we fall? The light was dimming, and shadows seemed to be reaching for him,
and there was no warmth, and no comfort.

Why do we fall? You’re walking along and you fall through a hole. You never stop falling. You fall
and, what’s worse, you watch others fall. The two gunshots blasted in his brain, and in the
snowflakes falling before his eyes he saw the pearls from his mother’s necklace scatter in the
alleyway. They fell. His mother and father fell, and they never got up again. Neither did he.
Because when young Bruce Wayne rose from that sidewalk, he was not the same boy. He was
already becoming what he would eventually be. He had a purpose, but he needed direction. And he
needed other things too – knowledge and skills. And to get those, he needed cunning. He had to
thwart all the well-meaning people who wanted to care for the poor orphan – and the poor orphan’s
fortune. He wrote letters that weren’t exactly forgeries and weren’t exactly anything else, and they
enabled him to leave Gotham City and begin a Global Quest for what he wanted to know. He
visited many campuses, and many other places of learning, but he never stayed long. His
professors knew he was bright, but felt he had no discipline.

“Why are you leaving?” His classmates would ask.

“Because, frankly, I’m bored.”

“Rich snot.”

He would turn away, pretending he hadn’t heard. Sometimes he’d sneak a glance back, and the
ache he felt seemed to fill his entire being. But he learned to ignore the ache, and the pain of loss
and isolation. They were the conditions of his life, and he accepted them. There was always
another plane, or train, or bus – another city, another teacher.

He had settled in the nation’s capital and sought out the recruiting officer of the Federal Bureau of
Investigation. He had entered FBI training. He stayed exactly six weeks, and during that time he’d
learned much about writing reports, obeying regulations, analyzing statistic, and dressing neatly –
and nothing else. The experience confirmed his long-held suspicion: he could not operate within a
system. People who caused other people to fall did not recognize systems. Why do we fall? He left
the country that night.

He began to live amongst many fallen souls. Homeless. Humble. And criminals. Learning from
every source he could – every thing he could. Traveling circus acts, martial artists, and con artists.
He learned it all. And though he did not come to pity them, he did come to understand them. The
first time he stole so that he wouldn’t starve he lost many assumptions about the simple nature of
right and wrong. And as he traveled amongst the criminals he learned the fear before a crime, and
the thrill of success. But he never became one of them.

And then word came to him about an organization that criminals and the corrupt had feared for
centuries. Stories of nation’s leaders being taken down in the name of justice. The only name he
could come up with was The Demon. What was The Demon? How did it operate? Would it stop
others from falling? Whether it took months or years on the case, Bruce couldn’t recall, but he
searched endlessly for The Demon and came up entirely short. But he did come upon one name:
Kirigi.

It wasn’t easy to find the temple, high in the Paektu-San mountains. It took him six weeks and
forty thousand dollars in bribes, but he finally stood in front of its ancient, massive doors. Snow
whipped through the air, cutting through his jacket. He knocked. His knock wasn’t answered,
though he had been told it wouldn’t be. But his information had given him the secret sequence for
rotating the knobs on the doors. It opened, he entered, immediately sensing the presence of another. But no one responded to his shout. And again, it was as he expected.

He waited in long periods of meditation for three weeks. And then, on the first day of the fourth week, Bruce heard Kirigi’s voice. He was old, with grey hair, wearing traditional robes and with a look of restrained anger permanently etched onto his face.

“You may sweep the floor,” he had said. Eagerly, Bruce accepted.

He stayed with Master Kirigi for nearly a year. For the first month, he swept. For the next, he swept and washed dishes. For two more, he swept, washed dishes, and boiled rice. Finally, in his fifth month, he was given the instruction he sought.

His first challenge was to take on the rest of the warriors in the temple. Kirigi had ordered Bruce to kill them. When Bruce refused, Kirigi assured him that his opponents would not be as kind. Twenty men came at him, and using what skill he had already learned, he fought them all. One by one, they fell. But he did not take a single life. They would all walk again. Kirigi was impressed, but there was another master within the temple walls.

She had called herself Lady Shiva, and she was easily the most skilled warrior there. She was lean, slender, but strong like a horse. Every inch of her body had been sculpted and worked to perfection. Agile, cunning, and intelligent, she had been bred and raised to be the perfect warrior since she was a little girl. When Kirigi watched his twenty men taken down in a brawl with Bruce, she challenged him.

“Now, fight me” she said as she leapt down from a balcony and stood before him. Her eyes glared, studying Bruce in the same way that he had learned to study opponents and surrounding. “Fight me to the death.”

“I won’t kill you,” Bruce said, catching his breath after his brawl. “And I can hardly… hardly stand.” She attacked.

“Death does not wait for you to be ready. Death is not considerate or fair. And make no mistake, here you face death.” Though the fight was fierce and ended in numerous scrapes and cuts, Bruce managed to incapacitate her. She was alive, but she was humiliated.

“You’ve traveled the world to understand the criminal mind, but the criminal is not complicated,” Kirigi said to Bruce as Lady Shiva proudly strode out of the room, hiding her deep shame. “And what you truly fear is inside yourself. You fear your own power. You fear your own anger – the drive to do great, or terrible things. Now you must journey inwards. Are you ready to begin?”

“I am.”

“You have learned to bury your guilt with anger. I will teach you to confront it, and face the truth. You know how to fight twenty men. I will teach you how to engage hundreds. You learned how to disappear from society, but I will teach you how to be truly invisible. The ninja understands that invisibility is the result of patience, and agility. Always mind your surroundings. Ninjitsu employ explosive powders and shurikens.”

“As weapons?”

“As distractions. Theatricality and deception are powerful agents. Though we learn the art of Ninjitsu, we have more honor than a ninja. But the ninja understand an invaluable truth: You must become more than just a man in the mind of your opponent. If you do not, you will fall.”
He trained for months, learning all he could from Kirigi and the other warriors. Though, for all his growth, no friendships beyond his relationship with Kirigi were formed. The art of the warrior was the only concern on anybody’s mind. And while Kirigi treated Bruce with fondness, Shiva often vocalized her criticism of his humanity.

“What do you seek?” She had demanded.

“Justice. I seek the means to bring fear to those who prey on the fearful,” Bruce responded.

“Justice,” she sneered. “Criminals thrive on the indulgence of society’s understanding. They must be fought without pity – without hesitation. You must learn to do what is necessary.”

In the eleventh month, Bruce finally felt he could ask Kirigi a question which had burned in his mind since before even finding the hidden temple.

“What is The Demon?” Bruce asked. The Master’s face tightened, and his voice became somber.

“Nature has been kind to you. You are of exceptional intelligence. Your physique is extraordinary. Reflexes, vision, strength – all are at levels of human perfection. How terrible it must be for you.”

“Terrible? Why?”

“You cannot value what comes so easily,” Kirigi answered. Wind roared through the canyons around the temple and thunder rumbled in the distance. “The only thing I can teach you now is how to ignore all I have taught you thus far.”

“I do not understand,” Bruce said, visibly confused. It was the first time in many years that someone he felt he understood had taken him by surprise.

“Some great violence has marked you. It gave you your genius for combat technique. Unless you are very lucky, it will destroy you. Lady Shiva, and those who are masters above me, believe that anger is the source of power. The drive to accomplishment. I, like you, had to learn that there are those who must be fought without pity and without hesitation. Your anger gives you great power, but if you let it, it will destroy you… as it almost did me. But I can take you beyond the anger, to what lies on the other side. I will require another twenty years.” He nodded as he had reached his conclusion, and the pain left his face.

“I don’t have twenty years,” Bruce replied. “And I don’t want to forget what I have learned from you.” Kirigi did not respond.

That night, Bruce washed dishes and boiled rice for the last time. But the Master did not ask him to sweep. In the morning, he departed. There were others he felt he must seek. He had heard Shiva mutter a name in the darkness. He would find that name. France was his next stop.

A man named Henri Ducard was there. He was a detective. A warrior. A powerfully intelligent muscle for hire. He had, for a time, trained with Shiva and Kirigi. He showed Bruce the uses of brutality, deception, and cunning. Together for half a year they tracked down those would cause others to fall. But one night, as Henri lowered his recently discharged rifle, a fugitive they had been tracking died – unnecessarily, Bruce thought.

“You’re as bad as those you hunt,” Bruce said with disdain.

“No,” the Frenchman said with his characteristic smugness, and a cigarette hanging from his lip beneath his mustache. “I have not become. I always was. I am. As are you. We’re all fallen, kid.” Bruce sadly trudged away. Ducard let him go. Both later regretted their inaction.
Within the next couple of years, Bruce had studied with, or at least spoken to, every eminent detective in the world. Except one. To find Willie Doggett, he had to leave civilization yet again. He had jumped from a smuggler’s plane over snowy mountains to meet him. Willie was a bounty hunter, not unlike Ducard, though Willie was as gentle as Ducard had been brutal. But he was no less skilled, and no less determined. Together they trailed Tom Woodley to a mountain ledge. There, Willie died. Bruce watched Willie fall, just as his parent’s had fallen, blood bathing the white snow where he landed. Woodley thought he didn’t need his rifle to deal with the city boy they had been tracking, but he was wrong. Tom engaged Bruce in combat, hoping to cut his liver out while he was still alive. But that did not happen. Tom ran away with a broken jaw, hanging wide open, and in his panic he fell into a crevasse and ceased to exist. But Bruce’s victory had been costly. He had lost his pack, his parka – everything he needed to survive the lethal cold. And as the frozen air closed in around him, he fell on his face into the snow. Why do we fall?

Bruce awoke some time later in a bed made of furs, with the warm glow of fire before him, and the smell of incense resting in his nostrils. The Indian Shaman who rescued him had sat at his feet, wearing a mask of a beast sacred to his tribe. The mask of a bat. In hindsight, Bruce could appreciate the irony. Later, the old man said, “You have the mask in your eyes. Its mark. The mark of the bat.” Master Kirigi had also said Bruce was marked. The Demon eluded him, and The Bat was marked in his eyes. The bats had watched him fall as a child.

As he had returned to Wayne Manor, Bruce had the feeling that the universe was taunting him – defying him to solve some riddle. Something about bats, and his mission. His war. He was, he knew, a superbly trained detective. Probably the best in the world. But he had no franchise, no direction. And his greatest mystery had been left unsolved. And so much was it taunting him that he couldn’t even think about what he was wondering. There was only one question. Why do we fall?

His debut as a crime fighter was a dismal failure. Humiliated, and nearly dead, he retired to the library where his father had once studied medical texts. He had read these books after his parents fell, and as he contemplated death, a verse from an old book in the library crossed his mind: *Criminals are a cowardly and superstitious lot.*

He heard a faint noise at the window. A hissing and a chittering. Then, only the ticking of a clock and the creaks and groans of the old house, as blood dripped from his wounds.

And suddenly, the bat entered the study. Flapping manically, its eyes gleaming, and its mouth gaping wide open, Bruce saw it, and his heart raced. And then he knew. He knew in that single instant. He understood what his direction had been all these years – what he had to be. For a brief moment he had savored a new emotion. For a moment, he was happy.

*That mask. I should have realized it was more than just some insignificant tradition. It was something elemental and terrifying to strike up emotions in all who saw it.*

It was something that had never existed before but that had been gestating inside of Bruce since the night his parents fell – a nocturnal avenger, relentless and compassionate. Something that was at once human, and less than human, and more. It had to have a name, this being he had created – this being he became. He called it The Batman. And on his first night, wearing his new identity – the face that criminals would soon fear – he stood on a building’s ledge. He stood, tensed, and relaxed. The time had come. He breathed deeply, filling himself with the night, and stepped forward, and fell. He fell as he had fallen when he was a child, and as he would fall for many years to come. Maybe even the rest of his life.

He stood atop the ski slope in Switzerland. Breathing once more, he tensed, and then relaxed. He
slowly slid forward, gripping the poles in his hands. Air rushed by as he flew down the slope and suddenly felt the ground leave him. As he soared through the sky his feet flew up over his head, and he gazed down into the chasm below. And then, with such assured calmness, he went upright again and landed on the opposite ledge.

*I am accustomed to falling. I have what it takes, but I can’t do it alone. Alfred is in the cave, and Dent is in the public eye. I need an inside man who is out there with me, hitting the pavement. I need someone on my side. I need James Gordon.*

Day later, Gordon and Essen sat in a café, watching the rain pour down onto the streets outside the window. They both looked dishelved, with their hair having dried crazily, but they both looked happy. They both *felt* happy. Gordon couldn’t remember feeling quite so happy while out with someone.

“Oh look,” Sarah said. “Rain’s letting up a bit. Should we head out and find a cab?”

“Sure,” Gordon said. His heart felt a bit heavy. He’d enjoyed the talk. He didn’t want it to end. But he put some money on the table and stood up to leave. She stared at the table for a moment before standing up herself, at which point Gordon realized he’d absentmindedly paid for her.

*Paid for her. Just like a date. She didn’t seem to mind it, and I don’t know why but it makes me feel pretty happy.*

*It’s beginning to become a habit for Sarah and I to have a cup of coffee at the local diner before calling it a night. Actually, I’m the one who has coffee – she does her herbal tea. She’d qualify as a health nut if she didn’t smoke. We’ve stayed longer tonight than expected, hoping to wait out the rain. And we ran out of shop talk a while ago, but have just kept going! Her family is from Germany, just a generation back. She’s got a thing about the bad rap Germans generally get. Has a soft spot for kids. Wouldn’t have really guessed. Tried being a teacher and majoring in early child development, but never made it. She entered law enforcement after being told she was too masculine for about six different careers. Yeesh. Whoever said she was masculine must have been blind, deaf, and dead.*

*The rain has eased up and I’m well over an hour late, and feeling terrible about having forgotten to call Barbara. But we’ve finally decided to risk it and look for a cab, and I feel sad about that too. I like being with Sarah. A group of bikers notice her legs as we pass and make the usual remarks. We ignore them and keep walking.*

*Turns out, she’s from Chicago too – some years back. Small world. Even went to the same place for ribs. I’m sure I would’ve noticed her... though, come to think of it, she was probably in high school then... Jim, what are you doing to yourself? To your family?*

Suddenly the rain began to pour again, this time harder than ever. It felt like a solid body of water had just hit the city and within only three seconds both Essen and Gordon were completely drenched head to foot. Quickly they ducked into an old doorway and watched the rain come down.

“Gotham weather,” Gordon muttered. “Just when the rain seems to be clearing up, lightning flashes. Makes ya feel how Noah must’ve felt.” Sarah smiled.

“And this doorway is like our ark,” she said. Lightning cracked across the sky, sounding more like a gunshot than anything else. Sarah jumped a bit, and leaned in against Gordon. He instinctively put his arm around her. She was shivering. He looked down, and she looked up. Their eyes were
locked on each other, and Gordon felt the gravitational pull from her face to his. Slowly, just wanting to feel something for the first time in a long time, he leaned down and kissed her. Their lips sealed together, and though she hesitated for a moment, she reached up and placed her hands gently on his face, pulling him in closer and letting him know he was welcome.

A cab eventually came by, and he hailed it. Its red lights blazed as it sloshed to a halt, and without a word Sarah ran up to it and opened the door. She looked back and smiled. He smiled back all the brighter. And then, without saying goodnight, she crawled in and the cab lurched off.

What the hell have I done?

In Gotham’s East end, as the rain began to let up ever so slightly, a crowd of prostitutes and their usual customers gasped in disbelief. Stan reeled, and rocked from side to side for a second or two, until he leaned forward and slammed against the pavement. Blood splashed all over the sidewalk, and continued to gush from his nose to the gutters. His fedora flew off and landed a few feet away.

“Selina,” Holly exclaimed. “You punched Stan!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Selina grunted as she grabbed Holly by the wrist and began angrily pulling her away. “We’re changing up our line of work, Holly. I got an idea.” The two pushed through the onlookers and headed into the rundown apartment building where they lived. Holly complained and protested in worry as they purposefully headed up the stairs, but Selina barely snorted an acknowledgment until they were inside the apartment with the door bolted behind them.

“He’ll come after us!”

“No he won’t,” Selina spat back as she rifled through her closet. “I’ll see to that. He won’t bother us ever again. Holly, we don’t have to be pushed around by pimps and gangbangers anymore. This city has a sickness, and it’s all about to be cured.”

“What are you talking about?” Holly asked as Selina grinned and pulled out a long article of clothing stitched together from black spandex and leather.

“I’m talking about everything,” Selina said happily, stripping down to her underwear. “Falcone, Stan, the cops – Gotham! They think they can live so large and leave so little for the rest of us! Well… a storm is coming. And they better all batten down the hatches.”

“You sure?” Holly watched as Selina began slipping into the tight form-fitting costume she had made.

“Sure am,” she replied. “Didn’t you see Branden and his guys last week? Batman took them all on! He showed all of them that the rich and powerful don’t run Gotham anymore! We don’t need to be afraid of punks like Stan, or crooked cops. We don’t need to sell ourselves and our dignity just to survive! Holly, I used to have it all. When I was your age, I was in Gotham Heights with the best of em. We were all pushed to desperation by pricks like Falcone. But it’s over. Time to take back what’s mine.” She stood up before Holly and stretched. The suit was skin-tight, black, and covered her entire body from neck to toe, only opening at her hands and at the top of her neck. She reached into a drawer and pulled out some leather gloves which she had stuck various sharp objects to the tips of. Blades, needles, anything sharp or sturdy. It looked like claws.

“I’ll get a better suit soon,” she said. “I’ll get better everything soon. Everyone’s worried about looking over their shoulders for a bat. But soon they’ll be locking their doors because of a cat!”
Selina pulled out a mask which pulled over her face, similar to the one Batman wore. It was crude, with pointed cat ears and eye holes in the shape of cat eyes. Her mouth and nose were revealed through and opening so that she could breath, talk, and eat.

“Selina, this is pretty queer. I mean, you spent all your money on this stuff?”

“It’s just money, Holly,” Selina said as she pulled the mask over her face. “It’ll be a kick! And soon we’ll have so much more! Just watch.” She stretched, and Holly had to admit to herself that Selina did move very much like a cat. She had always been an accomplished acrobat, extremely strong and flexible. But Holly gasped at what Selina did next. She walked over to the window, hunched down, and in one fluid motion propelled herself out and into the night ahead.

“Selina!” Holly shouted, but it was too late. She was gone.

Gordon sat in the darkness at the edge of his bed. His pregnant wife had removed all of the covers and sprawled out over the majority of the bed. She looked peaceful, but only a half hour earlier she had been a tightly wound ball of frustration and hurt feelings. Gordon stared into the darkness ahead, and then lowered his gaze to his hands where he held his revolver. Ugly and cold, it seemed to be gazing up at him beckoning him to come.

This ugly weight… Just take my life… I hate this city. I hate myself and the night and everything it brings. Mostly, I hate it when she cries. Another fight… We fight so much, Barbara and I. She tells me I’m away too much and just when I should apologize, I snap at her. I freeze up. And every time I’m willing to talk it out and validate her feelings, she bludgeons me with her accusing words and a hateful attitude. What has gotten into her lately? I miss her. I miss the Barbara I married. The one who gave birth to our daughter. She was emotional, but that’s what I loved about her. Now she’s more spiteful than anything else. But who am I kidding? I’m no better. I’m the worst.

Tonight she called the office and I wasn’t there. I was out having coffee with Sarah… It’s all wrong… Barbara’s what’s more important. Fixing this. I should be talking to her right now, begging her for forgiveness. Begging her to forgive me for our daughter, and for the baby in her stomach and the way that I’m thinking about Essen – that’s right, call her Essen… Forget how she felt. How her body and her lips felt… Barbara… I should talk to her. I shouldn’t be thinking… not about Essen… and now about Batman. He’s a criminal. I’m a cop. It’s that simple. But…

It’s not that simple. I’m a cop in a city where the mayor and commissioner of police use cops as hired killers… He saved that old woman. He saved that cat. He even paid for that suit. The hunk of metal in my hands is heavier than ever…

“Get outta here,” Flass grunted as he landed his boot into Stan’s already bloodstained face. “If you can’t control your girls, then we won’t give them a chance to have anyone to rat on.”

“No, please Flass,” Stan said, grabbing his rebroken nose. “It’s just Selina. We can take care of her, and there’ll be no need to go after me for it! It’ll send a message!”

“If one stands up to you then they all might stand up to you,” Flass grinned. “Which means for a message to be loud ‘n clear, we have to send the message to all of them.” He grabbed one of the prostitutes who was standing nearby, scared stiff.

“Please,” she screamed. “I’ll be good! I respect Stan!”
“And do you respect me?” Flass said, grabbing her face and pulling her close.

“Sure, sure, I’ll respect anyone, just please don’t hurt me! Please!!! Please!”

Suddenly, a nearby dumpster erupted in a cloud of smoke and debris. Flass released the girl and turned around just in time to have a baseball bat slam directly into his face. The old Flass might’ve stuck around and tried to win the fight, but he knew better these days. After his beating at the hands of Gordon, and his more recent fight with Batman, he wasn’t gonna stick around. He ran back to his squad car, and got in, only to find that the hood had been recently spray painted with a big red A, surrounded by a circle. It was an anarchy symbol.

“What happened to this town?” Flass muttered as he stared the engine and took off.

A shape stepped forward and extended its hand to the fallen prostitute. She looked at it hesitantly, but never reached out to take it. Above her stood a figure garbed in what appeared to be homemade armor of some sort. Football pads and various other safety pads for knees, arms, shins, and so forth were strapped to the figure, all spray painted red, gold, and white. He wore a homemade breastplate which looked like it had been welded out of an old trash can. Painted on the right side of the breast was the anarchy symbol. He wore heavy boots, similarly red, gold, and white, along with massive hockey gloves and a red hood. He wore a mask over his face that depicted a white, blank, stare.

“Hey buddy, thanks,” Stan said as he stumbled over and extended his hand. “I dunno what you owed me, but I appreciate it.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” the masked figure said, his voice distorted through a crude electronic voice-changer in his mask. “It was for her.” He lashed out, a cattle prod in his hand, and jabbed it down and hoisted the prostitute to her feet. She quickly ran to the head of the alleyway and rejoined the group of onlookers and fellow prostitutes.

“Do not fear,” the figure said. “I am your friend in this time of anarchy. I am Anarky. This city has feasted on the poor and needy for far too long. Its wealth and infrastructure are a corrupt weapon used to force us into servitude. The gap between the poor and the wealthy and decedent is growing ever wider, and if it stretches any further then this city will fall crumbling inward. The consequences of their uncaring will come down on us all if we do not act now. Now is the time for change! Now is the time to act!

“Last week, the GCPD ordered the demolition of a building in Robison Park where countless homeless and needy citizens were killed without mercy or care. Their names have not been released, and no record of their deaths were kept. How many of your friends here on the East End have died without this city taking notice? How many poor citizens perish without a second thought from the upper class? And yet, how many of us are there compared to them?

“All of us have many different backgrounds and political beliefs but feel that, since we can no longer trust elected officials to represent anyone other than their wealthiest donors, we need real people to create real change from the bottom up. In the spirit and tradition of civil disobedience, we will take to the streets to protest corporate greed, abuse of power, and growing economic disparity. We will empower individuals to lead others into action by gathering in the commons – public spaces, parks and online – as engaged citizens to demonstrate a culture based on community and mutual aid. We will be the change we are seeking in the world.

“These changes can only happen by dismantling what is already there. The changes can only be birthed in a period of anarchy. I am Anarky.”
“I’ve got him,” Sarah said as she ran up to Gordon, wrapping her arms over his shoulders and kissing him on the cheek.

“Who?” Gordon asked.

“Bruce Wayne. He’s been a hard man to reach, but I know when we can get him. Bruce Wayne has been dating the model, Julie Maddison. She’s some wealthy philanthropist’s daughter. She was even with Bruce when he was supposedly in Switzerland. I know it’s a stretch – he’s had a lot of alibis – but we can question him on her birthday. Three weeks out. She’s bound to have a big party, and he’ll be there.”

“Oh Sarah,” Gordon smiled. “I could just kiss you.”

“Then do it.”

“Are you sure you can manage?” Alfred asked, staring at Bruce as he angrily fiddled with the wires and cables he was attempting to run through the Batcave.

“I am,” Bruce grunted back. “Fox said it wouldn’t be too difficult to figure out.” The air in the cave was warm, but that is because it was getting warmer outside as well. The long rains were finally letting up, and Gotham was enjoying it’s first few days of sunnier weather.

Bruce was busily setting up a massive bank of computers and monitors in the cave – a sort of networking central. With sensors and the ability to link up to various networks all around Gotham, they would be capable of receiving a host of information that could help him in his work. Scientific data, court files, satellite imagery, security systems, forensics – it could all be done from right here in the cave. And of course, Alfred would have a specific station here so that he could use the machine and feed it directly to Batman. Bruce hoped it would soon even share a visual feed with the lenses in his cowl so that Alfred could see what he was seeing, and even highlight various things from the cave so that Batman could make note of them. This would be the most state of the art crime computer in the entire world once it was all up and running to Bruce’s specifications, and Alfred would have to learn all of its systems, subroutines, and maintenance needs to help keep it running. It was a daunting task.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred said. “Might I suggest bringing Lucius in to do the upkeep on the computer? I am not quite up to par for the job, I fear.”

“You’ll be fine, Alfred,” Bruce said. “Fox can access it remotely from the computer in the Applied Sciences of Wayne Enterprises.”

“So, he knows then?” Alfred’s eyebrow rose.

“I already told you he does,” Bruce huffed as he kept working.

“You said you were fairly certain.”

“Well now I’m one hundred percent certain.”

“You told him?”
“Never told him. Told me not to, so he wouldn’t have to lie about it if he was ever asked. But he knows.”

“Very well, Sir,” Alfred sighed. “I suspect you’ll be giving this gadget a bat themed name? The Batcomputer?”

“You’re mocking me?” Bruce grinned.

“Hardly. That’s just been your tendency lately. Did you test the Batcycle yet?” Alfred motioned over to a motorcycle off in the corner of the cave, black with various pieces of armament welded to the sides and front. The tires had been rotated out with massive thick ones for all terrain.

“Last night,” Bruce said. “Works fine, for now. It’s fast, agile, and blends in with the dark. Should be good for now, but it’s too open. I’ll need something better for my main mode of transportation – which is why we’ve started up Wayne Motors again and I’m absorbing all of the old prototypes into Applied Sciences from their last try.”

“Will you need me to pick those up, Sir?”

“No. Fox is having them delivered to the house. Unmarked crates.”

“Very well, Sir.”

“But I might need you to bring them down to the cave.”

“Cars?”

“They’ll be mostly disassembled, Alfred.”

“Master Bruce, I am not a spry young man in my twenties.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll do it when I find time… There! Look.” The computer whirred and its enormous panel of monitors lit up with a blue iridescent glow. Text scrolled across the screens and one by one they all started lighting up with different interfaces and displays. Some showed the news, some showed police reports, and others showed menus or asked for user preferences and so on.

“Impressive,” Alfred said.

“Now,” Bruce stood up and rubbed his hands together, “you came down here for something?”

“Yes, Sir, your new suit has been completed.” They walked over to the ever-growing workbench station that Bruce had set up, where the newest costume lay staring at Bruce as if it were inviting him inside. The new cowl had been made using a new plastic compound that Bruce had headed up at Wayne Enterprises. It was sturdier, and better fitting than his previous ones. Lined of course with kevlar inside, and this time the lenses fitted the face better, appearing more like the eyes of a monster than the goggles worn underneath. The body of the suit was made using the combat suit that Bruce had absconded with from Applied Sciences. Armored, heavy, and with multiple attachments that Bruce had put together himself, most notably being shoulder and chest armor, it made him appear larger than he really was as well as adding protection. His last suit had been torn to shreds in the fight against Branden’s men, and he wasn’t too keen on that happening again. The entire thing was spray painted black with all identifying markers filed off. And on the center of the chest Alfred had etched a symbol shaped like the outline of a bat.

*My symbol. The Bat.*
“Is it to your liking, Sir?”

“Absolutely,” Bruce said. “Not quite to where my vision is, but this is a major improvement from the last few. I’ll wear it tonight.”

“Tonight? What is on the schedule for tonight, Sir?”

“A lot of strange new activity,” Bruce said. “Burglaries for one. There has been a huge string of cat burglaries lately. All appear to be from the same perp. Cops didn’t care too much until their people started getting hit. Politicians. But clues are scant. Whoever is doing it is extremely good. And then there’s this Anarky. Costumed Social Activist. He’s assaulted several cops, and he’s rallying support from anyone he can.”

“Why?”

“Social change. Looks like he was inspired by Batman. Doesn’t want to lie down while the wealthy ruin Gotham. He realizes that the crime here is being instituted from the top, not the bottom, and he’s working his way up to break it all down. Really popular among the vagrants, I’ve discovered. His tags are all over town – big red A’s spray painted on walls. He’s more popular than Batman in some neighborhoods.”

“And this is a problem, Sir?”

“Copycats could be dangerous, Alfred. I have training, rules, and plans. We can’t trust just anybody taking the law into their own hands. There are lines that can’t be crossed.”

“Sir, I thought Batman was meant to inspire change. To show people that they can take care of themselves. To pick themselves up. How can they take control of their city if you don’t trust them to on their own?” Bruce looked puzzled. He hadn’t realized this about himself. On one hand he believed that Gotham could save itself, but on the other he didn’t trust them to do it at all. This had not been something he counted on.

“I don’t know,” Bruce said finally. “Maybe this is why I need you. I don’t have parents to guide me, Alfred. I have you.” He put his hand on Alfred’s shoulder and smiled. Suddenly one of three of the monitors clicked on, showing text reports from various media sources and while others showed video. The largest monitor showed Vicki Vale and Jack Ryder.

“It did that on its own?”

“It’s programmed to,” Bruce said dismissively as he stared at the screen trying to absorb the situation. “There are certain keywords it picks up. If it finds enough, it decides it’s something important enough to bring up automatically. We can change the keywords and data when we want in the preference setting…” He droned out as the picture of Lieutenant Gordon and the children he had rescued from Victor Zsasz showed up next to Vicki.

“Hero cop, Lieutenant James Gordon, today apprehended notorious narcotics dealer, Jefferson Skeever. It looks like Gordon’s out to set a record, right Jack?”

“It sure does,” Jack responded. “He’s caught a big fish this time. If Skeever is convicted, this’ll be the fourth time he goes to prison. Bet they throw away the keys to all of Blackgate this time.”

Bruce quickly spun around and headed to another monitor, frantically typing out a message.

“What are you doing?” Alfred asked.
“Sending a message to Dent,” Bruce said. “Skeevers is a notorious dealer. He was at the docks that night a few months back when I stopped the shipment of drugs. He’s as close to Falcone as we can probably get – at least, on the streets. Need to make sure Dent gets his case. If we tie him to Falcone, or any corrupt cops, or Loeb… or all of them. This could be big. I have a plan.”

*It’s the right thing to do. It’s the only thing to do.* Gordon thought as he let the words slosh out of his throat and hit the floor with a thud. A moment of silence followed between them. Just silence up against the quiet talking of the radio, which they had turned on to create a noise barrier so nobody could hear them together.

“It needs to end,” he had said. He and Sarah were both in his office. It had been an incredible month. For the first time she felt like she had found someone she could be herself around. Her entire life she’d been called hard, cold, *masculine*, and yet here was a man who had liked her for all of that as well as all of her softer more vulnerable qualities. This month had been great, because for the first time in her whole life, Sarah Essen was being treated the way she deserved to be treated. Gordon was gentleman. He bought her gifts, took her out to eat, kissed her, made her feel beautiful, and they had talked and talked for hours every single day. Just talking and growing closer to each other as friends, the way a relationship naturally would. They’d even apprehended Skeevers a week and a half ago, and the general feeling between them was nothing but pure elation. He hadn’t even ever tried to make a move. They’d never slept together – just kisses and affectionate touching. But she lowered her head and knew he was right. He was married, after all. And what a lucky woman Sarah thought Barbara must be.

“You should take the bracelet,” she said as he lifted her wrist and began unclasping a golden chain Gordon had bought for her the night after they had brought in Skeevers. “I’m sure your wife would like it.”

“No,” Gordon said sadly. “Please, Sarah, keep it.”

“Jim,” she sighed. “Damn it, Jim… You’re right, of course – to end it, I mean… I just want to… Jim, I just want to know… if your wife weren’t pregnant? I mean… would you?” She trembled, but no tears escaped her eyes.

“Sarah, I-”

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t fair,” she said quickly. “I just…” She stared at him. There was nothing to say. She just stepped forward, softly touched his face, and kissed him. He embraced her back.

“Sarah-”

“No,” she said, pressing her finger to his lip. “Jim, I’ll request a transfer. I understand. Be a good husband for Barbara, and a good dad to your children. I’m not angry at you. This is just how life works out sometimes.” And then, silently they stared at each other, both understanding. And they pulled in and began passionately kissing, as if to mourn what couldn’t be.

*It’s not just that Barbara’s pregnant. It’s that I married her. If things were different, and I was alone… but they’re not. I need to do the best with what I have. Her arms are strong. Her whole body is strong. It’s late. We’ve both worked late again. I never get tired around her. But it’s over. She’s requesting a transfer. She’s leaving Gotham City. I’m in love with her… It’s the only thing to do.*

Just then the radio caught his attention. He pulled away from the kiss and pressed his ear to the
Tiny speaker on his desk, blindly fumbling to turn up the volume. Jack Ryder’s voice was cynically saying a name that had caught Gordon’s attention. Skeevers.

“Judge Rafferty set bail for Jefferson Skeevers. Surprisingly, Assistant District Attorney Harvey Dent, known for his tenacious pursuit of justice, did not argue with the decision.” Gordon stood up, looking confused, angry, and shocked. His gaze turned to look at Sarah, but her mind was elsewhere. She was sad. The police work in Gotham City was not going to be her job anymore.

“Go,” she said, half smiling. “I won’t be here when you get back.”

About a half hour later, in the darkening offices of the Gotham Court House, Gordon barged through the door to Harvey Dent’s office. Dent looked up at him and smiled, seemingly knowing why he was there.

“You on your way out, Harvey?”

“Should’ve been two hours ago,” Dent said. “I have a fiancé to get home to. Marriage is just around the corner, you know.”

“I have to talk to you, Dent,” Gordon said. “I know we’ve gotten off on a bad foot in the past. But I like you.”

“Thanks Lieutenant,” Dent said as he grabbed his coat off of a coatrack and began slipping his arms into it. “I like you too. Gotham’s Hero Cop. What’s not to like?”

“Look,” Gordon said, steadying himself against Dent’s desk. “I know you aren’t on the take – and I don’t think you’re crazy. So tell me why the hell you let them let Skeevers out on the street, Dent!”

“I understand how you feel, Lieutenant,” Dent said, placing his hands in his pockets. “But justice rains on us all. Even in Gotham City. I believe in Gotham City.” He tilted his head and winked at Gordon, but Gordon barely noticed.


Skeevers sat in a dimly lit apartment, with his attorney bellowing down at him about his conduct. He didn’t care. Falcone had gotten him this lawyer. Falcone had gotten him the apartment. Falcone did this sort of thing all the time for the guys he liked. So there was nothing to worry about. He just rubbed his hands over his cornrowed hair, and opened a small drawer in the side of a nearby coffee table.

“Relax,” Skeevers said, pulling out a small bag containing white, powdery cocaine. “We’re in the clear.”

“No,” the attorney said, pointing angrily at the drugs on the table. She wasn’t very pretty. Looked like the sort of woman who’d fought her whole life to maintain her status and position. Overcompensating for her gender by pulling her hair back as tightly as she could and wearing the largest shoulder pads she could find. “No! None of that stuff! You stay clean until we’ve gotten you off.”

“Don’t sweat it babe. Just a couple of lines.”
“You got off easy, Jeff. Make no mistake: this isn’t usual. Dent and Gordon are gunning for you. They’d love to catch you with your pants down.”

“Catch me?” he laughed. “They caught me, babe. And then they let me go! And you got me a court order tying Gordon’s hands. I mean, I’d be sweating, if it weren’t for you, babe. Or if it weren’t for our cop, right? They nail me and I talk about Flass – and maybe Flass talks about Commissioner Loeb-” He was laying the drugs out on the table and began systematically snorting them up.

“Don’t you dare talk like that again,” the attorney shouted, kicking the table. “You say one word about Flass, and The Roman will kill both of us, you got that? I mean it! Now take that thing out of your nose and listen to me!”

“Just a couple of lines…”

“Where do I start? Bad enough that you’re black.”

“Watch it,” his tone took a turn bordering on angry.

“I want you in a blue suit at the inquest. With a tie. Make it black. Same for the shoes. None of that pimp stuff. And when you smile at the jury, make it nice. Particularly at the women.” She turned her back, shaking her head, and walked for the door, opening it angrily.

“I’ll smile at them okay,” he said, rubbing his nose.

“Just remember, they’ll still have their clothes on,” the attorney muttered as she slammed the door, and the lock clicked behind her.

“Whatever,” Skeevers moaned as he leaned back in the sofa. He exhaled, and then heard a tiny scratching behind him. He quickly spun around and survey the room. There wasn’t anything there. Just the curtains billowing. Although, they shouldn’t have been.

“Thought I closed that window,” he muttered as he shuffled closer. But suddenly there was a rush of noise, and the window was obscured from his vision as he went flying backwards and smashed down on the coffee table, breaking it beneath his weight. Above him crouched the menacing stare of Batman, who had him pinned down, and one hand grasped around his throat.  There was a knock at the door, and the attorney’s voice carried into the room.

“-Skeevers, you all right?” Skeevers shifted his eyes but at Batman whose grip tightened as he glared.

“I’m fine,” Skeevers coughed back.

“Better lay off that coke. Bad on the nerves,” the voice returned, and then the sound of footsteps carried down the hallway as she left. Batman’s grip didn’t let up. He snapped Skeevers’ head up, forcing him to make eye contact. The dealer trembled and sweat ran down his forehead.

Wonder what he must think of me. Wonder what the drugs have done for my performance. Batman leaned in, breathing into Skeevers’s face heavily.

“You can never escape me,” he growled. “Bullets don’t harm me. Nothing harms me. But I know pain. I know pain, and sometimes I share it… with people like you…”
“Someone here to see you,” Officer Merkel said as he entered Gordon’s office, followed by a man in a long coat, wearing sun glasses and a hat with the brim lowered to obscure his face as much as possible.

“Skeevers?” Gordon exclaimed from his chair. Just the night before, he had confronted Dent about allowing Skeevers to get back on the streets, but here he was standing right in his office.

“Lieutenant,” Skeevers said, his voice sounding tensed, breathing out the words with force as if he were a child remembering his lines in a play. “I want to talk to Dent. Want to cop a plea. Want to talk about Flass.”

“Merkel, get Dent on the line,” Gordon ordered, jumping to his feet. “And forget to tell the Commissioner.”

“I’m gone,” Merkel nodded as he rushed out the door.

“Alfred,” Bruce said as Alfred entered the cave from the secret entrance they had built behind a bookcase up in the mansion. The foundation work was already there from years ago, but now updated with new security, it was ready for use. “I need to run some ideas off of you.”

“For what, Sir?”

“Julie’s birthday is just a few days away. I need a plan.”

“For a gift?” Bruce’s eyes widened and he paused for a moment.

“A gift… yes, I suppose so. Hadn’t even thought of that… Alfred, I’ll need you to buy her a gift.”

“Very well, Sir,” Alfred rolled his eyes. “It would mean more coming from you, though.”

“No time,” Bruce said. “But make it good. I need her to stay interested.” Alfred perked up at this. He had assumed that Bruce was only using her, but perhaps he was truly interested after all.

“What are your intentions with Miss Maddison, Bruce?”

“My intentions?”

“Is this relationship… real?”

“Real as it can be right now,” Bruce answered.

“Bruce…”

“Alfred… I don’t know. She’s interesting, smart, beautiful. But I wasn’t looking for a relationship. Not a real one, anyway.”

“Perhaps love has found you even though you were not looking for it.”

“Maybe,” Bruce said. “I don’t really know yet. I need more time. Right now though, I need her to wait until I figure it out. So make the gift good and thoughtful. No wedding rings.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Alfred smiled.

“But that’s not all I needed,” Bruce continued. “Her party. I’m obligated to make an appearance.
Lieutenant Gordon and Detective Essen have been eager to get ahold of me to question me about the identity of Batman. I want to preempt that. Make it seem like I’m not hiding. I’ve avoided them long enough.”

“Very good, Sir,” Alfred said. “In that case, I have a plan.” Bruce smiled. Alfred seemed to be coming around to things. He’d been less and less questioning lately, and more and helpful. Things were coming together.

“What does this say?” Commissioner Loeb asked, handing Gordon a news article they had printed out. Branden stood behind him, sneering. Whatever this was, Gordon knew it wasn’t good. He picked up the article and began reading aloud.

“What this says,” he cleared his throat and started over. “Sources inside the Gotham City Police Department revealed that Gotham Detective Arnold Flass has been implicated in Jeffery Skeevers drug operation—”

“That enough,” Loeb said, snatching the article from Gordon’s hands. “Detective Flass is a friend of mine, Gordon. You might have at least informed me of your plans before handing him over to Dent and the boys at internal affairs.”

“It was a slip,” Gordon said, trying to regulate his voice so as to not seem nervous. He had nothing to be nervous about. It was over. He wasn’t taking this from Loeb anymore. Time to do the best with what he had. “Everybody’s just working such long hours.”

“Friendship, Gordon,” Loeb snarled, standing out of his chair. “Loyalty. These words still stand for something in Gotham City. We took you in. Yes we did. Blemishes and all. And you do have your blemishes, make no mistake. We take you in, and you go and—”


“You get good press, I’ll give you that. They like you, don’t they? Vale and Ryder? They report only the best about you. But they don’t know you. Not really. They don’t know the real you, do they? Not the way we know you. Terrible if they – or your wife – learned of the special nature of your relationship with Miss Essen.” Loeb grinned and threw some papers down on his desk. They were all photographs, taken from hidden angles, of Gordon with Sarah. Kissing, holding hands, and kissing some more. Gordon removed his glasses and felt his heart sink into his stomach.

I knew the mob would come after me, or Dent, or Skeevers, he thought, But not this... This is worse.

“Walls have ears, Jimmy,” Branden chuckled.

“Gotham City’s had a rough year so far,” Loeb said. “But there’s still over half a year to go, Gordon. I know you might not have understood, what with getting here and seeing all this trouble caused by folks like Dent, Anarky, Batman, or this Penguin guy, but here in Gotham we look out for each other. We have a system. If you’re good to us, we’re good to you. And now is your chance to get with the program.”

Gordon and his wife walked through the halls of Wayne Manor. It was barely noon, and the sun shown brightly through the massive windows along the hallways. He didn’t think there’d be much
trouble at this visit, and he figured Barbara would like to get out and see the mansion. Wayne Manor was something of a legend to anyone who didn’t live in The Palisades. Plus, the baby had been due the previous week, and she’d been having a rough time. It was time to start rectifying the relationship. A butler named Alfred Pennyworth lead them down the halls, assuring them that Bruce Wayne was waiting for them.

The butler’s made us feel as welcome as a virus. Not exactly the reception I had hoped for. This was supposed to be sort of fun for Barbara. Guess that’s police work for ya. Not fun. He leads us through a few dozen rooms the size of small states until we reach Wayne’s study. Big place. Wayne’s been out of the country. Wayne’s had the flu. This morning I was told he had a hangover, but that he still wanted to see me. Better than having Barbara sit at home and worry about being so overdue, or argue with Barb… They haven’t been getting along well lately. Nobody has, I guess.

“Police Lieutenant and Mrs. Gordon, Sir,” Alfred announced as they entered the study. Bruce leaned against a walking stick, and was still wearing a lush blue bathrobe and matching slippers. Across the room, laid out on a lavish velvet couch, was a woman with dark olive skin and bleached blonde hair, wearing a skimpy silk nightgown.

Huh, Gordon thought, That’s not Julie Maddison. Hadn’t expected that. Seeing Bruce with another woman reminded him of Essen, but he pushed the thought away. Or, at least, he tried to.

Bruce swaggered over to Gordon and his wife and bowed ridiculously, taking Barbara’s hand and kissing it.

“Mrs. Gordon, I’m charmed,” he said, grinning. “Alfred, be a joy and get some glasses for our guests.” He swaggered over to a bottle on the desk and picked it up, but seemed displeased. “And another bottle, please. This one’s evaporated.”

“Uh… a little early in the day for us, thanks,” Gordon said, raising his hand. “Plus, Barbara here is due any day now a-”

“Fine, fine,” Bruce said, stepping over to the couch and plopping down next to the woman who snuggled up against him and nestled her head on his shoulder. “Please, take a seat.” Bruce motioned to the two chairs opposite him as Alfred left the room and closed the door behind him.

“Mr. Wayne,” Gordon said as he helped his wife lower herself into a seat and then began to take his own. “I don’t want to waste anymore of your time than-”

“Nonsense,” Bruce blurted, leaning back and crossing his legs, opening the bottom of his robe, exposing himself to Barbara who angrily looked away. “My time is worthless Lieutenant. Just ask Alfred. Now, I’ve been following your exploits, and I must say I’m impressed! Hero Cop! You’re getting about as much press as Batman. It is Batman you wanted to talk about, isn’t it? Something about me being him?” The woman next to him started rubbing Bruce’s chest and then leaned in and began gingerly kissing his cheek and biting his ear. “Oh my! Excuse me, Lieutenant. It must be the champagne. I neglected to introduce you to my friend…” He paused a moment and looked confused. “You see, I’m not entirely sure of what her name is. She doesn’t speak any language I know… Well, except one.”

“How convenient,” Barbara muttered.

“Barbara,” Gordon warned, then turned his attention back to Bruce. “Mr. Wayne, I need to know where you were on the following dates.”

He laughs and rings for his butler. The butler brings him a datebook. I could auction off the phone
numbers in his datebook for a fortune, I’m sure. They’re all women. They’re all famous. They’re all beautiful. And there was one for every single night. Sarah was wrong. He had seen Julie a few times, but I could hardly call them a couple.

“He’s a pig,” Barbara complained after the interview was done, as Gordon started the engine to the car sitting out in front of the mansion and they prepared to leave.

“He’s acting like one, that’s for sure,” Gordon said. “But any man who’d wear a cape – and it is a cape, not wings, I’ve seen it – anybody who’d wear a cape and hunt criminals might go pretty far to keep his secrets.”

“Or he really is a sleazy, womanizing, scum bag,” Barbara hissed. Gordon felt the pain in his heart. Scum bag. Sleazy. Some people go far to keep their secrets... He turned to her and gave her a sad, deep, longing look.

“Honey,” he said softly and slowly as he searched for the words. “There’s something we have to talk about.”

Meanwhile, from the window of Bruce’s study, Bruce stared out the window at the Gordons’ car, waiting for them to get going.

“So are we done yet?” the blonde woman asked impatiently.

“Yes,” Bruce said. “Wait here until they leave. Then, Alfred, please show Miss Elvensen to her car – and pay her.”

“Easiest hundred grand I ever made,” she said, tossing her hair. “I’ll go change.” Alfred held the door open and she walked out, arrogantly swinging her hips from side to side as if she had just made a major achievement.

“A bit rude,” Alfred said once she had left earshot.

“But appreciated, Alfred,” Bruce said, still staring out the window. “Ten minutes he’s just been sitting there. What could they – oh, he’s moving. Good. Alfred, how did you like my performance?”

“Positively vaudevillian, Sir,” Alfred said as he began cleaning up the study. “I gather the remaining bottle of club soda may be left in its proper container?”

“Yes, Alfred. Thank you.” Alfred hadn’t complained all day. He had, at least for this morning, accepted what Bruce had been doing. And Bruce was truly grateful for that.

“What do you want, Merkel?” Loeb groaned as officer Merkel knocked on his office door and peered in.

“Commissioner, we have a problem.”

“What is it?”

“Our network,” Merkel said. “The GCPD network, here in the building. It’s been compromised. Somebody got in and took a bunch of files. Left some of his own. We have viruses on a lot of the computers. Network’s totally down.”
“What?!” Loeb stood up angrily. “What is going on?”

“It’s Anarky,” Merkel said. “He left a message in a word document. Just said his name. Anarky.”

“Dangit!” Loeb landed his fist against his desk. “Call GothCorp. They do our security and networking. Mayor says they’re the best. Ask for uh… that Nygma guy to come down and take a look at it. That’s who the Mayor uses. Says he the best. Get on it, Merkel!”
The room was dimly lit, with a metal table in the center. On one end sat Flass, his arms crossed, looking absolutely livid. A scrawny lawyer that Loeb had recommended sat next to him. On the other end of the table sat Harvey Dent, quickly shuffling through a folder of notes, files, and paperwork that Flass had wished didn’t exist. Gordon leaned against the wall behind him, sipping coffee and feeling free.

I’m free. Barbara has been strong. I told her about Sarah. She didn’t take it well, but I couldn’t have expected her to. Once we have the baby we’re going to need to start seeing a councilor. Gotten a lot of calls at the house lately. She answers and says she knows about Essen. Asks them never to call again. Things are looking up. I’m free. If she doesn’t go into labor today, we’re going to the hospital tonight and having the baby induced. I’m free. Free to do the best with what we have. Free to fix my family. Free to take Flass down. They don’t have anything to hold over my head anymore.

“Skeevers told us where, when, and how much money you received, Flass,” Dent explained to furious detective. “And you’ve been spending a lot more than you’re earning… We’re talking ten years in Blackgate Penitentiary, minimum, Flass.”

“That’s if Skeevers is alive long enough to testify,” Flass grunted.

“Whoa!” his attorney stood up, waving his hands, and leaning between Flass and Dent. “My client didn’t mean that!”

Bruce had only been in this alleyway once since he’d been back to Gotham. Park Row. The alley where a mugger who was still at large had gunned down Thomas and Martha Wayne. And there, standing in the doorway of her clinic stood Leslie Thompkins.

“Well, well, well, Bruce Wayne,” she said. She was thin, old, but very much alive. Her grey hair was pulled up in a bun behind her head, and her shirtsleeves were rolled up as if she’d been recently hard at work on something. Her eyes were a very light shade of blue. So light that they almost seemed to glow.

Leslie Thompkins. The woman who tried to be a mother when mine was taken from me. A doctor, like my father. She’s a smart woman. Tried her best to help Alfred raise me. Can’t say I appreciated it much. Now she runs this clinic for free, offering aid to whoever comes in her door. Homeless, bank robbers, Falcone’s thugs trying to avoid going to a real hospital… She treats them all. Didn’t think I’d ever come back to see her, but here I am.

“Leslie,” he nodded. She put her hands on her hips and looked him over, studying him, almost criticizing him with her stare.

“I can honestly say I never thought I’d ever see you in Gotham again,” she said. “And when you came back, I honestly never expected to see you darken this doorway again. Not that you aren’t welcome, of course… What brings you this way?”

“It’s the anniversary of the night they died,” Bruce said. “Came to pay my respects.” He held up his hand, showing that he was carrying two roses.

“I see,” she said. “And you stopped here… why?”
“Making peace with ghosts, I guess,” Bruce replied. “Both theirs, and yours. I wanted to apologize for how we ended things.”

“You were gone a long time.”

“I know… I know… and I was rude and belligerent when I left.”

“You were.”

Bruce nodded and searched for words within himself to express what he wanted. He felt bad for how much he resented her. She never did anything other than try to help him. And he never did anything but let her know he didn’t want it.

“How are things? Here, I mean. At the clinic.”

“The same,” she said. “And worse… It’s not hard to see. Look beyond your own pain and anger, Bruce… look beyond your own arrogance, and you’ll see this city is rotting.”

“Arrogance?”

There’s the old Leslie charm…

“I’ve seen the news, Bruce. Skiing, dating super models, starting new automotive companies with the flick of your wrist like it was nothing. Meanwhile some of us have been actually putting our talents to good use. Trying to save this city. You’re smart, Bruce. Could’ve been a doctor, like your father. Could’ve at least ran some charities with all your money. But instead you chose to run away, burning through money around the world without a single care. And Alfred… Bruce, Alfred was worried sick about you. And you hardly wrote.”

“I know, I know,” Bruce said. “I live with Alfred, Leslie. I know what I did, and we’ve made peace with each other.”

“Alfred raised you since you were a baby. You could be a murderer and he’d make peace with you. It doesn’t mean what you did was okay. We could have used you here. You could have put your talents and money to use. For Gotham! For the world! You never even graduated!... So yes, I suppose things here have gotten considerably worse.”

“Can’t change the world on your own, I guess,” Bruce muttered.

“What choice do I have? When you’re too busy skiing?”

“Leslie… Look, I had my mistakes in the past. I know. But I’m back now, and I’m changed.”

“Changed? You’re a playboy, Bruce!”

“No, no, Leslie! All of… all of that… it’s not me. Inside, I am… I am more.”

“Bruce,” Leslie shook her head. “I love you. You’re always welcome here. We don’t have to argue every time we see each other. But I need you to know this from me. I need you to know that this is what I believe. Deep down inside, you may be some great guy… but it’s not who you are underneath. It’s what you do that defines you.”

If only she knew. But she never has. She never could. She’d never been able to see beyond her own agenda. How can the most charitable person in this entire city be so blind?

“I’m sorry, Leslie,” Bruce said. “Just wanted to come by and say that. I’ll get out of your hair.”
“You know, they don’t even call this place Park Row anymore,” she said. “They call it Crime Alley. Ever since your parents died here. Crime Alley. There’ve been sixteen murders here since then. Did you know that? Eighteen people in all – just a few feet away from my clinic that could have saved all of them. Makes me feel pretty helpless. It’s all the bureaucrats, Bruce. They’re the reason nothing gets done in this town. They’re the reason that mugger who killed your parents got away. This city has a sickness… Can I join you?”

“Sure,” Bruce said, surprised. He began walking down the alley to the spot he remembered all too well. The spot where they had died. As a boy he often snuck away from the mansion and came to this spot, staring at the pavement where it had happened. The place where he had seen them fall that night.

“What sort of things have you been up to that wouldn’t make my blood boil, Bruce?” Leslie asked. It was a rude question, but he knew she didn’t mean anything by it. It was just her way.

“I doubt anything,” he said. “That automotive company you talked about… it’s to make cheap reliable transportation for the lower income citizens. Families, mostly.”

“You don’t say,” she said. “How about in your personal life? Any of the upper class’s loveliest good enough for you?”

“One,” he said. “Her name is Julie Maddison. She’s a law student.”

“And a model,” Leslie scoffed. “Norman’s daughter. I know them. He runs charity events. Poorly, if you ask me. All of the money they raise go back into the fat spread of food provided. It’s just a party fund for Gotham’s jaded. Law student though? Think she’ll be any good at it? You should know. You just about have ten law degrees by now, don’t you? If we added up all your incompletes, I mean.”

“Sure,” he said. “She knows right and wrong. She’s smart.”

“Oh, I see,” Leslie nodded. “Not as smart as you though? Is that what you’re getting at?” “What?”

“The way you said that. She’s smart. You sounded disappointed. You’re smart too. Probably not as smart as you’d like, right?”

*She’s as blunt as getting hit with a cactus, but speaks with a softness of a grandmother from a cookie commercial.*

“Different perspectives, I guess. It’s not that she isn’t capable. It’s that she just hasn’t seen… I mean, I’ve been all over the world. I’ve seen how people starve, and scramble. I’ve seen how this city can hurt even its wealthiest. She lacks the perspective to see just how much justice is needed. She thinks she gets it, but I don’t know that she does.”

“I see.”

They reached the spot, and Bruce knelt down and placed the two roses on the ground. The ache was still fresh, as if he was feeling it all over for the first time. Bruce had so often tried to move beyond that night. He had tried to forget what had happened to his parents. He had tried to accept it. He had tried to find peace with it in nearly every way possible. But there was no peace to be had. Bruce Wayne had watched his parents murdered before his eyes at the age of eight. Their blood had splashed onto his body. Their final glazed-over stares were etched forever into his memory. These roses could never resolve that for him.
Why did he get away? Why did he kill them? Why? This city… with all its problems… with all the corruption and the ever growing gap in social classes… I still find myself only caring about that night. About that man. About bringing that man to justice. About beating every last thought out of his head. Forcing him to tell me why – why did he kill my parents?

Wiping his watering eyes, Bruce stood back up.

“You’re just leaving them here?” Leslie asked.

“Yes.”

“They’ll just blow away or get run over.”

“My parents are worth it.”

“What did you spend on those? Six dollars? You could buy a meal for a homeless person with that. There are better uses for your money.”

“All in our own way, Leslie,” Bruce said.

“I suppose,” she nodded over at the wall to their left. “You heard of that guy?” Bruce looked over and saw the wall had graffiti markings of a big red A on it.

“Anarky,” he said.

“We need more people like him,” she said.

“You like him?”

“Hardly know a soul who doesn’t. Can’t say anyone who doesn’t is worth my time and association, honestly.”

“What about Batman?”

“Fighting thugs and Branden’s squad of goons? I appreciate the sentiment but that’s not real change. Anarky is real change. He gives hope to the desperate souls who come to the clinic. He sends real messages to the politicians. Messages about social change. About the vast majority of people who are under the poverty line who need help to rise up. That’s what we need. A people’s champion who will raise everyone to his level and upheave the corruption that weighs over us. I suppose that’s what I like. He’s not on anybody’s side – except the side of right. No politics or bull. He just is doing what is right.”

“I see,” Bruce sighed. “Well, Leslie, I’m sorry if this wasn’t as pleasant for you as you might’ve hoped.”

“Didn’t hope for anything. Never thought I’d see you again, so there weren’t any expectations.”

“Right… well I need to get going. But I hope we can be on good terms – whatever that means, between us.”

“We’re on no worse terms than we were when you were ten,” she said. “I’m glad you’re back. I’m glad you’re safe. Good luck with Maddison. Charitable family. But I can’t say I think she’s really right for you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”
Gordon sat in the waiting room at the hospital. Barbara had requested that he not be in the room for the birth. He couldn’t blame her. He had complied, but he wasn’t happy about it. And he was nervous. He needed to keep his mind preoccupied, so he did the only other thing he knew how to do. Work. As he paced back and forth in the waiting room, he had his ear pressed directly to his phone.

“Yeah,” Dent’s voice came in on the other line. “Somebody slipped rat poison into Skeevers food, but Merkel got his stomach pumped in time.”

