NOW WITH AN AFTERWARD FROM THE AUTHOR!

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The Undying

by GeneralIrritation

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Chapter 1: And He Ain’t Comin’ Back

His arm was broken.

The Batmobile had chased The Joker’s van through Gotham’s Narrows, a particularly run down and violent part of Gotham. It was a haven for the brand of criminal Batman fought: they who took garish *noms-de-guerre* like “Poison Ivy,” or “The Riddler.” It’s easy for a costumed freak to set up shop in a hellhole with no beat cops.

The rear doors of the van opened during the pursuit to reveal The Joker himself, alongside one of his henchmen in a clown mask holding an RPG. Batman could see The Joker screaming at the goon, but the speed and the winter wind deafened his screeches. Finally, not one to repeat himself during one of his fits of mercurial pique, The Joker shrugged, pulled a .44 Magnum out of the front of his purple suit pants, and decorated the interior of the van with his henchman’s brains.

As The Joker bent over to liberate the RPG from his dead goon’s clutches, Batman’s finger hovered over the buttons on the Batmobile’s steering wheel that activated anti-vehicle rockets, and thought against it. They were going at such high speeds, and the van itself was so old, that the rockets would vaporize the vehicle itself along with anyone inside.

And Batman was not confident that this latest model of Batmobile could withstand an RPG straight to the engine block.

“Initialize safety protocols,” Batman said, and the Batmobile’s operating system, in the voice of the current Oracle (and former Batgirl) Barbara Gordon, replied “* Foam initialized.*”

At the exact instant that The Joker fired the RPG at the front of the Batmobile, the interior of the vehicle itself was filled with a patented WayneTech safety foam that would ensure Batman’s well-being, even if the rest of the Batmobile was destroyed. The fuel lines of the Batmobile were segmented, and sealed off, preventing an explosion.

Or an even bigger one, at any rate.

The entire front of the Batmobile was demolished, and the flaming ruin of the car plowed into the side of an abandoned tenement building.

The trick with the WayneTech safety foam was that it was comprised of a special chemical compound (courtesy of Lucius Fox) that sublimated from a solid form directly to a non-flammable gaseous state roughly forty-five seconds after deployment. As the foam disappeared into a faintly maple syrup-scented miasma, Batman knew he would have to talk to Lucius about the improvements that could be made. He knew he had suffered a concussion.

And his arm was broken.

Batman pressed the button on the dashboard of what was left of the Batmobile to open the roof, allowing him to escape.

Nothing happened.

He moved his left hand to the manual latch, which was how, in the worst possible way, he found out that arm was broken. The pain was voluminous, like a coil of pure fire compressing the ulna.
With gritted teeth, Batman moved his right arm over to the manual latch, and emerged from the wreckage of the Batmobile underneath Gotham’s gun-metal gray January sky.

Batman took care to mind on his right arm as he crumbled to the street, his black cape and body armor protecting him from the scorching ruin of the Batmobile. His breath exited his mouth in a plume of fog. His ears were ringing, and he felt so, so tired. Even an icy pavement would make a perfect place to curl up and sleep until the stars burned themselves out.

But his discipline kept him from so much as blinking, for fear of drifting away. In contrast to the cold, the world shimmered before him as though he were in a blanket of desert heat.

And cutting through that mirage was the sound of a van’s tires grinding into pavement. The high groan of ancient brakes. A set of doors opening.

“THE BATMOBILE LOST ITS WHEEL AND THE JOOOOO-KERRRRR GOOOOOT AAAAA-WAYYYYY!”

And then the laugh. The high, demented laugh that struck fear into the hearts of millions. The laugh that filled graveyards. The laugh that Batman first heard almost a decade ago, and in the stillness of the night, trying to fall asleep, could hear in the silence around him, like white noise underneath the soundscape of existence itself.

As Batman nudged himself along the pavement to get closer to the fire hydrant in front of the abandoned apartment building, he could hear something being drug along the pavement. He looked up.

The Joker was dragging the henchman whose brains he had liberated from the rest of his body on the inside of the van. The Clown himself was wearing a fur coat over his regular retro purple suit. To Batman’s knowledge, no one made purple fur coats, so at appeared to him that The Joker just found a plain fur coat, and applied a whole can of purple paint from Sherwin-Williams. His skin was a ghastly white, his lips a ruby red, and his green hair must have been fresh out of the shower, because Batman could see it bearing a thin sheen of frost that The Joker didn’t seem to notice.

The half-beheaded henchman dripped gore on the pavement as The Joker drug him to the side of the building in front of Batman, and propped him up in the sitting position. The Joker looked at the henchman, nudged what was left of the nose of his clown mask, and sighed.

“Harl?” he asked. “Do we know this gentleman’s name?”

A voice from the front of the van. High, and shrill, and Long Island all over. “No, puddin’!”

The Joker sighed again, even though he never stopped smiling. “Then I guess I’ll just name you Pete.”

It was then that The Joker fixed his gaze upon Batman, and it was only now that The Dark Knight allowed himself to blink. He hoped it would help him think.

The Joker looked back at the dead henchman. “Well, whaddya think, Pete? Should we use…”

He pulled the .44 back out of his pants.

“The gun? I know you’re familiar with this one Pete, you scamp.”

The Joker stared at the corpse expecting a response. When he didn’t get one, he just shrugged.
“Yeah, Pete, you’re right. Where’s the flair? Where’s the showmanship? Luckily, I have…”

The Joker reached into the right pocket of his fur coat, and produced…

“Brass knuckles!” The Joker said, his ever-present smile growing still wider. “It’s old-fashioned, it takes a while, and it turns faces into fun new shapes!”

The Joker waited for another response. The one he (and only he) got seemed to shock him.

“Well, there’s no need to swear, Pete! Not in front of Batman! If you don’t like the knucks, you don’t like the knucks, but just because you’re discerning, you don’t need to be rude. Now, how about…”

He reached into the inside of his suit jacket and came up with…

“A cheese grater!” The Joker let off a high, insane giggle. “It’s thorough, it’s disfiguring, and it produces longs strips of bloody flesh that you can keep for your very own! Or, y’know, to sell on Ebay, I’m not one to judge.”

And again, The Joker waited for a response from the dead henchman. Unlike the other two times, however, he liked what he seemed to be hearing. His head slowly turned toward Batman, and the rictus of permanent mirth that adorned his face had morphed into a suggestive grin.

“It appears we have a winner.”

Batman blinked again, trying to summon his strength. He’s been in tighter spots before. All he needed was to study his environment, and wait for the time to strike.

The noise of sneakers grinding into pavement interrupted Batman’s survey. Harley Quinn had parked the van, and had decided to join the scene.

She wore customized mismatched red and black Converse sneakers that went up to her knees. The hot pants she was wearing were also red and black. As was the tank top. Her hair was in blonde pigtails, with black and red tips. Her face was a smear of white paint and red lips that lent her pale blue eyes an even creepier air. She held a massive mallet over her shoulder, and there was a revolver in a holster on her hip.

And her exposed skin was turning purple in the freezing temperature. She was trying not to shiver.

In the years since The Joker had come across the former Doctor Harleen Quinzel and bent her to his will, her apparel had become more and more revealing, going from a full body suit and motley to the hot pants get-up she was wearing now. Batman knew that Harley was so mentally enslaved by The Joker that she wore these clothes by his suggestion, but whereas he formerly assumed that he wanted her to dress this way because he was attracted to her in his own sick way, it had begun to dawn on him over time that he wanted her to dress this way because he knew she wouldn’t say no to anything he said, and decided to push the privilege as far as he could, knowing it wouldn’t snap.

The Joker dressed Harley Quinn in hot pants on a ten degree January day because he thought it would be funny.

“W-w-w-we finally did it, Mistah J!” Harley said, shuddering, trying enthuse her way past the cold. “We’re finally gonna put that stinkin’ Bat in a shallow grave!”

The Joker rolled his eyes and stood up from his crouch in front of his dead henchman. He held his hand out to her.
“Dance with me, my dear.”

Harley set her mallet down, took The Joker’s hand, and they began a stately waltz in front of the abandoned apartment building in The Narrows. While they did, Batman used his good arm to pull himself up into a sitting position. But the intense dizziness got the better of him, and he slumped back down.

It came to the point in The Joker and Harley’s dance when he twirled her around. While her back was turned to him, about as quick as Batman could turn his head back to them, The Joker put her hand to the back of his head. He used his right foot to sweep her legs out from under her, and Harley landed face first into a pile of snow. It hadn’t snowed in Gotham City in the past few days, so Batman could only guess that the pile of snow was mostly ice by now.

“‘We?’” The Joker asked with spite in his voice as he shoved the struggling Harley’s face deep into the brittle mass of ice. Her hands clawed at his grip behind her head as she thrashed and let out muffled groans. “WEEEEEEEEEEE?”

The Joker, after what seemed like an eternity, finally let her go, and Harley, now crying and sporting a profusely bleeding nose, rolled away from him with her hands to her face.

“Do you have any idea how much work I did?” The Joker asked? “Do you have any idea how many bones I’ve broken, how many days I’ve lost to unconsciousness trying to get him to this point? That was my work! Not ours, and definitely not yours! You… You embarrass me!”

The Joker pointed to the dead henchman. “YOU EMBARRASS ME IN FRONT OF PETE!”

He turned around to look at Batman, and recomposed himself. He walked over to the dead henchman, picked the cheese grater up off the pavement before turning his attention to Batman. He squatted in front of him, put the cheese grater under his chin, and fixed him with a maniacal green glare.

“This is it,” The Joker said. “This is where it ends. You were responsible for me, somewhere down the line. You left a trail of damage and destruction behind you trying to protect this latrine of a city, and out of that grew me. You got the assist on every man, woman, and child I killed, and I gotta say, you get the biggest and shiniest participation trophy there is. And the funniest thing is that you don't even remember how you brought me to the dance.”

The Joker’s grin grew wider.

“You never look back.”

He started laughing.

“So… so neither do I.”

The Joker cut his laugh short as he grabbed one of the ears of Batman’s black cowl and wrenched his head back. Batman didn’t make a sound. He was marshalling his strength, and as long as The Joker indulged his weakness for monologue, he would only get stronger.

“I am the only one that gets to kill you,” The Joker said. “Not the lawyer with the two-tone face, not the insufferable dweeb with the green question mark jacket, not the sawed-off gangster with the bird fetish. Me! Because we’re so close. I… I am the equal and opposite reaction. Now, who knows what’ll happen to me tomorrow with you dead and in the ground? Maybe I’ll just vanish. Maybe I’ll go sane. Maybe I’ll pop up in New Mexico working a factory job.”
The Joker stood up and looked at the cheese grater in his hand. “Or mayyyyybe… I’ll just kill a whole bunch of people. I’m down for whatever. You know me.”

And it was now that Joker looked at Batman again. He boosted himself up on the fire hydrant and tried to ready his legs beneath him.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” The Joker said, “I have strips of you to sell on…”

**BLAM!**

“...Ebay…”

Batman tried to put together what that sound could have been through the miasma of his concussion, but whatever it was, it achieved the impossible.

It wiped the smile off of The Joker’s face.

The edges of his red smile were like vestigial wings across his cheeks as his actual lips drooped and sagged into a pained frown. He looked to his yellow button-up shirt, and found smoke billowing and blood spewing from the hole in his chest.

He turned around and looked behind him.

Harley Quinn, blood falling from her nose and staining her shirt, held the revolver from the holster on her hip. The barrel was smoking.

But she wasn’t shivering any more.

The Joker fell to his knees, his red lips eagerly flapping, but unable to form words, unable to even make a sound.

Harley, by now, had grabbed the handle of her mallet. She kicked The Joker in the back, knocking him onto his stomach. She walked the length of his slender body and put her left foot on The Joker’s exposed white neck. She heaved the mallet onto her shoulder and then brought it over her head, before sending its business end careening towards her Puddin’s head.

And for the first time since he put on the cowl, Batman flinched. He closed his eyes. He could not bear to see the sight that accompanied the grisly sound that followed. It was like someone shoving a rotten jack-o’-lantern off a fifth story balcony.

A moment passed, a moment during which a river could have worn a mountain to sand, before he opened his eyes again. He made sure to look at Harley instead of the mess of a corpse at her feet that used to be his greatest enemy.

Her breath came out of her mouth in shallow little clouds, obscuring the paint and the blood on her face. Obscuring the pale blue eyes that were welling up.

“I get it,” Harley said. “It took me a while, but…”

She looked at Batman.

“He loves you more than he loves me.”

Batman tried to reckon with the wall of heartbreak in human form that stood before him in red and black sneakers. And in the guiltiest corner of his mind, where he tried to sequester all of his unworthy thoughts, he reckoned with how what had just happened affected him. What this would
mean going forward.

He had been here before. He had stood on this kind of precipice and had jumped into the darkness beyond, and that leap dictated the rest of his life. But now? Now he had stumbled and tripped into that same blackness, unencumbered from his will and divorced from his wants. He didn’t have the faculties to puzzle out what this meant, but he knew that this moment would similarly dictate the things to come.

Batman finally spoke. “Harley, The Joker isn’t… wasn’t… capable of loving anyone.” The words tasted like bile. As though a past meal had risen back into his mouth.

With this, the tears finally fell from Harley Quinn’s eyes. The placid mask of shock on her face cratered as she succumbed to open weeping.

“Aw, now ya tell me!”
Chapter 2: Can’t Stand Losing You

It’s been three years since The Joker died.

And it’s been three years since anyone’s seen the Batman.

Gotham City paid to have The Joker’s remains cremated, and his ashes scattered in an undisclosed location. Mayor Justin Hawthorne, in a memoir written after the fact, stated that he did not want to risk creating a monument to a murderer by burying him, even if the grave was unmarked.

News of The Joker’s death spread instantly, and the city braced itself for the inevitable violent and bloody struggle for power to erupt from Gotham’s underworld. Things were quiet for a week, as the city’s major players geared up for war, from the Maroni and Falcone crime families, to The Penguin. Word spread of black market guns being bought wholesale, of drug sales and buys being halted on corners and warehouses the city over for fear of making their products and their manpower targets for any or all of the enemy factions.

And as the city girded itself for war, there was a thrum of panic underneath the demeanor of the Gotham City Police Department, for during that week, despite the Bat-Signal being shone above the central precinct for all seven days, Batman did not appear once.

However, the war that both cop and criminal alike had been preparing for never happened.

On the seventh day, Thomas and Tad Trigger, The Trigger Twins, hit town from their usual haunt of Bludhaven, and after they plugged the security guard in front of the First Bank of Gotham in the chest, their robbery turned into a hostage situation. The civilians beyond the police barricade outside got more and more nervous as the night went on. The people inside the bank were in danger, and Batman was nowhere to be seen.

And when the midnight deadline imposed by The Trigger Twins arrived, and Tad Trigger moved to execute a hostage in full view of the police and gawkers beyond the central window, Thomas and Tad were shot through the head by GCPD SWAT snipers from the rooftop of the artisinal bakery across the street.

While this might not have been headline news in any city outside of Gotham, the deaths of Thomas and Tad Trigger sent immediate and lasting shockwaves throughout the segment of Gotham City’s criminal underworld that wore garish costumes and had goofy names. It was immediately apparent (though obvious in hindsight) that the average, law-abiding citizens of Gotham City weren’t the only ones that Batman was keeping safe, and now that he was gone, they really were just like any other criminals in a town that didn’t have a superhero looking after it.

It had been said that criminals were a cowardly and superstitious lot, and while the unfolding events couldn’t speak to the latter, they certainly did speak to the former. The supercriminals of Gotham were mean, and they were bloodthirsty, but the core of the matter was that they didn’t want to die. In fact, the only one of their number who was prepared for such an eventuality had had his skull crushed with a large mallet by the girlfriend he had been abusing.

Breakout attempts at Blackgate Penitentiary and Arkham Asylum seemed to cease overnight. The remainder of the costume crowd kept their heads down and either served their time so they could matriculate back into civilian life, or tried to work with their therapists to, shock of shocks, get better.
Killer Croc disappeared into Gotham’s sewers, never to be seen again.

Bane retreated back to his home of Santa Prisca to make a go of it there.

Harley Quinn put her psychiatry PhD to work inside the walls of Arkham itself, providing ancillary analysis of her fellow patients to Arkham staff in exchange for the opportunity to share a cell with Poison Ivy.

The Riddler moved to Star City to annoy Green Arrow.

Mitchell Mayo (aka “The Condiment King”), upon his last discharge from Arkham, joined the kitchen staff of Dini’s; a midtown restaurant, as their saucier. It has been acknowledged by Gotham’s food critics that his work helped raise Dini’s Michelin rating one star.

And Jenna Duffy (aka “The Carpenter”) got her own show on HGTV.

The most unsettling post-Batman status, however, belonged to Harvey “Two-Face” Dent. He’d broken out of Arkham three days before The Joker’s death, and he had never resurfaced. He had taken no credit for any of the crimes in the three years since, and his body (if he had, in the devoutest wishes of his still-living victims, simply died one day) was never recovered. There were still some among the GCPD who were holding their breath, waiting for the former DA-turned-supercriminal to reappear with some explosive act of savagery and avarice to dwarf his previous misdeeds, as if to make up for lost time.

Which isn’t to say that there was no longer conventional crime in Gotham: The Maronis and Falcones still plagued the city, and each other. And the only “supervillain” operation still up and running in Gotham City to the present day is Oswald “The Penguin” Cobblepot’s gun-running enterprise. But the cultural commentators and academics who claimed that the city’s supervillains were dark reflections of Batman, and that they would vanish if he did, were proven right, though not in the way they had figured initially.

But the plague of supervillains had been replaced by something entirely more heartbreaking.

It was, again, immediately apparent (though, again, obvious in hindsight) that when a superhero leaves the city they have been protecting, while supervillainy may plummet, officer-related shootings will skyrocket. When local law enforcement entities have a superhero (many of whom with rules that prohibit killing) to take point for them, firearms get discharged less frequently. Nowhere would this have been more applicable than in Gotham City. Metropolis, after all, had Superman, who had blinding speed that could catch an erroneously or maliciously fired bullet. But this was Gotham. Plugging an unarmed and fleeing suspect in the back, no matter how guilty that suspect might have been, would have put that officer on Batman’s bad side.

And no one wanted to be on Batman’s bad side.

But Batman was gone, and the GCPD solved their first post-Batman crisis with two bullets. And once they had that hammer, everything started to look like nails.

The number of officer-related shooting swelled until they surpassed even their pre-Batman numbers within a year of the Dark Knight’s disappearance, and there was even an editorial in the Gotham Gazette by Vicki Vale, which posited that all it took for the city to unlearn the lessons Batman had taught them when he cleaned up the GCPD was a paltry twelve months.

As if to add a melancholy exclamation point to this sentiment, former Gotham City Mayor Hamilton Hill died in his home eleven days after the editorial went to print. Hamilton Hill had been Batman’s
first real success story. After Batman had exposed Hill’s connections to crime boss Rupert Thorne six months after his first sighting, Hill was impeached, removed from office, and charged with sixteen counts of bribery and corruption. After Thorne went to prison (removing a third of Gotham’s organized crime trifecta that Thorne shared with Sal Maroni and Carmine Falcone), Hill, strangely, was acquitted on all sixteen counts. Public accusations of jury tampering flew, but nothing the GCPD (or Batman) could make stick. After the trial, Hamilton Hill retired to his mansion and his wealth, and lived in relative seclusion until his death.

Hamilton Hill’s death certificate read that the former mayor had expired due to cardiac arrest. He was survived by his wife Janet and his son Hamilton Hill Jr. He was fifty-eight years old.

The number of officer-related shootings grew until, finally, it was too much for Gotham City Police Commissioner James Gordon to take. He resigned his post and made public his candidacy for mayor, vowing to take on Gotham’s police union, that threatened strike unless the offending officers were placed on paid administrative leave pending investigation, instead of said officers being fired and charged outright. Incumbent mayor Justin Hawthorne referred derisively to Gordon being the only cop-turned-politician he’d ever heard of to run against law and order.

Gordon won the election by 1.7 percent, two-tenths of a percentage point past Gotham City’s mandatory recall statute.

Election day wasn’t even over before Gotham’s new Police Commissioner, Tamara Hayden, and Mayor-Elect Gordon made enemies of each other in the press. The war of words escalated past inauguration day and into the following year until tensions tragically, regrettably, spilled over into violence.

Emily Shaddis, a thirty-three-year-old single mother of two, and community organizer who endorsed Gordon in his campaign (which some said was the deciding factor in handing the Park Row neighborhood--and the election-- to Gordon) was gunned down as she was collecting her mail from the row of mailboxes in the lobby of her apartment building. The building had no security cameras, but two separate eyewitnesses saw a caucasian male with brown hair, roughly five-ten, wearing jeans and a black leather jacket over a green sweater, exiting the apartment building and heading north up the street to where Park Row’s bars were located.

The Fat Tiger, a bar located on 82nd Street and Elm in Park Row, did have security cameras on premises, and had footage of a suspect matching the eyewitnesses’ description entering and sitting down for a beer.

The suspect was identified as thirty-eight-year-old Quincy Feldon, of the Otisburg section of Gotham City.

He was a sergeant in the GCPD.

And as per Gotham City’s police union bylaws, Sergeant Feldon was placed on paid administrative leave, pending an investigation.

Amid protests and a staggering lack of faith of a metropolitan area’s citizenry in the police force sworn to protect them is how Gotham City finds itself on a warm July day three years after The Joker died...

Daylight is not kind to Gotham City.
That which glimmers heavenly in the moonlight, from the gothic grandeur of Gotham Village to the gleaming skyscrapers of the Financial District are rendered quaint at best, or tacky at worst, by the unforgiving sun.

The only part of the city that sunlight even remotely compliments is Chinatown, whose tasteful architecture and art make it a crimson jewel in the middle of East Central Gotham’s gray Tartarus of clothing and furniture stores. So lovely was Chinatown during the day, in fact, that lodging in the area’s one unassuming building of luxury apartments were highly coveted by the city’s upwardly mobile.

And one such person made their way out of the apartment building’s front doors.

She wore an open black blazer over a white button up shirt, whose top three buttons were undone. A black pencil skirt hugged her legs and came to a stop two inches above her knees, and the noise of her black high heels hitting pavement provided percussion for the dim chorus of birds that had often congregated near the ashtray outside. She wore sleek black sunglasses over luminous green eyes, and her black pixie cut seemed to absorb light, rather than reflect it. Her eyebrows seemed permanently arched, and her full red lips appeared stuck in a smirk, as though she was assembled by whatever fates and furies that govern creation to grasp on whatever minor mistake one committed, and make a fool of them for it.

There was a contradiction to this woman who seemed so well put together, both physically and aesthetically. She exuded poise, grace, temptation, but all of that was weighted by something that a random passerby would notice, but only barely. It was like she was moving at twenty-three frames a second while the rest of the world was moving at the standard twenty-four.

But the thing that was weighing her down became more and more obvious the older the observer happened to be.

It’s regret, one might say. And about more than one thing.

Over her left shoulder, she wore a black Valentino purse, and in her right hand was a plain envelope addressed to a Mister Joshua Cassaday of Gotham City. And it took no feat of deductive prowess to determine what was inside that envelope, for this woman had handled it so much in seeming indecision that its contents had been molded into the paper itself.

It was a ring.

She walked to the curb in front of the apartment building, where a long black towncar was waiting for her. The rear door was held open by a man with a thin moustache and droll eyes. He was in the part of his sixties that few found, where the lines and creases in his face and his bald pate somehow rendered him more handsome than he potentially could have been in his forties. He was wearing a chauffeur's outfit with a black bowler hat like they wore in the old movies.

“Good morning, Miss Kyle,” the man said in an English accent that would have set the ladies’ fans-a-wavin’ on Masterpiece Theatre.

Selina Kyle smiled, though any genuine warmth in that smile was greatly dampened by the sunglasses she wore. “Good morning, Alfred.”

She got in the backseat of the towncar, and Alfred Pennyworth closed the door behind her. Selina had a moment to cool in the air conditioned rear of the car as Alfred made his way to the driver’s side door. He got in and eyed traffic before shifting into drive.
“And shall I be taking you to your office once this lunch date is complete?” Alfred asked as he waited for a truck to go past.

“Please,” Selina said. “Oh, and Alfred?”

“Yes?”

She looked at the envelope in her hand for a moment, before reaching over the front seat and handing it to Alfred.

“If you could put this in the mail, I’d really appreciate it.”

Alfred took the envelope, saw what was inside, and seemed struck. She could see from his body language, though she couldn’t see his face, that he wanted to extend some kind of sympathy to her, but didn’t want to extend past his professional bounds.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and left it at that.

“Yeah,” Selina said. “Me too.”

Of all the self-styled “supervillains” that found themselves thrust into irrelevance after Batman had vanished into the same thin air that had apparently produced him, none of them, not even The Carpenter or The Condiment King, had the success story of Selina Kyle, aka “Catwoman.”

For one particular reason (that she was too proud to admit, even to herself), being Catwoman was no longer viable. While she was reckoning with being a woman in her thirties with a rap sheet a mile long who hadn’t held down a legit job since she was seventeen, she hit upon a question that was tantalizing in its implications.

Who better to design security systems than someone who had launched herself to world renown bypassing them?

She called her friend Holly Robinson (who had moved to Keystone City), and Holly designed a website for Kyle Security. She then put out feelers for Gotham Gazette reporter Jack Ryder, who later contacted her for a human interest fluff piece where she got to talk about her new business. The two Gotham papers had taken an interest in Batman’s former foes trying to go straight, and this case was no different.

Selina didn’t expect anything to come of this little venture, and resigned herself in the corner of her mind that she didn’t like, to working fast food for the rest of her life, when her first ever customer called her brand new work phone.

Bruce Wayne.

And Wayne had plenty of facilities across the country that he assured her required her expertise, if not for design, then at least for consultation.

Both the Gazette and the Herald caught wind of this, and Bruce Wayne was more than happy to give interviews praising not only Selina’s drive to establish herself legitimately, but her keen, pragmatic mind and her aptitude for her chosen profession.

And this was how Selina Kyle became a millionaire.
Word of her new enterprise traveled fast, and before she knew it, she was consulting for Kord Industries, GothCorp, Queen International, and…

…and she drew the line at LexCorp, though. She’d had limited dealings with Lex Luthor at the occasional villain team-up and, well, he struck her as kind of a prick.

And Bruce kept tabs on her, helped her find a floor of an office building in Otisburg where she could hire an entire staff, asked her how she was doing, all the hallmarks of a well-meaning benefactor.

But these little check-ins soon grew to lunch dates every few days or so, and from there Selina Kyle and Bruce Wayne grew to be…

Friends.

Yup.

Friends.

He was hot, in a romance novel kind of way. Not the old romance novels, where the Handsome Man wore frilly shirts, had a long ponytail, and rode a horse. No, the new romance novels, where the Handsome Man was less of a draw than the Sharper Image catalogue he seemed to live in permanently. All very corporate and hairless and dressed in Hugo Boss.

And he didn’t seem to be interested in her, which, okay, fine, but here was the damnedest thing: For a guy with the reputation Bruce Wayne had of being a “Billionaire Playboy,” he didn’t seem to do a whole lot of playing.

In the two-and-a-half years Selina Kyle had known Bruce Wayne, she’d never seen him date anyone.

But hey, Bruce was a nice guy, they enjoyed each other’s company, and he liked to hear her Catwoman stories.

And it was in Dini’s at midtown, with each of them having the grilled chicken and asparagus, where she got to tell her latest one.

“Why the whip, though?” Bruce asked, his blue eyes glinting with the genuine kind of curiosity instead of the perverted kind.

“Okay,” Selina said, and looked around before she launched into this one. She didn’t want any old society ladies dropping their china or whatever at what she was about to say. Selina and Bruce seemed to be the only ones in Dini’s at the time, however, save for the tuxedoed waitstaff, who were placing folded napkins onto the oak tables.

“Okay,” Selina said again. “You know how… Everyone liked to make hay about me and the whip like I was a, uh…”

“Dominatrix?” Bruce asked flatly, as though he was trying to iron all connotations from the word, good or ill, using only his voice.

“Right,” Selina said. “And by the way, I got letters when I was in the women’s wing of Blackgate from these men—and some women, I’m not gonna lie—asking me to break out and step on them? Which, you know… the whole dom thing seems like a lot of work.”

“I’m not one to judge,” Bruce said.
“Neither am I, whatever gets you there, but--That’s not the point I’m trying to make here. The point is: The whip is genius. You know how the whip is genius?”

“How?”

“If I run in to fight a guy, and I’m carrying a knife, and I drop the knife, the guy can pick it up and stab me with it. Same thing with a gun, I could get shot. But I fight a guy with a bullwhip, and I drop the whip, and he picks it up? He’s going to hurt himself before he ever hurts me. Because a whip is kind of a specialty item.”

Bruce smiled. “Someone hurt themselves with the whip?”

Selina hunched over her food with a broad smile. When she was telling these stories to Bruce, all the gravitas and stature of “The Businesswoman Selina Kyle” vanished, and she was once again the orphan from the East End who stole to survive and looked good doing it. There was a giddiness and bravado that, though consumed secondhand, still provided a contact high.

“You ever hear of Killer Moth?” Selina asked.

Bruce furrowed his brow. “Can’t say that I have.”

“Drury Walker,” Selina said. “He tried to market himself to the mob and other costumes as ‘Batman-for-Criminals,’ you pay him and he protects your interests. He had gadgets, a Cocoon Gun, though I never saw him use it. He even used to sell these little Moth-Signal beacons...”

“Was he any good at being Batman for the Bad Guys?”

“Well, if you’ve never heard of him,” Selina said. “I think his biggest claim to fame was being the first villain to get his ass handed to him by Batgirl. Anyway, one night, I break into Johnny Vittorio’s house. He was a capo for the Falcone outfit. I go up to his empty bedroom, try to crack his safe, and I realize that Vittorio was dumb enough to hire Killer Moth.”

“Oh-huh.”

“And I realize this,” Selina said, “because he crashes through the bedroom window, right into me. We both got laid out on the bedroom floor, and my whip came unlatched from my suit. I try to get to my feet, and I see he has my whip and he’s itching to use it.”

Selina covered her mouth to stifle a giggle fit before continuing.

“He cracks the whip… splits his mask in half… and slices his forehead open…”

Selina’s giggles were full laughs now. Bruce was laughing as well, but he seemed to be the sort whose face laughed but no sound came out of his mouth. Just breaths that sounded wheezier than breaths from a guy as apparently jacked as Bruce Wayne had any right to sound.

“So he’s… he’s holding his forehead, his cheap little mask on the floor in pieces. He knows his mask is busted, so he asks me from behind his hand…”

Selina put her hand up to mimic the poor, accident prone Killer Moth.

“‘Do you have any Scotch Tape?’”

She laughed even harder. Bruce, apparently terrified of sound coming out, put his hand to his
mouth. Selina never would have thought she could describe a big strapping fellow like Bruce Wayne as “geisha-like,” but, well…

“I’m standing there in my Catsuit, skin-tight spandex and leather with just the pouch on my shoulder to hold lockpicks and these little smoke bombs I used to use, I say ‘Sure, Moth, I keep it in between the blowtorch and the ketchup.’”

It was a laugh-line, and she laughed, but it wasn’t as loud as the last one. The laughs eventually subsided until she was just staring at her food.

“You miss it, don’t you?” Bruce asked.

And once again, in that moment, she was on the Gotham rooftops, wind through her hair, haul under her arm, the sound of sirens off in the distance that had no hope of catching her. It was only an instant, but the instant passed, and she told Bruce the truth.

“No,” Selina said.

“You don’t?”

Bruce was fishing for a reason, and the truth popped up in her mind.

Because he’s gone…

But she didn’t say it. She settled on something else that was just as true, but far less embarrassing.

“I’m thirty-five,” Selina said. “I had to leave Neverland sometime.”

An uncomfortable silence. A pall. Selina literally shook herself to snap out of it.

“Sorry,” Selina said. “It’s just… I mailed Josh’s ring back to him today.”

“Oh,” Bruce said. “I’m sorry. That… That couldn’t have been easy.”

His eyebrows raised, and the look in his cobalt eyes was genuine.

You really mean that, don’t you?

Selina remembered the Christmas party months back at Wayne Tower. It was just after she had broken off the engagement with Josh, and she had told Bruce about it. She was sad. She was heartbroken. She was drunk…

...and she made a pass.

It wasn’t a sloppy one, or an embarrassing one. She and Bruce were both leaning against a table, watching the rest of the staff have a good time in the ballroom where everything was set up. She set her glass of champagne down, put her hand on his, tucked a bit of raven hair behind her ear, and gave him The Eyes.

And Bruce took his hand away. He looked at her, and with a voice that matched the concern in his eyes, said…

“Let’s not do anything we’re both going to regret.”

Selina had had nothing but contempt for men who used the term “FriendZone,” as though women existed only to dispense sexual favors to the men who deigned to cross the barest minimum threshold
of basic decency, but now that she found herself in a Bizarro version of that, she had to admit, it wounded the ego.

“I hear a hug helps in times like these,” Bruce had said, and opened his arms a little bit. She fell into them. Her arms tried to wrap around him as tightly as his did around her.

And he was right.

It helped.

“I beg your pardon.”

Back from her reverie, Selina looked up to see Alfred standing next to Bruce.

“I do hope I’m not interrupting anything,” Alfred said.

“No,” Bruce said, straightening up in his seat. “Is there something wrong?”

“There’s nothing wrong, Master Bruce,” Alfred said. “It’s just that I’ve received a telephone call from Clark, and he was inquiring as to whether the two of you--and this is a direct quote from him, sir-- ‘were still on for tonight.’”

“That is tonight, isn’t it?” Bruce asked, a smile crawling across his lips. “Yes. Yes, we are. Thank you, Alfred.”

“You are most welcome, sir,” Alfred said, before departing.

Bruce smiled, and said “A friend is visiting me from out of town.”

This trivial conversation raised a small alarm within Selina, as she’d never heard Alfred refer to anyone solely by their first name before. It as always “Master” this, and “Miss” that.

Selina wondered just who this “Clark” guy was.
Chapter 3: Gun, With Occasional Hella

At Wayne Manor (often adorned with the adverb ‘stately’ by press both foreign and domestic), there exists a garage bigger than most people’s homes, containing no less that sixteen luxury automobiles. Contained within are the Lamborghinis, Porches, and Bugatti that everyone on the other side of the great gulf of wealth would imagine would be in a rich guy’s massive garage, but there was one car of note in particular.

It was a silver 2003 Dodge Stratus, and aside from an unsightly line of rust that ran along the bottom of the driver’s side doors, it was perfectly maintained. The way that it stood out among the other more high profile and ostentatious vehicles in this garage is the only way this vehicle stood out at all.

And that was precisely the way that Bruce Wayne preferred it. Because this was the vehicle he used to go undercover as an average Gotham City citizen.

Which he liked to do at least once a year. Namely the first game of the yearly four game stretch between the Gotham Knights and the Metropolis Meteors.

And he liked to watch this game, whether it was played in Gotham City or Metropolis in a given year, with Clark Kent.

There were people not related to Bruce Wayne by blood with whom he shared a deep familial bond, like Alfred Pennyworth, who raised Bruce like one of his own from the night Bruce’s parents were murdered. Like with Dick Grayson, the first Robin and current Nightwing of Bludhaven; a former circus acrobat whose tragic origin mirrored his own. Like with Barbara Gordon, the former Batgirl and current Oracle, whose grit and determination to fight crime blossomed into astounding information gathering and computer skills after The Joker shot her through the spine and put her in a wheelchair.

And like, it must be said, with Jason Todd, the second Robin, who The Joker murdered a year before he was murdered himself.

Similarly, there were people who found their way into the deepest chamber’s of the former Dark Knight’s heart. Two of them.

The first was Talia al Ghul, who was almost as devious as she was breathtaking. She was the daughter of Ra’s al Ghul the leader of The League of Assassins. The mission of The League is to exterminate ninety percent of the world’s population to, in his words, “purify” it. Even though he used Lazarus Pits to resurrect himself every time he died, he has seemed fully aware, for all the time Batman knew him, that his time on Earth was approaching its end, and in hopes to produce a male heir to lead The League upon his death, had decided to betrothe Talia to Batman. For the ten years she had known him, she had been torn between loyalty to her father’s genocidal mission and her genuine love for Bruce.

And then there was Selina, and she was… she was Selina.

But when it came to his friends that were actually on the friend level, Bruce Wayne was proud to say Clark Kent was his best.

Bruce Wayne wouldn’t have thought it possible for someone as physically imposing as Clark to
project a manner so mild that it instantly put everyone around him at ease, but in this case, it was true. Maybe it was those blocky glasses that acted as a buffer between his intense eyes and the outside world. Clark Kent was the kind of person who actually meant it when he told someone to have a good day. So disarming was Clark that when he asked Alfred to just refer to him by his first name, Alfred did so with neither protest nor intermittent slip-up.

Yeah, Superman had that kind of effect on people.

The first game of the post-July four game series (as, in the estimation of both men, no baseball played before July even counted) was in Gotham that year, and Bruce stressed, as he did every year, that Clark fly to Wayne Manor so they could take the Dodge to the stadium, and then drive back. “I don’t want you flying off from some busy corner, making yourself conspicuous,” Bruce had said.

To which Clark replied “I’ve been doing this my whole life. If I can fool Kansas, I can fool Gotham City."

The drive from the Wayne Manor grounds to the downtown stadium was thirty minutes, as traffic was light. That stadium, of course, being Wayne Stadium, named so after Bruce had offered to pay for the stadium’s construction himself, undercutting the offers from more than a few multinational corporations who just wanted to chip in for more advertising space. No one’s taxes went up, and the “jobs for downtown” that so often came promised with the building of a new stadium, shock of all shocks, actually came to downtown.

Bruce Wayne was a philanthropist, in addition to being a businessman. He spent his billions to reduce poverty and increase access to information technology. He poured great sums into Arkham Asylum to treat the mentally ill, and he proudly hired not only paroled felons, but the homeless to work for Wayne Enterprises at comfortable wages. But he was still old money, and there was a snobby, Patrician part of him that would rather have eaten broken glass than to drive downtown and walk into a Dunkin’ Donuts Stadium to watch the Knights play.