“I heard,” Gordon answered. “He’s been talking. Merkel says Skeevers is still going to testify against Flass. Doesn’t care that his attorney quit or that the mob is trying to poison him. Whatever he’s scared of, it’s – Dent are you laughing? What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, Lieutenant. Just a hunch.”

“Batman,” Gordon said pointedly. “Dent, if you know anything about this, I urge you to tell me.”

“Gordon, I don’t know anything. But lets just say if Batman was behind it, you can’t say he’s all bad. The pieces are moving. For the first time in decades, we’re seeing justice come to pass. Finally. I hear this isn’t even all that’s happening.”

“You heard, right…”

“Can I hear it from you?”

“… Just some weapons showed up on the GCPD steps the past few nights. Crates filled with weapons. Marked with the word Penguin on ‘em.”

“Just think about it, Lieutenant. Not even The Roman’s guys know who Penguin is or how to track his weapons shipments. Maybe you should find out more about Batman, before you start gunning for him.”

“James Gordon?” a nurse said, entering the waiting room.

“Oh, Dent, I gotta go,” Gordon hung up and quickly turned his attention to her. “Yes?”

“It’s a boy,” she smiled. “Your wife is fine, and your son is healthy and ready to meet his father.” Gordon smiled.

A boy. James Jr. We had already talked about the name. I hope he does it a greater honor than I did.

“-fourteenth in a daring series of cat burglaries in the homes of elected officials,” Vicki Vale said on the flickering television set in font of Holly. “Commissioner Loeb’s private collection of pop memorabilia is valued at forty thousand dollars.”

“Forty thousand,” Selina scoffed as she sat on the floor, rummaging through the sack of dolls and action figures she had stolen from Loeb’s home. “Sure. So where am I supposed to sell it? I thought he’d have jewels, or paintings.”

“This one doesn’t even work,” Holly said as she pressed the button on a doll of a cartoon mouse
that was supposed to talk.

“Loeb was quick to charge the Batman with the crime,” Vicki continued on TV.

“Batman?!” Selina spat, hurling one of the collectible at the television, knocking it over. “They’re giving the credit to Batman? Aces.”

“Selina,” Holly said. “You don’t want them to know it was you….”

“Leaving Gotham to wonder,” Vicki continued. “Is Batman a vigilante – a thief – or a Robin Hood? In other news, Detective Arnold Flass faces indictment tomorrow on those drug charges…”

“I was hoping to get more of a take before I went after the big load,” Selina said, standing up and placing her fists against her hips. “But it looks like I’ll have to make due with what I’ve got.”

“What do you mean?” Holly asked.

“Just hoped I’d have made a little more money off of loot by now. Wanted to buy some more stuff before I went after the big money. You know, night vision binoculars, maybe some equipment to help me crack a safe or something. But I can’t wait.”

“Oh hey, I fixed it!” Holly waved the doll in front of her as it sang a song.

“I hear The Roman’s got a fortune in old stuff,” Selina said, ignoring Holly. “Maybe I’ll give him a scratch or two before I steal it. Won’t think it’s Batman if I give him a scratch. They’ll know it’s Catwoman. Where’d I put that freaking costume…?”

“Selina, The Roman? Come on, that’s dangerous. And some of this stuff is pretty cool.”

“Not helpful though,” Selina said as she searched the run-down apartment for the costume which she had left scattered all over the floor. “I need to get my own fortune back. My status. I’m not a prostitute. I’m not a dominatrix. I’m a lady, dammit.”

“Selina-”

“Ah, here,” Selina said as she slipped one of the gloves onto her hand. “Scratch him. On the face. Just once. He could use it.”

“Come on, Selina. Why The Roman?”

“You wouldn’t understand. There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Holly.”

“Selina-”

“Look, girl, if you don’t like it then I’ll cut you a deal. Take this stuff. Forty thousand dollars in collectibles. Sell them online. Do whatever you want. You can take it and leave. Does that make sense? I’ve looked after you long enough now. It’s time to go our ways.”

“You’re mad at me?”

“No, no,” Selina rushed over and embraced Holly. “Not mad, Holly. I’ll be looking out for you. I’ll be in touch. But we gotta go our own ways for now. You have forty thousand dollars. Do what you want with it. Can you do that? I just have some stuff that’s needed working out for a long time…”

“Industry experts were stumped by the demonstration of unheard-of possibilities for lightweight durable plastics displayed by Wayne Industries this afternoon,” Vicki continued.
Carmine Falcone’s penthouse consisted of the top three stories of a tower in downtown Gotham. Even the roof was his. On the roof, he had constructed a pool house, made to look like roman architecture, like a miniature Caesar’s Palace. The roof was held up by Roman columns, with a matching outer façade, but the top was all framed glass so that those who were swimming could look out and see the sky above. There were even replicas of old Roman sculptures lining the outside of the pool. Ruthless and vile as he was, Falcone wasn’t entirely devoid of a sense of style.

Silently, Batman glided through the air towards the roof of the penthouse. He had leapt from the top of a nearby building, and quietly landed atop the pool house roof. He peered inside, and his lenses immediately locked onto two men inside. One was Carmine Falcone. Slim, old, but still fairly well-built. His white hair was slicked back to perfection, with his pencil mustache groomed to specification as well. Next to him was his nephew, Johnny, a much larger man both in height and width. And his girth mixed with his bowl haircut made him look extremely dimwitted. The two of them were pulling themselves out of the pool and wrapping towels around their wastes. Batman reached into his belt and produced a tiny recording device. Pressing a button on its side, it clicked on, and began recording the conversation of the two men below.

“Johnny,” Falcone said, putting his arm around his nephew. “Little Johnny. You’re a strong man now. A strong man. And how is my sister? My beautiful, faithful sister.”

“Mother is well, Sir,” Johnny replied, appearing to struggle with his words as he said them. “She sends her deepest devotion. She prays for your continued success.”

“I fear I need her prayers, Johnny. I need her son, too. And you have shown that you are brave as Horatius, Johnny. Have I told you of Horatius, Johnny? One man on a narrow bridge, holding himself against hundreds until-”

“You have, Sir. And it has thrilled me every time, Sir. I am, of course, yours. Mother has said that there are several men who are plaguing you, Sir.”

“Your mother is wise, in her way.”

“I need only their names.”

“You see, Johnny, there are too many people in the world who ask questions, and far, far too many who give answers.”

“Mother said-” Falcone slapped his hand hard against the back of Johnny’s head.

“We must avoid more bad publicity, Johnny. I don’t know all of their names. Batman… Anarky… Penguin… We cannot do anything about these characters. The masks. But listen to me. I will tell you what must be done.”

Suddenly there was a loud hiss and a thud. Batman turned to see a shape leaping across the rooftop below, moving towards the entrance to the pool house. Falcone’s bodyguards moved out from the doorway and began shouting.

“Over there!”

“Over here!”

“My face!”
“It’s a woman!”

Batman watched as a strange figure leapt its way between the guards, systematically swiping at each of them – dropping them to the floor. Her figure was female. Lean. Well-muscled. She was wearing a full bodysuit of black that clung tightly to her body – though it did not hamper her flexibility. She wore boots with heels on them that ran up to her thighs, similarly flexible, and gloves up to her elbows that had clawed fingertips. Over her face she wore a mask similar to Batman’s, only this one had much wider ears, like a cat, and didn’t cover her nose. It didn’t have lenses over the eyes either, but it was still too concealing to give away her identity. The way she swiftly leapt and contorted herself like an acrobat was stunning. She was extremely skilled – agile like a ninja – but without the grace or discipline. There was a brutality to her. The way she hissed and smiled as she’d slash her claws across the guards reminded Bruce of his time with Henri Ducard.

The door to the pool house burst open as Johnny stepped out angrily, holding his uncle in his massive arms as if to protect him.

“What’s going on out – let go of me you idiot!” Falcone shouted. Then his eyes grew wide as he saw the cat woman sliding between his guards and knocking them down against the floor of the rooftop.

“Somebody help me,” one of the guards screamed as he thrashed on the floor, clutching his face with his hands as blood dripped from his cuts. The woman crouched down, as if you pounce, staring at Johnny and Falcone, who were flanked on either side by guards with their guns drawn and pointed directly at her.

“Batman,” Falcone said, pointing at her. “You work for the Batman. I want her alive. And in pain.”

“Allow me,” Johnny said, picking a knife up from the thrashing guard and brandishing it. “It would be my pleasure.”

“Johnny,” Falcone said, a warning tone in his voice.

“Not a chance,” the woman scoffed. “I’m way out of your league.” Johnny took a step forward, smiling as if he were relishing the idea of the combat ahead, but then suddenly swaggered and fell forward.

“Johnny?” Falcone exclaimed. There was a small piece of metal sticking from his back. A shuriken, dipped in a tranquilizer, and cut in the shape of a bat. But before he could react, he felt one sink into the back of his neck, and fell to the ground, followed quickly by his two bodyguards. The woman looked stunned.

“Waste of my time,” Batman growled from atop the pool house. The woman looked up at his dark shadowy figure and smiled.

“Can I borrow any of those?” she asked.

“Don’t let me catch you out here again. Better get lost before they come to.” Batman turned and flew off of the building, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

The catwoman watched him disappear, and then looked down at Falcone. He was just laying there, defenseless before her. She smiled and crouched down next to him.

“I don’t know if you can hear me,” she whispered. “And honestly, I don’t care. But I don’t work for Batman. You’ve had this coming a long time, Falcone. I am Catwoman. Hear me roar.” Slowly,
she sank her claws into the side of Falcone’s cheek, and painfully ripped the side of his face open in three large gashes. Her smile grew all the wider as she watched the blood gush from his wounds and flow down, pooling around his head.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred said from his armchair as morning broke the following day. “I’ve just come across a fascinating piece in the *Gotham Gazette* concerning the effects of lack of sleep among the marginally sane.”

“Quiet Alfred,” Bruce said. They were in the study. Bruce was doing pushups against the hardwood floors while Alfred sat a few feet away in his armchair, reading the paper. Between them sat the recording device Bruce had used the previous evening, playing back all that he had captured.

“We must avoid more bad publicity,” Faclone’s voice cautioned.

“If only that woman hadn’t been there,” Bruce muttered. “The Roman was about to tell his nephew something important. The entire night’s investigation was ruined.”

“Marked increase in paranoia,” Alfred said, still reading the paper. “Sounds like you, doesn’t it?”

“I should’ve crippled The Roman’s nephew,” Bruce said. “Would’ve bought us time. No… wait… he would have just gotten someone else. At least I know who he’s using.”

“Tendency toward aberrant, even violent behavior, it says.”

Bruce picked up the device and went back a few seconds, and then started it again.

“Avoid more bad publicity,” Falcone’s voice repeated.

“He doesn’t want bad publicity,” Bruce said. “It follows that he wont murder anyone… that leaves blackmail or…” He paused, and then leapt to his feet.

“Sir?”

“Dent said Lieutenant Gordon had his son two days ago,” Bruce said as he headed for the door. “Stands to reason that Gordon is home now. Falcone and Johnny have awoken by now… recovering… There won’t be much time.”

“So, you’re off again then, Sir? Sun is rising. I thought you said Batman can’t operate in daylight.”

“Almost risen, Alfred. Have to act fast.”

“Loeb says Gotham’s finest will continue the manhunt,” Jack Ryder reported on the television. Selina watched, crouching over her cats’ food dishes and filling them with breakfast. To her left sat a sack filled with diamonds and jewels she had sacked from Falcone, as well as a few bucks she took off of the downed guards. It was a different feeling, being in the house without Holly. But a good one. Holly had to grow up sooner or later. Jack continued, “Last night’s incident connects the Batman with the recent cat burglaries. A woman described with claws – presumably Batman’s own assistant – is said to have-” Selina kicked the television off of its stand.

“Assistant,” she hissed. “Now I’m his assistant. I’ll have to do something really nasty next time…”
I’m outta this dump by *tonight*.”

“What must I do,” Johnny asked, leaning over his uncle’s hospital bed. Falcone’s head was bandaged, with gauze taped to his cheek from where Catwoman had scratched him.

“Come close Johnny,” Falcone beckoned. “This goes down immediately. Batman, Penguin, Anarky… that cat lady… these masks hide. They elude us. But a message can still be sent.”

“How, Sir?”

“Lieutenant Gordon, Johnny. James Gordon. When a man becomes a father he is never truly free. Gillian Loeb assures me that he will be on duty within a half hour. Listen closely…”

_Third-rate witness in a nickel-and-dime open-and-shut domestic grievance, and Loeb knows I’ve only had two hours of sleep,_ Gordon thought as he pulled out of his driveway. The morning rays of the June sun were just appearing beyond the horizon. *Been up all night with the baby. Trying to give Barbara as much time to rest as possible. Loeb knew Merkel was on duty. But said my job depends on it. Wonder if Flass has any information on Loeb… If we could get him to talk – what the?_ Gordon swerved the car as a dark mass sped passed him. _Maniac! Should arrest the – wait a minute! That was him! Batman!_ He quickly swung the car around and tried to speed up, pursuing the man he had hunted for months.

His cape billowed behind him as Batman flew down the road on the Batcycle. There wasn’t much time to spare as he turned onto Gordon’s street.

_He’s heading down my street, _Gordon thought. _To my house?_

Batman swerved up into Gordon’s driveway, and Gordon felt his stomach lurch.

_Nickel-and-dime domestic – he was getting me out of the house. Barbara. James. Babs._

Gordon skidded to a halt and leapt out of his car, leaving the engine running. He ran around to the back of the house – his gun drawn – waiting for anything. Then he heard it. A sound that made his entire spirit drop to the bottom of his body. His baby crying.

“Hands up!” he shouted as he saw a dark sedan next to the door of his house. Inside the car was a large man with a bowl haircut, holding James Jr., one hand cupped over his mouth to muffle the cries, and the other holding a knife to the infant’s throat. The man grinned.

“Drop the gun, Lieutenant,” a voice from the porch said. “Go to the office. Wait for our call.” Gordon looked up and saw two other men dragging his wife and daughter out of the house.

“Jim!” Barbara shrieked, still in her underwear.

“Dad!” his daughter shouted through a gag wrapped around her mouth. Gordon aimed his gun at them, and one of the men quickly aimed a gun back.

*If I let them go, my family’s as good as dead. Can’t go for a wound. Have to go for a kill._ He squeezed the trigger and hit the man who had struggling to push his daughter into the sedan right in the chest. The fell backwards, and Barb followed, taking cover behind the car. The other man released his wife and opened fire back.
Good. Stay low to the ground. Stay- ow! A bullet caught Gordon in the shoulder, and he fell back. In the instant of halted gunfire, the remaining gunman grabbed Gordon’s daughter by her hair, dragged her forcefully into the car, slammed the door shut.

“Wasn’t supposed to happen!” the man said as he settled in the driver’s seat.

“Get out of here – he’s crazy!” the one with the baby shouted. The sedan rumbled to life and screeched down the driveway onto the street. Gordon frantically began shooting at them, but to no avail.

My shoulder. Throws my aim off just enough. A motorcycle rumbled to life somewhere behind him. Him! I completely forgot. Gordon spun around to see Batman revving his engine, but he didn’t wait. He pulled the trigger, and a bullet landed right in Batman’s chest, throwing him from the bike onto the ground. Without a second thought Gordon ran forward and hopped onto the motorcycle.

“Get out of here, Barbara,” he shouted to his wife as he sped off on the bike. “Call a cop! Call Merkel, O’Hara, Bullock…” He roared out onto the street.

There, I can still see them ahead. James. Barbara.

As Gordon took off on the bike, Batman slowly started to pull himself up off the ground. Barbara, shaking, remembered all of the things that her husband had told her over the years. All she had learned from his stories, and the stories of those he worked with. She grabbed a gun from the man who was bled out on the ground next to her, chambered a round, and aimed it with both hands steadily at Batman.

“Mrs. Gordon,” Batman said, softly but gruffly, as he clutched his chest. “You have to trust me. I won’t let your family die.” He stared at her, just for a second as if to tell her that he was being completely serious, and then dashed back down the driveway. She stared, in awe, lowering the gun and hoping she had done the right thing.

As they raced toward a bridge that crossed a river from their neighborhood into the more industrial district, Gordon felt he could get a good shot in. With one hand on the handlebars, he used the other to aim his gun. It was a near impossible shot, but he felt like there were hardly any other options available. He shot at the tire and missed. He shot again. And again. And again. He fired until his weapon was out of ammunition, and while he wasn’t sure exactly which shot had done the job, the tire on the car had blown out. The sedan swerved crazily all over the road.

The driver hit the brakes too late – going too fast – the bridge shakes and I hear the sound of rending metal and clattering glass.

The car slammed into the railing of the bridge as its escape was put to a sudden halt. Gordon nearly crashed the motorcycle as well, hopping off and running toward the mashed-up vehicle with worry in every heavy breath he took.

I’m listening. The radiator hisses, spitting water onto the street. I don’t hear a human sound. I don’t hear my baby cry.

He could see the diver’s head smashed against the steering wheel, blood splattered against the windshield. Barb had been in the passenger’s seat, which appeared to have its airbag deployed. He ran to the backdoor, but suddenly saw a bright flash of light and went sprawling back as the door swung open. The large man with the bowl haircut leapt out, holding the struggling newborn baby
in one hand and the knife in the other. Gordon stumbled back to his feet only to have his assailant slam him into the metal railing behind him.

_The rail digs into my back. He’s heavy._

The main raised his knife and jabbed at Gordon, who grabbed his wrist, haulting the attack. Using one hand to hold the knife back and the other pressed tightly to the man’s face – and pinned against the railing – Gordon felt panic overtake him.

“Dad!” Barb screamed as she limped out of the car wreck. She was visibly bruised and cut, but alive. Gordon turned to look at her, sighing amidst the struggle to see that she was alright. But as he turned, the large man’s weight shifted and he lurched forward. The knife missed Gordon’s face just an inch or so, while the baby flew past his other side and went tumbling over the edge toward the muddy shore below.

“No!” Gordon bellowed as he followed the shift in weight and hurled himself and his attacker over the side after his son. The three of them tumbled down, and while the large man struggled and shouted, Gordon only looked ahead at his son, waiting for the tiny child to hit the ground below. Waiting for his infant son to die.

But a rush of sound fluttered by as a shadow dove past them and seemed to wrap itself around the baby. Gordon knew it was Batman, but barely had enough time to register the thought before he and his attacker slammed into the mud. Barbara ran toward the railing and peered over, her eyes as wide as saucers.

Gordon ached. His entire back had popped as he hit the ground, but he had landed on top of the large man who lay unconscious in the mud and appeared to have broken his arm, as it was flopped backwards next to his body. The sound of the baby’s cries reached Gordon’s ears and he fumbled on the ground for a strong spot to push himself to his feet. As he arose, he saw Batman standing before him, covered in mud, bathed in the golden sunlight of the dawn. In his outstretched arms, Batman held James Jr., who was struggling, covered in mud, but alive. Gordon rushed forward and snatched his son up, holding him close.

“That’s right,” he whispered, tears streaming from his eyes, as his heart nearly beat its way out of his chest cavity. “Good boy. Settle down, now. You’re safe.”

“You should get him to a hospital,” Batman said. “It’s a miracle he’s able to still cry. Even with me catching him, that could’ve killed him.” Gordon nodded and looked at the man standing before him. He was terrifying, but majestic all at once. And he had saved his son.

“Bulletproof armor,” Gordon said, thinking back to the perfect shot he had landed in Batman’s chest.

“Yes,” Batman nodded.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I’m sorry I… shot you.”

“No need.”

“Batman!” Barb shouted from above. He glanced up at her, and she waved down to him.
“Sirens coming,” Gordon said as the sound of police cars began closing in on them. “You’d better go.” Batman removed a grapple gun from his belt, aimed it at the bridge above. A line blasted up and hitched right above Barb’s head. Quickly, he shot up into the air and hoisted himself onto the road next to her.

“Thanks Batman,” she said, looking at him eagerly. He looked at her and nodded in acknowledgment. She just smiled back. He walked over to his motorcycle which was laying on its side. The paint had been scuffed off pretty badly.

“Need better security on that,” he muttered as he hoisted it back up and hopped on. “He shouldn’t have been able to steal it like that.” The engine roared to life, and he quickly shot off down the road heading west.

“Haven’t heard from you in a while,” Dent said as he locked his office door. Batman stood in the corner of the room, patiently waiting for him to arrive. “How’d you get in this time?”

“Window was unlocked,” Batman replied. “Pretty simple.”

“So why the long absence then?”

“You’ve been in court. And with all that stuff about Falcone’s nephew out in the open, I figured you could handle your own while I chased down my own leads.”

“Leads on what?”

“Anarky.”

“Anything?”

“A lot of people have seen him, but nothing can lead me back to him. Does a lot of his work anonymously via the internet, it seems. Can’t trace him though. He’s good. But maybe not the threat we thought. How about things on your end?”

“Turns out Flas is smarter than anybody knew. He took notes on every little talk he’d had with Commissioner Loeb. Dates, times – it was all there. Two weeks and four days in jail, and he remembered where he kept them all. Loeb’s holding up pretty well under the strain. Judge Norton’s on the case, so I don’t think I have a chance of putting him behind bars if I tried…”

“No,” Batman nodded. “You wouldn’t.”

“And I imagine it’s too late for blackmail. But word has it that Loeb is conferring with the mayor on the terms of his resignation.” Dent grinned, pulling a large coin from his pocket and flipping it into the air happily.

“Good.”

“Well, it’s progress. They’ve already got Grogan primed and ready to replace him. Grogan could be worse… Still, things aren’t so bad right now. I hear The Roman is at war with his sister ever since he tried to get a hired knife slid between his nephew, Johnny’s, ribs. Funny. I’ve heard stories about her from Gordon. She’s from Chicago. I don’t envy Carmine, I’ll say that… And speaking of Gordon, heard about his run-in with Johnny. Everything ok?”

“His family is safe,” Batman replied. “The newborn had some health complications, but he’s fine.
now."

“You on good terms with Gordon, then? I talked to him right before his kid was born. Told him to think it over, like you asked. Any luck?”

“Not sure. Didn’t get much of a chance to talk, and I figured I’d give him some time to himself before I talked to him again.”

“Gordon’s been promoted, you know. You got everything moving. Changing. In all the commotion is seems they were all too busy to stand in the way of him getting promoted to Captain. Go figure. You know… I’m gonna try and move up in the ranks too.”

“Oh?”

“Elections are in November. I’ve thrown my hat in the ring for District Attorney. Time to step up and make things happen. Figure I’ll be of better use there. Both by you and by Gotham.”

“Good,” Batman said. “But you need to realize the responsibility that will put on your shoulder. You’re a symbol of hope that I can never be. I’ve told you that before. You’re the proof that the system can work. If that works out, our relationship will have to be even less collaborative than it is now.” Dent scrunched up his face at that, seeming displeased, but understanding nonetheless.

“I get it… but I can’t say I don’t envy you. You have the ability to actually go out and accomplish things. Can’t imagine why Gordon’s so stubborn about joining up… All the same, can’t say you haven’t started a few things…”

“Oh?”

“Sure. Bad cops running scared. Falcone’s goons all at the end of their nerves. But now they’re being more careful. They’re feeling threatened. They’ll be less sloppy from here on out. We’ll have to up our game.”

“We will. We can bring Gotham back.”

“What about escalation?”

“Escalation?”

“We try harder, they try harder. We use semiautomatics, they buy automatics. We start wearing Kevlar, they buy armor piercing rounds.”

“And?”

“And you’re wearing a mask, and jumping off rooftops. Anarky, Catwoman, and now this guy… in the past week we’ve got an armed robbery, double homicide, and a flare for the theatrical, like you. Last night he hit again. Greg Danielson. Scum-bag city councilman – obvious crime connections – and he was gunned down last night by a gang lead by a man wearing a red cape and mask.”

“Anarky?”


“Any leads?”

“Nothing other than that Danielson had ties to Sionis, of all the criminals. He was his accountant.
Not on the best of terms from what I know, but the point is we haven’t been able to get at this guy for any reason in years, and suddenly someone else does it for us.”

“For us? He’s dead now, Harvey.”

“Good riddance. One less goon.”

“And one less witness. Remember, whoever did this wasn’t doing the favor for us.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t understand why someone would want him gone.”

“I’ll look into it,” Batman said as he headed toward the window. “Tomorrow night I’ll pay Sionis a visit. Haven’t bothered to deal with him much. Didn’t see him as having too many connections. But now… You never know.”
OSWALD COBBLEPOT

Roman Sionis stood in his father’s darkened study. The walls were lined with tribal artwork from all over the world. They were masks mostly. Wooden masks from Africa. Glass display cases surrounded Roman’s father, who sat in his armchair, staring into the flames of the fireplace which sat before him – occasionally glancing up to briefly admire one of his prized possessions. Roman stood nervously, awaiting his father to begin speaking – or shouting.

Charles Sionis, Roman’s father, owned the Sionis Steel Mill, Gotham’s largest industrial complex set right in the middle of downtown. The company was a sprawling empire in the early 1900s. When the Great Depression hit after the collapse of the National Stock Market, the mill and those under its employ were hardly even scratched. But in recent years, this was hardly the case.

When Gotham had its own localized economic crisis about thirty years earlier, everything fell apart for Sionis Steel. Wayne Industries and the fledgling technology company GothCorp were just about the only two companies that seemed to be able to stay afloat. Anyone with money invested in any Gotham-based operations aside from those two quickly pulled out and horded their fortunes, waiting until the crisis was over. Without the flow of money and exchange of value in the financial veins of the city, every business began to atrophy. Hundreds of citizens went bankrupt or homeless. And while those who had pulled out their investments and sat on their money did well enough, the wealthy who had money invested into their own companies all suffered in some way or another. The Sionis family had been no exception to this rule.

Sionis Steel nearly went completely under, and the family had only days worth of funds to keep them from ending up on the streets. It had been a great strain on Charles and his wife, who spent almost the entirety of Roman’s early childhood screaming at each other. Roman’s mother had ran their debts through the roof, and even when Gotham’s economy began to struggle, she had arrogantly assumed there wasn’t a problem. She didn’t think the rules of society applied to her, but as a result they’d almost lost everything. One day Roman came home after school and found his mother hanging from a noose, wrapped around the chandelier in their main hall. There was barely a funeral at all. A hole was dug, and a marker was placed, but no tears were shed by anybody but Roman himself. His father, in the meantime, had decided to move on and look for a way out of the mess his late wife had gotten them into.

“Boy,” his father finally spoke in a gruff and gravely voice reverberating from his throat. “Do you remember when your mother died?”

“Yes, Sir,” Roman said, bowing his head. He remembered it all too well. Wayne Enterprises’ CEO, Mr. Fox, had approached them and offered to buy Sionis Steel. But Sionis refused the offer. He couldn’t give up his legacy. That company was his legacy. Roman had always wondered why his father nurtured that steel mill more than his own child, but deep down he knew the reason. As much as he’d wanted to blame it on himself for being a poor excuse of a child, the reason was that he was his mother’s son. And his father loathed his mother.

Refusing to allow Sionis Steel to become a part of Wayne Enterprises, he went to the only other man in Gotham who seemed to be financially thriving after the depression. The Roman, Carmine Falcone. Falcone had most of his money over seas, primarily in Italy. The rumor was that Falcone’s family had a long and prominent history within the Italian mafia, though official records always stated, there is no mafia. Still, whatever organization Falcone originally belonged to, they had invested in what was, at the time, a small startup company called GothCorp. Falcone had only moved to Gotham to oversee the relationship between GothCorp and their overseas investors. That
was before he became The Roman – the only Roman that Charles Sionis ever truly cared about. And ever since, the Sionis family had been tied up in the brutal politics of the organized crime on Gotham’s streets – but it at least allowed them to maintain what Charles called dignity. But to his son, Roman, they had little to be proud of.

“When your mother died,” Charles grumbled, “I didn’t go sniffin around for some new tramp to take her place. I was better than that. Stronger than that. Men like my father – and my grandfather – taught me some pretty important lessons. Lessons that you don’t seem to quite understand.”

“Please, tell me,” Roman said as he trembled, running his hand through his slick, black hair. He knew what this was about. He had just come home after another date, and even though it was none of his father’s business, the man never passed up an opportunity to criticize his only offspring.

“You don’t need em,” Charles growled. “You’re out with a different woman almost every night, and you bring enough of em back that you’re using the guestrooms more than your own bedroom these days. Is that your life, boy? Women? Fast cars? Clubs? That’s what you’re into?”

“I was with Salvatore-“

“Sal Maroni?” Charles coughed up a phlegmy cough as he said the name. “He’s a chump, boy. A fall guy. He’s The Roman’s stooge. We don’t need ‘im. We don’t need to do things like Falcone. We do things like my father did them. Know what his family did when the Great Depression hit? He got it done. He took care of business. And that’s what I aim to do. But what about when I die, eh? Can you take over? Can you take care of business?” The old man’s fleshly lip quivered as his yellow eyes stared into the flames, narrowing as they anticipated his son’s disappointing answer.

“I think so.”

“You think so? You think running around with floozies, rubbing elbows with Maroni, snorting coke, and sweating your balls off every night is what this is about? I don’t want you out with Maroni anymore. And I don’t want to see you out with Tiffany anymore neither. I need you here.”

“Dad I-“

“Shut up. Just shut up and listen. You know I’m changing things around here. We’re gonna see some big changes in our family business soon. You need to learn how that works, and I can tell you one thing: it won’t work at all if you’re out digging around with Maroni.”

Roman sunk his head into his shoulders, and slammed his fist against a nearby table.

“Dad-“

“I said shut up!” His father stood out of his chair as he bellowed. “And you watch that temper of yours, boy. I’ve had it with your tantrums. Are you a man, or a child?”

“I’m your child!” Roman stepped forward, hissing and spitting, but his father just swung his arm through the air and backhanded his son in the head, sending him sprawling down to the floor.

“You aint no child of mine, boy. Not until you decide to lose that uterus of yours and man-up.” Roman twisted around on the floor while his father bent down, eyeing him bitterly. “Your latest fling – Tiffany – she your girlfriend or just someone you’re using? Because I’ve got news for you, boy. Do what you need to with her and then sweep her before she starts using you. Riding you for all your worth until you’re out on the street. Your mother was that way – they’re all that way!”
“Father, stop.”

“I’ll stop when you grow the hell up!” Charles shouted as he picked up a tribal walking cane from nearby. Over and over and over again he slammed his cane down onto Roman, blacking his eye. Two of Charles’s bodyguards entered the room, hearing the racket.

“Is there a problem, Sir?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, gesturing down at his son. “I’m done with this. Get him outta here.” The guards grabbed Roman and dragged him out of the room before he could get back to his feet. Angrily, but without saying a word, Roman stared at his father, never breaking eye contact as he was pulled along the floor. Even when the guards shut the door, he stared forward angrily.

“Let go of me,” he finally said, slapping the guards’ hands away. “I’m leaving, I’m leaving.” He stood up and shook himself off, before coolly storming off into the empty, cold, hallways of their Gotham Heights mansion. Dozens of his father’s horrible masks lined the walls, staring at Roman as if they were mocking him.

Slowly he made his way up a long marble stairway to the third story, and entered his room. Cold sweat ran down his face, and he leaned over a chest of drawers to steady himself as he trembled. Taking a deep breath, he looked around the room and realized his window was open. How that happened was beyond him. His father was extremely paranoid about making sure that the house stayed completely secure at all times. About a dozen armed guards patrolled the grounds outside, plus the two who remained inside the house. If any of them saw this they would surely report it to his father, and he didn’t want that. He stood up and walked toward the breeze to close it off, before suddenly feeling his feet slip out from under him. His vision span as his head flew back and slammed onto the floor. He barely had a moment to breath as he felt himself being dragged along the floor, out the window, and suddenly hanging upside-down several stories above the ground below.

Blinking, he looked up to see his feet bound together by a wire, and realized he was hanging off of the roof. Crouched next to him, on the edge of the rooftop was a grimacing gargoyle. Only it wasn’t a gargoyle. The massive, black, horned shape moved forward and stared angrily into Roman’s eyes. It was Batman.

Not much time. Need to make this quick.

“Greg Danielson,” Batman growled. “Who was he to you?”

“I—I’ve never heard of him.”

“You can tell me now, or you can tell me through a broken jaw.”

“I don’t know.”

“Who was he?!” Batman’s voice rose.

“I don’t know! I swear to God.”

“Swear to me!” Roman suddenly started free falling toward the ground. He opened his mouth to scream but hardly a sound escaped. The fall was abruptly ended and he felt his entire back stretch and pop before suddenly jolting back up to the rooftop until he came to eye level with Batman once again. Batman reached out and grabbed him by the hair, pulling his face close to his own.

“Danielson.”
“Okay, okay,” Roman sputtered. “He was a friend of my father’s.”

“Friend, or hired thug?”

“Business associate.”

“I doubt that. Danielson was a nobody. Hardly corporate mogul material. But he had paperwork and contact information for your father. Why?”

“He was a middleman. Liaison to my father.”

“For?”

“I can’t tell you! My father would kill me!”

“And I wouldn’t?” Batman popped his fist out, slamming it against Roman’s nose.

“I can’t,” Roman coughed out through his hands as he grabbed his face in pain.

“You can if you want to be able to keep chewing your food from now on.”

“Fine, fine. He was a liason between my father and an arm’s dealer.” He hoped that if he talked long enough, the guards would arrive and kill his assailant.

“Penguin?” Batman asked.


“Danielson died earlier tonight,” Batman said grimly.

“I-I know.”

“Why did he die?”

“I don’t know… It’s… it’s someone like you. He wears a cape and mask and everything. Been giving my father some trouble. Calls himself The Red Hood.” Someone was banging on the door back inside the bedroom, Batman knew there was very little time left.

No time. Need to choose a path to follow. Doesn’t seem to know much about Red Hood. But Penguin…

“Who is The Penguin?”

“He’ll kill us,” Roman said.

“Who is Penguin?” Batman shook the man around on the wire, making him shout. A voice down below shouted something.

They’re on their way up here.

“Believe me, I’m more scared of him than you.”

“And what about The Roman?” Batman asked, at which Roman’s eyes went wide. “I suspect The Roman – or your mutual friend Salvatore Maroni – don’t know you’re father’s been dealing with Penguin – their rival. Nor would they be happy to find out.”

“Fine, fine,” Roman said. “His name is Oswald Cobblepot – whoa!” Batman shoved him, and he
went swinging out from the building and then came rushing back and slammed into the wall. A commotion sounded all around him, and he felt hands wrapping around him, pulling him back up. A gunshot sounded somewhere in the distance. Before he knew it, his feet were free and he was standing on the roof with his father glowering down at him. One of the guards held a gun to his temple while his father looked him up and down with his bulging yellow eyes.

“I don’t believe it,” his father grunted. “You’re out of my sight for three minutes and you let the frikkin’ Batman into the house? What did you tell him?”

“Nothing! He was asking about Greg.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing! But father, he knew about Greg – he knows about what you’ve been doing!” His father glanced at the guard and nodded. Roman heard the gun at his head click as a round was chambered.

“One more time, boy. What did you tell him?”

“Nothing!” Roman shouted. The gun lowered. His father shook his head.

“Good. But know that if I ever hear otherwise, I’ll have you gutted.”

The batcycle’s engine hummed as it slowed down, and Batman stepped off of it and walked up to the enormous bank of monitors in the cave. Alfred was filing away papers in an enormous metal cabinet, glancing over his shoulder to make sure that Bruce was alright.

“And how was your lead from Mr. Dent?” Alfred asked.

“He was right,” Batman responded as he sat at the computer. “Greg Danielson was a friend of Charles Sionis. And you have been wrong.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The Sionis family is caught up with The Roman,” Batman explained. “I suspect they have been since the economic downturn. How else did Sionis Steel stay running?”

“Well, running though it may be, it certainly hasn’t been doing well in many years.”

“Exactly. Charles Sionis isn’t primarily interested in steel anymore. I think he’s planning to make a play – get his own gang out from under The Roman’s thumb. He’s been buying weapons through Danielson. Danielson worked for The Penguin.”

“My word!” Alfred exclaimed. “Charles Sionis was always nothing but kind to your parents. As was his wife. What ever could have driven him to this?”

“He’s not the only old friend caught up in this…” Batman said solemnly. “Roman said he knew who Penguin is. Mentioned a very specific name.”

“And?”

“Oswald Cobblepot.”

“Oh my…” Alfred said, his face looking sad.
“Exactly,” Batman said.

“He grew up not far from here as well… The Sionis family were fond of the Cobblepots. I believe Mrs. Sionis was particularly good friends with Mrs. Cobblepot. Though, the Cobblepots were not fond of your parents.”

“I know,” Batman said, quickly reading information on the monitor infront of him. “I thought Oswald moved to England.”

“For a time,” Alfred said. “He returned a few years before you did. Seemed to have regained some of his family’s lost wealth.”

“Does he still live in the Pallisades?”

“I don’t believe so, Sir” Alfred answered. “The mansion’s deed is still likely owned by his mother, but the both of them abandoned it not long after his return. They even had the family graves on the land exhumed and cremated, as I recall.”

“And he moved into a penthouse downtown in the Bowery,” Batman said, reading the information from the screen. “Looks like he purchased the old Gotham Natural History Museum too. Looks like he owns some sort of nightclub or lounge annexed to the building. The Iceberg Lounge.”

“My word, I just realized, Sir… The Penguin. A bit of a cruel pseudonym, considering Oswald’s… condition. Perverse, even.”

“He’s flying in the face of the most dangerous gangster in America,” Batman said as he began walking back toward the batcycle. “He’s been challenging Carmine Falcone for months, and if Sionis is any indication, he’s planning on making his big move soon.”

“Are you going to confront him now, Sir?”

“I am. His life may be in danger.”

“Oh?”

“Danielson was killed by this Red Hood I’ve been hearing about lately,” Batman said as he revved the bike to life. “Danielson was a nobody. He had such a low profile that the only thing I could dig up was that he was friends with Charles Sionis. But Red Hood knew he was working for Penguin. So it stands to reason that Penguin himself may also be a target.”

History makes a great deal out of Judge Solomon Wayne, one of the founding fathers of Gotham’s original settlement by Europeans. His influence still radiated throughout the city. Less-favored, however, was his contemporary, Henry Cobblepot. Henry had tried to desperately outbid Solomon at nearly every turn, running for magistrate, mayor, and trying his best to be a leader for the young colony. But he never was able to outclass Solomon Wayne. Still, determined as ever, he never stopped pouring what fortune he had brought with him from England into the growing town, but it not only cost him from his wealth, but his health as well. On his deathbed, Henry left the remains of this fortune to his son, Stanley Cobblepot. Stanley vowed to outdo the Wayne family and their empire, headed at the time by Alan Wayne.

Stanley Cobblepot instigated a very public feud with the Wayne family. As the Wayne business empire extended to include more and more public buildings, Stanley was determined to outdo them, pouring more and more money into a fledgling inn, as well as a local newspaper, in hopes to
bringing in new people hoping to make Gotham their home. But it cost him almost everything, and caused the Cobblepot name to be tarnished in the eyes of the public.

The Cobblepots became all but entirely forced from the town when America fought for independence, as they sided with Britain – for little reason other than that the Wayne’s supported the revolution. And so went the family legacy, as they struggled to hold on to their family homestead, the Cobblepot Mansion, for decades since. Their ill legacy faded from public consciousness, and their property fell into disrepair as each generation slid further and further into poverty. But still, they held on, and remained in the dellapodated old house until Oswald Cobblepot, newly returned from time away overseas, with no family empire to call his own, decided it was time to make a change.

When the city council decided to shut down the Gotham City Pinkney Natural History Museum, they sold the historic structure to the highest bidder. Located in a deteriorating part of the city, many investors passed up the opportunity. But for Oswald Cobblepot this was exactly what he wanted.

The old museum was enormous, and very old. It had originally consisted only of two cavernous exhibit halls – one displaying reconstructions of ancient megafauna from Gotham’s prehistoric past, and the other displaying artifacts from the Miagani tribe that had called the land home before the European settlers arrived. However, as an old favorite landmark of the city, generous donations came in every year to add to the building. Newer, larger exhibit halls were added, with more and more ambitious exhibits being created. At one point, there had even been an enormous room made up to look like a cave that housed hundreds of indigenous bats, but that exhibit had long since moved to the Gotham Zoo. When Bruce was young, they added an aquarium to the labyrinthine museum, housing sharks and cephalopods found in the nearby Gotham bay. However, as the years went on, the cost of upkeep became too expensive for the city to justify – especially considering the lowering value of the Bowery, where it was located. This is when Oswald decided to purchase it.

He quickly went to work, constructing an eccentrically themed, lavish restaurant to the back end of the museum. The Iceberg Lounge. It was a lavish establishment – extravagant and old-fashioned in its style – with crystal chandeliers, velvet furniture, and a massive bandstand. It had an open floor plan, with a second story consisting of a wraparound balcony running along the outer wall. Private rooms radiated out from both floors. But of course, the feature that would catch one’s eye as soon as they entered was the enormous pool in the center of the room.

The two-story, 12,800-square-foot restaurant and lounge included an arctic theme with an artificial lake in the middle of the main dining area, utilizing the water pumps and filters from the existing aquarium in the museum. The pool contained live sea lions, as well as a giant iceberg-shaped structure with a bandstand built into it for live entertainment when the occasion permitted. The walls were lined with windows peering into separate tanks where live penguins swam in crystal blue water, fitting the overall polar décor. This display had naturally attracted massive crowds in the opening weeks of the Iceberg Lounge, quickly earning it a reputation as a reputable establishment.

But below the surface was a den of iniquity, a go-to place for illicit and illegal wares. Oswald Cobblepot had his own private dining area, upstairs near the bar where he could oversee everything. And above the club itself, he had a three-bedroom penthouse. But there were also secret areas throughout the club, including his office, an armory, and several hidden backrooms. Not to mention, all of the waitresses and hostesses had been trained in martial arts, doubling as bodyguards and enforcers. There were gambling tournaments of dubious legality, and although it had a legitimate reputation, the lounge quickly became known for its rough clientele.
The adjacent museum exhibit halls were all locked away, for Oswald’s use only, and repurposed as the Penguin's storage facility – housing everything from his torture room, his weapon cache and a gladiator pit wherein illegal fights occurred, with the victors earning a job on Penguin's growing crew.

Oswald Cobblepot locked the door to his office, and turned around to head to his desk. It had been a long evening, and the Iceberg Lounge’s earnings had been good as usual. But even a prestigious racketeer had to sleep sometime. He just had to drop his checks off at his desk, and then he’d go up to the penthouse and rest. But as he turned, he saw the tall shadowy figure of Batman standing there, waiting for him.

**Oswald Cobblepot. He smells like tobacco. No wonder why they call him The Penguin. Short, overweight, balding, and with an extremely prominent nose. He’s wearing an old three piece suit. He does resemble his namesake. He even waddles when he walks. He looks at me as if he’d been expecting me all along – not showing an ounce of fear.**

“Well, well, well… Batman,” Cobblepot sneered, a cockney droll in his voice.

“Cobblepot,” Batman said, taking a step forward in an attempt to intimidate the vertically challenged man. “Or should I say, Penguin.” Cobblepot smiled, but kept walking toward his desk as if it were just business as usual.

*He’s not afraid.*

“Call me whot evuh’ you like, Batman. Everybody else does. Used to be tha’ if you cawled me *that* name, you’d maybe get a bullet in your head for it. But it’s served me well in recent years. Now, whot can I do fo’ya?”

“Red Hood. What do you know?”

Penguin’s entire demeanor fell sour. He slipped some papers into a drawer and then stepped out and pulled an umbrella out of a pail in the corner of the office.

“Red Hood… that bloke’s given me a load of trouble. What do *you* know?” He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a cigar. Casually, he began to light it and puff away at it as though this were the most normal conversation he’d ever had.

“Greg Danielson died tonight,” Batman said, trying his best to get a read on the strange little man. “He was killed by the Red Hood. Your life may be in danger.”

“So whot if it is?” Cobblepot scoffed, belching a cloud of smoke into Batman’s face. “Loike you’d do anything about it. If you know abou’ tha Hood, then I reckon you know abou’ me too. And I don’ take too kindly to that.”

“Don’t test me, Cobblepot,” Batman growled. He stepped forward but Penguin raised his umbrella and pointed it directly at Batman’s face. From this angle, Batman could see clearly that the umbrella was a disguise, concealing a cleverly hidden gun.

“Uh-uh!” Penguin said. “Don’t move. Don’t want blood in m’ office.” Batman stopped, knowing that even with all his armor, the shot could still kill him from this range. He needed to wait. Penguin smirked and continued, “Batman, I ‘ave a lot to thank you fo’, I think. A lot.” He laughed a loud, nasally cackle that sounded more like a honk than a laugh.

“For what?”
“Why, you inspired me. You know that? You inspired me.” He nodded, eyeing his umbrella-gun with pride.

“Oh?”

“Sure! Yeah, you start using gadgets and costumes and secret identities, and suddenly Falcone’s sweatin’ under the collar. First time he’s probably had a problem in a quarter of a century, I’d think. So what do I do? I start gettin’ smart just like you. Start plannin’ to make my big play. I got gadgets, like this umbrella. Embracin’ the name they been callin’ me all these years.Penguin. And it’s done me a lot of favors, I think.”

“Is that why Greg Danielson was killed?”

“In a way. Greg died more because of Sionis than me. He’s the one you wanna talk to for that.”

“Why?”

“Status quo. Sionis has been ruffling Falcone’s feathers. Trying to move up on his own. Control ‘is own turf. Be a proper criminal. Tsk tsk. Shoulda known there’d be risks.”

“Red Hood works for Falcone?”

“Absolutely! Who else? He only does things that favor The Roman. Falcone’s not stupid, Batman. You changed things, but you haven’t barred ‘im from playin’ the game. You. Anarky. Hell, even me. We’re all wearin’ masks of one kind or another. Looks like he hired someone to wear a mask for ‘im too.”

Can’t prove that, but it’s a sound hypothesis.

“And you’re not afraid?” Batman asked.

“I made peace with my fears a long time ago,” Penguin said, narrowing his eyes menacingly. “If you wanna do somethin’ wit’ yourself, fear can’t get in the bloody way.”

“Who else are you supplying weapons to? Where are you getting them from?”


“You’re holding an illegal, concealed weapon right now.”

“Won’t matter none. It’s self defense. Do you know how many fools here get killed every day by gun violence? Nobody in Gotham would fault me for keepin’ it and shootin’ an intruder like you.”

Arrogant little guy. Dangerous too. Detached demeanor. Possible sociopath.

“I suppose you’d rather I just left you alone.”

“Yeah, that’d suit me jus’ fine. And next time you wanna talk, don’t come bargin’ in here without permission, or I’ll ‘ave your head on a pike for it.” Batman walked over to the door of the office, careful to not show any of his fear, and opened it.

“Get down!” he suddenly shouted as he leapt to the side, followed by Penguin, as a barrage of bullets riddled the doorway.

“What the bloody hell is-”
“Red Hood,” Batman growled. “Stay down.” Penguin didn’t show even the slightest worry. He just held his gun close and looked hungrily at the doorway. Batman didn’t have time to incapacitate him though, as he was sure that the pause in gunfire would only be momentary. Quickly, he darted out of the office and out into the main dining area of the Iceberg Lounge.

The sea lions barked loudly, clearly startled from the gunfire. On the edge of the pool, between the water and the entryway into Cobblepot’s office, stood three armed men. One was tall and well-muscled. The second was much shorter, and even in the darkness, his silhouette revealed that he was missing a chunk of his left ear. But the third, tall and lanky, was unmistakably the Red Hood.

He wore a black pinstripe suit, and black gloves over his hands. A red, velvet cape was draped around his shoulders, and over his head was a strange helmet of sorts, also colored red. It looked almost like a fishbowl – or an oversized pill – completely red, and covering the man’s entire head so that not a single feature showed through. He was tall, and lanky, brandishing a fully automatic machinegun.

Knowing he had little time, Batman dove into the sea of tables and chairs as Red Hood muttered something to the men accompanying him before the room erupted into gunfire yet again. Blending in with the shadows along the floor, Batman lunged at the nearest gunman who was standing right next to Red Hood. Spittle flew through the air from the slacked jaw of the man as he was forced back and onto the ground. Red Hood was startled that Batman had got so close, and stammered backwards, momentarily losing the tight grip he held on his weapon. The other gunman immediately began to struggle and shout under Batman’s weight, randomly pulling the trigger of his gun hoping a stray shot would remove his attacker. As glass shattered all around him, Batman reached down and shoved his palm into the man’s forehead, slamming his skull onto the floor. The man stopped struggling, knocked out, and Batman looked up to see Red Hood running away toward the front doors of the Iceberg Lounge.

And then he fell. A long gunshot reverberated throughout the lounge, and Batman quickly turned back toward the door to Cobblepot’s office. The little stout man was pointing his umbrella toward Red Hood, and shot again from the hidden rifle inside. Red Hood twitched, grabbing his knee, and Batman could see blood was pooling around him on the floor.

_Two gunshot wounds. One in the stomach. One in the leg – looks like the knee. Bleeding out. And if he doesn’t bleed out, the internal bleeding will kill him soon._ Batman got up, but another shot rang out. A table directly beside Batman burst into a hail of splinters as the bullet hit.

“Cobblepot!” Batman shouted. “He’s dying!” But Penguin shot again, cackling and swearing as he did it. Red Hood pulled himself behind a walkway barrier and Penguin stopped shooting long enough to pull out what looked like a grenade.

_A grenade?! Is he that unstable?_

“You’ll destroy your own club!” Batman shouted, but it was too late. Penguin pulled the pin and hurled it into the middle of the room.

“Gotta break a few eggs to make an omlet,” Penguin muttered through his glistening little teeth as he grinned.

Unable to get to Red Hood or some of the other thugs in time, Batman darted toward the hallway that lead into the interior of the old museum. The grenade exploded behind him as he dove through the doorway, knocking the _DO NOT ENTER_ sign to the ground.

He was in one of the enormous chambers of the old museum, now in total disrepair. It seemed that
Penguin had cluttered this room with old misplaced exhibits after purchasing the building, likely making space in other rooms to store his weapons shipments – or something more sinister.

Enormous plaster pterodactyls hung from the ceiling, along with an even larger replica of a blue whale. Crates and boxes cluttered the floor, along with the odd sarcophagus or Miagani mannequin. A large skeletal reconstruction of a mastodon stood in the center of the room, half draped in dusty plastic covers.

As good a spot as any I can get right now, Batman thought as he ran to the base of the skeleton and crawled up into the empty chest cavity of the beast. Concealed beneath the dusty plastic covering, he began desperately trying to reach Alfred.

“Alfred,” he said quietly into his radio. “Alfred, I’m in the museum. A firefight broke out between Cobblepot and Red Hood. How long until law enforcement or firefighters arrive at the scene?... Alfred?” There was no reply.

Am I being jammed?

He reached down for his boot, removing his sonic device for attracting the bats in the cave and activated it. Suddenly there was another thunderous explosion, and the skeleton Batman was cradled in lurched from the shockwave.

“I know you’re in here,” Penguin’s voice cooed. “You’re playin’ where you aint allowed, Batman. This is a restricted area. Authorized employees only.” A spatter of machinegun fire filled the room, and six bullets tore through the plastic cover over the mastodon skeleton, whizzing past Batman by only a few inches.

The bats aren’t coming, he thought. He must have installed a signal jammer in the museum. I’m on my own.

Suddenly there was an ear-splitting screech, followed the sound of sparks and grinding metal. The skeleton jittered and vibrated, and Batman thought he could hear something large approaching.

“Tyrannosaurus Rex,” an old scratchy automated recording announced. “Tyrant king of the thunder lizards.” Batman recognized the recording as having accompanied an exhibit he had seen as a child. It had been a new addition to the museum at the time, consisting of larger than life animatronic replicas of dinosaurs. They moved and roared, and could even be controlled remotely by an operator so that their behavior would feel more lifelike. And Cobblepot had just activated the biggest one. But before Batman could react, the plastic covering above shifted wildly, falling away as the enormous ribs began to crumble.

“Gotcha, ya weasel,” Cobblepot shouted over the commotion as the jaws of an incredibly large green, animatronic tyrannosaurus rex bit down ad crushed the chest cavity of the mastodon, trapping Batman inside. “You know that birds are dinosaurs? Murray Wilson Hunt, the man who created this particular exhibit, actually owned an entire island down south where he wanted these blasted things to roam around in simulated primordial swamps. With that settin’ in mind, he made ‘em look like liza’ds, but he was wrong. They weren’t swamp liza’ds. They were birds. His Dinosaur Island still sits in disrepair down beneath Blüdhaven, but his best work has always resided here in the museum… And I like it. In a way, that tyrant king is just a big penguin!”

Batman struggled, slipping through the closing gaps in the bones. Half his torso was free when he spotted Penguin down near the doorway, leering and holding a large tube of some sort.

A rocket launcher?!
Penguin lifted up the weapon and took aim as Batman struggled to free himself from the jaws of the robotic dinosaur. He felt a leg pop out of its socket. He heard the hiss of Penguin activating the weapon. He slipped free. He heard the hollow thud of the rocket blasting off. And then there was nothing. Nothing but noise, heat, and weightlessness. Smoke and debris flew through the air, pushing Batman up against the window and blasting him out. Everything swirled out of focus as he weightlessly hurdled through darkness until splashing down into the water canal which ran past the back of the nightclub.

Water filled Batman’s nostrils as he desperately paddled his arms, trying to stabilize and orient himself. Suddenly, he slammed against the concrete wall of the canal, and scraped his jaw along the side, trying to drag himself up. A huge piece of debris ran up against his other side, pinning him against the wall and pushing him deeper into the water. His ears were ringing louder and louder ever since the explosion. The pressure in the cowl seemed to be rising more and more. He thrashed his head back and forth, trying to keep himself conscious and concentrated.

The debris slowly gave way, moving ahead of him, being carried off by the swift current. Batman bobbed up and could see that the debris being swept off was none other than the animatronic dinosaur itself, which quickly dipped out of sight as it toppled over a man-made waterfall into the churning bay below.

Batman frantically tried to get a grip on the ledge of the concrete wall, wincing in pain, until he finally felt his arm slip up over the edge, and he clawed at the ground. Somehow, feeling as though the muscles in his arms had torn loose from his skeleton, he hoisted himself up out of the water and only to the edge of the canal.

“Alfred,” he hoarsely coughed into his transmitter. “Alfred!” The sky above was becoming ever brighter as white spots began to blur his vision. At first he thought they were stars, but they just seemed to get brighter and brighter with every passing moment. Everything turned into a mass of blinding white, and then suddenly there was nothing but muffled sounds somewhere far away.

The feeling of soft sheets nestled all around him came into focus. He stretched his body out, feeling the comfortable sheets of his bed slide over his legs and feet. Slowly, he opened his eyes, and the lavish bedroom all around him came into view.

He turned his head, trying to make out the time on a clock sitting on his nightstand, and as he did he felt a dizzying rush swirl about him. It felt like someone was trying to wedge a knife directly behind his eyes, and it was accompanied by an intense throbbing on both sides of his cranium and at the base of his neck.

“Ugh,” he groaned as he whipped his hand out from under the sheets and pressed it to his head.

“Master Wayne,” Alfred’s worried voice said as he entered the room looking anxious. “Thank goodness you’re alright. I’ve been up the entire night watching over you, making sure you stayed with us. You gave me quite a scare.” Alfred rushed to the side of the bed, moving as if he was going to throw himself down ontop of Bruce and wrap him in a loving embrace. Bruce knew he wanted to. As much as Alfred had never tried to be his father, he was the most fatherly figure Bruce had in his life. But Alfred suddenly regained composure and just put his hand lightly on Bruce’s shoulder.

“How long was I out?” Bruce asked, squinting at the butler through his pain.

“Just a few hours,” Alfred sighed. “It’s noon. I found you within an hour of your call.”
“Thank you, Alfred. Thank you for coming to get me.”

“The homing device in the cowl may have saved your life tonight, Sir.”

“I doubt I would have died, Alfred, but it certainly helped things go more smoothly. What happened after I passed out?”

“I honestly have been quite worried about you, Sir. I didn’t keep up with the events after you left the Iceberg Lounge. It was on fire when I drove by, looking for you. Fire brigade was there.”

“Cobblepot threw a grenade,” Bruce said as he sat up, removing his hand from his head and feeling his brain seemingly click back into focus. “In his own club. Then fire a rocket launcher inside the museum. He’s dangerous. Unstable. Insecure. Arrogant.”

“Do you think he was arrested?”

“Unlikely. He seemed pretty confident that he wouldn’t get in any trouble. Even had a signal jammer in the museum, preventing anyone from calling out for help – even me. It likely gave him time to control the narrative however he pleased.”

“A jammer? It would be have to be military-grade hardware to block our equipment.”

“I have no doubt that it is – not that I’ll have the chance to ask him anytime soon. He’s likely gone into hiding.”

“Hiding?”

“Red Hood, Alfred… Alfred, we need to go to the cave.” Bruce twisted himself out of bed and reached for a robe draped over a nearby chair.

“Sir, you only just regained consciousness.”

“I need to get this information into the databank while it’s still fresh on my mind.” Bruce tied his robe on and immediately started walking to his father’s study where they had built the secret entrance to the cave.

There had actually been a service elevator from the cave which ran up to the old study already. They had guessed it was built in during Wayne Manor’s time as a stop along the Underground Railroad. It was crude, of course; made of rotting wood and no longer operational due to the rope in the pulley system having long been too fragile to use without snapping. But in recent months, Bruce had been hard at work erecting a new system.

He walked to the enormous grandfather clock which was build inset into his father’s enormous bookcase, with an ornate owl carved above the top of it. Opening the case to the clock’s face, he moved the hands until they pointed at 10:48.

10:48 – The very minute that my parents were slain.

Something clicked behind the enormous clock, and it shifted slightly. Then he reached over to an old piano to the left of the clock and pressed three two-note chords. A second click sounded and the grandfather clock automatically swung aside, revealing a darkened shaft behind the bookshelf.

Purposefully, Bruce and Alfred stepped in, finding themselves in the new elevator, made of metal bars and chains. The clock swung back into place, momentarily leaving them in darkness, and then slowly some dim lights kicked on and the elevator started moving down the shaft to the cave.
“I need more security on the entrance,” Bruce mumbled to Alfred as they descended. “I’d like a retina scanner in the elevator. Just to keep out anyone who might figure out the two door locks.”