Clark and Bruce sat halfway up to the nosebleeds along the first base foul line. Bruce offered Clark seats in the sky box, but even though Clark was born on another planet, he was still raised in Kansas, and the prospect of sitting next to all those rich people would have made him feel weird. They both ordered large sodas from concessions among a throng of other spectators that ordered beer. Bruce didn’t drink because, even though he had been three years retired as Batman, he didn’t like his senses dulled. Clark didn’t drink because nothing got him drunk, and he thought just the taste of beer was gross. Bruce wore a Knights cap and the hood of a dark blue hoodie over it because he didn’t want anyone walking up to him and saying “Hey! You look just like Bruce Wayne!” Which was rich (no pun intended), as he’d never seen anyone walk up to his muscle-bound friend with the black spit-curl and glasses and say “Hey! You look just like Superman!”

And that still pissed Bruce off after all these years.

Bottom of the third with one out, tied at zero with no hits for either team. Eighth in the order for the Knights, Shortstop Mike Hernandez, stepped up to the plate.

“Dylan Irkner’s on the mound,” Clark said. “He has an ERA of 2.38 this season. He keeps it up like this, he has the Cy Young in the bag. And Hernandez has an average of…”

“Two-oh-five,” Bruce said as he analyzed Hernandez’s stance, which foot he was favoring at the plate, where his hands were on the bat. He studied Irkner’s eyeline on the mound, as through that, he was checking where Metropolis catcher Biff Robinson’s glove was going to be. Cross reference the pitching repertoire with the batting average, and...
“Foul off the first base line,” Bruce said.

“Right,” Clark said, nodding and smirking in a way that dripped patronization. “Suuuuure.”

Irkner threw the ball and the bat cracked. The little speck of white sailed across the first base line and bounced harmlessly off the top of the Gotham Knights dugout.

As both Hernandez and Irkner warmed up for the next pitch, Bruce kept his eye on them as Clark slowly looked over at Bruce.

“Well? What now, Mister Wizard?”

Bruce’s analysis of the two men on the field revealed something surprising.

“Ground rule double in left,” Bruce said, his eyes raised.

“You do know it’s impossible to deduct something like that, right?”

“All the outfielders are bunched in,” Bruce said. “They don’t think he’s a threat.”

“Wait, they’re…”

Crack!

The ball rocketed into the air, and Metropolis left-fielder Washington Capp knew he was in danger. Try as he might, slide as he might, he couldn’t make it to the ball in time, and that ball bounced off the left field grass and into the hands of a lucky lady in a Green Lantern t-shirt, who reached over the left field wall to get it.

As Hernandez jogged to his rightful position at second base, and as the Gotham crowd cheered at the Knights’ first hit of the game, Clark sighed and looked at Bruce.

“Faster than a speeding bullet,” Clark said, confident no one around him was listening to them. “More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound… and there are days when I’d trade that in for the ability to do that Sherlock Holmes thing you do.”

Bruce looked at Clark with one raised eyebrow.

“Not a lot of days,” Clark said. “But… there are some.”

Now it was Bruce’s turn to say “Suuuuure.”

Clark looked at the field as the next Gotham batter took the plate, before looking back at Bruce.

“You miss it, don’t you?” Clark asked. “I mean it’s one thing to analyze a baseball game, but that thing here in Gotham? That organizer in Park Row who got killed by that cop. Allegedly, I mean…”

“Emily Shaddis,” Bruce said with bass in his voice, and one thought rampaged throughout his mind.

If Quincy Feldon killed that girl, I can prove it.

But entertaining the notion of turning the hands of the grandfather clock in his study to ten-forty-seven, of seeing the entire wall slide back, of walking into the elevator that would bring him down to the Batcave, of picking up that old life again, was met with a sound and a sight.

The sound was of pearls hitting the pavement in a dark alley: the moment that life began.
The sight was of a mallet on a collision course with the skull of his greatest enemy: the moment that life ended.

Any therapist just stumbling out of school with a degree in their hands would mark that as a symptom of PTSD, but Bruce saw them as signs warding him from a great hazard, guiding him back to the path.

Bruce hunched forward in his seat, with his elbows on his knees. “I have to ask… Is it the money?”

Clark pinched his nose beneath his glasses, knowing where this was going.

“Because we have scientists on our side. People with magic powers, aliens, demons, Speedsters, two people who stretch to incredible sizes and shapes, at least two ghosts the last time I checked, an Amazon princess, the king of Atlantis, and the daughter of Trigon. Anything I can do, they can do better. So again, I have to ask, is it the money? Oliver go broke again?”

“No, Oliver didn’t…” Clark sighed, and paused for a bit. Bruce knew what it looked like when Superman was thinking as fast as he could.

“Do you know what Wally told me the other day?”

Wally West. The Flash. Keystone City liked to call him its favorite son. Little did they know, Wally was born in Nebraska.

“What?” Bruce asked.

“He said you were that little voice in the back of everyone’s head. The one that tells them they’re about to have one too many and makes them leave the bar while they can still drive. The one that tells them that something that seems too good to be true probably is.”

“Wally would call that a buzzkill.”

“I call that a conscience,” Clark said, and leaned over to him.

“We miss you,” Clark said. “And the ones you don’t think miss you? They miss you most of all.”

Bruce just stared ahead at the game with nothing to say. Clark sighed again and leaned back into his seat. He took off his glasses and rubbed his face before putting them back on.

“I’m going to tell you something you don’t want to hear,” Clark said.

“Why stop now?”

“And because it’s coming from me,” Clark said, ignoring him, “you know—or I hope you know—that I’m not trying to hurt you when I say it. You’re my friend, and of all the honors that have been given to me in this life, the privilege of saying that ranks high among them.”

Bruce finally looked at Clark and nodded. Clark was still looking ahead, but he knew he saw it.

“A lot of us don’t have reasons as personal as yours for doing what we do,” Clark said. “Sometimes, it happens to us by accident. Sometimes we’re chosen. And there are some of us…”

Clark pointed a thumb at his chest to indicate himself.

“…see themselves as a free public utility. And the ones with the personal reasons are the first ones to put that life down. Ten percent of the time, they leave—if they leave—because they accomplished
what the set out to do, but ninety percent of the time? It’s because this life breaks them.”

Clark slumped down in his seat, his eyebrows hooding his blue eyes. To Bruce, he looked like the world’s biggest fifth grader, forced to own up to an F in Geography.

“If I were placing bets,” Clark said, “I would have bet on something happening to Selina to be the thing that did you in.”

Bruce turned his entire upper body to look at Clark, preparing himself to battle the urge to break his own hand cracking his Kansas farmboy friend right in the face if he didn’t navigate what he was about to say correctly.

“What happened to Jason was horrible,” Clark said. “So horrible that I can’t put it into words. But you powered through it, and I was proud of you. I figured that maybe if something happened to Alfred, you’d hang the cape up, but then again, maybe you’d go harder. Try to make it up to the man who raised you. But Selina? She’s that little bit of hope for a normal life you just kept chasing that we all know you’d never take. Once she went, if she went, I figured that’s what would do you in.”

Clark slowly turned his head to look at Bruce. His expression held neither warmth nor pity.

“Imagine my surprise what all it took to bring you down was that damned clown getting his ticket punched.”

Bruce knew that Clark considered himself “Clark Kent” first and “Superman” second, but he also knew when that slipped. Nothing stung quite like The Last Son of Krypton using his face to express the gravest of disappointment in you.

“I don’t kill,” Clark said. “Neither do you. But just because I wasn’t happy about that… that thing dying doesn’t mean I was sad. The story of how he got into your head and stayed there to the point that you couldn’t exist without him—not Bruce Wayne, you—well… That’s the story I’d really like to hear.”

Bruce’s insides were swirling with horrid emotions that he didn’t want to put names or faces to. When he was Batman, Bruce used to like this as a way of interrogating himself. He was aware enough of his overweening need to be right about everything, so he used these emotions and the people around him to ferret out his own fallacies and weaknesses. But he wasn’t Batman anymore, and he just wanted it all gone.

There was a question Bruce liked to ask Clark when he didn’t want to talk anymore. It was time to ask it now.

“How’s Lois?” Bruce asked.

And Clark knew that was a sign to back off.

“It’s like that, huh?” Clark asked.

“Yeah,” Bruce said. “It’s like…”

Bruce felt his phone vibrate in the pocket of his hoodie. He sighed.

“I swear, if that’s Elon Musk again…”

He got his phone out and rehearsed his response (“No, Elon, I will not smoke weed on a podcast
with you.”), when he saw the screen.

It said, in big block letters: “SECURE LINE.”

It was the line Alfred used when either Dick or Barbara needed help on the crimefighting side of things.

And it hadn’t been used in three years.

“I’m sorry,” Bruce said standing up. “I have to take this.”

Clark nodded and said “Sure,” as Bruce shimmied his way down the aisle past the other people in the row.

He walked up the cement steps past fans in varying stages of drunkenness before he got to the sparsely crowded hallway where the bathrooms and the concession stands were.

Bruce answered. “Alfred?”

“Yes, sir,” Alfred said on the other line. “I’ve received a call from Master Grayson and, well…”

“Did you remind him I don’t do this anymore?”

“I did, Master Bruce,” Alfred said. “But…”

“But what?”

“I believe Master Grayson should tell you himself.”

Bruce rubbed his eyes. “Put him through.”

Just then, a generously overweight man in a black Knights shirt staggered into Bruce, almost knocking the phone out of his hand, yelling to someone on the other end of the hall that “I’M TELLIN’ YOU, FINSTER CAN’T HIT FOR SHIT!”

Bruce put the phone back to his ear to hear Dick ask “Bruce?”

“What is it?” Bruce asked.

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**Bludhaven. One Hour Earlier…**

Twenty-five miles of highway heading south is what separates Gotham City from its sister city Bludhaven, and it has often been said that the refuse too foul for Gotham washes up in Bludhaven eventually.

It has also been said that crime operates in Gotham City from the ground up, whereas the crime in Bludhaven operates from the top down. Gotham’s criminals are upjumped gangsters and, until three years ago, costumed freaks. They got their tendrils into the stations above them: Mayors, DAs, cops, clergy, all were theoretically vulnerable to Gotham’s underworld while, theoretically just as likely to be sterling people under immense pressure from the iniquity and vice that surrounded them. It was possible for the citizens of Gotham City to elect a good person mayor of their city. Indeed, in the estimation of a great many of the citizenry, they had done exactly that by electing James Gordon.

There was no possibility in Bludhaven. No theory. There was no choice between a good person and a bad person for mayor because a certain strain of bad people in Bludhaven were bred for politics.
The city had been in the hands of the corrupt longer than any of its residents had been alive. Street-level organized crime in Bludhaven was less a driving economic force, and more like a lamprey, attaching itself to the city’s institutions for sustenance. And good people in Bludhaven, those civic-minded enough to enter public service to attempt to make the city one worth living in, had a habit of having their illusions or their lives torn away from them.

Take, for example, the young lady on the motorcycle, tearing down the Little Neck Narrows Bridge that joined one section of the cesspool that was Bludhaven to another. The woman in the corset, with wild red hair flowing from under a black mask decorated with garish caricatures of conventional femininity, like blue eyeshadow around the eye holes, and a red kiss of paint where her lips should be.

The woman with the guns on her hip.

In better days, she was Kate Riordan, and she was the latest of a long and fruitful tradition of Riordans in the Bludhaven Police Department, each good and exemplary officers. By the time she graduated from the academy, she was the twentieth living Riordan ever to have served in the BPD.

The Mayor of Bludhaven, Sean Holcomb, ever hungry for a media opportunity, decided to celebrate the Riordan family by inviting them all to an event at Melville Park, where they would jointly be awarded the key to the city.

But Mayor Holcomb, as mentioned, was corrupt, and eager to send a message to any other officers in the BPD that people like the Riordans; people who got famous for being good cops, were every last bit as touchable as street dealers. Clean cops in a city like Bludhaven would not be tolerated. It upset the natural order.

So Mayor Holcomb had the stand upon which they were to assemble in Melville Park rigged with explosives.

Of the twenty members of the Riordan family who served in the BPD in attendance at Melville Park that day, Kate was the only one who survived the explosion. She was disfigured in the blast, and the trauma took some of her memory, but she knew damned well who did this to her.

Like many in this world with tragedies in their past and a grudge to bear, Kate Riordan turned to a life of costumed villainy.

She wore a red and black leather outfit, complete with corset. She donned a mask, and took the name “Hella.” And she would not rest until she made Mayor Holcomb pay for what he’d done.

And now, on her motorcycle, trailing the mayor’s limousine in the Little Neck Narrows Bridge, Hella was closer to that goal than she’d ever been. She took the Desert Eagle from her right hip while steadying the bike with her left. She took aim, and fired a .50 Action Express into the left-rear tire of the limo.

The thunderous sound of the gun drowned out the pop of the exploding tire. Hella slowed her bike down as the limo tried to right itself on its three remaining tires, but settled for grinding to a halt in the middle of the unpopulated bridge.

Hella stopped the bike. She dismounted, gun still in hand, and walked to the driver’s side of the limo. She used the barrel to knock on the tinted glass of the driver’s side window.

The driver of the limo, a Hispanic man in a suit with a five o’clock shadow and a paunch, rolled the window down.
“What’s your name?” asked Hella.

The driver didn’t say anything.

“I don’t bite unless I’m hungry. What’s your name?”

“Julio,” the driver finally said.

“Alright, Julio,” Hella said. “If you unlock the rear doors so I can get to the mayor, I won’t shoot you in the face. Sound like a plan?”

Julio didn’t do anything. It didn’t appear to be defiance, though. He seemed to be in shock.

Hella tilted her head. “Think of how big the list of people you want to die for is. I’m willing to bet that no one in human history has ever put the guy who signs their paychecks in their top five. We want to be smart this evening, don’t we?”

Julio looked from Hella, to the gun she was holding, and then back to Hella again, before hitting the button on the driver’s door that unlocked the rear of the limo.

“Yes,” Hella said. “We want to be smart.”

Then she walked away.

Hella holstered the Desert Eagle on her right hip, and pulled her Glock from the holster on her left. Seventeen in the magazine, plus one in the chamber. Mayor Holcomb had three guys in his security detail, and she was going in at point blank range.

She was kicking herself that she didn’t bring a grenade with her. But then again, she wanted to see that bastard’s eyes before she blew them out the back of his head.

Hella took a deep breath, quickly opened the door to the back of the limo, and blind-fired a bullet inside, before ducking back out of the way to avoid retaliatory fire.

That fire never came.

After a few moments, Hella risked a peek into the back of the limo.

There didn’t appear to be anyone inside.

That wasn’t exactly true.

Downtown in Bludhaven there was a cop bar called Hogan’s Alley, where BPD officers, off-duty and on, active and retired, convened to drink and swap stories and rumors. Bludhaven being Bludhaven, most of these cops were, if not, corrupt, than at least privy to information they shouldn’t have.

Like how a contact told tale of some chick in a weird black mask who showed up to a black market sale and bought up all the .50 Action Express bullets they had.

The cops in Hogan’s Alley could talk about stuff like this in the open air, free of judgement, surrounded by their brothers and sisters in blue… except for the bartender, but what was he gonna do?
It should be noted at this juncture, however, that the day shift bartender at Hogan’s Alley was one Dick Grayson. And this is how he learned Hella was back in town.

About five years ago, just as he was starting his college education, Batman fired Dick from his post as Robin. His performance in the field was suffering, and Batman, ever the perfectionist, was most displeased indeed. In hindsight, Dick could have said that it was because he was dividing his time between school, his duties in Gotham, and his work in the Teen Titans, but the fact of the matter was, Dick knew (as well as Bruce) that he was just growing up and getting restless. He’d become more like Bruce than he’d care to admit even now, half a decade later. As much as Bruce liked to say Dick was his partner, Dick knew he was a sidekick. And he didn’t see that in his future for much longer.

So he moved to Bludhaven, and became a hero in his own right, with some help from WayneTech’s own Lucius Fox on the gadget and transport side. He took his new name from a Kryptonian legend of old that Superman taught him.

Nightwing…

He had visions of a thrilling motorcycle chase through the streets of Bludhaven when he told Mayor Holcomb about Hella’s resumed presence in the city (as corrupt and slimy as Holcomb was, Nightwing hadn’t strayed as far from Batman’s teachings so as to let someone murder the mayor, no matter how rotten he was), but Nightwing knew it was easier to take his spot in the limousine, tell the driver to take flashier routes, and when Hella struck, he’d be there.

So when Hella peeked her head into the limousine, she saw Nightwing sitting there, all five ten of him in black leather and kevlar, a blue insignia across his chest and shoulders: the V-like shape of a flying bird. A stylized domino mask, similarly bird-shaped, covered his blue eyes.

In his lap was one of his escrima sticks, which he picked up and used to give a friendly wave when Hella saw him.

“Hi!” Nightwing said.

Hella silently brought her Glock up, and in the time it took her to do that, Nightwing quickly, yet gently, brought the escrima stick under her chin.

His escrima sticks were equipped with a fifty-thousand volt charge, and all Nightwing had to do was press a button. Less than a second of buzzing and flopping later, Hella was out cold on the floor of the limo.

Nightwing looked down at his incapacitated villain and sighed. “Well, *that* was exhausting.”

“I feel sorry for her,” Oracle said through his earpiece. “But I have to say, I’d take her just a bit more seriously if she called herself something else.”

Oracle (Barbara Gordon, currently in the on-again stage of their on-again, off-again relationship) moved to Bludhaven last year. Partly because her father, Jim Gordon, had been elected mayor of Gotham City, and it was hard to do the superhero information broker thing with a security detail outside her clock tower apartment. But mostly to be with him.

Or at least, that’s how Nightwing chose to flatter himself.

“I know,” Nightwing said. “She had her reasons for picking the name, but who says ‘Hella’ anymore?”
“Oregon stoners with blue hair,” Oracle said.

Nightwing pushed a button by his seat, next to the limo’s mini-bar.

“You okay in there, Julio?”

“Yeah,” Julio said over the intercom. “Went down like you said.”

Nightwing didn’t think Hella would waste any of her bullets on the driver. If he thought she would have, he’d have driven the limo himself with no one in the back.

“You did great,” Nightwing said. “My partner’s already contacted the BPD. Just sit tight, and we’ll get you--”

A bullet from a rifle dented the bulletproof roof of the limo before Nightwing heard the shot proper.

He yelled “JULIO, GET DOWN!” before he dragged Hella’s unconscious body all the way into the limo and slammed the door behind her. He got down onto the floor with her.

“What was that?” Oracle asked.

“Someone took a shot at the limo.”

“Sniper rifle?”

“Not sure.”

“I’d say it was Deadshot, but…”

“I know,” Nightwing said. “He doesn’t miss.”

There was no second shot.

Nightwing waited until he heard sirens in the distance before he got out of the limo. He quickly analyzed the bullet dent in the limo’s roof to see where the shot might have came from, and determined that it came from a rooftop to the north of him, across the bridge and into the city.

He saw the lights from police cruisers coming across the bridge from the south, and decided to make himself scarce. He didn’t have his Nightcycle with him, but he did have his grapnel gun, and he figured that could cover its fair share of ground.

It was half an hour before he found a clue, but what a clue it was. The shooter left his rifle on the roof of a small, empty office building a quarter of a mile to the north. It was an old weapon: bolt action, and quite possibly military issue.

“Our shooter left their gun behind,” Nightwing said.

“Did you leave your scanner on the bed again?” Oracle asked.

Nightwing reached down into his boot, to produce said scanner. “No, I have it with me.”

It was a small cylindrical device (provided by Lucius Fox, of course) with a long screen on the side. He pressed a button at the bottom, and the screen lit up. He shone the light on the rifle and found…

“Fingerprints,” Nightwing said, smirking. “Finally, a criminal that hasn’t been ruined by CSI.”
“Everything’s just coming up roses for you tonight, isn’t it?”

“They should be over to you by now.”

“Yes,” Oracle said. “Got ‘em. Just let me run them through the database.”

“Y’know, it takes the Bludhaven police weeks to match prints.”

“BPD doesn’t have my processing power,” Oracle said. “Annnnnnd… we have a match.”

“And who’s our lucky winner this evening?” Nightwing asked.

Nothing.

“Oracle?”

Still nothing.

“Sweetie, what is it?”

Nightwing had only rarely heard the kind of gravity in Barbara Gordon’s voice when she said…

“We have to call Batman… Right now.”

“Oracle, who do these prints belong to?”

“I sent them to the readout on your scanner,” Oracle said.

Nightwing looked at the screen of his scanner and saw a name. He blinked a few times, still not believing what he just saw.

“Is there a way this can be wrong?” Nightwing asked.

“No,” Oracle said. “I’m putting you through the secure line now.”

A few moments passed until Alfred Pennyworth’s voice came through his earpiece.

“Master Grayson?”

This line had the benefit of as many layers of complex encryption that Oracle could provide, so he was grateful no one could hear his old butler use his real name. He was also still grateful, even in the weirdness of the moment, that Alfred had stopped calling him “Master Dick.”

“Hey, Alfred, uhh… I really need to talk to Bruce right now.”

“This is the secure line,” Alfred said. “This is only used for…”

“I know,” Nightwing said. “It’s… it’s that kind of weird.”

“Master Bruce is at a baseball game with Clark,” Alfred said. “Is it something I can help with?”

Nightwing was enough of a Superman fanboy for his ears to perk up when he heard Clark’s name, and he regretted that he had to put that aside for now.

“Bruce would believe me,” Nightwing said. “You won’t.”

“I see,” Alfred said, not sounding upset. In fact, he sounded in awe. “The matter is *that* bizarre,
“That’s what I love about you, Alfred. You’re understanding.”

“I’ll connect you presently,” Alfred said.

Another few moments of silence, until he heard…

“I’M TELLIN’ YOU, FINSTER CAN’T HIT FOR SHIT!”

That… sure didn’t sound like Bruce Wayne.

“Bruce?” Nightwing asked, barely keeping the credulity out of his voice.

“What is it?” Bruce asked over the line.

No “Hi,” no “Howya doin?” Don’t ever change, Bruce…

“Long story short,” Nightwing said, not even bothering to introduce himself, “someone shot at me from a rooftop in Bludhaven. The shooter left the gun on site, and I found prints. Oracle scanned them, found a match, and, uh….”

What he was about to say seemed so implausible that he stopped, blinked some more, and took a deep breath to see if, during this stalling, the world’s default state of relative sanity would somehow reassert itself.

“Who did the prints belong to?” Bruce asked, some of the old bass creeping into his voice.

Nightwing blinked again, and said…

“Nora Fries.”
Chapter 4: The Death of The Green Comet

Years ago, a man named Victor Fries met a woman named Nora Patterson. He was a doctor, one of the world’s leading authorities on cryogenics. She was a dancer, and the most beautiful woman Victor had ever seen. Despite being seeming opposites at first glance (or, perhaps, because of that fact), they fell in love and got married.

Eighteen months after the wedding, Nora Fries was diagnosed with MacGregor’s Syndrome; a disease that causes necrosis in bone marrow. MacGregor’s Syndrome was not even treatable by most doctors, let alone curable.

Rather than let his wife go, Victor took a job at a research and development firm called GothCorp. There, he used company resources to put Nora into cryostasis, preserving her in ice until a cure for MacGregor’s Syndrome could be found.

Ferris Boyle, the CEO of GothCorp, found out about Victor’s activities, decided that they amounted to nothing more than a gross misappropriation of funds, and, flanked by security guards, went to Victor’s lab to confront him. That confrontation turned physical, however, and in the ensuing fracas, Victor was doused with his own cryogenic coolant, dropping his body temperature severely and rendering him unable to survive outside of sub-zero temperatures.

Victor managed to spirit not only the cryogenically preserved Nora out of the ruins of the GothCorp lab, but one of his insulation suits, which he managed to reverse engineer to keep the cold inside, so that Victor might survive outside of the freezing temperatures he needed to live.

In order for Victor to continue his efforts to cure Nora, he would need resources beyond his grasp. He managed to devise a cryonic rifle that could freeze its targets, and set out for a life of crime. He ran afoul of the GCPD during these repeated escapades, and, of course, Batman. The Gotham City Gazette called him “Mister Freeze.”

Mister Freeze, much like all the major players in Batman’s orbit, resigned himself to staying in Arkham after The Joker died and Batman disappeared. Victor sued the city to remand the frozen Nora Fries into his care within Arkham, and won. To this day, Victor continued his research and experiments from within his special cell in Arkham Asylum.

And now, many years later, standing in a concrete hallway in Wayne Stadium, Nightwing was telling Bruce Wayne that a frozen, terminally ill woman had shot at him from a Bludhaven rooftop.

“That’s impossible,” Bruce said into his phone. “Nora Fries is…”

“A wife-cicle,” Nightwing said. “I know. But that’s what the prints are telling me.”

“Is there a chance the scan could be wrong?”

“Oracle ran them,” Nightwing said. “Her level of computer mojo is Greek to me, but if you want to tell Babs she’s wrong, be my guest. You’re not the one who has to sleep on the couch after you do it.”

Bruce blinked. “What are you going to do now?”

“Eliminate the impossible,” Nightwing said, “like you taught me. Come up to Gotham, head to
Arkham, and see if the Nora in Mister Freeze’s cell is the actual Nora, and cross-reference her actual prints against the ones I got off the rifle. Just because Oracle got the ding on Nora doesn’t mean that records haven’t been altered.”

“I see,” Bruce said.

There was a long pause after this, and Bruce wondered if the connection had been cut off.

“Hello?” Bruce asked.

A sigh from the other end. “Bruce... Don’t make Babs and I stay at a hotel when I’m up there doing my Nightwing thing.”

Bruce closed his eyes, and felt a headache bloom slowly from his temples. He had stopped being Batman for reasons that he had never vocalized to anyone. Partly because, as close to him as the people in his life were, he still didn’t trust them with these reasons, and partly he wasn’t sure these reasons could be vocalized to begin with. So this request to stay at the manor to conduct business that he himself had ceased conducting three years prior felt less like a concrete matter of ideals that could be debated, and more like a haze of irritation threatening to invade his zone of comfort. This resulted in an irritation that made him want to jump out of his skin.

“Me,” Bruce said.

“What?”

“Don’t make Babs and me stay at a hotel.” Don’t use ‘I’ in plural if you wouldn’t use it in singular.

A brief pause from the other end. “Y’know, you usually look for something to complain about before you do something you don’t wanna do.”

“I didn’t look for something to complain about,” Bruce said. “You presented it to me. Grammar is important.”

“Just say yes,” Nightwing said.

Bruce sighed. “Fine. Yes. Be quick and be thorough.”

“Gotcha,” Nightwing said. “I’ll see you in two hours.”

“Make it three,” Bruce said. “I’m at a baseball game. These things run late.”

“Yeah, Alfred told me,” Nightwing said. “Tell Clark I said Hi.”

Nightwing hung up without saying goodbye. A habit, Bruce feared, that he picked up from Batman.

Bruce put the phone in the pocket of his hoodie, and walked back to his seat with his head down, raising it only to see the scoreboard. The Knights failed to capitalize on their runner on base, and the game was still tied at zip.

He slumped down in his seat and, because he knew it would mean the world to his former ward and partner, said...

“Dick says hello.”

Clark turned to Bruce and smiled that blocky, authentic smile of his.
“So *that’s* who that was?” Clark asked, genuine affection in his voice. “How’s he doing?”

“Fine.”

“Is he still…”

“Yes,” Bruce said, scowling. “Making the world a better place.”

Metropolis won two-to-zip.

Forty minutes after last pitch, the Dodge pulled up to the above-ground floor of the garage on the eastern grounds of Wayne Manor, and in spite of the suggestion (that sounded like an order in his head when he gave it over the phone) that Dick come in three hours, Bruce saw Dick Grayson standing in between his motorcycle with the sidecar, and Barbara Gordon in her wheelchair. Alfred was standing to Barbara’s left, with his hand on the back of her chair. When the headlights hit them, they stopped what looked like a jovial conversation and shielded their eyes.

He parked the car in front of the garage and got out, noticing that Clark didn’t immediately follow from that passenger’s seat.

Bruce walked up to Dick, and in lieu of saying Hello, said “Didn’t I say three hours? You’re an hour early.”

“I wanted to see Clark,” Dick said.

Bruce looked at Barbara.

“I wanted to see Clark too,” Barbara said, and then lacquered her voice in sarcasm. “This is, of course, the proper way to speak to people you haven’t seen in years. It’s nice to know Miss Manners still writes to you for advice.”

Bruce was about to say something, when he heard a light *whoosh* from behind him.

Clark Kent had gotten into the car at Wayne Stadium in a pair of brand new jeans, and a forest green sweater over a coral button-up. He emerged from the car in red boots, red cape, and blue full-body tights with sigil for the Kryptonian house of El emblazoned on the chest.

Mild-mannered Clark Kent had just used a 2003 Dodge Stratus to turn into Superman.

Superman carried a large briefcase in his hand, which he entrusted to Bruce. He was about to say something, but Bruce cut him off.

“Just… Buy new clothes.”

“I’m a reporter,” Superman said. “For a newspaper. After the pivot to video, and after the pivot *from* the pivot to video. I just can’t keep buying new clothes when there’s work to be done.”

“There are Justice League expenditures for this, though.”

“I know, but it just feels dirty. So…”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “I’ll mail them to you.”

“Thanks,” Superman said. “I’ll pay you back the shipping.” He turned to the assembled party behind Bruce. He spread open his arms and said “*Kids!*”
“Hey, Clark,” Dick said, and walked right into the hug.

Seeing Superman talk to Dick and Barbara like this always put Bruce on a strange kind of edge. He had spent years compartmentalizing his free time and generally being secretive with everyone in his life, and this is what he imagined it was like when a coterie of ex-girlfriends met and got along famously.

Superman and Dick broke the hug. “How’s Bludhaven?”

Dick sighed. “Doing the Nightwing thing, it’s like holding back the Atlantic with a mop. I mean, I’m sure you could do it, but…”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Superman said. “You found a place that needed help, and you decided to help them. You’re making a difference just by being there.”

And there it was. Bruce saw Dick look down at the ground, trying to hide the broad, uncontrollable smile in his face. If Superman envied Batman’s detective skills, then more than anything, Bruce envied Superman’s ability to do that to people. To make a kind word from the world’s kindest man the honest truth by dint of just saying it.

Superman looked past him to Barbara. His eyes lit up and his grin grew wide.

“Don’t think I forgot about you,” Superman said, walking toward her.

Barbara opened her arms wide. “Bring it in.”

Superman bent down and wrapped his arms around the sitting Barbara. Something must have caught him by surprise, because he could hear Superman say “Goodness gracious…”

He stood back up and hovered his right hand over the left arm of Barbara’s gray hoodie. “May I?”

Barbara flexed her bicep, grinning, and said “Please do.”

Superman felt her arm and said “You have been working out quite a bit, I see.”

“Yup,” Barbara said as he took his hand away. “I can do more pull-ups and chin-ups now than I ever could as Batgirl. I even got this shirt…”

Barbara opened her unzipped hoodie to reveal a yellow t-shirt underneath with writing on it that Superman read aloud.

“‘I Flexed and the Sleeves Fell Off.’” He laughed. “Judging from that hug, I believe it. Are you still on that wheelchair basketball team?”

“No,” Barbara said, with a slight downward tilt in her voice. “I quit when I moved to Bludhaven. They have wheelchair roller derby over there, but I don’t know the rules. I mean, I won’t be fighting Darkseid anytime soon, but I’m Oracle, I’m still a superhero, I need to be in fighting shape.”

“With a grip like that,” Superman said, “Darkseid doesn’t stand a chance.”

Barbara smiled like that made her day. Bruce reckoned that it did.

“Anyway,” Superman said, “I have to run.”

“Don’t you mean fly?” Dick asked.
Superman sighed. “We’re both too young for Dad jokes, Dick.”

“That’s, um… Yeah, that’s fair,” Dick said.

Superman looked at Alfred. “Take care of them.”

Alfred bowed stiffly, and said “I shall endeavour to do so, sir.”

“Good man,” Superman said as he slowly achieved lift-off from the ground. “Goodnight, all.”

Dick and Barbara said “Bye,” and waved as Superman rose into the balmy summer air. He waited until he was a mile away from Wayne Manor before he broke the sound barrier.

No matter how much Barbara Gordon had felt she had grown up, the kitchen in Wayne Manor still felt massive to her. She was halfway tempted to find a tape measure and see if it was bigger than Dick’s apartment.

The floors were done in a checkerboard pattern of imported white and black marble. At its center was an island (at which Barbara now sat) that seemed roughly the size of one of the earlier NASA lunar excursion modules, which had to be modified to account for wheelchair users. To the rear was a smart fridge bigger than most peoples’ cars, complete with a WayneTech OS that regulated the temperature of each separate drawer within.

Yet, off to the left, clashing with everything else, was a plain gas stove from about the time the pyramids were built. Barbara Gordon was no stranger to Wayne Manor, or the eccentricities of the two souls that staked permanent residence therein. So she knew that getting rid of that stove meant getting rid of Alfred along with it. Should the unfortunate day come that Alfred Pennyworth would perish from the Earth, Barbara reckoned he’d have that old rusty stove buried with him.

And it was at this stove that Alfred now toiled with his back to her.

“I never really thanked Bruce for setting up the, uh… You know, the chairlifts, and rails, and ramps all over the Manor for when I came over. Knowing Bruce, if I thanked him, he’d just get all weird.”

“That is one way of putting it,” Alfred said, still working at the stove. “Knowing Master Bruce as well as you or I do, that would have made him most uncomfortable. I think, however, that there was no small amount of shame in that action.”

Barbara furrowed her brow. “What do you mean?”

“That it took what happened to you for him to have them installed in the first place. I do believe Master Bruce would consider that a moral failing on his part.”

“That makes sense,” Barbara said. Although they had spoken over the phone in the past three years, Barbara hadn’t seen Bruce Wayne in the flesh since shortly before he gave up the cowl. She was a superhero, he wasn’t, and their circles just didn’t meet anymore.

However, Dick had seen him three months after that, and he came away from the experience somewhat shaken. Dick didn’t tell her what they talked about, or how civil the conversation had been, but when he came back, it was though the light behind his eyes had dimmed. Not too much, barely noticeable for someone who didn’t know him well. But Dick was the man Barbara loved, and it was as obvious to her as it would have been had he taken to open weeping.

Whatever transpired in that conversation that she knew next to nothing about caused Barbara to lose
a sliver of the respect she had had for Bruce Wayne.

Alfred turned, and in his hand was a cup of hot chocolate, just for Barbara. For everyone else, this liquid portion of divinity itself was reserved for the winter months, but for Barbara, it was available on demand. Years back, while she was still Batgirl, Alfred Pennyworth’s hot chocolate got her into a zone of concentration while studying for her SATs.

“Does Mayor Gordon know you’re in Gotham?” Alfred asked as he set the cup of hot chocolate on the island in front of Barbara.

“No,” Barbara said. “We’re just verifying prints, we shouldn’t be here that long.”

“A pity,” Alfred said, and Barbara studied his expression.

If she didn’t know any better, she’d almost think that Alfred was more pleased that Dick and herself were under this roof than was warranted by the adoptive familial connection they all shared.

And if she were more bold than that, she would say that Alfred missed the superheroism going on in this house, and was more than a little pleased that he was at least in the vicinity of costumed do-goodery at Wayne Manor again.

Barbara took a sip of her hot chocolate, the thick sweetness burning going down. “So, uh… How is Bruce handling retirement?”

“I’d hesitate to call it a retirement,” Alfred said. “Master Bruce is the head of a Fortune Five-Hundred corporation. Now, however, without his… extracurricular activities, he no longer delegates the day-to-day operations of Wayne Enterprises to Mister Fox.”

“And how’s Lucius handling that?”

“Does Mister Fox not help Master Grayson with his excursions as Nightwing?”

Barbara nodded. “The Nightcycle, the escrima sticks, the Wingdings.”

“Wingdings?”

“Those little bird-shaped shurikens.”

“And to think, I thought it couldn’t get more ridiculous than ‘Batarang.’”

They both smiled. Barbara took another sip of her drink, and hesitated before she spoke again.

“Did… Did Bruce ever tell you why he quit?”

Alfred sighed. “After a fashion. Not in words, but in… behavior. How he changed after… he died.”

Barbara nodded again. “And what might your read on that be?”

Some of the warmth dropped from Alfred’s face. Not enough to be angry at her, but she came to the realization that she had asked too much.

“I am a gentleman’s gentleman,” Alfred said. “Theorizing of persons under whom I am employed would constitute a most severe breach of trust.”

There was a twinge of guilt in Barbara, though more for Alfred’s sake than for Bruce’s. “Okay.”
“But you know how Master Bruce is.”

“Someone with the social skills of a rabid pitbull who’s been keeping secrets so long that it’s his default setting now?”

“That was uncharitable, Miss Gordon,” Alfred said.

He smiled a little when he did, though.

While Barbara and Alfred caught up, Dick moved their bags from the motorcycle out front to the room in the guest wing that Bruce provided for them. It took two trips, and when he was done, he knew exactly where Bruce would be.

At the center of Wayne Manor, on the ground floor, was the study. It was smaller than one would imagine the solace for one of the world’s richest men being, but it still had enough room for a fireplace, a large oak desk, rows of books, and a grandfather clock built into the wall.

And it was where Dick found Bruce, standing in front of the grandfather clock, and staring at nothing in particular.

“I’ll be out of here as soon as I can,” Dick said.

“I didn’t notice any computer equipment on the bike,” Bruce said, still not looking at him.

“No,” Dick said. “Barbara has her laptop to do the Oracle thing. I’m pretty sure she told Helena and Dinah that she’s taking a little time off.”

Bruce sighed and said “She can use the Batcomputer.”

Dick just blinked. “In the cave?”

Bruce stared at him, asking Where else would the Batcomputer be? using only his eyes.

Dick nodded. “Is the time on the clock still ten forty-seven?”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “Get into contact with Mayor Gordon tomorrow. He’ll get you into Arkham.”