“Seems a bit paranoid.”

“Maybe so, but I’d rather be careful than sorry.”

The elevator shuttered to a halt as it met the ground below, and its barred doors clacked and clanged as they slid open. Bruce and Alfred headed down the stone hallways until they came out in the main chamber, and Bruce took his seat in the enormous chair next to the computer console and began furiously typing away.

“Penguin has been openly opposing The Roman’s grip on Gotham,” Bruce explained, his eyes glued to the screen ahead of him. “I’ve destabilized some of the power in Gotham, it seems. Penguin is making his move to take as big a slice of the pie as he can, and it seems he’s also now in league with the Sionis faction of the crime family. He’s selling them weapons exclusively. So now Falcone’s not only dealing with an unusual rogue, but even his own men are turning against him. And with *Batman* pressing his street level goons into testifying with Dent in court… Falcone’s threatened.”

“Not to mention that Catwoman who attacked him outside his private pool,” Alfred chimed in.

“And this Anarky character drumming up what he can on the streets,” Bruce said. “Add Penguin to the mix… these big personas, all inspired by Batman, no doubt, are all threatening Falcone’s chokehold on the city. So he’s panicking. And he’s come up with his own big persona on the streets.”

“The Red Hood?”

“Exactly.”

“You think Carmine Falcone is the Red Hood?”

“Unlikely. Falcone covers his tracks. He’s never at the scene of the crime. He’s too smart for that – and too big for it. Prefers to have hired goons do his dirty work for him. If anyone pinned him for anything, he’d be done forever. His entire empire here would fall beneath his feet. Too risky. The Red Hood has got to be someone else.”

“If he’s even alive at all, Sir. Even you barely made it out of the Iceberg Lounge.”

“Right, but I still wish we could undeniably tie him to Falcone… Falcone fabricates a Red Hood gang to go out and openly oppose his dissenters while also upholding *his* particular interests. He’s trying to make a sort of Anti-Batman. He’s killing off his oppressors. Penguin shot Red Hood though… probably killed him with the grenade. Not sure. Either way, I learned something last night. The criminals are getting desperate. Falcone is trying everything he can to keep his throne, and those beneath him are salivating at the chance to take him – and me – down. Penguin didn’t even think twice about damaging his own establishment.”

“But why the hood?”

“The pinstriped suit, the cape – it screams a classic pulp fiction character. Something classic, like Falcone himself, mixed with what he considers some of the new. Sloppy concept.”
“It’s a silly getup,” Alfred scoffed. “Hardly the stuff of nightmares.”

“Aren’t you the one who thought dressing up like a bat was weird?”

“It is. But at least our costume is functional.”

Bruce smiled.

“Either way, Alfred, last night showed me these people mean business. They tried to kill Gordon’s baby. They’re blowing up their own buildings. Other people are masking-up… I think we’re reaching the climax of my war.”

“Do you, Sir?”

“Maybe another six months. Maybe a year. But Falcone’s empire is about to crack, I’m certain… I need more armor on my suits though. Something more mobile, but more protected. I could have died last night.” He swiveled the chair around looked gruffly at Alfred saying, “Can you get in touch with Fox and have him start on working something up?”

“I will add it to my list, Sir.”

“Thanks.” Just then the screens all turned a bright color of green and showed a graphic icon of an alarm next to one of a door.

“That would be a ring at the front door of the mansion, Sir,” Alfred explained. “I actually only just finished connecting the intercom at the door to a line down here. Would you like me to answer it?”

“Be my guest,” Bruce said, moving aside. Alfred pressed a button on a far panel of buttons, and spoke into a transceiver next to it.

“Hello?”

“Hello,” a woman’s voice returned. “Um… is Mr. Wayne in?”

“That’s Julie’s voice,” Bruce said, a look of surprise in his eyes.

“I shall check right away,” Alfred said, pretending to ignore Bruce’s remarks. “May I tell him who is inquiring?”


“Thank you, I shall return shortly, Miss Maddison,” Alfred responded as he silenced the line and turned to give Bruce an inquisitive look.

“What could she be doing here?” Bruce exclaimed. “She’s never shown up at the house before, has she?”

“No, Sir.”

“What do I do?”

“I can tell her to go away, if you wish. Or, should you wish to speak with her, you can go upstairs to the study and I’ll let her in.” Alfred smirked.

“I know,” Bruce grunted. “But… but what does she want?”

“You’re her boyfriend, are you not?”
“Not officially!”

“Well, I wouldn’t presume what to tell you to do, Sir. It is your relationship, and you may do with it what you like. But from someone who cares about you, I do believe you feel most at peace with yourself if you at least granted her an audience, no matter how brief.”

“Ugh, you’re right,” Bruce said, regaining composure and already walking toward the elevator to return to the house above. “Tell her you’ll let her in in a minute. I need a few seconds to cover the scrapes on my face… or maybe not. She’d spot the makeup…”

“Very well, Sir.”

“Bruce, you didn’t return my calls this morning,” Julie said as she entered Bruce’s lavish study and saw him sitting casually in his bathrobe on one of the chairs.

“Now Julie,” he said, standing up to greet her and smiling. “That’s hardly a warm reception on such a rare occasion. You’ve never come to visit me at home before. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Just checking up on you,” she stammered, blushing and fiddling with her hair. “Can’t a girl check up on her man?”

“Her man, huh?”

“Well, I… I just had called a few times this morning to ask you – oh, Bruce!” She suddenly looked rather worried and shocked.

“What?”

“What happened to your face? It’s all bruised up.”

“Polo,” Bruce said quickly. “Polo injury.”

“I didn’t know you played polo.”

“Alfred was teaching me, actually,” Bruce said, smiling embarrassedly. “Guess I’m not as good at riding as I had thought.”

“I envy your carefree attitude about all this,” she said, squinting as though it was hard for her to see him injured or in any kind of discomfort.

“You have to take the blows as they come,” Bruce shrugged.

“Sure, sure,” she said. “I guess I just envy it. I spend a lot of time feeling so serious about things.”

“Oh?”

“You know, law, politics, and all of that,” she said, drifting off and then suddenly perking up. “You know, speaking of that, did you hear who’s running for Gotham District Attorney?”

“No, who?”

“Harvey Dent.”

“Who?”
“Come on, Bruce, we’ve talked about him before. Harvey Dent. He’s the one who kept going after Carmine Falcone last year, and who pressured Loeb into stepping down from his position as Police Commissioner.”

“Oh, right, right. I remember. Well that’s great, right? A little late in the game though. It’s August. Elections are in November.”

“He’s a popular candidate,” Julie said. “I’m excited about it. I don’t even know how long it’s been since a DA so much as made a splash in Gotham.”

“Or a dent. Get it?”

“Har Har,” Julie looked at him wryly, raising an eyebrow.

“What? It’d be a good slogan.”

“A pun?” she shook her head. “No, no, he’s got something much better.”

“Oh?”

“His slogan is, I Believe In Harvey Dent.”

“A bit self-aggrandizing.”

“Says the millionaire with a massive corporate conglomerate named after him.”

“I didn’t name it,” Bruce joked. “So do you believe in Harvey Dent?”

“Absolutely I do. So do the people. He’s the hope that Gotham City has needed since before the economic crash. There has been organized crime in Gotham for way too long. And so blatant too! Even the worst cities have their limits.”

She’s comforting, Bruce thought as their conversation carried on. She is extremely intelligent. I’d have never suspected that from a philanthropist’s super model daughter. But she’s smart. Passionate too. Similar passions to me. She’s almost an exact match as far as local politics go. And her distaste for crime... But what else is there? She’s beautiful. Gorgeous even. Normal people envy Bruce Wayne for her more than anything else. The money, the house, the cars... she’s what most would take if they could have anything from my life, I know that. I would too... It’s just... is that all I am? What other interests do I have? Literature, chemistry, computers, martial arts? It’s all part of the same thing... Batman... can we really be such a good match based only on my mission? On the war?

Their conversation continued for hours, room to room, minute to minute, until Alfred eventually served them both dinner in one of the mansion’s enormous dining rooms.

I don’t even remember this room, and I have a nearly eidetic memory! When was the last time I ate dinner here? We have more in common than I thought. Turns out she does like the literature I like. Even knows a little martial arts. It’s all part of who she really is at heart, I suppose. Wants to be a lawyer. Help the world. Stay fit. Genetics and a healthy routine account for the modeling more than an actual interest in it. Though, she does seem pretty vain when it comes to clothing. Sure dresses like it, and takes care of her clothing like it too. Taking perfect care not to ruin the finer details of each piece of the outfit – the details that nobody cares to notice – but never caring enough to keep them in tact enough to be worn more than a few times over. At least until it’s out of fashion. And she knows all of the things a wealthy person like myself likes... or would like... will like... the things Bruce Wayne will be interested in once the war is over...
It’s getting late. How long ago did we eat? Two hours? Maybe three? I want to spend more time with her… This time has flown by… Almost aches, knowing it’ll be time to say goodbye soon… But the worse ache is knowing how much time I have wasted. A whole day of work in the cave has been squandered. No, there will be time for closeness with Julie later. Not now. Not tonight. Tonight I have a date with someone else…

“It’s getting pretty late, and I’m pretty tired,” Bruce said, feigning a yawn. Julie looked disappointed, but leaned in closer all the same.

“Are you sure we can’t talk longer? We can just go lay down in your bed, or on a sofa, and talk until you fall asleep.”

She wants to stay?! I guess that is what I like most about her. It’s that she wants to be with me. I spent my whole life pushing everyone away… This feeling… it’s different. I like it… I love it, even. But-

“No, no,” he said. “That’s alright. You deserve my full attention, not me drowsily checking out.” He stood up and extended his hand to her, offering to help her stand as well. She ignored it and stood on her own, hefting her bag over her shoulder, and then looked at him with a gaze that seemed to be partly happy and partly sad.

“Bruce, can I ask you something?”

“Uh, sure.”

“Bruce, how many women do you spend time with?”

How do I answer that? I’ve been with a few others for show, but she’s the only one I’ve been on real dates with.

“Just you, lately.”

“But we… I mean… you’ve never… never made a…”

No, no, no, no. I can’t have her feeling uncomfortable around me. I need her. Bruce Wayne needs to be seen with someone… and I… I need her for when this is all over… so we can be normal together.

“I never made a move on you? Your father tell you to expect that?” He chuckled, hoping she bought how easily he was pretending to take this in stride.

“Sure,” she said. “I mean, I guess…”

Can’t back out now.

“It’s just…” he paused, making it seem as though he was searching for the words that had almost instantly formed in his mind. “It’s just that I really like you, Julie. I don’t want this to be about money and sex. You’re smart, and we have so much in common. I guess I just didn’t want to go too fast.”

“Oh Bruce,” she smiled. “I like you too. It hasn’t been fast. It’s been… it’s been almost perfect, actually. You came in like a knight in shining armor, and rescued me from that jerk when we first met. And you’ve been a perfect gentleman. I just… I want to know where this is going?”

“Going?”
"I thought I’d been careful enough to keep this at bay, but I guess it ran its course.

“You and I. Are we just two people who like to talk law and literature, or are we… more? Bruce, I’ve never met a man like you before. You’re so different and I just… are we just passing interests, or are we more?”

“More, of course.”

“The tabloids say we’re an item.”

“And you say?”

“I’d like to say they’re right.”

“Well then, they’re right.” Bruce smiled, and Julie positively lit up back at him. She ran forward, and they embraced. Bruce found himself leaning in almost against his will, apressing his lips to hers. She pressed back, her lips slightly more open than his, and they held it there for a few seconds before slowly pulling apart, with her leaving one more smaller kiss on his lower lip as they parted.

Not how I expected today to turn out.

“You’re late, dad,” Barb said as her father walked into kitchen.

“I know,” James Gordon responded, hanging up his coat on some hangers in the corner and then walking over his wife who was busily toiling over a rice steamer while simultaneously holding their screaming baby in her other arm. “But I’m not as late as usual.” He smiled and kissed his wife, with her trying to smile back. Things hadn’t been smooth between them, but they had been better than they were.

“How was work?” Barb asked, not looking up, instead focusing on a mess of computer chips and wires which she had laid out all over their wooden kitchen table.

“Different,” Gordon sighed. “The new boss is a lot different than Loeb. But I still don’t like him.” He winked and then asked, “What’s all this?”


“No, I meant your shirt,” he said.

“Oh!” She looked down, tugging at the bottom of her t shirt so that its design could be seen clearly. It was a black shirt and screen-printed in the center was the yellow silhouette of a bat. “Some kids at school were making them in the graphics lab. I bought one. You know, for Batman.”

“I see,” Gordon said, tilting his head and wondering how he felt about that. Batman had saved his family, but he didn’t know whether or not he entirely condoned a vigilante shaking things up in Gotham the way that he was. It was one thing when Batman was an obscure myth on the streets, but now it had become a popular urban legend among kids. And they were looking up to him like some sort of hero.

“Jim, Honey,” his wife said, looking back over her shoulder. “Dinner is ready, but could you take out the garbage while I set the table?”
“Sure,” he said, walking over the trashcan and lifting out a heavy plastic bag filled with refuse. Tying the top shut, he trudged over the door and headed out toward the driveway. It was a warm night, almost completely still and silent. He hoisted it up into the can, and turned around to hear a familiar gruff voice.

“Gordon,” Batman said. He was crouched on a crossbeam of the supports overhanging Gordon’s porch. Gordon scratched his mustache, looking up at Batman, and then turned and moved out of sight of the kitchen windows.

“You know, Grogan’s set up a massive task force to get you,” he said.

“I know. They’re not as good as you and Detective Essen were.”

“And I wasn’t even effective… My daughter looks up to you, you know. Especially after what you did for my boy… But what you’re doing is against the law.”

“But what do you think?”

“I think you’re trying to help… but I’ve been wrong before…”

“Would you be willing to help me?” Batman pulled a tiny radio device out of his belt and held it up so Gordon could see it. “Communication link.”

“To you?”

“So we can keep in touch.”

“I don’t know, I just…”

“Gordon, we can end this. But I can’t do it alone. Falcone is on the defensive. Grogan isn’t the only one out to kill me. Someone shot at me with a bazooka last night.”

“A bazooka?!"

“Iceberg Lounge. Gang quarrel. It got out of hand.”

“Seems to be a lot of things getting out of hand with you lately. I can’t do this. This… this thing you’re doing. This war… I can’t…”

“You already are.”

“Why? Cuz I was doing my job?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Batman leapt down and stood as close to Gordon as he could without scaring him off. “They’re not just after me, but you too. They tried it once. It’s only a matter of time before they try it again. You know that, and I know that. Yet you’re still here.”

“I’m a cop, it’s part of the job.”

“These men tried to kill your family, Gordon. These aren’t crooks like on tv. These are depraved, power hungry, animals that will ruthlessly and violently attack anyone they perceive as a threat. And you know that! But you’re still here, standing in defiance.”

“It’s not defiance, it’s-”

“You and your whole family should be gone, Gordon. Disappeared into the maze of the witness
protection program. Not just for this, but for crossing corruption in Chicago too. Isn’t that why you
left? To escape some bad people out to hurt your family? You crossed the wrong people, but you
couldn’t just roll over and give up. You had to keep fighting. So rather than disappear, you
requested a transfer to the only city those people wouldn’t follow you to: Gotham. The one place
so corrupt that no criminal could get in and pull a job without having to strike a deal with someone
worse. The Roman. Less they incur his wrath. You want to fight. But you’re fighting a battle that
they will eventually win – unless we work together.”

“How?”

“For a start, you move your family. Take an apartment on an upper story. It’ll be harder for them to
get to you. Do it as soon as possible.”

“Ok, then what?” Gordon asked. He didn’t like being ordered around like this – especially when it
involved his family – but Batman was only saying things he had thought to himself at least a dozen
times already.

“Then you take this,” Batman said, holding up the communication link. “And if you ever find
something too heavy for you to handle alone, or something of particular delicate interest, you press
the button and bring me in on it.”

“Does it go both ways?”

“Don’t expect me to contact you.”

“But you could?”

“Yes.”

“Does it have a tracker?”

“Yours does. Mine can’t be traced.”

“Doesn’t seem fair.”

“The GCPD isn’t out to take you down anymore, are they Gordon? Now are you in, or out?”

Batman held out the device, and Gordon looked at it heavily, as if he wasn’t sure weather or not it
would bite him. Sweat ran down his mustache, and he constantly kept looking over his shoulder
toward the house, thinking of Barb wearing the shirt.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll take it. Under a stipulation though.”

“What?”

“I can quit whenever I want.”

“Done.”

“And you have to swear not to tangle me in this mess if you get caught.”

“Your device will shut off should anything compromising happen to me.”

“And how do I know you wouldn’t talk?” Gordon asked. Batman merely glared back at him. “Fine,
fine, point taken.” He took the transmitter and held it in his hand. It wasn’t heavy, but it felt as
though it was weighing every bit its worth in secrecy in his hand. Still, it was nowhere near as
heavy feeling as the ugly weight of his gun whenever he drew it from its holster. He ran his finger
over the button, turned it over, and then looked up to Batman. But Batman was gone. He was alone in the yard. Batman had slipped away.

“Jim?” his wife called, peaking her head out of the doorway. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah,” he said, stuffing the radio into his pocket. “Sorry, I just… thought I saw a bat out here, is all.”

“Batman!” Barb shouted, running over to the door.

“No, no,” Gordon said as he approached. “Just a bat.”
Nearly one month at large, and Red Hood’s list of victims is still growing. I’d have thought for certain that Penguin had killed him, but it doesn’t seem so. Cobblepot is nowhere to be found – for the moment. In the meantime, reports of Red Hood’s continued activities are still flooding into the GCPD. Jeffery Skeevers was assassinated from inside Blackgate Penitentiary. How did Red Hood get in? I’d say an inside job, but I honestly can’t be certain. I haven’t been to any of the crime scenes… I thought Gordon would get me in on at least one, but he hasn’t so much as tested using the radio I gave him.

“Sir?” Alfred’s voice came in. Batman pressed his hand to the side of his cowl, and leaned over his motorcycle, shrouded by the shadows of the dark alleyway.

“Alfred?”

“Sir, the police scanners are showing that there’s been a murder at the Sionis Steel Mill compound, and you’ll never guess whose name their throwing around as a suspect.”

“Red Hood,” Batman responded as he mounted the bike and revved it to life.

“Precisely.”

“I’m only a few blocks away,” Batman said as the bike skidded before catching its grip on the pavement, hauling him away into the night. “Even just a few moments on the scene before the police show up could be the difference between allowing Red Hood another kill or not. Who called it in?”

“From what I gather, it was an anonymous tip.”

“Went in over the dispatch then?”

“From the killer?’

“I wouldn’t know, Sir. Why would the murderer call the police?”

“To send a message. Get the word out. He’s communicating with Penguin, and anybody else who might want to cross paths with Falcone. Making sure his name it out there. That’s why Skeevers was shot in his cell at Blackgate.”

“If you’re theory is correct, wouldn’t they assume it all the same?”

“He’s confirming it.”

“What if you’re wrong about Red Hood working for Falcone?”

“I had considered it, but if Red Hood truly killed Sionis then this proves it. Sionis was trying to break away from Falcone’s organization. All of the kills – or attempted kills – have been people who opposed The Roman’s rule. Alfred, I’m coming in near the steel mill. Give me radio silence so I can concentrate.”

“As you wish, Sir.”

Bruce stepped down off the bike and grappled up into the forboding surroundings. It was a vast plantation of smoke stacks and factory warehouses, dumping loads of chemicals not only into the
nearby waterways, but belching it up into the sky as well. A great black wart on the face of Gotham City.

Charles Sionis’s body was near a doorway that opened into a building filled with cubicles and filing cabinets. It was one of the smaller buildings in the complex, and clearly a place where records and financial information was kept. Strictly administrative.

*Must have just been coming home from work. Just leaving the office when they gunned him down.* Batman leaned over the body, inspecting what was left of the old corpse’s face. *Brutal. Red Hood held nothing back on this hit. His keys are still in his hand. He must have just barely locked the door behind him… The wall is riddled with bullet holes.* He looked at the wall, spattered in blood, and then looked in the direction that the bullets must have came from.

*Shooter was somewhere over there. Really need Fox to work on the forensics lenses I wanted. They’d be helpful in a situation like this.*

He scoured the ground and easily came across the killer’s footprints. It was a muddled mess of shoes in all different styles and sizes. But there was one pair that unmistakably were made by a pair of extremely fancy leather shoes, the type one might wear with spats and a pinstriped suit. These were the prints of the Red Hood. He watched where they lead after they had carried out their deed, but saw very quickly that they just lead out of the complex where they’d have surely gotten in a car and disappeared. But he noticed something else as well.

*An even gate. He walked with an even gate. No limp. No sign of trauma or anything. I saw Red Hood get shot in the leg… but now he seems fine. Maybe one of his men was wearing the suit tonight… But it doesn’t look like any of them struggled to walk at all. Could have stayed behind or… Or.*

“Alfred, I need you to access the notes I took on the past Red Hood victims. I need to know causes of death and how it was carried out. Where the wounds were and so on.”

“One moment, Sir… Skeevers was shot right through the back of the neck while working out in his cell. The shot was clean, and couldn’t have been discharged from more than a yard away. Then there’s Jane McCallister, a courier for the Maronis, who was bludgeoned on the back of the head—”

“It wasn’t a brutal attack though, was it?”

“For a murder I suppose not… Just shook his brain loose. Very little skin breakage, aside from the expected splitting and bruising.”

“How about someone else who got shot, like Skeevers?”

“One Lauden, John, and underling of one of Falcone’s more ambitious underlings, Rupert Thorne. Last week he was shot multiple times in the chest.”

“His funeral was still open casket though… and those shots were fairly precise, were they not?”

“Yes, Sir. Just three wounds in his chest. Medium range.”

“So Red Hood would have taken a good aim… When I saw him at The Iceberg Lounge, he was spraying an automatic weapon around the room just hoping to hit someone. Not a disciplined shot. Not calm, either. This looks like it happened in somewhat the same way, and it seems Red Hood stepped closer and just obliterated the head with gunshot wounds. Not as delicate as the head trauma inflicted on Lauden, nor with the precision of the shot on Skeevers…”
“Rather grizzly, isn’t it?”

“Alfred, I don’t think these murders were all committed by the same man.” He quickly ran back to the bike, hearing approaching police vehicles just down the road, and quickly started it up to escape before they arrived.

“I did tell you to consider that the Red Hood wasn’t behind all of them, Sir.”

“Carmine Falcone never actually goes to a crime scene in person. He can’t afford to be so easily connected to a crime. So it makes sense that Red Hood isn’t him. And the other mob leaders, like Maroni, wouldn’t either. They have thugs and hired muscle who do it for them. So what if Red Hood is just hired muscle? And what if they get a new person to play the role during every job?”

“Are you certain you’re not… reaching, Master Bruce?”

“I should have taken better note of the footprints… Could have calculated his height and compared it to what I saw… They seemed to come from a man of similar height… Can’t be sure though. I have a good memory, but I can’t guarantee it’s free of flaws.”

“With Sionis gone, will that be the end of Red Hood?”

“Doubtful. Penguin is still at large, and you can bet that Falcone will send him after me and Gordon too. Maybe even Dent… I’d have to imagine that Catwoman and Anarky are pretty high on his list too. He has a scar all down the side of his face from her. And I saw plenty of Anarky tags at the Falcone Shipping Yard just two nights ago, while on patrol. I think Red Hood will stay the course… At least until he’s no longer effective. Falcone is a business man at heart, and if his returns are better than his losses, he’ll keep it up.”

“He lost against Penguin.”

“Hardly. Cobblepot’s club was burnt and put out of commission. Since then, he’s disappeared – hiding from Red Hood – and unable to get his business up and running again. They’re waiting him out. But maybe I can put a stop to it.”

“I don’t like the sound of you engaging with these characters. Detective work and pulling the strings with the Assistant DA are one thing, but your close encounters with these people hasn’t seemed to end well on more than a few occasions.”

“Well, you’ll have plenty of time to wait before worrying, Alfred. I won’t be doing it tonight. I’m actually heading home now. Red Hood will have to wait. We need to find out where he’ll strike next, first.”

“And how do you propose we’ll do that?”

“Need to do some snooping into the Sionis family secrets. I’ll talk to Fox tomorrow. See if he knows anything about their business. And I’ll be attending the funeral as well… Maybe I should bring Julie… Alfred, would you call Julie tomorrow and invite her for me?”

“The software is all there in different parts,” Bruce said, placing a notepad on the table in front of him. “Different programs. We need to take the pieces we need, and immediately get to work on this.”

“Forensics Lenses,” Fox said, rubbing his mustache in thought. “You sure we can do that?”
“If you got me the programs I listed from the companies I listed, I could do it myself.”

“But you’d rather one of our guys did it?”

“Under the guise of working on something that the police or military could use, yes.”

“And do you intend on letting either of those parties use them, Mr. Wayne?”

“The version the company comes up with, yes.”

“And then you’ll upgrade it for yourself.”

“Unless you see a problem?”

“No,” Fox laughed. “No, I don’t. I’ll work on getting a team ready as soon as our meeting is over.”

“Thank you. We could even have our people upgrade each program specifically, and then I’ll just put them all together… That’s actually probably a better idea… Then we could sell it – in its pieces of course… help people… What’s so funny?”

“You’re just so ambitious, Bruce,” Fox said. “We’ve never had so many projects all going at once here before. At least not in the past decade or so.”

“Is the load too big?”

“Hardly. This was a successful company with only one or two big projects at a time. With the thirty-six you’ve got us working on, we’re going to be doing even better. Any other ideas?”

“Actually yes. Security systems.”

“We’ve actually done that.”


“Money. It was too expensive for people to buy, and too expensive for us to manufacture. They cost more than the return.”

“Well mark them down and sell them,” Bruce said. “Not to houses or individual consumers, but to banks, stores, museums… the GCPD especially. Anything high security. Get them sold.”

“Just take the hit?”

“You said we’re projected to make more than ever as a company. We can afford a small hit for better security for the rest of the world.”

“You mean security that’s easier for you to break into?”

“No, no… I mean, yes, but that’s a side benefit. This will really help people against normal invaders… Wait, you were joking though, right?”

“Of course,” Fox laughed. “Of course. I understand.”

“Thank you,” Bruce sighed, smirking a bit. “You’re certainly less critical than Alfred.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Fox replied. “Being critical doesn’t always mean being negative. Mr.
Wayne – Bruce – when I was young, this was a much more racist world than it is now. Make no mistake, it’s still got its share of hateful thinking but… when I was younger, it seemed especially hard. And those people who stood up for human rights – who took the heavy fire for the rest of us – and some of them died doing it, mind you – they made a difference. They didn’t cure the world, but they made a difference, and not a day goes by that I don’t remind myself how much I owe to them.

“Well, now I’m older, and I’m successful, but I can’t say I’m entirely pleased with the way world runs. Especially in Gotham City. I’m here because this is my home, but it’s not necessarily a nice home. There are people here who… well, who have ruined it. And I’m just sick of it. I joined this company for the same reason. Gotham’s economic crisis had caused a very large burden on some very unfortunate people, and your father was using this money machine to try and ease that economic gap. Bruce, I’m tired of the corruption and hopelessness in Gotham, and it’s time somebody did something about it. If that somebody is Bruce Wayne, I might as well be a part of it too… plus, I get to help keep you as safe as possible with some of this stuff too.” Fox winked.

“And I thank you for it,” Bruce said. Then he became somewhat sullen and serious and asked, “What do you know about Sionis Steel?”

“News said Sionis was killed last night,” Fox answered, frowning. “What do you know about that?”

“It’s of great interest to me at the moment.”

“Don’t know much myself. But I do know they were working with Ace Chemicals on some big stuff earlier this year. Ace helped us develop some of those new plastics you ordered… Don’t know what Sionis wanted with Ace though, but it must have been something pretty advantageous… but at the beginning of summer I heard that Sionis tried to buy out Ace.”

“What stopped them?”

“Two of the four major shareholders wouldn’t sell out.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Maybe,” Fox said thoughtfully. “A lot of time and money have been sunk into Ace. They own one of the smaller island districts to the south. And they’re not entirely out of business by any means.”

“But?”

“But it’s a new age, Bruce. Enormous industrial compounds in and around such densely populated areas aren’t necessarily basking in public approval these days. Not like they used to be, at least. They’ve laid off a lot of employees recently. If they feel the need to downsize, it’s interesting that they wouldn’t want to sell to Sionis.”

“And just as interesting that Sionis would want to buy,” Bruce said. “They’ve been in the same situation. Falling revenues. Downsizing. Public disapproval. Why buy a company with an equally deteriorating reputation and return?”

“Why indeed,” Fox nodded. “I suspect you’ll want to get some of our guys looking into it?”

“No teams,” Bruce said. “Give it to just one accountant. Special assignment. I’ll look into things on my end in the meantime.”
I’ve seen many die in my lifetime, but this is the first funeral I have attended since my parents’s. Ironic that it is one for an enemy. Rain fell from above, adding a sense of sorrow to an otherwise nearly emotionless funeral.

Charles Sionis was buried in the Gotham Heights Cemetery. It was a vast burial ground. In spite of being located in Gotham Heights, most of the city’s dead were buried there. At least the ones the city took note of. There were cheaper cemeteries and crematoriums to be found, but this was the general go-to graveyard. Most of the old money in Gotham was present. Bruce Wayne hardly stood out at all. Sionis Steel had been a dying company, but it was nevertheless a big name around town, and there were many who felt obligated to attend.

Bruce and Julie sat under a tent which had been set up for guests. All in black, Bruce felt Julie looked beautiful even when she was supposedly mourning. But he knew that mourning was only supposed. Hardly a soul looked sad to see Charles Sionis pass. Even though it was a murder, little sympathy could be found. He didn’t have many friends in later life. The one who looked the most shaken was his son, Roman.

Roman was the only one not in black. Instead he wore a pinstriped white suit. It likely appeared to be little more than an eccentric choice to most, but Bruce knew better. Roman hated his father. This was not mere eccentricism, but defiance. Aside from the white suit, his hair was a mess, and he looked as though he had been unsettled beyond any point he’d been before. Bruce hardly recognized him from the man he had interrogated a few nights previously. He didn’t look sad, but he looked hurt, angry, and pensive if nothing else. He kept staring at his father’s casket of ebony wood. Every once in a while he would glance at others in attendance; particularly Sal Maroni, Carmine Falcone, and their partner, The Russian. But for the most part, he simply stared, and shook as if he were cold. For the entire procession, he didn’t speak even a word.

“Roman seemed to be taking it hard,” Julie commented after the casket had been lowered, and people were either leaving or offering Roman their hollow condolences.

“Maybe,” Bruce shrugged. “He and his father were often at odds, I hear.”

“We all live in our father’s shadow, in a way,” Julie said. “Regardless of whether they were good men, or how long they’ve been gone. You still think of yours, don’t you?”

“All the time.”

Bruce glanced towards Roman, who, while being greeted by an older couple, looked up and locked eyes with him. Bruce quickly turned around, unsure of what to do, but Roman continued staring, and then, ignoring the elderly woman who was attempting to speak with him, pushed through the crowd toward where Bruce and Julie were standing.

Why is he coming over? I’ve hardly spoken a word to him in my entire life.

“He’s coming this way,” Julie said.

“Oh,” Bruce replied, trying to sound surprised. They turned and saw the man walking briskly towards them.

“Mr. Sionis,” Julie greeted him. “I’m sorry for you loss.”

“Bruce Wayne,” Roman said, ignoring Julie entirely and extending his hand.
“Uh, Roman,” Bruce said, clasping his hand in return. “Haven’t seen you in a long time!... Sorry about your father.” Julie shot Bruce a shocked expression, blushing with embarrassment, but Roman hardly seemed to mind.

“Wasn’t very close to him,” Roman shrugged. “How about you? Did you know him?”

“I’d met him, but I wouldn’t presume to know him better than you did.”

“Didn’t say I didn’t know him,” Roman replied. “I said I wasn’t close to him. But I figured a big wig company man like yourself would have crossed paths with him on more than a few occasions.”

“Sure, I have... I mean, I’ve only really been involved with my company since January though. I used to live abroad.”

“Oh… but you are involved now, right?”

“Sure,” Bruce was somewhat taken aback by talking business at a funeral.

“I’ll just be upfront with you then, Bruce. I don’t know anything about the Steel business, and it seems I have more or less come into possession of the company. Not by my father’s will but... as next of kin, you know... Anyway, I was wondering if Wayne Enterprises would buy Sionis Steel from me.”

“That’s a, uh... rather sudden offer,” Bruce said, scratching the back of his head uneasily.

“Well, it was a rather sudden inheritance,” Roman said, irritated. “I’m sure you relate – no offense – I just mean I don’t really want it. And frankly, I’ve heard enough people speculating as to whether I plugged the old man myself, and I’d rather just be rid of the whole thing.”

“The whole thing? You don’t want involvement at all?”

“I have different interests.”

“Well... I can talk to my people about it, certainly.”

“Could you actually just get me in contact with some of them directly? I’d like to broker a deal as fast as possible, actually. Your people can pretty much name a price and it’s theirs.”

“Sure,” Bruce nodded. “Uh, Lucius Fox is who you’re going to want to talk to. You can just call Wayne Enterprises and ask for him. I can phone ahead and make sure you get through to him – priority call, or something.”

“Is their office open today?” Roman asked, quickly.

“It is.”

“Thank you,” Roman reached out his hand, and Bruce opted to take the opportunity to do a little bit of snooping. “Just make sure to call ahead as soon as you can.”

“I hope it works out in your best interest,” Bruce said. “I do have a question though... about your company, that is. Wayne Industries recently did some work on lightweight plastics with Ace Chemicals. It’s my understanding that your father actually tried to buy them out. Would you happen to know anything about that? If your father was aware of any good business ventures that we should be aware of-”

“I really wouldn’t know,” Roman said, looking dully at Bruce. “I wasn’t close to my father.
Different interests. I’m going to head home soon though, and call your friend, so please do call ahead. Have a good day.” He turned and walked back into the crowd, taking extra care to keep a wide radius clear of Falcone and his cronies.

“Strange,” Bruce muttered.

“I’m sure he’s taking the death hard,” Julie replied. “Just coming to terms with it.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I know how that goes… Come on, let’s get going.” He put his arm around her and they began walking toward his car, where Alfred was dutifully awaiting them. But as they walked, Bruce couldn’t help but notice Falcone glaring at them, intensely.

What could he want?

Evening had come and gone, and night now blanketed Gotham Heights. But unlike most nights, there was a different feeling in the air. It was foreboding, but calm. Alfred was sitting at the computer terminal in the Batcave, typing up various data entries as per Bruce’s earlier requests. He had driven both Bruce and Julie back to the mansion that afternoon, and provided a light lunch for the two of them before returning to work. And to his great surprise, when he had returned at dinner time, the two of them were still sitting in the parlor, talking. Bruce had asked him to prepare a meal, to which he happily complied, and Bruce and Julie had been up in the mansion ever since.

It wasn’t until nearly ten-thirty that Bruce entered the cave, still wearing his collared shirt and suit pants.

“How are things going?” Bruce asked.

“I’m almost done adding your data entries, Master Bruce. And how are you? Did Miss Maddison depart yet?”

“No,” Bruce said.

“No?”

“She fell asleep talking… in my arms.”

“Surely you of all people didn’t lose track of the time,” Alfred laughed.

“Hardly,” Bruce said, rubbing his hands over his face. “It was just a good conversation… She’s still sleeping upstairs on the parlor couch.” He walked over to a security monitor and typed in a code which immediately lit the screen up, showing a live image feed from a security camera in the room where Julie was sleeping.

“Spying?”

“Just keeping an eye on her,” Bruce sighed. “Let me know when she wakes up.”

“I can’t imagine her father will be too pleased with her spending the night.”

“It’s just hard to make her leave sometimes, Alfred.”

“Make her leave? Or hard for you to say goodbye?”

“Probably both.”
“Master Bruce,” Alfred smiled. “You’re growing quite close to her. I know we’ve had this conversation many times before, but what do you plan on doing with her? I know you intended to keep your distance, but things don’t seem to be going in that direction.”

“I know… I don’t know what’s happening.”

“What’s happening? Love, Master Bruce. You are falling for her.”

“Then it has to end.”

“No,” Alfred said, standing up and walking to Bruce’s side. “Bruce, we can figure out a way to make this work.”

“Why?” Bruce asked, obviously agitated by the subject.

“Because you need to be happy, Master Bruce. You need to give this a chance. What if Julie is your perfect match? You don’t want to squander this before it even takes off.”

“I… I can’t,” Bruce said, placing his palms down on the desk in front of him and leaning on them, hanging his head. “It has to be one or the other. I can’t have it both ways. I can’t put myself on the line when there’s someone waiting for me to come home.”

“Then choose the one which will last,” Alfred said.

“And which one is that?”

“In my opinion, Master Bruce, it’s Julie. You can move on with her. Have a family. Have a life. Have a life away from this awful city. But also in my opinion, I don’t think you’ve let this relationship grow enough to know what it is you want. The only time I have seen you take this relationship seriously has been when your guard was down. Try to find a way to make it work. Have this life, and her. After all, you put yourself on the line time and time again, and I’m here waiting for you to come home.”

“So you think I should keep things going as they are?”

“Absolutely,” Alfred said, placing his hand on the large shoulder of the man who had once been the boy that he himself had tried to raise. “Bruce, open your heart and mind to the possibility that someday it won’t be just you and I here in this house alone. Find a way to reconcile that within yourself. But give it time before you decide to let them into this part of your life – the Batman part of your life. Because you never know if things are going to prosper between you two. It’s too early. You know… I used to have feelings for Leslie.”

“Thompkins?” Bruce said, raising his head and looking quizzically at Alfred.

“Indeed,” Alfred breathed out. “I had rather fancied her during much of the time that she and I worked to take care of you together. And when you left, I finally allowed myself to open my heart to the idea. We spent more time together, and had a brief relationship. But it wasn’t right. And eventually we decided to end it.”

“You dated Leslie?” Bruce said, sounding disgusted and surprised all at the same time. “I never would have guessed.”

“You never wrote home enough to find out.”

“Well, that would explain why Leslie was so mad about how I’ve treated you… She was there for
“Indeed, she was. But the point is, I would have never known how that relationship would have worked out, had I not given it the chance. And when I finally did, I realized that happiness was simply feigned.”

“Well how will I know, Alfred? How will I know if my happiness with Julie is real or not?”

“You’ll know,” Alfred smiled. “Trust me. When you find someone that you truly connect with, you will know it’s right.” He paused for a moment, and then chuckled a bit to himself.

“Are you laughing at me?” Bruce asked hostilely.

“A bit, Master Bruce,” Alfred said as he sat back down at his computer. “It’s just been a very long time since you needed my advice on something of that nature. You tried so hard to be an adult when you were younger. Now, you’re a man who is still afraid of talking to women.” Alfred’s tone was playful, but Bruce did not appear amused. His face darkened as he looked away and walked toward the case where his costume was stored.

“I’m not afraid of that,” he said quietly. “I’m afraid of losing sight of my goals.”

“If you’re goals are self-destructive,” Alfred said even quieter, “I’m not so certain that is a bad thing.”

“Over the past several weeks I have had communication with numerous citizens of Gotham City,” the modified voice of Anarky said through a recorded video message on Commissioner Grogan’s computer screen. Grogan’s lips tightened, and a vein began to bulge on his bald head as he stared anxiously at the screen.

“How many did this go out to?” he questioned Merkel, who looked scared for his life.

“Hard to say,” Merkel replied nervously. “Most of the city council, the mayor, us, dozens of attorneys and business owners…”

“I have met with many,” Anarky continued. “And I can truly say without any hesitation that we are one. We are one people, united. We have found each other. A massive population of brothers and sisters who have one simple goal in our hearts and minds: a better world for everyone. But there are also those of the minority who do not share this goal. No, these few are those who love crises. When people are panicked and desperate and no one seems to know what to do, that is the ideal time to push through their will filled with malice. Their pro-corporate policies, their privatized education and social security, slashing public services, getting rid of the last constraints on corporate power, and worshiping money. There is only one thing that can block this tactic, and fortunately, it’s a very big thing. It is the rest of us. A unit so vast that it is nearly immovable. And we must stand idly by no more! We must pay for their crisis no more! In the frenzy of hyper patriotism and corporate desperation that followed the economic rot of decades past here in Gotham, it was easy to sweep us away completely. But that was a long time ago, and we have chosen a fixed target. A focal point for which to make change. That target is now. That target is the enemy. And we have put no end date on our presence here – on our fight here. Only when you stay put can you grow roots. It is a fact of the information age that too many movements spring up like beautiful flowers but quickly die off. It’s because they don’t have roots. And they don’t have longterm plans for how they are going to sustain themselves. So when storms come, they get washed away. But that will not be us! Blood will be shed, and the most of us will have been
slaughtered in Gotham’s streets before we give up! So while the politicians and criminals and wealthy of Gotham squirm, support for our movement grows and grows. Too long have you been drunk on easy money. Unfettered greed has trashed this city. And not just the concrete lands of Gotham, but the nature around us as well. We are overfishing our oceans, polluting our water with oil and deep water drilling, turning to the dirtiest forms of energy on the planet. The lush water ecosystem near Sionis Steel is now filled with new tar sands that we can’t seem to decompose. It has choked out all life in that part of the bay. And not our water, nor the dirt, nor the atmosphere cannot absorb the amount of poison we are putting into it, creating dangerous warming. The new normal is serial disasters: economic and ecological. These are the facts on the ground. They are so blatant, so obvious, that it is undeniable to say this system is broken. We all know, or at least sense, that the world is upside down: we act as if there is no end to what is actually finite—fossil fuels and the atmospheric space to absorb their emissions. And we act as if there are strict and immovable limits to what is actually bountiful—the financial resources to build the kind of society we need. The task of our time is to turn this around: to challenge this false scarcity. To insist that we can afford to build a decent, inclusive society—while at the same time, respect the real limits to what the earth and its people can take. We have rolled over before, but this time our movement cannot get distracted, divided, burnt out or swept away by frivolities. This time we have to succeed. And I’m not talking about regulating the banks and increasing taxes on the rich, though that’s important. I am talking about changing the underlying values that govern our society. That is hard to fit into a single media-friendly demand, and it’s also hard to figure out how to do it. But it is no less urgent for being difficult. That is what I see happening now. In the way many of Gotham’s so-called street urchins are feeding each other, keeping each other warm, sharing information freely and providing simple health care, and empowerment to those who have previously had none. I have seen my symbol on buildings all across the city, but my favorite one says, “I care about you,” beneath it. I did not write this, but in a culture that trains people to avoid each other’s gaze and to say, “Let them die,” that is a deeply radical and powerful statement. And it is true. I care about you. No, not you of the system, but you the real denizens of Gotham City. The core of Gotham’s wealth is spent, hollowed out by decadent living. Well now, we shall burn the shell. In this great struggle, it doesn’t matter what we wear, whether we shake our fists or make peace signs, or whether we can fit our dreams for a better world into a media soundbite. But a few things that do matter are our courage, our moral compass, how we treat each other, and how willing we are to act. And we are willing! We have picked a fight with some of the most powerful economic and political forces on the planet. That’s frightening. And as this movement grows from strength to strength, it will get more frightening. Always be aware that there will be a temptation to shift to smaller targets—like, a fellow brother or sister in arms. After all, that is a battle that’s easier to win. Don’t give in to the temptation. Treat each other as if we plan to work side by side in struggle for many, many years to come. Because the task will demand nothing less. Let’s treat this beautiful movement as if it is most important thing in the world. Because it is. It really is. Change is coming. Beware, Gotham’s Fatted Calves… Anarky has come.” And the message cut out.

“Find this guy,” Grogan bellowed. “I don’t care what it takes. Batman is now priority number two. Anarky is number one. I am starting a zero tolerance policy on all these masked weirdos. Zero tolerance! I want every last one of them locked up in Blackgate Penitentiary by Christmas, do you understand?”
I can’t believe I’m doing this, Gordon thought as he stood nervously in the center of the Gotham Heights Cemetery. I never thought I would be doing this… Why am I doing this? Should have never accepted the darn thing… Just too tempting… I’ve told myself that if I got close enough to him I could capture him, but I know deep down, the reason I’m doing this is simple. I’m curious. I’m fed up. I want to be a part of this. I can’t help it.

Nervously he looked over his shoulder, thinking he heard a slight sound off in the shadows. But there was nothing. Just a great stretch of tombstones in the cold September night.

“Gordon,” Batman’s deep voice spoke out.

“Gah,” Gordon gasped as he spun around, finding Batman standing sternly to his left. “Jeez, you’re gonna give me a heart attack sneaking up like that.”

“It’s been a long time, Gordon,” Batman growled, stepping closer. “I expected to hear from you sooner.”

“You mad at me?” Gordon immediately shot back. He angrily pulled the radio transmitter that Batman had given him earlier from out of his pocket and brandished it mockingly. “Do you have any idea how much I had to calm my nerves before I could even look at this thing? You think it’s easy to press a button that could end my entire career – and maybe land me in jail or worse – if anyone ever knew I had pressed it?”

“I do,” Batman said. “I put myself on the line every single night.”

“Yeah, but I somehow doubt you have a family that’s depending on you.” Batman glared silently, realizing that he had perhaps expected too much of the cop.

“My apologies,” he finally whispered.

“Yeah,” Gordon sniffed, rubbing his finger over his mustache. “Your apologies… Look, I didn’t call you here to argue. I called you to look at this.” He stretched his hand outward, motioning directly toward the grave of Charles Sionis. Only, it was not as Batman had seen it a few weeks earlier.

The earth around the gravesite had been torn up, with the stone vault inside having been violently smashed open. Sionis’s casket had been lifted out of the grave, sitting half in the hole and half out. But even more curiously, the casket itself had been chopped into splintered pieces on the portion which had been raised out of the hole. Entire sections of it were completely missing.

“The corpse?” Batman said, noting that it was clearly not inside.

“This happened last night,” Gordon said. “The body was cleaned up this morning.”

“Cleaned up?”

“It had been removed. Chopped into pieces and spread all over the area. Some pieces were missing entirely… The genitals, and the head haven’t been recovered…”

“You called me here on a day old case?”
“You’re lucky I called you at all. You’re a vigilante! I should be trying to capture you, not work with you! Look, fact is, I don’t trust you.”

“Then why did you press the button on the transmitter?”

“Who knows…” Gordon muttered, before offering, “To see if I could trust you?”

“Because you want to.”

“Look, GCPD isn’t taking this too seriously. It’s a small case. But we know Sionis kept company that are of high interest to us. If Grogan wasn’t so worried about rounding up the Anarky character, I’m sure we’d be looking into this more thoroughly.”

“Rightfully so.”

“Anyone could have done this – it might just be nothing. But since it’s a loose end we aren’t looking into at the moment, I thought it might be of interest to you.”

“Interest to us.”

“Not us,” Gordon said. “You. We’re not a baseball team! You think I’m working for you, and your cause? Wrong! You’re working for me. You’re trying to end Falcone’s reign of terror, and that’s exactly what GCPD wants. Which means I’m in charge. You are earning my trust – not the other way around. I’m not the one wearing a mask and assaulting people.”

“Fine,” Batman grunted. “We’ll do it your way, Gordon… Did anyone contact Roman Sionis?”

“No,” Gordon sniffed. “He’s gone. Nobody has seen him since last weekend. He hired some cheap lawyers to handle offloading most of the estate – gave them full power of attorney from what I can gather.”

“He had a tough relationship with his father. The way the casket and body have been so mutilated might indicate that whoever did it both knew him and had strong emotional connections to him. I’d say it was his son. If not the son, then it was from Falcone, warning the son.”

“Jeez,” Gordon said. “Pretty morbid… Since Loeb stepped down, I feel like things are getting worse.”

“Worse?”

“Falcone’s been on the war path, trying to take out people who’ve crossed him… He’s trying to tell everyone that people like you – people who don’t bow down to his rule – can’t be tolerated.”

“You think I did this?”

“In a way,” Gordon said. “What about Anarky and Red Hood? Wearing masks and causing mass havoc… they’re copycats.”

“Copying me?”

“Who else?”

“Maybe… I think Red Hood is a part of this whole thing. I think he works for Falcone.”

“We’ve had the same hunch. He certainly seems to have the same interests as Falcone’s crime family, if nothing else. Maybe he is Falcone?”
“Doubt it. Carmine Falcone is a business man. He stays in the office. He leaves the field work to his thugs. His capos. Even in a mask, it’s unlike him. In fact, it’s unlike all of them. The world of organized crime doesn’t seem to smile on masks, even when they’re on their own side.”

“So then what’s the connection?”

“Red Hood is a ruse – an idea,” Batman explained. “It’s a part, and Falcone hires actors to fill it – to do the dirty work. I think Red Hood is more than one person.”

“In the same outfit?”

“I saw Red Hood get shot up pretty good a few weeks ago. But he’s continued his crime spree like clockwork. I think Falcone hires a different person to wear the mask for every night. Keeps the character unpredictable, and harder to trace… Plus, the role comes with incentive, as it doesn’t force anyone to wear the mantle for too long.”

“That’s quite a theory.”

“In the meantime, Falcone himself has been keeping a relatively low profile in his operations.”

“We’ve noticed… the low profile these past few weeks, I mean.”

“Is Grogan on his payroll?”

“No,” Gordon said. “But he’s still under Falcone’s thumb still… Afraid of something. He’s probably crooked, but not a personal friend of the mob like Loeb was. And he’s more ruthless than Loeb ever was. I sort of wondered if he was part of the reason Falcone’s been staying out of the spotlight lately.”

“Dent, more likely,” Batman said.

“Yeah. Dent running for DA has probably got him pretty spooked… A lot of people are really rallying behind him – Dent, that is… What do you think about Dent?”

“What about him?”

“His campaign. Him being DA. I mean, have you heard his slogan? I believe in Harvey Dent. It’s a little self-serving.”

“Maybe.”

“So what do you think? Do you believe in Harvey Dent?”

“I believe in Gotham City.”

“Well,” Gordon said. “You’re one of the few then… Look, if you wanna do more than track down grave robbers, I hear that Sal Maroni is prepping a large drug run on the southern docks. Heroin, I’d bet. They seem to be having some disputes over there with the Penguin gang… Anyway, you can look into that if you want.”

“I’ve been running surveillance on that all month,” Batman grunted back.

“Oh,” Gordon replied awkwardly.

“Sir,” Alfred’s voice buzzed in on Batman’s internal comm-link. “The CFO of Ace Chemicals, a Mr. Lambert, has been murdered.” At that same moment, Gordon’s radio started to go off as the
dispatcher read out information about the exact same case.

“The CFO of Ace Chemicals has been murdered,” Batman said before Gordon could grab his walkie talkie.

“Stabbed to death,” Gordon said as he listened. “With his son’s fingerprints on the knife. They’re apprehending the son now. Look, I’ve got to go, but you stay clear of this. I’ve given you two good cases tonight. Just stay with those.”

“Sionis had interest in Ace Chemicals,” Batman said as he began walking away. “This could all be connected.”

“This way, Gordon,” Officer Bullock said as he lead Gordon into the front room of Mr. Lambert’s Gotham Heights home. It was big, lavish, but nowhere near the size of the estates and mansions that dotted the Palisades.

“Hello, Merkel,” Gordon said as he saw Merkel overseeing a group of officers who were taking photos of the bloody corpse on the floor, and scouring the scene for evidence. “Everything under control?”

“Yeah,” Merkel said, sighing as he eyed the body on the floor. “We’ve got the younger Lambert in the back room. Usual routine hasn’t turned up much other than his prints on the knife. But, as you can imagine, he says he didn’t do it.”

“Think I can talk to him?”

“Sure,” Merkel said. “We read him his rights, but, you know… He’s still in there panicking and talking. Got a comforter wrapped all around him. Grogan is coming to take him in personally I think, so you’d better hurry. Come on.”

Merkel brought him down the hall and into a small study where Lambert sat, shaking in a large red armchair, sweat running down his ill-looking face, being watched over by Officer Montoya.

“Lambert,” Merkel said as they entered the room. “This is Officer Gordon.”

“The Hero Cop,” Lambert said quietly.

“They say you killed your father,” Gordon said calmly as he approached the man.

“I didn’t do it! You’ve got to believe me, I didn’t do it,” he shouted back, writhing in his armchair.

“Evidence shows that you did,” Gordon said. “Commissioner Grogan is on his way to take you in himself, and then I’d imagine you’re going to have Harvey Dent prosecuting you.”

“I didn’t kill my own father!”

“Well if you didn’t, I suggest you calm down and talk to us before Grogan gets here. You have the right to remain silent, as anything you say can and will be used against you… But if it can be used for you…”

“Gordon?” Montoya said quizzically.

“Better us than Grogan,” Gordon said, shrugging.
“Look,” Lambert said, still upset but focusing. “I got home tonight late from work. I work at the Ace Chemicals Plant as an accountant. You can ask anyone, tonight I had a lot of work to do for a contract we just made with Shreck Enterprises on treatment for their new power plant project in Gotham Bay. I came in, and as I was passing my father’s library I heard a groan… I rushed in, and there was my father lying on the floor with a knife in him! I ran in, and I saw something leap out the window, and then saw that his safe had been opened. I pulled the knife out of him, and turned him toward me, and he grumbled something about some contract, and then he died. That’s how I got my finger prints on the knife. That’s the truth, I swear it! The killer is still out there, and you’re all letting him get away!”

“Is the safe still open?” Gordon asked.

“Yes!” Lambert cried.

“Window was open too,” Montoya added.

“Well, did your father have any enemies or people who had an interest in his business activities?”

The phone began to ring in the house.

“The phone!” Lambert said.

“Ignore it,” Gordon said sternly. “An officer will handle it. Just tell me, do you know of anyone who would have either been an enemy or have had interest in your father’s business activities? Or the contract he was talking about?”

“He had a lot of contracts,” Lambert said quietly. “But I don’t know why he’d have one here at home. I know his partners were mad about something to do with Sionis Steel—”

“Name them,” Gordon said, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

“Well, uh, it’s public knowledge. Steven Blain, Paul Rogers, and Alfred Stryker.”

“Gordon,” Officer Bullock said as he entered the room. “There’s a man on the phone. Says his name is Steve Blain. Wanted to talk to the stiff.” Lambert went white as a sheet and Bullock winced, realizing he needed to watch his language more closely.

“What did you tell him?”

“That this was the police,” Bullock shrugged. “He got all excited by that. Wanted to talk.”

“He still on the line?” Gordon asked, sighing.

“Yeah,” Bullock said.

“Alright, get a squad dispatched out to his location now,” Gordon ordered. “He’s a suspect. I wanna talk to him on the phone for now.”

“This way,” Bullock said. Gordon followed him back into the front room, and picked up the telephone receiver.

“Hello,” Gordon said. “This is Officer Gordon. Who am I speaking with?”

“This is Steven Blain,” the voice on the other line said in a long, drawn out Southern Accent. “I need to talk to you all about some business that’s happened recently, but I need police protection first.”
“We’re sending a squad over as we speak,” Gordon said. “But if you’re in some sort of danger, I suggest you tell me what you know.”

“I have no problem with that,” the voice returned. “Yesterday, Mr. Lambert called and told me that he had received an anonymous threat on his life… Today I received the same. He was real worried, but I thought it was some sort of joke. Until today. I called up to tell him what had happened, but now I’m afraid I’m next. What should I do?”

“Are you at home?” Gordon asked.

“I am. I told the other officer who answered that I was.”

“Lock your doors and windows, and stay calm. Don’t let anybody in who doesn’t have a badge. We’ll be there in just a few minutes.”

“We’ll be there in just a few minutes,” the voice of Officer Gordon had said. Blain sat in his own armchair only a few miles away, waiting for the doorbell to ring with the arrival of the protection he had requested. Gordon had asked him to divulge more, but he refused to talk until he was sure he was absolutely safe. He saw no reason to provide any reason for delay in protecting him. But as he sat in his chair, with a feeling of unease and impending danger, a sickening shot suddenly rang out through the darkness.

His vision blurring and his stomach churning, Blain looked down at his girthy body to see blood oozing from a gunshot wound in his chest. Before he could fully comprehend all that had happened, he slumped over in his chair, dead. The shooter hastily made his way through the room to the safe which sat behind the armchair, and quickly opened it, obviously equipped with a full knowledge of the lock’s combination. Securing a piece of paper, he quickly ran for the second story window which he had broken through minutes earlier, and crawled out and up onto the roof.

“Did you get the paper?” A second man asked as he helped the shooter up.

“Yeah,” he said, catching his breath as he leered over his conquest. As they sighed a moment of relief before making their getaway, the two men did not notice the third menacing figure standing behind them until it was too late.

“The Batman!” one shouted. Behind them, Batman had been creeping up, but upon being noticed he leapt forward, lashing out at the second man with a terrific blow from his right fist, knocking him entirely unconscious. The second adversary aimed his gun, but wasn’t quick enough to pull the trigger. Batman grabbed the man’s wrist and slammed it back into his face. Then, he grabbed him in a deadly headlock, forcing him to drop the crumpled up piece of paper. With a final mighty heave, Batman sent the burly criminal flying through the sky over the edge of the roof. As the man fell, Batman swiftly retrieved the paper from his feet.

He’ll live, but I was too slow. If only Lambert had mentioned Blain a minute or two earlier. I could have saved Blain.

Sirens sounded as several police cars pulled up, followed by Gordon himself. Batman crouched down, careful not to be seen in the shadows which stretched over the slopes of the roof, and crept off.

Gordon and Merkel rang the doorbell to Blain’s home, which was a much larger home than Lambert had lived in. The door opened, as a portly, balding man in a suit answered in a panic.
“Mr. Blain has been murdered,” he shouted. “It’s horrible!” Weapon’s drawn, several officers immediately pushed passed the man, lead by Merkel, and into the house.

“Calm down,” Gordon said. “When? Who are you?”

“Mr. Blain’s butler,” the man replied.

“Bullock,” Gordon said as he turned to Bullock who had stayed behind. “That’s two dead partners out of the four. These two received threats. The other two must have as well. I’ll go after Rogers, you get to Stryker. Call for backup on the way.”

“Right.”

Six miles away, also in Gotham Heights, Paul Rogers was walking up the steps of Alfred Stryker’s home, similarly nervous about the death threats, though unaware that his two partners had already died that night.

Stryker’s house was larger than all of his partners’. Though it wasn’t the house itself that made up the majority of the building, Stryker was a chemist, unlike his partners who were more into business. As such, in Ace Chemicals’s early days, he had actually furnished a rather large laboratory in the back portion of his home.

Rogers knocked on the large front door, and nervously waited for a reply. To his surprise, the door was answered quite promptly by the familiar face of Stryker’s butler, Wilson Jennings. Jennings was a large man, well over six feet tall, who always wore a black bowtie and a green sweater vest.

“Jennings,” Rogers said thankfully. “Sorry to bother you at this hour, but I must speak with Stryker immediately.”

“Please come in,” Jennings said.

“Thank you,” Rogers nodded as he entered. “Now, where is Stryker, or should I wait here?”

“Wait,” Jennings said gruffly. Suddenly, Jennings’s massive fist slammed against Rogers, knocking him to the floor. Rogers gasped for air, grabbing his face in pain, and looking around in bewilderment.

“Jennings! What is going on?!?”

“Shut up,” Jennings said as he grabbed Rogers by the throat and began strangling him.

“Stop,” Rogers choked as he slammed his fists against the large man, but it was hardly any use at all. He was too weak, and Jennings had the physique of a rhinoceros. And then, with a loud crash and a barrage of smoke, the front door exploded, knocking Jennings to the ground and forcing him to release Rogers. Batman flew in through the smoke and debris, and slammed down on top of Jennings, punching his head back down onto the cold marble floor and knocking him out cold.

Concussion. Stay down so I don’t have to cause more damage.

“What is going on?” Alfred Stryker shouted from the main stairway as he entered the room. “What is all this commotion?”

“Your assistant just tried to kill me,” Rogers said as he wobbled to his feet and rubbed his throat.
“Well then he didn’t do a good enough job,” Stryker growled as he produced a handgun from his jacket and took aim. However, Stryker was so intent on silencing Rogers that he had not noticed Batman hiding near the edge of the stairs. Batman flicked a batarang up at the gunman, hitting him in the face and causing him to sprawl backwards.

*Must be quick. Only seconds before he regains control and shoots.*

Batman charged up the stairs, knocking against Stryker and grabbing the wrist of his hand which held the gun, twisting it until he heard the bone shatter inside. Stryker shrieked, but silenced his yelling with a groan as Batman landed another punch into his ribs, cracking two of them.

“Why did he try to kill me?” Rogers gasped. “What’s going on?”

“This,” Batman responded as he pulled out the paper he had received from the gunman earlier and tossed it at Rogers’s feet.

“What’s this?”

“You know very well what it is,” Batman said bitterly. “The four of you were partners in founding Ace Chemicals. Stryker wanted to be the sole owner, but having no ready cash, he made these contracts with you, Blain, and Lambert. A gentleman’s deal, but not legally binding. They state that he would pay you a certain sum of money annually, until he owned the business. The contracts were all very personal, and as such, would only have been known to the four of you. Any heirs or employees in the outside world wouldn’t know a thing about them.”

Suddenly, Stryker, with the strength of a madman, tore himself free from Batman’s grasp, kicking him back, but Batman just lunged forward, grabbing him again and slamming him into the banister of the stairway.


“I have the right to remain silent.”

“I’m not a cop,” Batman roared as he crashed his fist into the man’s ribs a second time, breaking the ones he had cracked before. “Nor am I patient. You would have eventually gotten the company. You killed them off so that the contract would go into effect more immediately. You threatened them first to make it seem like a less calculated attack. But why did you do it? What’s your hurry?”

“Fine, fine,” he blubbered through teary eyes. “It was this guy, Black Mask.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know who he is,” Stryker cried. “He wears a mask, like a skull. He wanted to oust my partners because they support Falcone. Black Mask’s got it out for him.”

“Ace deals with Falcone?”

“We all did,” Stryker wheezed. “Business deals and so on.” Batman grit his teeth and slammed his boot down on Styker’s ankle, breaking it.

“Watch him,” Batman growled at Rogers. “The police will be here soon, and they can protect you.”

“Protect me?” Rogers blurted out in bewilderment. “From what? We got him.”
“Stryker was a fall guy,” Batman said as he headed back out through the destroyed front door. “He killed your partners just to send a message from someone else. Chances are, that someone else will know he failed pretty soon, and come calling.” He continued back outside to where the Bat Bike was waiting for him, ignoring Rogers’s worried shouting from the doorway. There wasn’t time. Booting the engine up, Batman roared off down the road, barely skidding by the squad car which was heading toward the Stryker mansion.

“Alfred,” Batman said. “Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Sir,” his butler’s warm, refined voice returned. “It appears the noise-canceling device is working.”

“I need you to get on the line with the GCPD and get them to send a unit out to Ace Chemicals immediately.”

“Right away, Sir.”

“And then I need you to look for a good entrance inside for me.”

“And how might you suggest I do that?”

“Street map should be fine, but if you can find any schematics of the compound, I’d appreciate it. I’m en route, so hurry.”

“Did you protect Mr. Blain and Rogers?”

“Rogers. But I was too late to get to Blain. Stryker had made a deal with his three partners, stating that he would be able to buy the company over a certain number of annual payments, but was killing them off so that he would be able to get control of the company immediately. His flunkies were stealing the contracts after murdering their victims, so as to clean up loose ends. I was lucky enough to get one of the contracts off of them before they destroyed it, or else I would have never found Stryker.”

“Did you incapacitate him? Stryker, I mean.”

“Yes. And police were on the way when I left the scene.”

“So why the rush to the chemical plant?”

“Stryker is a pawn. He would have gotten the company on his own over time. He was pressured into doing it now. Said he was working for someone calling themself Black Mask.”

“Another masked character in Gotham?”

“I’ll leave that for the GCPD to find out. They can interrogate him on their own. Stryker said Black Mask was trying to take control of the company back from The Roman, Falcone. Falcone has plenty of cops in his pocket, and if not Falcone, then his capo Maroni certainly does. They’ll know about the murders, which means any evidence Ace Chemicals has of Falcone’s activities is in danger tonight. Now.”

“Evidence?”

“Files and records tracing Falcone to certain activities or financial gains that he wouldn’t be happy about becoming public. The sort of evidence that Dent could use to put Falcone behind bars.”
“So you want to get to this evidence…?”

“Before Falcone can. Or his puppet, Red Hood. Or the Black Mask. There’s been a lot of interest in the chemical company recently. I need to get there first.”

“Black Mask,” Gordon huffed as he watched Commissioner Grogan arrive at Stryker’s home, which was crawling with police officers by now.

“That’s what he said,” Merkel shrugged. “Red Hood, Black Mask, Catwoman… The only black mask I know about is Batman’s.”

“Yeah,” Gordon snorted as he watched Grogan exit his vehicle and stare at the property with a stone gaze, as though he were trying to intimidate the very brickwork of the house itself. Grogan was an extremely large, well-built man, with shoulders even wider than Flas’s had been. His jaw was strong, and seemed to be permanently clenched to the point that he most often talked through his gritted teeth. His head was bald, waxed to a smooth and shiny perfection. But perhaps most prominent about him, aside from the throbbing vein in his forehead, or his pursed lips, were his eyes. Large, glaring, and piercing, his eyes were persistently held wide and intense on his face, as though he were constantly disgusted.

“He was here tonight, wasn’t he?” Grogan said, barely even glancing at Merkel and Gordon.

“Who, Sir?” Merkel said innocently. Without moving so much as a tendon in face, Grogan’s eyes immediately shifted down at the officer, staring at him in disbelief and annoyance.

“Batman,” Grogan finally spat. “Batman, Merkel. Who did you think I was referring to?” Merkel gulped, and immediately regretted that he had even opened his mouth. Swallowing dryly, he opened his mouth and searched desperately for the words. However, he didn’t need to finish, because at that moment every radio in the area exploded to life as the dispatcher made a general call to all officers in the city.

“All available officers, we have a break-in and possible arson in progress at Ace Chemicals.”

Leaving the getaway car with the rest of the gang outside, three men walked through the maze of rusty equipment. Two men took up the read, while the tall, lanky figure of Red Hood lead the way. He was cautious in his steps, carefully not to make too much noise, almost faltering as he walked.

Ace Chemicals used an assortment of machinery that ranged from looking brand new, to appearing as though it hadn’t been in use since the Industrial Revolution. Rust, stains, and grime covered nearly every surface of twisted metalwork. The only sounds in the darkness were the hum of distant generators and air conditioning units, which never turned off, and the swish of chemicals flowing through tubes, pipes, and vats located throughout the plant.

Ace Chemicals was an old company, which had made its debut in Gotham during the First World War. Originally known as Kane Chemicals, after one of its primary founders, the factory and company was renamed following the death of the entire Kane family line. Once celebrated for continuing the capitalist tradition, and providing stimulus for the city’s economy during the Great Depression, they had recently been lauded as a toxin-spewing antagonist of the environment. The Kane family itself all died of mysterious illnesses and ailments all believed to be due to exposure to toxic elements from the factory. Over the years, Ace Chemicals became affiliated with underhand dealings and immoral practices, and became linked with various trafficking of illicit materials. Many saw them as the model example of the decadence of old money. The main factory consisted
of a large complex of warehouses, located on one of the many small islands near the center of Gotham City. There were various mixing chambers and processing plants, along with storage yards, while the Northeastern corner the building had a large brick tower which acted as the front for the business itself, containing offices, a break room, and so on.

The three men who stalked through the darkened walkways, between the mixing vats. None of them carried flashlights, for fear of revealing themselves. The two taking the rear both wore long trench coats and gloves. One was shorter, a bit portly, with a bushy black mustache and a bowler hat. The other was much taller, with a pencil mustache resting just atop his upper lip, and wearing a fedora. His snake-like eyes shifted back and forth on either side of his hooked nose, and he breathed heavily as though he was agitated.

“Okay,” Red Hood’s metallic voice spoke from the red mask, clearly through use of a voice changer in the helmet. “We go through here, past the Filter Tanks, and then through the partition and into the executive offices down the hall… Y’know, this place, it looks even worse in red. It looks like-”

“Freeze!” a voice shouted from a walkway above. The three men turned to see a police officer standing on a grated walkway above, knees bent, and pointing his weapon directly at them.

“You asshole,” the fedora hatted man shouted at Red Hood as he drew his weapon from his coat. “You said there was no security!”

“Come on, get em up!” the officer shouted.

“They must have altered things since I left,” Red Hood’s robotic voice retorted quickly.

“Altered things?!” the fedora man shouted as he opened fire on the officer above. “I’m gonna alter your stupid horse face, man!”

“Ah!” Red Hood recoiled, grabbing at his mask with his gloved hands as though he were trying to cover his ears, quivering violently off balance. “That noise! The gunshots! It’s so loud in here!”

“For God’s sake,” the bowler hat man said as he watched the officer dive behind a steel support beam. “Run! This is all screwed up!” Before his sentence had even finished, Red Hood ran off into the tangle of industrial equipment ahead, followed quickly by the two other men.

“Murph,” the officer said urgently into his radio. “Get some men over to the Rear Bay. We got the Red Hood Gang in here!”

In the maze ahead, the two hatted men ran briskly past Red Hood, who stumbled and struggled as he ran, almost clawing at the mask on his head.

“Jesus! Which way is it?!?” the bowler hat man barked. “How do we get out?”

“I don’t know,” Red Hood called up at him. “This mask! I can’t see where I’m going!”

“I’m gonna kill you, you useless son of a bitch,” the fedora man yelled. “When we get outta here – oh.” His sentence cut off as a bullet whistled through the clearing in the equipment ahead, and planted itself cleanly into his temple.

“Weaver!” the other man shouted as another bullet hit him in the knee. A group of police officers came closing in. Trembling, Red Hood hung back, fear surging through his body.

“What do we do?” he asked in a panic, but the man in the bowler hat ignored him, instead shouting
toward the officers ahead.

“Aw hell, aw hell,” he shouted. “You don’t want me! You want him! He’s the ringleader! He’s the Red Hood!” Red Hood locked his legs for a moment in disbelief, and then turned and ran back into the mess of equipment while the bowler hat man reached into his jacket.

“Careful!” one of the officers yelled. “He’s pulling a gun!”

“It’s not a gun,” another shouted. “Duck!” The bowler hat man produced a grenade from his jacket and hurled it in their direction. Officers scattered as the device exploded, showering the surrounding area in blazing shrapnel. Fires erupted along the floor, walls and railings, burning the excess chemicals that had spilled throughout the years.

“No no no no no no no,” Red Hood muttered in rapid succession as he ran up a stairway and onto a grated walkway which was suspended above the machinery below.

“That’s him,” and officer shouted. “Red Hood! It’s Red Hood talking off across that catwalk!”

“He’s still in range,” another shouted as he pulled out his gun and aimed at the panicked criminal beyond.

“No more shooting,” a voice roared behind them. The officers turned and froze, as the massive shadowy figure of what appeared to be an enormous animal charged toward them.

“Jeez, what?”

“It’s the Batman!”

“He’s real??”

Batman rushed at the group of surprised police officers, and launched himself into the air, sailing over their bewildered heads. Landing amidst the ever-spreading flames, Batman ran toward the stairway and began to ascend.

Red Hood. Just as I thought. Looks panicked. More panicked than I saw him before. Lankier… thinner… and clumsier. His feet are so huge. Awkward. Definitely not suffering from a shattered kneecap. Unarmed, even. Only confirms my suspicions that there’s more than one Red Hood. It’s a different man in the costume every time.

He lunged forward, lobbing a batarang ahead which smacked into the back of Red Hood’s head, knocking him down onto the ground. The man rolled onto his back, facing Batman, and raised his hand as if to shield his face, his body convulsing in terror.

“So,” Batman said, as he slowed his pace. “Red Hood…”

“No,” Red Hood began raving. “No no no no. This isn’t happening! No! Oh dear God, what have you sent to punish me?! Don’t come closer! Don’t come any closer!” Batman halted, staring at him.

He’s hysterical. The costume frightens him, as it has so many others, but I’ve never seen someone panic like this. He might go into cardiac arrest. Must be cautious.

Red Hood waved his arms around, banging on the railing to his side as he scrambled to get away. Quickly, he shifted over and peered down below the catwalk at a group of large, round, open-top silo-like vats of swirling green liquids.
He’s going to hurt himself.

“Don’t come any closer or I’ll jump,” Red Hood screamed.

Have to stop him.

“No, don’t,” Batman lunged forward, his arm outstretched, hoping to incapacitate him before he could hurt himself, but it was too late. Red Hood kicked and flailed violently, knocking Batman away just long enough to pull himself up over the railing and launch himself downward, screaming, as he plummeted into the vat of green toxins below. Batman watched in awe as the figure below splashed in the vat for a moment, screaming wildly, and then disappeared as he was swept below the current of the industrial sludge.

Gone.

Hours had passed since Batman watched Red Hood, flailing and screaming, disappear into the chemical sludge below, but he couldn’t get the image out of his mind. He couldn’t get the terrified, scrambled, metallic screams out of his ears. The contents of the vat were highly acidic, leaving no chance for survival. Even Batman couldn’t have jumped in to save him. The police had closed in, and he had left. They could clean up the mess.

But it’s a mess that didn’t need to happen. They were sloppy. Shooting their guns… I could have taken all three of them in alive.

“Brooding, Sir?” Alfred asked as he found Batman sitting in his chair at the computer in the Batcave, still wearing his full costume.

“Thinking,” Batman responded.

“About what, if I may inquire?”

“Red Hood,” Batman said. “He – or at least whoever was wearing the mask tonight – and some of his men died.”

“And the evidence they were trying to cover up?”

“Half the building burned to the ground,” Batman replied. “If there was anything there to use against Falcone – which I’m sure there was – it’s gone now.”

“Oh dear…”

“Alfred, am I doing any good? We all know where Falcone lives, and what he does. We all know how to find him. But I have this growing panel of computers, the elevator we installed that goes up to the mansion, the car under construction over there… All of this, and Falcone is still sitting comfortably in his home while people die in his name.”

“Perhaps patience-”

“Patience?! Alfred, people are dying! Tonight, at least six men died. Some of them I could have saved! One of them I may have caused! Red Hood killed himself because of me.”

“You?”

seen someone so frightened."

“Sir, you don’t know that. It could have been anything. The fire—”

“Or the cops – shooting without thinking. I should’ve been quicker. I shouldn’t have lunged at him.”

“We can’t blame ourselves for other’s choices. Suicide is only the choice of the one who acted on it. We don’t know if he had been contemplating it for a long time, whether he was mentally stable all along, or what else had driven him to go out there to the chemical plant that night. It has nothing to do with you. You didn’t push him off that ledge.”

“Maybe,” Batman said, tightening his fists. “But if I didn’t, then someone did. He chose to go to the plant, but it was Falcone who hired him. It was all to serve him. People died, because of him. And you can’t defend that.” Batman stood up, and headed back over to his motorcycle.

“Bruce,” Alfred said, his voice trembling with worry. “It’s almost sunrise. You’ve been out all night. Where are you going?”

“To talk to The Roman,” Batman said. “I can’t get to Black Mask, or Anarky, or Penguin, or any of these guys. But I can get to him.”

“Just don’t do something you’ll regret, Master Bruce.”

“You think you’re gonna scare me?” Falcone wheezed as he held on tightly to Batman’s wrists. He was dozens of stories above Gotham City, on the roof of his penthouse, being held over the side by Batman, who was breathing heavily in anger. Moments earlier Falcone had been violently torn from his bed and dragged up onto the roof by Batman, who was now holding him over the edge of the building, ferociously snarling at him.

“Too many men died tonight because of you,” Batman growled.

“You’ve broken into my house before,” Falcone sneered. “Didn’t do nothing then, and you aren’t gonna do anything now.”

“Wanna bet on it?” Batman yanked Falcone back onto the roof, bashing him down onto its hard surface, and cracked his arm under his boot. Falcone opened his mouth to scream, but Batman covered his mouth with his hand, and slammed his head down too.

“What do you know about Black Mask?” Batman snarled.

“What do you think I know? He’s got beef with me, and that’s about all I got.”

“Who is he?”

“Why would I know? I should be asking you, you crazy piece of – Yow!” Batman hit him again.

“I want answers.”

“Yeah right,” Falcone wheezed. “No reason to talk to you. You’re the freakin’ reason all these masks – these freaks – are in Gotham at all. You brought them here! They’re all here because of you!”

“Wanna tell me you had nothing to do with The Red Hood?” Batman shouted.
“Shut up. I don’t know nothin’ about that.”

“Is that so?” Batman slammed his fist down on Falcone’s shoulder, dislocating The Roman’s arm from its socket. Falcone winced and groaned, but then looked up at glared at the dark figure standing over him.

“Go ahead. Break my bones. I don’t care. I’m wise to your act. You got rules. You’re not gonna kill me. People like Black Mask, or Penguin… they got no rules. So if you want them, you go after them *you*self. They’re all here because *you* brought them – not me. You understand?” Batman grunted and backed off, looking down with disdain at the man at his feet, broken and battered by Batman’s own rash lack of control.

“Fine,” he growled as he turned to leave, feeling ashamed deep within himself at the explosive display of violence he had just acted in – and how pointless it all had been.

*Alfred told me to avoid doing something I might regret. I should have listened…*

“You won’t kill me, Batman,” Falcone shouted as Batman walked away. “But make no mistakes, pal, you come sniffin around me ever again, and I’ll murder you. You hear that, Batman? I’ll kill ya!”
“Criminals,” Norman Maddison snorted as he lowered his cup of coffee and raised the morning edition of *The Gotham Gazette* to eye level. Beneath the banner at the top of the front page reading, “Inside: Harvey Dent’s Campaign Gears Up For Strong Finish,” read the massive-print headline, “Red Hood Gone? Eyewitnesses claim mystery thief falls to doom after Ace Chemicals heist attempt foiled by run-in with vigilante, Batman. By Vicki Vale, Gotham City.” It was accompanied by two artists’ sketches, one depicting the Red Hood pieced together from eye witness reports, and another featuring a sketch of Batman’s dark silhouette. Norman scowled as he looked at the article. Across the table sat his daughter, Julie, sipping her own coffee and smirking slightly.

*I remember Mother saying Daddy shouldn’t be allowed to read his paper in the mornings, she thought, gazing up at the sky above. It was a warm day for early October, and the two of them had decided to eat breakfast on the outdoor patio of their downtown tower penthouse.*

*She said it ruined the rest of his day. But I think he’s quite impressive when he gets riled up like this. He’s a man of conviction, my father. And I love him for it. Strong convictions are just about all we have to stand on anymore, it seems.*

“For months now we’ve heard about this… costumed vigilante roaming the streets at night,” Norman spat angrily. “And now the thieves are getting the idea to put on masks as well! The report says this one fell into a vat of chemical waste…” He paused a moment, twitching his mustache back and forth as their butler walked out onto the patio offering him a plate with two pieces of toast placed neatly in the center.

“Thank you Thomas,” he nodded before continuing. “It’s like something out of a tawdry crime novel! I tell you-”

“It’s not the same town you grew up in,” Julie smiled.

“It’s not the same town I grew up in,” Norman said bitterly. “Tease me all you like, but I didn’t build my career from nothing just to service a city gone mad. What has happened to people’s sense of common decency?”

“Left behind,” Julie said, lowering her cup to the table and wiping her mouth with a napkin before rising from her seat. “Certainly left behind in that last election... Gotta run, Daddy. Doing some case work for my law class this afternoon.”

“You are coming to the charity ball tonight, yes?” Norman asked. “You and that elusive boyfriend of yours?”

“Elusive? You met him before I did,” she laughed, walking to father’s side and kissing him on top of his head. “I’ve got a yoga class at six so he’s meeting me there. One thing about Bruce, he likes to make an entrance.”

“Yeah,” Norman said, smirking as he shook his head. “Careful with that one, darling.” He’d been wary of Bruce since the night his daughter spent over at Wayne Manor. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Bruce – quite the opposite, in fact – but Julie was all he had. Sometimes he felt like she was the only pure thing left in the world. Especially lately.

“See you then,” she laughed as the walked away. Norman sighed, and returned to reading the paper. He felt like Gotham City was sinking further and further into total anarchy. Looking out
over the city this morning, things appeared normal. But at night, Gotham was a different city. Lunatics were warring on the street, and Norman felt sick just thinking about it. They weren’t out and about by daylight, but they were somewhere – lurking – waiting to spread their lack of decency.

*The war continues,* Batman thought as he crept through the rafters of the wharf warehouse where he’d been waiting since the minute the sun began to set. *I only have a few hours tonight, before picking up Julie. These docks were once proud portals of commerce and exploration. Now, they are stagnant pits of corruption and vice. Down below are some of Salvatore Maroni’s thugs. A week ago the entire underbelly of this city went crazy, as a massive shipment for Falcone arrived in Gotham and immediately went missing. Falcone only handles the shipping through his company. He leaves the manner of the cargo up to Sal Maroni, and his underlings. The shipment went unprotected in the immediate aftermath of Red Hood’s death. I figured Flacone would simply hire another poor soul to wear the mask, but so far, no such luck… It seems Red Hood is dead. In the meantime, Marni’s men have been eagerly tracking that missing shipment down, but it looks like I’ve finally caught up to them in the investigation.*

“So, y’see… the time for bein’ nice about this situation is over,” a greasy looking man in a business suit sneered. A cigarette hung from his lip as he spoke, and he repeatedly tugged at an earring hanging from his right ear. The piercing appeared to be fairly recent, and certainly infected. He was flanked on both sides by two large, brutish thugs. They were the enforcers – obviously, the hired muscle. And behind them stood one more man, dark glasses covering his eyes, with bleached spiky hair and a goatee. In front of them sat another man in a chair. He was blonde, with a ponytail, and dressed far more sloppily than his four assailants. His wrists were bound together with rope, which then ran up and wound his chest tightly to the back of the chair on which he sat. His face was bloodied, and sweat ran down his forehead as he looked up at his assailants.

“Please,” the man with the ponytail coughed.

“Naw, look,” the man with earring said. “That time is over. It’s over and done, ain’t that right Carl?”

“Just like you said, Richie,” the larger of the two muscles laughed.

“So, y’see,” Richie continued. “What you’ve experienced so far… that was me askin’ nice-like. Now, I’m movin’ on to bein’ kinda serious. Where are those shipments from Thailand?” He leaned forward and blew a long blast of smoke into the man’s face.

“I don’t know,” he coughed. “I freakin’ swear it, I don’t know! The manifest didn’t include any coded barrels when it arrived. I swear I didn’t see any!”

“Oh,” Richie said as he grabbed the ponytailed man by the hair. “So you didn’t see any coded barrels? Even though we know they were there? Guess if your eyes are that useless, they’re not much good to you anyway.” He took the cigarette from his mouth and slowly moved it toward the man’s face.

“No!” The man winced, closing his eyes as Richie pressed it onto his left eyelid.

“Hold still, y’freakin’ weasel!”

*Sal Maroni wields an iron fist in service to his master, Carmine Falcone. Sal’s thugs, in turn, are as loyal as they are brutal. Eager in their violence. I’ve found them nearly too late. Must be*
“So, my nearsighted friend,” Richie laughed as he pulled the cigarette back and returned it to his mouth. “Did that help to seriously jog your memory? Or do I move on from serious to perturbed?”

The man just wheezed heavily in the chair, coughing.

“What was that?” Richie asked. “I couldn’t hear – gnhh!” Batman leapt down and kicked the back of Richie’s head while simultaneously punching out with both hands, hitting both of the larger brutes in the face.

“It’s him!” the man with the spiked hair screamed, fumbling in his jacket for his gun. “It’s the bat! I’ll be the one to cap ‘im. As good as-” Batman spun around, knocking the gun from the man’s hand before landing a vicious blow to his jaw, leaving him sprawled out on the floor. Richie tried to crawl away, but Batman caught him.

*These guys get bolder by the day. Must be something big in the works. This shipment must be important to go through all this trouble. Animals like this understand only one language. The very fear they so casually inflict upon others. It’s the only way.*

Batman grabbed Richie by the leg and dragged him off into the shadows of the massive stacks of crates which were scattered throughout the warehouse. The ponytailed man watched in near shock as Richie literally dug his nails into the floor, clawing for escape, but it was no use. As he disappeared behind the crates, the warehouse filled with his screams and shouts.

“What?! N-nuh- wait! I don’t… I don’t know! Wait! No! No! I’ll talk! Please, I’ll talk! No, I swear! Please!” Four minutes and a massive amount of screams and loud banging noises later, Batman returned to the man in the chair, produced a small knife from his belt, and gently began cutting the ropes.

*The tough guy lasted all of four minutes before talking. The costume works… too well, in the case of Red Hood… I’m still haunted by that memory… But for now I have my answers. Heroin. Maroni’s been importing heroin disguised as pickled fish, of all things. A lot of it, too. The street value for such an amount is staggering. A sum he and The Roman will use to further crush this city under their heels. Still, this is all I can do for now… Julie is waiting for me.*

The rope fell to the floor in pieces, and the tortured man fell out of it, staggering around in horror.

“I swear,” he said, staring up at Batman. “I didn’t know! I told them already, I don’t know anything! Please!”

“You are on the verge of shock stemming from your mistreatment. The police and an emergency medical team have been notified, and will arrive shortly. Rest assured, those who did this to you will not escape punishment. Not ever again.”

Norman clanged his martini glass up against another glass in the hands of Lucius Fox. Both were in attendance of their charity ball, surrounded by lavish decorations and a throng of people dressed to the nines, dancing, drinking, and talking with extreme enthusiasm.

“Thanks for coming,” Norman smiled.

“Got to show up at one of these every once in a while,” Lucius responded, nodding and walking toward a table displaying a spread of expensive seafood delicacies.
“To business, Norman,” a cold voice said from behind. Norman turned, knowing he knew the voice from somewhere, but as he realized to whom it belonged his heart sank. There, standing as casually as if he owned the venue himself, stood Salvatore Maroni, one hand stuffed into his pocket while the other waved a martini. Two men, obviously acting as bodyguards, stood on either side of him, scowling at Norman.

*I’m a man of distinguished fortune,* Norman had thought earlier. *A man in my position must make choices. But sometimes, the necessary choices are less than agreeable.*

“Maroni,” Norman said without a note of happiness in his voice. “What are you doing here? This is a charity ball. And don’t crowd me with your dressed up trigger-monkeys.”

“You heard Mr. Maddison, boys. Take a walk,” Maroni laughed, taking his hand from his pocket and running it through his greased, dark hair. The two men nodded and departed.

“What do you want?” Norman asked gruffly.

“What can I say, Norman? I’m an honest businessman interested in contributing to society’s future welfare. Just like you.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Sal. Any… connections… between you and I are tenuous at best. If, for appearances’ sake, you wish to put your dirty money to a noble use, that’s fine. But it’s none of my concern.”

“You know your problem, Norman? You got your nose in the air, and your head up your-”

“There you are, Daddy,” Julie cut in as she approached the two men. “I was beginning to think I’d never find you.” Her hair was pulled up into an elegant bun, accented with a pearl hairpiece. Her dress was sleek, silver, and form-fitting, along with gloves which ran from her hands halfway up her arms.

“Julie,” Norman said, happy to get away from Maroni. “How could I miss such a stunning debut?”

“I hope I’m not interrupting something important,” Julie said, eyeing Maroni. Just at that moment, one of the bodyguards approaching Sal and whispered in his ear.

“Again?” Maroni groaned through gritted teeth. “That pointy-eared freak!... Sorry, Norman. Love to meet your daughter and all, but business calls. That, I know you understand.” And with that he waved his hand in disgust and headed for the exit.

“Is that an associate of yours?” Julie asked.

“In a manner of speaking… regrettably, yes.”

“Not much like your usual business partners,” she said, narrowing her glare in Maroni’s direction.

*Nothing escapes her notice. She’s going to make an excellent lawyer someday. I’d have made a lousy District Attorney, as my father had hoped once... But in spite of any wayward turns my business might have demanded, I have never lost sight of what really matters. I have never sacrificed my ideals for the sake of mere profit. I’d never be able to look my daughter in the eye if I had. She’s even more beautiful than her mother ever was – and I hate myself for thinking that.*

“Enough about all that,” he said, taking Julie by the arm. “I’m just glad you were able to join me for such a worthy event. The Gotham Institute is a very deserving trust. The work it does is invaluable to society as a whole.”
“Can’t fool me, Daddy. I know you’ve got a hidden agenda this evening. It’s not just the trust. You’re dying to get another chance to talk to Bruce.”

“Well, I-” A roar of whispers and cooing erupted from the doorway, and Julie burst into a smile.

“And from the sounds of it, I would say he has just arrived.”

On the far side of the room, Bruce Wayne brushed past Maroni and his men, barely taking notice as they passed, and stood proudly in the entranceway, peering over the sea of faces for the one that he had come to meet. He stood stiff, and at attention, as though he were always on his guard.

“What a fine hunk of man,” one woman giggled to her friend near where Norman and Julie stood.

“That’s what I call better living,” her friend replied with a wink. Julie simply rolled her eyes and approached the man she had grown to feel close to over the past several months.

I know Bruce hates these overblown affairs, she thought as she navigated the crowd moving toward him. And he hates all the stir his presence causes. Still, his conscience demands that he put in an appearance… and for what? I hate to say I’m falling for him, but of all the beautiful, available women at his fingertips… he chose me. Me!

“Oh, Mr. Wayne,” one woman cooed as she approached him and placed her hand on his shoulder, “How wonderful that you’re joining us this evening.” He avoided her gaze, and even appeared as though he were pretending she wasn’t there at all.

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“Are you here… alone?” another younger woman asked, approaching him.

“Well, I uh…” he said awkwardly. “I… Sorry ladies, I’m afraid my time is spoken for.” His eyes locked onto Julie who was approaching eagerly, hoping that he could catch her knowing smile from across the room.

“Darling, I was afraid you weren’t going to show,” she said jokingly as she pressed her way through the gathering crowd and took him by the hand. “Dance with me?”

“How can I resist?” he smiled back.

“Pretty slick, Maddison,” one of the women scoffed under her breath. Julie pulled Bruce out onto the dance floor and placed his other hand on the small of her back. Nodding, Bruce began to lead her around the floor.

“It’s a good thing you don’t attend many of these soirees,” Julie said. “I’d have to beat them off of you with a stick.”

“I’m pretty good at defending myself,” Bruce said. “Except when it comes to smart, stylish, grey-eyed law students, I suppose.”

“Hah,” Julie grinned all the brighter. “Okay, Mr. Wayne, you just earned your degree. But I’d love to hear the rest of your dissertation, if you don’t mind.”

I feel… happy, Bruce thought. I feel happy with her. But I don’t know if she’s the one to let into my life… Alfred made this sound easy. It isn’t. All this flirting… It isn’t me. Not the real me, anyway. But maybe it is… Is this who I am without Batman? Is this Bruce Wayne if his parents weren’t taken from him? I meant what I said… She is beautiful. And perhaps it is her smarts more than her style that has me attracted to her. Am I being too logical? Have to avoid making this too complicated.
At that exact moment, a voice started shouting from the opposite end of the room. Deep, and with the hint of a slight accent from Eastern Europe, a man was waving his hand around at a group of onlookers and raving as seemingly loudly as possible.

“What do you suppose that is?” Bruce said, halting their dance and focusing his attention on the odd man. The man was short and bald, with a strong square jawline accented by a well-trimmed, black goatee. Thick glasses covered his eyes, magnifying them and reflecting light so that they sent a glare at those who were watching.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said as he raised his finger up in the air and over his head, pointing to the ceiling above. “I assure you, genetic engineering is the cornerstone of all future life as we know it! It will free us from disease! From infirmity! From the chains of heredity and fate! There are naturally certain limitations to which we can achieve physically, but through my work I hope to change all of that. Through genetics, none need ever suffer the cruel sting of society’s rebuke! Equality shall be the rule! Excellence, the norm!”

“No wait a minute,” the woman in the slinky dress who had scoffed at Julie earlier said, placing her hand on her cocked hip and raising an eyebrow. “Just wait a minute, is it, Doctor-?”

“Professor,” the short man answered with every indication that he took himself entirely too seriously, moving almost robotically as though he were uncomfortable with the movements of his own body. “Professor Strange, Madam. Hugo Strange.”

“I’m sure,” the woman said, raising her eyebrow even higher. “So you’re saying, Professor, that someday we’ll be able to just style ourselves to fit our every whim?”

“Within reason, yes.”

“So, in the future, no one would ever be… short?” She smiled.

“Any height that one wished, Madam.”

“And no one would be, oh… bowlegged?” She scratched her head.

“I should think not.”

“Nor… nearsighted?”

“Optical degeneration is genetic, Madam,” he said, compulsively fiddling with his own glasses as he spoke.

“Nor, let’s see… bald?” She was doing all that could to keep from laughing, at which point the professor finally understood. She was mocking him.

“Um… no.” He dropped his stiff demeanor and looked as though he felt entirely dejected.

“Thank you, Professor,” she said sharply, turning and walking away as the crowd chuckled and began to disperse. “So glad to hear of your efforts on behalf of all of mankind!” Professor Strange looked from side to side, feeling as though the crowd were caving in on him, and quickly darted away as if he could hide from his own embarrassment.

“Strange,” Bruce shook his head, and then grinned as he acknowledged his own pun.

“You’re weird,” Julie laughed. Suddenly a hand reached out and grabbed Bruce by the shoulder and spun him around. Bruce found himself staring at Norman Maddison in the face. Only Norman
was no longer the jovial man he had met before, but a stern father figure trying his best to stare down one of the most wealthy men in all of Gotham City.

“Norman,” Bruce said, scratching his head.

“Daddy,” Julie said.

“Wayne,” Norman replied, extending his hand. Bruce clasped it, a bit turned off by the cold reception.

“Honored as usual, Sir,” Bruce said awkwardly. “Between Lucius and your daughter, I couldn’t stay away tonight, I’m afraid.”

“Well, you know Lucius,” Norman said, his icy demeanor already melting away. “Always a kind word for the unworthy and all.”

“Daddy, you are modest to fault,” Julie said. “One of your many charms.”

“If you say so, Dear,” he grunted back. “Anyway, Wayne, would you care for a cocktail?”

“Bruce doesn’t drink, Daddy,” Julie interjected before Bruce could answer. “And, besides, we’re off. I’ve made him spend more time here than he had hoped to. Don’t wait up. I’ve got my key with me.”

“Nice to see you again,” Bruce waved as Julie hastily lead him away from her father and out the door.

“Don’t you worry about her Norman?” an elderly man asked as Bruce and Julie disappeared around the doorway. “I mean, Wayne’s got quite a reputation…”

“You obviously don’t know my daughter very well, Deavers,” Norman said, almost raising his nose in the air. “If anyone can tame that playboy, it’s Julie Maddison.”

The Gotham Institute ballroom lead out to a balcony, several stories above the streets below. Professor Hugo Strange, his entire body tensed, feeling the gut-wrenching dullness of rejection, looked out over the cold city beyond. In spite of the relatively warm day, the night had brought a cold pre-autumn chill, leaving the outdoor balcony entirely abandoned. It was the only place Hugo could find that was devoid of other people. It was the only place he could retreat to feel safe.

“Those fools,” Hugo muttered to himself, feeling his head throb in anguish over the embarrassment. “Those over-dressed, slab-headed fools. Why can’t they see the potential? Why don’t they share-”

“You talk to yourself often, Professor?” a voice asked. Hugo felt his body jump, and he turned around startled, and even further ashamed.

“No, I – Oh. It’s you.” Behind him, leaning against the wall of the building stood Maroni, lighting a cigar between his teeth.

“So,” Maroni said as he put his lighter back into his pocket and sucked in a long drag of smoke. “Looks like your canvassing pitch fell a little… short.” He laughed.

“I didn’t know they let your kind into these events, Maroni.” Hugo’s voice was bitter, hissing, and filled with sting.
"You’d be surprised in what circles I’m accepted, Professor. Money seems to count more than most anything in these cases… Which, of course, is what brought you to me in the first place, isn’t it?"

"Don’t lord your ugly assets over me, Maroni. I’ve always managed to make good on your loans."

"With a fair bit of interest, sure," Maroni shrugged. "It’s why we still do business, you and I. It’s why you’re even still able to walk. Heh. But, from the sounds of it, you have need of my services again."

"What a presumptuous thought," Strange said, scowling.

"You are here begging for money, right?" Maroni grinned, and Hugo felt himself shrink in the gangster’s presence. "That’s why you’re here. And I’m here to help, as always. But this time, I want to hear you ask for it… Come on, don’t be shy."

"I – I need another two hundred grand."

"Not a problem, Professor," Maroni spewed a stream of smoke into the tiny man’s face. "My pleasure, in fact. Lucky for you, I came rather prepared for this." He reached into his suit coat and retrieved a manila envelope about as thick as a flack jacket.

"Prepared?" Hugo asked angrily. "You’re spying on me?"

"Just looking for opportunities," Maroni said. "That’s my job, after all. But if you don’t want it I can just take it back."

"No, I’ll take it," Hugo said through gritted teeth as he ripped the envelope from Maroni’s hand.

"Yeah, that’s what I thought. Good luck with your work, Professor. I’ll be around for collection soon. See ya." Maroni flicked the ashes off the end of his cigar and walked over to the edge of the balcony. Hugo watched him, bitterly wishing he could just push him off the edge. But it would never work. Too many witnesses. Too many people would suspect him. He hadn’t kept a low profile at this party, and Maroni knew it. In fact, Maroni loved it. He took extreme glee in his ability to push his weight and power around over the stubborn little professor. Maroni thought he was funny, an amusement who also happened to pay with high interest rates. It was always fortunate, in his line of work, when his customers were as amusing as they were profitable.

Hugo angrily headed back through the ballroom, panic in his heart as he thought of attracting more attention to himself. He didn’t know if he could handle being stared at by one more person tonight. Their scorn and laughter was more painful than any of the beating Maroni’s thugs could dish out. To his pleasure, however, he made it through the ballroom and down the elevator without ever being at the end of any mocking fingers or being laughed at any further.

Grabbing his coat from the doorman, he briskly walked out through the front doors, relieved to see that his manservant was already there waiting for him at the car. Sanjay was a large man, wearing white clothing and a turban wrapped around his head. His dark skin glistened amber in the wash of city lights from above. Sanjay had been born in India, and though he spoke English well, he was a man of few words for the most part. Upon seeing Hugo approaching, Sanjay dutifully stood to attention and opened the door for his master.

"Home, Sanjay," Hugo sighed. "This evening was a total waste. This world is perverse beyond understanding. Nobody would take me even remotely seriously, and that slack-jawed Maroni was there… He’s been following us… The fact that I am forced to borrow from a shark like Maroni..."
makes my blood boil with unquenchable contempt. Truly, there is no justice…”

“Oh, look,” a woman’s voice laughed from behind him. “There goes that funny little man with the great big… theories!” Glancing back, Hugo saw the woman who had mocked him earlier. She was wrapped in the arms of some socialite man, pointing at him and laughing loudly. The man chuckled and shook his head. Feeling his mind racing, his head throbbing, holding back tears, Hugo closed his eyes tightly and took in a long, deep breath.

“Change of plans, Sanjay,” he said as he pulled himself into the car. “We will follow that young woman home – and her drunken friend.”

“Yes Professor,” Sanjay nodded.

“They will be joining us later.”

Julie slid into the bed of Bruce Wayne, butterflies fluttering in her stomach. The lights were down, and shadows danced all over the darkened bedroom.

Bruce has always tells me that this place is frightening at night, but I still can’t shake the feeling that I’m in some sort of enchanted castle. That I’m a princess. I can’t believe I’m going to do this…

Pulling the sheets up over her naked body, she looked around at the floor on which she had strategically scattered her removed clothing. They had come home together, but Bruce stepped out for a minute to talk to Alfred. Julie had disrobed and taken to the bed.

Never hurts to be proactive. The first time that Bruce showed me around Wayne Manor I felt like I was walking through a fairy tale. Me, who has been used to wealth and affluence her entire life. Admittedly, I’m a hard one to impress. Yet here was my handsome prince with his castle in the country. Sometimes I still don’t believe it’s all real.

Footsteps sounded from the hallway outside. They were approaching. Taking a deep breath, Julie sat back, trying to appear relaxed, and grinned as the door started to open.

“Oh Bruce,” she said. “Your donation to the institute this evening was so generous. But now, how about showing me just how generous you can be?”

Did that sound as cheesy as I think it did? Please don’t ruin this moment.

The door opened, and there stood a man, but it was not Bruce Wayne. It was the butler, Alfred Pennyworth, doing his best to divert his eyes and maintain his proper demeanor.

“Alfred,” Julie gasped, ducking further under the covers. “Where’d uh… Bruce?”

“I’m afraid Master Wayne was called away on business, Miss,” he said.

“Oh, I didn’t… uh… Well, is he coming back?”

“Hard to say, Miss. The demands on Master Wayne’s time are most… unpredictable. I would be more than happy to chauffeur you back into the city if you like. If not, you’re more than welcome to stay the night.”

“I… well… yeah, that would be fine. Thank you. Just give me a minute to get… um, ready…”

“One moment, if you don’t mind,” Alfred said, stepping into the room still avoiding eye contact. “I
will gather your things up for you and have the car running by the time you are ready.” He hastily, yet carefully gathered up her clothes and left them neatly laid out on the dresser, and then left, closing the door behind him.

The night wind whistles through the cold, stone hallways. The castle is now so lonely and dark. Sometimes, it all just feels like a dream…”

Bruce sat before the glow of the computer bank in the Batcave, hastily typing away and running over the night’s events in his mind. He couldn’t repress his excitement, but had to be mindful to stay focused. Things were changing in Gotham.

I’m closing in. The war may be ending soon. Connecting The Roman to that heroin could crack the back of organized crime in Gotham. The city my mother and father worked to preserve will again be clean… I haven’t felt this hopeful since I was eight years old. I even have a girlfriend now… I think mom and dad would like her…
The rain came down in thick sheets, maintaining a half-inch thick layer of water on the ground at all times. Amidst the rain, just in front of the barbed wire fencing near one of the industrial yards, two police cars had gathered, and standing next to them, staring down at an open manhole, stood three officers. Fog, rain, and pale city lights all mingled together to form a greenish hue that spread throughout all the air around them, making an entirely eerie atmosphere ever-present for their already unnerving outing.

Merkel stood a few yards away, staring out over the bay, trying his best to keep the contents of his stomach from forcing their way back out his mouth. The stench was almost unbearable. Officer O’Hara and Gordon, however, stood near the manhole, looking down at what was left of a mangled woman’s corpse. A disembodied left hand, gnawed away halfway up the forearm, lay at their feet. Next to that were a few entrails from the lower abdomen, along with an attached leg, and another torn-apart thigh.

The call came from O’Hara. He’s a good cop, honest and dedicated. Unfortunately something of a rarity in Gotham. What the heck is happening to this city? It was Hell when I got here, but now… it’s like everything has gone haywire. The crooked are working overtime, and the downright depraved are all popping out of the woodwork. It weighs on me a lot, and I try not to pay attention to the details that add up to an answer I don’t want to consider…

“Sanitation guys pulled it up outta the sewers… uh… her, I mean,” O’Hara said, his eyes still fixed on the bloody pieces of meat that once belonged to a woman. Her nails, though torn, broken, and all but destroyed in the altercation that lead to her death, were still painted a bright shade of pink.

Reminds me of Barb…

“I thought you’d wanna be in on this,” O’Hara continued. “There is more of… well, her, over there.”

“Thanks O’Hara,” Gordon said as he watched the rain drip off of the brim of his hat. “Glad you called me first. This could easily turn into a media circus… Do me a favor, take Merkel and patrol the edge of our crime scene. Make sure the perimeter’s free of any gawkers…. Give me a few minutes alone here.”

“But… Sir, shouldn’t we be calling the forensics guys?”

“In a bit,” Gordon said. “Just give me a few, okay?”

O’Hara obeys. He and Merkel are friends. What would they think if they knew? What would they say if they saw the analyst I called? They’re good cops… But me?

Merkel and O’Hara walked along the barbed wire fence which ran the length of the property, rain spilling off their bodies as they went. As soon as they had rounded the corner and were far enough away, a massive shadow flew by overhead and landed in front of Gordon, staring at him intensely.

He arrives, all black and real – no urban myth… That massive frame, and those lifeless white eyes. And I think of how I spent the better part of this past year trying to uncover his secrets. But now… heck… now I call him “friend.” The meaning of the word hasn’t sunk in yet. He gives me the creeps, the way he stares and growls. Who does this? Who spends their life, let alone their nights, dressing up like a bat and nipping at the heels of dangerous crime lords? Friend… No, he’s no
friend. He’s a consultant. And he’s reliable, so far. I think of my family. Barbara, little James, and Barb… they’re alive today due to his actions. Safe and warm at home. I try not to think of Sarah at all…

“Jim,” Batman said curtly.

He’s calling me by my first name now? What have I gotten myself into?

“Thanks for coming,” Gordon nodded.

“What have you got?”

“Pretty grisly death,” Gordon said, flicking his eyes briefly down toward the fragmented body on the cement below. “And… well… unusual.” Batman looked down at it, and his entire frame tensed. At first Gordon wondered if he was disgusted or repelled by the thing, but it wasn’t that at all. He was angry.

“She was in the sewer?” Batman asked. His voice was focused, and determined. There was never any wavering in the way he said “she.”

She’s a person to him. Might as well be a relative the way he looks at it.

“Sanitation worker found her, uh… clogging up the pipe.”

Batman knelt down next to the mass of skin and blood, and began looking it over, carefully picking up the severed arm and examining the sticky edges where it was torn from the body.

“Yeah,” Gordon nodded. “There’s no head, so we’ll have to hope the prints turn up an I.D. Those lacerations on what’s left of the torso and thigh—”

“Yes,” Batman said. “Bite marks. The diameter is enormous. She appears to have been mauled by a wild animal.” With his free hand, Batman reached into his utility belt and produced a pair of tweezers, looking grimly at the victim’s remains.

“Nothing unusual reported from the local zoo. No circuses in town. But Gotham’s in no shortage of eccentric collectors…”

“There’s hair and blood beneath the nails,” Batman explained as he ignored Gordon’s comments and began carefully using the tweezers to remove the hairs from beneath the ravaged remains of the woman’s pink nails. “Could be nothing, but I doubt there’s an abundance of large carnivorous mammals living in Gotham’s sewers.” Then he placed the hairs in a tiny vial and packed it all neatly back in his belt, rising to his feet and saying, “There. Plenty left for your team.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Gordon said, “Also, I thought you might be interested in this.” Reaching into his coat pocket, he handed over a set of photographs to Batman, instantly soaking them in the rain.

The photos each showed groups of men, the typical sort of lowlifes Batman had come to know all too well over the past year. But there was something strikingly different about these men. Though they were the same sort of thugs who ran with every gang operating out of Gotham City, this particular group was armed to the teeth with weapons that were far more likely to be found in a warzone than in an urban environment. Machineguns, rocket launchers, packs of grenades. These were military-grade weapons. And in the second photo there was one man who stood out among all the rest. Wearing a white pinstriped suit, black shoes, and black gloves, stood a man who’s head was a great, black, skull.
“Black Mask,” Batman acknowledged aloud.

“First photo we’ve got of him,” Gordon responded. “These guns show he means business. And they don’t hide em…”

“Penguin supplies them. Oswald Cobblepot.”

“Got anything we can pin on him?”

“Not as of yet. Black Mask’s face. Wood?”

“We think so. A wooden mask.”

“The wood from Sionis’ casket. Ebony. He has to be Roman Sionis. I suspected him from the beginning, and the mask confirms it.”

“He’s certainly bold. Very theatrical. He’s been rounding up various smaller crime factions and getting them to join him. We’ve mostly ran across the scenes of those who refused… He knows how to put those weapons to use…”

“Why haven’t I heard?”

“Loeb always wanted good press. But for Grogan, the only good press is no press… How can you be sure it’s Sionis? I mean… the mask, but-”

“I recognize some of the men in these photos. They were associates in Roman’s father’s illicit activities too.”

“How do you know?”

“They’re in your database.”

He’s been in our files? Does he even have boundaries? What else does he know? What does he know about me?!

“Well, do you think we can get him?”

“You won’t find him,” Batman said. “Any business he was conducting has already finished. He’s making his name known. The next move still has to be his.”

“Think he’s connected to… to this?” Gordon nodded at the remains at their feet.

“Not sure.”

“Well…” Gordon said, trying his best to repress the awkwardness he felt as he distrusted Batman more and more with every passing moment. “Any uh… any ideas?”

“Not yet,” Batman said as he aimed his grapple gun at the nearest tall structure and shot it. “I’ll let you know when I do.” And with that, he glided off into the rainy darkness beyond. O’Hara and Merkel were only a few feet away, eyes wide open, and jaws dropped.

“All right, boys,” Gordon huffed. “Time to get the meat wagon down here.”

“Y-yes, Sir,” O’Hara stuttered, still gawking at Batman’s shrinking silhouette up above.

They won’t talk. They don’t know what to think of it yet. They’re good cops in a rotten town… I let
“Now,” Hugo Strange began after pressing the record button on his audio-capture device. “Genetic manipulation isn’t the hard part. It’s coaxing that altered code into an already living organism. Icing the cake, as it were.” He paced back and forth throughout his laboratory, nervously running his hands over his pristine, white lab coat as he did so. These were his notes, and while he generally remembered most of his personal insights, he always went through the trouble of recording them. He never listened to these recordings afterwards, but in the moments in which he was recording, it at least made him feel proud of himself. It made him feel as though he were important, and that his mind and discipline hadn’t been put completely to waste in his otherwise stout body.

“So far,” he continued, “it must be told that my efforts in this have been… less than successful. For unknown reasons, radical mutation occurs at this stage. A fact that distresses, but has yet to deter me.”

“Excuse me, Professor,” Sanjay’s voice called as he entered the lab.

“What is it?” Hugo snapped, angrily snatching up the recording device and stopping it.

“I’m sorry, Professor. They just-”

“Ease up, Bum-boy,” another voice cut in.

Hugo spun around to see Sanjay looking forlorn and annoyed as two men pushed their way into the lab and approached Hugo. One of them he hadn’t seen before, but was clearly just hired muscle. The other, Hugo knew all too well. It was Richie, one of Maroni’s go-to scumbags, toting a cigar from his lip as usual, only he looked a bit more unsettled than usual. For starters, an earring usually hung from one of his earlobes, but it appeared to have been recently torn out, leaving a bloody scab behind. His face was swollen and bruised, sporting a bandage on one cheek, and he limped as he walked, carrying one arm in a sling.

“Y’see,” Richie said. “We just need to have a few words with yer employer… nice-like.”

“Richie,” Hugo hissed. “I assume you are here on Maroni’s business? I know the drill – you don’t need to come barging in here to intimidate me.”

“Hey, hey,” Richie laughed. “Y’see, man? I told you he was a smart guy here! Smart enough to pay his debts on time… and keep his arms in one piece.”

“Yes,” the professor grinned. “Advice you seem to have ignored.” He eyed Richie’s sling with disdain.

“Occupational hazard,” Richie said bitterly. “But this aint about me, Coke-bottles.” He took the cigarette from his mouth and pointed it fiercely at Strange, who firmly stood his ground.

“There’s no smoking aloud in my laboratory.”

“A health-nut too, huh?” Richie walked over to the nearest counter and flicked his cigarette into a beaker of carefully measured liquids. “Just hoping you remember that we expect weekly payments outta you. Got that? Turns out, Sal runs a floating poker game not too far from here. We’ll stop by after the gig on Friday. That gives you two days, Smart Guy.” He held up two fingers, then nodded at his companion, and they both began to exit the lab. Hugo’s blood pressure rose, and without
even looking at his assistant he spat out his orders.

“Follow them, Sanjay. You know the procedure. Only this time there is some gain in it for us. An illegal gambling den will be flush with illicit cash.”

“Yes, Professor,” Sanjay nodded.

Julie impatiently tapped her freshly manicured fingernails on the table in front of her, resting her head on her left hand, and leaning on her left elbow against the table. A string quartet played softly in the far corner of the restaurant, and a busy flow of waiters and servers in tuxedoes scrambled around her. The room was alive with the light buzz of conversation at every table. But there were no words at hers.

She was wearing her silkiest black dress, and even opted to go strapless in spite of the weather getting more frigid. Her hair had just been styled professionally, she had a new manicure, a facial, and was wearing her best gold necklace. But there was one problem. She was alone. The centerpiece candle at her table had nearly melted away entirely, and she was on her third glass of wine waiting for Bruce to arrive.

Okay, so my handsome prince does have one big shortcoming. He’s terminally late. Especially at night. Jeez, I can’t even remember the last time I sat and waited for a man in public like I have for him. I hope he realizes how lucky he is… I know I realize how lucky I am too. I’ll give him just ten more-

“Hope I’m not in too deep,” Bruce said as he strode up beside her, leaned down, and kissed her on the cheek. “Sorry…”

“Well, the jury’s still out,” Julie said, trying to not notice the flutter in her heart as she watched him take his seat across from her. “And you’re all wet! Was your board meeting in a swimming pool?”

“Raining,” he shrugged as a waiter approached him and offered him one of the menus.

“The wine list, Sir?”

“No thank you,” Bruce said, raising his hand. “Water will be just fine.” The waiter obliged, almost instantly returning with a glass of ice water, and then left the two of them to decide on their meal.

“Anyway, now I am here,” Bruce said as he sipped the water. “And dining with Gotham’s loveliest lawyer-to-be. For that, I would have braved any element!”

“Okay,” Julie rolled her eyes and smiled. “I guess we’ll suspend your sentence in favor of some community service.” The rest of the evening followed suit. Plenty of playful banter and discussion of law and the social climate, but Julie was having a hard time shaking off her negative feelings from before.


At the conclusion of the meal, Julie wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and took Bruce’s arm as he lead her outside to meet her taxi home.

“So, Daddy says he’d like to get to know you better,” Julie said. “Says he wants to see if all the
“rumors about you are true.”

“But not a one,” Bruce grinned. “I’m really pretty simple at heart. What you see is what you get, I guess.”

“Well, I like what I see.”

“Me too.”

“So… where to? You’re ‘pretty simple’ mansion again?”

“Not tonight. I’ve got an early meeting that I can’t miss in the morning.”

“Awe, I was hoping to discuss the terms of your probation from earlier.”

“Soon. I am your prisoner, Counselor.” He leaned in and gave her a kiss before helping her into her taxi and waving as it drove away. She wore a smile the entire time, but the moment he was out of sight, she found herself scowling.

*He claims to be straightforward. Yet he never really tells me what he’s doing or where he’s going. Is he hiding something? Perhaps the rumors about him are true… What if there’s another woman? Or several? Now I’m being paranoid… Are those sirens?*

The taxicab suddenly swerved wildly out of the way as a beat up jalopy tore past them, missing them by mere centimeters, closely followed by a police car with its siren blaring through the sounds of the normal city night.

*This city…*

The junker was carrying three men, all wearing dark brown coats and ski masks. One was armed, holding a shotgun. Behind them rode Officer O’Hara and Officer Garr. Garr spoke hastily into his radio, pressing his free hand into his seat to steady himself as they darted through traffic.

“All units, respond,” he shouted. “Officers in pursuit of robbery suspects. Just turning onto West 39th! Repeat, all units-”

“Dang it,” O’Hara muttered. “These crooks are gonna hit someone!”

Up ahead, the man in the front passenger’s seat had rolled down his window, and was fumbling with the shot gun as he tried to lean out and take aim.

“Hold steady, man,” he shouted. “Gimme a clear shot! Whoa! Watch it!”

“Ok,” the driver said. “I’m just gonna – Holy! Where the hell did-” An unmarked black car skidded across the intersection ahead of them, no driver in sight, and stopped directly in their path. The criminal’s vehicle slammed into it, crushing the front end of their car and blowing both of the front tires. The black vehicle flipped over and skidded into the center of the intersection.

“Dammit,” the driver shouted. “You all ok? That thing came outta nowhere.”

“Everybody out,” the man in the back seat screamed as he crawled out through the door.

“Our ride is fried,” the driver groaned.

“Watch out,” the man with the shotgun ordered. “Those cops! Who’s got the goods?”
“I do.”

“Good, we can set up a shield here.” Opening all of the doors to their vehicle as wide as possible, the crooks made a sort of fortress out of the two wrecked cars, in which they could hide behind and shield themselves from any fire from the police.