“Goodnight,” Bruce said, in a way that ended the conversation.

Three months after Bruce stopped being Batman, Dick came to the Manor to claim the mantle. He had every intention of turning it down. Bludhaven needed a defender, and he didn’t want to give up being Nightwing to become Batman.

But before he had even broached the subject, Bruce, in this very study, put his hand on his shoulder, and said…

“Gotham City will never see Batman again. Not me… and not you.”

He had taken his hand off of Dick’s shoulder and took his position in front of the grandfather clock, his favorite brooding spot, and stared into nothing, like he did now.

Dick told Barbara that they’d had this conversation, but not what was talked about. He knew that Barbara thought the reason that Dick was so reticent to talk about the last time he and Bruce had
spoken was that the encounter had taken a turn for the worse, but that wasn’t true.

The fact of the matter was that seeing Bruce, the man who took him in, raised him, and brought him into a life that had fulfilled him and protected others, so… diminished, so shrunken, pained Dick Grayson to even think about, let alone put into words.

And that shrunken man, who once struck fear into the hearts of those who would hurt others, still stared into the middle distance as Dick left the room.

Bruce gave Dick and Barbara a room in the east wing of the Manor, and though he lived in this place for most of his formative years, he wasn’t strictly sure that he had actually seen this room before. Looking at the state of the room, seeing no dust, no smudges, and not even fingerprints, he was almost convinced no one had.

Barbara was already in the queen-sized bed, having used the rails on the side to get out of her wheelchair. She was still wearing her I Flexed and the Sleeves Fell Off shirt. It was, naturally, sleeveless, revealing lean, sinewy arms dotted with freckles. Even her legs, poking out from a pair of revealing red underwear, were reasonably toned after years of physical therapy.

There were offers, of course, by members of the Justice League. Experimental procedures, alien technology, magic, all would give her the ability to walk again, and Barbara refused all of them. She said that wasn’t fair to call in a superhero for that when the average person on the street with the same problems as her didn’t get that luxury.

But she knew that her world was a crazy one, and off to physical therapy she went, because if she somehow did gain the ability to walk again, she wanted to spend as little time as possible on the shelf fighting off atrophy.

Dick, naked save for a pair of gray boxer briefs, was standing over one of their bags, laying out his clothes for the morning, when he turned around to say something to Barbara. He stopped himself when he saw that she was engaging in the activity that every man with a girlfriend was impressed by: that of removing her bra without removing her shirt.

Once she had finished, lavender bra in hand, she looked at Dick “Could you open that hamper for me?”

There was a black hamper that looked sleek and expensive, right next to the bag he was unpacking. He wordlessly opened the lid.

“Thanks,” Barbara said. “Kobe!”

She flung the bra into the empty hamper from her position on the bed. Once she saw that it went inside without even touching the sides, she raised her arms and said “Yes!”

“I’m the best acrobat in a team of superheroes and a master of more than a few martial arts, and I wouldn’t be able to do that with a gun to my head,” Dick said.

“Is your basketball game that weak?”

“No, not that,” Dick said. “The other thing, the…”

Dick mimed taking a bra off.

“It’s not that hard.”
“There is too much math involved in that,” said Dick. “You get all… all contorty, like something out of science fiction.”

Barbara took her glasses off and set them on the bedside table. “You’ve literally slept with an alien princess, and me taking my bra off from under my shirt is the strange thing to you?”

Dick froze, just like whenever he did when Barbara brought up Starfire. Once Barbara was angry, she stayed that way, and her anger knew precious few bounds. When she had learned that The Joker, the man who put her in that wheelchair, had been murdered by Harley Quinn, she only had three words on the subject.

“Now that’s funny.”

It was Dick’s experience with other women that when one’s girlfriend brings up one’s ex, arguments or stony silences soon follow. But Dick’s relationship with Starfire had occurred when he and Barbara had broken up, and Barbara and Starfire actually got along.

It took him a second to convince himself of that, though.

“How is Starfire, by the way?” Barbara asked.

“Kory was fine the last time I saw her.”

“She still working at SeaWorld?”

“It wasn’t SeaWorld,” Dick said. “It was an aquarium in Key West, and they fired her because she missed a few days in an underground kingdom where time moves slower. That and, uh… she let one of the dolphins out.”

In the time it took for Barbara to finish laughing at that, Dick had walked over to her and shut off the lamp on the bedside table. In the darkness, he maneuvered himself in between her legs, and supported himself on his elbows, so they were face to face in the dark. Her last couple of giggles carried hints of toothpaste on her breath.

“I kinda tense up whenever you mention Kory.”

“Why?” Barbara asked? “We’re all friends.”

“I know,” Dick said, “but not everyone’s girlfriend is on such good terms with their boyfriend’s ex. I mean, wouldn’t you feel a little funny if I brought up Jason Bard?”

Jason Bard was a Gotham City detective that Barbara had had a thing with. Dick hadn’t seen enough of the man to form any kind of assessment.

“No. And besides, there’s a difference,” Barbara said.

“Which is?”

“Jason’s not funny.” Barbara tried to stifle some giggles, and failed. “Jason didn’t free Flipper.”

As soon as the giggles subsided, Barbara looked into Dick’s eyes.

“Seriously, though,” Barbara said. “If we were in a line of work that required less secrets from me? I’d brag.”

“You’d brag?”
“Yeah.”

“About me and Starfire?”

“Yeah,” Barbara said. “I’d say that the sexiest man I’ve ever seen in my life almost got married to a seven foot tall alien princess with the body of an underwear model. Gold skin, green eyes, about thirty feet of flaming hair, and in the end, Dick Grayson came home…”

She leaned her upper body up and kissed Dick on the forehead.

“…to…”

She kissed the tip of his nose.

“…me.”

Barbara kissed him on the lips. The kind of kiss a man could dissolve into. His hand found its way under her shirt. Her hands roamed down the mass of toned muscle and fading scars on his back until they snaked their way beneath his underwear and latched firmly onto his ass… the area of his body every woman he’d been intimate with seemed to revere on the level of a lost religious relic.

They broke their kiss, their foreheads resting on each other.

“I love you,” Dick said.

“I love you too… But I want to know why.”

Dick raised his head to look at her. “Huh?”

“I want to know when Robin first fell in love with Batgirl.”

That was easy, but Dick paused for effect anyway.

“The one time when we were sparring in the Batcave and you beat me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Dick said. “I never thought you’d be able to, and you got me with a judo throw. Pretty girl knocks me on my ass, it gets my attention.”

“And all these years later, nothing’s changed,” Barbara said. “I can still take you in a fight.”

“Oh, you-- GYAAAH!”

Barbara’s hands let go of his rear and deftly found their way to his ribcage, where Barbara Gordon knew good and damned well he was ticklish. He safely rolled over to the side of Barbara. And even though he wasn’t looking at her, even though it was dark, he knew she was smiling.

“Told ya,” she said.

On Gotham City’s northern end, where the mainland gives way to three massive, populated islands, there sits Old Industrial. The decline of American manufacturing hit Gotham harder than the rest of the nation’s major cities, and not even Bruce Wayne’s grip on Wayne Enterprises could stop that company’s board of directors from moving their industrial operations to Mexico and China.
What resulted was a series of decaying factories and warehouses clinging to North Gotham’s coast like a line of filth on the interior of a poorly cleaned bathtub. And at its very apex, like the skeleton at the head of a table at which all assembled guests had died a decade ago, was the biggest building of them all.

The Sionis Steel Mill.

Sionis Steel had still been privately owned and operated until Roman Sionis ran it into the ground through mismanagement and misappropriation. The remains of the company were purchased by Wayne Enterprises, and Roman Sionis, furious both with his shortcomings as an industrialist and how Wayne was looked at as a hero for saving some admin jobs, embarked on the criminal career that would lead to him becoming known as Black Mask.

Black Mask was in prison now. The Sionis name, the weight and meaning that it carried, beyond Blackgate Penitentiary’s walls was gone. Yet the old Sionis Steel Mill remained, providing a small upthrust in the corner of Gotham’s skyline. A miniscule yet noticeable ghost of the old Gotham City that was.

The interior of the main loading bay of the mill would be empty most nights, all the machinery and equipment having been sold off long ago, save for a few barrels, a couple of boxes, and the stray food wrapper left by migrant homeless looking for whatever protection they could from the city outside. The offices built into the side of the bay were empty, their plexiglass windows caked in graffiti ranging from the ornate to the crude.

On most nights, the main loading bay of the mill would play theater solely to the rats, and the mice, and the insects that crawled within its walls and skittered across its floors.

Tonight was different. Tonight, in the middle of this darkened bay were two metal folding chairs facing each other.

One was empty.

In the other, unconscious, her hands tied behind her and bleeding from a small wound in her temple, was The Green Comet.

Maria Tellis didn’t want to be Batman. She didn’t want to join the Justice League, or fight Mongul, or match wits with Count Vertigo. She’d had her purse snatched a year ago, the cops didn’t care, and she just wanted to do something about it. She didn’t want to protect and defend all of Gotham City, no, she just wanted to look after her one part of Burnside on the nights she didn’t work as a security guard at a department store on Founder’s Island.

The name she picked didn’t hold any significance for her. She clicked on a Facebook quiz on her mom’s wall that said “FIND OUT YOUR SUPERHERO NAME!” and “The Green Comet” was the one with which she was supplied. She thought it might cause at least some confusion, what with the fact there was both a Green Lantern and a Green Arrow, but she didn’t plan on running in the same circles as those two. That and all the colors were taken by superheroes, save pink. She could have called herself The Pink Comet, but she couldn’t help but think of Kaopectate when the name crossed her mind.

Clad in a green flak jacket, green leather pants (with roller-skating knee-pads underneath them), and a green domino mask (all, unfortunately, different shades of the color), with her blonde hair tied in a ponytail, The Green Comet had spent the last three months patrolling whatever rooftops in Burnside she could reach by fire escape. And in that time she had stopped just one mugging with her store-issued retractable steel rod. In The Green Comet’s estimation, given that her area of operation was so
small, and she had to wait for the crime to come to her instead of going to the crime, that really wasn’t bad.

Tonight, however, she was on the roof of one of Burnside’s two vegan food co-ops, when she felt an immense pain on the side of her head, and she blacked out…

...only to awaken in the loading bay of the old Sionis Steel Mill.

Not that she knew that when the sound of footsteps pulled her from unconsciousness.

She tried to rub the side of her head when she felt that her hands were tied. She wriggled in the folding chair, and stopped when she saw a figure, shrouded in darkness, step in front of her.

“Hey!” The Green Comet said, and the noise of her own voice echoing back at her in the cavernous loading bay just made her headache worse. “Hey! Untie me, you…”

The Green Comet fell into silence when the figure produced light from his hand. The light came from one of those small, dinky battery-powered camping lanterns that turned on when you twisted the top. The figure was a man in a cheap suit, all black. He was bald, and he looked to be in his late thirties, but he had thin wrinkles like the kind that form when a thin film atop cold pudding is broken by a spoon. They aged him another fifteen years.

He took his suit jacket off, and draped it on the back of the folding chair facing her. He did the same with his black shirt, and when his bare torso was revealed to her, she felt revulsion roil in her stomach.

Scattered all across his scrawny back were tally marks carved into his pale flesh. Four at a time, with a fifth across them, and these series of five dotted his back at irregular intervals.

He turned around, and there were even more across his front, from his collarbones all the way down to the pathetic potbelly that drooped over the front of his slacks. He sat down, and The Green Comet saw that there were four vertical slashes on his forehead, right above his stubby nose.

The man had no eyebrows, and his eyes were black, as though his pupils waged war on his irises, and won. He levelled his dark gaze upon her, and The Green Comet found herself frozen.

He tapped a steel toolbox at his feet with his black dress shoe.

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

“Do you know me?” the man asked.

The Green Comet nodded.

“Then say my name.”

Her jaw seemed clenched shut. It took a force of both will and strength to open her mouth.

“Victor Zsasz,” she said, and she couldn’t keep the tremble out of her voice.

“Then you know what I do,” Zsasz said.
The Green Comet nodded again.

“What is it I do?”

“You kill people.”

“No,” Zsasz said. “I free them.”

He tapped the toolbox with his foot again. “It’s an unkind existence in which we live, young lady. Toiling in obscurity for a future that never comes, and for what? Money? Fame? Some abstract ideal of right or wrong? It’s all an illusion. A mirage. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.”

Zsasz smiled, and ran his hand down his chest, his fingers sliding across every tally mark on the way down. “Every mark a soul, and every soul saved. To think, all these people would still be chasing what wasn’t there, had I not appeared to show them a kindness. And the kindness I show you, the salvation I’ll provide… lies within.”

And again, he tapped his foot on the toolbox. Even in her shell of fear, The Green Comet figured that box was where he kept his knives.

“You see this?” Zsasz asked, pointing at the four vertical scars on his forehead. “Four. In search of a fifth. And you… are not the fifth.”

The Green Comet exhaled. “So… you tied me up just to let me go?”

Zsasz laughed. “No,” he said. “No, I’m not letting you go.”

The Green Comet forgot to inhale again, and had to remind herself to do so.

“The fifth,” Zsasz said, “was to be Batman. But Batman disappeared right after The Joker died. I have been… denied the mark. But after he disappeared, there was an abundance of men like me to be snapped up like Nazi scientists after World War II. By men like Falcone. Men like The Penguin. Men like the man who snapped me up. Men like Maroni.”

He folded his arms over his bare chest. “Sal Maroni underwrites my activities, sending his little mafia dwarves to clean up after me so no looky-loo officers of the law interrupt the matters of the soul to which I attend. And in return, if there is tale to be told of any who would dress up in a costume to dole out misguided vigilante justice, then I am the one who removes them from whatever equations he conjured.”

A shudder ran through the entirety of The Green Comet’s body.

“Did you think you were the first?” Zsasz asked. “Did you think that you were the one to take up the mantle of justice in Gotham after the passing of the great and mighty Batman? No. You, Maria Tellis, you, Green Comet, are the eighth.”

Zsasz leaned forward. “Actually, in all honesty, you’re the third.” He pointed two stray tally marks on his right shoulder. “See? Right here.”

“Y-You don’t have to do this,” The Green Comet said. “I won’t—”

“No,” Zsasz said. “I do have to do this. Don’t talk to me like I’m some common criminal because that’s not where the truth lies. I’m here… on a mission… of mercy.”
He leaned down and opened the toolbox. Inside was a variety of ripping and cutting implements. The Green Comet could spot a meat cleaver and a butcher knife inside, and she broke out in shivers and pants.

Zsasz produced a medical scalpel from the toolbox. “You stopped a mugging. You saved a young woman, and in a similar fashion, I shall save you, only to remain on these shores. I will rid you of your body, I will carve you into my flesh, I will remember you. And I hope… from whatever awaits across the water… that you will remember m—”

A clang of metal on concrete, like a trash can being knocked over, came from the offices on the side of the loading bay. It scared the both of them. The Green Comet couldn’t tell what had made the noise, as the office windows were covered in graffiti.

Victor Zsasz ran his thumb along the flat of the scalpel.

“The homeless,” Zsasz said. “They take to these warehouses in the night. And if I catch whoever made that noise, then I regret to inform you that you’ll be number four instead of number three.”

Zsasz got up out of the chair and made his way to the office side door, which shut behind him.

The Green Comet leaned her head in the direction of that office door, hoping to hear someone. Hoping that some poor soul wouldn’t join in her messy fate on a concrete floor in an abandoned part of an urban outcropping of Hell itself.

She heard a scream. It was high-pitched, but The Green Comet swore it belonged to a man.

The sound of a body hitting concrete.

Victor Zsasz did not walk back out of the office door moments later. He was thrown, bleeding from the mouth. From her angle, she could see that his left eye was already beginning to swell shut.

And five people followed.

Two were men and two were women, all, from The Green Comet’s judgement, between twenty and thirty-five. All were wearing street clothes.

But the fifth?

The fifth was someone of a medium height, in black robes and a black hood. They wore a silver, reflective mask that covered their whole face, save for three vertical slits at the bottom, placed, no doubt, to allow the one wearing it to breathe. Their pace was slow, their gait confident. Not a sliver of skin revealed who this person was, but the aura coming off of them was that of authority.

One of the men and one of the women grabbed Victor Zsasz by each arm, and he screamed a high scream. Far from being the eloquent nightmare of minutes ago, he was now like a pig caught in a fence while trying to escape the farm.

They drug Zsasz toward the light of the cheap plastic lantern, and he screamed something.

“Jacket pocket!”

“What was that?” the person on the robes asked. In addition to their face being obscured, their voice was distorted by some kind of electronic modulator beneath the mask. It came through the mask’s air-holes like the reedy whine of a creaking door.
“There is ten thousand dollars in the pocket of my suit jacket,” Zsasz said, spritzing the air in front of him with sweat from his forehead and blood from his mouth. “It’s yours if you let me go.”

The person in the robes looked at the man who wasn’t holding Zsasz down. “Go get it.”

The man stiffly bowed, and said “Yes, Undying!” before storming happily off to the suit jacket on the chair in front of The Green Comet. The woman who wasn’t holding Zsasz down saw this, and rolled her eyes.

The man came back with a stack of hundred dollar bills about an inch thick, bound with a strip of yellow adhesive paper. The person in the robes--this “Undying,” whoever the Hell that was supposed to be--took the ten grand and hefted it in their palm.

“And this is mine, you say?” The Undying asked.

Zsasz sighed with relief. “Yes,” He said. “Just take it and leave. Why do you think I carry it around? For situations like this! Just go. But let me have the mark.”

Victor Zsasz looked to The Green Comet, before he looked back to The Undying. “I need the mark.”

The Undying looked at The Green Comet, and she felt yet another chill go through her as she hoped the enemy of her enemy would be her friend.

Money in their right hand, The Undying looked from The Green Comet to Zsasz. They slowly walked up to Zsasz and used their left hand to hold his nose.

Zsasz grunted as he tried to wriggle away and breathe through his mouth, and The Undying took this opportunity to shove the ten grand right into Zsasz’s open maw.

He tried to wriggle harder, but The Undying stuffed the small brick of cash further into his mouth, and down his throat.

However long it took Victor Zsasz to die, The Green Comet swore it was a compacted eternity. The minutes passed as thick as chilled syrup as Zsasz’s face turned red, then purple, then blue. Rivers of drool cascaded from his mouth down the wad of cash as his throat tried, in great futility, to lubricate itself to dislodge the obstruction.

Victor Zsasz’s whole body jerked violently, then softly, then became still as his life left it. The man and woman holding his arms let go, and his body hit the concrete floor of the loading bay.

The Undying looked at one of the women. “Untie her, please.”

It wasn’t until the woman had loosed the ties that bound her that The Green Comet realized she had forgotten to breathe. As she rose from the chair, her eyes stayed on Victor Zsasz’s body, and only when she spoke, did her eyes flit to The Undying.

“I… You…”

The Undying raised their hand, and it silenced The Green Comet. With their other hand, they reached into one of the pouch-like pockets of their robe and procured something small and spherical. In the dim light of the cheap lantern, the object looked to be…

...a bouncy ball.
“A test of intelligence,” The Undying said, and bounced the ball off the concrete floor.

The Green Comet reached out, caught it, and inspected it. Yup. A bouncy ball. The kind with the wacky tie-dye pattern. She didn’t remember them being this heavy, though.

“Ohhhhh, Honeybunch,” The Undying said. “You failed.”

The Green Comet looked down at the bouncy ball in her hands. The top of it seemed to cave in on itself, and purple fumes arose from the crater.

The moment she registered that these fumes smelled like a mixture of chalk dust and paint thinner was the moment she dropped it on the floor.

The Green Comet didn’t know just what the hell it was, but she barrelled past The Undying and their four henchpeople trying to get away from it. She went through the office doors that Zsasz had been thrown through minutes before, and she searched in desperation for an exit, the scent of the gas playing house in her nostrils the entire time.

She didn’t have to look long. There was an unlocked set of steel double doors in the hallway leading away from the offices. She kicked them open and was greeted by the sight of the empty lot behind the mill, and the warm sweetness of July evening air.

And still, she kept running. She immediately turned left, trying to get to the street. But something stopped her. A something that had been boiling in her stomach since she caught a whiff of those colorful fumes from the bouncy ball. A something that stretched her lungs. A something that tickled her throat. A something that stormed its way out of her mouth.

“Ниуиуиуиуиуи-ha-ha-ha-ha…”

The Green Comet stopped immediately once this happened. She had no idea what it was, or what it meant. Her breaths came out in loud pants.

It came again, like the second heave in a spell of vomiting, only instead of the bile-soaked remains of a meal, it was…

“Hhhhhhhhhhhhhha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-....”

And now it came full force.

The laughter.

And while she was laughing, she could feel the sweat pour down her face, the fear skii down her spine. Why am I laughing? Why, why, why, why, why God, why am I laughing?

The Green Comet dropped to her knees as the laughter came in peals. She had never laughed this hard in her life, and she had never been more terrified. She was on her back, now, her eyes spewing tears, her lungs on fire, her throat hoarsening, her heart rate climbing higher, and higher, and higher, until…

Until…

The time it had taken from The Green Comet’s first unexpected laugh, to her death by chemically-induced cardiac arrest at the age of twenty-six, was one-hundred eleven seconds.

And the full moon above the city illuminated the pale face of the corpse of Maria Tellis, also known
as The Green Comet.

On that face, was a smile.

That isn’t entirely accurate, of course. One of the strange side-effects of the toxin she had inhaled was a peculiar and instant rigor mortis of the facial muscles. It looked like invisible fingers had quite painfully stretched the corners of her lips up to the bottom of her cheeks. It looked artificial. It looked like a ghastly parody of mirth.

But it looked like a smile.

In fact, it looked like the kind of smile Gotham City hadn’t seen in three years.
Chapter 5: Therapy Block

Mayor James Gordon was entering his twenty-seventh hour without sleep.

He was born in Chicago. He was a former marine. He spent five years as a cop in the Chicagoland area, and another sixteen in GCPD, going from Sergeant all the way to Commissioner.

But it was getting elected mayor of Gotham City that gave him insomnia.

It wasn’t the lack of stress; being mayor of a city as big as Gotham was a stressful job. But it was the stress combined with the lack of any concrete thing to do about it that led to an inability to sleep.

If the mother of the dear, departed Emily Shaddis had sat in his office when he was a cop, and he told her that he was doing everything within his power to make sure her daughter’s killer was put behind bars, that, in itself was something immediate that he could do, even apart from pressuring the police union to fire the cop who James knew damn well did it, or pressuring the DA to get his bail denied. But her sitting in the mayor’s office was something else entirely. He could only offer assurances. He lost all of his capital with the police unions when he ran against them to become mayor, and every attempt at using political power to weaken that union was met with resistance at every turn.

A politician could probably get this done, but even though he had the office, Jim Gordon was no politician. He was just an ex-cop with no cigarettes and no Batman to make his life easier.

He’d had a full day of work yesterday, two hours of tossing and turning in bed next to Sarah in their bedroom at the Gotham City’s Mayoral Residence, and another six hours wasting away in front of his son’s Playstation playing some damned thing called “Overwatch,” because if he wasn’t going to be getting to sleep, he needed to do something to stay awake.

He was, in the words of his son James Jr., “a McCree main.”

So now he sat at his desk in the Mayor’s office in City Hall, on his twenty-seventh hour without sleep, the bottle of Glenlivet in his bottom drawer softly calling his name.

There was a knock on the office door.

Gordon got up from his plush leather chair, his knees creaking as he did so, and walked the twelve feet from his desk to the door.

He opened it, and paused.

James Gordon was not the best judge of other men’s appearances. Jenna Bardolo, the teenaged daughter of his Deputy Mayor, was obsessed with something called a “Niall Horan,” and for the life of him, he couldn’t see it.

But he knew Human Panty Remover when he saw it, and it was standing in front of him right now. About five-ten, square jaw, not a whole lot of miles on him. Swimming pool blue eyes, and thick black hair a few scant centimeters away from being floppy and annoying.
And the black and blue bodysuit, and the mask covering his eyes would have been a hit with a lot of the ladies he knew. Good for him.

“Nightwing, right?” Gordon asked.

“That’s right, Mister Mayor,” Nightwing said.

“Knock that off,” Gordon said. “Call me Jim. I thought you guys came out at night?”

“We do,” Nightwing said. “But the business that needs doing needs to be done during business hours. Or visiting hours, rather.”

Gordon looked over Nightwing’s shoulder to the upstairs hall behind him. “You got past security.”

“I’m good.”

“And the cameras.”

“I’m very good.”

Gordon opened the door to his office further and said “C’mon in.”

Nightwing entered the office and looked around while Gordon walked to his desk.

“I thought Mayors’ offices were supposed to be, uh… what’s the word…”

“Opulent?” Gordon asked. He had gotten the bottle of Glenlivet out of his desk drawer along with a glass.

“Yeah,” Nightwing said. “Or at least the one in Bludhaven is. Guy has plaques and pictures everywhere.”

“It would be,” Gordon said. “Holcomb’s a prick. Me? I only have one little piece of decoration.”

He set the glass down, and picked up a framed photo from his desk. It was of Barbara, Gordon himself behind her wheelchair, and his son James Jr. and his wife Sarah on either side.

“They’re lovely,” Nightwing said.

“Yeah,” said Gordon. “My daughter moved to Bludhaven to shack up with some asshole bartender.”

From what Gordon could see, Nightwing cringed slightly when he heard that.

“That’s… that’s sad to hear,” Nightwing said.

Gordon pointed at him. “You’re a Bludhaven guy too, right?”

Nightwing nodded.

“So… I’ll pay you fifty bucks to kick the shit out of him.”

Nightwing seemed to cycle between five separate responses before he settled on “Isn’t, um… Isn’t that a father’s job?”

Gordon sighed, and said “You costumes are all the same. So what brings you down Gotham way?”
“I have some business at Arkham.”

“That business being?” Gordon asked.

“According to a set of prints I got off an old rifle, Nora Fries shot at me from a Bludhaven rooftop last night.”

Gordon blinked. “I wasn’t aware that Nora Fries had gotten herself unfrozen.”

“Neither was I,” Nightwing said. “Hence my business at Arkham. I have to see if what they have in the basement is actually Nora, and if that’s actually Nora, if the prints match… and isn’t a little early for…”

Gordon stopped pouring his scotch.

“I mean… It’s eight AM.”

“For you it’s eight AM,” Gordon said. “I haven’t slept since I got up yesterday, so this is my two AM. The bars are just closing. Might take a sick day, go home, and finally get some of the shut-eye I deserve, if I can get it. I’ll call Administrator Pender over at Arkham, let him know you’re coming.”

“Thank you, Jim,” Nightwing said. “I’ll see myself out.”

Nightwing turned to leave.

“Hey,” Gordon said.

Nightwing looked at him.

“Have you, uh… Have you heard from him? Is he doing alright?”

Nightwing looked at Gordon for a spell, before he said.

“I can’t really say I knew the guy all that well.”

Nightwing got on the Nightcycle (which, along with the spare Nightwing suit, he’d gotten from Wayne Tower this morning, courtesy of Lucius Fox) outside City Hall. He put his helmet on—partly for safety, and partly to shield him from gawkers on the road—and made his way to Arkham Island.

It took him forty-five minutes through traffic, before he hit the bridge to Arkham Island, and crossing the water from Gotham City proper to the place that held the most dangerous people the city spat out was like crossing a paper-thin dividing line between realities. The Arkham Reality was the one where the lights were dimmer, the smells sharper, and its ancient ambience clashed with anyone and everyone, from patient to staff, rendering them all alien.

He parked the Nightcycle in the lot to the side of the squat brick edifice that served as the Arkham admissions building. There, he met with Administrator Bianca Pender, a black woman with a frame so plump and a demeanor so pleasant that she was just one dimension-hop away from being Mrs. Claus. She smiled, greeted Nightwing politely, and was about to give him a plastic Arkham visitor’s badge, but frowned when she saw there was nowhere on the leather and kevlar suit to pin it. She put it in his hand instead, and was very insistent that she was “Administrator” Pender, and not “Warden” Pender.

“Arkham is a hospital, not a prison,” she said. “Ergo, I am an administrator and not a warden, and
the people here are patients and not inmates.”

“Hell of a change from the last guy,” Nightwing said.

“And the patients kept trying to break out,” Administrator Pender replied. “Go figure.”

From the admissions building, they walked to a large, square, brick monstrosity of the kind Mussolini would have erected when he was trying to kill art. This was what Administrator Pender called “The Therapy Block,” and it housed all the Gotham City supercriminals from a bygone age that weren’t in Blackgate, dead, or released of their own recognizance.

Off the entry door, Nightwing, Administrator Pender, and an orderly named Julius stepped onto a cargo elevator that took them down to the basement. Once they got there, they navigated a narrow corridor made of thin walls, through which Nightwing could hear all the hooting and hollering that came attendant with a wing for the dangerously, criminally insane.

They got to a small door on the opposite end of the corridor with a keypad next to it. Administrator Pender punched in a few numbers, and Nightwing could hear locks retract. She turned to him and said…

“Welcome to Inter-Patient Therapy.”

“Inter-Patient?”

“Where the patients talk among themselves,” Administrator Pender said. She opened the door, and Nightwing followed.

This was a circular room that contained four cells with plexiglass windows. Opposite the door they had gone through was another door. Nightwing knew, from his time as Robin, that this other door led to the sub-basement, where Mister Freeze’s special cell was kept.

“I have to let Victor know we’re coming,” Administrator Pender said. “Just wait here.”

“You don’t think me just being here will upset the inm-uh, patients?”

“Not these patients,” she said. “I’ll be but a minute.”

Administrator Pender walked to the opposite door and entered. Nightwing, alone, took a look around.

In the first cell was a man Nightwing was familiar with. His long nose and short stature gave him an elfin appearance, along with the orange Arkham Asylum scrubs hanging loose on his body. He ran both hands along his thinning hairline, as though endlessly searching for something that wasn’t there.

He was mumbling to himself.

No… Singing.

“Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, will you join the dance…”

Above the plexiglass was a little dry-erase board that served as a nameplate for the cell’s occupant. This one, in green Sharpie, read “Jervis Tetch - MAD HATTER.”

In the cell next to him sat a reedy man at a typewriter, the little greasy fronds of dull brown hair weaving slightly back and forth as he angrily mouthed what he was typing.
Nightwing noticed that there was no actual paper in the roller.

The nameplate above this one? **“Jonathan Crane - SCARECROW.”**

Past the opposite door, the third cell…

**“Helloworld?”**

Nightwing slowly walked to the third cell. Inside was an orderly in a white uniform. His eyes bulging in fear. Sweat was pouring down his forehead as he banged on the glass.

“One of the patients knocked me out and took the keys! He’s escaped! **You have to let me out of here!**”

At which Nightwing just rolled his eyes and pointed above the cell.

“You know they have nameplates up there, right?”

The nameplate above the third cell said **“Basil Karlo - CLAYFACE.”**

The orderly smiled, and both his form and his color, collapsing into a mass of vaguely putty-colored gunk, before it reassembled itself as a massive humanoid form with glowing yellow eyes and plank-like brown teeth jutting out of a crudely shapen maw.

“If you didn’t see that nameplate,” Clayface said in a rumbling voice, “I would have had you.”

Nightwing shrugged and said “Yeah, probably. I didn’t know you could do sweat.”

Clayface smiled. “It takes practice. I think I could have won an Oscar if I didn’t have this little accident.”

“The accident had nothing to do with it. You going crazy and killing a bunch of people, *that* stopped you from winning an Oscar.”

“You’d think,” Clayface said, “but they gave two to that asshole Kevin Spacey.”

From the fourth cell…

**“Hey! It’s the nicest ass in the Justice League!”**

Nightwing didn’t even need to look at the nameplate above the fourth cell to place that almost tragically New York voice.

The nameplate above the fourth cell said **“Dr. Harleen Quinzel - HARLEY QUINN.”** And underneath that, **“Dr. Pamela Isley - POISON IVY.”**

They both stood at the plexiglass of the fourth cell. Harley still had her hair in pigtails, but her face had no paint. The top to her Arkham scrubs was unbuttoned and tied around her chest, revealing both her midriff and a fair amount of cleavage. The look she was giving Nightwing was a carnivorous one.

And standing next to her was Poison Ivy. She had skin the color of mint ice cream, and a long braid of violent red hair that reached halfway down her back. Even in loose-fitting orange scrubs, Poison Ivy still reminded Nightwing of those voluptuous pin-up girls that they painted on the sides of bombers during World War II.
Ivy looked at Nightwing, and shrugged. “I don’t see it,” she said. “Meat-sacks all look alike to me.”

Harley’s expression turned on a dime, from thundering lust at Nightwing, to shocked reproach at Ivy.

Ivy sighed, and said “Except for you, Harley.”

Then she kissed Harley on the nose, and Harley collapsed into a pile of giggles.

The one way Harley was weird, apart from the multitude of obvious ways, was that she had spent so much time making The Joker’s toxin for him that she rendered herself immune to most poisons. This included not only Scarecrow’s fear gas, but Ivy’s toxins and pheromones. That little kiss on that nose would have put anyone else under Ivy’s suggestion, similar to hypnotism or mind control.

Or it would have killed them dead.

Harley pressed her forehead to the glass and put on an exaggerated frowny-face.

“I lost a lotta opportunities following Mistah J around. I always thought you were cute.”

“I’m taken,” Nightwing said. “Happily.”

He looked at Ivy. “And so are you, apparently.”

Ivy rolled her eyes. “I’m an adult,” she said. “I don’t care what toys Harley plays with.” And with that, Ivy walked to the side where the plexiglass stopped, where the bed and toilet of the cell were.

Harley grinned and said “See?”

“Still taken,” Nightwing said. “And not, y’know, insane.”

“We can work on that second one,” Harley said. “And as for that first one, your boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever needs to work on their self-confidence, so they know whatever flings ya have with certain hot-as-hell clinical psychiatrists means ya don’t love ‘em any less.”

Nightwing squinted. “Yeah, I heard you were giving out analysis in exchange for… uh… perks.”

“Welcome to Inter-Patient Therapy,” Harley said. “They send people into this little block, and I try to help the doctors with their analysis. Take a look at Jervis over there.”

They both looked at Jervis Tetch in his cell.

“He hasn’t talked to me yet, but we’re dealing with arrested development and a loss of control. He fixates on a kiddie book and makes little hats to control people’s minds. Musta stemmed from a rough childhood. And to think if he were into comic books instead—a Alice in Wonderland, he’d-a just harassed actresses offa Instagram instead of killin’ people.”

“That your professional opinion?” Nightwing asked.

“No,” Harley said. “My professional opinion’s that he’s friggin’ screwy!”

Just then, Ivy’s husky, seductive voice called from the private part of the cell. “Harley, come to bed…”

Harley was still drinking Nightwing in. “In a minute, Red.”

A thin green vine came into view. It reached up from the floor, worked its way into the waistband of
Harley’s scrubs, and started tugging.

Harley sighed, looked at the vine, and looked back at Nightwing.

“The things I do for love.”

As Harley began to walk to the unseen Poison Ivy, her hands batting the vine out of the way so she could take her scrubs off, hard tree roots spread across the plexiglass, blocking the view into the cell.

Nightwing noticed that the sound of typing from Jonathan Crane’s cell had ceased. He looked over to see Crane looking back at him.

“Heaven only knows what they do in there,” Crane said.

“No,” Nightwing said, “I have a pretty good idea.”

The opposite door opened, and Administrator Pender emerged.

“Sorry for the wait,” she said. “Victor will see you now.”

Nightwing and Administrator Pender walked down the stairs into the sub-basement cell of Doctor Victor Fries.

How Arkham staff managed the former Mister Freeze was through a WayneTech donation. There were a series of emitters on the ceiling that produced hardlight partitions through which sub-zero temperatures could effectively be negated. This was how doctors and therapists could walk freely into Fries’ cell and perform inspections.

Two of the hardlight partitions were up in the middle of the cell, leading from the room temperature Safe Zone for the staff, into Fries’ cell, right to the frozen spectacle of his wife Nora, still encased in ice within a cryogenic chamber.

The orderly Julius was on the room-temperature side of the partition, while a spitting mad Victor Fries was on the other.

“This is outrageous!” Victor said. His skin was white, save for the blackness that had infected his nose and his ears. They had succumbed to frostbite, but the peculiar state of Victor Fries meant they hadn’t fallen off. “This was not in the settlement. If I have to take this hellhole to court again, I--”

“Doc,” Julius said, “the settlement said we house your wife in Arkham, but it didn’t say a damn thing about where. We could wheel her out of this cell and put her on the other side of the facility if we wanted to. We don’t want to, but we will if you don’t cooperate. So be a guy, huh?”

“I do not consent to having my wife being poked and prodded by orderlies!” Victor said.

“No poking, no prodding,” said Julius. “Just scanning. And we’re not even gonna be the ones doing it.”

“Then who is?”

Julius looked into the Safe Zone at Nightwing. Victor saw him too, and visibly bristled.

“You.”

Nightwing waved. “Hi, Victor. Haven’t seen you in a while.”
“If my wife comes to harm at your hands, I will not rest until I’ve made you and everyone you love into ice sculptures.”

Nightwing sighed. “Victor, has your wife ever killed anyone?”

Victor blinked a couple of times. “Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Has she ever stolen precious jewels or scientific equipment?”

“This is absurd!”

“Has she… ever taken a shot at someone with an old rifle from a Bludhaven rooftop?”

“No!”

Nightwing folded his arms. “Then she’s the safest person in that cell. Give me a minute and I’ll be out of your…”

It was at this point that Nightwing remembered not to tell a bald guy that you’d be “out of his hair.” He might not take it well.

But Victor knew where this was going, spared Nightwing a look of utter disgust, threw up his hands, and sat on his bunk.

Nightwing took that as his cue to enter the room temperature hardlight corridor into Victor’s cell. He quickly walked up to Nora Fries’ chamber. There was a small touch screen on the Chamber’s right side, and he brought up the interface.

Once he saw an option for “DNA Scan,” he pressed it.

Less than a second later, Nora Fries’ picture and name came up.

“Damn,” Nightwing said under his breath. But the job was only half over.