O’Hara and Garr had stopped their car and were now crouched behind the hood of it with their weapons drawn and ready.

“We’ve gotta get clear,” one of the masked men said.

“Take those cops out,” another shouted. The driver pulled a handgun out from the back of his pants, and aimed it steadily with both hands. He had a clear shot of the top of O’Hara’s head.

“Watch me plant one right in that big guy’s hea- Gah!” A rope dropped down from above, slipping over his head and tightening into a noose of sorts, which quickly jerked him up onto the overhanging streetlight above.

“What’re you waiting f- huh?” the man with the shotgun cut off as she saw his partner being hauled up into the haze above. Suddenly, pain jolted through his arm as three tiny batarangs planted themselves into his forearm, forcing him to drop the gun.

“Come on,” the third man shouted, peaking up over the make-shift barrier. “What’s wrong back there?” And with a loud crash, two heavy boots planted themselves on the hood before him, further crushing the vehicle. The man shouted as he gazed up at the enormous figure of Batman, who quickly lashed out, kicking the man in the jaw and knocking him unconscious on the ground.

The second man was desperately trying to crawl away, panting heavily, but felt Batman’s hand grasp around his ankles and drag him back. He screamed, but it was useless as Batman tied his hands behind his back, and then bound them to his ankles.

“You see that?” Officer Garr gasped. “It’s Batman!” Batman turned, seeing the two officers across the intersection, and then quickly darted off down a nearby alleyway.

“Hold it right there,” Garr shouted, raising his weapon. “Stop! I’m sh-”

“Ease up there, partner,” O’Hara said, pulling Garr’s arm down.

“What are you doing?” Garr said. “He’s a wanted felon! There’s a standing warrant out on him! Commissioner Grogan-”

“Commissioner Grogan isn’t here. And that wanted felon just took out three armed, hopped-up dirt-bags without a single shot being fired. I say we keep it that way. Now come on… Let’s go see what he’s left for us.”
The Arkham Wing

There were two prisons located in Gotham City. The first, and oldest of the two, was Blackgate Penitentiary. When it first opened shortly after the foundation of Gotham, it was known as Blackgate Prison. Designed to remove the undesirable criminals from society, Blackgate was constructed on the outskirts of Gotham’s southernmost border.

On the southern tip of what was known as the Gotham Line, there were no beaches, but rather the land rose up into massive cliffs which angrily looked over the churning sea below. It was there, amongst these jagged rocky facades, that the prison had been originally carved into the face of the cliff. An angry cave that swallowed up society’s regret, it was as primitive as it was brutal, but it did its job. Blackgate swallowed up many undesirables into its dark, lightless caves, and it kept them there. Escape could only be accomplished by leaving through the heavily guarded front gate – the prison’s namesake – made of thick, black iron. And once they escaped through the gate, they would have to scale the cliff above, risking either falling into the crushing waves below, or – more likely – being dashed against the cliff by the tumultuous waves. It was a virtually inescapable fortress, and remained so for many decades.

At the end of the 1800s, however, Blackgate Prison was condemned for its crude nature and generally inhumane conditions, and two new, more modern facilities, were built as replacements. To the far north of the city’s limits, Gotham State Penitentiary was constructed as a complex of various cell blocks that was still in use to this day. But a third, more infamous facility also opened, known as the Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane. Built on a small island northeast of Gotham bay, isolated from the main island outcroppings on which downtown Gotham was built, Arkham Asylum had a long and frightening history. Most notoriously, the asylum’s own director and architect, Amadeus Arkham, who lived in a mansion sitting adjacent to the asylum, became mentally unstable and ultimately murdered several of his employees to death with an axe. He was convicted and sentenced to spend the rest of his life in the same asylum he had been built.

Its dark history had begun in the early 1900s when Amadeus Arkham's mother, Elizabeth, having suffered from mental illness most of her life, committed suicide. Amadeus, upset at the death, decided that as the sole heir to the Arkham Island estate, he was to remodel his family home in order to properly treat the mentally ill, so that others might not suffer the same fate as his mother. He and his wife and daughter moved back to his family home to oversee the remodeling. While there, Amadeus Arkham received a call from the police notifying him that Martin "Mad Dog" Hawkins, a serial killer before his time, had escaped from custody during his relocation from Blackgate to Gotham State, and sought his considered opinion on the murderer's state of mind. Shortly afterward, Amadeus Arkham returned to his home to find his front door wide open, and inside, he discovered the corpses of his wife and daughter in an upstairs room, with Mad Dog's alias carved on thier bodies. Despite this family tragedy, the Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane officially opened that November.

With his sanity in tatters, Dr. Arkham designed a floor plan that evoked occult runes and Gothic architecture, reflecting his own dark impulses. One of his first patients would be his family’s own murderer, Mad Dog, whom Amadeus Arkham insisted on treating personally. However, after treating Mad Dog for six months, Amadeus finally strapped him to an electroshock chair and deliberately electrocuted him to death. The staff treated the death as an accident, but it contributed to Amadeus's gradual descent into mental illness, in which he began to believe his birthright was to be a killer who killed other killers. After killing an untold number of his own patients over the course of several months, suspicion eventually fell on him, and he when on a killing spree amongst his employees. He was eventually overpowered and ordered to be a criminal patient in his own
asylum, where he died.

During the prohibition era and decades immediately thereafter, Gotham State became overrun due to the upswing in organized crime, and mass breakouts became a common problem. Elsewhere, Arkham Asylum had been seen as unfit for treating criminals due to increasingly dilapidated conditions, and a campaign was immediately pursued for alternatives to both facilities. For decades, people tried to rally support to blend the best of both facilities, and finally, in the late 1960’s, Blackgate Prison was renovated and reopened as Blackgate Penitentiary. Gotham State became a low security facility for lesser criminals, and Arkham Asylum was shut down and designated as an abandoned historical landmark.

Blackgate Penitentiary, the new maximum-security prison, was a fortress jutting out from the cliffs side, equipped with all the latest amenities and security features. Since that time, Blackgate was regularly renovated and upkept, serving as Gotham’s primary location to house captive criminals, although since The Roman’s reign of terror, most people had been able to bribe their way into minimal sentences at Gotham State. As for those who were deemed criminally insane and in need to mental health treatment, the Arkham Wing at Blackgate Penitentiary opened in the mid 1970s, and served as a sort of functioning hospital for mentally unstable criminals within the prison.

Sanjay drove the old van down the road along the cliffs’ side, and gradually the famous iron gates of Blackgate grew closer and closer, standing proud and dark against the red haze of light pollution from the city beyond. They had once been embedded into the very cliff itself, barring the way in and out of the cave-like prison, but now they had been moved outward as the part of a secondary entrance for road-traffic, while most people had to get to the prison by way of ferry during amiable tides. Hugo and Sanjay had made this trip many times before. In fact, they were nearly expected. The two guards at the gate knew them instantly, and nodded, pressing a button, which gradually opened the enormous gates.

“The availability of test subjects,” Hugo said to Sanjay, as though he were presenting new information. “It is an obstacle we were lucky to overcome, my friend. Though drastic, it is necessary that we come here again.” Sanjay simply nodded, trying not to think too hard about what they were doing. It felt unethical, but it was for a cause he desperately believed in.

The gates were now opened, and they slowly drove up into the prison’s interior and pulled around to the north wall, where they saw the familiar door with its neon backlit red sign, reading proudly, The Arkham Wing.

“Wait here, Sanjay,” Hugo said. “I’ll go retrieve the subject.” Hastily, Hugo stepped out of the car and shuffled his way to the door, pressing the button to announce his presence.

“Your business?” a woman’s voice asked through a speaker panel next to the door.

“Professor Hugo Strange,” he said calmly. “I believe the director is expecting me.”

“Hold on one moment,” the voice said. Seconds passed, and then the door buzzed indicating that it had unlocked. He entered, confidently, immediately searching the front desk for the woman who had spoken to him. It was a new voice - her fairly strong accent indicated she was from New York or New Jersey – so it must be someone he hadn’t previously known. And he was right.

At the front desk sat a woman, slender – even beautiful – with bright blue eyes and even brighter platinum blonde hair. Her hair was pulled up into a bun, and Hugo smiled. She smiled, but she didn’t bother to even glance in his direction, instead fiddling with her glasses distractedly.

“Hello,” he said, bowing his head slightly. “I do not believe we have met before.”
“Not that I can recall,” the woman answered, her voice wavering with ennui. “A lot of people come through here, you know?”

“You work here, then? Now, I mean?”

“Just finished my internship, so yeah, now I do… Yeah.”

“Nice to meet you,” he smiled, extending his hand. “My name is Professor Hugo Strange.”

“Great name, pal,” she replied, not taking his hand. “I’m Dr. Quinzel.”

“Your hair,” he said. “How long is it?”

“Huh?”

“Your hair is pulled up into a bun. I assume you have long blonde hair. Arkham’s regulations ask that women with long blonde hair to either pull it up into a bun, or cut it off, because it provides… shall we say, unwanted temptation for a lot of the male patients. I’m sure its very beautiful.”

“Are you hitting on me, creep?” she said, raising and eyebrow. “What did you say your business was here?” Hugo’s face flushed, and he returned his hand robotically to his side, trying his best not to look her in the eye.

“I am here to see the director, Miss. Dr. Crane. I believe he is expecting me. I suspect we’ll being seeing quite a lot of eachother, you and I, as I visit quite often.”

“Lucky you,” she shrugged.

At that exact moment, a man entered into the lobby. He was tall, and extremely gaunt and lanky. Probably the lankiest man that Hugo had ever known. He was Dr. Jonathan Crane. The two of them had briefly worked together on a project at Gotham University many years back, and though they did not exactly get along together, Hugo had figured that Dr. Crane would be a sympathizer. They both shared odd physical appearances, and had both been severely bullied for it in their younger days. And while Crane was more interested in the characteristics of the mind, Hugo knew he at least had a passing interest in the physical as well.

Surely, Hugo had thought when he entered into their illicit alliance earlier in the past year, Jonathan Crane would be a supporter of my genetics research.

“Professor Strange,” Crane said, moving curtains of greasy black hair out of his face, revealing his sharp, blue eyes. “We’re all ready for you. Have your driver come up around back to the loading dock. I’ll meet you there.”

“Thank you,” Hugo said, eyeing Dr. Quinzel briefly before turning to head out the door.

When they had pulled the van around near the back, Crane was waiting patiently, standing next to a patient strapped down in a wheelchair.

“So,” he said coolly. “Professor Strange, trawling for rubbish again?”

“People to improve,” Strange replied. “May I ask, who was that woman in the lobby?”

“Quinzel,” Crane said dryly. “She recently finished an internship with us. I hired her on. Pitiful psychiatrist though.”

“Manic depressive, no?”
“What?”

“She is a manic depressive,” Hugo said. “Correct? It stems from her lack of self respect. The clothes say it all.”

“She’s autophibic,” Crane said. “That’s the uh… the fear of being alone, or the fear of one’s own self.”

“Fascinating.”

“You suffer similar fears, don’t you?” Crane said, eyeing the professor. “Avoidant personality disorders… fears of inadequacy. Is that why you’re asking about her?”

“I was merely curious,” Hugo said quickly. “I have a right to know who knows I am visiting you.”

“You fancy her, but I assure you, neither of you would be good for one another,” Crane said, ignoring Hugo’s response.

“Maybe,” Strange said, taken somewhat aback. “Is this the candidate?” He nodded toward the man in the wheelchair. The man’s hair was wild, and his eyes completely dull, with long strands of drool hanging from his slacked lower lip. He was motionless, other than the occasional slight twitch of breathing.

“Mmm, yes,” Crane nodded. “I’ve got a real ripe one for you tonight.”

“Untraceable, I hope. If any of these men were ever connected to me-”

“Nothing to fear, Professor. Nobody is going to miss this guy. He’s been inside here for a long time, and zonked out on so many meds, I doubt even he knows he’s still here! A real bottom feeder… Trust me, I understand discretion when it comes to test subjects.”

“You haven’t tampered with him, I hope.”

“He’s been through my psychotherapy, but it won’t be a problem. That was ages ago. Now, you have the payment?”

“As usual,” Strange said, handing a massive wad of cash that he had procured from Maroni earlier over to Crane’s hand.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Professor. As always.” Sanjay began wheeling the patient over to the back of their van and loading him in.

“I remember when I first became a cop, Gordon thought. It seemed easier to tell the good from the bad back then. But Gotham City has a way of confusing that issue.

He stood in his office, pouring himself a mug of coffee, worrying about his wife and kids back home as usual. Worrying that he wasn’t good enough for them. He and Barbara had been in therapy for weeks, but truly all it had done so far was make him feel worse about himself.

“Jim?” Grogan’s secretary, Danny, said as he knocked on the door and entered. “Thought you’d wanna hear the latest on that jewel heist that got… um, interrupted.”

Danny worked directly under Grogan, who’s militant style of command was universally disliked. All of the department was afraid to ever sympathize with Danny’s complaints about the boss,
leaving him pretty isolated. But not Gordon. Gordon had extended his hand in friendship, and quickly became friends with the secretary. These little tips from the Commissioner’s office were becoming even more frequent.

“Whattaya got, Danny?” Gordon asked.

“Okay, at first glance that mystery car that collided with the getaway vehicle? Looks like any other nondescript black sedan on the road… until we dug further. First off, it had no plates.”

“You don’t say,” Gordon said as he stared out his office window at the city beyond and began sipping his coffe.

“In the trunk, we found half a dozen phony plates though! Along with three hundred yards of nylon chords and an E.M.T. medical kit. The wheels were filled with a flat-resistant gel. The glass was tinted, and bulletproof. The frame, lined with plates of steel. Turbo-charged engine responding to – get this – short-distance remote control. Of course, no prints on any of it… Looks like our Batman lost his car.”

“Oh well,” Gordon said. “Guess he’ll have to fly from now on.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Danny said. “Oh, also, got the lab work on your Jane Doe done.”

“The hand?”

“Yeah,” Danny nodded. “Those hair and blood samples under the nails? Human.”

_The DNA samples from under the victim’s nails were human, _Bruce thought, contemplating in the Batcave. _But how is that possible? The samples were four or five times as thick as human hair… I need to trace the remains to their source._

He turned around and began fastening his cape on, ready to go out and investigate further, when Alfred arrived, carrying a tray with a modest meal placed neatly at its center.

“As always, it seems my timely reminders that you need to eat will be lost in the frantic furl of black cloth wings.”

“Sorry, Alfred,” Bruce said as he pulled the cowl on. “I need to follow-up a trail before it goes cold. I’ll eat later. I promise.”

“Very good, Sir. It is a shame about the loss of your _night car_ this past evening.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Bruce said as he strapped his gauntlets on. “You’ve seen the new car. It should be finished soon. In the meantime I have the bike.”

“Do you really have to light that in here?” Norman Maddison sighed. Across the room from him, sitting in his penthouse, sat Sal Maroni, placing a cigar in his mouth. Norman’s heart raced, but he had to keep his temper. Now wasn’t the time to argue with Maroni.

“I can leave, if you’d like,” Maroni laughed. “Is that what you would like, Norman?”

“No, no,” Norman shook his head. Maroni smiled.
“So, Norman, why am I here tonight?”

“Don’t play coy with me, Maroni. There’s only one reason I’d have any use for you.”

“Oh, I know the purpose of my visit, my friend. I wanna know why you’d have need of my services… again.”

“You’re a cruel man, you know that?”

“Hey, it’s a livin’. It’s a truly fine livin’. And I’m assuming that’s more than you can say for yourself. So… trouble making payroll again, eh?”

“Several of my investments haven’t panned out,” Norman said, rubbing his hand over his face. “The people interested in charities aren’t as interested in being charitable as I’d have hoped… So yes, the people on my payroll haven’t been given their full compensation.”

“In how long?”

“Seven months. I thought the Gotham Institute Ball would pan out but…”

“Tragic,” Maroni blew a large puff of smoke out. “You dug into their retirement funds yet?”

“No. Nor will I. It’s why I’m forced to deal with you.”

“Well, I hope your workers appreciate this. But something tells me they won’t. Not enough. Three million is a lot of scratch. Yours, at thirty percent. We got a deal. Be seein’ you Norman.” Maroni tossed the still-lit cigar into a vase on the coffee table, nodded, and headed for the door saying, “I know the way out.”

Norman watched, and heard a noise coming from above. Looking up, he saw Julie, descending down their spiral staircase, wearing her pink bathrobe he had given her last Christmas.

“Daddy? Were you… were you smoking in here?”

“Oh Julie,” he said, picking up the vase and shaking it, seeing if he could snuff the cigar out. “No, my dear. I had a visitor whose manners leave a bit to be desired… But why are you here, dear? I thought you had a date this evening.”

“No, no,” she sighed. “Bruce had another commitment.”

“Another commitment, huh? Tell me, Julie… do you trust this man? I mean… his reputation…”

“I know, Daddy! I want to trust him… but there are times I must admit… I feel like I barely know him.”

Water ran up halfway to his knees as Batman stalked through the sewer tunnels. It was dark, somewhat cramped, and smelled completely awful. But Batman figured that he had better get used to it now. His nighttime activities would almost certainly bring him into pretty seedy and disgusting situations. And if not anywhere worse than the sewers, he’d certainly be back in these dank tunnels at some point.

*Tracking upstream from where the remains were uncovered. Should have done this as soon as the body was found. Trail is bound to have gone cold – and if not, it’s out of pure luck. Pure luck.*
It was hard to distinguish what of all the objects floating in the water was or wasn’t something important. Debris, waste, and dead rats. He was starting to think it wasn’t any use, until suddenly he saw something caught against the edge of a pipe. It looked almost like a flag flapping in the breeze, only about the size of his hand. Picking it up carefully, a twinge of excitement and intrigue ran through his body.

*Scraps of a biohazard bag. That shouldn’t be here… Could her murderer have been in the medical profession? And what of the enormous bites? This case is confusing. I have to reign in my impulses. Can’t go running after a lead without more certainty – especially when there are so many other things that I need to give my attention to. Anarky, Penguin and Black Mask are still at large. And the heroin is still missing, with Falcone’s capos turning the streets upsidedown looking for it.*

Hugo rubbed his eyes, and then, frustrated, put his glasses back on, and began washing his hands. The procedure had not gone as well as he might have hoped. His latest attempt had been arduous, and with all of that, it had not gone even remotely according to plan. But at least the subject was still alive.

*The subjects’ immunity systems need bolstering before they can accept the altered DNA. A small implant releases necessary stimulators. Sweet reason, let this be the one that succeeds.*

“Profesor,” Sanjay said as he entered the lab. “I have located the gangster’s gambling house. There is a game in progress now.”

“Excellent… how many, total?”

“Around a dozen men. I’d say less than half are armed.”

“Then I’d say only one will be sufficient. Wouldn’t you?”

“More than enough, yes, Professor.”

*The gambling den is dead ahead, Batman thought. Sal Maroni’s high-stakes poker game. Might just set up surveillance. Might interrogate a few of them. Depends on how many there are. Anything to help me find the heroin before they do.*

He approached the building, an old boarding house, and then listened. It was quiet.

*Quieter than I’d expect from a bunch of hoped-up criminals losing money to each other. Much quieter. Something is up.*

The doorway appeared to be open at first, but upon closer examination, the door had been removed from its hinges. Not only removed, but forcibly torn. The hinges were twisted like paperclips. And inside was a scene of pure and absolute carnage. The furniture was all upturned, and splintered into bits, with glass and broken bottles thrown in all directions. Blood was smeared along every wall, all four of which had been shot full of bullet holes. Eleven men were scattered over the floor, some in pieces, others simply crumpled like pieces of papers. One man’s head appeared to have imploded. Innards were strewn across nearly every surface. And right at the doorway lay Richie, the man Batman had interrogated at the wharf only days earlier, his arm and sling ripped from his body and tossed aside on the other end of the room.
Batman entered, cautiously, and immediately zeroed in on a set of parallel gashes running along the floor, nearly hidden under a mess of spilled alcohol, blood, and cards and poker chips.

*Gauges in the carpet as if made by enormous talons. What could have left such marks? He stood up and surveyed the room again. Such utter carnage. The charnel reek hangs stale and silent in the air. Most of the victims suffered limbs torn right from their sockets. Gigantic bite marks, similar to those on the woman found in the sewer, are clearly evident. This was no massacre. It was a feeding frenzy. My purpose here was to get a pulse on Maroni’s operations. Maybe instill further fear. Shake down Richie Pantone when I had the chance. But somebody’s beat me to it.* He leaned over Richie’s body, and lifted a tuft of hair off of it. *And again… the same coarse hairs… How could such a creature have gotten in… let alone bested so many men? Many of them were armed.*

He immediately located the telephone in the kitchen and picked it up, quickly dialing in the phone number to the police department.

*What am I facing?*

“Jim,” he said urgently. “There’s been another attack.”
Hugo threw down two thick stacks of hundred dollar bills on Maroni’s desk. Salvatore Maroni was known for his grungier tastes in life. He did drugs, dealt with positively greasy people, and was more likely to be found at a rave than one of Falcone’s fancy shindigs. But when it came to his business front, he had only the best. His office was located on the top floor of a Gotham skyscraper, adjacent to his own penthouse, lavishly ornate in its Art Deco style. A massive window was set at his back in an archway in the wall, overlooking the sprawling cityscape beyond. And his desk was kept as neat and tidy as possible. Hugo had often thought it was an interesting contrast to the man who owned it, but nonetheless did his part to keep with appearances and make sure he placed the stacks down straight and neatly.

*His own dirty money,* Hugo thought, smirking to himself. *It looks the same as any other. How is he to know the difference? Or its source?*

“I must say, I’m impressed, Professor,” Maroni scowled at the money. “Truthfully, I didn’t expect you to make good on your payments for at least several weeks yet.”

*Sanjay had most carefully washed away any bloodstains on the bills.*

“Yes,” Hugo nodded. “I am a man of my word, Maroni. And besides… I was most impressed by the warnings of your associate… I’m sorry, his name escapes me at the moment.”

“Richie Pantone,” Maroni breathed. “Yeah, yeah… that’s just the standard squeeze-talk we give all our squibs. So… where’d you find this sudden windfall?”

“Mr. Pantone, yes,” Hugo said. “When he didn’t return to collect they money as he had said, I decided to deliver it in person. I do hope he’s well?”

“Yeah, yeah, *enough* about Richie! Look, I thought you were in such a bind over this genetic research of yours – how’d you come up with fifty grand in a week?”

*There is suspicion in his troglodyte, beady eyes, but confusion as well.*

“I am no crackpot, Maroni. And the sciences are not without their financial rewards for those with advanced vision. All that need concern you is the fact that my initial obligations have been met. Exactly how I manage to do that is *my* business. You will give my regards to Mr. Pantone, yes?”

*He has a predator’s survival instinct. Always edgy. Always on the prowl. Too bad it’s wasted on such a brute.*

“Yeah sure,” Maroni waved Hugo away, who happily tipped his hat and exited out the door. “Whatever.”

Meanwhile, outside the enormous window in the archway, hanging from the brick exterior of the building, was Batman. His cape billowing in the breeze, he hoped he was too high up for anyone unsavory to notice him from the ground below. He had come in hopes of finding out what had gone down at the poker game, and so far it had been rather enlightening.

*Maroni has a notorious temper,* Batman recalled. *It’s rumored he once killed a man with a ball-peen hammer simply for splashing mud on his new Italian loafers. News of the massacre must have him ready to blow a fuse. Yet he conducts his illicit deals calmly – “business as usual.”* Batman glanced down at the street below, watching the Professor head out to his car, being helped in by
his large assistant. The visitor is a far cry from Maroni’s usual associates. He’s the same man from The Gotham Institute Charity Ball. The loud one. Must remember to follow up on that. License plate is JV7-IC3. Remember that. Almost too hard to make out, even with the magnification function on the cowl lenses. Must remember to improve their capabilities on the next upgrade. Now… Maroni… Time to crack that cool.

Maroni had, by this time, moved over to his penthouse apartment, accompanied by his bodyguard, and was pacing uneasily back and forth across his living room, wearing out the massive kodiak bear rug on his floor. His ear was pressed firmly against his telephone as he did so, as he nervously talked with his boss, Carmine “The Roman” Falcone.

“Yeah, yeah, I know Carmine,” he said. “I swear to you, I got no idea who could’a done this! But when I get my hand on that son of a… Yeah, yeah… The cops were here all afternoon, but they got nothin’ to actually connect me to that game. Nothin’ I tell ya. Bad enough I got that pretty-boy Dent crawlin’ up my butt all the time. I swear, one of these days I’m gonna get that guy. If he makes DA next month… But… Carmine! I really don’t think that’s necess – but – but – all right, all right! I’ll go. Whatever you say! Fine.” He hung up the phone and immediately closed his eyes and began rubbing his fingers over them as if he was suffering a migraine.

“That The Roman?” his bodyguard asked. Maroni didn’t respond. “What’d he say?”

“Says I should get outta town for a bit. Hole up at his estate until all this shit with the card game blows over. Jeez… I hate bein’ out in the country like that. All those friggin’ trees!” He stomped over to the nearest table and fumbled through a drawer, eventually removing a bottle of unmarked pills, which he began voraciously downing.

“Look, Sal, you gotta relax. Try and get some rest. I’ll stay here and stand point for anything you need.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right. I gotta relax! Jeez, feels like I’m getting another ulcer!… Yeah, I’m headin’ to bed. Lock the door for me will ya?”

“You’re wife’s not home yet.”

“Yeah, and I wanna keep it that way. She wants to stay out with other men all night long, she can have it.” Maroni stormed out of the room and into his bedroom, shutting the door behind him. However, as soon as he had latched the door, a voice whispered to him from the darkness.

“How did you get in here,” he gasped.

“None of your kind are safe from me, Maroni. No matter what hole you crawl inside.”
“What do you want? C-can’t breath!” Batman released him, shoving him back down onto the bed where he rubbed his neck and winced.

“Who or what is responsible for the bloodbath at the card game?”

“Jeez, you think I know? Freakin’ wish I knew. I’d dance on his face with an ice pick.”

“And does your boss know anything?”

“You heard of Black Mask? Doesn’t seem to happy with us at the moment… offing my friends…”

“You think it was just a slaying? You’re forgetting the obvious motive. The cash. A game like that…”

“You’re right!” he clenched his fist and sat up, shaking angrily. “Musta been fifty, sixty grand in that room… Strange!”

“What’s strange?”

“Oh uh, nothing,” Maroni’s temper immediately cooled. “It’s just… strange that I hadn’t thought of that… but I mean, what kinda animal tears up people like that over money? I hear Richie’s freakin’ entire stomach was ripped out on the floor.” Batman leaned in and angrily glared.

“Don’t play games with me Maroni!”

“I swear! I thought it was a turf strike! Black Mask!” Batman stood up and tilted his head, silent for a moment.

“Whatever the cause, Maroni, something is out there that’s more brutal than your wildest dreams. Perhaps you should say a small prayer that I’m around to stop it…”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say.” And then, as fast as lighting, Batman lashed out, hitting Maroni across the side of the head, knocking him unconscious.

The face of Professor Hugo Strange lit up on the screen in front of Bruce in the Batcave. Beneath the photo read the words, Gotham State Medical License. And next to that, a massive amount of scanned documents and various write-outs flickered across the monitor.

The car is licensed to a doctor. Professor Hugo Strange. Former professor, though… No longer working… Used to be a professor of psychiatry at Gotham State University. His tenure was suspended over increasingly bizarre theories in genetic engineering… Eugenics… Earliest records show that Hugo was raised in an orphanage on the lower east side. Smack in the middle of Hell’s Crucible. Not far from Crime Alley… Eventually went overseas before returning to work at the university.

“Any luck, Sir?” Alfred asked, arriving with Bruce’s bathrobe folded over his forearm.

“A promising lead,” Bruce said as he arose to his feet. “But it’ll have to wait until this evening. I assume you’re here to tell me that the sun is rising?”

“You do need to rest, Sir,” Alfred said as he helped Bruce put the robe on. “I should also tell you that Miss Maddison phoned. She said to remind you of your lunch date tomorrow.”

“Thank you Alfred. I do need to be rested, then. She’s sharp and perceptive, Julie.”
“She is indeed, Sir.”

*The world of business is a stern mistress,* Norman thought as he sat in his office at the Wayne Foundation. He watched helplessly as two men in suits pushed their way past his secretary and approach him. He recognized each of them as being Maroni’s bodyguards. *She is always unforgiving. And often unfaithful. My years of valid success do little to curb my current dilemmas.*

“You can’t just-” the secretary called desperately ahead at the men. “Mr. Maddison! I’m sorry, these men just-”

“Easy, sister,” one of the men grunted.

“We’ve just gotta have a few choice words with your boss. Discuss his obligations,” the other man explained.

“It’s all right, Betty,” Norman said. “Please make sure we’re not disturbed.” Betty looked at him with obvious worry in her eyes, but did as she was told.

“Yes, Sir,” she muttered as she turned and left.

*Such conditions truly separate the men from the boys.*

“Where’s Maroni?” Norman asked. “I’ve told him I’d have nothing to do with any of his cheap thugs.”

“Mr. Maroni’s been called out of town,” one of the men explained. “So, for the foreseeable future, you’re gonna just have to deal with us.”

“Called out of town, huh?” Norman said, puffing out his chest. “Is that mob-speak for being under indictment?”

*They’re on my turf now. My office. My rules. I am king in this castle. I am the man.*

“Ha! Sal said you were a funny guy…” the man returned, looking hardly amused.

“In any event,” Norman continued. “I don’t need, and don’t appreciate, these strong-arm attempts to intimidate me. Tell your boss that I intend to make good on our deal in a timely fashion. *And* tell him that I have no intention of granting further audience to his muscle monkeys. If he wants to speak to me, tell him to contact me himself.”

“Yeah,” the man returned, taking in a deep breath before leaning against Norman’s desk and picking up a framed picture of Julie. “Sal also said you’d be a pompous bastard who thought he always had the upper hand. This your daughter? Pretty.” And no sooner had the words left his mouth before he slammed his knuckle directly into the picture, shattering the glass and sending pieces of the frame flying in all direction.

“Hey, that’s-” Norman shouted, but was cut off as the thug hurled the remains of the picture down on the desk, further destroying it.

“Your first payment is due Monday,” the thug sneered. “So take your exclusive attitude and stick it in your… bank!” They turned and began exiting the office as Norman picked up the remains of his daughter’s picture.
“We’ll see you on Monday, Daddy,” the second man laughed as they shut the door behind them.

But what separates the men from the beasts? I’m losing control over this situation.

“Hey there, tall, dark and moody,” Julie said, looking up at Bruce as they walked arm-in-arm through the park. “I was gonna offer a penny for your thoughts… but then I figured I’d need more like… what? A million at least?… Hello? Mr. Wayne? That was one of my patented sure-to-get-Bruce-to-smile jokes. What’s got you down?”

The two of them had been walking through the park all afternoon since they had finished their lunch, bundled up in the latest fall fashions. Or, at least Julie was. Bruce was wearing his usual long black jacket with a scarf and turtleneck. And while the day had been pleasant, Bruce had left a lot to be desired at various moments. He seemed so distracted.

Bruce really is an enigma, Julie found herself thinking. At times, he seems so happy to see me. So much a part of my life and my love.

“Oh sorry,” Bruce said. “I’m all right. Just… preoccupied.”

“No kidding! And I’m the one working on a law degree!”

“Sorry, Julie. There’s a… business problem that’s got me troubled. Something that’s deadly serious.”

Other times, it’s like I’m hardly even here to him.

“What you need is a distraction,” Julie said, tugging at his arm playfully, trying to hide the distance she felt looming between the two of them. “And I’m just the attorney-in-training to mislead you!”

“Julie, I don’t think-”

“No, no, no… No comments from the witness stand until counsel has framed the question. Now, Sir… please tell the court what would make your girlfriend absolutely giddy this evening.”

“Julie, I’m sorry. I know it must be frustrating when I get like this…”

“The witness will please answer the question…”

“I’m afraid that sometimes… this time… it can’t be helped. I can’t be with you tonight.”

“Oh,” Julie took her hands off of him and stepped back.

“You can understand?” Bruce asked as he began walking back toward the street where Alfred was waiting with the car.

“Y-yes,” Julie said, shrugging her shoulders and clinging her arms around herself. “I just thought-”

“I know. Like I said, I apologize. I would love to spend the night in your arms again, but this can’t helped. Do you want me to drop you off at your father’s penthouse?” He stretched his hand out toward the car ahead.

“No… no thanks. I can walk. It’s not far.”
Sometimes he seems like two completely different people.

The sun began to set behind the silhouette of buildings reaching up to the dark skies above. Norman stared out his penthouse window, his eyes feeling heavy as his head was pounding. His eyes peered down at the vase on the table next to him, and he saw Maroni’s cigar still sitting inside. Sighing, he took a cup in one hand, and a bottle of whisky in the other, and began to pour himself a drink. His fifth that night. Without a second’s hesitation, he lifted it to his mouth and gulped the entire thing down.

First payment’s due Monday. I don’t have the money. I won’t have the money. They know about Julie… I never meant to hurt anybody. Not my company. Not Lucius or Wayne… not Julie. She has her mother’s eyes. And her smile. And my own stubborn will. God help me if anything ever happened to her. Devil claim me if I were ever the cause.

Julie descended the stairway, wearing a tight crop top, carrying a jacket in one arm, and smiling at the sight of her father below. He, however, merely glanced over his shoulder at her, and sighed a long sigh before speaking.

“Oh, hello, Darling,” he said finally. “I didn’t know… how was yer clash… wurreryou headed thiss ev’n’ing? I sh’pose it’s that Wayne again?”

“Afraid not, Daddy,” Julie said as she walked up behind him. “Bruce is all bent out of shape about some business deal he’s got going on.”

“Business?” Norman felt a vice clamp around his heart. Did Bruce know? Did Bruce know that Norman was ruining the Wayne Foundation? Had Betty told him about Maroni’s thugs being in the building? Maybe Julie had mentioned something to Bruce. He staggered back and tilted his head in wonder.

“Too busy to think about me, I guess,” Julie shrugged. “So, I’m off for an evening with Sharon and Crystal. Girls’ night out! Don’t wait up for me, okay?” She leaned forward and kissed her father on the cheek. But she wasn’t stupid. She knew her father was drunk.

Daddy’s seemed preoccupied lately, too, she thought. All the men in my life are so… compulsive…

“How could he be too busy for you?”

“Started drinking a little early tonight, didn’t you Daddy?” Julie said, deflecting his question as she put on her jacket.

“Might have had a few already, yes,” Norman said, at one moment seeming calm and at the next going into a frenzy. “But what about this boyfriend of yoursh? See-seems like he’s often busy at night. What kind of man takes a fine young woman like you for granted?”

“Oh Daddy,” Julie giggled. “Bruce is fine. He’s just… overcommitted. He is the head of Wayne Enterprises, after all.”

“Pfft,” Norman said, “They say that’s in title only… Fox… Bu-but I want to know, Darling… ish he a good man? Ish he… Ish he a generous man?”

“Yes, yes, of course, Daddy. I wouldn’t care for him if he weren’t.”

“Yes…” Norman said as he turned back toward the window and stared out blankly at the city with
a heavy heart. “Yes. Of course. I’m sorry, Dear. I trust your judgment. It’s just… sometimes I worry about my own… Have fun with your friends…”

He’s a man of deep convictions, my father, Julie thought as she headed out the door. Sometimes I worry that he takes too much upon himself.

“All right, Daddy, good night.”

Insurance records list Strange’s address as a long empty warehouse near the docks. Bars on all the windows. Alarms on all the doors. Motion sensors around every corner. What is he hiding?

Batman headed down a long dark set of stairs within the warehouse which he had broken into easily. Hugo used Wayne Tech security, after all, making Batman’s job all the easier. The stairs headed down to a basement level which opened up into a massive room humming with the sound of generators and motors, and was bathed in a golden glow of light emanating from strange orange lamps placed around. It was a laboratory. A massive laboratory that rivaled Batman’s own in the Batcave.

A science lab. It’s enormous. But why? Strange is a psychiatrist by trade. Unless... the eugenics...

Batman rounded a corner, and found with ease exactly what he was looking for. An apparatus sat to his right, about six yards long, made up of four adjacent tube-like tanks of fluid, each individually attached to a computer, a pump and a generator. The computer was monitoring various systems within the tanks, while the generators all provided power, and the pump kept the fluids moving inside. Batman’s gaze ran up the tubes, horrified and intrigued by what they contained.

Each tube was filled with a yellowish fluid, and at the very top of the containers hung harnessing devices which ran down into the fluid, strapped around human bodies which floated limply in the water. Humans in giant test tubes. Each one was in one of the harnesses which strapped around their chests and then ran down and attached to an underwear-like garment adding further support. Bundles of wires ran down into the liquid, attaching to their heads, chest, and to devices attached to their forearms as well. And finally, gasmask-like contraptions were suctioned securely onto their faces, giving them expressionless, almost insectoid faces. Tubes ran from the mask up to the top of the tank as well, which Batman assumed must be providing air.

Humans in gigantic test tubes. If the massacre at the poker game was the most gruesome sight I’d seen yet, this is easily the most... spectacular. Disturbing. Odd. Fascinating. Unbelievable... Strange. He’s here.

“Stand where you are,” the professor’s deep bravado-filled voice demanded. “I warn you, I’ve got a gun aimed right at you. It is loaded. What are you doing here?”

I heard the click of the gun loading before he even spoke. His voice trembles. He is nervous. As he should be. But it’s not fear. It’s surprise. It’s lack of expectation. Lack of expectation. I can get to him before he fires the gun.

Batman whirled around, his cape creating a brief, massive, confusing, whoosh of furling black shapes, before he exploded forth from the chaos and landing his right fist directly into Hugo’s right eye. Hugo fell back, releasing the gun and sending it whirling off behind the giant test tubes, and his glasses skidded across the floor, the right lens completely shattered.

“My Lord! So fast,” Hugo said as he picked himself up off of the floor, one hand pressed tightly
against his spinning head. “Wait, don’t – don’t hit me again. Hold on one moment.” Hugo fumbled along the floor, picking up his ruined spectacles and placing them back on his face. And then, slowly, he looked up as his dark trespasser stepped forward, swelling with power and fortitude. Hugo was awe-struck.

“Hugo Strange,” Batman growled.

“Bless my soul,” Hugo said with wonder in every syllable. “This is a surprise. This is Gotham’s mysterious vigilante of rumor… Batman. Here. In my research lab. You are… most impressive. Powerful. Swift and frightening. My God, every movement so deliberate and sure… but why are you here? This is a private research facility.” Batman lunged forward, grabbing Hugo and lifting him up to eye level.

“Private and definitely illegal,” Batman said. “Who are those men in the tanks?”

“T-test subjects. Pardon my panicked disposition, but they are here of their own accord I assure you.”

He’s feigning frailty here. Though small, his body is muscular and firm. He could likely wriggle free if he tried…

“Testing for what? Answer me!”

“Please, don’t! I’ll cooperate! They’re genetic trials. Subjects to be transformed.”

“Into what?”

He’s trying to distract me. Why?

“Into perfection,” Hugo said, his mouth widening into a broad grin, just as Batman felt a hard blow land itself across the back of his cowl. He dropped Hugo, stumbling forward, and glancing back just quickly enough to see Strange’s large, Indian servant swing a large, metal chain again, this time hitting the side of the cowl. Batman stumbled back, as the lens on that side of his cowl started fuzzing in and out of focus. Blindly, he kicked out, and felt his boot land harshly against his attacker’s chest.

Hugo was meanwhile scrambling to escape, searching for the gun he was toting earlier, when he suddenly felt three sharp pains dig themselves into his left shoulder. Looking down, he saw three tiny batarangs sticking out of his flesh, and frantically tried pulling them out. Across the room, Sanjay had regained his balance, and swung the chain one more time, this time hitting Batman across the cheek and jaw, splitting the flesh on the left side of his face. Spinning in pain, Batman felt the chain hit his chest and move its way up his body, constricting around his neck. Gasping for breath, he tried to make sense of his situation, realizing that Sanjay had the chain wrapped around his throat and was dragging him across the room to a large metal door with a massive padlock on it

“Professor,” Sanjay shouted. “Quickly, the door!”

“A shame,” Strange complained as he quickly shoved a key into the lock and twisted it. “An enormous shame. Such a specimen… not just of body, but of mind! An inspiration of mine, Sanjay, this man! Such a waste.” He pulled the door open, and Sanjay shoved Batman in, who stumbled down a few steps and then heard the door slam shut behind him. Quickly, Batman unwrapped the chain from his neck and tried to make sense of his situation.

With each breath, the smell becomes stronger. The same one that hung like a rancid pall over the poker massacre. I am not alone.
Standing to his feet, Batman’s right lens kicked into night vision, lighting up the room and its macabre contents within. It was a square room, though more like a cell than anything else. A cement floor sloped slightly down to a drainage grate in the center of the room, and scattered around near the corners were a random assortment of bones, matted with hair and pieces of flesh. Some of the remains were identifiably chicken, pork, or even beef. But others were quite obviously human. And there, standing before him, moving cautiously forward while they gurgled and cooed, were three enormous beings, each standing between nine and twelve feet in height.

The creatures were human in form, aside from their enormous frame. They were broad, well-muscled, and covered from head to toe in patches of wild, thick hairs. Claw-like nails had sprouted from the ends of each finger and toe, while their lips hung open revealing jagged, crooked, sets of teeth within their slobbering mouths. Warts and tumor-like growths sprouted from their legs and shoulders, and their large ears were distinctively primal looking.

*What are these?*

Taking a larger batarang from his belt, Batman bent his knees, grounding himself, and prepared to defend himself. The creatures tilted their heads and watched for a moment, and then, as if in perfect sync with one another, they all reached forward and charged forward, roaring out a garbled, wet, bellow as they did.

From outside the cell, Hugo and Sanjay sat, watching the battle ensue from a screen that was receiving a direct video feed from a night vision security camera inside the room. Sanjay tried to carefully wrap his master’s arm and shoulder in a bandage, but Hugo’s eyes were completely glued to the screen ahead.

“Look at him,” he said with awe. “Inside the monsters’ den… this… caped crusader exhibits not a trace of fear! You know, Sanjay, it was this man’s brash ability to take matters into his own hands that inspired me to start doing the same with this research all those months ago. That mental focus and determination. I knew I needed it for my own. Let us see how he deals with our *superior* specimens, though.”

Two of the monsters lunged forward, with the larger and least deformed of the two grabbing Batman first, and literally lifting him up into the air with one hand. The second one grasped angrily for him as well, but was brutally slammed back against the wall by the larger one with his free hand. The third cautiously moved forward, watching with a dull curiosity.

“Ever greedy, Number Two lunges for what he has come to expect as an all-too-easy victim,” Hugo spoke excitedly. “Faster and better fed, Number Three beats him to it. Ever confused, Number One again watches his brothers fight over food.”

Batman raised his batarang, and then slammed it down into the ginormous hand wrapped around his waist, stabbing it into the joint of the thumb, and then repeating this movement over and over again. A rain of blood splattered the front of his suit as he did so, until the creature finally dropped him.

“Batman wears a paramilitary belt of some sort.” Hugo noted to an uninterested Sanjay. “Stocked with weapons and who knows what else!?”

The creature who had been slammed against the wall watched hungrily as Batman hit the ground, and seeing his opportunity, launched himself forward. But Batman was ready. As he hit the ground, he rolled, and while in mid-roll he removed another batarang and launched it as soon as he was sitting back upright. It flew toward the monster, slicing the air as it went, and sunk directly into its left eye. The beast screamed, recoiling backwards and frantically clawing at its own face,
slamming its body up against the wall repeatedly in panic.

The creatures are surprisingly fast for their size. But, like anybody afflicted with gigantism or extreme obesity, their joints likely suffer from excess stress. I'll focus everything I've got into the slowest one's knee.

Batman ran forward, landing a flying kick into the kneecap of the third monster who had just stood by and watched. The creature stumbled, but didn't fall, and began slowly grasping near his ankles trying to catch Batman as he removed a line from his belt.

Like kicking a steel girder. This line should hold up to 500 pounds of resistance.

He immediately began circling the creature, tying the line around his ankles in an effort to trip him up.

“Remarkable,” Hugo smiled. “He never hesitates. His every action… as sleek and swift as an Olympic athlete. Coupled with a martial precision. Fascinating. Anyone else would already be dead!”

Batman yanked the line, which immediately tightened and sent the monster landing face-first into the cement.

“Such skill! Such determination! He is… magnificent!”

The monster with the now-swollen and bloodied eye lashed out, punching Batman who literally soared through the air from the blow and slammed against a wall. Dizzy, he rolled back to his feet, grabbing his head as if to steady his vision, and winced as he realized how badly he'd been hurt.

Felt a rib crack. Can't afford a concussion right now. Concentrate. Ignore the pain.

“Ughh!” Batman choked as his cape pulled tight and he felt himself be lifted from the floor. The first creature which had grabbed him originally had grabbed him by the cape and was lifting him towards its own awful jaws. Batman could hear the creature’s stomach churning through the echoing chambers of its throat and out its open mouth.

The cape. Useless against an opponent who can’t be scared. Blast, the second one is back.

The beast who had punched him now grabbed him by his utility belt, yanking him in its direction. The other pulled back on the cape. Batman’s back stretched and popped, and he felt as though his entire body was about to be torn in two. However, the tension immediately eased as he was swung upside down in the direction of the one eyed one. The cape had ripped, and the one-eyed monster was now holding him upside-down by his right leg, and had torn the belt off and was curiously sniffing it. Deciding the belt was not a tasty piece of meat, the beast tossed it aside and bellowed at the other monster, as if to ensure that it would stay at bay.

Distracted by each other and their handful of trinkets, the creature has relaxed its grip just enough…

Batman pushed against the hand above him, and fell free, though now with one barefoot. Sprawling, he hit the ground hard, feeling his rib sear with pain, and his hip and thigh throbbing wildly.

Lucky my hip wasn’t dislocated. Lucky my knee didn’t shatter.

To his right, his crumpled utility belt lay in ruins, spewing a steady hiss of visible gas into the
Several gas capsules ruptured. Might not be enough to take down these monsters. But it’s more than enough to put me out of commission. Need to retrieve the belt. Respirator inside.

He staggered to feet and ran forward, ignoring his bare foot becoming more and more lacerated on the rough floor as he ran. But just before he had reached the belt, the massive hand of one of the giants slammed down, crushing the belt. Batman had grabbed out desperate for anything, only having retrieving a pair of handcuffs from his gear as he rolled away.

Lucky dodge. Stealth is not one of their strengths. Nearly had the belt. Only came away with one of the cuff pairs. Blood-stained grate in the center of the room must lead to sewer. Or at least away from the gas. Gas is spreading.

Glancing back he saw the metal chain which had been wrapped around his neck when he was thrown into the cell, and knowing there was no time to lose, he picked it up and faced the closest charging behemoth. He leapt up, grabbing hold of the creature’s hairs and craggy skin, and scaled its awful body. Once on its shoulders, he wrapped the chain around its throat, snapping the cuff around two of the links to act as a clasp, leashing the chain around its neck. It roared with anger, and thrashed, throwing Batman down to the floor with a thud.

Felt another rib go. Harder to… harder to ignore the pain.

Blood now dripping from his nose and seeping out of his mask, he forced himself back up, grabbing the loose end of the chain leash on the floor as he did so. Crawling, he reached the grate, and wrapped the chain hurriedly around its bars, feeling his head grow lighter and foggier with every second.

Must get out of here, he thought as he stumbled backward. Have to say clear… until the tethered one…

The chain went taut as the creature stumbled away, catching him. It roared the deepest scream Batman had ever heard, trashing about violently, and finally stumbled forward, ripping the grate from its secure place in the ground.

Ignore the pain. Go. Go. Go.

Batman jumped with one leg, and dove down into the darkness of the drainage tunnel below. The largest creature leapt forward, reaching its entire arm down the drain after him, but it was useless. He had escaped.

“Did you see that, Sanjay,” Hugo laughed. “He escaped! He escaped using only a pair of handcuffs! Can you imagine what one could do with the DNA of that man!? Sanjay, he is perfection.”

In the darkness below, Batman used one arm to pull himself up out of the dark, rank water, and into a shallower tunnel. Panting, and using his good arm to steady himself against the stone walls around him, he began the arduous task of dragging himself to the surface. Once there, the radio would be able to get reception. He could reach Alfred.

Strange has created genetic monsters out of human guinea pigs… Like nothing I have ever encountered. Like nothing I have ever imagined. What drives a man to such twisted ends? And to what wicked lengths will he go before he is stopped?
An hour later, Hugo examined the objects that he had retrieved from his monsters’ lair. Spread out on the table were batarangs, smoke pellets, gas capsules, the crumpled utility belt, knives, darts, magnifying glasses, vials, batteries, skeleton keys, sonic cryptographs, a grapple gun, the tattered remains of the cape and so much more. He reverently picked up the belt, and held it thoughtfully in his hands.

“They are sleeping still, Professor,” Sanjay reported. “The gas has them heavily sedated.”

“Thank you, Sanjay. Look at this... What an array of utilities! All manner of silent weapons, detection equipment, emergency aids… Hmm… No firearms aside from the grapple gun.” He lifted the cape, feeling it between his fingers before continuing, “Who is this man? With his fascinating persona and his elaborate disguises?” He fastened the belt as best he could around his waist, and tied the cape around his neck like a child with a bath towel. Smiling gleefully, and raising one of the batarangs, he explained, “I tell you, Sanjay… My quest for genetic perfection has just taken a most startling new turn! Ha ha ha! My entire life’s work has taken a turn! This is what I was meant to do! I must know more about this man…”

*In my dreams, the bullets that ended my parents’ lives are achingly slow. They spin, lazy and sluggish, as though passing through water.*

“Bruce….?”

*And I run to catch them.*

“Bruce…?”

*Though it all, I can hear my mother screaming for me to come back. And then… it goes black. Her voice still echoes as my eyes open, and the darkness swirls into shadowy shapes dancing within my bedroom. My mother’s voice melds into the voice of the woman standing above me. She smiles, and I cannot help but smile back. But… why is there a woman in my room? Julie?*

“Bruce,” Julie said softly and giddily. “Bruce, wake up, sleepyhead! You gonna stay in bed all day? Without me?” She laughed.

“Whoa,” Bruce sat up with a start, grabbing his head to steady its throbbing. “Julie?! Wh-what are you doing here?”

“Just checking in on my overworked, stressed-out sweetie. I’ve got a brief I have to deliver this afternoon, and I just dropped by to see how you’re doing.”

“But… how’d you get in? Alfred-”

“I assume he’s running errands. I passed him in the limo on my way out here.”

*She just walked in? Are there no locks on the doors? No security measures on my own home? This is completely and entirely unacceptable. Did Alfred not arm the alarms?*

“But… how?”

“I let myself in,” she giggled as she walked across the darkened room and drew open the curtains of the massive bedroom window, letting bright light fill all of the shadowy spaces of the room. “I remembered the code I saw you punch into the security system the other night.”
I've let her too close…

“Julie,” Bruce muttered, trying to find the right words to say under the circumstances.

“I just wanted you to know that – Oh my! Bruce!?” Julie turned back to look at her boyfriend, now revealed in fullness in the bright room, but screamed out in shock as she realized what state he was in. He was shirtless, wearing only pajama pants, however, little of his body was revealed at all. Bandages wrapped both of his forearms, and braces wrapped around his chest and upper abdomen. Scratches and bruises covered every single surface of skin, and his face itself was halfway bandaged in bloody coverings. He looked as though he’d been run over by a car, several times over.

“It, uh… looks worse than it feels,” Bruce lied.

“Well it looks absolutely horrible! What happened to you!?,” She ran back to the bed, trying to embrace him in a hug, but he turned his back trying to slide out of bed and avoid her touch.

“Nothing, really. Just a stupid mistake. I took a spill… playing polo… My pony dragged me around for a bit. But really… I’m fine.”

“Polo? When? Last night? I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“Our team often practices in the evening. We’re all busy men, after all.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“Unnecessary. Alfred is an army-trained medic.”

“But that’s not good enough! Is that why…? Bruce… I’ve often meant to ask you… You’ve got so many scars on you… On your arms and back… Have any of these been properly treated? Ever? I mean… this one on your forearm looks like a-a-a bullet wound!”

I’m being careless. Julie is no fool. Not much escapes her notice. She’s the best lawyer I’ve known, next to Harvey Dent, and she’s not even licensed yet.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bruce said, jerking his arm back to himself and out of her reach. “That’s from an old skiing accident. I already told you, I’m fine.”

“Bruce! Don’t… I’m just… I’m just concerned about you.” Bruce stood up and strode over to his chest of drawers, lifting his robe up and beginning to put it on.

“I understand. And I appreciate your concern. But, Julie… I’m a big boy, and I can take care of myself just fine. After all, I’ve been on my own since I was just a little kid.”

“I know… And I find that fact unbearably sad. But, Bruce, you’re not all alone anymore! Not as long as I’m around.”

“Julie, I’m sorry,” he turned back and walked toward her. “It’s… it’s been so long since I’ve had someone actually worry about me… I guess I’m just out of practice.”

“… I know…”

“Forgive me?”

“Any day and any way, silly,” she said as Bruce held her close and kissed her on the head.

They spent about twenty minutes more together, talking about Julie’s upcoming briefing and what she had done with her evening the night before, and finally Bruce walked her out of the mansion.
He remained on the top of the mansion’s porch, waving down at her as she got in her car and left. And though they had ended this encounter on a good note, he couldn’t shake the feeling that their relationship was winding down.

*Have I let her get too close to my dark and violent world? The war has suddenly grown so large and bizarre. Yet, it still remains heedless of the victims it claims…*

Hugo, still wearing Batman’s belt on top of his own, was happily cleaning his laboratory from the scuffle the previous evening. Work seemed so much more pleasant today. So much more interesting. He even whistled as he did so, much to Sanjay’s annoyance, as he had elected to work in the other part of the lab where it was quieter.

“Professor,” Sanjay suddenly shouted from near the stairway. Strange turned around and saw Sanjay, standing tense, joined by two other men. The first of which had grabbed Sanjay by the collar of his garb, and was pressing the nose of a handgun tightly against his cheek. The other man stood waiting, his gun also drawn and ready. They were Maroni’s thugs. His personal bodyguards. Only, there was no Maroni.

“What is this?” Hugo shouted angrily. “This is a research lab! We don’t have *any money* for you here!”

“No kidding?” the man at the ready retorted. “And here I heard the sciences were *not without their financial rewards*. But we aint here to sting ya. We’re here on behalf of your… loan officer. Capisce, Mr. Strange?”

“What is the meaning of this?” Hugo growled. “Doesn’t Mr. Maroni know that I’m already paid up?”

“For now. And there’s no way to prove how we think you did it… So just consider this a warning.” He snapped his finger, and the man holding Sanjay at gunpoint turned and pointed his weapon on the four enormous test tubes with dormant specimens floating in them. The gun sounded, and a bullet cracked through the casing, shattering the tank. Another crack from the gun, and the harnessed body twitched as a bullet slammed through his chest. Then he moved on to the next tank. And the next.

“There better be no more *unusual* events around the time of your next payment. No more dead poker players turning up, eh Strange?”

“Maroni could have certainly come and confronted me himself on the matter,” Hugo shouted, waving his arms angrily.

“Quiet down pipsqueak. Mr. Maroni was forced to leave town for a while. For health reasons. You’d do well to consider your own health, Professor. I’m sure a smart guy like you can understand that.” The men turned, and began wordlessly walking up the stairway, exiting the lab.

“That does it,” Hugo hissed, compulsively fumbling with the utility belt. “Follow them again, Sanjay. See if you can discover what rat-hole Maroni has crawled into.”

“Certainly, Professor.”

“I believe our association with Sal Maroni has reached the *end* of its benefits.”
“I believe our association with Sal Maroni has reached the end of its benefits,” Hugo Strange’s voice echoed through the speakers of the Batcomputer through the cavernous chambers of the Batcave. Bruce sat tensely in his chair, his arms folded, listening carefully to the entire exchange, thinking of his next move.

“It appears that Mr. Maroni will be in need of your services,” Alfred said.

“Yes,” Bruce agreed. “We were lucky that Strange didn’t locate the listening device I attached to under one of the tank monitors when he ambushed me. Time to pay him a visit. I’ll need the reinforced suit tonight, Alfred. Keep me from hurting anymore ribs.”

“I will prepare it at once, Sir.”
Haven't even been on my shift for an hour before Grogan called me into his office, Gordon rolled his eyes as the Police Commissioner waved an artist’s sketch of Batman’s likeness in his hands. The case files that I had thought I locked away are spread across his desk.

“I’m only asking you once, Gordon,” Grogan said harshly. “How do you contact him?”

I’ll play it as dumb as any stoolie in the hot seat.

“Contact him… you mean the bat-man? I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean, Sir. I don’t-”

“Don’t hand me that dreck,” Grogan spat. “I’ve heard the rumors, all over the department. Gordon’s got a friend. One who only comes out at night. These, here on the table, are your files! For months you spend serious time and effort trying to find this nut-case. And then, suddenly, nothing. Why’d you drop it?

Edward Grogan. He was appointed by the mayor to succeed Loeb as Commissioner. It was like replacing a hyena with a jackal.

“The case went cold, Sir,” Gordon explained. “After Commiss – former Commissioner Loeb was indicted, it seemed to be a dead end. Plus, there were bigger fish to catch. The Roman-”

“Falcone’s not exactly a new problem in Gotham! Doesn’t add up… You’re working with him, aren’t you?”

“Falcone?!”

“Batman! Damnit Gordon, do you have any idea how many charges I could have you up on? Aiding an abetting a freelance vigilante… A felon by any description! I’m warning you, Gordon. I could have you badge…”

“Look, Sir… I’m just a cop trying to do my job the best I can in a city that doesn’t seem to even care what that means,” Gordon turned and began walking defiantly out the door to Grogan’s office. “Whoever this Batman really is… he hides his secrets as well as any of Gotham’s criminal class.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Gordon!” Gordon shut the door and headed toward the stairwell which lead to the GCPD roof.

I leave him to chew on that as my heart rate slowly returns to normal. Lucky I decided not to lock the radio up with my files. I always keep it on my person. Always. Ever since he first gave it to me. Feels like a ten pound weight in my pocket. Even so, I find myself wanting to use it, time and time again.

Batman stared at the warehouse Strange had used as a laboratory, as flames stretched sky-high from the smoldering ruins of what it once was. Firefighters had gathered like a small army, desperately trying to quench the blaze. But it was useless. Any remains of what Hugo had been doing were surely lost.

The trail has gone cold, if you could call it that… Hugo Strange has cut his losses and gone on the run. Even if there is any evidence to be gained from the aftermath, the smoldering remains will be
untouchable for days. The question is, did he also abandon or destroy his monstrous creations? Or
does his twisted mind still plot some further carnage? A buzz sounded inside of his cowl. A noise
he had hoped to hear all too often, and yet been left disappointed time and time again. But not

Gordon stood atop the roof of the GCPD building, his long coat billowing in the breeze. It seemed
an odd place to choose to meet, so close to the police force and all, but it was one that Batman had
suggested to him once as a place where the signal would be strongest. And even though it was
close to the lion’s den, it was private for the most part as well. With a ruffle of fabric and shifting
air, Batman glided down from the dark skies and landed next to his partner. His friend.

“That was fast,” Gordon said.

“I was nearby. What’ve you got?”

“Our lab analysis hasn’t turned up anything new on these massacre attacks. Again, the DNA
results still come back as human.”

“I know. They’re mutations. Created through some radical form of genetic engineering. The
resultant beings are gigantic monstrosities. Absolutely savage and, seemingly, cannibalistic.”

“Wh-what did you just say?” Gordon’s voice cracked as he spoke, his heart sinking in his chest.

“They were created by a renegade scientist named Hugo Strange. I managed to track Strange to his
lab, but only barely survived an attack by these… monster men. Believe me, Jim, they are
extremely dangerous. If they ever manage to get loose…”

“Giant mutant cannibals? A mad scientist? You… you’re serious?”

“Completely,” Batman spoke, rigid, though he could clearly see a hopeless expression forming on
Gordon’s face. “Unfortunately, Strange also managed to sabotage and destroy his lab. I have no
idea where he is now. But I think he was involved with, and probably in debt to, Salvatore Maroni,
one of The Roman’s top men.”

“This… isn’t a joke?”

“I don’t tell jokes,” Batman growled back.

“All right… I’ll… We’ll put out an APB on Maroni… See what comes up.”

“Good,” Batman said as he turned and headed for the edge of the building. “I have some other
leads to track down. I’ll be in touch.” And with that, he leapt off the side of the roof, his cape
opening like gigantic bat wings, and glided off into the night. Gordon watched, dumbfounded, and
shook his head nervously.

I just get the third degree from Grogan over this guy… I go through all that to protect him… And
for the first time since I entered into this “partnership,” I find myself questioning not only the
motives but also the sanity. The sanity of a man who dresses like some kind of demon and leaps off
the sheer sides of buildings. Talking about gangsters and monsters… How did I come to this?

“Okay Daddy, I’m headed for the library,” Julie said as she headed for the penthouse door. “I’ve
got an all-nighter ahead of me, so don’t leave the lights on.” But then, she stopped in her tracks, finding her father crouched over on the couch, his head in his palms, looking as though he’d been sobbing for hours. His hair was a tangled mess, and dark circles hung under his eyes. He’d been getting worse and worse with every passing day.

“Julie…” he said, “No, you… can’t… I… Julie, I need to speak to you,” he raised his head, revealing that his eyes were red from being bloodshot, almost to the point of glowing like embers in the darkened room. “I’m afraid something’s gone terribly, terribly wrong. You can’t go out alone, tonight.” He spoke in a dull, almost lifeless tone.

“Daddy, what is it? What’s wrong? I’ll be fine—”

“No! No, you won’t be fine. Not if they decide to find you. Not if they decide to—” Julie put her hand on his arms and sat down next to him.

“Daddy, what do you mean? Who are you talking about?”

“Very bad men, Darling,” Norman sighed. “The kind you read about in your case studies, but have rarely ever met. My dear… I’m afraid I’m not quite the man you think me to be. In fact, I’ve done something very foolish.”

“G-go on…”

“I was forced to borrow a large, large amount of money from someone in organized crime… a very powerful gangster. And… if I default on the loan in any way, they’ve threatened to harm you in retaliation.” Julie’s eyes widened in awe. This was nothing she ever imagined coming from her father. He was the king of charity and upstanding society. He was a champion of social righteousness, in her eyes.

“Daddy—” Norman suddenly grabbed her, tightly, and began talking loudly, and slightly shaking her.

“But you know I’d never do anything to hurt you, don’t you?! Don’t you!? I thought – I thought I was in control of the situation, but I—” Tears began streaming down his face.

“Of course, Daddy… I know you wouldn’t. But… but why did you borrow this money through normal channels? The banks… Investors…?”

“If the business world caught wind of this, it’d be the end of my career. I raise money for a living, Julie. Non-profits. Some of the biggest charities in the world are in my hands. If I let it known I can’t pay for any of it, I’d be ruined… But I won’t let them do this! You’ve got to hide! Leave the city! Go somewhere! Go somewhere they’d never find you… I-I don’t know where…”

“I know where,” Julie said, hugging her father. “I’ll go to—”

“Hush! Don’t say. It’s better if I don’t know. That way, they can’t…”

“Oh Daddy…”

“I know, Darling. I know,” he patted her on the head and pushed her toward the door before turning around and pouring himself a glass of brandy. “Don’t worry. I’ll get this straightened out and… and everything…”

“Goodbye, Daddy. Be careful,” Julie said as she headed out the door. “I’ll be in touch… soon…” She closed the door, fear pumping profusely throughout her body with every heartbeat.
“Everything will be…” Norman muttered as he gulped down the glass. “Everything will be… will be… fine…”

Norman slumped back in his chair and waited. He watched the seconds tick by with agonizing worry. Every once in a while he’d pour himself another drink, and every once in a while he’d break out in tears. But after an hour or two of sitting and waiting, Maroni’s thugs came to collect.

He let them in, and lead them to a large suitcase, which he then clung tightly to himself. The thugs demanded he hand it over, and he barked his terms of delivery at them, repeatedly. Finally, one of them got on the phone and called Maroni.

“Yeah, Sal,” the thug said. “We got a problem. Yeah, yeah… We’re here at Maddison’s place. And yeah, he’s got his first payment in hand… Or at least, he *claims* he does. Trouble is, he *also* claims he’ll only deliver it to you in person! Says you two have certain issues to resolve… Yeah. Truth be told, I think he’s three-sheets-to-the-wind… but you know what a stubborn ass he can be.”

“T-tell Maroni,” Norman stammered through his drink-soaked lips. “Thish is a… matter of *honor! Buhtween gentlemen!”

“You hear that?... Yeah…. Yeah, okay. I’m on it. See you soon,” the thug hung up the phone and turned angrily to Norman. “All right, Bud. You got your way. Sal says he’ll see you tonight. But *we* gotta drive you there. And you gotta wear a blindfold.”

“I am not.”

“You *are* in no position to argue, Mr. Maddison. That’s the deal, take it or leave it.”

“Very well…”

*I can’t believe it*, Julie thought over, and over in her mind as she waited with Alfred at the foot of Wayne Manor’s massive set of stairs in the entryway. *I can’t believe it. My father… My father is a noble, principled, and decent man! How did he come to this?!*

Bruce peaked his head from the top of the stairs next to the two massive suits of armor he kept on display.

“Master Wayne, you have an unexpected visit from Miss Maddison,” Alfred said.

“Bruce,” Julie shouted over the introduction as she ran desperately toward the stairs and up toward her boyfriend, tears streaming down her face. “Thank God you’re here! There’s no… I have to… I can’t-”

“Julie, what is it?” Bruce asked as he grabbed her in his arms. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s… It’s my father! I think he’s in… He’s in danger! He just confessed to me. He owes… He’s in debt to a loan shark! They’ve threatened *me* to get to him! Bruce, I’m so afraid! Afraid of what he might do! Afraid of what *they* might do!” She was in a full-on panic at this point, nearly screaming her words through the sobbing.

“Calm down,” Bruce whispered. “Hush… hush… Where is your father now, Julie? What has he done?”
“I don’t… I don’t know! He insisted I go into hiding and I… I came here… I didn’t know what else – Oh, I feel so out of control! My head-”

“You’ll be fine,” Bruce said, turning his gaze to his butler. “Alfred, pour a glass of water for Julie, please…”

“Certainly, Sir,” Alfred said, turning to a pitcher of water and some glasses they kept near the front door, as was the etiquette in case of thirsty company arriving.

“Now, you’ll be fine, Julie,” Bruce said, lifting up his sweater and rummaging through a small zip-up pouch he kept attached to his belt.

“What’s that? Are you a diabetic, Bruce?” she asked.

“Just seeing if I have any aspirin,” Bruce shrugged, zipping it up and then taking the glass of water from Alfred. “You need to calm down, Julie. Here, drink this?” Alfred noticed that Bruce dropped something small into the water as he took it. A quick slight of hand. He opened his mouth to ask what it was, but a glare from Bruce told him to keep his mouth shut. Julie took the glass and gulped it down before handing it back to Alfred.

“Yes, I…” she said. “Oh, Bruce… what am I… I… I…. unhuh…” Her eyes rolled up into the back of her head, and closed as she went limp, falling backwards into Bruce’s arms. He caught her with ease, lifting her body up and taking her purposefully toward one of the guest bedrooms.

“She needs rest,” Bruce said as Alfred followed hastily behind. “And, unfortunately, there’s a situation at hand tonight that demands Batman’s attention.”

“And so,” Alfred said sarcastically. “in keeping with conventional wisdom, you’ve chosen to secretly drug your girlfriend. I trust that you’ll understand I believe you made this decision far too rashly.”

“I had no choice, Alfred.”

“And how shall we explain it to her when she awakens?”

“She was on the verge of a breakdown,” Bruce said. “Tell her she fainted.”

“Bruce, this is wrong.”

“I’m going to lay her out in the East Guest Bedroom. See that she’s comfortable.”

“Yes, Sir.” The two men made sure Julie was carefully tucked into the soft feather bed, and then immediately took to the secret elevator in Thomas Wayne’s old study, heading directly down into the Batcave. Bruce, perhaps quicker than ever before, dawned his suit.

“Sir,” Alfred asked. “Not to further question your so-called wisdom, but what about Julie’s father? Mr. Maddison could be in great danger.”

“This situation with Norman complicates matters,” Bruce said as he fastened on his glove. “Dealing with a loan shark is not what I would’ve expected from him… and he’s on my payroll, after all…”

“Perhaps there are extenuating circumstances?”

“There always are, Alfred,” Bruce retorted as he busily walked by the computer panels and down
to the lower level of the cave. “Still, I don’t have time for that right now.”

“All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t jump to conclusions, Sir. You are in love with his daughter, are you not?”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “Well… maybe… Yes, Alfred, maybe I am. And I will look deeper into this, I promise. But not right now. With the bug I planted destroyed, I can’t be certain, but I believe Strange plans to attack Sal Maroni where he’s holed up at The Roman’s country estate. That place is a veritable fortress. And I’ve got just the thing to storm it with.”

As Bruce entered the lower level, motion sensors activated and turned on the pale blue lamps which they had installed overhead, lighting up the floor which displayed his brand new vehicle. It was huge, bulky, and yet sleek. Covered in iron plating, and possessing massive tires, the black vehicle looked somewhere between a tank and a racecar.

“Very good, Sir,” Alfred marveled. “It’s finally finished, then?”

“Always a work in progress,” Batman returned. “But yes, it functions now. This is something I’ve needed since the very beginning of my mission. The sedan was good, and the bike is fast, but this… It’s all but indestructible, operates on a jet turbine engine and has night-vision head-lamps so it can run in total darkness.” He pressed a button on the side of his gauntlet which beeped, and caused the cockpit on the car to slide open, revealing a sleek leather interior, and a steering mechanism that was covered in buttons and switches.

“Very impressive, Sir,” Alfred said as Batman climbed inside and strapped himself in. “I’m actually surprised that you didn’t add winged fins to the rear fenders and make it a true Bat-Mobile.” He chuckled at his own joke, and Batman silently turned his head away, frowning. Alfred gasped, “Oh good lord! You’re actually considering it?!?”

“This isn’t a game, Alfred,” Batman said gruffly. “Julie should sleep through the night. I’ll be back before sunrise.”

“Yes, Sir.” Alfred sighed as the car roared to life, it’s engine purring like a tiger and roaring like a jet when Batman revved it. A round black exhaust port on the back of the vehicle burst out a blast of blue and yellow flames as the entire vehicle shook and then sped off down the dark tunnel ahead, toward the waterfall entrance to the cave beyond, with a speed that was simply astonishing. Alfred worried within himself about Bruce driving such an unpredictable car, and worried more about how casually Bruce had incapacitated Julie. He also worried about Bruce not only breaking into Carmine Falcone’s estate, but also about the prospect of running into Strange’s monsters again. Sighing, he whispered to himself, “And good luck, Sir.”

Norman stood inside the country estate of Carmine Falcone. He heard a bustle of people around him, trying to make sense of the noise, but with the blindfold still on, he could hardly make any sense of it.

_The ride was long_, he thought. _Crammed in the back seat with Maroni’s thugs, their sour breath and their brutal laughter. There were guards and the clanking of iron gates as we arrived. Wherever Maroni has gone into hiding… I’m sure he feels secure. Criminal._

“Well, well,” Maroni’s voice chuckled. “I must say we don’t get a lot of visitors out here. Take if off him.” Norman’s vision blurred into focus as the blindfold was lowered, revealing his bloodshot, sunken-in eyes. He immediately tried to make sense of his surrounding, noting the fire roaring in
the fireplace, and the enormous, lavish windows.

“A castle,” he muttered to himself.

*This place is too sophisticated for an overblown street-thug like Maroni. He acts like he lives the high-life, but even for him... this is pushing it. It must belong to the one who pulls his chain – the one the papers call “The Roman.” Julie would know his name...*

“But this aint exactly what you’d term a social call, eh, Norman?” Maroni continued.

“I’d… I’d never socialize with the likes of you anyway, Maroni,” Norman returned, trying his best to sound unafraid.

“Jeez,” Maroni groaned. “Always with the mouth on you... All right then, Maddison. What the hell was so important that you had to come all the way out here?”

“I’ll be outside if you need me, Sal,” one of the guards said, leaving the room. Maroni nodded back.

“Better yet,” Sal continued. “Norman, how about I’ll tell you what’s so important... You got my frickin’ money?”

“Maroni,” Norman said sternly back. “You are a cheap thug. And you always will be. We need to speak about my daughter.”

“Heh, what?” Maroni laughed. “Her? Okay... So – speak.”

“You and your brutes have gone over the line. When you threaten her-”

“Hey, hey! C’mon,” Maroni cut him off. “Who did you think you were dealin’ with here? This aint no charity organization, y’know! And you’re into it for a lot of shake, pal! So don’t-”

“I’m not, but-” Norman and Maroni both jumped as a clamber of shouting arose out the window.

“Now, what the heck is that all about?” Maroni exclaimed. “I told those idiots a million times-”

“Sal, we got trouble,” a guard said, entering the room in a panic. “There’s a commotion at the front gates. Looks like some kinda attack... comin’ from outta the woods!”

“But who the heck knows I’m here? Musta been a setup,” Maroni quickly whipped a gun out from his coat and pressed it right against Norman’s face, who shook wildly in terror.

“No, no,” Norman shrieked.

“Which means it musta been you, y’darn mole! You brought them out here! Whattaya got, a bug in that briefcase?! Say yer prayers, rat!”

“No, Maroni! I swear, I never – No!”

*Outside – gunshots... chaos... inside – threats... paranoia... What have I gotten myself into? And now... all Hell has broken loose.*

“Jeez,” the guard shouted as a nearby window shattered. The body one of the men who had brought Norman flew through it, and splattered across the floor.

“Aint that... what’s his name – Santo?” Maroni gasped.
“Yeah,” his guard said. “But what the?.... He was workin the front gate. How did he…?”

“We’re on the third floor for cryin’ out loud!” Maroni shouted, running over to the shattered window and staring outside. To his horror, three enormous shapes where scaling the front gate as a flurry of armed men scrambled about shouting and shooting in a panic. The shapes were animals – giants – grumbling and cooing as they walked.

“What is that?” Norman whispered to himself.

Elsewhere, hiding amongst the nearby trees, Sanjay and Hugo stood in waiting. Hugo rubbed his hands together, grinning.

“What of Rajan?” Sanjay asked, worrying slightly.

“They will be fine,” Hugo said dismissively. “Look at them! Like great beasts, they clamber over the fence and its illusionary safety. The men inside are ill-prepared for what they are about to encounter. The guns will only serve to enrage them. Something inside me is proud… like a mother cat as it watches its young toy with a mouse for the first time.”

“I want ‘em dead,” Maroni shouted from the open window as he and his guard began spraying gunfire down on the scene below.

“More gunfire,” Hugo laughed. “More noise! Drawn by the lights, and movement, they close in on the main entrance. None can withstand them! I may not have created perfection, but they are nonetheless astounding!”

The monsters closed in on the building, tossing people in every direction, crushing the enormous, ornate support columns as they swung their arms from side to side. The greedy, one-eyed monster lifted a man and shoved him into its mouth, crunching down on him until he went limp. Hugo and Sanjay ran up to the front gate, and the professor pressed his face to the bars like an excited child.

“Look at them, Sanjay,” he salivated. “Such ferocity! Such mayhem! They are like lions among sheep! Gods among insects! And these men think they are the predators! Ah, if only I could see Maroni’s face up close… Ha! Run, you craven thugs!” A light began to shine on the back of his head, glowing as it approached. Sanjay turned, looking back into the forest for the source of the light, and his eyes widened.

“Uh, Professor,” he said, grabbing Hugo by the shoulder and shoving him out of the way. “Look out!”

An enormous black vehicle, roaring with the sound of a sonic boom, exploded forth from the forest, and crashed full speed into the giant gates of the estate. More like a tank than an actual car, the gates split and flew off their hinges as though were made of weightless cardboard. The car flew into the courtyard and turned, drifting along the yard and knocking over one of the beasts before ejecting a massive wire net from its side, which flew out and encased the downed, thrashing monster. Inside, Batman took note of the situation.

I had always imagined smashing through The Roman’s entry gates, he thought. But under far different circumstances. The front lawn is a battlefield. I was right. Strange has sent his monsters to wreak havoc on Maroni. This little one, while still dazed from the blow, has been caught in my containment net. The mesh is laced with steel fibers. The sort used to contain the largest marlins and sharks.

The two other monsters had followed a few of the gangsters through the front doors to the house,
which they effortlessly crashed and crawled through. Meanwhile, the remaining men outside surrounded the now netted monster.

“It it-?”

“Some sorta netting.”

“The hell was that?”

The net started to move as the beast struggled beneath it, and some of the stakes which had deployed with the netting began to loosen and tear themselves up from the ground.

“It’s breaking loose,” one of the men shouted. “Let him have it!”

Batman’s car drove up to the front door, and its cockpit slid open. Slowly, Batman arose, and looked over the scene.

_The other creatures have breached the main entrance. The tighter confines will make any confrontation all the more treacherous._

“Unbelievable,” Hugo giggled as he and Sanjay crept through the destroyed gate. “It’s _him_! It’s Batman! Such tenacity, Sanjay!”

“Shoot! Shoot!” the men around the netting were shouting as they opened fire on the trapped monster on the lawn. It screamed and blood splattered in all directions.

“Rajan!” Sanjay screamed, running toward the commotion. Batman had noticed the chaos by now and removed his grapple gun, twisting a cylinder-shaped attachment to the front and then firing toward the net. A canister flew out and landed amongst the gunmen, spraying a greenish smoke over the scene.

“What th-?”

“Can’t see! I- I can’t see!”

“What is this stuff!”

“Rajan,” Sanjay shouted as he waved the smoke from his face, frantically trying to reach the netting. “Rajan!” He reached the net, now covered in oily, thick gobs of blood. “R- Raja… Oh Rajan, I-I am here, Brother . . .” Sanajy ran his hand over the sticky mesh, and lifted it to his face, horrified at the blood which was now slathered over his palms and fingers. He took a gun from his jacket and looked at the men who were running from the dispersing gas and said, “Rest in peace, Rajan. Your killers are on their way to hell!” With a loud bang, he took out one running thug. Then another. Then another. And another.

“Gotcha,” a man to his side shouted as he shot, landing a bullet directly into Sanjay’s temples, his turban falling into tattered bloody pieces.

“Sanjay!” Hugo shouted, removing his own gun and killing the man who had killed his assistant. He ran to the Indian’s side, and looked scornfully down at the bloodied body. Sanjay’s head was half missing, and Hugo mourned, “Sanjay… my faithful aid and only supporter… you join your pitiful brother in death.”

“Y’hear that?” Maroni said from the room above as the entire frame of the house shook. “They’re inside the house! What’ll we-”
“Sal,” the guard said quickly. “There’s a helipad on the roof. Carmine keeps a fully gassed bird just for emergencies.” Maroni smiled as he and the guard headed out of the room and for the stairs.

“I love that big, paranoid, lug! Let’s g- whoa!” Norman had ran forward and grabbed Maroni by the arm.

“Maroni! Wait! What-what’s happening here?! I’m not part of thi-”

“Leggo, ya weasel,” Maroni snapped as he whirled his gun around and smacked of over the back of Norman’s head, releasing his grip. Norman fell to the ground while Maroni and his guard ran out of the room.

Downstairs, Batman stood in an utterly destroyed room with blood painted all over the walls, facing two beasts who were chewing on the remains of the guards who had been there.

“All right,” Batman shouted at them, removing two wound-up cables from a pouch on his side and swinging them around wildly. “Over here!”

I must face them. The slaughter is so utterly savage. Worse than even men such as these can expect from their violent, sordid lives. And still, the creatures hunger for more. Too many have died tonight.

The creatures charged forward, and Batman released the spinning lines from his hand which flew forward, each one wrapping around the great necks of the oncoming monsters who immediately stopped in their tracks and began gnashing their teeth wildly. Batman quickly grabbed the loose ends of each cable, and fed them through a tiny, round, shiny gearbox.

Steel cables, fed into a mountaineer’s camming device. The harder they tug, the faster it ratchets in the lines. Until the only focus of all that bound-up rage... is at each other.

The two monsters struggled until they were both attached at the neck, roaring into one another’s faces. Batman turned and began darting up the blood-soaked stairs, hoping Maroni was still on one of the floors above. The creatures remained below, as the one-eyed one leaned in and bit off a large chunk of cheek flesh from its brother. They each roared savagely as the fight continued.

Batman darted into the library on the third story, finding the fireplace ablaze, and Norman Maddison struggling amongst the shards of glass from a nearby shattered window.

“Norman,” Batman gasped.

“Wh… what’s—?”

“You are injured,” Batman said, helping him to his feet. “How badly?”

“Aaagh!” Norman shouted. “You! You’re that – that… wh-what do you want?!?”

“How badly are you injured?”

“J-just a scrape. But, wha… what do you—?”

“Maroni. Where has he gone to hide?”

“The… the roof! There’s a helicopter…” Batman immediately turned and ran for the stairs.

“This is no place for a man of your stripe,” he growled as he ran. “Go home, Norman.” Batman disappeared up the staircase, leaving Norman standing in shock.
“He…” Norman said to nobody but himself. “He… knew my name!”

Meanwhile on the roof, Maroni and his guard kicked open the access door, revealing a view of the outside. And much to their pleasure, there was, indeed, a helicopter sitting on the roof.

“All right,” Maroni said. “ Couldn’t be easier! Now, let’s go.”

“You flyin?” the guard asked. Maroni stopped, and turned angrily.

“What? C’mon… you, fire it up.”

“Whattaya mean? I don’t know how to fly one of those things!”

“Th’hell!? You’re the one who suggested-”

“Yeah but I never said-” Both men stopped as a massive beast squeezed around the helicopter, roaring and gurgling louder and angrier than any of the beasts had yet. It’s body was covered in scratches and scrapes, and punctured full of holes, smeared with oily, thick blood. It was the one which had been captured in the net earlier, apparently having survived and broken free before climbing up the side of the house and onto the roof.

Both men frantically lifted their weapons, but it was too late. The beast knew now what guns were capable of. It opened its mouth wide, revealing fangs and jagged teeth, roaring as it swept its massive arms knocking both men over. Maroni skidded along the roof, scraping the side of his face as he went, but his guard was knocked clean over the side and flew helplessly down to the bottom where he splattered on the roof of Batman’s car with a loud cracking sound.

“Wh-what the hell is this?!” Maroni shouted, realizing his gun had been knocked out of his hand. “Who sent you?” The monster roared back, and reached down for him, but then reared back up as a black shape hurled itself through the doorway and up onto the creatures face. It was Batman, his cape wrapped around the beast’s head. Moving quickly, he yanked a syringe out from his belt and plunged it into the monster’s neck.

_Just in time. Animal tranquilizer. Heavy dose. Should bring down an elephant._

He leapt off of it, and watched it sway back and forth, and then steady itself and continue roaring and spraying spit and blood in all directions.

_The tranq should have dropped him by now. He’s groggy, but still on his feet._

Maroni grabbed Batman’s cape desperately, screaming something about needing help. Batman kicked him away and shouted.

“Back off Maroni! Let me work.” He ran forward, and jumped in the air, landing a flying kick into the beast’s head. It stumbled half a step back as Batman landed and swiftly tossed three batarangs up at it. Two hit its arm, and the other planted itself in his check.

_The batarangs are tipped in acid. Won’t cripple him, but they should hurt._

The monster roared and zeroed in on where Batman stood, leaping forward. Batman sidestepped as the creature flung forward and passed him. It stumbled on, and slammed up against the helicopter which rocked forward, and then, slowly, tipped over the side of the building. It and the creature both toppled over the edge and down to the ground below, both hitting the ground and exploding into a magnificent fireball. Flames and smoke billowed around the entire building as Batman returned to Maroni and lifted him by his jacket’s lapels.
“Maroni, you gutless rat,” Batman shouted directly in the mobster’s face. “I should send you over the edge, along with that fiend!”

“No! Don’t! Please! I – I swear, I–”

“Shut up! I’m going to spare your useless life on one condition… Norman Maddison… You’ve got your dirty hooks in him. No longer! He’s now square with any debt to you!”

“But he owes…!”

“Not anymore, got it!?”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. He’s square.”

“Good,” Batman said, releasing him. “Watch your back, you slug.” Maroni felt cuffs click around his wrists, locking him to a railing.

“You just gonna leave me?!?”

“You got a problem with that?” Batman growled. “I just wonder who you’d rather find you first. The cops, or Falcone?” Batman’s cape opened like massive wings and he gently swooshed down to the ground below where his car, covered in rubble and gore, was waiting for him.

Inside the building, Norman crawling down the stairs on all fours, shaking as he did so. He rounded each corner, looking carefully to see if danger lay in waiting ahead.

He… he knew my name! Downstairs… such unspeakable carnage. In the middle of the room are two creatures – like elephants. Their bodies as torn and broken as all the others. Carcasses. I must get out of here… this is no place for me… He knew my name…

He carefully rounded the corner, tiptoeing past the remains of the gigantic beasts, when he suddenly crashed into another man. This one was short, bald, and wearing glasses with a little goatee on his chin. Hugo Strange, though Norman did not know him.

“Who is this?” Strange said, clearly frustrated as he straightened his glasses. “One of Maroni’s surviving thugs, no doubt. I should snuff out your miserable life right now… But alas, I should not have come in here. I have made a mistake. My curiosity is hubris. I must leave this place.” Strange kicked Norman on the ground, and then turned, running out of the house and off into the woods beyond.

“Ugh…” Norman groaned. “I’ve got to get out of here… Batman, he… he knew my name…”

Two huge tire tracks in the woods, not far from Falcone’s estate, Batman thought as he carefully scanned the wooded area. Likely belonged to an enormous truck… Something Strange would have transported the monsters in, after destroying his own lab.

“Alfred,” he said.

“Yes, Sir,” Alfred’s voice buzzed back inside the cowl.

“Strange must have rented a large hauling vehicle to transport his creations here. I need you to check with all truck rental locations to see if we can find a lead.”

“I will get on it first thing tomorrow. But Sir, must I remind you that you have a guest here at the
manor, tonight? Might I suggest you get back here as soon as your business has finished?"

“Of course,” Batman said. “I’m on my way.”

_I was dreaming…_ Julie’s voice echoed in her mind as she felt Bruce’s fingers softly brush across her cheek.

“Julie?” his voice said. “Julie? Wake up…” Slowly she opened her eyes, finding herself inside a well-lit room in Wayne Manor.

*How long had I been out? What has happened…? My father!*

“Bruce?” she said as she sat up. “What happened? What… How long have I been asleep?”

“All night,” Bruce said. “It’s lunch time. You passed out. Sometimes when the body is nearing a state of hysteria, it just shuts down. Self-preservation. You’re fine, now.

_I dreamt I rode a wild, galloping horse, with no saddle or reins. Eventually, I fell off and Bruce was there to catch me. But then he ran off, trying to catch the horse._

“I barely… I mean, my father,” she stammered.

“You father is fine,” Bruce smiled. “I spoke to him this morning. I’m going to work something out with him. Lend him the money to pay off the debt. I’m suspending him from the Wayne Foundation, of course… At least until we can get this whole thing settled with… But for now, he’ll be safe.”

“Oh Bruce,” Julie said, wrapping her arms around him in a hug. “How can I ever, ever thank you?”

“There’s no need,” he said. “I’m sure he’d love to see you now, though. Come on. I’ll take you home.”

“Do you think we could walk part of the way? I feel like I need it…”

“Of course.”

“And… Wait, did you say _hysteria_?”

It was the eve before election day, and Bruce and Julie sat in Wayne Manor, watching a news broadcast on the upcoming elections. Jack Ryder was all riled up about the prospects of Harvey Dent becoming the new DA.

“Can you imagine this city with Dent prosecuting?” Jack said excitedly. “Wherever The Roman is tonight, he’s sure to be shaking in his tighty-whities. You hear that, Roman?! You and your cronies are gonna be able to make bail any day of the week, but your street level punks sure won’t! And you can bet… I mean, mark my words, Harvey Dent isn’t gonna overlook the misdemeanors of all your small-time operations. You oughtta be feeling pretty scared right about now, because your empire here in Gotham is about to come crumbling down.”

“Thanks Jack,” Vicki Vale smirked at her co-host’s enthusiasm. “And we know you’re not the only one who feels that way. The _I Believe In Harvey Dent_ campaign was estimated by polls last week to be one of the single most supported campaigns in this state’s history, and as you can
imagine, there are a lot of people hoping Dent wins at tomorrow’s election.”

“Thanks Vicki. Back to you.”

“All right. Tonight we are discussing one of my favorite subjects, and perhaps the only man getting more press than Harvey Dent tonight, the famous mystery man and self-styled guardian of the city’s nocturnal streets – Batman. Joining us tonight is the former head of psychiatry at Gotham State University, and a current doctor at Blackgate Penitentiary’s Arkham Wing, Professor Hugo Strange. Professor, what can you tell us about the psyche of a man who would go to such lengths, as Batman so reportedly does?”

“It’s a very complex case, Miss Vale,” Hugo replied back.

Bruce watched in disgust.

_The night of the attack on Falcone’s estate, Hugo had rented a truck in order to transport his monsters. We found the rental facility which he had gotten it from, and tied it to an address that Hugo had used to procure the car. It was a boarding home, and he’d only stayed in the room for one week. Under a different name, no less. Sanjay did all the business dealings, so the renters and owners of the home never even saw Strange’s face. The room he’d stayed in was small, and he’d only left behind a few things... A handful of doodles of Batman. He’s since moved into his place of work – the prison, of all places. The Arkham Wing. Now he is hiding right out in the open. And worse, as a commentator and expert on Batman. With no hard evidence, I can’t just bring him down. It would be seen as an unjust vendetta. He’d immediately go free. At least now he’s in Blackgate – close to the law. I must keep an eye on him. Far too many people, both wicked and innocent alike, have died because of him. Nobody else can die because of him._

“Or should I say, head-case?” Hugo laughed. “Because, make no mistake, he’s surely quite insane.”

_The Roman and Maroni successfully managed to hush up the monsters’ attack. Even Gordon wasn’t able to get close to the case. If not for the woman leaning on my shoulder right now, I’d feel like I completely lost this one..._

“And he’s an emotionally stunted persona, you must understand,” Hugo continued.

“So, you think he’s dangerous?” Vicki asked.

“Oh, undoubtedly. Hasn’t he already committed the legal definition of assault many times over? Such obsessive-compulsive behavior is utterly disconnected with the rest of reality. He’s not concerned with how the rest of the world thinks, or feels. It’s antisocial! All that matters to this Batman is his own perverse and relentless version of self-satisfaction. And he will stop at nothing to achieve those ends!”

Elsewhere, in the heart of Gotham City, Norman Maddison sat in a dark room in his penthouse. His heart raced, and sweat ran down his face. He leaned forward in his chair, nearly gluing his face to the television set as he watched the broadcast with Strange and Vicki Vale. His thoughts kept pounding on the inside of his skull like an industrial worker.

_Stop at nothing... Relentless... Insane... Surely, he knows what I did... Why I was there... He knew my name..._
“You wanna eat, don’t you?” Grogan said, sneering down at the homeless denizen of Gotham that he had chosen, seemingly at random, to carry out the task he needed. The homeless, in his opinion, were an exploitable class. Teenagers and illegal aliens were where corporations looked to, but not him. He’d employ the desperate and the hopeless.

“Yeah, but...” the bearded man said, refusing to make eye contact with the overbearing officer of the law.

“Listen. I’ve got you on possession, B’n E, trespassing - hell, I got you on loitering. So? What's it gonna be?”

“Alright, alright. What do I gotta do?”

“Simple. You get ‘em riled up. You know? You blend in, you make suggestions. Hey, there's a fat cat - let's roll his car. Hey, let's burn that building down, those corporate bastards put us out in the street. And if you have to, you kick in the first window, you throw the first Molotov.”

“But... that's what they're gonna do anyway.”

“Yeah, so they say. But talk is cheap. No one wants to be the first one to do it. That's where you come in.”

“ Ain't burnin' down a buildin' gonna get me in more trouble than I'm already in?”

“Well, yeah,” Grogan chuckled. “But that's what you got me for. I'm on your side, friend. You get them started, and then you get the hell outta there before us boys in blue start crackin' heads. I'll make sure the heat doesn't come down on you - so long as you don't get yourself caught.”

“I don't know about this...”

“Look, this prick... Anarky or whatever – he ain't got your best interests in mind. He's got his own agenda, and he's just using you like he's using everybody else. You bring him out in the open, we bring 'im down, and everybody’s happy. So? We got a deal?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Deal.”

“You made the right choice. Now... will that be light, or dark meat?”

“This has truly been a whirlwind, the past few months,” Harvey Dent’s campaign manager, Mr. Voeks, said. “We weren’t expecting to join the race when campaigns began. That much is obvious, since the current Gotham City District Attorney barely even lifted a finger in their campaign until just recently. Now, we’re only moments away from the big announcement of who has won the elections this year, and we figured we’d go over a few things before we got going. Normally Mr. Dent would do this himself, but I figured that seeing as he and his wife Gilda have only been married one week at this point, and we’d let them enjoy as much of this party as they could, before Mr. Dent has to get hard at work cleaning up our streets when he wins in just a few moments!” The crowd cheered.

Julie cheered perhaps louder than most, and Bruce couldn’t help but smile. They were in the Grand
Ballroom at the Royal Hotel, attending the Election Day party thrown by Harvey Dent’s campaign. Bruce had been given an exclusive invite for the generous donations he made to the last-minute campaign, and he figured attending wouldn’t do any harm. He was dating Dent’s biggest fan, after all. Some men took their girlfriends to their favorite band’s concert. Bruce took Julie to her lawyer-hero’s campaign celebration.

Harvey had been campaigning hard, and having great success. However, in the process of it all he really got to thinking about his life and his priorities. One week ago, he and his girlfriend, Gilda, had surprised everybody by tying the knot, and the press had a field day. When royalty in Britain got married, the world watched as though they were witnessing a real-life fairy tale in action. When Harvey Dent got married, Gotham watched as though their savior were rising to power. The amount of wedding gifts they had received at their home in the past week alone had a value than more than double that of their own tiny, beat-up house.

“I think it’s safe to say that Harvey Dent-mania has been sweeping Gotham lately,” Voeks said. “The media has extensively covered the amazing outpouring of charitable wedding gifts this week, but let’s look at some of the professional endorsements which have rolled in for Mr. Dent over the past few months. Harvey Dent has been endorsed by philanthropist James Wilecotten III, Reverend Marvin Winteryme of Gotham’s Baptist Union, Cesar de la Salazar Gallo, head of the Gotham chapter of Latinos United Against Crime and Corruption, and Wayne Enterprises’ CEO, Bruce Wayne! How about that? Oh, and pictured on the slide show behind me is perhaps one of the most poignant endorsements we’ve received yet: Jason Lee Pincus, a third-grader at Gotham’s Ravinia School in Grainley, contributed his entire fortune of eighteen dollars and fifty one cents, piggy bank included, to the Dent campaign. He had saved that money over three years, mostly by helping out with chores like shoveling snow and raking leaves. But he gave all the dough to Harvey Dent – because, as he said, Harvey can protect my Mom and Dad and me from the bad guys. Jason Lee Pincus, you are an inspiration!”

If only they knew how true that really is, Bruce thought as the room erupted with clapping and cheering. Dent and his newlywed wife stood off in the corner, nodding, smiling, and waving happily. The public eye was where Dent thrived, though he was hardly comfortable there. Were he given the choice, he surely would have preferred to spend this evening hearing the results at home with his wife, but he knew the people of Gotham needed more than that. He had to stand up before them and be their hero.

“Little Jason knows that our current DA has not been doing a decent job. This isn’t slandering or anything of that nature. This is simple fact. Take one look at these numbers: Crime has skyrocketed by an estimated ninety-seven percent in Gotham over the last four years. Murders up seventy-eight percent. Armed robberies up seventy-six percent. Rape and other sexual crimes are up a horrifying fifty-eight percent. Violent attacks are up ninety-seven percent. Isn’t it time for a change? Isn’t it time to take Gotham back? Harvey Dent is the one man with the courage, the guts, and the steel to stand up to the violent mob gangs that are destroying Gotham. We all know about the crime that makes us scared to walk home at night – scared to take public transportation – scared to even leave our own homes. Harvey Dent can stop the crime wave. Because Harvey Dent is the one man who can target the real sources of the violence – organized crime and corruption. Harvey Dent has already put dirty cops behind bars when nobody else had the guts to do it. Harvey Dent took on the corruption and secured eleven guilty verdicts. And those verdicts pressured former Commissioner Loeb to step down and retire from the GCPD. And he’s not stopping there. When everybody else was throwing up their hands about massive police corruption, Dent started a public tip line for citizen complaints about corrupt cops. The tip line has received thousands of calls, and let citizens fight back against corruption. Harvey Dent is now aiming at the mob kings that are feeding off the misery of Gotham citizens. Dent has sworn that if he is elected District Attorney, he’ll go after the worst mob kingpin first – Carmine Falcone. We all know who
he is. We all know what he’s responsible for. And yet we sit back and let him use this town for his personal gain at the expense of our citizens. Isn’t it time? Isn’t it time we had someone who can help make a difference? Someone who will take Gotham back? Well, I believe we’ve found that man. And tonight we will know if Gotham believes as well. Who believes in Harvey Dent?” Voeks shouted this last sentence, a well-known slogan from the campaign commercials and advertisements, and then threw his hand to his ear as the entire crowd shouted back.

“I believe in Harvey Dent,” they cried.

If Batman inspired this city to take action, then Harvey Dent has inspired this city to believe they have the means of saving themselves. Falcone can’t be pleased… But then again, many have tried to take on Falcone, including Dent himself. He won’t be able to do it alone. He’ll need my help. Sal Maroni is missing a massive shipment of heroin. Based on the time it went missing, it is fairly likely that the splinter group from the crime family led by Black Mask is behind it. Black Mask is, in all likelihood, Roman Sionis, and he is in league with The Penguin, Oswald Cobblepot, who is supplying him weapons. If I can locate and connect the heroin to Falcone, Dent will be able to bring him in on trial. That could break the crime empire in Gotham forever. But finding those drugs depends on finding Black Mask. Cobblepot won’t talk – even if I could find him – and there’s pretty much nothing connecting him to the weapons trade, even though they all know he runs it… I might have to simply hit the streets and start squeezing people for information.

“Bruce,” Julie said. “I want to go talk to Harvey.”

“Yeah? Thinking of asking him out? He just got married, you know?”

“Hush, you,” Julie smirked. “I just want to tell him how inspired I am by his bold campaign and his passion for justice. He’s really made a difference.”

“Let’s go then,” Bruce said. The two of them made their way through the crowd, to the corner where Harvey and Gilda had secluded themselves from the rest of the party. Gilda was a fairly simple looking woman, with cropped brown hair, and watery eyes that shone brightly out from the dark makeup which surrounded them. She glowed every time that Harvey turned his attention to her, clearly very much in love with the lawyer.

“Mr. Dent,” Julie said as she approached, extending her hand. “Sorry to bother you and your wife. I’m Julie Maddison-”


“Yeah, I am,” Julie blushed. “But I’m also working on my law degree. Mr. Dent, you’ve been a big inspiration and influence on my dream to become a lawyer. I actually hope to be a Gotham City DA myself one day.”

“And maybe you will yet,” Harvey said, shaking her hand. “Thank you for your support.”

“And I’m sure you recognize my boyfriend, but this is-”

“Bruce Wayne,” Harvey said, recoiling his hand and glaring at Bruce. “Can’t say I expected your support, Wayne.”

“Oh?” Bruce took a step back, completely surprised by the cold reception. “Is there a reason for that?”

“If you ask me, Gotham’s wealth is what has eaten out most of its soul, lately,” Harvey said. “I was pretty surprised to receive your support and donations, especially. Just know, that doesn’t give you
immunity in court, Mr. Wayne. Justice is blind.”

“I’m sorry,” Julie interrupted. “Did Bruce do something wrong?”

“The Waynes and the Falcones were friends,” Harvey explained. “Just hoping the apple has left the tree behind… so to speak.”

Interesting…

“Well, I assure you, I am extremely interested in your success, Mr. Dent,” Bruce said.

“Yeah…”

“Harvey, calm down,” Gilda said, trying to shrug off the awkwardness of the situation. “I’m Gilda.” She smiled, and extended her hand. Bruce shook it briefly, and Julie did the same. Julie was visibly colder in her demeanor since Harvey’s outburst, but did her best to be polite.

“Pleasure to meet you, Gilda,” Bruce nodded.

“Congratulations on the wedding,” Julie said.

“Thank you,” she smiled. “It’s like a fairy tale – almost. Marrying Gotham’s own Knight in shining armor. Just not so sure I’d want to raise children in a city like this… Not until things get settled anyway.” She tugged teasingly on Harvey’s arm.

“Don’t worry,” Harvey boasted. “Criminals like The Roman won’t have their way in Gotham much longer. If I make office, that is.”

“Well, hey now,” Bruce laughed. “I mean, I was raised here, and I turned out okay.” Dent rolled his eyes.

“Is Wayne Manor even in the city limits?” Dent asked.

“The Palisades?” Bruce smirked. “Sure. You know, if you make DA you might, uh, wanna make sure you figure out where your jurisdiction ends.”

“Well, criminals, sure,” Gilda interjected. “But I’m more talking about a city that fosters and idolizes a masked vigilante.” Harvey straightened up at the mention of Batman.

“Oh, Batman,” Bruce said. “True, true. If you ask me, that guy is far more off his rocker than The Roman.”

“Well, hold on now,” Harvey said, shaking his head. “If you ask me, Gotham City should be proud of an ordinary citizen standing up for what’s right. It’s historically rare, and that makes it pretty admirable.”

“Gotham needs heroes like you,” Gilda said. “Elected officials. Not a man who thinks he’s above the law.”


“We did,” Dent said. “All of us who stood by and let scum take control of our city.”

“But this is a Democracy, Harvey,” Gilda said.

“Democratic Republic,” Julie sliced in.
“When their enemies were at the gates,” Harvey began, “the Romans would suspend democracy and appoint one man to protect the city. And it wasn’t considered an honor. It was considered a public service.”

“Harvey,” Julie said. “The last man that they appointed to protect their republic was named Caesar, and he never gave up his power. That’s why they call Falcone The Roman.”

“Okay, fine,” Harvey nodded. “You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain. Look, whoever the Batman is, he doesn’t want to do this for the rest of his life – how could he? Batman is looking for someone to take up his mantle.”

“Someone like you?” Julie asked.

“Maybe. If I’m up to it,” he grinned.

“You sound like you are the caped crusader,” Julie said.

“Yeah, well,” he turned and looked at his wife. “If I was sneaking out every night, I think someone would have noticed by now.”

Perhaps it’s best that Harvey and Bruce Wayne don’t get along after all, Bruce thought. Avoid suspicion. Avoid someone connecting my identity.

“Well,” Bruce said. “Thanks for allowing us to bother the two of you for a moment. Good luck tonight, Harvey… Come on Julie, they’ll announce the results soon.” He took Julie’s arm and walked away.

“How dare he!?” she complained. “What nerve! Does he realize how much money you gave him?”

“It’s really quite alright,” Bruce smiled. “I support Harvey Dent for that exact tenacity he has. His refusal to be swayed by money. His disdain for organized crime. He’s only doing exactly what was advertised.”

“But that quip about your family! What was that about?”

“To be honest, I’m not entirely certain. I know I’ve met the Falcones… It was when I was very young. But I can’t really remember.”

“Maybe your dad was a mobster,” Julie ribbed him.

“Maybe,” Bruce said. “Say, would you like me to grab you a drink? Some punch, or water?”

“Punch would be great,” Julie said.

“Okay, I’ll be right back,” Bruce said as he ducked back into the crowd.

Waynes and Falcones are friends? Why don’t I remember…?

He waded through the crowds until he found the face he was looking for. Alfred was also in attendance at the party, as he too had offered up a small amount of his own personal fortune for the campaign.

“Master Bruce,” he smiled. “How are you this evening?”

“I’m a bit confused, to be honest,” Bruce said. “I just spoke to Dent, and had a rather cold conversation.”
“Oh?”

“He said that the Falcons are family friends of the Waynes. Do you know anything about that?”

“Yes,” Alfred said. “Your father associated with Mr. Falcone on occasion, but I assure you Bruce, your father was an honorable man. He was no criminal or mob supporter.”

“Well then what was he?”

“Regrettably, I don’t know,” Alfred said. “I never knew the details. The Falcons were in attendance at your parents’ funeral, but I have not seen them since. And they’ve never upon you. Obviously whatever the tie was, it’s long since disintegrated.”

Everybody cheered as Voeks took to the podium again, and motioned for Harvey and Gilda to join him at the stand.

“Well everybody, the polls have closed, and it looks like they are calling it,” he said. “It’s been a fast and inspirational few months. But it looks like it has paid off. Let’s all give a rousing round of applause for the new District Attorney for Gotham City! Harvey Dent!” Balloons fell from the ceiling, coupled with music blaring from the loudspeakers. Harvey smiled awkwardly, but sincerely, and watched the crowd ahead.

“This is Vicki Vale reporting, and the bitter struggle in the Gotham City District Attorney race ended yesterday with a landslide win for Harvey Dent. With ninety-seven percent of precincts reporting, Dent won the election with just over seventy percent of the vote, followed by former DA, Roger Garcetti at sixteen percent, and Dana Worthington at fourteen percent. Exit polls showed fear of violent crime and a desire for change fueled Dent's decisive victory.

“'It's one of those only in Gotham stories,' said longtime political observer Walt DeFabrizio. "Our city has a way of finding the leaders it needs at every critical moment. And obviously, the voters felt we needed a hard-charging, unbending prosecutor like Harvey Dent."

"Dent vowed to take quick action against the crime bosses and corrupt officials he claims are destroying the city. "Gotham is sick and tired of rising crime rates and endemic corruption, and I will target our city's enemies in my first day in office," Dent said.

"Officials close to the Dent campaign say that the new District Attorney plans to immediately seek out and prosecute senior city officials for malfeasance. Defeated opponent, and Dent’s former coworker, Roger Garcetti, is believed to have already been indicted, sources say.

"From her election night party held at the Gotham Victims Advocate Foundation headquarters, Dana Worthington addressed dozens of tearful supporters.

"This experience has been quite a ride, hasn't it?" Worthington said to the small group of hardcore supporters that showed up. "We've all been on this journey together and I wouldn't trade a moment of it. I want to thank you all from the bottom of my heart. As you move on to all the great things I know you're going to do, I hope you will join me in showing Mr. Dent your support," Worthington said, adding with a smile, "God knows, he's gonna need it."

“A long-shot, last-minute entry to the race, Harvey Dent's campaign began with a grassroots effort that earned him a small but passionate following that used forms of popular media to spread his anti-crime message. His campaign was rocked and almost derailed by a massive anti-Dent effort launched largely by GCPD officers taking part in a group called Concerned Citizens For a Better
“The group brutally attacked Dent in the press and on television commercials with accusations that Dent was fabricating evidence against innocent police officers in order to raise his own reputation. With many pundits calling for Dent to resign from the race, his poll numbers tanking, and his fundraising collapsing, Dent looked finished.

“But fate intervened with the incident at Rossi’s Deli. One of Dent’s primary accusers, GCPD officer Frank Notaro, took a hostage when he feared that his life was at risk from mob associates. Dent traded himself for the hostage and then convinced Notaro to turn himself in. The incident resurrected Dent’s hopes and created a wave of support that continued through the campaign until the landslide victory of yesterday.

“Some, however, remain skeptical of the incident and of the District Attorney-elect himself.

""It was all rather convenient, don't you think?" said one Garcetti advisor. "I'm not saying that it was all a set-up, but there are no accidents in politics. Now Dent will have to live up to his rhetoric, and I fear that we are all about to see how unfit he is for office."

“Such words of caution were in the minority, however, as Harvey Dent supporters savored the massive victory.

""It doesn't matter what the naysayers think," said Dent strategist Allan Voeks. "This is a landslide win not only for Harvey Dent, but for all of the people of Gotham City."

“Gordon,” Bullock said, walking into Gordon’s office.

“Yeah?”

“The phone. Somebody’s on the line for ya.” Gordon strode over to his line and picked it up, assuming it could Grogan trying to chew him out again, or perhaps it was Batman with more stories about monsters and ghosts.

“This is Gordon.”

“I know who you are,” a voice returned, metallic and distorted, obviously using a voice-changer.

“Who is this?”

“I’ve seen your record. Impressive. In a city full of dirt, you’re the only one with a clean jacket. And I’m someone interested in the clean jackets.”

“… Anarky?”

“The one and only.”

“I need a trace started!” Gordon frantically pointed to Bullock, who darted out of the room to the front desk.

“But despite a clean record,” Anarky continued, “you're still just an instrument of oppression at the beck and call of your corporate masters.”

“I work for the city of Gotham, not some corporation.”
“Are you really so naïve? The government is owned by corporate America – the city is owned by The Roman, Wayne Enterprises, GothCorp… and the mayor wouldn't wipe his own ass without permission from people like Salvatore Maroni, let alone your own Mr. Grogan. You're a cog in the machine, Gordon. And that machine is voracious. That machine must be stopped.”

“So, you're doing me a favor of some kind?”

“That's right. I'm here to help the misguided. Despite your chosen profession, your record suggests you could be reformed. So, a warning: get out, Gordon. Get out while you can. And tell Grogan that if he tries to exploit one more helpless soul to get to me, he’s gonna be responsible for a lot… a lot of deaths…”

“… Hello? Hello? He hung up! Bullock, did we get the trace? Encrypted? Son of a-”
Lower East End. I seem to be spending the majority of my time on this side of Gotham. Months now, and I’ve hardly made a dent in this part of town. Hugo Strange has holed himself up in the Arkham Wing… All but disappeared from what I hear. Dr. Crane, the head doctor, seems to be hiding him. Probably knows something… But even with Hugo out of the picture, there are plenty of other threats to take care of. Nothing has been seen of Red Hood since he fell at Ace Chemicals. No body recovered. Black Mask and Penguin seem to have gone cold as well. Anarky continues to pester the GCPD, but so far it has only been through a series of empty threats and rallying the city’s homeless population. No clues as to his whereabouts. And with Dent officially in office, Falcone and his people have been laying low. No major movements. But here on the East End, small-time criminals haven’t slowed. Some of them even seem to see me as a personal challenge. I’m going to have to try and stay a step ahead. Like right now, for example.

Batman watched from the rooftops above as a sleek, dark figure slipped silently in through a maintenance shaft in the back of the Dagget Jewelers store. He had encountered this opponent once before, and let her go without much incident. Perhaps, that had been a mistake. In the weeks after that first encounter, the Catwoman, as she was known, had gone on a serial robbery spree. There had been bigger issues at hand, but tonight, Batman hoped he had finally caught up to her.

Quickly, he slid down the side of the building and into the maintenance shaft, crawling as silently and stealthily as he could. Eventually, the shaft opened into a storage room of sorts, which led into the front showcase room. Slowly, Batman peered around the doorway, and saw her.

She was leaning over one of the displays, carefully plucking diamond necklaces out, and wrapping them around her wrists. The care she put into studying each piece of jewelry was like the steady gaze of a well-trained watch-maker. She seemed to know exactly what she was looking for, taking accurate note of each item’s value and worth to her personally. She was wearing the same full-bodysuit of black that clung tightly to her, along with the high-heeled boots running up to her thighs. It was a striking look, but she had added some functionality to it since Batman last encountered her. Similar to the utility belt, she had pouches on tops of her boots, like thigh holsters, holding tools and weapons. And, as per her name, she was wearing her usual cat-inspired cowl.

*Have I inspired this? This “Catwoman,” wears a costume and a mask. Just like me. Her, Red Hood, Penguin… even Strange… Have I inadvertently given license to every criminal with a flair for the dramatic?*

“I don’t know who you’re supposed to be,” Batman said as he entered the room. “But in case you didn’t notice, this building’s business hours are closed.” Catwoman spun around as Batman sternly approached. She glared at first, gritting her teeth, but as she realized who had caught her, she became calm, cool, and even friendly.

“Oh, I noticed,” she said. Her voice was soft like velvet, hinted with pulse phonation – an act, Batman figured, to throw him off guard. “But I’m afraid my business never sleeps. I’m nocturnal.” She smiled. “Surely you of all people can understand that. So, Mr. Tall-Dark-And-Mysterious, tell me you’re not this place’s over-dressed security guard.”

“I just go where the crime is.”

“You sure you want to cut this so short? You haven’t even heard me purr yet…” She stretched, craning her neck and puffing out her chest.
Is she flirting with me?

“You won’t be purring when you’re in Blackgate or Gotham State Pen. I can see I was wrong about you, that night on The Roman’s rooftop. I would never have let you go if I’d known you were just getting started.”

“Oh? Somehow I didn’t think petty burglarly was the type of thing that upset the Batman. Thought you had bigger fish to catch.”

“You’ve made a bit of a name for yourself. As far as I’m concerned, you are a big fish.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Mr. Bat! I don’t answer to you! Besides, you ever tried to catch a cat that didn’t want to be caught?” And then, as swiftly as Batman had removed batarangs from his belt so many times before, Catwoman made one fluid motion in which she unfurled a whip from its casing on her thigh, and lashed it out at Batman. He had been taken by surprise, hardly expecting her to move with such expert precision. The whip wrapped itself around his legs, and Catwoman gave it a hard tug, pulling Batman’s feet out from under him, and sending him crashing down on his back.

Catwoman pulled the whip back in, wrapping it expertly around her own body, and slid down next to Batman, still dazed on the floor. Slowly, and cat-like, she crawled up along side him, placing one hand over his chest and leaning down so that they were looking at each other face-to-face. Her head lowered down next to his, and she sniffed the air, smiling.

“What are y-?”

“So,” she cut him off with her sultry voice. “Who is she?”

“She?”

“You know. Miss Chanel Number Five,” she giggled, running her hand from his chest down along his right arm, stopping on his elbow. “I can smell her on you. Didn’t expect you to be the romantic type.”

“Get. Off.”

“Fine,” Catwoman shrugged, grinning. “Just like a man. No time for the cuddly stuff.” A sharp pain, like a needle, stabbed into the joint in his armorung. Catwoman had found a vulnerable point in his suit and punctured through it with the claws on her gloves, stabbing Batman’s arm. As he winced in pain, Catwoman dove away. Pushing off of his body, she leapt on top of the display case to their right, landing on her feet, immediately springing back up into a backflip toward the door. Landing that just as successfully, she shot forward and through the door toward the exit shaft.

Like her namesake, she’s agile and swift. Like a practiced thief, she’s left an open exit for herself. The war has grown ever more bizarre. Perhaps I should look into reinforcing the joints on the suit. She strategically sought out a weak point immediately. Lucky it was just a scratch. If this had been a bullet – Ugh… My head...

Batman stood up, watching the room spinning around him. I’m dizzy. The room is spinning and my legs feel weak. Feel sweaty… Her claws… must’ve been… must’ve been drugged. Groggy...

And then, like a crack of thunder in his eardrums, he heard a beep from within his cowl.

The radio signal… that’s Jim… Jim is calling me…
Julie stood on the curb outside of R.M. Lacy & Co. Her arms were folded impatiently across her chest, as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The golden light from the store bathed the darkened sidewalk around her in its glow as people continued to shuffle in and out of the enormous department store.

Okay, this time he’s pushed the whole “stylishly late” routine way too far! I’ve been waiting here – on the street – for almost an hour! Now, the store’s getting ready to close... and all I wanted to do was buy him a tie. Granted, he could probably buy the entire building if he wanted. But it wouldn’t been a tie – something special – from me.

She sighed, checking her watch and hoping that it hadn’t been as late as she suspected. But it was. In fact, it was later. She turned around, looking desperately hopeless as she watched an employee move toward doors and begin locking them up for the night.

Great. Lacy’s is closing... Julie Maddison, this is not you! I swear... When have I ever gone chasing after a man so desperately? I’m a supermodel for crying out loud! I’ve had men four times my age chasing after me. Why am I so desperate now?! It’s not because he’s Gotham’s most eligible bachelor. It’s because of how he makes me feel. The tenderness in his touch. The decency in his eyes. The intelligence. It’s not because he’s wealthy as sin. I couldn’t care less. It’s... It’s... It’s about time!