He reached into his boot for his scanner. He activated it, and ran it over the parts of the chamber where Nora’s hands were visible.

A second later, the scanner verified that Nora’s prints matched the prints found on the Bludhaven rifle.

He learned under Batman that the first job of the detective was to eliminate the impossible. It was impossible that a frozen, comatose woman had unfrozen herself, found a rifle, learned to shoot it, ran off to Bludhaven, found Nightwing, scaled a rooftop, shot at him, left the rifle behind, ran all the way back to Arkham Island, and froze herself again.

But if that was impossible, then what the hell happened last night?

Nightwing put the scanner back in his boot and looked at Victor.

“Thanks for your time.”

Victor Freeze spat at Nightwing as he left. From the time it left his mouth to the time it bounced off the hardlight corridor, it had frozen solid.

As the walked up the stairs into the Inter-Patient Therapy block, Administrator Pender asked “Did you find what you were looking for?”
What Nightwing said was “This whole thing is weird, so I’ll just say yes.”

What Nightwing thought was:

*My boss at Hogan’s Alley is gonna kill me. I don’t know how many shifts I’m gonna miss.*

*Bruce is gonna kill me. He told me to be quick, but I don’t know how to do that right now.*

*And Babs. Babs is definitely gonna kill me.*

As they emerged into the block, an orderly had come through the entry door with a phone in his hand. He was about to say something, but stopped himself, looked at Harley and Ivy’s cell (still covered by tree roots), and quietly rushed over to them.

“I think the both of you have to see this,” the orderly said, and handed Administrator Pender the phone.

Nightwing saw that it was a headline from the Gotham *Herald’s* website. It said, in big bold font:

**“HAS THE JOKER RETURNED?”**

Nightwing and Administrator Pender read the accompanying story of Maria Tellis, the budding superhero who had called herself The Green Comet, being found dead outside the old Sionis Steel Mill, her signs of death identical to that of someone who had been felled by Joker Toxin.

The event was so sensational that the article’s author relegated the fact that noted serial killer Victor Zsasz had been found inside the mill, choked to death on ten thousand dollars cash, to little more than a footnote.

As he finished reading the story, the prospect of a long stay in Gotham getting even longer, Nightwing said what he was thinking.

“Well… Shit.”

Selina Kyle did not see the *Herald’s* story.

She had spent the entire day on the forty-fifth floor of the Delacourt Building in Otisburg, where Kyle Security was located, sitting at the head of a boardroom table, surrounded by staff, listening to some advertising schmuck go over advertising copy.

When she got home, Selina planned on destroying her *Mad Men* blu rays with a hammer. Because that show made it look like these ad meetings were quick little five minute affairs, and not day-long gauntlets where some jagoff with an IQ smaller than his dick was in inches tried out slogan after slogan after slogan…

His name was Justin. Justin’s blue suit was more expensive than the textbook budgets for most of the school districts in Mississippi. Justin had enough product in his hair that Selina could easily imagine Greenpeace picketing outside every shower he entered.

Selina hated Justin.

And it was at four PM that Justin, beatific expression on his face, as though he’d just been converted by Ambrose of Milan, finally dropped the bombshell slogan that he’d been under the woefully mistaken impression that Selina was waiting all day to hear.
“Kyle Security,’” Justin said. “‘Just… Purr-Fect.’”

Now Selina wanted Justin to die. Selina wanted to claw out Justin’s eyes and set him loose in a room full of mouse traps. Selina wanted to dip this little trouser crust in brown gravy and dangle him by her bullwhip in front of whatever sewer Killer Croc was living in.

It’s bad enough that they had her model for the ads in fur coats and diamond necklaces, as though they were selling perfume and trips to Dubai instead of thumbprint scanners and laser grids.

At least they used fake fur in the ads… And she got to keep the jewelry.

And now this little chode had the gall to come into her place of business and make The Cat Pun.

It was just the way she said the word “Perfect!” She didn’t try to make a pun out of it! She kept wanting to say something else when she saw something she wanted, like “Delicious,” or whatever, but before she could settle on something, that son of a...

Selina shook herself in the middle of the meeting.

That was the thing about anger. It made her just a little too honest with herself.

The meeting ended at seven, and it was getting dark out. Selina immediately called a Lyft, and half an hour later, she was in front of her apartment building in Chinatown.

She entered the building and took the elevator up to the fourth floor. She found herself in front of Apartment 412, where she lived.

One key for the knob, one key for the deadbolt, and on top of that, a thumbprint scanner. Selina offered her landlord free security in exchange for across the board rent decreases. She wanted some of the locals to move into the building, as she’d lived in Park Row too long to have any pride whatsoever in being the face of Chinatown gentrification. At the very least, the guy who ran Wan Fu Lo’s a couple of blocks over on Perez managed to move himself and his family in. Good for him, and a fitting place of residence for the guy responsible for the best crab rangoon in the city.

The lights of the hallway briefly illuminated the interior of her apartment in the time it took to open the apartment door and close it again. Selina had never been able to bring herself to extensively decorate this spacious abode. She’d grown up a poor orphan in the East End, she turned criminal, and she expected, irrationally, that one day someone would show up at her apartment door and say that she couldn’t live here anymore. That she’d broken some rule. That her very existence disqualified her from living among the decent and the law-abiding. And if that was the case, there’d be less shit to pack up.

At the very least, the lack of stuff around meant that navigating in the dark was a cinch. She saw the silhouette of her black shorthair Isis sitting at the alcove to the bedroom hallway.

“Hey, princess,” Selina said. “Don’t act like I didn’t put food in--”

Isis growled.

The cat didn’t growl at her. She growled at the hallway.

While Selina paid for security for the entire building, she didn’t particularly need it for herself. That’s what she had Isis for. She’d had this awesome little cat since she lived on Park Row, a couple of years before she hung up the cowl and the whip. And in that time, Isis was the only burglar alarm Selina had considered infallible and uncrackable. The cat had gotten her out of a Black Mask
ambush, and had even spotted Batman himself in the shadows, attempting to do that creepy appear-
out-of-thin-air thing he liked to do.

If Isis was growling at something in the bedroom hallway, then something was in the bedroom.

But how did they get past the two locks? How did they get past the thumbprint scanner?

Selina looked at the wall next to the hallway, and even in the dark, she could see a circular form. It
was her twelve foot bullwhip, its handle decorated with real diamonds that she had procured
through… less than legal means.

She briefly entertained the thought of taking the whip into the bedroom.

But she shook her head, reached for the drawer in the table beneath the whip, and pulled out a nine
millimeter Beretta, and a clip. She loaded the gun, pulled back the slide as quietly as she could, and
saw that she had kept one in the chamber.

She softly crept the ten feet down the hall, and quickly wheeled into the open bedroom doorway.

Selina saw the scrawny silhouette of a male figure sitting on her queen-sized bed, facing her, his legs
dangling over the side . Her heart leapt into her throat as, given the security, she still couldn’t quite
bring herself to believe someone was in there, Isis or no Isis.

She raised the gun.

“If I shoot you,” Selina said, “then I don’t get my deposit back. So just leave, and I don’t call the cops.”

The man on the bed cocked his head a bit.

“You ever shot a man before, Kittycat?”

That voice was mushy but, Selina reckoned, vaguely familiar.

But it was the second voice that she would remember to her grave.

“COULD yOU LiVE wITH YoURSeLF iF YoU dId?”

Terror itself crawled up Selina’s back, and her eyes went wide.

“Harvey?”

The man on Selina’s bed reached over to the nightstand and turned on the lamp.

Harvey Dent, also known as Two-Face, was sitting on the bed.

Almost ten years ago, Harvey was Gotham’s District Attorney. He, along with then-Police
Commissioner James Gordon and Batman, were supposed to rid Gotham City of crime with a
righteousness that appeared to be bestowed by the Almighty Himself.

Erin McKillen put a stop to that. She and her twin sister Shannon were upstart Irish mobsters that
Harvey had a bead on. Harvey had them arrested, and within the jail, a plan was hatched. Shannon
would commit suicide, and Erin would escape disguised as the body.

It worked. Erin McKillen escaped custody, murdered Harvey’s wife Gilda, and disfigured half of
Harvey’s face with acid.
This attack drove Harvey off the deep end, bringing forth an evil dormant personality that the old Harvey Dent had to share a brain with. He became Two-Face, who decided every nefarious deed with the flip of a coin.

But the Two-Face that Selina knew from back in the day wasn’t the Two-Face sitting on her bed tonight. To start, he used to wear specially made suits split town the center with different fabrics and colors to match his face. He was wearing just rags right now.

He looked like he’d been starved. He was slightly shivering. The hair on the good side of his head was falling out in clumps. From a glance, it looked like some of the skin on his right pinky had been flayed off.

Two-Face was breathing through his mouth, and Selina could see that his teeth had been yanked out.

“Jesus Christ,” Selina said. “No one’s seen you in three years. What the..”

“We Have Been Witness To Horror…” They tortured us… He Tortured Us…”

“Who, Harvey?” Selina asked. “Who did this to you?”

Two-Face’s eyes finally made contact with hers. The one on her left was a bloodshot brown. The one on the right was on the damaged side of his face, and was almost completely white from the retina getting scratched due to the lack of an eyelid.

“The Undying,” he said.

“Who’s The Undying?” Selina asked.

“He Sent Us Here,” Two-Face said. “He sent us to tell you he’s coming for you. He Sent Us To Tell You He’s Coming For Him…”

Selina felt sweat form on her forehead. “Who else is this Undying coming for?”

Two-Face leaned forward toward Selina, and she could see a tear forming in his good eye.

“Batman…”

Selina’s breath left her mouth in a shudder. “Batman, he’s.. He’s gone.”

The tear finally fell from his eye. “We Know Better.”

The sweat began forming on her back as well. “Uh… Um… Okay, uh… Thank you for telling me, Harvey. Now… Let’s go get you some he--”

“It’s too late for me,” Two-Face said. “And… And It’s Too Late For Me.”

When he said this, Selina saw a sickly green glow on Harvey’s chest. With mounting horror, she realizes that it wasn’t coming from under his shirt.

It wasn’t coming from under his skin.

It was coming from under his ribcage.

Two-Face saw it as well. He looked back up at Selina and drew in his breath in a ragged gasp.

As soon as he started screaming, he came alight in green flame. The hair on his head singed away in
The skin of his face began a noxious melt down his front, revealing the skull beneath. His eyeballs popped into a cascade of molten goo.

Selina screamed and dropped the gun. She ran out of the bedroom and down the hall, picking up Isis.

Harvey Dent burned to death, screaming, engulfed in emerald fire, on Selina Kyle’s bed as she fled for her life.

Chapter End Notes

The Undying will resume on Monday, December 17, 2018, with new chapters coming in every Monday and Thursday.

See you then!
Pickup on Harlow Street

Chapter 6: Pickup on Harlow Street

Selina bolted through the doors of her apartment building with Isis under her arm, the balmy evening air filling her overworked lungs. Her shoes clicked on the pavement as she made her way across the street to the alley between the florist’s and the bakery. She stopped and wheeled around as she got her phone out of her black suit jacket.

She had already dialed 911 and put the phone to her ear when she noticed something.

Where were the alarms?

In order to save money when she supplied the building with security, Selina had hooked up the system that found unauthorized breaches to the fire alarm instead of using a completely separate siren. Someone burning to death in an apartment should have triggered the alarm.

There should be noise. There should be people streaming from their apartments to the street outside. But there was nothing. Save for sounds of distant traffic, all of Chinatown was completely silent.

She heard the Emergency Operator in her ear. “911, what’s your emergency?”

Selina took a moment to assess the situation, before saying “I’m sorry. I thought I saw something happening, but um…”

The Emergency Operator sighed. “Uh… alright, but this is an emergency line, okay lady? Be sure of…”

Selina hung up the phone and put it back in her jacket pocket. She looked at the cat under her arm, and Isis looked back at her with the look of contemptible judgement that all cats had mastered by simple virtue of being cats.

That, or she was hungry.

The first inkling that Selina Kyle had that she might be losing her mind was after she had come back into the apartment building. She was on the elevator and had pushed the LCD touch screen display that would take her to her floor.

The display blinked and shorted out for a second, before it came back on with the following words in red font instead of a list of floors.

Selina.

Rock Memorial.

Midnight.

Tomorrow.

Then the display blinked back out again, and the list of floors appeared, just like normal. The elevator started moving up to her floor

Selina shuddered, and shook her head.
One of the things she was glad about during her eight years as Catwoman was that she’d never been gassed by Scarecrow. She’d seen what Jonathan Crane’s Fear Toxin had done to people. She’d seen people claw their own skin off, trying to get rid of bugs that weren’t there. She’d seen people run into traffic to escape from horrors present only in their minds.

Was this what it was like? Was there a period of doubt before the terror began?

But this notion didn’t last. Selina didn’t fancy herself a particularly fearful person (and she figured that no one who had zipped around Gotham City’s rooftops with nothing but a bullwhip and world-class gymnastic skills would be), but of the fears she did have, a tortured and broken Harvey Dent burning alive in green fire on her bed wasn’t one of them.

No, Selina thought, I’m just going the regular kind of crazy tonight.

She got off the elevator once it hit the fourth floor, and walked to her apartment. She unlocked the door, the deadbolt, and the thumbprint scanner. She opened the door, and…

The smell was atrocious. The kind you could almost taste. It was thick, almost gel-like. It coated her lungs like paint. After she closed the apartment door and set Isis down on the floor, she put her hand to her face to try and block some of it out.

Perfectly natural for an apartment in which someone had burned to death just minutes before.

The problem was that this stench was burnt flesh. Selina had smelled burnt human flesh before.

No, this was burnt popcorn.

Selina took slow, measured breaths behind her hand as she turned on the lights in the kitchen and the hallway. She cautiously made her way into the bedroom as the smell got more and more thick. She reached her hand into the bedroom itself to turn on the light so she wouldn’t have to go inside. She opened the bedroom door the rest of the way, looked inside, and…

Nothing.

Not a single thread of her six-hundred thread count sheets had been disturbed by Harvey Dent’s consumption into green flame. The plastic alarm clock on her bedside table had neither warped, nor stopped functioning. The ceiling was the same white that it had always been, free from smoke discoloration of any kind.

There was no evidence in this room whatsoever that a man had burned alive within.

Save of course, for the Godawful reek of burnt popcorn, and even that was strange.

I am going insane, Selina thought, but I will deal with that later.

Selina went to her closet and opened it, to get Isis’ Kitty Carrier.

They weren’t going to be staying in this apartment for a while.

In the morning light coursing into Wayne Manor’s eastward facing side, Bruce Wayne was working the heavy bag.

Three years ago, when Bruce Wayne had been Batman, he had been at the peak of his physical condition. Now? He was better than an he had been, through simple virtue that he hadn’t been beaten into a pulp in the years since he’d hung up his cape.
However the depths of vigorous training and exercise had become a habit with him that he just couldn’t shake. He’d spent years training to become Batman, and years after that actually being Batman. Putting down the regimen meant he’d have a lot more free time on his hands, and free time was, to an ex-superhero, tantamount to whatever villain was terrorizing the city for a current one.

It was a fear.

As Bruce started laying into the heavy bag with kicks, he remembered the hobbies he’d tried to cultivate over the last three years. Skydiving didn’t take. Neither did driving racecars among his fellow billionaires. Partly because the adrenaline rush that they all swore by paled in comparison to racing against the clock to stop Wrath from murdering everyone at the Policeman’s Ball, and partly because, well, he always won.

In fact, the only hobby that he even remotely stuck to was the simple and humble practice of watching television. Not just any show, no. The only show Bruce watched with any real regularity was *Death Trap*. It was on HGTV, and it was hosted by Jenna “The Carpenter” Duffy. On *Death Trap*, Jenna built the kind of inescapable lairs of doom that Batman and Robin had had no end to trouble escaping from. Bruce had been called the world’s greatest detective, but he had to kick himself for assuming for so long that The Riddler built his torture chambers all by himself.

He watched the show as a mental exercise, to see how he would escape Jenna’s trap of the week. He watched because, even though it was put toward dubious ends, he still admired her craftsmanship. And he watched because it was nice to see that Jenna Duffy was staying out of trouble.

As Bruce halted his exercise for the day and walked toward the adjoining shower to his upstairs gym, he tried to suppress the dread that the coming day held for him.

For today was his day off.

Bruce had stopped delegating his daily Wayne Enterprises duties to Lucius Fox, because as he was no longer Batman, he could actually work for a living. But Bruce Wayne was “*Bruce Wayne.*” He was the sum total of the various tricks utilized in a ten year smokescreen to conceal an alter ego, and now that the alter ego was gone, that smokescreen was all that was left.

To the world, Bruce Wayne was a playboy, even though all of the dates he’d been on since returning to Gotham had been business transactions, and he hadn’t actually slept with anyone in eight years.

To the world, Bruce Wayne was a tech innovator, even though Lucius Fox and Barbara Gordon had done all the actual work.

To the world, Bruce Wayne was a philanthropist, and… and that one he held up pretty well. His program to get the homeless of Gotham living-wage jobs at Wayne Enterprises was the one he was particularly proud of.

And to the world, it was really weird that Bruce Wayne spent all of his time at work. And he wasn’t so oblivious to not know that having the boss around all of the time was stressful for the people under his employ. He’d known Dick and Barbara long enough to know that.

As he scrubbed his hair in the shower, he thought about the question that Dick and Alfred and Lucius had all asked him off and on over the past three years.

“*Isn’t it time you started seeing someone?*”

Meaning dating, and that… that seemed impossible for him. He couldn’t even put on the charade
that he was dating anyone as he had when he was Batman.

It wasn’t that he was under the impression that he’d never find someone. He was under the impression that he would. He thought he would find a woman he’d want to tell everything.

And there was a big problem with Bruce Wayne telling a woman everything. It wasn’t that he feared for this hypothetical woman’s safety, but rather it required the kind of emotional unpacking he was both uncomfortable with, and ran the risk of this hypothetical woman running off, screaming into the night, never to be seen again.

It was the one aspect of the ongoing charade that Bruce could not indulge. Once he stopped being Batman, he even stopped going on the fake dates. And then, as if to add further fuel to Dick’s theory that he had a masochistic streak, he decided to become close friends with Selina Kyle in her post-Catwoman life. And…

And that was complicated. The kind of complicated connected with a mystery, Bruce Wayne liked to tear into. It was a problem to solve. The kind of complicated that emerged between people, he just didn’t like to think about at all.

After his shower, he got into a pair of khakis and a black button-up, and made his way from his makeshift gym in the east wing of the Manor, to the kitchen.

There, he found Dick and Barbara around the island in the middle of the room, with Alfred at the sink over on the side, rinsing some dishes off before he put them into the huge and expensive washing machine.

Upon seeing him, Bruce and Barbara immediately stopped talking. They looked at each other, unsure how to proceed, as Bruce walked to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of water.

Apparently, Dick lost whatever silent debate they’d had with their eyes, as she took out a pair of earbuds, and hooked them up to her phone as Dick turned and looked at Bruce.

“Hey, Bruce, um… Did you happen to see the news yesterday?”

“I did,” Bruce said. “Hamilton Hill Jr. is trying to get a museum opened celebrating his father. He’s… optimistic… about his chances.”

Dick sighed. “Has anyone told you how much you suck at being funny? I’m talking about the girl. The girl who was killed with Joker Toxin?”

“Maria Tellis,” Bruce said. “And?”

“And…” Dick looked at Barbara, who seemed to find her phone very interesting all of a sudden. “And… Do you… How sure are you The Joker actually died?”

Bruce fixed Dick with an icy stare as he took a sip of water. “It’s not him.”

“We’ve seen weirder things.”

“It’s not him.”

“I… look, just because Talia told you she destroyed the last Lazarus Pit in Gotham doesn’t mean she was being entirely truthful.”

Bruce sighed, and put the cap back on his water, as he didn’t think he’d be drinking from it for a
while.

“I know Talia didn’t destroy the last Lazarus Pit in Gotham,” Bruce said. “Their locations are closely guarded secrets, and just her saying it means it was a lie. But The Joker was cremated. Lazarus Pits are powerful, but they’re not powerful enough to resurrect a full-grown body from a pile of ashes. And even if they were, the League of Assassins would have to reckon not only with controlling him after he was alive again, but with the period of short term insanity that comes with emergence from a Pit, and I don’t even want to know what that would look like on The Joker. It’s… Not… Him.”

Bruce took the cap back off his water, not even needing to look to know that Dick was successfully cowed.

“Plus,” Bruce said as he got the bottle back to his lips, “it’s not his style.”

“How so?” Dick asked.

“Killing a rookie superhero in front of an old steel mill with no witnesses around wouldn’t be very funny to him,” Bruce said. “Where are you on the Fries thing?”

Dick sighed. “The prints match, so I have to figure that one out. Not to mention that I’ll have to fold the Green Comet’s death into this with the assumption they’re connected. The girl was killed with Joker Toxin, which means someone’s making it, someone’s selling it, or someone’s stealing it.”

“So your stay in the Manor is going to be extended?”

Whatever apology Dick was going to offer in this matter was cut off when Barbara yanked her ear buds out, and raised her hand as though she were a child in school.

“Um…” Barbara said. “I got this off the 911 dispatch from last night.”

She pressed the screen on her phone, and a call from last night played.

“911, what’s your emergency?” an operator asked.

A moment, before a woman’s voice, alluring even in a time of stress, made itself known.

“I’m sorry. I thought I saw something happening, but um…”

A sigh from the operator. “Uh… alright, but this is an emergency line, okay lady? Be sure of…”

The conversation ended as the woman had apparently hung up her phone. Even through the heavy processing of a cell phone signal, Bruce knew precisely who it was.

“Selina…”

Alfred had made a silent spectacle of the fact that he had stopped rinsing off the dishes.

Barbara nodded. Dick looked like he was about to say something, but Bruce held up his hand, and waved him over.

Dick got out of his chair at the island and walked over to Bruce, clearly confused. This wasn’t precisely a private conversation, and Bruce could see that he didn’t know why he had to get up.

Bruce took a deep breath before he began. “I need you… to tell me… to check in on her.”
Dick just blinked a couple of times. “Huh? Why can’t you…”

He wasn’t getting it. Bruce held up his hand again, cutting him off. “I need you… in your capacity as Nightwing… to tell me to check in on her.”

Dick just stared. He looked back at Barbara, who seemed just as stumped as he did, before looking back at Bruce.

“Uh… Fine. Go ch–”

“In your capacity as…”

“Yeah, in my capacity as Nightwing, go check in on Selina Kyle. And I’ll–I’ll check in on her too. What the hell, right?”

Bruce sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

He reached out and squeezed Dick’s shoulder, which is something he saw men without horrifying interpersonal problems do with the people they loved.

“Stay as long as you like,” Bruce said, and he took his bottle of water back upstairs.

Dick and Barbara watched Bruce leave, before they turned to each other.

“What the hell was that about?” Barbara asked.

At the sink, Alfred sighed, and turned the faucet back on.

“I swear, with all the time you two have spent under this roof, it’s like you don’t know the man at all.”

They both looked at Alfred. “Is there something you want to share with the rest of the class?” Dick asked.

“Six or so years ago,” Alfred said, trying to get something crusty off of a plate, “Master Bruce was summoned for jury duty in a case involving… Penny Plunderer, I think it was. During the selection process, the prosecutor asked him if there was any reason why he should not be chosen to serve. Do you know what Master Bruce’s reply was?”

“No,” Barbara said.

Finally satisfied that he had successfully rinsed the plate, Alfred switched off the faucet and turned to Dick and Barbara.

“I am Batman,” Alfred said.

Both Dick and Barbara’s jaws dropped.

“The prosecutor didn’t believe him, of course,” Alfred said, “and Master Bruce was sent home.”

“He just revealed his secret identity to some schmoe in front of God and everybody?” Dick asked.

“Those were not the precise words I used when I confronted him on this topic,” Alfred said, “but the spirit was identical. When I asked him why he would expose himself to someone outside his vaunted Circle of Trust, his reply was simple.”
Alfred folded his arms and leaned against the sink.

“‘I was under oath.’”

He let that marinate with the two of them in before he continued. “Master Bruce plays by a very strict set of rules. The trick for those who know him as well as we is deciphering them for ourselves, as he is under no inclination to explain them. Maybe, I fear, even to himself.”

Alfred looked at Dick. “Master Bruce will not lie to Miss Kyle. He will omit information, but that is as close as he will get. He could not simply tell her that Nightwing told him to check in on her until Nightwing told him to do exactly that.”

“And why do you think that is?” Barbara asked.

Alfred rolled his eyes.

“For the same reason you don’t lie to Master Grayson,” Alfred said. “Or at least I bloody well hope you don’t.”

The East End of Gotham City was home to many superlatives.

None of them were complimentary.

In fact, “shithole” was the most popular term of description.

This mass of decaying buildings near the water’s edge was home to Park Row. And six blocks from the old Monarch Theater, behind which Thomas and Martha Wayne were brutally murdered in front of their young son almost thirty years before, was Harlow Street.

The nameless apartment building on Harlow Street was a squat little thing: just five floors of bricks. It had a mouse problem, and most of its apartments were where drug pushers called home. But the one claim to fame that this building had was this:

It was home to Catwoman.

Or rather it was home to Selina Kyle when she was Catwoman. Selina Kyle had moved up in the world, and left this place behind. But pity poor Miss Kyle’s Impostor Syndrome. Fearing that she’d be kicked out of her swanky digs in Chinatown for no other reason than she wasn’t “the right kind of people,” Selina had never stopped paying rent on her Harlow Street apartment.

It was where she found herself now, standing at the kitchen counter in a pair of lavender boy shorts and a Fiona Apple t-shirt. On the counter in front of her were two things that occupied her attention.

The first was the can of tuna that she and Isis were sharing.

The second was the nickelbag of weed that she had purchased from the teenage girl in the lobby of the building.

Selina dug her fork into the open can of tuna, and said “Alexa, play The Police.”

So Lonely started playing from the apartment’s speakers.

Selina’s mother came to America from Cuba, and for some reason that had never been clear to Selina, Mrs. Kyle had glommed on to this particular band, and The Police wound up becoming Selina’s favorite band as well. If Selina had to theorize, it was because Mrs. Kyle, having arrived in
America, seemed dead-set on listening to American music as a way of assimilating into her new home. If so, Selina’s mother died without ever having found out that Sting was British.

The world’s greatest cat-burglar was a fan of a band called “The Police.” The irony was not lost on her.

As Isis nipped at the edges of the can of Chicken of the Sea, and as she chewed on her own forkful, Selina realized that this crummy apartment was the place that she’d been happiest the most in her life. This was where she had secreted away the valuable hauls of hundreds of heists. This was where she had spent countless nights diligently making improvements to her Catsuit.

This was where, every once in a while, in the darkest corner of the room, he…

Selina shook that last one off.

As she did, there was a knock on the living room window…. Which was strange, because Selina lived on the fifth floor.

She put her bag of pot into the silverware drawer, and made her way to the living room. She opened the window, letting in more of the funky summer evening air, and peered out.

A man was carefully perched on the thin ledge that separated her apartment from the one next door. He wasn’t the tallest guy she’d ever seen, but he was one of the prettier ones. The black and blue body suit hugged him in ways that complimented him greatly.

Selina squinted, and said “Nightwing?”

“That’s me,” Nightwing said. “Mind if I come in?”

She shrugged, and said “Why the hell not?”

Selina backed away from the window and went further back into the room as Isis, who herself was curious about the goings-on, retreated to the friendly confines of the plush red recliner over in the corner.

Nightwing gracefully made his entrance from the ledge into the living room, and stopped when he saw Selina.

“Um…” Nightwing said. “Did, uh… did you maybe wanna…”

Selina saw what he was concerned with, and glanced down at what she was wearing. She looked back up at Nightwing, and grinned.

“I don’t think a man as pretty as you has never seen a beautiful woman in her underwear. And this is my apartment.”

“Aw,” Nightwing said. “You think I’m pretty.”

Her smirk turned into a smile. “So what brings a Bludhaven guy to this part of Gotham? It can’t just be to flirt with an older woman.”

Nightwing actually almost seemed to blush. “I… wouldn’t call you and older woman per se.”

“I’m not,” Selina said. “You’re just so young.”

“I.. Wait, was I flirting?”
Selina nodded. “What else would you call it?”


And with that, whatever theoretical overtures Selina could have made toward this guy withered and died on the vine. Nightwing was unbearably cute, and he seemed like a mellow enough person, but…

But he was too eager to please. Just like Josh.

She didn’t even fight the next thought that swam up through her consciousness. A thought she normally would have tried to hold back with all her will.

*He’s not him…*

Selina leaned against the wall and folded her arms. “What makes a man so eager to entertain at ten o’clock at night, in a city that’s not his own?”

“Yes, about that,” Nightwing said. “Oracle and I intercepted a 911 call from last night… and you’re no dummy, so you know what I’m about to say next.”

Selina sighed, weighing her options. “I wound up seeing something that wasn’t there.”

Nightwing nodded. “Well, that’s interesting. Because I got a look at your building’s surveillance feed—which, I believe, you installed.”

“Not, like, personally, or anything, I mean I have employees.”

“Yeah, you walked into your apartment at seven thirty-three PM. You ran out with your cat under your arm at seven thirty-seven. Whatever you wound up *not* seeing must have been persuasive.”

“It had to be,” Selina said, knowing her caginess was running out. “I dialed 911, didn’t I? But it still doesn’t change the fact that I didn’t see anything.”

Nightwing nodded again, and Selina wondered whether or not he was too young to have ever watched *Columbo.* This was a very *Columbo* act he was putting on.

“Here’s the thing, though,” Nightwing said. “I was *at* your apartment in Chinatown tonight.”

“Wait,” Selina said. “You got past the cameras and the thumbprint scanner?”

“I could have,” Nightwing said, “but it would have taken too long. I got in through the window.”

Selina shrugged. “Smart man.”

“Thank you,” Nightwing said. “Here’s the thing, though. It was relatively easy for me to get up to the fourth floor of your building. I have a grapnel gun… But I’ve gone through the camera feed in your building, and I have to ask… How did Harvey Dent get up there?”

Selina’s eyes shot wide and beamed at Nightwing.

“Because I’m pretty sure *he* didn’t have a grapnel gun,” Nightwing said. “It smells like burnt popcorn in your apartment. I ran a scan on the air and found four separate gasses that my scanner can’t identify, along with sulfur and human bone marrow. I ran a DNA check on the marrow, and everything came up Two-Face.”
Selina looked down at her shirt. Her sigh came out in a slow shudder. *Well, at least I’m not going crazy.*

“Look,” Nightwing said. “I’m not here to accuse you of anything. Your reputation precedes you, and you never killed anyone as far as the GCPD or I can tell. In fact, if you tell me what happened in your apartment last night, there’s a two-to-one shot that it won’t be the weirdest thing I’ve rubbed up against in the past two days. So go ahead. Unburden yourself. I’m not here to judge.”

Selina looked back at Nightwing. “Harvey burned alive on my bed in a green flame that somehow didn’t set my sheets on fire.”


“He looked rough,” Selina said, ignoring him. “Like he’d been tortured. Parts of his hand had been flayed off and all his teeth had been knocked out. And he said something about… Does the name ‘The Undying’ ring a bell to you?”

“No,” Nightwing said.

“Well, he said he was sent as a warning. That The Undying was coming for me. And for…”

Her eyes flashed toward Isis, before they went back to Nightwing.

“And for Batman.”

Selina was willing to be that she’d said that name more times between last night and now than she had in the preceding three years. It tasted funny. Like stale saltines.

And Nightwing only stared back. She knew the look of a guy whose workload just got bigger. She employed guys who looked like that.

“Thank you very much for your time,” Nightwing said. “I’ll get out of your hair.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. I’ll, uh… I’ll send someone around for you to contact in case you need to get me some additional information.”

Nightwing turned around to make his exit through the window. Selina’s eyes slightly glanced over his broad back, to the escrima sticks sticking out of two leather loops on the small of his back, and now further south to…

*Oh my Good God!*

Watching Nightwing bend over to get through the window, Selina had now begun to consider her stance on not flirting with this guy as somewhat ill- advised. An eagerness to please, after all, wasn’t an entirely bad thing.

“Hey,” Selina said, and Nightwing got back out of the window to face her.

She looked in his eyes, and…

*Nope. Still can’t do it.*

In absence of anything else to say, and against her better judgement, she brought herself to ask a question she knew wouldn’t lead to a good place.
“Uh…” she said, scratching her head. “Look, I know you didn’t get this address out of a hat or anything, so… Is he alright? Is he doing okay?”

Nightwing sighed. “Contrary to what you might think, Selina… I didn’t know him all that well.”

Selina nodded, and swallowed.

Nightwing turned to the window again, before he turned right around.

“Actually…” he said, and Selina’s eyebrows raised.

“To the extent that I knew him,” Nightwing said, “and to the extent my opinion means anything to you at all… You were a hell of a lot better for him than Talia al Ghul… And if we’re, like, being super bestie honest? I was pulling for the two of you.

Selina’s eyes took on a shade of their previous glumness. “Yay me.”

He smirked. “Selina, you stopped putting on your Catsuit and you became a millionaire. You’re the American Success Story ‘Yay you’ is right.”

Nightwing propelled himself out the window by his arms into what must have been a five story freefall. She heard the high whine of a grapnel gun, and she knew he was gone.

Just like he did.

Just like they all did.

Selina snorted. “Brat…”

Her bare feet padded along the ugly red shag carpet that came with the apartment as Selina walked to the window sill and leaned against it, taking in the better-than-expected view across the bay of the good part of the city.

Whatever absent-minded reverie in which she found herself was pierced by something strange.

Across the bay there was a little stock ticker that ran across the side of the building that housed Gotham Financial News. She must have looked at that damned thing a thousand times, the three letter abbreviations for companies scrolling by with little green numbers and upward pointing arrows if they were doing well, and little red numbers and downward pointing arrows if they weren’t.

But now it was distorted, blinking on and off as though it was broken.

The ticker’s screen came up black now, and words in a bright red font scrawled by.

**SELINA… THE ROCK MEMORIAL… MIDNIGHT… TONIGHT…**

She remembered those words on the touchscreen in her apartment building elevator last night. It was just so buffeted on either side by all manner of insane shit that she just forgot to tell Nightwing about it.

But she wasn’t seeing things. If Harvey Dent really did die in her apartment, then she really had seen two separate electronic displays telling her where she needed to be in two hours.

Selina rolled her eyes.

She wouldn’t be working her way through that nickelbag.
She had somewhere to be.
Chapter 7: Everyone Remembers Their First Time

GOTHAM PORT - ELEVEN YEARS AGO

A small, rugged peninsula on the southern tip of Miagani Island was where the luxury yachts of the rich and famous came to dock. These ships cruised around Gotham Bay by day, but by night their owners moved onto Miagani Island proper to take in museum exhibits, or concerts, or whatever big musical was opening.

So the cream of Gotham’s crop invaded the island, leaving their yachts--and their valuables--behind in the port with minimal security.

This particular night was the night of a fashion show, put on by the label founded by a British import named Neil Richards. His label, Mad Mod, was displaying the latest in hideously expensive womenswear, and the richest in Gotham, with no aesthetic sense beyond what a price tag looks like, flocked to the Tynion Ballroom on Fourth street to take in the spectacle.

And on this rainy September night at Gotham Port, on the deck of the nearly abandoned \textit{Lysistrata}, a lone female figure stood peering into a skylight at her feet.

Catwoman’s first ever Catsuit was nothing more than a black one-piece swimsuit worn over a pair of purple running tights. It had black combat boots and regular leather gloves. And topping off the ensemble was a plastic cat-themed masquerade mask that cost a buck-fifty at Spencer’s Gifts. The green ones were the only ones they had left, so she had to go over it with a black Sharpie.

It took Catwoman a year of ripping off drug dealers and boosting jewelry from the apartments of mafia girlfriends before she could afford what she was wearing now, which more complemented both her visual tastes and the demands of her chosen vocation.

It was spandex with leather around the legs, arms, and midsection below the sternum, complete with dark purple accents. Gloves with titanium tipped claws, perfect for cutting glass. A thin belt with pouches for tools like lockpicks, caltrops, and smoke bombs. A cowl with cat ears. There wasn’t a mask, but that was what the goggles were for. They were in a cat-eye design, with red lenses that served as the ensemble’s only splash of vivid color. They had infrared and night-vision, and could spot the invisible threads of laser grids and motion detectors.

Looking at herself in the bedroom mirror in her Harlow Street apartment, this was the coolest she had ever looked or felt. But it still needed… \textit{something}.

It needed black lipstick.

Oh, and the twelve-foot bullwhip, of course.

Catwoman peered down into the skylight above the main cabin of the \textit{Lysistrata}, her goggles scanning the inside for any security measures. She didn’t find any.

She knelt down and carved a small circle into the glass of the skylight with her claws, and tapped that circle of glass with her finger. It fell harmlessly to the red satin sheets on the king-sized bed below, without making a sound. She reached in through the circle and found the handle that opened the skylight hatch. She opened it, but before she went in, she tied the business end of the bullwhip to a nearby rigging hook, and she used it to slide the eight feet down to the bed of the cabin.
Catwoman stood on the bed, and the first thing that struck her was the decor of the cabin. There was a series of four massive black-and-white photographs, one on each wall, each featuring the same nude woman in different artistic poses.

She sneered. “Jesus…”

It wasn’t beyond Catwoman’s ken that some fool would decorate the cabin of their massive yacht with pictures of naked ladies, artistic or no. She was the farthest thing from a prude, and naked women were nowhere near the worst thing to look at.

In fact, she thought she could use some herself in her own apartment. Catwoman considered daydreaming healthy

No, what bothered Catwoman was that the woman in the pictures was the owner of the yacht.

The Lysistrata belonged to Mallory Moxon, a socialite who hit paydirt in her divorce settlement from a some big-wig media lobbyist. Catwoman actually read articles in yachting magazines to case tonight’s job, and in an interview, Moxon said she called this bucket the Lysistrata because “‘Well, I’m a big fan of irony.’”

Whatever the hell that meant.