Julie breathed out in relief, but slight annoyance, as she watched Bruce’s car pull up along the curb and come to a halt. Quickly, she stormed toward it, heading to the back seat where Bruce was sure to be waiting. Alfred opened the driver’s door and stepped out, trying to beat her to the door, but she just waved her hand at him.

“Never mind, Alfred. The store’s closed. And I have no idea where he wants to go now, but you can bet-”

“Unfortunately, Miss Maddison,” Alfred cut her off. “I’m afraid I am the bearer of bad news this evening. Master Bruce has been unexpectedly detained by business.”

“Detained? You mean, he’s not in the car? But.. I don’t-”

“Unavoidable, I’m afraid,” Alfred said. “Master Bruce has asked me to express his sincerest regrets.”

“His sincerest regrets? Like he’s the one who was kept waiting.”

“Miss Maddison, I am... aware of how disappointing this must be. But I find it unlikely that Master Wayne’s... scheduling problems will change any time soon. In the meantime, I would be more than happy to chauffeur you to wherever you care to-”

“Thank you, Alfred. But no! I’ll just walk home instead. Tell Bruce... Ooh! Just tell him that I’ll call him tomorrow.”

“Very good, Miss.”

There’s a certain expectancy – a tightening in my spine every time I push the button on that... "bat-pager" he gave me, Gordon thought. It’s range can’t be very far, especially among all these tall buildings. So far, it’s never failed, but... will this be the time he doesn’t hear it? Will this be
**the time he doesn’t come? Or can’t?**

Gordon stood atop the GCPD as per usual, waiting for his newfound ally to arrive. He had waited a considerable amount of time to press the button. It didn’t seem to matter. Batman always appeared to be up on the latest scuttlebutt within the station, so Gordon often felt it unnecessary to risk meeting him in person. And perhaps it was more than just that. Gordon had felt uneasy since his latest encounters with the vigilante. Batman had been less composed lately. He had been growling on about mad scientists and monsters. Gordon had always questioned Batman’s mental stability. What kind of man dresses like a bat to take on the mob? And with such determination? But now he wondered just how much of Batman’s war was simply in the vigilante’s head. What if Batman was making it all up? What if Batman was Falcone? What if Batman, Anarky, and Black Mask were all the same person, and it was all an elaborate fantasy to fuel his mania?

Gordon had spent a great deal of time, usually as he sat in therapy and pretended to listen to his wife’s ever-growing list of complaints against him, wondering about the implications of the trust he’d put in Batman. Sure, Batman had saved his children, but how did he know they were in danger at all? Who had tipped him off? What if he had orchestrated the whole thing himself? It certainly made sense. And his daughter, Barb seemed to be getting more and more obsessed with Batman each and every day. She treated him like he was a rock star. What if she knew her own father had a direct line – the only direct line – straight to him? What kind of message would that be?

The roof-access door opened behind him, and he turned back quickly, with a jump, feeling his heart stop for a few seconds. Three other officers, all larger than him, approached, grinning wildly. He’d been caught. What if Batman showed up? He’d never be able to explain it.

“Well, well, Gordon,” one of them said. “Up on the roof again, I see. Word is, you spend a lot of time up here. Quite the skyline view, isn’t it?”

Jensen, Pulver, and Briggs. Three of Grogan’s strong-arm thugs. He’s had them all rounding up homeless winos recently, trying to smoke out Anarky. Probably trying to smoke out Batman now.

“What’s it to you?” Gordon responded. “Just enjoying the night air for a moment.”

“Of course, of course,” Jensen said. “I’d never question your motives… you bein’ a superior officer and all. But the Commissioner… now he-”

“Commissioner Grogan has already spoken to me, Jensen. What more do you have to offer?”

“Maybe more than you’re counting on, Jimbo. Maybe a whole lot more…”

They circle me wide – hot, but wary. They remember what happened to Flass.

“I doubt you’ve got anything more than I expect, Jensen,” Gordon said.

“We’ll just see about th-” Jensen’s voice cracked and went out as Gordon immediately moved forward, punching him in the stomach before delivering an uppercut to his jaw before he could properly double over.

*I don’t give them time to react. They’re big, but soft around the middle. Slow. Two are down before they even know what hit them. The third one, Briggs, eats a chunk of my heel.*

But just as he landed the kick, Jensen lashed back with a blow from his baton, hitting Gordon’s back and knocking him forward. The two other’s stumbled up and scrambled toward him, one grabbing each of his arms to keep him steady. Gordon went limp, only moving his eyes, keeping them dead ahead on Jensen who was nearly foaming at the mouth with anger.
“You’re gonna be sorry you did that, Jimbo,” Jensen said, raising his fist. “What’s your little family gonna do without you bein’ able to provide for them anymore? Can’t be a good cop without kneecaps!” Suddenly, a tiny object flew down, and span around Jensen. It was a batarang, attached to the end of a rope. It span around him, tightening, and then lifted him up into the foggy night sky.

“It’s… It’s him! Must be!” Briggs said.

“What?” Pulver gasped.

“That’s what Gordon was doing on the roof! Waiting for him!”

“But where is he?!”

*Happened so fast. Jensen just disappeared. The other two are like a pair of jittery teenagers. So hopped-up they don’t even hear him coming. But, truth be told, neither can I.*

Batman landed directly behind the two of them, moving like a wild animal in a frenzy. Immediately, he launched his fist into Pulver’s face, as his cape furled and confused them as to where exactly he was at all. With them separated, he turned on Briggs, tossing a handful of batarangs at him, and then pounced on him like a predator. Brigg’s hit the ground, and Batman grabbed his leg, twisting the ankle, spraining it painfully. Then he grabbed the pitiful man by the head and slammed it down, knocking him out.

*It all occurred so fast. The first time I’ve ever actually seen him fully in action. And again, he’s fighting cops. What the heck is wrong with this city? He’s faster than anyone I’ve ever seen. Feral and brutal. But he never falters. Their weapons never come near him.*

Pulver, his nose gushing blood, ran for the door, but Batman launched a line from his grapple gun at him, which immediately snagged his legs. Tugging the line, Pulver fell to the ground, and Gordon winced as he heard something break inside of him. Then, breathing heavily and angrily, Batman dragged Pulver back towards him. The terrified officer clawed at the ground, trying to escape, screaming for help, but it was futile. Batman grabbed him, and swung him out over the edge of the building, dangling him dangerously over the enormous drop below.

“Listen up, dirtball,” Batman growled. “This is a message for you and all your crooked cronies who disgrace their badges. From now on, this area is *off limits* for *anyone* who isn’t James Gordon! Do you hear me? For your own safety—”

“Yes! No! Please!”

“-stay off of the roof of Police Headquarters!” Batman roared as he tossed the man over the edge.

“No!” Gordon shouted, scrambling to his feet before realizing that Batman was tightly gripping the other end of the line, dangling him safely from it.

*Batman doesn’t let him fall. He’s already proven he’s no killer. But that doesn’t stop him from letting the rope slip and jerk as he lowers Pulver to the pavement. Twelve gut-churning stories below. On his lips, just the hint of a smile.*

Batman released Pulver from the line, letting him fall the last two feet. Then, he reeled it back up, and holstered the grapple gun before turning to Gordon, and extending his hand shakily.

“Sorry I’m a bit late,” Batman said. “You okay?”

“I’ve been worse, thanks.” Gordon shook his hand, but as he did so, Batman’s entire body shook
dangerously, and he staggered away, trying to remain on his feet.

“Whoa,” Batman grumbled.

“Hey,” Gordon stepped forward, holding Batman by the shoulders. “The question is, are you okay? Steady, man…”

“I’m fine,” Batman grunted. “I believe I was drugged earlier this evening. Poisoned.”

“Poisoned? By who? Where?”

“It’s nothing,” Batman said as he suddenly seemed to regain control of himself and stood sternly. “Just tangled with the wrong alley cat… What more have you learned of Hugo Strange?”

“His past is questionable but… legal. He was abandoned as a child, grew up in state homes. A bright kid, but he apparently had a heck of a temper. Nobody knows how he put himself through college and medical school – did most of it overseas, accounting for that odd accent. He’s dedicated, I’ll say that… Look, I know I wasn’t quite on board with this at first, but after seeing the strings The Roman has pulled to hush up whatever happened at his country estate… at this point, all we can do is keep a close eye on Strange. If he steps out of line, maybe we can nail him on something.”

“How many deaths is he responsible for?” Batman asked.

“By your count? Few dozen…”

“That’s unacceptable. This man is responsible for the murder at least thirty people that we know of.”

“Until he moves again, there isn’t much we can do. Whatever evidence there was, was lost. You can’t blame yourself.”

“But I do.”

“Why?”

“Because I could have made the difference. I could have stopped him. We always can stop these people, Jim.”

“Do you have a better suggestion?”

“…No. He’s under my surveillance too. But don’t think I’m letting this rest.”

“Fine, fine. But that isn’t why I called you here tonight. Something… new has cropped up that I’d like you to see. We need to go down to the morgue.”

Julie stuffed her keys into the front door of the penthouse, and turned. The door clicked, and she opened it up, entering the dark room beyond.

*Despite everything, I find it all but impossible to stay mad at him. By the time I’ve gotten back home, I’m already thinking of the soft skin in the crook of his neck. The slow, rare rumble of his laughter. And… what? What’s wrong with the light?*

Impatiently, she flicked the light switch up and down, but the room remained dark. Turning, she
looked over toward her father’s study, and saw the door still shut, and heard his faint mutterings coming from within.

*Looks like Daddy is still in his study.*

She slowly opened the door, and peered inside. Her father sat with his back turned to her, hunched over his desk, frantically scribbling something onto a yellow notepad in front of him. One desk lamp was on, though set to its dimmest setting, and next to it was a sideways cup and an empty bottle of whisky.

*Daddy and I have hardly spoken since he confessed his… crimes to me. I hate to call it that.*

“Daddy?” she said. “Hi, I’m home! Something’s wrong with the lights out here. I’m going to call maintenance.”

“Yes…” Norman muttered. “Light… out… yes… yes I – Oh! The lights! NO! Leave the lights out!” He was shouting at this point, and frantically spun around, revealing his wide, sunken-in eyes as he continued, “We need to – need to lay low… Especially at – at night…” Julie stared for a moment before folding her arms and raising an eyebrow and responding.

“What are you talking about? Daddy… how much have you had to drink tonight?”

“Never… I – um… Don’t worry, Darling. I – I swear. I’m doing alright. I’m… I’m doing fine.”

“Uh huh,” Julie said as she helped him out of his chair and to his feet. “All right. Daddy, it’s ok. Here-”

“I swear!”

“You need to get some rest. Can you make it to bed okay?” Norman ignored her and shuffled slowly out the door.

“I swear I’m fine… need to – need to keep the lights off, though…”

*I know Bruce helped him out of that jam with the loan sharks. But he’s apparently been too embarrassed to ever tell me about it. He’s too proud. But this behavior seems a little extreme. What’s gotten him so shaken?*

She brushed her hair out of her face and looked down at the notepad on the desk. On it was a series of doodles, all depicting giant dark figures with pointed ears and large bat-like wings. Some had fangs and faces drawn on, others were just scribbled over blankly. Either way, it was odd behavior. He’d been so distant lately.

Gordon stepped into the morgue, lit up in sterile, blue, lights. A balding man stood in the center, wearing rubber gloves and a lab coat, slightly dirtied. He looked up as Gordon entered, and immediately went to greet him, as though he had been expecting him.

*Murray Fineman is the Gotham Central coroner,* Gordon had explained earlier to Batman. *Four months ago, his brother-in-law got squeezed by a protection racket. I made sure the squeezers ended up in jail. Ever since, Murray’s only been too happy to return the favor.*

“Thanks again, Murray,” Gordon said.
“Yeah, yeah, hurry up…” Murray said as he looked over his shoulder, as if one of his superiors would stride in at any moment. “Look, I can only give you ten minutes, tops. My lab assistant’s on his break.”

“More than enough,” Gordon nodded. “I appreciate it, Mur. Okay, you can come in.” He spoke over his shoulder, followed by the large, dark figure of the Batman. Murray gasped, and stepped back as though Batman were about to mug him. But he didn’t complain. If he ever told anybody, he’d reveal that he’d been giving Gordon free reign on the morgue. Hardly worth losing his job over.

“The victim was fished out of the East River,” Gordon explained as he opened a drawer and pulled out a sliding slab with a body bag sitting neatly along its center. “A tugboat spotted her. She wasn’t in the water very long, so the body’s still in good shape. She’s young. No positive ID yet, but we’re running her prints. Manner of death… Well, have a look.” He unzipped the bag, revealing the head of a blonde young lady, pale, and lifeless. Batman leaned in, staring at her, and then turning his attention to the left side of her neck where a gaping wound stared back at him.

“Throat’s been ripped out,” Batman said. “Severed her jugular. Pretty jagged wound.”

“Right. At first, the coroner thought that was due to her time in the water – the marine life and all. But then he found what looks like bite gouges deeper in the wound, along the edge of her trachea.”

“Strange’s monsters? But the wounds too small…”

“Maybe. Someone – or something – chewed into her neck. And here’s the weird part, if you can believe it… her veins were also completely drained of blood. Not a drop left.”

“The water-”

“Would have siphoned it out. I thought so too, but the coroner insists there should still be some trace of plasma. She’s empty as a flat tire.”

“But nature is chaotic. Random. I still think the river-”

“And I’d agree. If it wasn’t for this.” Gordon unlocked the drawer next to the one he’d already opened and rolled out a second body bag, unzipping it to reveal the head of a man.

“Same wound…” Batman glared.

“Victim number two: Discovered in the basement of a building that was set for demolition. Same neck wound – definitely a gnawing bite, even though there’re no active saliva samples. Also absolutely bloodless. It seems like someone’s taking this whole creature of the night bit even further than you are.”

“A serial killer,” Batman responded. “We have to end this, Jim.”
Bruce and Julie walked through the aisles of Lacy’s department store. Only this time, rather than her buying him a tie, he was buying her several full outfits. He owed her much more all of his broken promises, but this was a start. Interactions had been icy between them all evening, and quite honestly Bruce couldn’t blame anyone but himself. This woman had thrown herself in his lap time and time again, and he repeatedly snubbed her – or outright dismissed her.

There have just been so many distractions lately, he thought. With Falcone running back into his corner, we’d only need to find enough evidence to bring him down. Even the small-timers in the East End would surely feel the shockwaves of the fall of someone so powerful. I can end all of this, and then get on with my life with Julie. I feel like I love her – not that I’m even sure what that means – but I haven’t been able to ever give it the thought it deserves. Or the respect… That mess with Hugo, and this Catwoman… Gordon’s bloodless corpses… I need to cut the distractions and keep my eye on the prize. Focus.

“I’m sorry if I’ve seemed on edge today,” Julie said. “I really am, Bruce. I know we’ve had a rough time lately, figuring out how to work with each other’s schedules… But it’s not even that. I’m just worried lately, about my father…”

“How so?”

“He’s just not been the same lately. Ever since… what happened. He’s so anxious and distracted. You know, he’s never even told me how you helped him resolve his illicit debt. He’s a proud man, my father. I just wish he could learn to forgive himself. Like I have.”

Norman. He never told her, because I never helped at all. Batman did. I didn’t even ever have to force him to take leave at work. He hasn’t shown up since the incident at all. Maybe there is something wrong… But I can’t distract myself with all that.

“He may just need more time.”

“Maybe… they say time heals all wounds.” Julie looked so hurt. She was truly anxious over her father’s behavior.

Julie clearly loves her father. She’s fiercely protective of him. Almost as if she were his mother. I imagine that’s true of any child who loses one parent. The survivor becomes doubly important. I never had that luxury… She can work that out on her own. I need to focus on other things.

Maroni scowled bitterly as he looked up from his desk in his office and saw two of his guards escorting in Norman Maddison, looking as on edge as ever before. He curled his lip in disgust, and felt his entire body tense up. This was the last man he ever wanted to see walk into his office ever again.

“I’ll say this for you, Maddison,” Maroni said. “You are one persistent pain-in-the-neck. I told you, I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want to see you. Why are you still here?”

“I had… um… I had hoped that we could have a private conference,” Norman said, eyeing the two guards. “To uh, to discuss our… outstanding business, Maroni.” He whispered the last few words, as if they couldn’t hear him. The guards looked at him in disbelief, wondering if he were serious or not, and Maroni just pressed his fingers to his forehead and rolled his eyes, taking a moment to sigh.
and contemplate his next few words. Was this a trap? Was Batman waiting nearby? He was told to
cut ties with Maddison, and he intended to keep it that way – though he was more afraid of what
The Roman might do to him than Batman.

“Forget it, Norman,” Maroni finally said. “In case you aint noticed, we got a whole new crew
around here. Whole new crew. You wanted a powwow and you got it, but it’s going to be
on my terms. Now stop wasting my time, and talk.”

“Well, it’s just… that is, I hadn’t heard from you in some time. Since the… since what happened at
that country estate-”

“Okay, now ease up on that scratch, Pal,” Maroni said bitterly. “Look, you don’t need to whisper
and talk all delicate-like here, Norman. We all know what business means around here. No need
for niceties. But second of all, and this is a rule without exception, we don’t talk about that
incident around here. Too many bad feelings, you know? Let’s just say… you’re off the hook.
Okay?”

“But, Sal…” Norman looked lost for a moment and then spoke up loudly and confidently. “I am a
man of my word and I intend to honor that. I still owe you the better part of three million dollars-”

“And I couldn’t use it? Cost me nearly half that to square things with The Roman. I’m as lucky to
still be walkin’ as you are, Norm!”

“Well, okay, but like I said, I intend to pay you back!”

“I guess you don’t hear so well. I said you and I are through! Capisce?! Boy.” The two guards
grabbed Norman and began dragging him out of the room while he struggled.

“But I…I-”

“You owe me nothin’, Maddison. You understand? And uh, tell your friend that I lived up
to my part of the bargain.”

“But why? What friend?” and as Norman spoke, his face went pale. “Y-you’re talking about him,
aren’t you? Maroni! Maroni, I swear to you! I have nothing to do with Batm-”

“Shove off Maddison,” Maroni yelled as the guards pushed him through the door and locked it
behind him. “In case you aint heard, we don’t like to talk about that around here, either!”

“Thanks for getting me these reports, Valerie,” Harvey Dent said as he walked into his office.
“You can leave the rest until morning. I’ve still got some work I want to finish up.”

“Thanks, Mr. Dent,” her voice returned. “I’ll see you in the morning.” Dent closed the door and
flipped the light switch, but the room stayed dark. Confused, he flicked it up and down a few more
times.

“Now what? City forget to pay the bill?” A click sounded from behind him, and his desk lamp
flickered on, revealing a tall, dark figure standing on the other side of the desk.

“Come in, and lock the door,” Batman said from the shadows.

“Ah. Shoulda known,” Dent said as he locked the door. “Your pal, Gordon, was here the other day.
Still trying to get a subpoena to search Falcone’s country house. What went on out there?”
“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Well, unfortunately, there’s still no judge in all of Gotham who’ll crack The Roman’s whip. Believe me, if it was within my power, I’d bust down his front door and haul him out in chains myself.”

There’s a real dichotomy in Harvey. Part of him is bound by the rule of law, while the other half smolders for justice. In that sense, we understand each other.

“Actually, that’s why I’ve come. Falcone has recently misplaced a huge shipment of heroin. Or should I say, his main capo – Sal Maroni – misplaced it.”

“Yeah, I’d heard rumors that ol’ Sal was having troubles. I’d love to dance at that guy’s arraignment.”

“His main trouble is me. I’ve been trying to locate that dope before they do.”

“Well, if you can connect Maroni to such a deal, we could put him away from a long time.”

“If we got him, what are the chances of connecting it to Falcone directly?”

“If it’s still with its shipping manifest, yeah. But otherwise, if we got Maroni, I could probably get him to squeal. Not on purpose, but I have my ways. And if we got Falcone… it’d take a judge willing to take the case but… we could end this.”

“Then I’ll do my best,” Batman said. “You work on finding a judge. If you need leverage, I’ll be touch. I’ll work the streets looking for the drugs.”

“Deal.”

Julie sat in her car, parked slightly off to the side of the road, staring at the darkened gates to the Wayne Estate ahead.

From the back seat of the Rolls, you never get a good idea of exactly how big those gates really are. Bruce said he had more “business” to attend to tonight. I’ve been here since it got dark, and so far, no one has either come or gone through those gates. Does he really expect me to believe that he got that cut on his arm from a rake? Like Bruce Wayne ever goes near gardening tools… Listen to me… this is textbook paranoia… and, jeez, this stakeout stuff is boring! How do cops even begin to cope with it?

Gordon stood in a shadowy side-alley, only a block away from the infamous Crime Alley. Accompanied by three other officers, Merkel, Montoya, and O’Hara, they gazed down at a pale body, crumpled on the ground. This one was a young woman, with blonde short hair, dressed in a miniskirt and torn-apart white button-up shirt. It looked like a Halloween costume, almost, resembling the outfit worn traditionally by Catholic School Girls. Though she was far too old to be in school. It must have been an outfit. Something she wore to a party, or to a club. The left side of her neck had been chewed off similarly to all of the other bodies.

Another one. Another body – abused and discarded. This one was found inside a common trash dumpster. I keep asking myself... what is wrong with this city?
“Bullock,” Montoya ordered. “Make sure that alleyway’s blocked off.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bullock grunted.

“Hey, Montoya,” Gordon said. “Why don’t you and O’Hara go help secure that border? Give me just a few minutes alone here before we call in forensics.”

“Fine, Sir,” Montoya responded. “But… you don’t have to pretend like that. Not all of us are in the commissioner’s pocket, you know.”

“What?”

“Some of us think it’s okay… what you’re doing. Some of us think he’s okay, you know?”

“Well, um… yeah. Thanks Montoya.”

“Take all the time you need, Sir,” O’Hara chimed.

“Okay, come on,” Montoya said as she lead the other two to the far side of the alleyway. Gordon sniffed, thinking on what she’d said.

What I’m doing… They think it’s okay… What I’m doing… How would they know what it’s like? They don’t talk to him. They don’t have Grogan’s goons trying to break their legs at every turn.

A huge object suddenly hurled down from above and crashed down onto the road behind him. Gordon jumped for a moment, but then steadied himself, realizing Batman had arrived.

Out of nowhere, he arrives. The slap of his boots and the dark beat of that big, black cape. I always try to stay cool, but I’m starting to realize… sometimes he even scares me… Just a bit.

“I guess this leaves no doubt,” Batman said. “It is a serial killer at work.”

“Yeah,” Gordon responded, still on-edge from the scare. “And I’m sick of it! No offense, but I don’t like the fact that this is becoming a habit – you and I staring down at the helpless victim of some maniac. What the hell?!... What is wrong with this city?”

“I wish I knew, Jim. I wish I knew.” Batman immediately leaned down next to the body and began inspecting the wound.

“Sorry for the outburst,” Gordon sighed. “Kitchen worker found her a couple of hours ago – inside that dumpster over there. It’s unusual, isn’t it? For a serial killer to take so many victims in such a short amount of time? I’m no expert criminal profiler, necessarily, but it’s unsettling.”

“Nothing is unusual in Gotham,” Batman said. “Not anymore… She appears to have been killed in the same manner as the others. Neck’s a mess. No blood… Her wrists and ankles were bound, it appears. Bruising and scratching… And the level of that bruising would indicate that she struggled quite a bit. Her heels and knuckles are badly scraped. She must have been tied down on a hard, rough surface.”

“The other victims had that as well,” Gordon said.

“Her clothes indicate she was picked up at a party… or a club. She’s partially undressed… Were the others sexually assaulted?”

“Not that we can tell. Partially undressed when we found them, like this one but, like I said, no DNA evidence of any kind.”
Batman returned to his feet.

“The repetitive nature of these crimes… it’s almost ritualistic. Hmm… The trash bins over there are nearly full, and this alley doesn’t appear to get much traffic. There are tire treads over here. They’re are too small for a garbage truck. Still, fairly wide set for an ordinary car.”

“I hadn’t even noticed,” Gordon said, leaning over the tire marks on the ground. “So faint, but you’re right.” Batman leaned over the treads and removed a small aerosol can from his belt. Carefully and methodically, he began spraying a substance from the can out onto the track. It came out like a sort of sticky goop, pooling over the track, and in a matter of seconds it had solidified into a rubber mold, which he quickly peeled up and placed in a pouch on the belt. Then, launching a grapple cable to the buildings above, he took off.

“I’ll be in touch,” he said as he disappeared. “This has to end.”

“Good luck,” Gordon called after him, as the other officers watched in awe.

Batman headed directly home for the Batcave, where he went hard at work on examining the mold of the tire tread. Notebook in one hand, and his computer running various computations on the angles of the tread, he frantically scribbled down what he could, trying to learn everything possible from the sample.

According to specs in the database, the vehicle’s axle width was just shy of a pickup truck, and too broad for a delivery van. Which leaves one choice… A hearse. Between this, the bite marks and the bloodletting, it’s hard to ignore the vampire fetishism. And the chemical residues found in the sample I took are a unique combination. A biochemical compound found mainly in exotic perfumes. And a neurotoxin used almost exclusively for animal sedatives… Animal sedatives and perfume in the ground?

“Sir,” Alfred said, approaching. “I do hate to interrupt you from playing with your chemistry set, but I need to remind you of a Wayne Foundation meeting this coming afternoon that you will need to conduct in place of Mr. Maddison.”

“Thanks, Alfred. I do want to only appear to be sleeping through that session. And to do that, I am going to need to grab a few winks beforehand.”

“And, conveniently, it is just your bedtime, Sir. Daybreak is nigh.”

*I can’t believe this,* Julie thought as she entered her penthouse with the sun only minutes away from rising. *I just spend the whole night spying on my boyfriend’s house. What’s happened to me? I never used to be like this.*

She clicked the light switch and yet again, the room remained dark.

*Oh no. Daddy’s loosened all the light bulbs again.*

Julie entered the room, and found the couch turned around from where it used to be, its back facing the windows outside.

*Why’s he got the couch all turned around like this – Oh.*

There on the couch, curled up under an extremely dirty sheet, lay Norman. He was grumbling and muttering as he slept, twitching restlessly. On the ground next to him was a bottle of rum, which
had half spilled out onto the hardwood floor.

Oh Daddy… This is so unlike him. He seems afraid of his own shadow these days. Or somebody else’s… Maybe it’s affecting me, as well. Maybe… in any event, I’ve got to get to bed. The sun’s coming up.

“Sleep well, Daddy,” she whispered as she moved on to her room. Norman was left alone, caught in his own nightmares, terrified. Terrorized.

This nightmare, he dreamt. Awake or asleep, drunk or sober, I can’t seem to escape. No matter how fast or how far I run. My legs are too short. I have no shoes. And still, it pursues me. Relentless… Unforgiving… There is no respite, no safe haven, from what I now know awaits me. Retribution! And reckoning! Vendetta! And vengeance! And it knows my name!

Rallstone Inc. One of Gotham’s oldest industries, it was originally a livestock purveyor.

Batman neared the old complex in the industrial district. It was the only place he could think of which would have the chemicals in its ground that were found on the tire. And as he approached, the sound of hushed voices ahead only confirmed his suspicions.

Over the years, the company diversified into a variety of ventures, all derived from their initial stock including cosmetics. Failure ensued and their factories were sold off. All but one, which remains broken and vacant. There are five figures ahead, gathering at the doorway. All wearing hoods. Time to work.

“Lonely night, bros,” one of them said to the others approaching. “You thrown’ down?” The approaching figures raised their hands and contorted them into a some sort of sign.

“Yeah, you got the claim. Wassup?”

“Dala sent us. Says she might need it tonight, and we should stand ready.”

The one at the door bobbed his head in understand and turned to the door, carefully unlocking the chains which fastened it shut.

“Yeah, yeah, we ready. We ready. If ya ask me, it isn’t ready that’s the quality in short supply. It’s follow through.” They entered the massive warehouse, and walked up to the only object which could be found inside. A shiny, black, hearse.

“Wha’chu mean?”

“I’m just sayin’… How long we been doing this Brotherhood thing? Three… four months now?”

“Two.”

“Whatever. Point is, I’m still one spin older every day. Now, I aint squeamish. Aint losin’ my nerve. And, yeah, it’s a helluva buzz – hearin’ em scream and all the rest. I’m even getting’ used to the taste! But that Monk… he sure is full of promises. The Demon’s Head says this an’ that – an’ I’m just getting’ tired a’ waitin’!”

“Yeah, I hear ya. Bu- wha-?!?”

Batman crashed through the crowd and began immediately incapacitating each and every thug in
the room. One by one, anger bubbling in his veins; he took them out until only one was left. The one who’d unlocked the door. Grabbing him by his hood, he dragged him on top of the hearse and slammed his head down against the windshield, sending a spider web of cracks spreading across the entire surface.

“Owe, man, that hurts!”

“I don’t care if that hurts,” Batman barked. “I am a master of pain and suffering and you’re my latest guinea pig! Now, who is the Monk?!”

Easy does it, Batman. He’s no good to me with a concussion.

“Wha-whaddaya mean? I don’t know-”

“You’re trying my patience! What is the Brotherhood? The Demon’s Head? Talk!”

Inside this abandoned warehouse, I tracked a hearse which I’m certain was used to transport the bloodless bodies of Gotham’s latest scourge. A mysterious killer who seemingly strikes with no concern for purpose or profit. I had assumed this was the work of a deranged longer. Never expected to encounter a posse of his cronies.

“Awe, man… that’s just my crew. You… you know… we’re like – like brothers!”

“Lies. Lies only serve to anger me. I heard you mention the victim’s screaming. And how you like it.” Batman slammed the man’s head down, lifted it and slammed it again. “Now tell me… Who is the Monk?”

“No! No… I – I can’t! I can’t-”

“Wrong. You can.” Batman lifted the man up and pulled him close. “You can also experience broken bones. Internal bleeding. Dislocated joints. Conditions I’m only too happy to share with you.”

“I… you… you don’t understand! You don’t… don’t know… don’t know what he… what he’d do to me…”

“And what makes you certain I won’t kill you?”

“Nah, man… I aint talkin’ about killin’. It’s… it’s worse than that. Far worse, man! Whoa!”

Batman punched the man in the face. And then again. And then again. And then, with blood splattered over his fists, he tossed the man aside, and stared down at him, moaning in pain.

What kind of monster instills such fear in his followers? Something far more frightening than Batman...

I had thought that an evening out with my friends might relieve my general malaise, Julie thought as she leaned on her elbow, her hand on her cheek, sitting between her two best friends in a nightclub. I haven’t seen Bruce in days. I’ve hardly even spoken to him over the phone. Unfortunately, Sharon and Crystal are both so privileged and pampered. It’s been nearly three hours and neither of them have even noticed I’m blue. That’s what you get making friends with supermodels, I suppose.

“So, I told him, I said, Excuse me? How am I supposed to live without my summers in Capri?”
Crystal giggled.

“Oh, I absolutely know what you mean,” Sharon returned. “I can’t help it if I just prefer Paris! There’s this little shoe shop there… I mean, it beats anything here in Gotham… Julie? You muttering over there? I gotta say, girl, you certainly don’t seem very with it tonight.”

“Heh, are you kidding,” Crystal said as she raised her brow. “She’s had it made since hooking up with that yummy Bruce Wayne! Talk about hitting the jackpot!”

“No,” Julie said. “In fact, I’m actually not doing so well… I’m… I’m worried about my dad. He’s really not been himself lately, and I just wish I could get him to seek out some… therapy or… counseling. I don’t know… But he’s just like both of your fathers, you know? Captains of industry, masters of their own fate. Prideful.”

“Such men are often in the most need of such help,” a sultry, foreign voice said from the bar. The three women turned and saw the voice coming from a woman watching them. She was dressed all in black, with black gloves running up her arms, and boots running to her hips. Her miniskirt was made of leather, and her top was a black mesh, showing off the dark bustiere underneath. A black cloak was wrapped over her shoulders, and she wore a wide brimmed hat with a black veil hanging over her eyes. Even her lipstick was black, and she spoke with a strange Eastern European accent.

“Unfortunately,” she continued. “They are often the least likely to ask for any assistance. I have seen it happen time and time again. I know this because my boyfriend is a private counselor to some of the country’s most influential men. You would be surprised at the depths of their fears. Such a position of power can often serve to leave one feeling lonely and vulnerable. They feel as if their responsibilities isolate them from the understanding of others. They are far too used to… to… How do you say it? Calling the shots?”

“Well, that certainly sounds familiar on my end,” Julie responded. “But I wasn’t really trying to broadcast my family problems.”

“Oh, my apologies. I did not mean to intrude. You just seemed to need someone to listen, so I listened,” the woman said as she removed her hat, revealing mahogany colored eyes drowning in dark eye makeup. “In my native country there are far too many secrets and, thus, far too much misery and despair. I realize we do not, in fact, know each other. But I would hate to have that happen to you.”

“No, it’s all right, I didn’t mean to… I’m Julie, by the way. Julie Maddison.” Julie shook the woman’s hand.

“Very pleased to meet you, Julie. I am Dala Vadim, and I am sorry to hear of your father’s troubles. You said he is behaving out of character? Is he withdrawing from the family members? Seemingly adrift in his day-to-day routines?”

“Jeez, it’s like you read my mind, Dala. And, yes, he’s all those things… and more. He… he had an… incident that seems to have broken his sense of personal security. I worry whether he’ll ever be his old self again.”

“Then he is very lucky to have a daughter as concerned and dedicated as you. What of your siblings?”

“I’m an only child. And my mother’s long passed. He’s just so stubborn…”

“Well, I’ve heard enough of this therapy session,” Crystal said as she grabbed her bag and headed out the door. “You ready, Shar?”
“You bet I am,” Sharon rolled her eyes and the two of them headed out. “Later Julie. Call us when you wanna have fun sometime!”

_Cold. Rude. But they don’t know any better_, Julie though as she waved her hand.

“Stubborn personality,” Dala nodded. “Another common trait. You should really convince your father to see Niccolai.”

“Is Niccolai your boyfriend?” Julie asked.

“Yes. His card…” Dala handed a business card to Julie which she read aloud.

“Discreet Consultation. Niccolai Tepes?”

“Yes, but it is pronounced _Tse-Pesh_. A very old name…”

The elevator doors opened to Maroni’s penthouse level. Maroni stood within the elevator and took a step out, followed closely by his two guards, and then turned heading toward his office.

“Can you believe the stem on that Irishman?” Maroni said as he began to unlock his office door. “He’s lucky I even let him keep his fifteen percent after that flack with the Welder’s Union. Give me that kinda lip again and I’ll take a welding torch to his freakin’ eyeballs.” He opened the door and immediately noticed three men standing behind his desk waiting for him.

“Sir,” the guards said, reaching for their weapons.

“What the heck is this bullsh- Oh.”

“That’s the trouble with you Sal,” one of the men behind the desk said as he stood up. “Always with the anger and spitfire.” With three scars running along the side of his face, a souvenir of Gotham’s current degeneration into chaos, and his unmistakable pencil mustache, the man was Carmine Falcone, accompanied by his own two guards.

“Carmine…” Maroni stuttered.

“You sound like my grandma’s teakettle half the time,” Falcone said. “You need to learn to relax, Sally. Man sounds off all the time like that, people start to ignore what he says.”

“What’re you do-”

“You know how I like things to run smoothly, don’t you, Sal?” Falcone cut him off. “And you know I like my capos to look after their own dealings.”

“But, Carmine! What are y-”

“Will you _stop_ interrupting me, Sal? Bad enough we got freaks in Halloween costumes doggin’ our tail, and Dent sitting on his throne in the courthouse. Now I’ve gotta come all the way over here to clean up _your_ mess?”

“My mess?”

“Does the name _Norman Maddison_ ring a bell?”

“Maddison?!” Maroni stammered. “What’s _he_ got to do with this?”
“As you know, he’s a big player in the community. Lots of charities and whatnot. So when he calls to ask to meet with me, I see that as an opportunity. Have to take every opportunity we can get under the new DA. But then, he shows up and tries to pay me back money that he says he owes to you!”

“That he-? You gotta be freakin’ kidding me!”

“Do I look like I’m telling you a joke over here?! I don’t need to know what the deal is between you two, but I don’t want it to cross my path again. I don’t want to have to come all the way over here to visit you again, Sally. We clear on that?”

“Yeah, Carmine,” Maroni sighed like a child who’d just been scolded by his mother. “We’re clear. Consider it done.”

Julie approached her penthouse door. She was light in her steps and felt a weight lifted from her heart after the night’s discussion she’d had with Dala.

*Daddy would have a fit if he knew I spent the evening discussing his problems with a virtual stranger. Still, it was so nice to have someone to confide in. And a woman, at that. I mean, Bruce listens, but he seems too distracted half the time. He’s just as consumed as Daddy. Maybe Bruce could see Dala’s boyfriend too.*

She pressed her key into the lock and twisted it, but it didn’t turn. It didn’t budge at all. She tried again, but it still didn’t move. Just as she was wondering what she could do, the door swung open, and inside stood her family’s butler, looking rather annoyed and even concerned.

“Oh, Thomas,” Julie said. “I don’t know what was wrong. I couldn’t get my key to w-”

“Your father has had all the locks changed, Miss Julie,” he said.

“He what?!” she gasped as she entered the house and closed the door. “Why?”

“He even had the locksmith install a lock on the door to his study,” Thomas informed her. “He seems very uneasy of late.” She walked passed him and tried the study door, but he was right. It was. So she lightly began to knock on it.

“Thank you, Thomas. I… Daddy? Daddy, it’s me! Please open the door?” Slowly, the door clicked and opened just slightly. Norman peeked out, looking more harried than she had seen him yet.

“Julie,” he exclaimed. “Julie! Wh-what is it?! Are you okay?!”

“Of course, I just… I just wanted to check on you.”

“I’m fine, Darling! I’m fine! Just… busy, that’s all! I, uh, I’m afraid I can’t come out right now though!” And then he flew back in and slammed the door, making sure to lock it from the inside.

“But Daddy…! You—” Julie hung her head in worry.

*He needs help. Even if he won’t ask for it himself.*

*Despite the dangers of this new and elusive enemy,* Batman pondered as he sat in the cockpit of the Batmobile, now outfitted with the fins on the rear fender that Alfred had previously mocked. *The
war is still being fought in the trenches. I mustn’t lose sight of another hazard that threatens to poison the streets of Gotham in a chemical flood. The heroin. Sal Maroni’s missing shipment – over nine hundred kilos of undiluted filth. Users. Suppliers. Dealers. The dope trade is very much alive in Gotham. Still, I find no trace of this vast and vagrant reserve… It’s an illicit cache that any junkie or pusher would have little luck in concealing. These frustrated efforts only serve to draw my attention back to this mysterious Brotherhood… The Monk, and his vicious homicides. The thugs near the hearse mentioned “The Demon’s Head.” I’ve heard this phrase before. While training with Master Kirigi, years ago, he and his student, Lady Shiva, often made references to “The Demon” and its “Head.” Interesting correlation, but the sheer distance makes me doubt a connection. The corpses drained of blood, and the savage neck wounds… and, again, a lack of physical evidence. Gordon said the hearse revealed not so much as a stray hair, and was tagged with a phony out-of-state plate. Aside from that, and a few illegal weapons charges, the police were forced to release most of the “Brotherhood” again… It all points to a conclusion… a word that my analytical mind cannot yet accept. More likely, it’s another melodramatic psychopath – one who thinks that Gotham is now a safe haven for “creatures of the night.” A cult perhaps. Again, I hate to consider the possibility. Have I somehow… inspired this?
It was a rainy afternoon. Dark clouds rumbled overhead, and mist seeped in from the surrounding area, blanketing the scenery in mystery. The weatherman had said it would be rainy for the rest of the week. It was supposed to even rain on Thanksgiving. Nevertheless, Julie had braved the weather and driven to a house on the very edge of The Palisades. It was enormous, surrounded by woods and large, grey stones. It was, without much doubt in her mind, the largest house Julie had ever seen, resembling an enormous castle more than anything else.

I don’t believe this… and I thought Wayne Manor was big! This must be the old Rallstone “Castle.” Never quite realized that it actually was a castle. I mean, it actually even has a moat! A moat! Wonder whatever became of the Rallstone Family after the old man, J. Thomas Rallstone, passed away? Obviously, too little business savvy coupled with too much… excess! Didn’t even know this place was still standing, much less on the market…

It had a moat, ramparts, towers, spires, and just about anything else one could expect from a castle. It was hard to believe it was only a few blocks away from Bruce’s house. Even harder to believe it was still within Gotham City limits, what with all the woodlands surrounding it. The Rallstones had built it once upon a time with the money from their livestock corporation. They had eventually diversified, but the company completely failed and the family went entirely bankrupt after J. Thomas Rallstone passed away. In fact, the Rallstone’s company had been involved with many of the bad trades and business dealings that gave rise to Gotham’s economic depression which nearly ruined the city about three decades ago.

It looked scary, surrounded by such odd weather, but Julie drove straight up to the front steps, and then climbed them to the enormous stone doors. An iron knocker crafted in the shape of a wolf’s head sat in its center, and she struggled to raise its massive handle. But she eventually succeeded and let it knock, hollow and dull throughout the foundations of the building. Finally, the door began to slide open, and standing behind it was Dala, wearing a nearly entirely see-through black, mesh dress.

*European fashion...* Julie thought as she threw a smile on her face and greeted the woman.

“Hello,” she said.

“Ah, Julie,” Dala grinned back, popping her hip out and raising one of her arms as though she were showing off the prize in a gameshow. “Nice to see you again. No trouble finding us?”

“Hardly! May I come in?”

“Certainly,” Dala said, beckoning Julie in and closing the door behind her.

“Sure is a grand house,” Julie said, her voice echoing through the massive stone halls.

“I know. It can all be quite intimidating, yes?”

“You said it! I mean, this place needs its own zip code!”

“It is very large, yes,” Dala said as she lead Julie through the corridors of the building. “Still, Niccolai says it is perfect for a life of complete reflection. Free from all the trappings and distractions of a modern life. He says it allows him to focus on the… wisdom that escapes most other men.”
“Well I… I guess that does make sense,” Julie lied. “Plus, it’s got the whole goth thing going for it. Very cool.”

“Ah, you will see for yourself,” Dala said as she pulled a large door open and revealed a room in which sat a rug, a great deal of lit candles, a table, and two enormous armchairs. Standing among them was a man, with pale white skin, dark hair running down to his shoulders, and eyes of maroon, wearing a long, red robe that ran all the way to the floor.

“You must be Miss Maddison,” he said, bowing and grinning. “Welcome to this place, my humble home. Please, enter freely and of your own will. May you find the peace and comfort you seek.”

“Um, I… thanks,” she said, taking her seat in one of the chairs.

_Daddy’s never ever going to go for this…_

“On the phone,” Niccolai said as he took his seat in the chair across from her and motioned for Dala to prepare some tea that sat ready on a stand in the corner of the room. “On the phone, you mentioned that your father is a wealthy and powerful sort of man. I have had many such clients. Therefore, I understand how difficult this must be for you… and for him.”

_But his voice is so rich and sonorous. His eyes, so deep and magnetic. The combination is almost hypnotic._

“Come,” he continued. “We had agreed that this would be a getting-to-know-you session. So let’s sit and do just that. You seem to need an ear, and I shall love to listen.”

_Maybe he can help Daddy after all… He certainly has manners._

“Well, I… I just hope this isn’t… I just don’t want this to all be a waste of your time,” Julie finally stammered out. “I have no idea whether I can convince my father to come see you or not.”

“You said he has grown reclusive, no?”

“Oh, lord, he practically barricades himself in his study. Surely _that_ can’t be healthy.”

“That all depends. I, myself, have not left the confines of these stone walls since moving in. But if your father is seeking refuge out of _fear_ or desperation, then you have just cause to worry. How long has he been like this?”

“A month maybe?” Julie said. “But it’s been getting progressively worse… and really quickly, too. He… He recently had a _legal_ problem, which he confided in me, but that’s all over now. It just seemed to fracture him, though. I mean, I forgave him, right from the start. But he… just can’t seem to get over it.”

_The words come easier than I had thought they would. For some strange reason, I’m finding comfort in all of this._

“… and so that’s basically it,” Julie concluded. “I think he needs help, but getting him to admit it is quite another story. What do you suggest?” Dala returned with a tray of tea and poured a cup for Julie, handing it to her.

“My special blend,” Dala said.

“Thank you,” Julie returned as she took a sip.
“It may take some time,” Niccolai said as he pressed his fingers together. “But you impress me as a very capable person. I’m certain you will find a way to convince him of his… need. Thank you, Dala, for the tea… Tell me, Julie, your father’s business… is he the majority stockholder?”

“He works for a charity,” Julie explained. “Or… several… there’s no stock in it, at least that I can figure. But there’s money, and he has had full control of it. Loves it. Like I said, he’s a man of great convictions, my father. Which is another way of saying he’s stubborn.”

“Yes.”

“He’s always… always wanted the best for me… and now… now, I jus-just want the… the best… best for him… I’m… sorry, I… I suddenly feel… woozy…”

“Oh my dear,” Niccolai said, leaning forward in the chair. “You also need respite from your cares. Relax, Julie. Just relax…”

_Everything is so bright, Julie thought. Lights. So many lights. I hear thunder, and also music. There are voices. “Why did you let her go? The Brotherhood…” “As my influence over her grows, she will gain access to his fortunes and wealth…” “And the Brotherhood?” “Then The Brotherhood can ravish her as one.” What are these voices? “Julie? Julie? Hello? Julie?!”_

“Y-yes?” Julie responded, looking around and seeing that she was in the backseat of the Rolls, sitting next to Bruce. He was in a suit and she was wearing a tight strapless dress with a fur wrapped around her shoulders.

“Julie?”

_I keep feeling like I’m passing out, Julie thought. Dreaming when I’m awake. Was that castle a dream? Am I on a date?! With Bruce?!_

“What, uh, what is it, Bruce?” she asked.

“Well, you’ve just been sort of distracted all evening,” Bruce said. “I thought you would enjoy the ballet. Or just being together… Is everything okay? Are you feeling ill?”

“Oh! No, Darling, I’m… I’m fine. I just… I have a lot on my mind. What with finals approaching and all. And I… have had a bit of a headache all day.”

“Should I take you home? We don’t have to-”

“No… No, I told you… I’m fine. I’m fine. This headache… I just can’t seem to concentrate you know? Zoning out. And I feel… it’s just so hot in here.” She unwrapped the fur and pushed her hair back behind her shoulders, letting the air hit her upper chest and neck.

“Julie?” Bruce said, staring horrified at her neck.

“Ah! That feels much better.”

“Julie, your neck,” Bruce said, moving in and seeing that she had a large, ragged, scabby cut on the side of her throat.

“Oh yeah,” she said absently. “I fell on the stairs… Bruce, I’m tired… I need some sleep, I think.” Julie fell asleep on the ride to her penthouse, and Bruce had to carry her to her room in his arms. It
was difficult bringing her in. The lights in her penthouse had all been disconnected, and he had to wait for the butler to open the door, but she was eventually tucked safely away in bed.

After leaving Julie at her home, Bruce went immediately home and got to work, preparing for the night ahead.

**Vampire**, he thought as he suited up with a host of makeshift tools he had put together in the past two hours. *Obviously, this is not a word, nor a concept, nor a deduction to which I come lightly. It is only my fear for Julie and her safety that drives me to such fantastic speculation. Still, “when you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”* Popularized by a writer of fantasies and a believer in fairies and the like… but wise, still. I should have been more caring. I should have spent more time with her lately. I have no idea what she’s mixed herself up in… Vampire legends exist in every culture, yet certain aspects of this case conform to the classic European variety. If I am to combat such a menace, I will need extraordinary weaponry. Even if it is just someone with a flamboyance for the macabre… can’t be too careful. I would have thought ten foot genetically engineered monsters were fantasy two months ago, but that turned out to be a reality… Garlic and religious icons seem to be mainly defensive in the lore. Only one common component seems to harm the creatures.

Batman loaded his newly molten-wrought silver batarangs into the belt, as Alfred watched and shook his head.

“I suppose it is safe to assume that *this* is what became of the candlesticks that have gone missing from the West Dining Room?”

“Sorry, Alfred. As usual, I have little time to waste and, as to the job at hand, I needed the purest silver I could find.”

Julie opened her eyes to the darkness of her room around her. Her throat was dry, her hair felt brittle, and every single breath tasted like illness. Eyelids heavy, she rolled over and picked up the phone, dialing a number that came to her as though by remote control.

There were fleeting moments of coherency here and there, but mostly all she felt was a soul-shattering weariness which let all her other aims and desires fall to the wayside. All she could hear was the sibilant, solitary voice that commanded her every action.

“Hello,” the voice said on the other end of the telephone line.

“H-hello…?” Julie responded.

“Good evening, my dear Miss Maddison. I trust you are feeling well?”

“Yes... yes, I-”

“It is time to summon you, Miss Maddison. We are to have another one of our… sessions. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I-”

“You will return to the castle. You will leave as soon as you are able.”

“Yes I... I will…” Julie dropped the phone, letting it clamber to the ground and break. She rolled out of bed, occasionally grabbing her head to steady herself, and, in her underwear, began
shambling toward the door. There was no denying that voice. She was like a dog, bred to obey. Any objection was like a leaf lost in a hurricane.

“Don’t… wait up, Daddy…” she muttered as she headed out the door. From the ledge out on the balcony outside, Batman peered through the window.

*It’s a dangerous gambit, letting Julie lead me to my enemy. But it’s the best lead I have.*

Once she had exited the penthouse, he turned and headed for the roof’s edge, launching a line to swing down on.

*It’s after three in the morning. Where could she possibly be going? If she’s on foot, I can shadow her easily enough. If not, the bug I placed on her car will lead the way. The legends speak of a vampire’s preternatural control over their victims. But why is she even still alive? Why hasn’t she ended up like all the others? And how did she even fall prey to such a fate?* Batman stepped off the edge and disappeared out of view.

On the other side of the window, peering around the wall, crouched Norman Maddison, watching with horrified eyes, his face and hands pressed firmly against the glass. Completely disregarding his daughter’s behavior, or that she’s even left at all, he watched Batman glide away.

*He knows my name,* Norman frantically thought, staring out at the city. *He knows my name, and as I feared… he knows where I live!*

“I’m warning you Jensen,” Gordon shouted, aiming his gun at the three officers who were holding his family captive before him. “This has nothing to do with them! I mean it! If you harm them in any way, I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you all!”

“James, don’t,” his wife said softly as one of the officers pressed a knife to her throat.

“See, Jimbo?” Jensen laughed. “Now, your little lady here… she knows how to behave! That’s a lesson you could learn, Jimbo. You and your nighttime buddy.”

“James, what’s he…? I thought-?”

“Shut up!”

“Dad,” Barb said, “You work with him!?”

“All right, that’s enough out of you,” Jensen said, shooting her in the back. Gordon went breathless as he watched her fall lifelessly to the ground. His wife screamed, blaming him for what had happened.

“How about your little boy, good guy,” Jensen said, walking over to Briggs who was holding the baby in his arms. “Think he knows how to behave?” He poked the baby, and it started screaming and crying.

“Jensen, don’t!”

“Awe, now,” Jensen laughed. “See that? Kid’s too much like his old man. Doesn’t know how to behave, or when to keep his mouth shut.” She shoved the gun up into the baby’s mouth, pressing it to the back of his throat, gagging him, and pulled the trigger.
“No!” Gordon shouted, opening his eyes and sitting up with a start. Sweat ran down his face, and it became immediately apparent that he had been dreaming. It was all a dream. But his heart was still racing, and his worries were still alive and well.

“What’s the matter?” Barbara asked as she rolled over next to him. “You all right?”

“Yeah,” Gordon said, sliding out of bed and reaching for his robe. “It was just a bad dream… Go back to sleep.” He tied on the robe and carefully crept out of the bedroom and into the hallway of their tiny apartment.

*Just a bad dream… Doesn’t stop me from going into little James’ room and checking that he’s still all in one piece…*

He headed down, peeking in, and saw his son peacefully sleeping in the crib. Down the hall, the lights were still on in Barb’s room, and Gordon went to check in on her.

“Barb?” he said. “It’s nearly four in the morning. What are you doing?”

She was at her desk, hunched over her personal computer.

“Oh, hi,” she said pleasantly, turning around. “I’m just reading.”

“Reading?”

“Yeah, I’m on the library’s network,” she explained. “I can download scans of newspapers and books and so on. *Crime and Punishment.* I’m almost done.”

“Don’t you have school in the morning?”

“Sure.”

“How will you stay awake?”

“Coffee.”

“Coffee? You drink coffee?”

“Sure.”

“Since when?”

“Always.”

“No you haven’t.”

“Well, relatively. I’m a teenaged girl, remember? Two years constitutes well over one tenth of my life. Weeks feel like years and months feel like eternity.” She smiled knowingly, and Gordon couldn’t help but smile back.

“Your mother would kill me if I let you stay up.”

“Lots of people stay up late. Studies show that people have been conditioned throughout history to work during the day and sleep at night, but those who break the cycle and take advantage of both are more likely to be successful, and have higher intelligence levels.”

“Yes, but you won’t be able to keep up with your athleticism without sleep. We were counting on
going for that gymnastics scholarship eventually, weren’t we?”

“Batman stays up all night, and I’d assume he’s in pretty good athletic shape. Seems doable to
me.”

“Yeah…” Gordon said. “I suppose…”

“Do you see him anymore, Dad? Batman, I mean.”

“We all do,” Gordon lied. “When we have night shifts.”

“Huh… cool,” she said.

“Well, goodnight, Barb. I’m going back to bed.”

“Night, Dad. Thanks for caring about me!”

Gordon walked back down the hall, feeling tense, and worried.

_Batman. If Barb knew I worked with him… had a radio that calls him whenever I want… I can
hardly imagine. And if my wife knew… she’d have a fit. But, of course, I don’t tell them a thing.
Can’t implicate them in what I’ve been doing… The company I’ve been keeping… Dammit! It’s too
risky! We had to up and move to this little apartment because of him! It has to end! I can’t do this!_

_The old Rallstone Castle, Batman thought as he watched Julie enter through its massive front
doors. In the terms of these massive estates, my neighbor. I had thought this place long abandoned,
decrepit by any description. But it all fits. The hearse was housed in a former Rallstone Inc
warehouse. And what better haven in which to conduct such nefarious activities? Someplace so
secluded and remote… After all, I ought to know._

He moved quickly, and silently, trying to get into the castle before any harm befell Julie. Rounding
corners and ducking under archways, he snuck around, looking for a good entrance other than the
main doors.

_Even by the Wayne family standards, the Rallstones were sinfully wealthy. My further
investigations uncovered evidence of bootlegging, shady land acquisitions, and even farther back,
slave trafficking. It’s no wonder that they’re downfall nearly ruined the entire city’s economy when
I was young. This stronghold is immense. Labyrinthine. What dark secrets do its stone walls
contain?_

A growl came from behind, and Batman spun around to see two grey-furred wolves staring at him.
They snarled, and one barked as they approached.

_Julie likes to tease me about how little I know of the latest popular trends. Still, I doubt that
keeping timber wolves as household pets has recently come into vogue. Unlike most wild animals,
these two don’t seem the least wary of a human presence. They seem trained. Trained to attack
intruders. They rapidly circle me, seemingly eager for a taste of my flesh._

He removed a tiny respirator mask from his belt and held it to his face. Then, he tossed a few gas
pellets forward, which landed directly between the wolves and began spraying gas in all directions.
The wolves bounded forward through the gas, however, snarling and biting as they went.

_In the open like this, the gas should dissipate. Still, should slow them down just a bit._
He twisted his body, kicking out with one leg and lashing out with his fist in the opposite direction. His kick landed in the ribs of one wolf, sending it falling back, while the punch similarly knocked the second wolf a few feet back. Then, without a single moment to spare, he ran forward, pinning the wolf down with his knee, and tying three of its legs together like a calf-roper.

*One down.*

But no sooner had he thought this, than the second wolf lunged at him from behind, biting its jaws down on his leg. Batman growled in pain, and frantically slapped the wolf in the face. It didn’t let go. He tried getting a grip on its jaws, that it was no use. He slammed his fist down on its head, but the blow only hammered the teeth deeper into his leg. With jaws like a vice and a skull like granite, Batman reached into his belt and removed a can of pepper spray. It shot out with a loud hiss, and the wolf instantly released its grip and stumbled back.

*Temporarily blinded it with the pepper spray. The beast is enraged. Confused. But it can still smell the blood from my leg.*

The wolf rolled on the ground in a frenzy, and then returned to its feet and jumped forward. Batman quickly unfastened his cape, and swung it out, wrapping it over the wolf’s head as it pounced. With the wolf unable to see, Batman grabbed it.

*No choice,* he thought, as he grabbed it with one hand on its haunches and the other up its back. With all his might he contracted the muscles on his arms, and twisted his body, swinging the wolf up into the air and slamming him up against the stone wall. Then he twisted the other direction, spinning it around and slamming its other end against the wall. It yelped, and he slammed it on the other side one more time, this time feeling the wolf’s entire frame give way with a crack.

*Finally, the spine gives in.*

He gasped for breath, removing the respirator and leaning against the wall. His leg was bleeding pretty badly, but he didn’t believe the animals were rabid. Either way, Julie needed him. Tearing a piece off of his cape, he wrapped it tightly around the wound, and then fastened whatever was left of his cape back on.

*I’m lucky the wolf’s bite missed my femoral artery. Still, it has taken precious minutes to get the bleeding under control. Time that Julie might not have to spare.*

Quickly, he headed into an open door on the west side of the house, entering a dark tunnel ahead. It led to a set of stairs, which ran down deep under the castle, into what appeared to be total darkness.

*As expected, the castle appears to have been tenantless for years. The stone walls are dank and musty. Who would’ve built such an anachronistic monastery? What!?*

The stairs shuddered, and suddenly Batman felt gravity yank him forward. Soon, he was tumbling down a slippery slide. The stairs had retracted. It was a trap.

*The stairs! Ugh, too slick to grab hold!*

He tumbled down and suddenly, there was no ground beneath him at all. He fell, down into a large, square, pit.

*A containment cell. No windows or doors. The stones shudder…*

He watched with wonder, as the sound of machinery and gear works hummed from behind the walls, and a series of large spikes slowly poked through the crevices in the stonework. The gears
kept grinding away though, and the walls both began to slide inward. It was as if the room was imploding.