Mallory Moxon’s naked body was on all four walls around her, literally surrounding her like the Mexican army at the Alamo, and if Catwoman ever got so full of herself that she ever put up pictures of her own ass all over her own apartment, then she hoped to God snipers were on stand-by.

Lord, Catwoman thought, what kind of rich people bullshit is this?

But then she sighed. Mallory Moxon was fine, though, so maybe she knew something Catwoman didn’t.

She made her way to the massive vanity next to the east wall. She was about to root through the drawers when she saw a picture on the dresser. The owner of this yacht, Mallory Moxon, her eyes closed in bliss, and her nose buried in the neck of that billionaire Bruce Wayne.

Catwoman shook her head. Poor bastard.

She liberated the vanity of as much jewelry that she could fit into the pouches on her Catsuit’s belt. Including a staggeringly hideous emerald ring that could get her thousands once she fenced it.

Haul in tow, Catwoman climbed her way back up the whip. Once she got to the deck, she untethered her whip from the rigging hook and stood up.

Lightning flashed.

And on the pale wood of the deck, Catwoman saw a silhouette familiar to criminals the city over.

Catwoman whirled around and glared at the towering figure before her. His cape blew in the rainy fall wind behind him. In the dim light she could see his gray armor, his black boots and gloves, the black insignia on his chest bordered by yellow. The gold belt around his waist with enough compartments to put hers to shame. His mask, with ear-like protrusions that extended two inches above the rest of his head.

The name escaped her mouth in a gasp. “Batman!”
He stayed silent for a moment before he spoke in a sinister baritone.

“T’ve had my eye on you,” Batman said. “You were the one who stole jewelry out of Rita Nunzio’s apartment three months ago.”

Rita Nunzio was the woman Carmine Falcone capo Barry “The Hat” Alfonsi went to when his wife was being a pain.

“That jewelry didn’t look good on her anyway,” Catwoman said.

“This doesn’t fit your MO,” Batman said.

“I have an MO?”

“Everyone has an MO. I was more than willing to let you go on your way, so long as you were targeting other criminals. But you’re here tonight taking something that doesn’t belong to you.”

Batman took one step closer. “You have one chance to put back what you stole. After that, you’re just one more criminal I have to deal with.”

Catwoman stared at him for a moment. Batman had been so shrouded in legend and exaggeration that she’d forgotten the “man” part of “Batman.”

And this man… was a colossal prick. He was every priest, every teacher, every boyfriend that had ever shit on her and tried to control her. Who had tried to ruin her fun in a world where fun was so rare as to be precious.

Catwoman puffed herself up. “Listen, freak. I’m no one’s just one more anything. And if you want this ugly, tacky crap… You’re just gonna have to catch me.”

She booked it in the opposite direction. She sprung off the deck and onto the dock of Gotham Port just as the hook from Batman’s grapnel gun embedded itself into the wood.

As she made it to the steps leading up to the street, Catwoman chanced a glance behind her.

Batman wasn’t running after her.

He was gliding after her. He was in the air, that cape of his outstretched, and gaining on her fast.

Catwoman pushed herself harder. She jumped the turnstile leading into the port, and found herself on the side of Gendreaux Street, where a cluster of movie theaters were located. The throng of people on the sidewalk must have meant a couple of the movies had let out.

A drunk man and his even more inebriated wife saw her, and gawped.

“Well, the street performers get weirder every damn year, don’t they?” he said.

Catwoman saw a public bus coming down the street, a parked car near the curb, and a streetlight. Two and two and two added up to six.

She ran up the front of the car, and pulled out her whip. She launched the end of it at the street light, and it coiled satisfyingly around the bulb. Using her momentum, she swung above the street, and just as the whip uncoiled from the light, she had gotten the claws of her free hand into the side of the bus’s roof. She threw the whip up, and scrambled up the side, until she was lying on her back on the top of the bus, no doubt to the great consternation of the passengers inside.
Catwoman didn’t know she could do that. She didn’t even know it was possible. As she stood atop the bus, coiling her whip around her arm to put back on her belt, she grinned like a fool. She felt the exhilarating God-haughtiness of a school kid who aced a test they hadn’t even studied for.

The bus pulled to a stop at a red light in front of an old office building with a fire escape on the side.

*Good enough for me!*

She leapt off the bus and her hands found the metal fire escape railing. She pulled herself up, and started bounding up the stairs to the roof, the evening rain streaking across her goggles.

Her boots made slushing noises on the wet gravel of the rooftop as she skidded to a stop to catch her breath. She bent over, putting her hands on her thighs, panting.

She heard the loud snap of metal digging into brick.

She heard a high metallic whine, like an industrial grade fishing line being pulled to the depths of a ravenous ocean.

And then… **WHOOSH!**

From the opposite side of the roof, Batman ascended upward, his leviathan cape outstretched behind him, fluttering in the wind and rain.

He defied gravity, gliding the length of the rooftop, until he let go of his cape.

Batman made landfall at an astounding velocity. He skidded to a stop two feet away from her, kicking up a wave of gravel that pelted almost every inch of Catwoman from the neck down.

Then he stood up straight, dwarfing her, the rain pouring in rivulets down the soft curves and hard angles of his cowl.

It was the scariest Goddamned thing Catwoman had ever seen in her life.

“How the jewelry,” Batman said. “Now.”

But even though she was scared, Catwoman just… couldn’t let this one go. She knew the type of hardass Batman was, and if you let them through once, they walked all over you for the rest of their lives. She was going to pay for this in so many more ways than one, this she knew. But this was going to be worth it.

“You say I steal from criminals,” Catwoman said. “I just steal from people who have more than me.”

“That’s not an excuse,” Batman said.

Catwoman moved the goggles from her eyes to her forehead. “Are you prepared to hit a woman to get Mallory Moxon’s crap back for her?”

Batman didn’t even blink when he said “Not first.”

She could resist smirking. “You can’t believe everything you hear on the street… ’Cause they said you were smart.”

And that’s when the claws came out.
Selina Kyle had spent a considerable amount of time training under an ex-boxer named Ted Grant, and her hand-to-hand skills had improved considerably. Boxing, Muay Thai, Capoeira, Krav Maga, Hapkido.

And Catwoman was going to need all of it.

Batman ducked out of the way out of her wild surprise left. He immediately sized her up as she went for a more calculated right slash, and he backed his way out of that as well.

The kicks came next. Two sides and a roundhouse. Bob, weave, duck.

Catwoman went for more slashes, now, with claws that could rend flesh. Kicks that could splinter bone.

And Batman was avoiding all of it.

It wasn’t effortless, though. Catwoman was blindingly fast, and Batman was a big guy with enough armor to make him tank-like. But she hadn’t laid a finger on him.

Well, I guess that’s what whips are for.

She grabbed her weapon from her belt and uncoiled it. She brought it up and, just as she was about to bring it down with a satisfying crack, Catwoman saw a flash of metal, and about eight feet of her whip harmlessly flying off over Batman’s shoulder.

Catwoman looked down on the gravel, and saw a piece of metal in the shape of a bat sticking up (a “Batarang” as she would later learn they were called). She looked at her hand and saw that she only had four feet of her twelve foot bullship left.

She looked at Batman, standing near the building’s water tower, and he had no smile on his face. No smirk. No triumph at having bested a foe.

Because she knew she wasn’t a foe to him.

She was a problem he just solved.

That son of a bitch…

Furious, Catwoman screamed and launched herself at him, her right claw extended over her head. Batman waited until the last possible second to glide out of the way. The only bodily contact she would have with him tonight was his cape seemingly gliding across the length of her torso.

She turned to look at him, and he was holding something in has hand, presenting it to her.

In that brief contact with her, Batman had somehow snatched the belt with all the jewelry inside it clean off of her waist without her even noticing it.

Full of rage, Catwoman lunged at him… and almost dislocated her shoulder.

Because not only in that brief contact did he take her belt, he had handcuffed her to the water tower.

The anger inside her had been snuffed out like a candle, and in that vacuum, it was replaced with sheer dumbfoundedness. He looked from her handcuffed wrist to Batman and just asked…

“How?”
And all Batman said was “The police will be here shortly.”

Batman turned, walked to the roof’s edge, and leapt off.

He was gone.

Catwoman slid down and sat on the gravel. She’d have balked at the thought of this earlier today, but the cops were just going to keep the suit after she was arrested anyway. She reached up with her free hand and took off her cowl.

But she had to sit. She had to reckon with what had just happened.

On first blush, Selina framed Batman as some hard-ass do-gooder. And while, yeah, to the letter he was, to the spirit he was something else entirely.

It was the way he fought.

Or rather, it was the way he didn’t fight.

He had heard horror stories from hoods and bagmen with casts on their arms or jaws wired shut about how The Bat fought like the Devil himself. It would have taken a miniscule fraction of the effort it did to dodge all of her attacks to just knock her unconscious. In the heat of the moment, she couldn’t have blamed him, and even later, with the benefit of hindsight, she couldn’t blame him either. She presented an immediate danger.

But he didn’t.

There was no bravado in his movement while dodging her. No need to impress upon her how talented and dangerous he was. He didn’t toy with her. He had just, with simplicity and without pretense, stayed out of her way.

But why?

As the rain seeped into Selina’s scalp, she realized she had an answer. It took no great deductive leap on her part, as he had told her the reason himself.

“Not first.”

He had told her that he wouldn’t hit a lady first, and he almost wore himself out making sure he didn’t have to hit a lady at all.

Selina had assumed that Batman was just like every other man who tried to control her. Like every other man she met who would shit on a woman’s good time for the simple reason that it was a good time being had by a woman.

And she was wrong.

Because all those priests, all those politicians, all those boyfriends, all those cops differed from Batman in the only way that mattered.

They didn’t follow their own rules. There was always some exception to be made as long as they themselves benefited from it. As long as they themselves could indulge in some base pleasure.

And as long as Selina was being completely honest with herself and revelatory in general, she wasn’t be best at following her own rules either.
But Batman did follow his own rules. He had demonstrated as such.

And to Selina, as her train of thought kept advancing, Batman seemed to be the rarest of men. The rarest of people. As rare as the jewels she had so much fun stealing.

Batman was who he said he was. Ironic for a man in a mask, but, well…

Selina wondered how far down that went. Beyond the mask. Who was he? What kind of person would do this? Who would function as an absolute in a world so full of gray?

As she head the sirens getting nearer, as she saw the red and blue lights flashing off the windows of the opposite building, Selina couldn’t help but think:

*We should do this again sometime…*

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**THE ROCK MEMORIAL - NOW**

In midtown Gotham City, almost forgotten in the midst of the gleaming skyscrapers that pulsate illumination even in the darkest night, there lies a small memorial. It is circular, about twenty feet across, wreathed in dirt that once grew flowers. In the middle are two weathered park benches facing each other, and between them an upraised plaque on a pedestal, bearing an inscription. And though it has been weathered by decades of polluted Gotham rain, the inscription is still legible.

*This humble monument stands in loving memorial of SERGEANT FRANK ROCK. Felled by the last bullet fired in the last battle on the last day of the Second World War. “Nothin’s ever easy in Easy.”*

On one of these benches sat Selina Kyle. She still had her black Ducati motorcycle in the storage unit a block away from her apartment on Harlow Street. Even two-and-a-half years as a millionaire CEO couldn’t keep her away from it for too long. Her staycations in Gotham were peppered with evening joyrides that were fun, but didn’t have a lot of the thrill they once had, as now she wasn’t being chased by the cops or by costumed vigilantes after she had stolen something priceless.

She didn’t want to use a Lyft for this midnight rendezvous at The Rock Memorial, nor did she want to use her personal driver. Something told her this was the kind of meet that would require as few witnesses as possible.

That something was right.

As she was buffing out a speck of dirt from her helmet with the sleeve of her leather jacket, she heard approaching footsteps and a familiar voice. It was deep, and was used as though its owner simply adored hearing it.

“I tell you, Selina, Gotham City journalism is in a sorry state indeed.”

Selina winced when she heard it, as though it was nails down a blackboard instead of a voice that could be quite pleasing under certain circumstances. She stood up and glared at the voice’s owner. The kind of man who really would hijack both an elevator touchscreen and a privately owned stock ticker to send a specific message to just one person instead of anything as prosaic as a phone call or an email, the obnoxious putz.
She spat out his name. “Lex…”

Lex Luthor stood in expensive Italian shoes, wearing an immaculately tailored gray suit. No tie on the white shirt underneath. His jaw was square, his cheekbones could slice through a side of raw beef, and his bare scalp was shinier than a diamond.

He had a newspaper under his arm, that he now took out and looked at. It was an issue of that day’s Gotham Herald.

“I can read plenty about the plans of Hamilton Hill’s son to open a museum in his father’s name, I can read about the death of The Green Comet, whoever that is… But I cannot find a single word about the ice cream truck that was stolen not three blocks from your… charming little apartment in Park Row two nights ago.”

Lex threw his issue of the Herald into the wastebasket near Selina’s bench and said “Can’t beat the Daily Planet, I guess.”

“You jumped through three hoops of bullshit trying to contact me in silly ways so you could talk about newspapers and ice cream trucks?”

“It’s relevant,” Lex said. “Trust me. But before we get to the heart of the matter, I have to ask: Why have you not accepted my generous terms for providing security for my LexCorp facilities?”

“I have two reasons,” Selina said. “The first reason is, you’re an asshole.”

“And the second reason?”

“You’re an even bigger asshole.”

Lex put his hands on his hips. “Was our prior collaboration really so trying for you?”

“You hired a thief to steal kryptonite from that S.T.A.R. Labs facility in Metropolis,” Selina said. “But you didn’t want a thief. You wanted a thief and a foot soldier. You wanted someone who would fight your battles and nod at everything you said. And if you thought I fit in with those tools you brought on, then you need to fire whatever idiot you have running your supercriminal HR department.”

“I’ve had success with those people before.”

“You…” Selina didn’t even want to finish the sentence. “Solomon Grundy is a corpse, okay? Smarter than the average corpse, yeah, but he still smells like one. And that— that evil little gnome Doctor Psycho kept trying to grab my tits, and the only thing that stopped him is that he’s so short he needed to get a running jump.”

“You’re not a team player,” Lex said. “I see that now.”

Through clenched teeth, Selina said “I… had to fight… Wonder Woman!”

Lex laughed. “I… I take it your encounter with our friend from Themiscyra didn’t go as well as you’d hoped.”

“She knocked me out with one punch! I had no business fighting a metahuman… Goddess… whatever the hell she is, and if you—”

Lex held his hand up to silence her. He still had a smile on his face.
“As—as entertaining as this is, I have business to discuss. Business you could benefit from.”

Selina knew this wasn’t about installing security at any of the LexCorp facilities. He could have just emailed her for that. This was big.

And she didn’t get dressed up for nothing.

She sat back down on the bench, draped her arm over her motorcycle helmet, and said “Step into my office.”

Lex gave her a stiff bow, and sat on the bench opposite her. He straightened the collar of his shirt.

“No now then,” Lex said, “if I were to ask you what you thought the future of military defense looked like, what would you say?”

Selina shrugged, and said “I dunno. Super-soldiers?”

“Need I read you the laundry list of the people who failed to create someone who could best Superman?”

“Okay,” Selina said, “but if that’s just an excuse to say your own name a bunch of times, I’m sorry, but I have places to be.”

“Your wit sparkles, Miss Kyle,” Lex said, in a way that let Miss Kyle know that he did not think her wit sparkled in the slightest. “What else?”

“We still on the military question?” Selina asked. “Uhhh… Something more powerful than nuclear weapons?”

“Closer,” Lex said, “but still not quite there. Believe it or not, most military scientists believe that heavy arms have reached their plateau. Not when there are Lanterns and Speedsters and Amazons who can disarm these weapons, and not when there are Kryptonians who can withstand them.”

Lex leaned forward in his seat. “The future of military defense is targeting.”

“Targeting,” Selina said. It wasn’t a question.

“Oh, indeed,” Lex said. “We live in the Smart Age, Miss Kyle. We’re not looking for a bigger boom. We’re looking for a more accurate one. And what if I told you that LexCorp had found a way to get it?”

“I’d say it’d land you in a shitload of trouble,” Selina said. “I remember LexCorp working on arms tech is a violation of your parole.”

Lex nodded.

Five years ago, in an escapade that cost forty-seven lives, Lex Luthor called together seven other supervillains in an attempt to build a kryptonite laser. The kryptonite for this laser was supposed to have been procured by Catwoman. They were defeated by the senior members of the Justice League.

Selina, along with Doctor Psycho, Scavenger, Golden Glider, and Deadshot all flipped on Lex in exchange for no prison time. Cheetah wanted to flip, but her status as a metahuman, along with the fact that she had no relevant information for prosecutors to use, meant that she was detained in Belle Reve. Solomon Grundy was spirited off to some A.R.G.U.S. blacksite whose location was unknown, where he remained to this day.
Lex was sentenced to life in prison but, thanks to legal finagling by the best defense attorneys in America, he got out in three years.

Selina would say this for him: He took her snitching in stride.

“Okay,’ she said.  ‘I’ll bite. How’d you get your boom more accurate?’

“Most targeting systems use thermal imaging to track a target, or satellite pictures that are often inaccurate the millisecond after they are taken. But my system uses the target’s DNA.”

A shiver raced down Selina’s spine.

“All one would need is a hair,” Lex said, “or a single flake of skin. Or even a clear mental image of the person, if the system was used by someone with psychic tech. And that person would be dead in an instant, depending on the type of device to which my targeting system was interfaced.”

“How is this possible?” Selina asked.

“Are you asking if we developed this technology?” Lex asked. “Quite simply, we didn’t. But there were more than a few crashed ships when the armies of Apokolips tried to invade Earth last year. It operates under the same principle as those Omega Beams that Darkseid shoots from his eyes. And those beams never miss.”

Selina sighed. “Jesus Christ, Lex.”

He seemed to recoil at her displeasure. “I’ll have you know that this system would drastically cut down on innocent bystanders during assassination attempts and times of war! Interfaced with the right orbital laser, it could destroy a target a mere inch away from another person, and that person would feel no ill effect.”

“Or,” Selina said, “you could hook it up to a nuclear missile array and target everyone in a country or, I dunno, an entire ethnic group? I swear, if Baroness Blitzkrieg was still alive to hear this, she’d be wetting down the front of her Goddamn thong right now!”

To which Lex Luthor simply shrugged.

“The first unwritten rule of tech development is to pay no mind to how your ideas could be put to nefarious ends,” he said. “How do you think Twitter got so successful?”

Selina rubbed her face and fumed.

“Okay, putting aside the fact that you are… just… so shitty at the whole ‘being human’ thing, why in God’s holy name are we talking right now? What does this have to do with me?”

“Well,” Lex said, “I am on parole, and working on something I shouldn’t be working on. And if the prototype of that something needed to make its way from Metropolis to Cape Canaveral, I wouldn’t put it in a big truck that said ‘LexCorp’ on the side, would I? No, if I were a genius, I’d switch the method of conveyance in every town at which that prototype stopped. A U-Haul here, a police cruiser there, and when it got to Gotham City…”

“An ice cream truck.”

“Yes.”

“The ice cream truck you said was stolen the other night.”
“Yes.”

“Doesn’t say a whole lot about you being a genius, now does it?”

Lex glared at her.

“If that targeting system is still in Gotham, I want you to find it,” Lex said. “And I will quite literally hand you a blank check to see to it that it is either returned or destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” Selina asked.

“I’ll need proof of the destruction,” Lex said, leaning back, “but yes. That system is home to quite a few patented LexCorp technologies, and if it landed in the wrong hands, it would lead back to me, and I would go to prison for the rest of my life. Oh, I could get out of it again, don’t get me wrong, but… My sister Lena is a fine and capable CEO, but she’s not me. I know that, she knows that, and the LexCorp shareholders know that.”

“Hmmm,” Selina said. “And you seemed to have forgotten the part where I’m out of the game. I’m not Catwoman anymore.”

“Oh dear,” Lex said, oozing fake concern. “I wondered who I would be speaking to tonight, and it seems I have my answer.”

Selina’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Would I be talking to a CEO who felt guilty about the millions she made? Would I be talking to a woman so used to living in feces that she’s willingly staying in a rathole apartment on Harlow Street instead of a five-star hotel? Would I be talking to a girl who got her poor little fee-fees hurt when her favorite flying rodent left her high and dry three years ago?”

Selina’s eyes narrowed further. Lex leaned forward on the bench again.

“Or would I be talking to the best cat burglar ever to grace the planet?” he asked.

Selina’s eyes stayed narrow, but her hateful expression slightly softened.

“The thing I hate most in all of fiction is the redemption arc,” Lex said. “Blah-blah-blah, the villain reforms so they don’t have to face their universe’s facsimile of moral retribution. It’s a nice sentiment for small children, but I don’t like seeing something rare and brilliant extinguish itself. And for what? Absolution? Convenience? To impress a boy?”

The hardness on Selina’s face was entirely gone now. She was never going to be one of Lex Luthor’s foot soldiers, but if he put this act on all the time, she could see the appeal.

“You know what you’re looking for, Miss Kyle,” Lex said. “Steal it from whoever has it, or destroy it. If you do either, the sky is the limit for whatever happens next.”

And with that, Lex Luthor stood up, and began to walk away.

Selina’s head was buzzing from trying to see all the angles, but there was one shot in the dark she had to take.

“Lex?”

He turned, wordlessly, and looked at her.
“Does the name ‘The Undying’ mean anything to you?”

“No,” Lex said. “Should it?”

In 1898, Gotham City began erecting its first effort at subway transportation. Hundreds of feet below the city, tunnels and stations, shops and eateries, were erected and decorated in the then-popular style of Art Nouveau. It was, in a word, grandiose.

There was, however, one problem.

The tunnels that were built were three feet too small on all sides. There were, at the time, no subway cars built that could effectively be used in these spaces.

The project was running over budget as it was, so the subway was scrapped, and the construction halted. They didn’t even take the time to destroy the tunnels that had been built. The next effort at subway construction began thirty-one years later, and was built three hundred feet above the initial 1898 tunnels.

These tunnels lay beneath the earth undisturbed, their existence a mere trivial footnote among only the most learned of Gotham City historians…

...until a few short weeks ago.

It was then that a small community of people began to live in these lavish 1898 tunnels quite literally overnight. There were no children in this community. The men seemed spacey. The women seemed hard.

And among these people strode the person who had a hand in leading them, their black robes trailing behind them, their silver mask reflecting the faces of their subjects.

The Undying.

The men bowed and some even genuflected in the presence of The Undying. The women just seemed to ignore them.

The Undying walked to a place that was, in 1898, intended as an expensive restaurant. Now it was a living quarters bisected by a beige silk screen, through which The Undying could only see silhouettes. Though they had brought power to these tunnels via multiple generators, the area beyond this silk screen was illuminated solely by candlelight.

The Undying saw a silhouette now: that of a woman in a bathrobe, a towel woven atop her head. This woman sat down at a desk, removed the towel, unleashing a torrent of heavy wet hair that she worked over her right shoulder. They saw her silhouette slide her arms from out of her bathrobe. Now, stripped naked from the waist up, the silhouette removed a brush from the desk at which she sat, and began tending to her hair.

The voice of The Undying came out as a high electronic drone behind their mask. “Has our partner returned from their errand?”

The woman behind the screen spoke in an accent that was hard to place. “Yes… he did.”

The Undying nodded. “Then don’t you think it’s time he should make his presence felt?”

The silhouette of the woman stopped brushing her hair, and stayed quiet for a spell before she said:
“Yes... He should.”
Chapter 8: The Bloody Forest

The act that Bruce Wayne put on to simply be “Bruce Wayne” was a strenuous one.

It began with something as easy for others as a smile. He’d been told he had a nice one. He could even remember his mother telling him his face was built for it, but the act itself just seemed so… unnatural to him.

Take, for instance, how he began this very day. Walking into the front lobby of Wayne Tower, he saw the security guard at his kiosk, and he smiled with a vacant expression.

Bruce smiled back, slowly drawing his lips up past his teeth. He was painfully aware that his bottom lip was covering his entire row of lower teeth, and he wondered whether or not that looked weird. He’s always meant to practice smiling in front of the mirror, but he’d never gotten around to it.

He walked to the elevator, and once the doors closed and the ascent began, he took his phone out of his dark blue sportcoat. His stomach lurched and his palms started sweating.

How did Bruce Wayne, as “Bruce Wayne,” talk to Selina Kyle? How did an eleven year history play out when another party wasn’t supposed to know about it. He figured that that would be an impenetrable mystery to someone who was good with people. But Bruce Wayne knew who he was, and to him, he was like a dog trying to translate Sanskrit poetry into a newer, less dead form of Sanskrit.

Bruce could feel his shoulders slump. He moved his eyebrows up and down trying to loosen up his face. He was about to do the impression of all the vaguely vapid billionaire men he met: Somewhat clueless, and mildly enthusiastic. A great deal more grounded than the ones who spent all their free time in Napa Valley Buddhist retreats, but infinitely more compassionate than the Silicon Valley Tech Bros with white nationalist leanings.

Alfred had trained him in acting. During his stint as Batman, he’d gone undercover as a gangster named Matches Malone in the Maroni mob, and that was less difficult than playing on off-brand version of himself.

He brought up Selina’s name on his phone and hit the call icon. After two rings…

“Bruce?” Selina asked.

“Hey, uh… It’s me.” Bruce said, kicking himself in his own mind, because who the hell else would it be?

“Is something up? Please tell me Ted Kord isn’t still complaining about the laser grids.”

“No,” Bruce said, “That’s--That’s not it, um… Nightwing showed up in my house last night.”

Which was not a lie. Dick, in his capacity as Nightwing, had told Bruce all about the apparent death of Harvey Dent and this new player called “The Undying.”

“Oh,” Selina said. “Yeah, he showed up at my house, too. We talked about… Well… Ex-supervillain stuff.”
“Okay,” Bruce said, his eyebrows arching in an odd approximation of a normal person’s concern. “Is, um… Can I ask you a question? And--and it’s okay if you don’t want to answer.”

“Well, shit,” Selina said. “With a lead-up like that, I get the feeling this conversation’s gonna be all light and fluffy.”

Bruce sighed, stalling for time. “Are you… doing the Catwoman thing again?”

No answer from the other end.

“Look, I’m not judging,” Bruce said. And now that he said it, he’d have to make a concerted effort to follow through on that. So it wouldn’t be a lie.

“No,” Selina said, her voice downcast. “I’m not doing the Catwoman thing again.”

“Okay,” Bruce said. “Like… I’m your friend, right?”

A pause. “Why wouldn’t you be?” Selina asked.

“No, it’s just… I’m concerned, is all. Worrying when you don’t need to worry sucks, but not worrying when you do need to sucks more, so… Am--am I making sense, here?”

“Just barely,” said Selina.

“Good. And Nightwing told me to tell you that if you know anything or learn anything about whatever he talked to you about to come to me. Because I’m the head of an international multibillion dollar corporation, and I’m easier to get a hold of than the guy who beats up gangsters in Bludhaven.”

Selina let off a short, quiet laugh. “You still coming over to Kyle Security Friday morning to look over the Kord Industries thing with me?”

“Yeah,” Bruce said. “I’ve been friends with Ted for years, and I’ll translate what he says from business asshole to regular English.”

Another short laugh. “See you then,” Selina said.

“Bye,” Bruce said, and hung up.

He involuntarily shuddered. Bruce Wayne had somehow managed to reach the Uncanny Valley version of himself. It was so close to the image of what he might be as a regular person, but there were enough flaws, major and minor, to be sickening. He even hated talking as “Bruce Wayne.” He felt his voice getting higher and higher when he did it, and he imagined if he did it much more than he already did, then only dogs would hear it.

Bruce Wayne did not like being “Bruce Wayne.”

Especially when talking to Selina.

The elevator stopped at the one-hundred-third floor, which was entirely Bruce Wayne’s office.

The first person he saw when he stepped off the elevator and into the sleekly decorated waiting room was his secretary Janice, and she had the same spacey look on her face as the security guard on the ground floor. Her brown eyes were the same kind of glazed-over. Her smile was similarly lopsided.

And as soon as Bruce saw who was sitting on the waiting room couch, he knew why.
He was sitting forward intently, his burgundy tie hanging lifelessly over the brown trench coat that he had taken off and folded sloppily in his lap. His blonde hair stuck up and spiked off at haphazard angles, and when he saw Bruce, his eyebrows raised while his blue eyes still remained squinty and peevish.

Bruce advanced on him quickly as the man got up. He looked like he was about to explain himself, but Bruce already had a forearm under his throat, slamming his head into a wall behind a couch. He reeked of stale cigarettes and whatever cheap lager he’d spilled on himself the night before.

And Janice seemed not to notice.

Through clenched teeth, Bruce said the man’s name.

“Constantine…”

To Bruce, John Constantine was a better asshole than he was a magician. And John Constantine was a relatively good magician.

Constantine opened his mouth to say something again, Bruce pressed his forearm in further, slamming his head against the wall a second time.

“You used mind control on two of my employees. If you didn’t think you’d get away with it with me, what on Earth made you think I’d let you get away with it with them?”

Constantine could barely breathe but he was still defiant. “How else were they gonna let me up here?”

“I care about the people who work for me,” Bruce said. “If you try that Sparkle-Fingers garbage on anyone who cashes a paycheck with my name on it again, I’ll break every last bone in both of your hands.”

And with that, Bruce let Constantine go. The Englishman straightened his tie and cleared his throat.

“It’ll wear off in an hour,” Constantine said. “It’s like you think I told them to walk into oncoming traffic.”

“In my office,” Bruce said. “Now.”

Constantine put his trenchcoat back on, and walked through the glass doors into Bruce Wayne’s spacious work area.

Bruce had had sonic dampener prototypes built into the corners of the office, camouflaged by expensive modern sculptures. Even though the both the doors and the wall to his office were glass, they were sound-proofed. As Bruce sat down at the large oak desk that once belonged to his father, Constantine was looking at the small selection of plaques, trophies and photos on the opposite wall.

“‘The Gotham City Philanthropic Society.’” That a real thing?”

“No,” Bruce said. “A figment of your imagination gave me a plaque.”

Constantine sneered. “You don’t know how vivid my imagination is, mate. The things I can conjure…”

“The point,” Bruce said. “Get to it.”

Constantine walked over, sat down in the chair opposite Bruce… and put his feet up on the desk.
It was not a great stretch of the imagination to reckon that Bruce Wayne did, with utmost sincerity and galvanizing desire, want to beat John Constantine to a pulp. But what beggared credibility, to Bruce at least, was that there wasn’t a line of people itching to destroy the Magical Limey Hobo’s face that followed him to whatever pigsty he slept in every night. That there wasn’t a congregation of ill-wishers and ass-kickers in lockstep behind him like the freed of Egypt following Moses through the desert.

“I need help,” Constantine said.

“I’m not giving you a dime.”

“I don’t want your money, Brucie-Boy, I want your help. Zee’s missing.”

Bruce groaned, and he didn’t care if Constantine heard it or not.

When he was fifteen, preparing to one day become Batman, Bruce studied under the stage magician John Zatara in hopes of learning escape artistry and sleight of hand. But it was through his daughter Zatanna that Bruce learned two things.

The first was that magic was, in fact, quite real.

The second was that she harbored a truly monstrous crush on him. The kind that that would make a teenage girl blast the masquerade that her father had been building his entire life to smithereens, telling the broody son of deceased billionaire parents that magic was real.

Nothing of a romantic nature happened between Bruce or Zatanna then, or ever. Zatanna grew to be a stage magician every bit as good as her father, and a superhero every bit as good as Batman.

In fact, the only knock Bruce had on her character was her genuinely reprehensible taste in men. And if he was being honest, he included himself in that assessment.

Some years back, Zatanna had started seeing a young magician named John Constantine. Their romance was tempestuous, and passionate, and came to a horrifying end when Constantine’s attempt to save the world from a mystical presence wound up claiming the life of Zatanna’s father.

In the years after this break-up, Constantine’s efforts to get back into Zatanna’s good graces had been persistent, bordering on the creepy. And if Bruce Wayne (who hadn’t approved of Constantine even before his attempt to save the world caused his one of his old mentors to die in front of his daughter) couldn’t beat the living shit out of this guy, the very least he could do was play goalkeeper.

“Missing?” Bruce asked.

“That’s right,” Constantine said. “Came to Gotham last week for a little vacation from her residency at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Can’t seem to find her.”

“Missing, or ghosting you? You know… like she did the last time you couldn’t find her.”

Whatever sneer of low-class bravado Constantine had on his face vanished in an instant. It got his feet off of Thomas Wayne’s desk, though.

“It isn’t like that,” Constantine said. “I don’t have proof that something went wrong, but this… this doesn’t feel right.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce said. “People go to strange lengths after the loss of a loved one. Would you like to know what I did after my father died?”
Constantine deflated in his seat. “Don’t talk to me like I don’t know that I won’t be paying for
Zatara’s death for the rest of my life.”

“And if I could grant you eternal life, I would, just to make the pain last longer,” Bruce said. “What
on Earth made you think I would help you?”

“You’re her friend.”

“And I wouldn’t be a very good friend if I invaded her privacy, now would I?”

Constantine actually laughed at that. “I spy, with my little eye, a spoiled rich fanny who used to
dress as a bat and kept files on how to take out every last superhero on this planet and beyond, and
has the bloody gall to brow-beat me about invading privacy.”

“Well, there are two things wrong with that. First, I made plans how to incapacitate them, not kill
them. And second…”

Bruce leaned forward and put his arms on the desk, so what he was about to say would carry more
weight.

“I’m not Batman anymore. And Zatanna doesn’t love you anymore. And if she’s hiding from you--
which she is, which she’s done before--then I will devote every last resource I have to making sure
she stays hidden from you.”

Bruce stood from his seat. “Your time is up. Don’t ever come here again.”

Constantine stood as well, his sneer in place again, but with an undercurrent of rage in his eyes. He
walked to the office door, before turning to face Bruce again. Constantine looked him up and down,
and said:

“Prick…”

The apex of the cave beneath Wayne Manor pulsed and undulated with a vast ceiling of matted fur
and living flesh.

Bats.

And underneath this blanket was a vast chamber that served as a museum of, and a base of
operations for, ten years of crime-fighting.

What first might catch one’s eye were the souvenirs of previous cases Most notably the massive
penny with the minting date of 1947, procured after Batman fought Penny Plunderer. Or the twenty-
foot high animatronic Tyrannosaurus Rex from when Batman and Robin defeated it at Murray
Wilson Hart’s theme park. Or even the massive playing card… A Joker, of course.

There were bays set into the side of the cave for various types of vehicles. There was a platform for
the motorbike that was called the “Batpod,” and there was a hanger for the plane called the
“Batwing.” In fact the only empty bay was the one for the Batmobile, as the Joker had destroyed it
the night he died. And being as that was the night that Bruce Wayne had ceased operations as
Batman, he had never ordered another one commissioned from the WayneTech Applied Sciences
division.

In the center of the room was a massive computer, with a built-in monitor roughly the width of a
semi-truck trailer. It had switches, knobs, interfaces, ports, and other assorted esoterica that the
average layman couldn’t even identify, let alone be able to use.

A few yards to the left of the Batcomputer were four display cases with mannequins inside, and each mannequin wore a different costume.

The first mannequin on the left wore the Batman costume, which hadn’t been worn by Bruce Wayne in three years.

The next mannequin to the right of it was Dick Grayson’s old Robin costume. Red armor tunic, green shorts, and a yellow cape, with low-heeled green boots completing the ensemble. Dick hadn’t worn it since he’d been fired by Bruce five years ago.

And it is here where the stories attached to these costumes take the air of the tragic, for next to the suit of the first Robin was the suit of the first and only Batgirl, Barbara Gordon. Black cowl and armor, black cape with a yellow inlay, yellow insignia across the chest, yellow boots. It also hadn’t been worn in five years. Barbara Gordon had only been Batgirl for one year when The Joker shot her through the spine, robbing her of the ability to walk. She wasn’t even acting as Batgirl at the time. She was sitting in her apartment as Barbara Gordon, just watching TV when The Joker rang the doorbell. Nightwing blamed himself for not being in Gotham to protect her. Batman blamed himself for roughly the same thing. Barbara just blamed The Joker. She loved Dick and Bruce, but she knew that if she gave them an opportunity to blame themselves for something, they’d bound after it like dogs after a car.

And next to that, was the modified Robin costume of Jason Todd.

Jason Todd was a teenage hoodlum on the night that he tried to boost the hubcaps from the Batmobile. Batman saw his skills, saw his rage, and hoped to save him from himself by asking him to take the same vow in this very cave as Dick and Barbara had done. Like Barbara, Jason had only donned the cape for a year, and like Barbara, Jason Todd’s time as Robin had come to a brutally unceremonious end at the hands of The Joker. He’d been beaten nearly to death with a crowbar, and then locked in a room with a live bomb. Batman couldn’t get to him in time.

Dick and Barbara had kept an eye on Bruce after Jason’s death, and had kept their ears to the ground to ascertain how Batman had been performing in the field. Both knew that Bruce Wayne was fueled by guilt in much the same way certain cartoon sailors were powered by spinach, but everyone had a breaking point, Bruce included. And both Dick Grayson and Barbara Gordon were terrified to find out what it looked like.

Both of them had very much wanted the events of that one scant year, the crippling of Barbara and the murder of Jason, to have been the reason that Bruce had ultimately quit being Batman a year later. At least that, to either of them, was a rational explanation. But for Bruce to have hung up the cape after Harley Quinn killed The Joker was something that was beyond either of their understanding.

To the left of these display cases, Barbara Gordon, clad in a pair of sweatpants and a yellow sports bra, was doing pull-ups. Alfred, knowing they were both going to be down there, had lowered it for her, so she could access it from her wheelchair. He had even moved thick pads to the area beneath the pull-up bar, so if she fell, she would not hurt herself upon impact with the cement floor of the Batcave.

She was on her fifty-fifth chin-up. Her biceps bulged as she slowly and repeatedly worked her chin above the bar. Sweat poured down her back, down her chest, down her forehead. Her teeth were clenched as she counted up her numbers, only letting them escape her mouth verbally when she was on her last two.
Barbara brought herself back up the bar and used whatever strength she could muster to push off. Her rear end landed perfectly back in her wheelchair on the floor below. Upon taking her seat, Barbara raised her arms and made that soft “Ahhhhhhhh!” noise to imitate an adoring crowd.

She did not see Dick Grayson, a bowl of Frosted Flakes in his hand, get off the elevator from the study in Wayne Manor.

“That… is dangerous,” Dick said.

Barbara wasn’t surprised. Catching her breath, she wheeled around and pointed at him.

“That,” Barbara said, “is a perfect dismount. *Suck on that, Circus-Boy!*”

Dick smiled.

“I always feel like some badass Viking whenever I do that,” Barbara said.

“It’s something to be proud of.”

“Like putting on one of those helmets with the horns, and… I dunno, eating a yak or something. Like a *whole* yak.”

His smile wore off as he saw what was on the Batcomputer’s desk. A series of small boxes and envelopes.

He set his bowl of cereal down on the desk. “You *didn’t*,” he said.

Barbara saw what he was looking at, and wheeled herself over to the desk. “I did,” she said.

“You went through Batman’s evidence locker,” Dick said.

Barbara nodded.

“Batman would have made me run until I puked if I did that,” Dick said.

“Really?” Barbara asked.

“Well, no,” Dick said. “But he’d have yelled at me. A lot.”

Barbara got her glasses out of a small zip-up compartment on the right armrest of her wheelchair. She put them on, and said “We’re dealing with someone who is using Joker Toxin. It’s not outside the realm of possibility to that there might be other weapons from other villains at play here. If that’s the case, we need to corroborate whatever evidence we find with what we have on hand here to see where these hypothetical weapons might be coming from. To see if they’re being made, or they’re being stolen. And before you ask, there’s nothing in the locker or in the database about anything or anyone that can turn someone into green flame and a weird popcorn smell.”

Dick cocked his head, and asked “You think they’re related?”

“We can’t afford to assume otherwise,” Barbara said. “This is all happening too close together to be coincidental. And this is Gotham City. And if Batman’s taught us anything over the years…”

“There are no coincidences in Gotham City,” Dick said, finishing the sentence in a way only only a
Top-Shelf Boyfriend would. Barbara saw it was her turn to smile now, and took full advantage.

Dick looked at the collection of baggies and boxes. “Not all of that appears to be villain stuff, though.

Barbara felt a little bit of heat rush to her cheeks. “Well, it isn’t. Batman never let us into that locker. You couldn’t blame me for being curious, could you?”

“No. Just if you get caught.”

She rolled her eyes. “He hasn’t been down here in three years,” she said. “He hasn’t even updated the Batcomputer with new hardware or operating systems. Not like it matters, though. A three-year-old Batcomputer is still five years away from anything anyone else has.”

She looked back at Dick, and saw he had that same deer in the headlights look as he always did when she was geeking out about tech stuff. The look of a man who knows he’s about to walk the gangplank in the middle of a storm.

Barbara smiled, headed off her tangent in her own mind, and said “The point is, Batman won’t know I went through his locker... Unless you narc.”

“Your secret’s safe with me, Senor Escobar.” Dick folded his arms. “Find anything interesting?”

“I did,” Barbara said. She wheeled herself over to the assortment of boxes and bags. She picked a small, thin baggie, about the size of a post-it note, and almost as flat. She knew Dick couldn’t see what was inside from his distance away, but inside was one single, slender thread.

“What is it?” Dick asked.

“This,” Barbara said, her eyebrows raised, her hands presenting it like it was a prize on an old game show, “is a single thread... from Diana’s lasso.”

The surprise slowly dawned on Dick’s face. “No way... But I thought the Lasso of Truth couldn’t break.”

“Me too.”

“Then how did Batman get it?”

“How did Batman keep getting green rocks from a planet that blew up almost forty years ago?” Barbara asked. “He’s Batman. He has his ways.”

“So does it work?” Dick asked. “Does just one thread make you tell the truth?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Barbara said, feeling the grin involuntarily stretch across her face.

“Okay,” Dick said, “so... what do you want me to ask you?”

“You’re not asking me,” Barbara said. “I’m asking you.”

“Oh, no. I played Truth or Dare just the one time at Titans Tower, and it ended with hurt feelings and Donna Troy crying in a closet all night, and this is that to, like, a factor of fifty. I’m not getting anywhere near that Goddamn thing.”

“Well, the Greek Gods actually made the lasso, so ‘Goddamn’ is closer than you think,” Barbara
said. “I guess… there’s only one way to settle this.”

“How?”

Barbara sneered, and put the bag containing the lasso thread back down on the desk. She leaned forward in her wheelchair, and placed her right elbow on the armrest, so her forearm stuck straight up. Her palm was open.

“You want me to arm wrestle you?” Dick asked.

Barbara nodded.

Only for Dick to just straight-up say “No.”

“Why not?” Barbara asked, putting the tone in her voice that often accompanied Double-Dog Dares.

“You wouldn’t happen to be taking pity on me because you just saw me doing sixty chin-ups, would you?”

“No,” Dick said, “it’s because it isn’t a fair fight. Chin-ups or no chin-ups, I’d lose. I’ve felt your grip in… in very sensitive places.”

And Barbara just stared at him. She’d been itching to arm-wrestle someone, anyone, now that she’d been working on her arms, and now that Dick denied her her opportunity, who was left? It wasn’t like she could just fly Dinah out to Bludhaven from Star City. That’d be like flying someone out to Detroit. It just sounded like a threat. Supergirl would be nice enough to fly out to Bludhaven (Literally). Supergirl would be nice enough to arm wrestle her. Supergirl would also be nice enough to let her win, which defeated the whole purpose. Kara would be all “Yaaaaay, you did iiiiiiiit.”

“You suck,” Barbara said.

“Yeah.”

“I should have dated Roy Harper. He’d have been macho enough to arm wrestle me.”

“And unlucky for you, you picked the guy who spent his preteen years flying around on a trapeze in a sequined unitard. With. His. Parents. So don’t look at me like I got dignity to lose.”

“So how do we solve this?”

Dick nodded, and put out his fist.

Barbara snorted. “You’re a child.”

“You just figured that one out?” Dick asked, and he nodded his head in the direction of the bowl he’d set down. “I’m eating cereal at two PM after having it for breakfast. Are you ready?”

Barbara was still losing her arm wrestling prospect sorely. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

They pumped their fists once.

Twice.

On the third one, Dick held his hand out flat, the international symbol for paper.

Barbara threw rock.
“Dammit,” Barbara said. Dick let his breath out as though he’d just heard the hammer of a revolver fall on an empty cylinder during his turn at Russian Roulette.

Barbara picked the baggy back up, and removed the thread. “Just… don’t be gross, okay?”

“I won’t be gross,” Dick said. “I’ll be… philosophical.”

Barbara furrowed her brow. “How philosophical?”

Dick unfolded his arms and put his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He squinted at her, as though he was a mathematician, and she was a particularly worrisome equation. His eyes only widened back to normal when he hit on something.

“What’s one thing you can say now that you weren’t able to say five years ago?”

And it was though the clouds parted in the mind of Barbara Gordon. It was, at this instant, that she had found peace within herself. That all the heavy curtains of her guardedness and self-delusion had parted, and all that was left was the truth. The kind of truth that should be shouted from rooftops for no other reason than it was real, and that it held a kind of glory in its simple telling. A faint smile crept across her face.

So lost was she in her reverie that she failed to notice that the thread in her hand had begun to glow a bright gold.

“That even though it sucks being in a wheelchair, I’m in the perfect position for whenever you decide to get your lapdance on.”

The thread stopped glowing. The clouds reformed. The veil reappeared. And Barbara Joan Gordon finally realized what had just come out of her mouth.

With a terrified “GAHHH!” Barbara flung the thread to the floor of the Batcave.

And Dick Grayson could not... stop... laughing.

“That thing is straight from Hell!” Barbara said. “It’s not funny!”

Dick rode his own laughter long enough to say “Yes it is!”

It was during this bite-sized eternity while Dick Grayson was hunched over, hands on the knees of his jeans, braying like a mule, that the screen to the Batcomputer came alive. It displayed a map of Gotham City. A red ping appeared over an area near Gotham Harbor.

“Dick,” Barbara said as he was still laughing. “Dick!”

He had to quite literally wipe the smile off of his face. “What is it?”

“We have something,” she said.

Barbara wheeled herself up to the Batcomputer’s keyboard. Dick accompanied her. While she was bringing up the information, she let her head list off to the left, until it found Dick’s ribs beneath his t-shirt. She let it rest there. Dick, for his part, brought up his left hand, and started running it down her scalp, going from her hairline back to the band that held her ponytail in place. They weren’t trying to turn each other on, or even particularly make each other feel good. No, they each did it because the other was simply there. Barbara had learned through her years with Dick Grayson that that’s what people who love each other do. They use each others’ bodies as worry stones.
“If the Joker Toxin is being sold,” Barbara said, “then it’s being moved through the black market. This means arms deals. I threw out some feelers on the Dark Web, and there’s an auction of Israeli IMI Galil assault rifles that were boosted from Tel Aviv a week ago going down in a warehouse near Gotham Harbor tonight.”

“Any players we know involved in this?” Dick asked.

“No info on the seller, but the buyers? We have hoods from Gotham, Metropolis, Central, Coast, even one from Ivy Town, which is weird. And those are just the Americans. We have an assortment from Corto Maltese, from Qurac, even one from Reelasia.”

“The unification not taking in Reelasia?”

“Guess not,” Barbara said.

“How would a shipment of Israeli rifles have Joker Toxin in it?” Dick asked.

“It wouldn’t” Barbara said. “But sometimes, it’s not just one seller selling one weapon. You get a whole bunch of them in an auction like this, each selling what they stole or what they made. Anyone looking to unload any old Gotham supervillain crap might show up at a meet like this.”

“The arms dealers are gonna have a hell of a time getting rid of their goods with me in town,” Dick said. “Not if I have to show up at every auction and sell-off to get to the bottom of all this.”

Barbara smiled. “I love it when you talk Good Guy. The auction’s at eleven.”

“Now, that I’m down here,” Dick said, “I’m gonna get some training in, too.”

He looked at her, and leaned down. Barbara craned her neck up.

He kissed her. Even though he’d shaved a few hours before, she could still smell the traces of his aftershave. She let her breath out through her nose in a slow shudder on his cheek.

He pulled away. She planted a chaste kiss on her cheek before his arms wrapped around her. She brought her hands up, and felt the expanse of the muscles in his back through his shirt.

He whispered in her ear as he held her tight.

“What’s the rule?”

“What rule?” she whispered back.

Barbara could hear the smile in Dick’s voice when he said “The lapdance rule.”

“Oh,” Barbara said. Her brow raised, and her lower lip slightly pooched out in a pouty way that Barbara always hated when she caught herself doing it.

“Only on my birthday…”

Nightwing perched on a small fishing vessel in Gotham Harbor, surveying the warehouse in which would be held tonight’s illegal weapons auction.

In his first year as Robin, Batman had told Nightwing that, when venturing into private property to apprehend a criminal, he must be absolutely positive that something illegal was going on inside.
Because movies and television shows had greatly misinformed the general public about how probable cause worked. An officer of the law could not enter a private residence or a place of business without a warrant, this much was known. But it was assumed, even by some of the more ignorant law enforcement officials, that if they had probable cause, they could just barge right in. This was false. Probable cause only meant that the police could go to a judge for a warrant, not that they could search right then and there.

However, if a certain Caped Crusader, or a random Boy Wonder, had decided to breach private property, then the police could enter without a warrant, as that would be construed in the eyes of many states, counties, and municipalities as a public disturbance.

So he had to be sure. Truly sure. If not, then he would have violated a potentially innocent person’s Fourth Amendment rights.

Nightwing was sure this was the place. He was truly sure.

“This is the place,” he said. “Cesare Shipping. Two big security guards out front.”

Oracle came in through his earpiece. “Is there another way in?”

“Yeah,” Nightwing said, “but I may not need it. The two security guys are dead.”

“I see,” Oracle said. “So I imagine whoever did this wouldn’t be the ones selling the Israeli guns.”

“No,” Nightwing said. “I’m gonna check it out.”

“There are no security systems or camera feeds within the building itself,” Oracle said. “I’ll stay in contact in case you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Nightwing said. He didn’t see the need to use his grapnel gun. He just hopped off the fishing boat and walked to Cesare Shipping.

The two dead security guys were both roughly six inches taller than Nightwing. Both had matching blonde buzzcuts. Both were wearing tracksuits (Survey says… RUSSIAN!), though the one on the left was red and the one on the right was blue.

Both had their throats slit.

Nightwing didn’t have nearly enough contempt for the cops in Gotham City to contaminate a murder scene, so he walked away and went around the corner of the building to find another way in.

That way in was a side window situated on the warehouse’s upper floor. The hook of his grapnel gun dug into the concrete just beneath. Nightwing reeled himself up. The window was open just enough for him to work his gloved fingers beneath the sill, and open it.

He landed on some boxes piled up on some scaffolding high above Cesare Shipping’s ground floor. He peered downward, and what he saw almost made him stop breathing.

The east and west walls were lined, almost to the bottom of the scaffolding that passed for the second floor, with giant wooden crates. The crates were all different sizes, meaning that Oracle was right in assuming that the ones who boosted the rifles from Tel Aviv weren’t the only ones selling weapons tonight.

This wasn’t what stunned Nightwing.
There were fifty people on the ground floor of Cesare Shipping.

And they were all dead, their bodies scattered among overturned metal folding chairs and spent shell casings. The air was thick with stale cordite. The entire concrete floor of the warehouse was slick with blood.

Nightwing activated the magnification lenses on his mask, and zoomed them in for a closer look.

The lucky ones had been shot.

The marginally less lucky ones had had at least one of their limbs either cut or wrenched from the rest of their bodies. A particularly unfortunate gentleman in a Corto Maltese military uniform had had his throat sliced and his face defiled by the sharp bit of bone extending from his own severed arm.

But unluckiest of all were the ones who had been impaled. There were seven of them, five men and two women, all of them having slid halfway down poles, all of them bearing rictuses upon their faces of pain and terror. The dim lights above made them cast garish shadows upon the rest of the scene, as though they were the only trees left standing in a bloody forest.

Closer inspection revealed that they were impaled, not by poles, but by harpoons. The sharp ends had been embedded into the concrete floor… which meant that these seven souls had been initially pierced by the *blunt* ends.

Nightwing switched off the magnification lenses. “They’re all dead,” he said. “Fifty of them”


“No,” Nightwing said. “What the hell could have *done* something like this?”

He heard the answer to that question coming from the main hallway leading out of the warehouse. Heavy thudding steps. Coming closer.

*Boom*… *Boom*… *Boom*…

Nightwing had a quick decision to make. Stay up here for the vantage point, or get down on the ground floor behind the crates of guns for cover?

Getting on the ground with whatever was coming seemed like a bad idea. But staying out in the open, no matter the elevation, no matter the distance, seemed like a worse one. Nightwing hopped from the scaffolding to the top of the wall of crates, and the dropped a good ten feet down to get behind them. His footfall to the concrete floor kicked up a soft and minimal amount of the blood lacquering its surface.

Mere seconds later, the steel doors to Cesare Shipping’s ground floor were kicked open. The booming steps were in here with him, now, though their source Nightwing could not see. They kicked up a tremendous and audible blood spatter.

These slow and methodical footfalls continued for eleven paces before they finally stopped. Nightwing pressed his ear to the crates, to see if he could hear what was on the other side.

And he heard a voice, deep and rumbling through electronic distortion.

“Do you think I don’t know you’re back there?”
Nightwing’s eyes widened. Before he could move, the crates above him were disintegrated in a powerful blast of crimson energy. He was sent backwards into the wall of the warehouse behind him, and he landed in a heap amidst the wrecked crates, stolen guns, and the blood of fifty souls.

His ears were ringing, and his vision cloudy. A wall of smoke stood between Nightwing and his would-be assailant.

Only two red orbs of fiery energy suspended six-and-a-half feet above the air were visible through the smoke. But they were all he needed to tell him with whom he shared the ground floor of this hellscape. As he got to his feet, his stomach plummeted with the realization.

The realization that Nightwing now stood in the presence of Black Manta.
Chapter 9: Brighter than Creation’s Dark

Before this narrative is to progress further, some words must be said about a Doctor named Stephen Shin, and how his actions forever bound the fates of one Arthur Curry, and one David Hyde.

Doctor Shin was a marine biologist working and living out of Amnesty Bay, Massachusetts. He knew of the town’s lighthouse keeper, Tom Curry, and Tom had a rather tall tale to spin. He told Doctor Shin that his son Arthur was born of a woman from the mythical undersea kingdom of Atlantis.

He went with Tom out to the Amnesty Bay lighthouse where he and his son Arthur lived just to see how wonky this farce could be. But then Doctor Shin saw how strong young Arthur was. How fast he could swim. How he could communicate with marine life.

Doctor Shin helped young Arthur hone his skills, while trying to both butter up the father to let him go to his colleagues with this historic discovery, and to convince the son to tell him the location of Atlantis.

Neither campaign was successful, and Doctor Shin was eventually shunned from the Curry household.

Years after this, Doctor Shin, on the brink of financial ruin and his reputation within the academic community in tatters, conjured that the thing that would bring him back from potential poverty was proof—real proof—of the existence of Atlantis. And he decided that proof would be a small sample of blood from Arthur Curry himself. Surely the fact that Arthur was not fully human could be borne out through a blood test.

Doctor Shin hired a scavenger out of Gloucester, Massachusetts named David Hyde to go to Amnesty Bay, sneak into the lighthouse residence of the Currys, and discreetly obtain the sample of blood from Arthur.

Hyde promised that he could be quick, and quiet, and be out before either Tom or Arthur could see him.

And David Hyde was not able to keep that promise.

Tom Curry noticed Hyde standing over his son while he slept, and attempted to fight him off. The elder Curry died of a heart attack in the attempt.

Furious, Arthur swore revenge for the death of his father. He was able to obtain the address of Hyde’s houseboat in Gloucester. Arthur crept onto the darkened craft in the dead of night, found a man sleeping in the main bedroom, and stabbed him through the heart…

Only to see the real David Hyde behind him, once he stepped away from the body.

In a twist fit for the poets, the man that Arthur had killed had been Hyde’s father, who had been living in the houseboat alongside his son for some time. Not Hyde himself.

And so it was David Hyde’s turn to swear revenge for the death of his father.

Though their fates wound up being distinctly different, their lives sometimes intersected, always with
turmoil and destruction, further movements in the symphony of revenge and recrimination.

Arthur eventually came to Atlantis, to find that his long-lost mother had once been Queen. He would wrest the throne from his mad half-brother Orm Marius to become the King of Atlantis. He would act as an emissary to the Surface World. He would fight Darkseid. He would join the Justice League.

He would become known the surface world over as “Aquaman.”

As for David Hyde? He would scavenge and hunt treasure in the ocean’s depths. He would put his considerable wealth and effort into an underwater suit and helmet that could withstand both the crush depth of the ocean floor, as well as the raw strength of Atlantean fighters. For he had goals in mind: the death of Aquaman, the death of his wife Mera, the destruction of Atlantis, and the complete genocide of all who dwelt within its watery halls.

To that end, Hyde would become known as a pirate.

He would become known as an assassin.

He would become known as a murderer.

He would become known as a psychopath.

He would become known as “Black Manta.”

Although what Black Manta was doing standing in front of Nightwing, drenched in the blood of fifty people amidst a weapon’s auction gone bad, was anyone’s guess…

As the smoke cleared, Nightwing saw that Black Manta stood almost resplendent in an oval-shaped silver diving helmet, with two glowing lenses in the front, through which he was able to see. Two thick silver cables extended from the helmet in long arcs to something on his back. His black and silver bodysuit made what must have been an ordinarily muscular frame downright intimidating, and Nightwing noticed that it was… dirty?

No.

Scuffed.

Two and two came together in the most terrifying four that Nightwing could think of.

Black Manta had walked into an auction of stolen guns populated with fifty people, surrounded by top-of-the-line weaponry along with whatever small arms they were able to conceal on their persons, and all they managed to do was scuff his armor before he slaughtered every last one of them.

“You didn’t plan on me, did you?” Black Manta asked.

“Plan?” Nightwing asked, “Me? Nah, you must be thinking of someone else. I improvise.”

Nightwing thought he could hear Black Manta slightly groan within his helmet.

“What is it with the guys with no powers running their mouths?” Black Manta asked. “The last thing Aquaman or Martian Manhunter want to do with me is say a word. But Nightwing… He got jokes.”

“Black Manta’s not a conversationalist,” Nightwing said. “I’ll just file that away somewhere.”
“I don’t talk much,” Black Manta said. “But you can talk all you want.”

“Thank you.”

“You know what a Columbian Necktie is?” Black Manta asked. “I won’t begrudge a man whose tongue’s gonna be hanging out a ragged hole in his throat the opportunity to talk for the minutes of entertainment he can provide me before he dies.”

Nightwing gulped. “You know… for a guy who’s not one to banter, you’re really good at it.”

His eyes shifted down to the weapon Black Manta was carrying.

It looked familiar.

“You noticed my new toy,” Black Manta said. “Wanna help me break it in?”

The words weren’t even out of Black Manta’s mouth before Nightwing started running to his right, kicking up spatters of blood from the fifty souls that the Scourge of the Seven Seas had murdered.

As soon as Black Manta fired the weapon he was carrying, Nightwing figured out why it was so familiar. It emitted a blast of cold white energy that raised a sheet of ice upon the brick wall that Nightwing had been standing in front of.

It was one of Mister Freeze’s old Cold Guns. From what he could remember off the top of his head as he was running away, it almost seemed to be a prototype.

Nightwing found a steel door leading outside to the parking lot a few feet away, and he ran through it. The humid July evening air wrapped around his face like a thin glove.

Oracle came in through his earpiece. “What is that?”

“Black Manta,” Nightwing said, still running.

A moment of silence, before Oracle said “Oh, no…”

A loud rumble, and Nightwing turned around.

Black Manta didn’t go through the door to chase him.

He went through the wall.

Black Manta marched through shattered bricks and rising dust, and aimed the Cold Gun at Nightwing again.

He fired, and just missed as Nightwing rounded a delivery truck. While it was July everywhere else, it was the middle of December on that truck’s grill.

“Any ideas?” Nightwing asked as he produced his grapnel gun and fired it through the second story window of the suite of offices next to Cesare Shipping.

Oracle started talking as Nightwing broke through the second story window and tumbled into the office.

“The energy blasts that those eyes on his helmet puts out are about three-quarters the strength of Superman’s heat vision. And that suit he’s wearing can survive ocean depths that can crush most submarines. He can take hits off of Aquaman, Wonder Woman, Superman and still get back up and
fight. Dick, you’re not going to win this one. Disengage now!”

Oracle knew damn well that she shouldn’t use his real name over comms. She only did it when she was panicking.

He couldn’t blame her, really.

Nightwing was making his way from desk to desk, when he stopped.

Black Manta was hovering outside another second story window.

Nightwing recalled that Black Manta had a pack on his back that could propel him through water at insane speeds. So of course he could use it on land as a jetpack.

As Black Manta hovered there, peering in, Nightwing got one of his escrima sticks from the loops at the small of his back and switched it on. The end crackled with blue electricity. Black Manta may be a dangerous dude, Nightwing thought, but fifty thousand volts is fifty thousand volts. I don’t need to win, I just need to stun him and bail.

Black Manta shattered the window, making his entrance, and Nightwing just had an instant to raise his arm to shield his face from the flying glass. He bolted forward and brought his live escrima stick right to Black Manta’s neck.

Nothing happened.

The red glowing eyes of Black Manta’s helmet stared at him, and he remained silent. Like he wasn’t going to dignify the fifty-thousand volts harmlessly coursing through his armor with a response.

Black Manta grabbed Nightwing by the wrist holding the escrima stick, and flung him through the window that he had just burst in though. He screamed all the way down.

Nightwing bounced off of the truck that Black Manta had coated with ice a minute or so beforehand. His Nightsuit offered some protection, but he felt a horrible pain in his side as he landed in a heap on the pavement.

As he got to his feet, Black Manta made landfall ten feet behind him. The boots of his diving suit kicked up chunks of concrete as they shattered the pavement. He pointed the Cold Gun at Nightwing.

Nightwing ran.

But he didn’t run fast enough.

A tendril of cryonic energy from the end of the Cold Gun hit Nightwing’s ankle, freezing him to the pavement. The kevlar in his shin-guard was the only thing that kept the bones in the lower half of his leg from shattering in his speedy attempt to get away.

He looked behind him at Black Manta, who was slowly advancing.

“You’re slippery,” Black Manta said. “I’ll give you that. But they all bleed in the end.”

Black Manta lowered the Cold Gun in his left hand. A retractable blade extended from his right.

Nightwing felt at the small of his back and secured three Wingdings. He didn’t know how he was going to play this, but he had to try.
Black Manta raided his blade, and…

“HOLD!”

Nightwing and Black Manta both stopped in their tracks. Black Manta turned and looked behind him.

A wraith-like figure in black robes and a silver mask strode up to the both of them. It was hard for Nightwing to determine their gender. He looked over their frame, trying to get some kind of read, when they spoke.

“Hello, young man,” they said, their voice coming through the three breathing slits in the mask in an electronic whine.

There was no one else this could be.

“You must be The Undying,” Nightwing said.

“And you must be smarter than you look,” The Undying said.

“I heard you came here looking for Batman,” Nightwing said. “I hate to break it to you, but…”

“Well, who knows what might happen if we kill a few of his friends,” The Undying said. “Though we won’t resort to such measures just quite yet.”

The Undying took another step forward, and looked Nightwing up and down.

“Intrigue makes a body predictable,” they said. “Revenge? Far less so.”

They turned to Black Manta. “He lives… For the moment. And you still have work to do.”

The Undying turned around to walk back to the warehouse. Nightwing thought he could detect a note of disgust in Black Manta’s body language, but that didn’t stop him from following his apparent employer.

With both their backs turned, Nightwing took one of the Wingdings in his hand, and started chipping away at the ice that was tethering him to the parking lot. After about a minute, he managed to remove enough to power his foot out.

Newly freed, Nightwing took one step toward the warehouse.

At which point, the night was rent by a shattering boom. Cesare Shipping imploded, rendering the entire building to rubble and crimson dust.

The Shockwave knocked Nightwing off of his feet, and the dust engulfed him.

Bruce had been sitting in the library at eleven forty-five, reading Agatha Christie’s *They Came to Baghdad*, one of her only spy novels, when he heard Alfred’s phone go off in the adjacent lounge. Even though the wall, he could hear Barbara’s voice.

“It’s Dick. He’s hurt. Be ready.”

Bruce didn’t hear Alfred’s reply, but he did hear his spats clomping on the hardwood floor as they made their way to the stairs.
To the study.

It’s where Bruce stood now, staring at the grandfather clock.

He felt a slight tremor in his hand that came and passed. He knew what was down there.

Bruce wasn’t ready. Not just yet. He took the phone out of his slacks, and brought up Zatanna.

He didn’t want to give any credence whatsoever to John Constantine, but he also didn’t want to be the one who didn’t listen if she actually was in danger. Strange things were happening. Someone called “The Undying” was after him. After Selina. They were willing to kill Harvey Dent to send a warning.

Harvey Dent.

The coterie of ghosts who would be waiting for him at The End had gained yet another number. Yet another accusatory voice to chide him from beyond The Beyond for his failure as a human being. Another friend who died because of Batman. He strayed late in life, his sanity taken from him by a mobster, his righteousness bent and twisted into murderous fury.

And that was Batman’s fault, too.

All he did as Gotham’s protector was rack up a body count, and the saddest thing was that he was never strictly responsible. He was the magnet for all of the wickedness in a city that only managed to rot in different ways. His home, his place of pride, decaying under different strands of evil that flourished, Batman or no Batman. His presence meant that costumed maniacs acted out their insecurities and traumas on a grand stage, costing thousands of lives. Without Batman, cops could shoot innocent people in broad daylight, and just get suspended for it.

There was no way to win. It was foolish, in hindsight, to even try.

These thoughts in mind, the least he could do, the one saving grace as a human being he could hopefully ascend to, was to check in on a friend. He texted Zatanna.

“Are you there?”

And because he was a grown man in his thirties, he used capital letters and punctuation.

He put the phone in his pocket, and stared at the clock again. Turning the hands counter-clockwise to ten forty-seven would grant him entrance to the Batcave.

He reached for the clock…

_The sound of pearls falling on a wet pavement._

_The sight of a mallet coming down._

…and his hand stopped, as though coming into contact with the plexiglass barrier of a museum display case.

His phone vibrated. He took it out.

Zatanna had texted him back. And because she was a grown woman in her thirties, she too used capital letters and punctuation.

“Yes. What’s up?”
Bruce sighed.

“Constantine came by my office today. He put some kind of spell on two of my employees to let him in. He said you were missing.”

A few seconds passed before the reply came back.

“To him, I’m missing. To my friends, I’m available. I’m sorry about your people.”

Bruce’s thumbs worked the screen.

“It’s alright. No harm done. I’m just checking in on you. Sorry to bother.”

A few seconds more, and…

“Good night, Bruce.”

Bruce texted “Good night” back. He was getting better at that, now that he was a civilian. He put his phone in his pocket, and looked at the clock again.

He was all out of delays. He was all out of excuses.

There was nothing forcing him to go down into that cave. Dick and Barbara were competent. Capable. They didn’t need his concern, or his help.

But Dick Grayson was hurt…

_________________________________________________________

He hadn’t been down in The Cave in three years. Like a child returning home after a prolonged and disgraceful absence, this place felt smaller now.

Stepping off of the elevator, Bruce came upon Alfred inspecting Dick as he lie on his side the gurney that the Batcave had for post-patrol medical analysis. He had the top half of his armor and his mask off in a pile on the floor. From the neck up, he was coated in something brown, save for the area that had been covered by his mask. Barbara was sitting next to the gurney, the looks on her face alternating between concern and I-Told-You-So.

“You have a cracked rib, Master Grayson,” Alfred said. “You should consider... yourself… lucky…”

Alfred had seen Bruce, and both Dick and Barbara’s eyes followed suit. They all stared at him for what felt, to Bruce, like the length of an ice age.

“Welcome, Master Bruce,” Alfred finally said. “As you see, I’ve been studiously cleaning these past three years.”

“So when you said he hadn’t been down here in three years,” Dick said, “you were actually being literal.”

“Why are you here now?” Barbara asked. Her eyes were dead and her tone was accusatory. He knew that something that she and Dick had talked about had apparently caused her to sour slightly on him. He had no earthly idea what it was or what it could be. He hadn’t seen much of her in these past few days she was at Wayne Manor, but the little he had, he had noticed her light frostiness toward him.

“I heard Dick was hurt,” Bruce said. “I was… concerned.”
And as soon as the word was out of his mouth, Bruce knew he didn’t sound the way he’d heard concerned people talk. There was a warmth to their voice that Bruce himself lacked. He’d hated having to perform his approximation of “Bruce Wayne” for Selina, and he’d thought that the trick to his problem was that he wasn’t being himself.

But now the closest thing he had to a son was injured, he wanted to show his honest concern, and he just sounded worse.

“I’m fine,” Dick said. “You heard Alfred. Cracked rib.”

Bruce looked down on the floor at the top half of Nightwing’s armor. “Then where did all that dried blood come from?”

“Believe it or not,” Dick said, “It’s not mine. I walked into an auction for stolen guns, only to find everyone had died before I got there.”

“Who did it?”

“Black Manta,” Barbara said.

Bruce looked at Dick. “You survived a fight with Black Manta? You are lucky.”

“I know, right?”

“What’s he doing in Gotham?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Barbara said.

“The Undying called him off before he could do real damage,” Dick said. “I don’t get it. This Undying comes out of nowhere looking for Batman, and they apparently have enough pull to not only rope in a heavy hitter like Black Manta, but they can get their hands on old Gotham villain weaponry. But the legit weapons? The Israeli guns? He destroyed them when he blew up the warehouse.”

He turned to Barbara. “They had one of Mister Freeze’s old Cold Guns.”

Barbara seemed to perk up at this. “Well, that narrows it down. The Undying isn’t making this stuff. They’re stealing it. Or at least buying from someone who stole it. But the only places they could get stuff like that are GCPD evidence lock-up. Or Arkham.”

“That’s a lead we can follow, though,” Dick said.

Barbara had that look on her face where she wanted to let him down gently. Bruce recognized that look from the first three times Dick asked her out.

“We… can’t, really,” Barbara said. “This isn’t like the old days where we could get a verbal sign-off for what we needed from the Police Commissioner.”

“We’re in tight with the mayor, though.”

“We’re in tight with a mayor whose police force doesn’t like him,” Barbara said. “Things have changed these past three years. With Batman gone, the cops are off the leash. They’re not going to like vigilantes coming in and ruining their autonomy, and they’re not gonna cooperate if we go up and ask them if they’re raiding their evidence lock-ups to sell their old supervillain shit to The Undying.”
“And Arkham?” Alfred asked.

“And again, not three years ago. Back then, we had free-run in the place. Now they’re going to want a court order. To be honest, I’m shocked they didn’t ask for one back in the Batman days.”

“So what do we do?” Dick asked.

“I have--”

She was cut off by the red light on the desk of the Batcomputer blinking on and off.

“That’s it!” Barbara said, and wheeled herself over. On the monitor, she brought up a list of names.

“I have a theory about the buyers and the sellers at that meet. And…”

A red X appeared next to one of the names. Barbara clicked on it, and up came a mug shot of a pasty white guy with muddy brown eyes and a rapidly diminishing black hairline.

“I set up a little something that cross-references the IDs of the dead at that auction you crashed with known associates of The Penguin. I’m getting them as soon as the GCPD can enter them. Our friend here is a KA of Oswald Cobblepot himself. Marcellus Conyers.”

“Of course The Penguin would have people at that meet,” Dick said. “He’s an arms dealer. If those guns were going at a low enough price, he could turn around and sell them at a mark-up.”

On the Batcomputer, Barbara brought up something with the heading of Gotham First National Bank. It was a bank statement.

“Our friend Mister Conyers bought a plane ticket to Tel Aviv two weeks ago,” Barbara said. “What the hell kind of outfit does The Penguin run that he forces his goons to pay for transpo out of pocket?”

Dick’s face lit up. “The Penguin wasn’t trying to buy those guns, he was trying to sell them. And Black Manta said that the Cold Gun he was carrying was his new toy.”

“That seems tenuous,” Alfred said.

“Either way,” Barbara said, “The Penguin knows more about this than we do.”

“Cracking him is gonna be tough,” Dick said. “He’s a legitimate businessman, now that he runs that casino on the Gotham River. He’ll bitch and he’ll moan, but he’s not gonna say a whole lot. And what he will say runs an eight-to-one on actually being the truth.”

During the last few seconds, while he had been listening, Bruce looked at the display case that held Jason Todd’s Robin uniform. A memory, unbidden, came to him. That of carrying Jason’s lifeless body out of a pile of rubble.

So many sacrifices had been made in the crusade that he had abandoned. And now his sins were coming back, clawing their way into existence through thin air, and the only line of defense were the people he cared about the most, and had rewarded the most poorly.

The Undying was looking for Batman, and would kill scores of people to lure him out.

Bruce Wayne wasn’t Batman anymore.

But that didn’t mean Bruce Wayne couldn’t help.
“I have a request,” Bruce said.

Alfred, Dick, and Barbara all looked at him. If Bruce didn’t know any better, he’d have sworn that they’d forgotten he was there.

“What is it?” Dick asked.

Bruce closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and said “Sit the Penguin thing out.”

He saw a medley of emotions pass over the face of Dick Grayson, before he finally settled on confused defiance.

“You... know you can’t bench me, right?”

Bruce closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them, they were looking Dick dead in the face.

“You have been a superhero longer than I ever was.”

Dick just blinked.

“Didn’t you ever think about that?” Bruce asked. “Robin for seven years. Nightwing for five. I was only ever Batman for ten. I defer to your judgement as a hero.”

“Jesus,” Barbara said in a mixture of disbelief and derision. “You look like you almost died trying to say that.”

Bruce elected to ignore that. Whatever he did, he probably deserved it.

“All that I am asking,” Bruce said, “is listen to the re… to the suggestion, of a civilian who loves what this city has the potential to be, and doesn’t want to see anyone else hurt.”

Dick looked from Bruce, to Barbara, and back. “What are you suggesting?”

“Well, you said yourself that The Penguin was going to be tough to crack.”

“Yeah?”

Bruce rubbed his face. What he was going to propose would bring a mess of upheaval into his life. But if it meant that fewer people had a chance of coming to harm, then, well…

“What if I could call in a favor that could make it easy?”

A day passed. On this day, Bruce Wayne went to work. Selina Kyle did as well, weighing her options for her future until she left to go home. Dick Grayson nursed his cracked rib, and Barbara Gordon pored over any information in the life of Marcellus Conyers, and the available ledgers of Oswald Cobblepot, to see if there was a Eureka moment hiding in the ones and zeroes.

And then night fell. The city lit up, and the stars came out.

At ten-fifty-five PM, Bruce Wayne found himself on the roof of the McInerny art gallery, located on the waterfront, looking out over the Gotham River.

Oswald “The Penguin” Cobblepot was an illegal arms dealer who reckoned that the front for his gunrunning should also be, in itself, a profitable venture. So The Penguin decided he’d try his hand at owning and operating a casino.
There was, however, the small problem of gambling being illegal within the Gotham City limits.

The Penguin, enterprising soul that he was, decided that if he couldn’t operate within the city limits, then he’d operate outside of them.

He bought an old, decommissioned oil tanker, renovated it, and repurposed it into the Iceberg Casino Hotel. It sat one-hundred thirty feet off the riverbank where, in the eyes of the city’s Zoning Commission, it was beyond any of Gotham City’s gambling statutes.

Mayor Gordon was trying to get those statutes to apply to the river itself, but the city council was stonewalling him. Bruce had his suspicions that a majority of the city council members were on The Penguin’s payroll, but he hadn’t had the inclination to attempt to prove it.