_The walls! They’re closing in!_

Batman desperately began pushing against the walls but nothing helped. A voice resonated from up above.

“It’s too late. The sealing stone has dropped into place. The observation mirrors are blocked. Whoever broke the wolf fell victim to his or her own curiosity. The fifth stair is a trigger that collapses the ramp. The room below holds only death.”

“I wish I could see,” a woman’s voice said with a thick accent. “I want to see.”

“Can you hear that deep rumbling? The counterweights are in motion and there is no escape. It will take hours for the walls to finally retract. Whoever’s down there will be ground into pulp… A shame, really. Such a waste of blood… Dala, escort her out and then return to me. She needs to get home and retrieve the passwords and account numbers.”

“Yes… this way…”

The voices disappeared, while Batman continued frantically trying to escape.

_Drainage grate is stuck tight on the floor. Small chance of getting lucky twice with that… Spikes inching closer. Any mechanism strong enough to move stone walls will be all but unstoppable. Need to slow them at least... Lucky I didn’t cast all the batarangs in silver._

He took out two of his larger models of batarangs and wedged them in the space between the wall and the floor. They clicked into place and scraped along the floor, slowing the progress of the wall, but not stopping it.

_Buy me some time, at least. A stone cap is blocking the hole I fell through. I could climb up the spikes to the ceiling and push, but it’s likely too heavy. Not enough leverage. Need to blast out._

Climbing up the spikes like rungs of a ladder, he removed a small case of gel from his belt that he had carried with him ever since he had been caught in Strange’s cell. He began running it along the sealing stone, and then hurried back down, scraping his body along the spikes on the way, tearing his armor to shreds.

_The room is small for this amount of plastique, but it’s going to have to do. The walls continue to grind. Have to take the chance, and pray I don’t blow my eardrums out._

With a loud explosion, shrapnel flew in all directions, showering him in shards of debris. The tips of the spikes were touching him now, and he knew he had to get moving quickly.

_Dizzy... Concussion? Doubt it. Ears are ringing. Good sign... Focus.... No time! Need to get out now!_

He removed his grapple gun and shot up until the line went taught. Quickly, he pulled himself up and out of the pit, the spikes scraping him and tearing his cape into tatters the entire way out.

_Lucky I didn’t lose a leg there, _Batman thought as he looked down at his body, oozing blood all over himself. _Lost plenty of other flesh though. And blood. I feel... and look... like I’ve been through a cheese grater. Can’t give up... Can’t give in... Julie is in danger..._
Slowly, he stumbled back out of the tunnel, and looked out into the main courtyard where Julie had parked her car. However, there was no car to be seen. It was gone. He had heard the voices saying that “she” needed to go back home. Hopefully that was Julie. Hopefully this was a good sign.

*Car’s gone… Need to check on her safety. Can’t confront whoever… or whatever is inside… Not yet. Need… patching up…*

The sun was only twenty minutes away from showing its first rays of light over the horizon when Batman arrived at the Maddisons’ penthouse. Hanging from a rope on the outside wall, he peered in through the window of Julie’s bedroom.

There she was, curled up in bed, though she hardly looked peaceful. Whatever had happened to her within the castle, she had no doubt lost even more blood. Her hair was wild, and she tossed and turned relentlessly. But still, she was alive.

*Stupid of me,* Batman thought. *She could have… She could have died tonight. Must be more careful… Thank goodness, she appears to be sleeping. Can’t afford… go inside… wouldn’t… oh!*

His fingers slipped on the line and he fell, luckily catching his arm on the edge of the balcony. Using all his strength, and literally gushing blood through his makeshift bandages he had fashioned in the Batmobile out of what gauze and tape he had, he pulled himself up onto the balcony and caught his breath.

*No good. Wounds reopened… need patching up. Had to… had to make sure… she’s okay. He jolted, as he heard the faint beep in his cowl indicating that Gordon needed him. Need patching up… But there’s one more stop… Have to help Officer Gordon.* He attached a line to the edge, and then the other end to his belt, and slowly lowered himself over the edge and to his vehicle below.

On the other side of the window, Norman stood, his heart nearly pounding right out of his chest, a gun held shakily in his hands. The entire penthouse was practically fogging up from his panicked breath. And slowly, tears began to stream from his eyes.

“This has to stop,” he mumbled through his heavy breaths and crying. “This has to stop.”

*He’s never taken this long to respond before,* Gordon thought as he waited. *Or perhaps I’ve just grown to expect too much. I simply push that button and expect him to show…*

“How! I was beginning to think that you’d taken the night off.”

“Crime never rests, Jim,” Batman said. “What are you doing at headquarters so early in the morning? Isn’t this your night off? You should be at home.”

“Yeah, I should’ve known – Whoa! Good Lord! You’re – Are you… are you okay?” Gordon stared at Batman, bandaged together with bloody rags, a wound on nearly every surface of his body.

“I’m… I’ll be fine. Look, I don’t have time for this. Why did you summon me?”

“Because I can,” Gordon said, halfway bitter and halfway in reverence. “And that’s part of the problem. Look, I have no regrets for being part of this… campaign of yours. We both want the same results – to see Gotham cleaned of what ails it. It’s just that our methods differ.” He pulled
the radio transmitter out from his pocket and weighed it in his hands.

“Jim…”

“I’ve also got no illusions that what you do is vitally necessary… and effective. But I can’t sneak around in the shadows like this anymore. That’s your path. Not mine.” And with that he hurled the radio off of the building, sending it tumbling off into some back alleyway below.

“I see,” Batman said grimly.

“If I’m going to contact you in the future, it’s going to have to be something more aboveboard. Not so covert. Don’t ask me how, because, as of yet, I haven’t a clue… I’m sorry. It’s just my family. I don’t mean to—”

“You don’t have to explain,” Batman cut him off. “You have a family to consider. I understand that. Any further news on our bloodless murder victims?”

“Not much. We did finally manage to ID them all via dental records. And, isn’t that some kind of sick irony? Anyway, they had only two things in common, and it’s not really much of a correlation. First, they were all out-of-towners – transplants to the city who had left home for a variety of reasons. I have to assume the killer chose them all for the lack of any local association. Secondly, and I tend to think this is mere coincidence… they were all only children. No siblings.”

“Only…?”

“Yes. Why? Do you think that’s significant—” Gordon looked back, but Batman was no longer with him. It had been a while since Batman had slipped away from him unseen.

Well… I guess I all but asked for him to keep his distance… huh. Never really noticed the view from up here. Even after all this time. Can really see quite far.

Bruce sat at the Batcomputer, shirtless, and in his pajama bottoms. Alfred stood at his side, dutifully stitching Bruce’s wounds closed and tightening new bandages and dressings. Bruce was reading a set of information on the screen regarding the Rallstones and their history, looking for any sort of lead he could find.

“I remember your father speaking about the Rallstone family,” Alfred said as he pulled the hooked needle out of Bruce’s skin, tightened the suture, and then stabbed it back in another time. “He said they were a stain on Gotham’s reputation and livelihood. Even blamed them and their circle for allowing so much corruption into the city in the first place. And of course, when Rallstone Inc went under, that started Gotham’s economic crisis.”

“A sign of things to come,” Bruce said, never removing his eyes from the screen. “Even though they’re no longer in power, their corrupting influence seems to have sunk into Gotham’s current legacy. The only surviving heir, Richard Rallstone, has been, by all accounts, the epitome of indolent young wealth. He traveled through Europe like it was his own personal playground, regardless of any political strifes. The rumors make it sound like a roving bacchanal. But when he reached the Asian border, he all but disappeared. That’s when their whole company flopped, seemingly out of nowhere.”

“Think there’s a connection?”

“It’s a hard correlation to ignore,” Bruce said. “His father was the last known residence of the
Rallstone Castle. He committed suicide when he ultimately had to declare bankruptcy. The castle’s deed is still listed under Richard’s name though… It’s interesting, Alfred.”

“What, Master Bruce?”

“The thugs from the Rallstone warehouse mentioned The Demon’s Head. It’s a phrase I had heard while training in Asia. Both references to The Demon and The Demon’s Head. I always wondered what it was, but my senseis never let it slip. Richard Rallstone, who has connections to both the castle and the warehouse, also had a mysterious trip to Asia. Seems like a stretch, but it’s interesting. I- owch! Easy there, Doc!”

“It’s not my fault you can’t seem to remain uninjured for more than a few days at a time, Sir.” Alfred said as he cut the suture thread and packed up his medical kit. “Now then, is that all? No other lacerations, lesions, contusions or abrasions that need tending to?”

“No, no… That’s fine. I think you got them all. Besides, I don’t know if I could stand anymore of these treatments!”

“Oh, don’t be such a baby, Bruce,” Alfred said as he took a large bandage and stuck it on top of the new stitches. “Here, let me bandage these.”

“Thanks, Alfred.”

“All in the line of duty, Sir,” Alfred said, helping Bruce put on his robe.

“But the question still remains, who – and what – is this character who has apparently taken residence inside the Rallstone Castle? If it is, in fact, Richard Rallstone, have his hedonistic travels left him with a horrible and bloodthirsty psychosis?”

“In any case, real or imagined, both vampires and Gotham’s other creature of the night must sleep during the daytime. You really need to rest up those wounds, Sir.”

“Or has he actually fallen prey to some curse or condition that exists outside the rational, known world?”

“Sir…”

“Alright, Alfred. Alright. I’ll go to bed.”
“Daddy…?” Julie gurgled groggily as she stumbled down the stairs in her bathrobe, itching at the enormous scab on the side of her neck, which was becoming more and more irritated and infected by the minute. “Daddy… are you h-here? Daddy, I – can’t believe I slept so long…”

Norman waited at the bottom of the stairs, his eyes wide as if they’d been nailed open. The skin around them was nearly black at pitch, looking bruised and dead.

_I have always been a man of my word_, Norman thought, puffing his chest out as he breathed in. _I have always thought of myself as a man who lives up to his responsibilities. No matter how distasteful the consequences may be._

“I’m… I’m in here, Darling,” he said, too wrapped up in his own thoughts to notice how little his daughter was paying attention. “I’m glad you’re finally awake. I have something to discuss with you. Something that’s vitally important!”

“I’m j-just so… so cold!… So cold… Still tired,” Julie nearly gargled the words out as she collapsed on the couch next to her father, ignoring him as he spoke. Though he took no attention. He was ignoring her as well. They were both existing in their own minds, alone.

“Darling… I know I… I haven’t been an honest man lately… Not as honest with you as I should have been, anyway.”

“It’s so bright… Can’t we? Can’t we draw the shades?” Julie shielded her face with her hands.

“You have to understand, this isn’t easy for me. Lord knows, I’ve been ashamed of what I did, but, now… now I find myself – Lord help me – forced into action that might… might ultimately prove dangerous! Disastrous!”

“Daddy, I don’t… Wha-what are you talking ab-”

“I know I am a man of principle… and of compromise! But this situation has proven unyielding, and it demands an end! Here…” Norman shoved a handful of crumpled documents into Julie’s lap, and then cradled her forcefully in his arms.

“What… what’s th-?”

“It’s a copy of my will. Along with vital information in regard to my various holdings, trusts, and accounts – along with all the necessary passwords. Oh, my dear… If for some reason, I never get to see – nor hold you again… remember me as a man of my word. Remember… your father dearly loved you!” He stood up, taking in a deep breath, and strode purposefully to the door, opening it and stepping halfway out before turning and looking back at her longingly.

“So… you’re leaving?” Julie’s words were barely conscious.

“Yes,” Norman said. “Now I’ve – I’ve got to go! I have further preparations to handle, and I must steel myself for the task that awaits.”

_Saying this possible goodbye to her is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Now, I must go confront the second hardest._

‘’Kay, Daddy,” Julie said, her eyes nearly floating off in different directions as she sat there,
crumpled up, holding the wad of legal documents in her hands. “G’bye, Daddy…”

Niccolai lay in a coffin, his arms folded, and his eyes closed. He was meditating somewhere between sleep and wake when Dala entered the chamber, her stiletto boots echoing in the hallways. She leaned down to his face, licking his neck before speaking.

“Niccolai,” she said softly. “She has returned, just as you said she would. And this time I think she has completed the task.”

“Excellent,” he hissed, opening his eyes and sitting up. “Maddison’s fortune – now at our fingertips. Where is she?”

“Waiting in the main hall,” Dala said.

Niccolai leapt gracefully from his coffin bed, and walked over to an adjacent coffin where a red article of clothing lay in wait. He lifted it up, and pulled it over his head. Matching his crimson, red robes, the cloth was something of a hooded mask. Similar to those worn by the Klu-Klux-Klan – only blood-red – it had two eyeholes, and a golden image of a skull patched onto the forehead.

“This is a moment I have waited for, for over thirty years,” he said tenderly through the horrible mask. “I, the grand high monk, am about to take my flock and cover all of Gotham.”

He hastily moved down the darkened halls, until he reached the entrance where Julie Maddison stood, swaying to and fro, still in her bathrobe, holding the wad of papers in her hand.

“So, Miss Maddison,” the Monk said. “What brings you all the way out here again? Is your father still well?”

“He…” Julie’s words barely came through her mouth, she spoke them so lazily. “He gave me… gave me… what you – what you wanted… gave me…”

The Monk swiftly, greedily, snatched the papers out from Julie’s hands and began pouring over them, taking in every detail he could.

“I must confess, I’m surprised at the ease with which you obtained this information,” he chuckled. “I wasn’t expecting you to retrieve it quite so soon. Men such as your farther are usually notoriously tight-lipped about their business dealings… even with their loved ones. Are you certain these figures are accurate?”

“Yes… he, he… he gave them to me… di-didn’t ask… Se’s up to… he’s up to something dangerous!… So-”

“Excellent! Indeed, these do seem legitimate. Enough out of you, then!” He snapped his fingers and Julie suddenly crumbled to the floor, unconscious, with her eyes frozen open and drool steadily streaming down her lips.

“Is it true, then?” Dala asked. “We have the necessary funds?”

“Yes. Apparently so, dear Dala,” the Monk cackled. “Funds and infrastructure. And thus, I’m afraid the lovely Miss Maddison has only one function she can yet serve for us… We must summon the brotherhood! And let’s attire our guest of honor in something more… fitting for the occasion. Thirty years ago, The Demon tried to swallow this city and remove its filth from the globe. Now, we can finally strike… Now, I can finally finish the job.”
“I hardly find one singular day to be a sufficient rest period, Sir,” Alfred protested as he followed Batman briskly through the Batcave. Bruce had already suited up and was about to enter the Batmobile when Alfred had burst inside. Alfred had apparently expected Bruce to continue resting, but upon finding his room empty at sundown, the butler knew he had to enter the cave and stop him. “You’re wounds-”

“Are of the flesh, Alfred. I’ll suffer through them. But that’s nothing compared to what I’ll endure if Julie falls prey to whatever is in Rallstone Castle. No matter what lives in, or haunts that place, I’ve got to stop it! If I’m not already too late…”

“…Very well then,” Alfred said, noting a uncharacteristic tremor in Bruce’s voice as he spoke about Julie. “At least allow me to provide some medication to make your night easier.”

“I don’t want to be drowsy,” Batman warned.

“Woudn’t think of allowing it, myself,” Alfred said as he quickly rummaged through the nearby medical kit, eventually returning with three pills in hand. “Here. These should help hold you together, at least for tonight.”

“What are they?” Batman asked as he swallowed them down.

“One is an advanced coagulant. It should help keep you from bleeding – too much. The others are to dull the pain and make sure you stay alert.”

“Thanks, Alfred,” Batman said, climbing into the cockpit of his car. “If you don’t hear back from me tonight, call in a report to the police. Find Captain James Gordon. He’ll know what to do. And… tell Julie-”

“Yes, I understand,” Alfred responded. “Just… be careful…”

Batman slid down into his seat and watched the roof slide closed overhead. The console inside the cockpit lit up as he fastened his safety harness, and the engine roared to life. Pressing the pedal, ever so lightly, the car burst down into the runway he had paved in the cave, with its tires gripping the slippery ground as it rounded corners, avoiding stalagmites. Soon, the opening came into view. It was a sheet of water pouring down from the waterfall on the outside. Batman calmly pulled the throttle, and pressed a large red button on the steering mechanism. The jet turbine in the back boomed, exploding a burst of hot energy out the back as the car’s advanced hydraulics and suspension kicked up, literally launching the vehicle up into the air. It jumped over the gap at the caved entrance, crashing through the waterfall, and landed gracefully in the woods beyond.

Bruce had done his best in the past month to remodel the immediate woodland outside of the waterfall so that there would be enough room for the car to drive through, as well as a terrain which would not get too eroded or show obvious signs of his driving on it. Luckily, he only needed a small portion of this terrain to be resilient to his tires, because an access road to the wooded area below Wayne Manor was only a few yards off, which he had made sure to prevent drivers from reaching by strategically placing warning signs and other labels around to indicate that the road had been washed out and that drivers were going the wrong way. Speedily, the Batmobile cruised by the signs on the access road and finally burst out onto a maintenance road, which ran along the water pipes and power lines straight into downtown Gotham. In time, he would have to create a more incognito path for getting from his cave into Gotham, but for now, this would do.
In a vast, torch-lit chamber of the castle, a throng of people had arrived, all dressed in red, hooded robes. Before them stood Niccolai, dressed in his masked regalia, with Dala at his side. She too wore a domino mask, and a red cape over her usual skimpy black clothing, and between them stood a large, dark shape. It was an iron maiden, wrought to appear as a giant ape-like figure, and from within came a chorus of moaning and sobbing.

“Long have I warned you all on the dangers of exposure,” Niccolai, the Monk, shouted in ritualistic fashion. “The daylight world will not tolerate the ways of The Demon’s Legions! If they gain one whiff of our actions, they will swarm to exterminate us here… All that I have promised you – the lure of eternity and the utter power of predation… all will be lost if we are uncovered by those who are little more than the chattel of our sustenance! All of you would stand revealed! Professionals, craftsmen, and criminals alike! Your dark and secret desires would lead to your ultimate disclosure and doom!”

The onlooking crowd of followers all began to shift uneasily. It was difficult for them to watch a fellow member of their brotherhood be punished. But this one had crossed a line. Not only had he recently been extensively questioned by the police about his activities, but he had also claimed to have been interrogated by the Batman. And, on top of all of that, fellow members testified that he had been complaining about the Monk not making good on his promises. For this, he had to be terminated.

The Monk pointed steadily at the iron maiden and shouted, “Encased in here is one who let himself be captured and questioned by those who would unveil us! Lucky for us all tonight, it is he who stands revealed!”

Dala gleefully opened the device, as the man inside squirmed and screamed. Eventually, its doors were open, revealing bloody spikes inside, and a ragged man whose crimson fluids were gushing out in an endless stream as he shook and spasmed in pain. He fell out, flat on his face, but continued squirming on the ground.

“Behold,” the Monk said, his pet timber wolf snarling at his side. “One who had stood at our side and partaken of the unholy sacraments of the night. Now, his blood is soiled and unworthy to even share with those who had been his brethren! His fluids and flesh are only fit as fodder for beasts.” He snapped his fingers, and his wolf lunged forward onto the man on the ground, viciously snapping at him and squelching out whatever life was left in the poor wretch.

Julie screamed, and felt her insides flopping up towards her throat and mouth. She couldn’t believe what was transpiring before her eyes. Golden earrings hung from her earlobes, and a ruby pendant was strapped tightly around her neck. She had been dressed in a ritualistic white dress, and was currently chained to a post behind the Monk. She screamed, shouted and struggled, but it was no use. The Monk and Dala ignored her, carrying on with the ceremony.

The Monk moved forward as a large stone bed was lowered on chains from above. The slab was concaved, with drains carved into it, which ran to a spigot on the outer edge. This was where Julie was to be placed, and her blood drained for the congregation to drink. The Monk nodded to Dala, and raised his hands in the air. She did the same, and the rest of the crowd followed.

“Eternal night, heed the petition of those who welcome your and dark embrace,” Dala chanted. “We who kneel at this sacrificial altar acknowledge the power of consumption. It is natural to ingest life! It is natural to lust for eternity! It is natural for the hunters to stake these thirsts on their prey! Oh sacred night! Send your blessings to this eternal congregation! And through this blood that we shed, grant us your never-ending bliss!”

“Tonight, we shall taste of immortality,” the Monk proclaimed. “Thirty years ago, The Demon
declared Gotham City no longer fit to survive. Crime, pollution and the filth of mortality had overrun every inch of this city, and we nearly ended it. But Gotham somehow came back, and has been limping on – smoldering – ever since. We finally have the monetary means to overrun Gotham with our influence. This time, Gotham City will fall, and when it does, my brothers, The Demon’s Head has promised us *true* immortality!*

*The castle’s windows are ablaze with torchlight,* Batman observed as he drove up to the massive structure. *The courtyard is filled with vehicles. And Julie’s car is one of them...*

He plunged the pedal down to the floor of the car, and pressed the red button, igniting the jet turbine, sending the armored car crashing directly through the castle wall and into the ceremonial chamber. Inside, a commotion of red-robed cultists fled in all directions, and Batman quickly glanced over the scene in order to get his bearings.

*Alfred was right. The Batmobile can also be used to strike terror. For intimidation. I’ve interrupted some twisted cult ritual. This room is enormous... cavernous. Still, gas should help thin out the numbers.*

Pressing another button on his control panel, green gas started billowing out from the side of his car, filling the room.

“Niccolai,” Dala shouted. “What is this? Some... some part of the sacrifice? Has The Demon’s Head come to witness?!”

“No...” The Monk responded. “I assure you *not!*”

Batman sprang from the cockpit, his respirator secured to his face, and lunged down into the throng of cultists. Using the momentum of his body as a weapon, he plowed through the masses, incapacitating as many as possible. Like water flowing over a bed of rocks, he slid through the crowd smoothly, having a relatively easy time of reacting to their oncoming, panicked attacks.

Each blow Batman delivered revealed another hooded cultist to be just an average citizen of Gotham. The members of this brotherhood were no warriors. They were old men, young men, butchers, bankers, gardeners, and a fair share of those who appeared to be homeless. It was a flock of cruel and perverted thrill-seeker – the dregs of society – lured in by promises of greater from their leader – their obscene shepherd.

“Brethren,” the Monk shouted. “Tear out this intruder’s throat as you would *any* cattle! Prove yourselves worthy of my gifts!”

“But, if you did not arrange this...” Dala said, clutching his robe, standing behind him for protection. “Who is he? Who is this demon?”

“You spend too long with your head buried in dreams, Dala,” the Monk growled. “He is the Batman. A meddler who means us no good – despite the tenor of his disguise. He is who forced my hand into action so quickly.”

Dala looked on in horror as Batman effortlessly moved his way up to where she and the Monk stood, defenseless.

*Half of them flee,* Batman thought, knocking another cultist out of the way. *A few more succumb to the gas. The remainder offer little resistance.*
“Batman,” Julie shrieked, still bound, away from the action and dissipating gas cloud. “Help me! Help me, please! Help!”

Julie.

Batman felt electricity and rage fill his body, turning to see both the Monk and his female assistant inching toward where Julie was captured. The female assistant was holding a large dagger in her right hand, eager to silence Julie’s shrieks. Batman had to act.

Two silver batarangs flung from Batman’s cape as he ran forward. The Monk stepped aside, letting one stab itself into Dala’s skin, sticking out directly beneath her collar bone. The second one nicked the Monk’s hand, and he recoiled and hissed.

He’s incredibly fast, Batman noted. Nearly avoided both ‘rangs. Lets the woman take the worst of it. He’s injured, but he doesn’t seem especially bothered by the silver. It figures. He’s no vampire. Just a deranged sociopath.

Batman stepped up next to the Monk, but the vile cult leader lashed out, kicking him in the chest with a thick, studded boots. Batman sprawled to the side, crashing into the old, wooden post which Julie had been lashed to, splintering it into pieces and sending Julie rolling across the floor.

So fast. Barely saw him lash out. My stitches have burst. The upper part of the suit is filling up with blood… but the Monk… He’s on the run.

The Monk took off down a corridor, while his lady accomplice sprawled herself out on the floor, appearing to be near shock from her wounds. Julie similarly seemed slightly injured, but she struggled to her knees, appearing to be okay for the most part.

Julie. She’s free, and seems okay. Small fires have broken out from the braziers, fallen in the scuffle … The gas has all but dissipated. But I have to risk it. She’ll be okay. Can’t allow the Monk to escape.

Norman Maddison stood behind a support beam in a dimly-lit parking garage. A revolver shook in his hand as he breathed heavier and heavier with every moment. Behind him, an elevator door slowly opened, and out stepped Salvatore Maroni. A woman with short blonde hair clung to his side, looking dull and somewhat displeased. His wife. On either side of them stood two of Sal’s bodyguards.

“Benny,” Maroni said. “Go get the car and bring it around for us, will ya?”

“You got it, Sal.”

Only one option remains, Norman thought as he clenched his eyes shut and held his breath. An avenue I find as dark and bitter as any I have yet had to transverse. I must sever any bond I have with organized crime in the most permanent fashion. The Batman will never connect me to these thugs… as long as I leave no connection left to be made.

“I’m hungry,” Maroni’s wife said, her nasally voice ringing with entitlement.

“Then make somethin’ when we get home,” Maroni grunted.

Now or never.
Norman leapt out from his hiding place directly in front of the couple, shakily aiming a revolver with one hand, his eyes wild and crazy.

“Maroni,” he screamed. “It’s over! Say whatever prayers you can recall…” He squeezed the trigger before finishing his thought, and the gun let off three rounds. Moroni shoved his wife to the ground, crouching over her, as his bodyguards reacted with the automatic precision of a machine. In one motion, both guards crouched and simultaneously raised their own handguns, releasing four bullets each. Maddison’s shots all hit the concrete walls beside the elevator, missing his target, but all eight of the guards’ shots hit their mark. Blood washed over the pavement as Maddison fell, and breathed out his final breath.

“Jeez,” Maroni grumbled, shakily rising to his feet and ignoring his wife’s frightened shouts. “Was that freakin’ Maddison?! At first, I thought it woulda been one of Carmine’s guys… Makes my life easier. You all saw this, right? He tried to shoot me! This was nothin’ but self defense, right? It was self defense, and you all gotta remember that, cuz I can assure you, Dent will be askin’ each and every one of us about this in a few days… Freakin’ Maddison…”

Batman ran along the dark hallways and twisted corridors, hardly stopping to catch his own breath and ignoring the fact that his suit was leaking blood.

_The castle is so vast. It makes Wayne Manor seem slight in comparison. I’m bleeding freely now – don’t have much more time. Smoke has filtered up here from downstairs… Hope Julie made it out. Can’t let the Monk escape. So close- ah!_

Batman rounded the next corner to find the Monk standing at the ready. In his good hand, he brandished a spiked mace, and the other held tightly to an old shield he appeared to have snatched off of the wall. The Monk swung, and his iron weapon just barely missed Batman’s shoulder.

_He’s incredibly fast. He’s definitely had training. Despite his wound he still moves like lightning – and I am becoming slow and addled from my own blood loss._

Batman grabbed a shield of his own from off of a nearby wall, crouching behind it as the Monk bashed it over and over again, cackling maniacally.

“You are foolish to pursue me, Batman,” the Monk teased. “Your appearance does not frighten me!”

“Drop the monk act,” Batman returned. “I know you’re Richard Rallstone.”

“You think you understand so much, but you understand so little, indeed!” The Monk slammed the iron mace down onto Batman’s shield again, battering it brutally.

_Ferociously strong. He’ll beat through this shield in mere seconds. Have to do something._

The mace swung around again, but this time Batman swung his free arm toward it, catching it. Using the momentum of the Monk’s swing, Batman quickly yanked his arm back, pulling the weapon down to his side and free of the Monk’s grasp. Before the Monk could make sense of what had happened, Batman lashed out with his nearly-ruined shield, slamming it across the Monk’s face. The Monk sprawled to the side, steadying himself along the wall, while the tired Batman staggered back, grabbing a spear from a suit of armor and leaning on it.

_I’m getting dizzy… Ignore it. Take the lucky break._
Batman took ahold of the spear and jabbed it out, hoping to sweep the Monk’s legs, but the Monk managed to grab the weapon himself and pull it away as he escaped. The Monk scrambled for a nearby stairwell, spear in hand, and took off into the shadows. Batman, steadying himself, followed. He went up and up and up, until he came to the top of one of the castle’s towers. A dead end. Rain poured from a window nearby.

End of the line. And he’s gone... The drop outside is too sheer, and too far for a jump – even with training. Only one more possibility...

Batman hoisted himself up from the window, and pulled himself onto the wet, slippery rooftop. There, the Monk stood, spear in hand, ready to fight.

“Drop the vampire charade, Rallstone,” Batman commanded. “Why are you doing this?”

“You couldn’t possibly understand the enlightenment I preach, fool!”

“Try me.”

“I would rather die than betray my master.”

“I too have had masters,” Batman said, desperately trying to distract his opponent and extract as much information as possible. “Master Kirigi. Do you know him?”

“I have known many in my lifetime, infidel.”

“Do you know him?”

“And why, I wonder, does such a trivial matter bother the wayward Batman?”

“Does The Demon mean anything to you, Rallstone?” Batman asked. The Monk twitched slightly at this question, bowing his head in the pouring rain.

“How dare you?” he finally hissed. “You blaspheme against salvation itself! Die!”

The Monk ran forward, waving his spear wildly from side to side, but it was for not. He slipped on the wet tiles of roofing, and slid down towards the edge. Desperately, he held onto his spear, stabbing it into the roof, catching himself as he hung over the edge.

“Hold on,” Batman shouted. “I’ll come to you.”

“Stay back!”

“I’m trying to help you!”

“I don’t wa-” A flash of light exploded in front of them, and for a split-second, the Monk’s entire body lit up. A bolt of lightning had cracked through the sky and hit the Monk’s spear tip, electrocuting him in the process. As quickly as the lightning had struck, the monk fell, like a smoldering, old rag, down into the crushing darkness below.

His glowing arc winks out in the darkened depths below. I almost had him... Psychopath... Murderer... Time to take a hint and get off the rooftop. I can smell the smoke from beneath me...

Julie.

Dala stood above and behind Julie, who was desperately trying to crawl away. The vile woman
grabbed Julie by her hair, pulling her back, and raised her dagger in the air.

“The brotherhood has been broken,” Dala scowled. “The castle in flames. Even Niccolai… Mighty, noble Niccolai… may stand defeated. But there will be a blood sacrifice this evening! I will gorge on the juice of your veins and then, I shall live forever!”

Julie shrieked, desperately reaching forward. Her fingers grasped onto a piece of wood, splintered from the pole on which she had been bound earlier. Grabbing hold, she flung her arm back, bashing Dala across the head. Dala stumbled back, releasing Julie, and then staggered two steps forward. It was two steps too many, however, as she accidentally plunged her dagger into her own left breast and through her ribs. Her eyes opened wide, and then froze there, as she realized what had happened, feeling the searing pain and maddening fear of death.

Julie scrambled to the side as Dala slouched over, bleeding out. Ignoring her attacker, she tried with all her might to suck down a breath of air, but it was useless. She was choking. The chamber was filling with smoke as the castle burnt away. The smoke and fumes were overwhelming, and Julie felt her mind reeling at the perversity and spectacle of the unbelievable events she had witnessed. She fought to remain conscious but gradually, and painfully, she felt herself succumb, and her lungs fill with smoke. She collapsed down onto the ashy ground, closing her eyes, and went numb.

“Julie,” Batman desperately cried out as he carefully set her unconscious body down onto the grass several yards away from the burning ruins, under the dry shade of an overhanging log. Next to her, he set down the limp body of Dala. She didn’t make it. And soon, Julie would join her.

*Julie’s breathing has stopped. Heart rate is faint. Focus. And count.*

Batman immediately began performing CPR on her, breathing into her mouth and doing compressions on her chest.

“…two, three, four. C’mon Julie!... Come on!” He leaned close as she started to somewhat pull out of it. “Julie! Listen to me! You’ve got to stay breathing! Julie!”

He sat back, desperate to try anything, and removed his cowl from his head.

*She’s never heard Batman’s voice. Most pray they never will, I imagine. It needs to be more familiar.*

“Julie,” he said, more soft than before, his face now free of the mask. “Julie? Listen to my voice… come on now. Breath in, Julie. The air out here is clear. Pure. Julie…?”

She slowly opened one eye, wincing with the other one. It appeared to be bruised, and would surely become a black eye in time.

“B-bruce?” she coughed, looking at him for a moment. Her eye was fixated on him, and then moved down over his body, and back to his face. She forced both eyes open with a start, and pushed herself away from him, shouting, “Bruce!”

“Yes, Julie,” he said softly. “I’m here.”

“But you-you’re… Oh my god! How can… How can this be true?!”

*Her eyes… she’s frightened. Confused.*
“Julie, listen to me. Are you okay? Can you breathe clearly?”

“Yes, I’m… I’m fine. But, how could…? How could you be Batman? How could I not have known!”

“I know,” Bruce bowed his head. “I’m… sorry for the deception. It’s not only you… I hold this identity secret from everyone. It’s not safe for others to know.”

“All those times I wondered where you were… All those nights!”

“Yes.”

“And Daddy would just go on about—oh my… Oh no! Bruce, I… I just remembered! When I was… under the Monk’s control…” She began sobbing uncontrollably at the mention of her assailant. A grumble resonated from her stomach and she doubled over, throwing up on the grass at her feet.

“Julie, calm down,” Bruce said. “You’ll go into shock. Calm down.”

“Bruce,” she finally spat out, wiping vomit from her lip. “I was hypnotized by that man… and when I was, Daddy told me… he—he intended on doing something desperate! Something dangerous! He gave me his will and everything—oh, Bruce! What if he… What if he’s—”

“It’s okay, Julie. Calm down. I don’t know what your father had planned… but I swear to you… he will come to no harm.”
“Yeah,” Maroni said into the phone. “I know, I know. Don’t worry, Carmine, Dent’s got nothin’ on me. This was plain old self-defense. I don’t even have to lie. Yeah… Yeah, yeah, okay. Your word is my command.”

Maroni had been on the phone all evening, as The Roman chewed his ear off over what had happened to Norman Maddison. Maroni was getting prosecuted for it, as Harvey Dent would never lose an opportunity to bring Maroni into court. And while Falcone was worried, Maroni knew he had this one in the bag. All the right people had been paid up, and there was plenty of evidence to prove that Norman had attacked him first, without provocation. Even their business association was accounted for as legitimate, as Maroni had attended the Gotham Institute Charity Ball little over a month earlier. It would be a piece of cake.

The lights in his office suddenly began to flicker, until they went dark completely. Nervous, Maroni’s guards in the room reached for their weapons. Two more guards entered the room, checking to see that everything was ok. Maroni looked agitated, but calm at the same time. He had expected this.

“Gotta go, Carmine,” Maroni said as he lowered the phone. “Something’s come up.” He hung up, and slowly rose to his feet. Taking a deep breath, he pulled his gun out of his desk, and stretched his neck.

“What do we do?” one of the guards asked.

“Call the cops and get em over here,” Maroni breathed. “Tell them there’s been a break-in. Batman’s here. The rest of you, keep watch.”

The men anxiously circled the office, watching every vent and doorway. Every shadow. There was no way they were going to allow Batman into the room.

“You call em?” Maroni asked as his guard entered the room again after doing a quick perimeter sweep.

“Yeah, Sal.”

“Well, where the hell are they?”

“Coming, I guess.”

Suddenly, Batman smashed through the great window of Maroni’s office, rolling across the floor and rising up right next to one of the guards. The guard pointed his gun, but Batman pushed his arms up, and slammed against the man’s body. Panicked, the man fired a few rounds into the ceiling as Maroni and his two other guards opened fire on him.

“Careful,” one of the guards shouted. “Don’t wanna hit Mikey.”

“Just get him!” Maroni snapped back. Batman shoved the guard down, behind Maroni’s desk, bashing him repeatedly in the face. The man surrendered, laying limp on the ground and hurling his gun into the corner. Above, Maroni’s desk was being shot to pieces. Splinters of it flying in all directions, like a cloud of sawdust and pulp.

“Hold it, hold it,” someone shouted. The firing stopped, and the remaining three men waited.
Perhaps they’d got him. Perhaps not. Carefully, they crept around to the side of the desk and peered beyond. The unarmed guard was there, unconscious, but Batman was not.

Suddenly, Batman leapt up from behind, having snuck around the desk. He kicked one guard away, and slammed his fist down onto Maroni’s shoulder, dislocating it. Maroni fell to the floor, shouting in pain, but suddenly screamed in disbelief as he felt his leg lift up off the ground, and his body be dragged across the room.

“Kill him!” Maroni shouted as Batman dragged him by his ankle back towards the window. The only remaining guard ran forward, but without even turning his head to look, Batman swung his arm out and knocked the man over, making contact with his throat. Coughing, the man sprawled across the floor as Batman reached the destroyed window. There was nowhere left to go, but out.

Batman hoisted Maroni up, and held him in front of him like a human shield. The two guards quickly both came back forward, guns raised, but hesitated. They couldn’t get to Batman without risking shooting Maroni.

“Hold it you idiots,” Maroni panicked as Batman roughly wrapped some kind of harness around him, fastening the two of them together. “Don’t shoot! You’ll hit me! Lower your weapons! Lower your weapons! Now!”

Batman’s breathing was heavy behind him, and he could feel his heart beat resonating loudly in his skull. Sweat ran down his face, and he looked around in desperation for anything to do. The two guards lowered their weapons hesitantly and watched.

“Hang on,” Batman whispered.

“Wait up, what are you going to- Oh whoa!”

Maroni held his breath as he felt Batman yank at his back and the two of them crashed through what was left of the shattered window. Wind flew past his head as he tumbled down to the Gotham streets below. Suddenly, he spun around, facing the upcoming street below, and screamed in fear. A quick tug put pressure on his chest as Batman’s cape extended out into enormous wings, and their fall suddenly was pulled into a glide. Slowly, they flew across the street to a neighboring building, landing on an outdoor terrace.

Gruffly, Batman released the harness and grabbed Maroni by the neck, lifting him up to eye level and shouting at him louder than he had ever shouted at someone before. The soft tissues of his throat resonated as he bellowed, bleeding from the strain he was placing on his voice.

“You’ll pay for killing Norman Maddison, Maroni! You forget our deal?”

“No I di- Ouch!” Batman had cut him off by smashing his nose in, and blood gushed down over his mouth.

“I gave you mercy, and you **killed** him!”

“Screw you, man,” Maroni spat. “I didn’t do nothin’. Maddison came to me! I was goin’ out with my wife when that nutcase jumped out and started shooting at **me**. I didn’t do nothin’! I kept my end of the deal!”

“You killed him,” Batman repeated.

“My **bodyguards** did,” Maroni said defiantly, even in his intense pain. “It was him or me! And I’m gonna stand trial for it anyway! Dent’s prosecuting, so what more do you want?”
“Justice,” Batman growled as he held Maroni out over the ledge, about an average house’s height from the ground below. “You’re going to walk free from that trial, and you know it. You deserve worse. Far worse.”

“So what, you gonna drop me from here?”

“I’m considering it.”

“Look, from one professional to another, pick a better spot. Fall from this height? Wouldn’t kill me.”

“I’m counting on it,” Batman said as he released his grip and Maroni tumbled down, screaming. His leg twisted and cracked as he landed, and he wheezed and coughed with tears streaming from his eyes. Batman landed gently next to him and grabbed him again, shoving him against the stone wall at his back.

“Want to try that again?”

“You’re a freakin… a freakin psychopath,” Maroni coughed. “What do you want from me?... If you’re gonna kill me, just grow a spine and do it. Do it. If you think paralyzing me will make ya feel better, go ahead.”

“Maybe I will,” Batman said as he jabbed his boot into Maroni’s fractured leg.

“Stop!” Maroni shouted. “Stop! Maybe, we can – maybe we can cut a new deal?”

“How about a deal that ends with you and The Roman behind bars?” Batman demanded. “I know you lost a shipment of heroin and I want to know where it is.”

“Prove I did anything, and I will be,” Maroni wheezed. “But how about I lead you to a real criminal?”

“What?”

“Leave me alone, and I’ll give you some information,” Maroni said. “About Penguin… You know him? He’s a seriously screwed up little freak. Thinks he can spit in everyone’s soup and get away with it. I know someone in his crew – someone close to him.”

Batman’s heart rate calmed down. Beating up Maroni was only serving to make him feel better. There was no purpose in it. No justice. No discipline. No amount of beatings would ever make Sal Maroni straighten up. But now Maroni was offering something. Something big. Vital to winning the war, perhaps.

“Talk.”

“We caught one of Penguins guys last weekend. We called him ‘Loose Lips’… jeez, this leg really friggin’ hurts… Ricky ‘Loose Lips’ Leblanc. He told Carmine where Penguin was hidin’ out… You want him, he can get you to all those freaks you’ve been lookin for. Black Mask. Penguin. He knows where to go. You can find him at the Ice Pick Club… He likes playin’ pool.”

Sirens echoed down the street as the police were arriving to Maroni’s penthouse. Batman grit his teeth and glared at the smarmy gangster at his feet. Then, closing his eyes, he pressed on.
A seedy hole-in-the-wall, The Ice Pick club had been built near Gotham University, in hopes of becoming a popular hangout for college students. However, it never caught on with those in academia, and instead became a den of villainy – a gathering place for thugs and crooks. It was in the back of another restaurant, down in the basement, adorned with an excess of neon lighting and old speakers. Music from the late 1970s crackled out of the speakers, and a host of unsavory people often gathered around the music to play pool and drink beer. Even though Loeb had caught – or been given by Falcone – a total of three prostitution rings operating out of the club, it still ran as usual.

Skeletal women dressed in raggedy clothing walked through the aisles of pool tables and near the bar, occasionally stopping to talk to the groups of men who gathered to take their orders. A gawky bartender served up drinks, looking like he’d just shot up on drugs before his shift. A buzz rang at the door, as the club had become more private since Grogan took Loeb’s position, and the bartender quickly shuffled over to answer it.

“Password?” he asked through a tiny sliding window in the top of the door. There was no reply, so he asked one more time, “Password?” Nothing. He pressed his eye to the small opening, and then leapt back in fear. His mouth fell open, and the swell of a shout grew in his throat, but the door was kicked down before he had a chance to speak. Music still crackling away, the patrons all turned and stared at the now-broken doorway, and the bartender desperately scrambling to get away. Batman’s immense figure strode through the door, cloaked in his dark cape, and he turned his head from side to side, allowing the crooks within to gaze at him in horror for a few moments.

“Ricky Leblanc,” Batman demanded. “I want him. Where is he?”

At first, the crowd inched back, one at a time, but a crash of glass to his side alerted him that some were not quite so intimidated. One man, a broken bottle in hand, slowly came forward, while another two carrying pool cues approached from the other side. Batman wasted no time. His cape flew open as he tossed smoke grenades and flash bombs in all directions, filling the neon-lit room with smoke and a torrent of seizure-inducing strobes.

Amidst the smoke, nobody could see where they were in relation to the door, or where Batman was in relation to them. A steam of people stampeded toward the exit, but very few made it out without first being caught and bound by Batman, angrily diminishing the crowd.

Finally, he had his prize. The man was bound to the pool table, and had been ratted out several times over during the fight. He was skinny, and young, with blonde spiked hair and a jaw that seemed too broad and square for his otherwise thin body. His watery blue eyes were fixed on Batman, complete fear saturating them, as the dark vigilante approached.

“We have a mutual friend, you and I,” Batman said. “Oswald Cobblepot. What do you know about him?”

“Penguin,” Loose Lips gasped back. “Can’t get me to talk about him. No way.”

“I just shattered Salvatore Maroni’s legs and nose,” Batman responded. “I just nearly destroyed this entire pool hall. I can certainly find a little more violence within me to use on you.”

“Fine, fine,” he said. “I don’t need convincing! But I’ve got better than Penguin.”

“I want Penguin.”

“What about… drugs. I got drugs that are connected to The Roman,” Loose Lips looked up at Batman hopefully, desperate for him to take the deal.
“… The heroin?”


“The drugs!”

“Oh, yeah, uh… Black Mask stole the heroin supply and has been selling it off a little bit at a time. He keeps it in an old apartment building… in… in-in The Narrows. No cops in The Narrows. Hell’s Crucible, you know?”

“I want an address,” Batman insisted. “And I want you to testify in court.”

“Naw, naw,” Loose Lips said quickly, shaking his head. “I go to the cops, and I’ll have Black Mask, The Roman and Penguin gunning for me. I’ll be dead before I can ever testify.”

“I’ll get Black Mask,” Batman offered. “With him and the heroin, the police will have enough to do everything it takes to keep you protected to testify against Falcone, Black Mask and Penguin in court.”

“If you get Black Mask and the heroin…”

“I will. Now, address.”

“Okay, it’s Green Estates,” Loose Lips blurted. “In the Narrows. That’s where he’s been. Black Mask. Don’t think he lives there, but he operates… yeah…”

The Narrows, Batman thought, moments later as he drove through the streets and toward his destination. The Narrows was a neighborhood located on a small, island in the middle of Gotham River, situated between Midtown and Downtown Gotham City. It was only several block long, but it had a big reputation. The Narrows had always been a section of the city in disrepair, ever since the Great Depression of the 1930s. But it was in Gotham’s own depression, after Rallstone Inc. went bankrupt, that The Narrows really became known as Hell’s Crucible. When the market had collapsed, Gothamites more or less rounded up the poor, needy, and homeless, and shoved them onto the tiny island neighborhood. There, entire city blocks became desolate, filthy dungeons where drugs were manufactured and consumed like they were a staple food group. At one point, heaps of human bodies had been piled up in the streets, as users chose to starve to death rather than give up their vile habits. Since then, it had improved some, but not by much. It was a slum in the midst of the sprawling metropolis, damp and in ill condition.

The Narrows has been a mess since the economic crash thirty years ago… Julie... Julie had told me that The Monk claimed he and his organization had been to Gotham before. Thirty years ago. If the market collapse was caused by Rallstone Inc’s bankruptcy – and if Rallstone was, in fact, masquerading as Nicolai, the cult leader – then perhaps Richard Rallstone had played a part in orchestrating Gotham’s economic depression, which nearly ruined the city. I have so many questions, but he isn’t around to talk to. I nearly had to pin Julie down to get any information from her… She’s been barely sane for two days now. I thought she was a wreck after the fire at the Rallstone castle, but things have only gotten worse since discovering her father’s death. I can relate to that…

Batman scaled the side of a crumbling building, as the smell of drugs and decaying organic matter
wafted through the steamy air of the Narrows. Gases fumed up from below, pushing past the tangled mesh of clotheslines, which stretched from building to building like cobwebs. Green Estates was old, and crumbling, with a ghastly decor of peeling green walls, and black and white checkered tiling on the floors. Most of the building was tenantless, and most of the tenants were there as squatters more than anything else. Finally, he found it. On the sixth floor was an apartment – dirty, old, and filled with cardboard boxes.

*The heroin*, Batman thought as he slid a batarang from his belt under the window, prying it open, and crept inside. The nearest box had been opened, and Batman cautiously approached. However, just as he’d reached the box and was lowering his hand down into it, the door to the apartment opened. Quickly, he sprang into the shadows, hiding behind an old, rotting leather couch.

Three men entered the room. One was wearing a large, puffy coat, the other a tattered sweater with a red scarf. Between them, holding a flashlight, stood Black Mask. He wore a white, pinstriped suit, shiny black shoes, and a mask made of ebony wood, carved into the facade of a skull. His eyes glared through the mask, peering at the crates around him.

“This is it,” he said to his goons in a calm, lowered tone. “I want it gone. Destroy *all* traces.”

“You got it,” the man with the scarf said. “We’ll torch the whole place.”

Each man was carrying a can of gasoline, which they hoisted up and began splashing around the room, taking special care to get a good amount on or around the boxes of drugs. Black Mask, however, immediately turned his head to the opened window, his glare tightening, as he slowly stepped toward it and peered out.

“Window’s open…” he said under his breath, barely audibly through the muffle of the mask. “One of you idiots open it?”

“Naw,” the man in the scarf said absently. “Maybe it was one of your other guys.”

“Maybe,” Black Mask responded skeptically.

*Arsonists*, Batman thought. *Can’t let them destroy the drugs. Don’t know why Black Mask is in such a sudden rush, but if these gets destroyed I will lose evidence not just against The Roman and his organization – but Black Mask, and Penguin as well.*

Black mask continued staring out the window, as the man in the puffy coat splashed his can closer and closer to the couch where Batman hid. Now was his opportunity.

He leapt up, placing his palm directly at the back of the man’s skull, and slammed his head down onto the backboard of the couch. The man with the scarf looked over, a bit bewildered, raising his hand threateningly, but Batman was too fast, leaping over the couch and coming down hard on the man’s arm, breaking it. But as he did this and fluidly rose back up, he got kicked back by Black Mask, who was advancing viciously.

“Well, if it isn’t the bat!” Black Mask taunted as Batman staggered back, feeling his stitches breaking open for a second time that week. “Awe, having trouble? Here, have a drink!”

Grabbing a bottle of vodka from a nearby table, Black Mask swung it around, breaking it across Batman’s head. Batman stumbled down, wincing, but knowing he had to get back to his feet. Black Mask was advancing to kick again, reaching for a gun in his coat pocket, but Batman grabbed his arm, twisted it back, and grabbed him in a headlock first. Black Mask struggled, as Batman quickly reached up, removed the mask, and tossed it aside. He then let go, and Roman Sionis stumbled
forward, spinning around with rage in his eyes, and raising his weapon.

“Put that down,” Batman grunted, slapping the gun out of Sionis’s hand and shoving his forearm against the criminal’s throat, pinning him to the wall. “Roman Sionis – The Black Mask.”

“Secret’s out,” Sionis spat back, nearly foaming at the mouth with anger. “What are you gonna do about it?”

“Turn you over to the police for starters. Then Dent, and then Blackgate.”

“I’m only doing what my father never could,” Roman hissed.

“Why the mask?”

“Dad took himself far too seriously. It’s a new Gotham City, and old men looking for extortion money have no place in it. And, you know, you look like a man who takes himself too seriously too. Want my opinion? You need to lighten up.”

Nonchalantly, but with enough speed to complete the action before Batman could react, Sionis removed a lighter from his pocket, lit it, and dropped it on Batman’s cape. Immediately, Batman’s entire body lit up in flames, and he staggered back, quickly trying to come up with a plan.

*Can’t stop, drop, and roll. The floor is covered in gasoline. The window-

Batman flung himself out the window he had entered through, as Roman ran, grabbing his mask, and left the rest of the apartment to burn down – arsonists and all.

Landing in a damp alleyway six stories down, Batman’s cape made for a slightly easier landing, but it was quickly burning up and the fall wasn’t landed quite as he had hoped. Luckily, nothing had broken, though his wounds were reopened and bleeding heavily. Ignoring the pain, he rolled desperately around on the ground, extinguishing the flames. A crowd was gathering, watching the burning vigilante desperately try to save himself, and as he finally rose to his feet, he looked back at them blankly, and then up to the apartment above.

*The building is already blazing. Going up like a dry stack of hay. Can’t risk going back right now… Need to create a flame resistant suit. The crowd is gathering. Head feels light. Might be suffering internal bleeding. Possible concussion. Need the car.*

He pressed a button on his gauntlet, and stood steady, glaring at the crowd of winos and destitute drifters. At first they were awe-struck, but the awe quickly turned to bewilderment and panic as they scattered as the enormous, roaring Batmobile came barreling down the alleyway. People fled in all directions, crawling over debris and dumpsters as the vehicle purred to a stop in front of where Batman stood.

*The autopilot should be sensitive of incoming collisions. Still seems a bit dangerous.*

Quickly, not willing to risk anymore exposure, Batman crawled into the car and headed back to the Batcave.

“Master Bruce?” Alfred asked quietly as he entered the cave. Bruce sat in his chair as usual, sullen and quiet. “Are you alright? I tried to reach you earlier on the radio, but you had turned it off.”

“Didn’t want to be disturbed tonight,” Bruce returned.
“Why might that-” Alfred’s voice cut off and he instantly ran to Bruce’s side. “What has happened? You’re a mess!”

Bruce was slouched in the chair, only having partially removed his suit from the upper part of his body. His wounds were open, oozing, or just freshly scabbed over. Some of them appeared to have been crudely stitched shut again, at least in part, by Bruce himself. Bits of the cape were burned – melted to the side of Bruce’s body like tar.

“Fell out of a building tonight,” Bruce said. “While on fire…”

“Well, some days are better than others, I suppose,” Alfred replied dryly. Bruce sighed.

“Alfred… I’ve really fallen out of touch with… with everything.”

“Master Bruce, you are bleeding out, allow me to-”

“Don’t touch me,” Bruce quickly growled. “I need to feel this.”

“You… you need to feel this? Master Bruce, have you lost your mind? This has to stop immediately! You are killing yourself!”

“I’m fine.”

“If your body is fine – which I assure you, it is not – then you surely are losing your own sanity. This is too serious for me to ignore this time.”

“Too serious? Too serious?” Bruce stood up out of his chair, his eyes beginning to water, but every inch of his body trembling in anger. “I have a few cuts and bruises. I have a few minor burns. Alfred, people are dying out there! I have seen more death in the past month than most people in Gotham deal with in their life! You’ve been in combat zones and seen less human wreckage than I have!”

“Bruce, I highly doubt that – I was a combat medic, after all.”

“Well then it’s not the same. How could it be? These people… They didn’t have to die.”

“Is that what this is to you? You fighting death? You proving that your parents didn’t have to die?”

“They didn’t have to die!”

“But they did die.”

Bruce stared, and then slowly sunk back into his chair, his skin growing ever more pale, and his head becoming lighter and lighter. He sunk lower and lower, tears now streaming steadily down his face.

“Did I do this, Alfred?” Bruce asked. “Did I bring this sickness on this city?”

“Sir…”

“I don’t mean this like I did as a child, blaming myself for my parents death. This is a serious question. I came back to help Gotham rise up, but since I’ve been back this city has started to come loose at the seams. Psychopaths, monsters, cults… Julie’s father is just another life on the pile of those who have died at the hands of men inspired by Batman… By me. I was meant to inspire good. Not madness… Not death…”
“Sir,” Alfred sighed. “You have inspired good. But you spat in the faces of Gotham's criminals. Didn't you think there might be some casualties? Things were always gonna get worse before they got better. Why do you think I worry about you? You talk as though you’re about to end this conflict in a month, but Master Wayne… This conflict is years from ending. Gotham’s problem goes beyond people like The Roman and Penguin. It’s in its soul, Sir. It’s the people… You’ve reached some of them. Harvey Dent, Officer Gordon, Vicki Vale, Jack Ryder… But Sir, perhaps those people are better suited to reach the masses than a masked vigilante.”

“Yes,” Bruce whispered. “Perhaps.”

Alfred watched him crying for quite some time, wondering in his heart if he could bring any more bad news to the child he had raised. It was unbearable.

“Sir,” he said. “It may be a tad inappropriate, but we received a letter from Miss Maddison today.”

“A letter?” Bruce’s asked as his tears began to halt. “I haven’t heard from her in days. Why would she send a letter?”

“Some wounds are too fresh to discuss in person,” Alfred said, handing the folded note to Bruce. “Perhaps you’d like to rest up a bit before you read it?”

“No,” Bruce said. “I’ll take it now.” He opened it, and Alfred retreated to the far end of the cave, giving Bruce some privacy as he read.

Dear Bruce,

For safety’s sake, there are things I can’t and won’t express in this letter. Things I’d like to say, but will never give voice to. From my father’s final journal entries, I now know exactly how he came to the state that consumed him and why he did what he did. It’s evident that he was paranoid and delusional. But the fact remains that he died from an overwhelming fear that obsessed him. My father died because of Batman. You may never understand or forgive me, but I have, by now, left Gotham. And you. The facts surrounding my father’s final days will always stand between us, and that is a reality with which I could never live. I know you could locate me, no matter where I fled, so there is no use in hiding. I am following my father’s wishes that I contribute to the world’s well-being. I have left my schooling behind, and am now in Africa, and I find that life in the Peace Corps likely agrees with me. This is an area of the world that needs the nurturing attentions of people like myself. So very different from my faraway home – a city that maybe does need a “Dark Knight” to protect it. There is a part of me that will always love you, Bruce. But that part of me died along with my father. And I think you’ll understand that.

-- Julie

Bruce dropped the letter to the floor of the cave, and found his eyes feeling surprisingly dry. A weight lifted from his shoulders. Not just the weight of his relationship – in fact, losing Julie felt like a hole had been punched through his chest and he was unable to breath – but the weight of Batman entirely. He was numb.

I was wrong, Bruce thought. Wrong to assume that I could accomplish my goals so quickly. So young. Wrong to allow anyone to get so close to the dark maelstrom that surrounds me. My mission would claim new victims as readily as its genesis claimed my parents. And I can’t allow that to happen. Not to Julie. Not to Jim and his family. Not to Alfred. And perhaps... not to me.

Harvey Dent’s words echoed in his mind, “Whoever the Batman is, he doesn’t want to do this for the rest of his life – how could he? Batman is looking for someone to take up his mantle… You
either die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself become the villain.”

I should give up. Bruce thought as he stared at the empty cowl sitting next to his chair, glaring lifelessly back at him. I want to give up. Alfred wants me to give this up. Julie, a woman I believed I was in love with, has given up. My ally, James Gordon, has given up. And Harvey Dent…

Bruce felt himself pulled from his stupor, as an echoing, pulsing sound began emitting from the darkened stalactites above. A swarm of tiny beating wings drove themselves through the cave. They boiled from the darkness, flapping, beating, gnawing, and clawing.

Harvey Dent believes in me. He knows what has to be done to fight this battle. I’ve said many times over, both to myself and others, that I believe in Gotham City. That also means that I believe in its DA, Harvey Dent. Harvey Dent believes in Batman. And I believe in Harvey Dent… Why do we fall? So we can learn to pick ourselves up. The war continues.

Outside, on the other side of the waterfall covering the entrance to the cave, snow began to fall. Winter had arrived in Gotham, and all over the entire city, people were beginning to decorate for the season ahead. Despite the dark reality of their existence, the people of Gotham were looking to hope. A season of holidays, and a season of peace. A season of joy, and a season of laughter.

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