It looked like a parody of the Sydney Opera House, it’s expressionist design defiled in the form of an iceberg motif. It looked, to Bruce Wayne, as though someone had thrown massive chunks of styrofoam into the river and they collected together, bound by the water’s pollution.

Inside, no doubt, was The Penguin himself. He possessed, hopefully, the answers that Nightwing and Oracle needed for their investigation into The Undying.

Bruce Wayne was not relying on his resources as a wealthy civilian for tonight’s plan. No, he was relying on his resources as an ex-superhero.

He was relying on someone close to him. Someone who knew him inside and out, on an almost uncomfortable level that even Clark Kent couldn’t lay claim to. Someone he hadn’t seen in the three years since he’d hung up his cape.

And at eleven PM, as though summoned on cue, she appeared.

She arose from the side street on the east of the art gallery, flying, gliding, and touched down on the rooftop about five feet away from Bruce, as though the ancient Gods responsible for her creation had reached down from their perch beyond the world, and gently placed her there.

She stood six-two, the same height as Bruce, even in her bare feet. But tonight, as she did every time that she worked for the betterment and safety of all life, she wore red leather boots with gold, diamond-shaped guards covering her knees. A blue leather skirt, ancient in design and hanging from her waist in gladiatorial strips, came halfway down her tanned, muscular thighs.

On her left hip was an ancient shortsword so sharp that it could split atoms. On her right, a golden lasso.

A red leather bodice wrapped around her taut abdomen, culminating in a golden breastplate, shaped like an eagle in flight, wrapping around the generous breadth of her chest. The expanse of her back was bare, as were her broad, sinewy arms, save for a pair of silver vambraces that went from her wrists to halfway up her forearms.

Much had been made by outside observers on the subject of her mode of dress. Why would a superhero wear so little armor? Why would the world’s foremost role model for girls and women dress in a way that men could so easily find appealing?

In short: “Why the hell’s she dressed so skimpy?”

They were fools, of course. To Bruce, to Clark, to anyone who knew her well, the exposure of her arms, her legs, her back, existed as both promise and dare: That no weapon of this Patriarch’s World could so easily pierce her skin. And that those who would wage war, those who would harm the
innocent, were certainly welcome to try.

And fail.

Rapids of black, curling hair fell to the point where her shoulders ended and her forearms began. And concealing her hairline was a golden tiara with a red star in the middle, of the kind ancient warrior queens wore on the battlefields of old to symbolize their authority to those under their command.

Heavy Mediterranean brows provided shelter for wide, inviting blue eyes. A full nose cast a portion of a shadow over full lips that looked just as natural smiling as they did baring her teeth in fury. For that which is warm and soft is not alien from that which is strong and righteous. Her presence entire was proof of that.

It was the smile that greeted him tonight.

“Good evening, Bruce,” Wonder Woman said. “It’s been years…”
Chapter 10: The Chapter with Wonder Woman in It

Wonder Woman took in the sights around her while Bruce stood silent.

“I don’t make it to Gotham City as much as I’d like to,” Wonder Woman said. “So many cities blend into one another, but this one has its own… distinct…”

She stopped. The more she breathed in through her nose, the more the look on her face wilted.

“That smell,” Wonder Woman said, the tone of her voice dour. “It’s… it’s urine, isn’t it?”

“Hello, Diana,” Bruce said, ignoring that. “I trust you’re well.”

“Well,” Wonder Woman said, taking a step toward him. “And very intrigued. You’ve avoided me since you stopped being Batman.”

“I have.”

“And I think I know why.”

“Maybe you do,” Bruce said.

Wonder Woman smiled. “And yet… here I am.”

“Because I’m calling in a favor,” Bruce said. “Remember Io?”

Io was an Amazon. She had been abducted by the immortal sorceress Circe from the island of Themiscyra, the home of the Amazons, and taken to what Wonder Woman called “Patriarch’s World,” which was basically any part of Earth where men dwelt.

It was Circe’s misfortune, however, that the place in Patriarch’s World to which Circe had absconded with Io was Gotham City. It was Circe’s further misfortune that she had taken Io to Gotham on a night that both Batman and Zatanna had been in town. Zatanna handled the magic. Batman handled everything else. They defeated Circe and rescued Io before Wonder Woman had even known she had been taken.

Wonder Woman’s smile turned into a slight frown, and she said “Yes, I remember Io. What do you want?”

Bruce told her everything. The guns. The deaths. The Undying.

“And the man you want me to see is in that… interesting structure over there?” Wonder Woman asked, looking out at the Iceberg Casino Hotel moored in the Gotham River.

“At least I hope he is” Bruce said.

Wonder Woman took the Lasso of Hestia off of her hip, and held it.

“You do realize this isn’t a toy? And that I refuse to just place it on anyone you want me to just to sate your curiosity?”

“That man I want you to talk to is The Penguin,” Bruce said.
Wonder Woman’s brow furrowed. “Oh,” she said. “Well… alright, then.”

In the casino portion of the Iceberg Casino Hotel, Gothamites and out-of-town vacationers alike gambled away their mortgages and their children’s college funds for a shot at untold wealth that Oswald Cobblepot’s games of chance were most stingy to part with. The Iceberg’s slot machine payouts were advertised by various websites as ninety-two percent, in accordance with state law. However, if the actual payouts for those machines were closer to, say, eighty-five percent, well, that would just be between you, me, The Penguin, and all of the people on the State Gaming Commission that The Penguin bribed.

In the hotel, which took up the middle third of the repurposed oil tanker that the Iceberg was situated upon, the civilians tried to rest up for whatever summer vacation activities they had scheduled for the morning. That they shared the halls of this gaudy hotel with the stray high-end pimp, or the odd human trafficker looking to offload a shipment from Mexico to a lieutenant in the Falcone crime family was unknown to them. Gotham City being Gotham City, the evidence against these tourists losing sleep while possessing that information is strong.

But it is the Iceberg Lounge, that which occupies the northernmost tip of the tanker, that is of the most interest.

It’s a two floor affair, darkly lit, with a dance floor, a bar, and a giant plexiglass aquarium with an archway built in running down the middle.

But it is the office beyond the lounge that is most peculiar. While the decor of the lounge itself could not be differentiated from any number of identical semi-upscale nightclubs across the developed world, this office’s expansiveness was contradicted by its relative old world homeliness. Oil paintings of birds on the wall, plush leather chairs, a small table off to the side that held brandy snifters, next to a small cabinet that held the brandy, and also cognac, for whoever wanted to mix things up. This office looked like the flashbacks in horror movies to a time before the old gothic mansion on the hill was haunted.

And in the middle of the room, at a desk elevated so high that those who sat behind it looked over the office like a judge in a courtroom, was Oswald Cobblepot.

The Penguin.

He was a monument to WASPish excess gone to seed. The considerable girth of his belly strained his black waistcoat to the point that attentive listeners could hear each fiber straining in pain. The tuxedo shirt he wore beneath was home to both flecks of stray food and voluminous yellow pit-stains. The black bow tie wrapped around his barrel of a neck still had the audacity to hang loose, and off to the left. His round face was was presided over by a long, pointed nose that was reminiscent of the masks worn by plague doctors during the Renaissance. The left of his soulless black eyes was home to a monocle that no one who knew him was ever quite sure he really needed. And his hair started past his forehead, and halfway into his sweaty scalp, before it extended into a tangled, greasy foot-long skull that would be considered either horrendous or majestic, depending upon the observer’s threshold for irony.

And so The Penguin folded his stubby fingers upon his desk, and looked down at the the person in the chair beneath the skylight in front of him.

Selina Kyle.

She looked all around the room to see five burly fellows. They wore the same tuxedoes as the
regular employees of the Iceberg Casino Hotel, and even the same nametags. But she knew straight-up henchmen when she saw them.

“And to think,” The Penguin said, “that all it took was the death of a clown to propel us both into legitimacy, Miss Kyle.”

Selina didn’t know whether to flinch or roll her eyes. If she had to choose between The Penguin calling her “Miss Kyle,” or a trucker screaming at her that she had a nice ass, she’d take the trucker. At least he was predictable. The Penguin was just… oily.

And the implication that Batman left because The Joker died was… something best pressed down in the dusty parts of her psyche where it belonged

So she just maintained eye contact. “The difference is,” she said, “I’m actually legitimate.”

The Penguin shrugged. “True, true, but then again… How legitimate can you be if you’re here?”

Selina leaned back. “I’m chasing a payday, Ozzie. That’s all. I’m looking for something.”

His eyes narrowed. “Aren’t we all?”

Selina sighed. It took three years of not seeing Oswald Cobblepot to forget that she hated these displays of forced gentility. Like if he used honorifics and talked all old-timey, people would forget that this guy was a vicious murderer who sold illegal guns to two separate crime families and a whole host of Gotham street gangs.

The Penguin smiled, and took a sip from a glass of wine situated near his right hand. It went into his mouth in a slurp, and the mere sound of it made Selina’s stomach droop.

“Forgive me,” The Penguin said, “but I simply have to reminisce. I haven’t seen you in ages, after all.”

“Okay,” Selina said. “Did you want to reminisce about when you, me, and Clayface robbed that bank and you tried to stiff me out of my share of the take, or did you want to reminisce about when you kidnapped me out of my apartment and left me in a cage that slowly descended into a shark tank?”

“The latter was just to distract Batman from my other activities that evening,” The Penguin said. “And Batgirl saved you that night, didn’t she? It’s not as though you emerged from the ordeal worse for wear.”

Selina’s eyes narrowed. “You… Shot… Me.”

“In the thigh,” The Penguin said. “You don’t plan to hold that against me forever--”

“You… Shot… Me,” Selina said. “I had to dip into my stash for the plastic surgery to get rid of the scars! You know they charge twice? One for entry and one for exit? And when you pulled that shit, no one even knew there was a Batgirl! That was, like the second thing she… ever…”

Suddenly there came a tapping, as of someone gently rapping, rapping at the skylight above Selina’s head. She looked up.

A silhouette, hard to make out against Gotham’s grimy night sky, was standing above the skylight. All that was visible of the silhouette’s owner was a hand, which was pointing at her, and then waving off to the side.
Crashing through the skylight was the kind of thing Batman did. In the years she’d known him, Batman had never met a skylight he wouldn’t destroy to drop on someone.

The thing is, Batman had never warned the people beneath him to get out of the way before.

The tapping had also gotten the attention of The Penguin, as well as the five or so henchmen gathered around the room. Selina got up from the chair, and put her back to the nearest wall, out of the way of whatever was going to happen next.

The silhouette’s hand gave a thumbs up, then…

**CRASH!**

Selina used her arm to shield her eyes from the falling glass. She heard the rumble and heavy thump of someone’s feet destroying the chair she’d been sitting in, as well as the five henchmen reaching into their matching tuxedo jackets and drawing their pistols.

She took her arm down to see who was standing amidst the ruins of the chair and the skylight.

Wonder Woman.

Selina took a moment to reflect that none of her ex-boyfriends had been that imposing, and none of her ex-girlfriends had been that hot. As Catwoman, Selina had only ever fought Wonder Woman once. Or rather she had attempted to, as Wonder Woman had knocked her out with one blow.

That line from *Mean Girls* played in her head. *“One time, Wonder Woman punched me in the face. It was awesome…”*

In Wonder Woman’s left hand was an old-as-hell shield that looked like it could stop a rocket (and for all Selina knew, it probably had). With her right, she casually dusted bits of broken skylight from the flawless skin of her muscular shoulders, before shaking a few stray bits out of her hair. Then she looked up.

As Wonder Woman slowly scanned the room, her blue eyes glancing across her with seemingly no recognition, Selina came to the conclusion that the Princess of the Amazons didn’t know who she was.

*Why should she?* Selina thought. *I was wearing a cowl and a pair of goggles the only other time we met.*

“I spend most of my working hours fighting Gods of your mythology, and monsters from your darkest imaginations,” Wonder Woman said to those assembled in the office. “So what will happen after this point, should you decide to react aggressively… will not be fair.”

She then looked at The Penguin. “You are the man I came here to see.”

The look of fury on The Penguin’s face was something Selina found impressive. “*Am* I, now?” he asked.

“I have questions to ask you,” Wonder Woman said, “and in the interest of saving lives, they must be answered truthfully.”

Wonder Woman took the golden lasso from her hip and held it out. “Come down here, hold this lasso, and answer my questions, and I will leave. This can be resolved peacefully.”
“You crash through my skylight, in my office, and you expect me to believe you when you say you come in peace?”

“You reputation precedes you, Cobblepot,” Wonder Woman said. “That’s no one’s fault but yours.”

“Maybe it’s just me,” The Penguin said, his hideous mimicry of Old World charm diminishing by the instant. “But no one wears a sword and shield unless they’re prepared to fight.”

“That’s what people get wrong about me the most,” Wonder Woman said. “I never want to fight… But I am only your enemy if you treat me that way.”

The Penguin leaned back in his chair. “Let me ask you something I’ve been curious about for a while now. Are you bulletproof like that Metropolis fellow in the red cape?”

“It depends on the bullet,” Wonder Woman said. “Some raise welts, some draw blood. But the bullets I couldn’t deflect with my vambraces haven’t killed me yet.”

“So if someone shot you in the head, there’s a chance it could just… bounce right off?”

Wonder Woman’s face stiffened. “No one’s been able to find out.”

The Penguin nodded, and turned to the tuxedoed henchman on his left.

“Vinny… Find out.”

Selina didn’t even have time to say “Oh shit” to herself before Vinny the Henchman pulled his nine out of his tuxedo jacket, and fired.

Wonder Woman brought up her arm, and the bullet ricocheted off of her vambrace, and embedded into the head of one of the birds in the oil painting on the far wall.

As the tuxedoed henchmen converged on Wonder Woman, Selina saw The Penguin push himself away from his desk and trot down the little stepladder he used to get up there. He tipped a vase off of its little end table, to reveal a keypad behind it. He punched in a number, and a thick steel door that was papered to look like part of the wall, opened.

A safe room, Selina thought.

Wonder Woman had grabbed one of the henchmen, and threw him into the opposite wall. She then flew, and smashed into him, busting both herself and the henchman though the wall and into the bar on the opposite side. Selina could smell the acrid scent of booze from the shattered bottles even from her position this far away.

As two more of the henchmen followed Wonder Woman and their compatriot into the bar, the other two stayed just outside the hole in the wall, their pistols drawn, holding their fire, trying not to shoot their co-workers.

Selina knew what was going to happen after this. The cops were going to come, and they were going to arrest everyone.

Up to and including Selina herself.

Unless, of course, she could prove to Wonder Woman by the time this rumpus ended that she wasn’t working with The Penguin.
Selina sauntered up behind the two henchmen at the doorway (whose nametags she remembered said “Pablo” and “Mike”) and said...

“Y’know, it’s a good thing I still work out and train and stuff… ‘cause I haven’t beaten the shit out of The Penguin’s henchmen in years.”

Mike’s eyes didn’t even have a chance to go wide, before Selina kicked him in the back of the leg, bringing him down to one knee. In two brisk, powerful moves, Selina snatched the gun out of his hand and pistol-whipped him with it, dropping him on his side.

Before Pablo could turn around, Selina planted a kick into his stomach that sent him on his ass, and sent his gun flying harmlessly from his hand.

Wonder Woman punted the henchman (whose nametag helpfully informed her was “Ronald”) through a few tables and into the massive aquarium that separated one side of the lounge from the other. She heard the meaty “Thump!” of a human body hitting plexiglass, and knew that Ronald wouldn’t be getting up for a while, and that no matter what she did, the actual aquarium wouldn’t break.

Which was nice.

She liked fish.

Wonder Woman looked up at the hole she made through the bar, and saw not only two more henchmen coming toward her (nametags reading “Vinny” and “Ed”), but the remaining two goons standing at the hole with their guns drawn.

And the woman in the jeans and the motorcycle jacket, who seemed to be there for some reason she could not conjure, slowly walked up behind them.

Vinny already had his gun. Ed got his from his tuxedo jacket.

Wonder Woman switched her stance, her left side facing them instead of the side that bore the shield. They got one, two, three, four shots off, and Wonder Woman deflected all of them with her vambrace. All she needed was a brief, one second pause in the onslaught of gunfire. For their trigger-fingers to get tired in the smallest of instants.

She got it.

Wonder Woman pivoted her upper-torso, flinging her shield at them. The disc of metal hit Ed squarely in the ribcage, and bounced off in a way that made it hit Vinny in the temple.

She’d been practicing that move for centuries.

Both men went down in heaps.

Wonder Woman went over to pick up her shield, hearing fighting in what remained of the office. Apparently, the woman in the motorcycle jacket was joining in on the festivities. This would require investigation.

She hadn’t even gotten up from kneeling down to retrieve her shield when a turret dropped down from the left wall above the fire extinguisher. She thought she had seen The Penguin run into a safe room when the fight started, so he must have been the one who summoned it.
The turret pointed directly at her. Wonder Woman brought her shield up as the turret started firing nine millimeter bullets.

While the turret in the lounge was making it hail lead upon Wonder Woman’s shield, Selina Kyle found out that yes, she could still kick as high as she did during her Catwoman days.

The heel of her boot jacked Mike’s jaw, and he fell back, stiff as a board. She whipped around and saw Pablo barreling toward her. She whipped back around, and started running for the nearest wall.

*It’s gonna be embarrassing and really painful if I find out I can’t still do this the hard way.*

She picked up speed and planted one foot on the wall. With her momentum, she planted the other. And now for the dismount.

Her arc was perfect. The wall-flip caused her head to sail over Pablo’s head at just the right time. She reached out, pulling Pablo back.

She landed in a perfect spread-eagled sitting position that let her drive Pablo’s head into the hard floor, knocking him out cold.

Selina, sitting on the floor, raised her arms and started laughing.

“**YES! AND THE CROWD GOES WILD! EVEN THE RUSSIAN JUDGE GIVES A PERFECT SCORE!**”

She saw Mike stirring, and she got to her feet.

“Alright,” Selina said. “Now you.”

Wonder Woman, shield up, marched toward the firing turret, stopping about ten feet away.

Beneath the cover of her shield, she unsheathed her sword. Using a technique she’d mastered on Themyscira (although, granted, using a spear and not a sword), she straight-arm launched the sword into the turret from the safety of cover.

A deafening roar as the ceiling-mounted turret exploded. Her sword, unstained and unblemished, jutted out of the blackened wall behind its remains.

Wonder Woman only had time to sigh, before she heard broken glass crunching beneath feet behind her.

She whirled around to see Vinny standing there, his gun less than a foot away from her face.

He fired…

...and the bullet ricocheted off of her tiara, and embedded itself in the ceiling.

Both Wonder Woman and Vinny just stood there. She had been about in Patriarch’s World since 1942, and tonight was the night she learned that her tiara could deflect bullets too.

She smiled. She couldn’t help herself.

That was apparently too much for Vinny’s pride to bear. He dropped his gun and balled up his fist.
Wonder Woman saw it coming, and brought up her shield.

The “BONG-G-G-G-G-G” sound of an unprotected human hand coming into full contact with a mythical Amazon shield was almost loud enough to drown out the sound of every bone in Vinny’s hand shattering on impact.

Almost.

Vinny screamed, and cradled his mangled hand. Wonder Woman brought up her own fist…

…and she stopped herself.

He was the only henchmen left standing. He was defenseless, and in excruciating pain. And in Wonder Woman’s heart, a great swell of pity bloomed for Vinny the Henchman.

She put a hand on Vinny’s shoulder. “Vinny?”

Vinny quieted his screaming, but his panting still carried heavy traces of the pain in his voice.

“Have a seat,” Wonder Woman said, “and I’ll see if I can’t find you some help.”

In a strange echo of her first fight with Batman, Selina was dodging everything that Mike could throw at her. Unlike Batman, however, dodging Mike required very little of her effort. In the midst of her bobs and weaves, she almost felt sorry for the guy.

Not sorry enough, though.

She grabbed one of his wild fists, and jumped, wrapping her legs around his arm, bringing them both to the floor.

Having Mike in a picture perfect Fujiwara armbar, she choked up on her grip, and pulled back. She heard Mike’s shoulder pop out of joint, and his howls of pain. She brought up one of her legs and drove the heel of her boot directly into Mike’s face. The screaming stopped, and Mike was out like a light.

She heard feet on discarded plaster coming from the hole in the wall. Selina rolled back and launched herself at the interloper…

…only to stop herself when she saw that she was launching herself at Wonder Woman, who was standing there, free hand on her hip, a quizzical look on her face.

“Whoa!” Selina said, skidding ungracefully to a halt. “That.. that could have ended in tragedy.”

Wonder Woman surveyed the scene.

“Impressive.”

“I try.”

“And who might you be?”

So it was true that Wonder Woman didn’t know who Selina was. She didn’t know why Wonder Woman was in Gotham City, or what she wanted from The Penguin. But she did know that Wonder Woman was all about truth and honesty. And Selina, being far from absolute truthfulness even on her best day, knew that the fewer people who knew that she was looking for the LexCorp targeting
system, the better.

“I’m… an interested third party,” Selina said. “I have some questions I want to ask The Penguin.”

“As do I,” Wonder Woman said. “Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

Selina and Wonder Woman walked past the elevated desk and to the safe room keypad.

“Okay,” Selina said. “This is an older keypad, so it won’t take…”

While she said this, Wonder Woman had already dug her fingers into the plaster surrounding the steel of the safe room door. With a great rumble, she tore it out of the wall and flung it onto the floor.

She looked at Selina.

“That works too,” Selina said.

They stood at the new hole in the wall that led to The Penguin’s safe room, a miasma of dust obscuring what lie within.

And as the dust parted, Selina saw The Penguin inside, pointing one of his parasol rifles at them.

Selina yelled “SHIT!” and ducked out of sight.

In one fluid motion, Wonder Woman deflected the bullet that The Penguin fired, pivoted, and flung her lasso at him.

The end of the lasso wrapped around The Penguin’s left wrist. Wonder Woman yanked the lasso, sending the parasol out of The Penguin’s hands, and The Penguin himself to his knees.

“Now,” Wonder Woman said. “Let’s talk.”

Selina ducked back in just in time to see the lasso around The Penguin’s wrist glow a bright gold. His angry lumpy face smoothed out into a state of blissful placidity.

“First question,” Wonder Woman said. “What do you know about the weapons auction that was attacked two nights ago?”

“We were selling Israeli weapons,” The Penguin said. “We thought that night would be different, but…”

“Different how?”

“I haven’t had a successful gun deal in almost a year,” The Penguin said. “No one has, not just me. The Maronis? The Falcones? They’ve all had their deals ripped off.”

“Do you know who’s doing it?”

“No idea. All I’ve heard are reports of men and women in street clothes attacking, destroying the guns with acid or explosives, and then disappearing. It’s like something huge is coming, and whoever’s behind it wants the organized crime in the city defenseless. Why else do you think I’d send my men all the way to Tel Aviv to get guns? Because it was far enough away to escape the notice of whoever’s doing this. It looks like we were wrong.”
Wonder Woman nodded. “Next question. Did you know Black Manta was the one who took out the auction?”

Selina involuntarily flinched at the sound of Black Manta’s name. There were some villains that she thanked God up and down she didn’t share a city with, and Black Manta was one of them. She’d heard that he put Supergirl on life support when he ran her through with a Kryptonite carving knife. She made a full recovery, but anyone who could drop a Kryptonian like that was bad news.

“Black Manta ripped off the auction?”

“Yeah,” Selina said. “Did he?”

“He did,” Wonder Woman said.

Selina sighed. “Shit.”

The Penguin nodded. “What she said.”

“Next question,” Wonder Woman said. “Do you know anything about stolen weaponry used by Gotham supervillains?”

“No,” The Penguin said. “Believe me, I’d know. If they were up for sale, I’d have been the one selling them.”

“So nothing about Joker toxin? Or Mister Freeze’s old Cold Guns?”

“Or,” Selina said, “y’know, like, prototypes of any kind?”

Wonder Woman looked at her while The Penguin said “No. Nothing.”

Selina couldn’t keep the disappointment off of her face. If The Penguin didn’t know where Lex’s targeting system was, she was fresh out of leads.

“Alright,” Wonder Woman said. “Last question. Who is The Undying?”

Selina perked up at that name. If Wonder Woman knew about The Undying, then Wonder Woman was working with Nightwing. Any further conversations would have to be discreet as she could manage. More capes meant a slimmer chance of a payday with Lex Luthor’s name on it.

The Penguin blinked, and asked “Who’s The Undying?”

Wonder Woman sighed. “The fact that I have no answers is an answer in itself. One last thing. One of your men is in the lounge right now. His name is Vinny. I compel you to get him some ice for his broken hand.”

The glow of the lasso fluctuated, and The Penguin looked more serene than Selina would wager he ever had in his life.

“Vinny is a nice fellow,” The Penguin said. “And it would be the Christian thing to do.”

“Do I even want to know what your definition of the Christian thing to do even is without that lasso on?” Selina asked.

The Penguin looked at Selina. “Young lady, I fear cynicism has ruined you for life.”

Selina rolled her eyes as she took the Lasso of Hestia off The Penguin’s wrist. He got up and
scurried out between the two ladies, toward the lounge. Selina and Wonder Woman walked out into the middle of the office.

“Prototypes?” Wonder Woman asked.

Selina shrugged, and put on the best aw-shucks look she could manage. “If I keep my secrets, it’s because I don’t wanna lie to you. I hear you’re big on that type of thing.”

“You’ve heard correctly,” Wonder Woman said. “Are you going to be alright?”

Selina was about to say that yes, she was, but something stopped her. The thought that she spent most of her adult life thinking ran through her head like a freight train.

_I shouldn’t do this. I’m going to do it anyway._

“Actually,” Selina said, “the cops are going to be here any minute, and going through the front of the Iceberg is gonna be a bit of pain, so… I was wondering…”

Wonder Woman nodded. “Say no more. Where’s the parking lot?”

“Ummm,” Selina said, trying to orient herself in her head. She pointed toward the wall on her left, and said “That way.”

Wonder Woman held her arm out. Selina walked up to her to let her put a sinewy arm around her waist. Selina herself put her arms around Wonder Woman’s shoulders in a kind of sideways hug.

“Hold on tight,” Wonder Woman said.

“Up, up, and away.”

“Funny.”

And off they went, through the remains of the skylight.

The massive parking garage that served the customers of the Iceberg Casino Hotel was situated on the Gotham mainland, one hundred thirty feet from where the Iceberg itself was anchored in the Gotham River. Customers of the Iceberg got to the Casino by a ferry service.

Selina Kyle’s motorbike was parked on the top floor, beneath Gotham’s sultry summer evening sky. Wonder Woman and Selina made touchdown in the space next to it.

As Wonder Woman let go of her waist, Selina said “Thanks for the lift.”

“Not a problem,” Wonder Woman said. “Wait…”

Selina turned to her.

“Where’s your helmet?” Wonder Woman asked.

“I gave it to the attendant in the little kiosk on the bottom floor,” Selina said. “It’s easier than just lugging in to the casino and back.”

“Oh,” Wonder Woman said as Selina approached the bike. “Good. I don’t need to worry about you, then.”
Selina froze.

*It's low.  It's over the plate.  Go for it.*

She turned back around, eyebrows slightly raised, smirk firmly in place. She put as much allure as she could into her voice when she said:

“I can think of worse things than Wonder Woman losing sleep thinking about me.”

Wonder Woman just blinked as Selina turned back around and got on her bike.

Selina found it a small degree of unsettling that the first thing she wanted to do with the first costumed superhero she’d seen in Gotham City in three years was flirt.

*But it’s Wonder Woman, Selina thought.  If you didn’t, you’d have regretted it for the rest of your life.*

She looked in the side mirror of the bike.  Wonder Woman was standing there, fist to her mouth, trying to stifle either a giggle or a blush.

Selina smiled.

*Yup.  Still got it.*

“So we learned nothing from The Penguin,” Bruce said.  Wonder Woman had just flown back to the roof of the art gallery.

“I learned that my tiara can deflect bullets, too,” Wonder Woman said.

Bruce just stared at her.

“I mean… that’s not nothing.”

“I’m just sorry I wasted your time.”

“It wasn’t a waste of time,” Wonder Woman said.  “Like I said before, it’s not every day I go to Gotham.”

Bruce shrugged, and…

…and…

…and nothing.  Bruce was stuck in the quagmire of awkward human interaction that he often found himself in.  Wonder Woman just stood there, hands on her hips, looking at him as though he were under a microscope.

“If, um… If you’re staying at hotel, I can drive you back.  You don’t have to…”

“Bruce…”

Wonder Woman silenced him by walking forward and placing a hand on his chest. Her voice was warm.  The look in her eyes was one of intent. A smile played itself across her face.

“Bruce,” Wonder Woman said.  “You *know* what I want.”
Like Clothes Made Out of Wasps

Chapter 11: Like Clothes Made Out of Wasps

Wonder Woman wanted pizza.

Years ago, when Batman and Zatanna saved Io from the clutches of Circe in Gotham, and Wonder Woman came to collect her, Batman discovered that Amazons, when away from their island home of Themiscyra, were subject to the same laws of hunger and thirst as everyone else. Bruce decided that it was time to introduce Io and Diana to the best pizza in Gotham City.

D’Artagnan’s was an unassuming joint in the East End, run by a guy named Phil who had heard the name “D’Artagnan” in a Three Musketeers movie, and thought it sounded cool. The premises were expansive yet intimate, the ambience dark yet inviting, and the smell of garlic hung heavy.

The two Amazons were vegetarians, and on Bruce’s request, he (in his civilian clothes), Diana, Zatanna, and Io shared a large with mushrooms and jalapenos.

Io thought it was too spicy.

Diana fell in love.

So it was decided that every time Diana was in Gotham, Bruce would take her back to D’Artagnan’s for a mushroom and jalapeno medium.

And it is where they could be found this very evening, fresh from their post-Iceberg raid rendezvous atop the McInerny Art Gallery, save for a short stop at the hotel Diana was staying at, so she could slip back into her civilian garb.

Her hair was in a loose ponytail, hanging over her right shoulder. She wore a red hoodie, with the hood pulled up over her head.

And because Diana of Themiscyra, Princess of the Amazons, daughter of Hippolyta: Tenth Queen of the Amazons held a kernal of all-consuming smart-ass beneath her dignified presence, beneath her unzipped red hoodie, she was wearing a gray Batman t-shirt.

The subject at the moment was her attire, but it was not the hoodie, or the t-shirt, or the white New Balances that she thought were comfortable.

No. It was the cargo shorts.

“The thing that amazes me about Patriarch’s World,” Diana said, wiping her lips from the last bite of pizza she took, “even after all these years, is that you will fashion a tool or an article of clothing to perform a task at a right angle from its intended purpose. You will design a coffee maker with a clock on the front. You will craft a telephone that takes photographs. And you will make a pair of shorts whose chief appeal, beyond preserving modesty, is to carry a broad assortment of very tiny things.”

Bruce nodded.

“It shames the lot of you in this realm,” Diana said, “that clothing designed for women has so few pockets, forcing them to purchase completely separate bags that they have to carry over their shoulders.”
Bruce looked around at the empty interior of D’Artagnan’s, before he turned back to Diana and said “I made Batgirl her first utility belt so, y’know, I’m there with you.”

Diana fished something out of one of the pockets of her cargo shorts beneath the table, and held it out to Bruce.

“Do you see this?” Diana asked.

Bruce did see it. Barbara had a similar lump of plastic on a keychain when she was younger. He believed she called it a “Tamagotchi.”

“I don’t even know what this is,” Diana said. “I bought this from a street vendor in New York a block down from where I got these shorts. But I had all of these pockets, something needed to go in them, so into the pockets it went. I may have use of this someday, whatever it is. Some stray bit of circuitry may be needed for Mister Terrific to disarm a bomb, and now I will have it somewhere on my person. This could save a life.”

Bruce had a hard time figuring out when Diana was screwing with him, so he smiled to play the odds. She smiled back, took another bite of her pizza and a sip of her iced tea to wash it down.

Diana fixed him with a level gaze. “You took a risk asking me here.”

“To the city, or to D’Artagnan’s?”

“The city.”

“So you’ve said.”

“Do you know why?” Diana asked.

“Enlighten me.”

Diana now took her turn to scan the empty interior of the restaurant, before looking at Bruce again.

“Because I can talk you into being Batman again,” she said softly.

Bruce folded his arms. “And how did you come to this conclusion?”

Diana sat up. “You have a family. Alfred, Dick, Barbara, Lucius. They love you very much. And because they love you very much, they don’t like to question you once you set your mind to something. Or if they do question you, they don’t want to question you too hard. You give off the air of being rigid and brittle at the same time. You either won’t give, or you’ll break.”

Bruce nodded. “Adult antisocial behaviors and a negative mood cluster stemming from post-traumatic stress.”

Diana smiled. “It sounds like a certain someone has been to therapy.”

“No,” Bruce said. “I’m proficient in psychiatry. I psychoanalyzed myself.”

Diana just stared at him, before she rolled her eyes. “Of course you did. What could I have possibly expected from a man who dressed up as a bat and started punching people to ease his city’s suffering instead of donating to charity?”

“I donate to charity,” Bruce said.
“It wasn’t your first idea, though.”

Bruce put his elbows on the table. “I know doing what I did wasn’t healthy. And I know that I can’t get the help I am quite sure I need without exposing myself, along with quite a few of the people I care about. But I stopped doing the unhealthy thing. That has to matter.”

Diana put her napkin on her plate to signify that she was done eating. She would be taking the leftovers home with her.

“How are you feeling, Bruce?” Diana asked.

This question was a minefield, made the more so by to whom he was speaking. Bruce had to admit that Diana’s assertion that she could talk him back into being Batman held a lot more water than he’d have liked for one very simple reason.

Once upon a time, Batman and Wonder Woman almost got into a relationship.

It was within walking distance. It was in spitting distance. It was in breathing distance. But it never happened.

The prospect of Batman and Wonder Woman dating each other might give more than a few outside observers some measure of pause. What on Earth could the embodiment of truth and empowerment see romantically in the embodiment of retribution and fear? But there was a nugget of truth in what John Stewart, the Green Lantern of Sector 2814, said about the subject:

“They seemed eager to withhold what the rest of the world gave them on a platter. Wonder Woman wasn’t as impressed by Batman as everyone else was, and Batman wasn’t reverential enough in his awe of Wonder Woman. I kinda think that was the appeal. In a world that let them get away with everything, those two wouldn’t have let each other get away with nuthin’. You ask me what they saw in each other, and… yeah, that’s it.”

But as it happens, when two people get so close to succumbing to romance, only to pull away at the last possible moment, each party comes away with a supreme frankness toward the other that seeps into their platonic friendship.

Bruce knew that he hadn’t spoken to Diana in three years because she was absolutely correct in her assertion that she could talk him back into the Batsuit. Dick couldn’t have done it. Barbara couldn’t have either. Not even Clark could. But Diana was a different story. She seemed to have the ability to see through him, which both terrified and amused a man who built his life upon secrecy.

But still the question hung in the air between them. Diana asked again.

“How… are you… feeling?”

Bruce let the words simmer in his head. He seemed to grasp toward possible emotions, only for them to dissipate into wisps of smoke.

He opened his mouth, and…

“Am I interrupting something?”

Bruce Wayne was not used to being snuck up on, so on the rare occasion that such a phenomenon occurred, he jumped. Only when he saw who was standing behind him at the table did he feel his stomach drop into his shoes.
For standing there, medium pizza box in her hands, was Selina Kyle.

“Or am I interrupting… soooooomething?”

Bruce was still so startled that he skipped right past the pleasantries. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here,” Selina said.

Bruce played dumb, and said “I thought you lived in Chinatown.”

“Yes,” Selina said, “but I have another place here in the East End that I go to whenever there are, uh… they’re fumigating. And besides, they don’t have Gotham’s best pizza in Chinatown.”

“They sure don’t,” Diana said.

Selina looked at Diana, and Bruce almost saw her eyes widen to the point that they may have fallen out, were this a cartoon.

She held out her hand with a very amused smirk on her lips. Selina took it and shook it.

“Diana,” Bruce said, “this is… I’m sorry, have you two met?”

“We have,” Diana said, still smirking.

“Um,” Selina said, “earlier than you think. I’m, uh… I’m Selina Kyle.”

Diana laughed. “Are you, now?”

“We’ve actually fought,” Selina said. “The Luthor thing a few years ago.”

“I don’t seem to recall.”

“Well,” Selina said, “you knocked me out with one punch, so…”

“Oh,” Diana said. “I hope it didn’t hurt too much.”

“I remember your fist coming at me, and I remember waking up in jail immediately after that, so no, it wasn’t that bad at all.”

“Good,” Diana said.

“I’m sorry,” Selina said, “I have to ask… are you two on a date?”

Bruce tripped over his own tongue. Thankfully, Diana was there with the truth.

“We’re just good friends,” Diana said.

“Right,” Selina said. “Bruce Wayne and Wonder Woman are friends with everyone, so why wouldn’t they be friends with each other? That’s, um… That’s an interesting shirt you have on, there.”

Diana looked at her gray t-shirt with the black Bat-Symbol. “Thank you,” Diana said. “I saw it, and I had to have it.”

Selina shrugged. “That’s what I said. Look where that got me.”

Bruce looked confused.
“Anyway,” Selina said, “I better leave before this pizza gets cold. Wonder Woman…”

“Diana.”

“Di an a, it’s been a pleasure meeting you for the third time.”

“Likewise,” Diana said.

“And Bruce, I’ll see you on Friday.”

“You know it,” Bruce said.

Selina made her departure. The bell over the D’Artagnan’s entry door jingled with her passing, and Bruce turned back to Diana.

“She was at the Iceberg tonight,” Diana said. “She wanted to ask The Penguin about a prototype.”

Prototype? Another line of inquiry to add to the list.

“I’ll have Nightwing look into that,” Bruce said.

Diana was still staring at the space Selina had been occupying moments before. “Yes… Nightwing… That was Selina Kyle?”

Bruce turned to look at her. “I thought you two had met.”

“Oh, I met Catwoman,” Diana said. “I hadn’t met Selina Kyle. No wonder she took up so much of your time.”

Bruce nodded.

“She’s elegant, and… earthy at the same time. I can’t quite explain it.”

Bruce nodded again.

“Is she seeing anyone?”

Bruce was about to nod again, when the words finally hit his brain. He turned and looked at Diana with shock.

And Diana was surprised by his surprise. “I spent centuries coming of age on an island populated solely by women… and the World’s Greatest Detective failed to do the math on that?”

Bruce had, in fact, done the math on that. In the dossier he wrote on Wonder Woman, he noted that Diana’s romantic life would not be a factor in anything crucial regarding the rest of the Justice League. There was nothing there that could be bent to nefarious purposes by an outside party wishing to do harm. He wrote that her dalliances for the past three decades were “brief, and looked upon in hindsight with a philosophical bent.”

Diana came to the notice of the world in 1942, with the crash-landing of American Flight Lieutenant Steve Trevor on the island of Themyscira, home of the Amazons. She was tasked with bringing Trevor back to England, where he was stationed. She spent the rest of World War II assisting the Allies in top secret operations in both the European and Pacific theaters under the codename “Wonder Woman.” After the war, she plied her skills in secret, unseating dictators and freeing the oppressed until thirteen years ago, with the near-simultaneous emergence of Superman in Metropolis, and Batman in Gotham City. That was when she decided to go public.
Steve Trevor died in October of 1988 at the age of seventy-four, due to complications from pneumonia. Diana, having never aged a day since she left Themyscira, was at his bedside when he passed. To hear her tell it, Trevor’s last words were “Goodnight, Angel.”

Bruce puffed himself up in his seat. His territoriality wrestled with his pride inside of him, until they both quailed, as they always did in matters concerning Selina Kyle, in the face of one question. The only question that mattered.

Would she be happy?

He felt himself slowly deflating as he gathered himself.

“No,” Bruce said. “She’s not seeing anyone. She was engaged, but… she broke it off six months ago.”

And upon Diana’s face was a look of both awe and dismay. He’d never seen her look like that before.

“Great Hera,” Diana said. “I was… just teasing you.”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose. He had read that some people who suffer traumatic events didn’t know they were traumatic until they tried to relay them as funny stories to shocked listeners. Apparently his willingness to tell Diana that Selina would have no romantic entanglements should she want to pursue something with her, that Bruce himself was willing to just give Selina up just like that, had passed a similar threshold.

“I don’t need to ask you what you’re feeling,” Diana said, her voice low and soft. “You’ve been defeated.”

Bruce looked at his empty plate.

“Look at me, Bruce.”

After a second, he looked into Diana’s blue eyes.

“This needs to be talked about,” she said. “I’m going to ask you a question. You can take all the time you need to answer it, but you have to answer it, and answer it honestly. Because if you lie, I’ll know, and you know that I’ll know… Are you ready for the question?”

Bruce took a deep breath, and finally nodded.

“Why did you stop being Batman?”

It took him a while to collect his thoughts. Almost a full minute. And during that time, Diana looked at him, the same compassion in her face that seemed to be her default.

“If I had to ask you,” Bruce said, “who it was that I spent most of my time thinking of when I was Batman… who I spent every waking moment wondering what they were thinking, who would you say it was?”

She studied his face for a while, her expression hardening a ever so slightly in concert with the answer she found.

“The Joker,” she said.

Bruce nodded. “He knew… every move I’d make. He had ways of confounding me and doing
damage, and you know… I was the exact same way towards him. He said we completed each other. He said he was my equal and opposite reaction. Looking back on it…”

“You sound as though you loved him,” Diana said.

“No,” Bruce said as his insides flared. “I hated him. I still do. And not in the purifying way. The ugly way. The dirty way. The way that rotted me from the inside and makes me less of a man. But… I knew him.”

He rubbed his face before looking at Diana again. “I’m not blind, Diana. This isn’t about me being liked, because people do like me, even though I’ve made it so… so difficult. My best friend is Clark Kent. That has to say something. And this isn’t about being loved, because…”

His words halted, and he tried, with all of his will, not to look at the patch of air near their table that had, until moments before, contained Selina Kyle.

“But if you ask me,” Bruce said, “if there was anyone in my life who ever really understood who I was, then…”

Bruce stared at his plate again. Diana didn’t say anything.

“And Harley Quinn shot him in the back and crushed his head. Right in front of me. And I was powerless to do anything to stop it.”

He looked at Diana again. “Think about what that means. My life, my real life, started when I saw a man murder my parents when I was eight years old. And the man who consumed my life, even in a bad way, when he dies like that? Thirty years later? In almost the exact same way? Then what does that tell you?”

Bruce leaned in, fixing Diana with the fire in his eyes.

“Becoming the Bat meant nothing.” Bruce said. “It didn’t matter at all. I gave my sanity, Barbara Gordon gave the use of her legs, Jason Todd gave his life… and I ended up in the exact same spot. So many good people followed me into a hellhole, and there was nothing but a dead end inside.”

He leaned back again, his face slackening. “So I step away. And this city I love so much decides to rot in the way it had before I put on the cape. I’m not the only one who didn’t learn a damn thing, and that’s the only comfort I can take from all this”

Bruce couldn’t find anything more to say. Outside of a business context, this is the most he’d spoken out loud in an amount of time he’d have shamed himself thinking about.

And Diana was still all compassion. Bruce feared talking about himself the way he just had, because he feared that the depths of his self-loathing would either drive people away or shut them down. Yet still Diana of Themiscyra remained, the softness in her eyes unwavering.

“Thank you for telling me this,” Diana said. “It wasn’t easy to listen to, but it must have been so, so much harder to say. You don’t trust many, and the fact that you trust me with all of that means a lot.”

Bruce didn’t say anything.

“About a year ago,” Diana said, “I walked in on a conversation Oliver was having with Ryan. They were talking about you.”
“I take it it wasn’t flattering,” Bruce said.

“You’re right,” Diana said. “It wasn’t. They kept talking about how all the villains you accrued over that ten years were dark reflections of you. That you shared their insanity. That you brought them into being.”

“Do you agree with that?”

“Yes,” Diana said. “I do.”

Bruce wanted to sink into his seat.

“But the thing that doesn’t occur to anyone,” Diana said, “is that you aren’t the only one this applies to. Have you ever noticed that?”

Bruce furrowed his brow as Diana leaned forward in her seat.

“Look at Superman. How many of the people he fights are the last of their kinds? Who are the only ones of their kind? How many are people blessed or cursed with immense power, trying to make their mark on a world that could easily shun them because they think it’s their duty? Or what about The Flash? Wally is such a well-meaning fool that his villains have formed a union that doesn’t harm women or children.”

“The Flash is a dunce.”

“The Flash has a museum,” Diana said. “That’s how much he means to the people he has chosen to protect.”

Diana slumped in her chair. “And then… there’s you.”

She let that float as she looked him over.

“Bruce, I have been alive for quite a few centuries. I have seen things that would inspire awe and rob you of your sleep. I have subdued Ares the God of War. I have beheaded Medusa.”

It was only now that a steeliness came to her eyes. “So why is it that you’re the one who’s fighting the scariest things I’ve ever seen?”

Bruce didn’t… couldn’t… say anything.

“My purview is the world,” Diana said. “I don’t look after just one city. So I see things others might miss. The city reflects back on the heroes that protect it, so why are you the only one who has this problem?”

Bruce felt… not invisible, but transparent. As though his thoughts and feelings were jars on shelves that could be looked at, perused, and put back.

“You know why,” he said.

“Of course I do. Because you are convinced that your own misery is an end in and of itself. I know you, Bruce. I know you will never be the standard definition of ‘happy.’ I don’t see you singing in the shower, or smiling for no real reason than that the world is beautiful in ways that halt your step. But by the Gods, you’ve never even tried, have you? Because you think your unhappiness gives you an edge. Even when this city, your city, has proven you wrong again, and again, and again.”

Diana sat up again, her head tilted forward in a way so that the light above them hit her brow first,
shadowing her eyes.

“If only you’d tried, things could have been so different. You even had examples in front of you. About how life could be better. About how your city could be better. Dinah and Oliver. Wally and Linda. Lois and Clark. But not you, oh no. You’ll push everyone away... even though you don’t know when it’ll be the last time you’ll see them.”

Bruce heard her voice quiver. It sounded like one of the intermittent tremors in an arm that had been holding a torch since 1942. Bruce didn’t need to see her eyes to know that the sadness they held carried over into her voice.

“They all leave,” Diana said. “Every one. They just… go away one day.”

Diana rubbed her face. When her hand came back up, she’d shifted her head in a way that her eyes were visible again.

“I’m not going to condescend to you,” Diana said. “I’m not going to say that life is short for you because I’ve lived for centuries. Life is… long, Bruce. For everyone, not just for me. And seeing people like you making themselves and everyone around them miserable because they think it’ll prolong it just makes me… the angry kind of sad.”

“My secrecy is important,” Bruce said, though he felt like he was trying to hold back a storm just by talking to it. “It keeps people safe. I can’t put lives in danger because I want to be happy.”

Diana sighed. “Bruce… Everyone’s life is always in danger. Your happiness or your misery has nothing to do with it. And if it matters that little… Shouldn’t you try to be happy anyway?”

She put her empty plate out of the way, and leaned on the table, looking directly into Bruce’s eyes.

“I know how proud you are of Dick and Barbara. And I know you don’t want to tell them that because you think you’ll jinx it. Or you think complacency will make them weak. Tell them anyway. Because they deserve to know. Because love only makes people stronger. And get the help you need. Real help. Just because you function doesn’t mean you aren’t sick.”

“Is this Wonder Woman talking? Or Diana?”

“There is no difference between the two. There’s barely any difference between Bruce and Batman, even though you like to tell yourself otherwise.”

Diana raised her brows. “And tell Selina everything. Including who you are. Including how you feel about her. Because the both of you are the kind of screwed up that makes you fit together like puzzle pieces. And by the Gods, Bruce, be... Batman. Because of all the unhealthy things you do, saving lives and helping people really isn’t one of them.”

She sat back again. “Do all this, Bruce, and maybe… just maybe… this city won’t smell so much like pee.”

Bruce drove Diana back to her hotel, and then pointed his Porsche east, towards Wayne Manor. All the while, he counted every storefront, every exit sign, every line on the road, committing them to memory as a way to delay the time between now and when he got home.

Because he knew where he’d be when he got there.

He stood at the grandfather clock in the study, his favorite brooding spot, staring at its face, listening
to ticking and the tocking as they carried him deeper into his mind.

There were no thoughts there that could be read. No ideas there that could be thought of as legible. Just a wall of sour, weak emotion lightly veined with anxiety.

Bruce had only known his parents for the first eight years of his life. His perfect recall was stymied by the fact that he was only a child, and they had communicated with him as a child, and whatever counsel or wisdom they could have provided to their son as a young man, as an adult, as someone so confused and so lost was forever irretrievable, thanks to happenstance and heartlessness.

He could not know for certain that Thomas and Martha Wayne would want their only child to avenge their murders or not. Whether they would approve of their son risking his life to stop those who play out the tragedy of Bruce Wayne’s life upon others.

But Bruce had seen other parents as an adult. He had seen how Lucius doted on his children Tiffany, Tamara, and Lucas. How much he loved his wife Tanya. And from that, he could conjure one theory that he knew to be truth, as immutable as gravity itself.

Thomas and Martha Wayne would want their son to be happy.

He knew this because he could picture Dick and Barbara asleep in one of the many rooms above him. Through heartbreak and adversity, they had found each other. Their happiness did not diminish them, and the tragedy that found them, now and again, did not weaken them. And this was what Bruce wanted in the most simple way, like he had wanted snow on Christmas Day as a child. Good people should be happy, and Dick and Barbara were more than good people. They were two matches next to each other in a nearly empty book, both ready to burn to spite darkness.

And if Diana was right, Bruce’s own path to happiness lie beyond this clock.

“I take it your date with Miss Prince went well?”

Bruce turned, and saw Alfred standing in the doorway of the study.

“Funny,” Bruce said without a smile. “It was… a conversation.”

“I trust it was an enlightening one.”

“She wants me to be happy,” Bruce said.

To which Alfred replied “Miss Prince is wise.”

“She thinks the best way to do that is for me to be Batman again,” Bruce said.

To which Alfred replied “Miss Prince… is correct.”

Bruce’s face slackened in surprise. “You were never the biggest fan of my being Batman.”

Alfred sighed and walked into the room. “I have questioned your methods, Master Bruce. I have feared for your life. But the one thing that heartened me throughout your tenure as Batman was that children… were never afraid of you.”

Bruce blinked.

“You could put the fear of the almighty Himself into adults, but every child in Gotham City could look into the night sky, see the symbol you chose for yourself, and never have to fear for their safety. There is… a purity in that. When you were Batman, I could look at you with a peculiar envy.
Because unlike most of the rest of us, you never had to question why God put you on this earth.”

Bruce looked back at the clock. “Some of those children even followed me on this… this crusade. One’s in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. One… one died.”

“Yes,” Alfred said, looking down. “That is… regrettable.”

“Regrettable,” Bruce said, the word so sour on his tongue that it lent a hint of anger to his voice. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“Regret is what those of us left behind are the best at,” Alfred said. “It’s all we can do. But ask Barbara if she has any regrets over what she did. What she still does. And I’ve a feeling Jason would give the same answer, were he among us.”

Alfred walked further into the room. “This world does not value those who walk upon it, Master Bruce. Not like it should. Not like it used to. All that remains is the will and resolve of those who would shield others from harm. Those who would brave the storm to save lives.”

Bruce sighed. “How many lives did Harley Quinn save when she murdered The Joker?”

“There’s no way of knowing,” Alfred said. “But I know for a fact that she failed to save at least one.”

Bruce’s face turned. “It’s not like The Joker could have been reformed. Or rehabilitated, or…”

“It was, admittedly, quite unlikely,” Alfred said. “But we will never know for sure. And that is the tragedy. And you know this, Master Bruce. To exist in this universe is to be in thrall to limitless possibility, but all that is certain is the hand we extend to others, even one as low and as debased as him. Past love, and even past hate, all any of us has is each other.”

“Have you been reading philosophy?”

“No,” Alfred said. “I’ve been listening to Superman.”

Bruce let out a sharp jet of breath through his nose that was the closest he was getting to a laugh tonight. Alfred was right next to him now, and he put a hand on Bruce’s shoulder.

“I’m so lost, Alfred. I could really use a way out.”

With his free hand, Alfred reached out, and turned the hands on the grandfather clock counterclockwise to ten forty-seven. The clocked thumped, shuddered, and came away from the wall, revealing the elevator that would take him down into the Batcave.

“Right this way, sir,” Alfred said.

Bruce stared into the empty elevator.

*The sound of pearls falling on a wet pavement.*

The sight of a mallet coming down.

And in he walked.

The small steel elevator gave a light shimmy as it descended, and Bruce felt his heart race, about to hammer out of his chest. A tremor in his hand came and went.
I’m not ready.

I don’t think I’ll ever be.

The elevator tripped the motion sensor when it hit the bottom, the Batcave, and the lights in this cavernous hall switched on.

The small elevator stopped, and Bruce took a tentative step onto the cement floor.

As he did, he heard an ear-splitting screech from above.

The ceiling above him, home to countless thousands of bats, began to undulate violently. The one ear-splitting scream from the one bat spread to the others, until Bruce couldn’t hear himself think.

And this ceiling began to break, piece by piece, and descend, screeching and flapping, until the center of the Batcave was home to a titanic vortex of bats.

Seeing this, Bruce’s heart slowed. His hands became steady. Far from wanting to shrink, he stood up straight.

Thirteen years ago, a young vigilante named Bruce Wayne sat in his father’s study, bleeding from an effort at dispensing justice gone wrong. He was lost and despondent, wondering how he could fight the plague of crime at the heart of Gotham City, and wondering if he even should.

And at his lowest, a bat crashed through the window of the study, and lie dying at his feet amidst the broken glass.

This was a sign.

“Yes, father. I shall become a bat.”

And now, thirteen years later, staring at this wild tornado of bats, his doubts began to vanish.

He knew what was happening.

They’re welcoming me home...
Chapter 12: Batman Returns

Quincy Feldon waited until his wife Rochelle fell asleep at one in the morning before sneaking out of his apartment on Founder’s Island. He walked out of the apartment building, saw no reporters on the street, and got into the Prius that Rochelle had pestered him into buying.

He crossed the Capeheart Bridge at one twenty-five in light traffic, the starless night sky shrouding the city, and made his way to The Narrows.

The O’Neil Arms Hotel was owned by the Maronis. This brown brick pimple on the ass of Gotham City was used as a place for meets, deals, and payoffs among those the Maroni family felt needed met, dealt with, and paid off.

And Quincy Feldon was one such person.

A year ago, Quincy Feldon was a Sergeant in the GCPD. A veteran officer with a near immaculate record, save for a fitness report here and there that didn’t go his way. And yet, apropos of seemingly nothing, Quincy Feldon traveled to Park Row and gunned down Emily Shaddis in front of her apartment building, before walking to a bar called the Fat Tiger, and allowing himself to be apprehended by authorities. Emily Shaddis was community organizer for the impoverished Park Row district, the backbone of James Gordon’s mayoral campaign in the East End, and a single mother of two.

He had been placed on administrative leave pending an investigation by the GCPD and had been out on bail for a year. Thanks to the efforts of the Gotham City Police Union, Quincy Feldon had yet to see the inside of a courtroom.

It had been theorized, both publicly and privately, that Sergeant Feldon had murdered Emily Shaddis on behalf of a newly emboldened police force, flush with power now that all of the old supervillains were terrified of trigger-happy cops in the wake of Batman’s disappearance. A little blood spilled in the name of showing Gotham City’s new crusading mayor just who ran the show.

The truth was altogether more simple. And altogether more depressing. For Quincy Feldon acted not on behalf of the GCPD, but Salvatore Maroni. Sergeant Feldon had been crooked since year five of his ten years of service as an officer of the law.

He had even been invited to Maroni’s mansion on the mainland to go over the hows and whys.

“What is it they say? ‘The medium’s the message?’ Cap her in the daytime. In front of everybody. Go for a walk, get a drink, and wait to get pinched.”

“Is it alright if I ask why I should go through all that trouble, Mister Maroni? I'm not an idiot. I know how not to get caught.”

“What’d I just say? The medium’s the message. It ain’t that we can get anyone under cover of darkness. It’s that we can pop someone in broad daylight and nothing’ll happen. We don’t want Gordon to see we’re good. We want Gordon to see we’re untouchable.”

Sergeant Feldon had a feeling that Mister Maroni didn’t really get the whole thing about the medium being the message. But whatever. He paid.
There was no elevator in the O’Neil Arms Hotel. He had to walk two flights of stairs to get to his meet on the third floor. He walked past not one, but two passed-out junkies. He had to navigate the thick, near-palpable stench of stale cigarettes and piss like an explorer hacking through the vines in the Amazon jungle with a machete. He almost tripped on loose carpet making his way to the second floor.

The third floor, on the average he’d formed from the first two floors, was at least decently maintained. It traded in the cigarettes-and-piss smell for spilled-booze-and-weed. But the dimness of the overhead lights was off-putting. There was a series of four bare bulbs running along the hallway, giving a little halo of dull yellow light beneath the bulbs themselves, and almost nowhere else in the rest of the hall.

Quincy walked past two open doors populated by one or two of what he could only assume were fellow Maroni Family employees before he found his meet-up point at the end of the hall.

Room 301.

There wasn’t even a bed in 301 as, Quincy assumed, no one slept there. There was a small round table in the middle of the room at which one man sat, wearing a t-shirt and jeans. Quincy knew this man. He was Burt, and he’d taken payments from him before. The guy on the couch near the window, on the other hand, the one in the blue suit with no tie, Quincy did not know. But judging from how Burt addressed him during their conversation, his name was Rusty.

Actually, conversation was a loose term, as Burt was talking at Rusty, and Rusty was talking into his phone. They seemed to be holding two completely different chats.

“The seven deadly sins are on that island,” Burt said. “You got Ginger, right? Pretty face? Ass you can set a drink on? That’s lust, bro. Which leads us to Mary Ann, who’s all jealous of Ginger, and that makes her envy. The Professor, now he’s pride, because he’s the one who’s convinced that his way is the only way to get off the island.”

“Put ten on Metropolis,” Rusty said to the person he was talking to on the phone, completely oblivious. “Yeah, ten… The spread’s what?”

“Mister Howell’s greed, cause he’s a rich dude, right? That’s easy. But his wife? She’s sloth, ‘cause she don’t do shit. She doesn’t even get the coconuts for the radio. Which leads us to The Skipper, which is, like, a fascinating case, ‘cause he’s pulling double duty as both gluttony and wrath. Gluttony ‘cause he’s a fat bastard, and wrath ‘cause he’s slapping Gilligan around all the time.”

“And another five on National City…. Yeah, I know they’re going up against St. Louis… Yeah, I know they’re an expansion team.”

“Which makes Gilligan… The Devil… Him self. He’s the one always screwing up the escape plans, making sure they’re never getting off the island, right? And…”

Quincy cleared his throat. Burt immediately popped around to look at him. Rusty was still making his bets. Quincy hadn’t taken an envelope from Burt in a couple of years, so he felt the need to introduce himself.

“Feldon,” Quincy said.

“Yeah,” Burt said. “Quincy Feldon. Mister Five-Oh. C’mon in, Mister Five-Oh. I got an envelope with your name on it.”

Burt got up as Quincy entered the room.
“Take a seat,” Burt said. “I got your envelope in the other room. Lemme go get it.”

Burt went into the bathroom. Rusty was still talking to his bookie.

“Don’t tell me about how to bet, alright? The NL East is dead, oka… The Mets? What are you, five?”

Burt came back from the bathroom with a plain white envelope which was filled, Quincy assumed, with his ten grand payoff. He set it on the table. Quincy reached out for it.

“Stop and talk awhile,” Burt said. “I don’t have anyone to talk to. Just…”

He nudged his head over in the direction of Rusty, who was listening to his bookie with a glare in his eyes.

“I can’t,” Quincy said. “I really have to get back to--”

“Don’t be a dick, alright? I don’t get celebrities in here very often. Not like Mister Five-Oh. I seen you on the news. Popped that broad in Park Row.”

“Yeah,” Quincy said. “That… that was me.”

“Her two kids, though,” Burt said. “No dad? They should be in the system now.”

Quincy just stared at him, his insides curdling.

“Hey,” Burt said. “I’m not judging. Mister Maroni says jump, we gotta ask how high.”

Quincy nodded. “It sucks. But if those kids have to go without so my kids can go with, then…”

“You’re Goddamn right,” Burt said. “Thing is, though, how the hell are you still a cop? See, if I were a janitor and I shot someone, they should fire me. I don’t mean could, I mean should. If someone walks on my wet floor, I’m not gonna see any call to gun them down in the street, y’know?”

“Police union,” Quincy said, still extremely uncomfortable with the conversation, and trying to give as many nonverbal cues to that effect as he possibly could. “They have rules on top of rules before a cop can get fired. If they handed me my walking papers the day I shot that woman, the city would have to pay out fifty grand.”

Burt sat up in his seat, surprise on his lips and stars in his eyes.

“Are you seriously telling me if I was a cop and I shot some broad in the middle of the daytime, they’d have to pay me fifty large?”

“It’s taking the long way.”

“It’s the American Dream, though. Hey Rusty, are you--”

Crashing glass from down the hall.

A loud “THUMP!”

Childish screams of terror from a grown man. “No! NO!”

The high thunder of cracking wood. As though someone had been driven through cheap furniture.
Rusty dropped his phone. Quincy, Burt, and Rusty hurriedly filed out of room 301 and into the hallway, to see the lone occupant of room 304 already standing there, near the door to his room.

One of the guys in room 308, who Quincy had seen on his way up here, was launched from his room’s doorway, and into the opposite wall.

The four men just gawked for a moment until a light wisping sound, like a knife cutting through the air, made itself known. The light bulb farthest away from them shattered, and shrouded that fourth of the hallway in complete and total darkness.

Silence. Pure, agonizing silence.

Until the wisping sound came again, and something made of metal emerged from the darkness to take out the second of the hallway’s four light bulbs. Half of the hallway was blanketed in darkness, including the guy standing outside of 304.

Two rapid whacks of a fist on flesh, and the loud crumple of a body falling unceremoniously to the floor.

Rusty growled, and got his pistol out of his suit jacket.

“Who do you think you are?” Rusty yelled, walking down the hall with purpose, his gun extended in front of him. “You think I’m scared of you? Don’t you know whose town this is?”

Rusty went into the darkness.

His gun fired twice, and in the muzzle flash, Quincy thought he saw Rusty standing in front of someone… some thing… much bigger than he.

The crack of bones in Rusty’s arm breaking, followed by the thud of a piece dropping to the carpet. Rusty’s screams, followed by the unmistakable sound of a skull being driven into cheap drywall. Another body falling.

Quincy looked at Burt. The formerly phlegmatic mob guy was shaking. He saw a bead of sweat making a slow journey down his right temple.

“Stay… in the light,” Burt said. “Whatever you do… stay in--”

Some thing in the darkness fired. A hook on a sturdy line emerged from the murk with a blinding speed, and latched itself onto Burt’s shoulder.

“NO!” Burt yelled.

The high whine of the line pulling back, and Burt was pulled forward off his feet and on to his stomach.

As he was reeled into the shadows, Burt seemed to lose all semblance of sanity.

“NO! NOOOOO! HELP MEEEE!”

The darkness claimed Burt. Quincy felt the tremor in his feet as what must have been Burt’s skull was rammed into the cheap and thin hotel carpet three times in rapid succession.

WHAM-WHAM-WHAM!

A long instant, an eternal moment, before a glint of metal took out the next lightbulb.
Now it was just Quincy Feldon, alone, in his one solitary pocket of light.

Quincy was shaking now, too. He cursed himself for not bringing one of his guns from home. He cursed himself further simply for leaving the house.

And from the darkness, a voice came. As low and as sinister as though it belonged to a guardian of Hell Itself.

“Quincy Feldon,” the voice said. “You murdered Emily Shaddis.”

Quincy shuddered before he said “Who told you that?”

“You did,” the voice said.

From the darkness, Quincy’s own voice came back to him. His and Burt’s.

“Don’t be a dick, alright? I don’t get celebrities in here very often. Not like Mister Five-Oh. I seen you on the news. Popped that broad in Park Row.”

“Yeah. That… That was me.”

“Her two kids, though? No dad? They should be in the system now… Hey, I’m not judging. If Mister Maroni says jump, we gotta ask how high.”

“It sucks. But if those kids have to go without so my kids can go with, then…”

The recording stopped. Quincy felt his world ending.

Feeling absolutely no confidence, Quincy said “Recordings like that aren’t admissible in court. If you’re trying to blackmail me, you got nothing.”

“I don’t want money,” the voice said. “I’m telling you to confess.”

“Confess?” Quincy asked. “You know what they do to cops in prison?”

“I do,” the voice said. “You’ll confess anyway.”

“Why’s that?”

The sound of footsteps coming out of the darkness. When he saw what emerged, Quincy Feldon’s face lost all of its color.

It was a mass of gray armor and black fabric over six feet tall. In the middle of its chest was the outline of a…

“No,” Quincy said. “It can’t be! YOU CAN’T BE!”

“If you confess,” Batman said, “you’ll get away from me.”

Batman flung a Batarang above Quincy’s head.

The last light bulb went out. The hallway was now in complete darkness.

Quincy Feldon screamed.

The call came in on Gordon’s phone at a little past three. It was from the Deputy Mayor, Solomon
Bardolo.

“I got the call from Central,” Bardolo said. “Quincy Feldon came in and confessed!”

Gordon had wiped the crud from his eyes. “Well… I didn’t think Feldon was gonna see Jesus on this one.”

“He didn’t see Jesus,” Bardolo had said. “He saw Batman.”

Gordon walked into the main lobby of Gotham’s Central precinct. What greeted him was a massive scrum of uniformed and plain clothes officers congregated therein, all talking hurriedly and worriedly about what had gone down.

One of the uniformed officers saw Gordon standing near the door, and stopped to stare at him. The uniformed officer she was talking to did the same.

The silent panic spread across the lobby like a plague until all were quiet, and staring at him.

“I’m going to the roof,” Gordon said. “I think someone’s expecting me.”

A woman in a black pantsuit and a blood red button up underneath stepped forward. She had a long black perm stretching down to her shoulders, making it look like a poodle had decided to use her scalp as a summer home.

“I’m coming with you,” said Police Commissioner Tamara Hayden.

“Sure,” Gordon said, and coated his voice in sarcasm when he continued. “He’s just gonna love you.”

Commissioner Hayden and Mayor Gordon had been sparring in the press since he resigned from his post as Police Commissioner, and declared his candidacy for Mayor. Hers had always been a voice of the kind of implacable calm that accompanied one having the law on their side. Ex-cop or no, Gordon was a politician now, and the rank and file of the Gotham City citizenry still held the word of an officer of the law over a politician, no matter how corrupt or violent the police force might be.

And Gordon saw that that calm, that reason, was rapidly falling apart as the two stepped into the elevator. How do you throw salt in the game of the face of a corrupt police force? Just add one unstable vigilante dressed as a bat.

It was almost four in the morning, and he should have been waking up right about now, but James Gordon felt like a kid at Christmas time.

Gordon hit the button for the roof, and the doors closed.

“If you think for one second that you’re using the roof of this building for your little meet-ups with that psychopath, then you are sorely mistaken,” Hayden said.

“I had spotlights installed on top of City Hall,” Gordon said. “For just such an occasion.”

“That confession Feldon gave was under duress. There’s no way it stands up.”

“Was his lawyer present?”

“Yes, but…”

“Any marks on Feldon? Any bruises?”
“No, but…”

“Have Sergeant Feldon’s options been made clear to him?”

Hayden groaned

“It’ll stand.”

Hayden was fuming. “So if you were Commissioner, and Batman just terrorized one of your cops, you’d still have that same stupid grin you’ve got now?”

“None of my guys ever gunned a single mother with no priors down in broad daylight,” Gordon said. “If Batman paid a visit to one of my cops who did that, I’d be grinning wider.”

Police Commissioner Hayden stared at Gordon as though he’d confused the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament at Saint Peter’s Basilica with a public toilet.

“I swear to God, Gordon, you’re worse than Hill!”

Gordon laughed at that. Loud. Gordon didn’t consider himself the best politician in the world, but even if he’d drunkenly set the city charter on fire, he’d still have been leagues better at being mayor of Gotham City than the late and not-so-great Hamilton Hill. Hill had been corrupt to his bones, and had never met a bribe he didn’t like. He’d been so deep in Rupert Thorne’s pocket that he was on first name basis with the little balls of lint inside. Gordon had worked a security detail once while Hill was still mayor, and he pitied Hill’s poor female interns: calling them all “Sweetie,” and “Honeybunch,” and “Doll.” And Gordon had even been in the courtroom for Hill’s arraignment on corruption charges, and that bastard had the nerve to get all weepy and tell those in attendance to think of his family. That he loved Gotham City sooooo much.

The elevator dinged when it reached the roof.

Gordon and Hayden stepped into the humid air of pre-dawn Gotham. The wind was low, and the streets were eerily quiet. As though everyone beneath them knew without knowing, and gave the occasion the softness it so richly deserved.

This rooftop held intermingling memories of both terror and relief for Gordon. Matters as grave as The Joker’s latest massacre, to as humorous in hindsight as a burger joint being held up by The Condiment King. Riddler death traps, and Penny Plunderer bank heists, and Calendar Man slayings, oh my.

And in their center was The Bat. He’d questioned his methods (all those teenage sidekicks gave him no end to pause), but in the end, the out-of-reach vigilante had tried his best to accommodate Gordon as best as he could allow. The Bat never killed, which was a big help.

At about year four of Batman’s decade-long tenure, a thought came to Gordon. A thought absurd on its face, but, the longer he rolled it around in his head, a thought that became more and more plausible.

Batman wanted to be Gordon’s friend.

Gordon didn’t want to get it twisted in his head. He and Batman weren’t going to be sharing a beer anytime soon. They weren’t going to be eating ice cream and talking about boys, as his daughter Barbara liked to say. Gordon, even possessed by a delusion of grandeur, wouldn’t impose in such a way.
And yet, it was like if he worked in a mailroom, and he and Pete the Stamp Guy knew each other well enough to shoot the shit all day.

Yeah. Like that. Except writ large. And Pete was a potentially psychotic man in a bat costume. And instead of a mailroom, it was an as-yet-undiscovered circle of Hell.

Gordon and Hayden scanned the horizon.

“Crime is down,” Hayden said. “We don’t need him.”

“Officer-related shootings have skyrocketed,” Gordon said. “Don’t pretend that you’re pulling your hair out because you’re worried about propriety and the law. You’re worried that you’re next.”

Hayden glared at him.

“Are you dirty?” Gordon asked. “Is it Falcone, or is it Maroni? Jesus, if it’s Cobblepot, I hope the check clears.”

“I don’t have to answer you,” Hayden said.

“What, you’re pulling the no-lawyer shit with me? Out here in the open air where nothing can stick? If Emily Shaddis had a lawyer, would that have stopped your guy from putting her down in the street like a dog?”

Hayden just kept staring ahead.

“Are… you dirty… or not?”

Hayden turned and looked at him with a frost-bound and singular fury. Detective Harvey Bullock, before he retired last September, called it “The Ex-Wife Look.”

“For a mayor,” Hayden said, “you have a piss-poor idea of how a city runs. You think pension funds come from the sky? You can ratchet up taxes as high as you want, and we still won’t have enough for all the cops we have on payroll to serve a city of nine point two million. Ten years of the Batman, and we had to go out among the pieces of shit who live in this city, hat in hand, and ask for money for our guys to retire. ‘Oh, please, give to the fund for the people who can’t do the job one guy in an animal costume can do with a fancy car and literal children as his sidekicks.’ We had to ride bitch for a full decade while costumed psycho after costumed psycho kept crawling out from under rocks we didn’t even know this city had, and we were powerless to stop them. Because we couldn’t use the force we needed. And then he was gone. And this place was ours again. Cops could be cops again. And you seriously think I’m giving that up without a fight?”

Hayden got right in Gordon’s face.

“Ask me if I’m dirty,” Hayden said, “and I’ll ask you what dirty really is, before I tell you to shove your question back up the asshole it came from. I don’t have to tell you a thing.”

And from the shadows, right near the water tower, the old familiar baritone.

“Yes. You do.”

They both turned quickly to the water tower, but only Gordon had a smile on his face.

Gordon only saw his silhouette in the shadows, but it was unmistakably him. The same intimidating
frame, the same cape making that frame bigger. The same up-sticking ear things on his cowl.

“Hello, Batman,” Gordon said, still smiling. “It’s been a minute, hasn’t it?”

He reached into the pocket of his jacket and took out his half-used pack of Nicorette.

“I quit smoking.”

“Good,” Batman said. “I take it your morning’s going well so far.”

Gordon cackled.

Hayden stormed up to Batman, but stopped just short of the shadows.

“You. Are not welcome. In this city,” Hayden said. “We’re doing just fine without you. You don’t get to terrorize cops like you did Feldon downstairs. You think one of Gotham’s Finest stumbles in all pale and sweating like he saw The Grim Reaper, confessing to a murder no one can prove he committed isn’t going to raise an eyebrow?”

From the shadows, the same snippet of conversation that played for Feldon in the darkness of the third floor at the O’Neil Arms Hotel played. The one where Feldon himself confessed to the murder of Emily Shaddis. As it played, the look of subtle horror on Commissioner Tamara Hayden’s face became more and more pronounced.

“Cute,” Hayden said in a defiant tone that Gordon could spot as decidedly fake. “You know that’s not admissible in a courtroom?”

“Yes,” Batman said. “But it is admissible in a newspaper. Sergeant Feldon can step into a courtroom and get declared not guilty if he wishes, but this will follow him forever. As it should. At least this way, he might get paroled one day. It’s more than he deserves, but what he deserves I’m not willing to take.”

Hayden stared into the shadows. “So that’s how this is gonna be, huh? The GCPD has to toe the line for a nutjob in a cape, or they get intimidated?”

It was now that Batman opted to step out of the shadows.

He loomed over Hayden, an outrageous mass of malevolence. His lips were thin, and the blue eyes Gordon could see through the slits in his mask betrayed a channeled and controlled rage.

Gordon took this opportunity to note that Batman was the only man he’d ever met who had successfully mastered The Ex-Wife Look.

“My line is better than no line at all,” Batman said. “The officers of the GCPD swore an oath to protect and defend the people of Gotham City the day they got their badges. Failure to uphold that oath will no longer be tolerated. If they will not answer to the people, if they will not answer to the law… they will answer to me.”

Hayden stared at Batman for a second longer, before she turned around to glare at Gordon.

She walked up to him, and asked “A crazy man threatens the police in your city, and you just stand there and say nothing?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Hayden whirled around to look at Batman again. “And just…”
She stopped. One look to the shadows near the water tower, and Gordon knew why.

Batman was gone.

Like he did.

Gordon laughed. Loud and hard. Hayden tried to stab him to death using only her eyes. Gordon calmed himself down long enough to say something.

“You… You know one time he did that to me in the middle of an open field?”

The morning light streamed through the kitchen windows at Wayne Manor as golden as a field of corn. Dick Grayson thought that this was the kind of light that made 1970s vitamin commercials just spontaneously happen.

He was sitting at the kitchen island across from Barbara, who had brought her laptop in to stream the morning news from Channel 52, as the kitchen had no television. They’d had no word of what had happened with Wonder Woman and the Iceberg the night before. Alfred didn’t seem to know anything, and Bruce hadn’t woken up yet.

As was custom when Dick Grayson came to Wayne Manor, Alfred had loaded the pantry with an assortment of breakfast cereals with rapidly escalating sugar percentages. It was Cocoa Puffs for Dick this morning. Barbara was eating the eggs and toast that Dick had made for her. Her beverage was coffee, black with honey.

As Dick contentedly munched away, Barbara looked at him with a curious glint in her eye.

Dick looked his white t-shirt up and down. “Did—Did I get any on me?”

“No,” Barbara said. “It’s just that I’ve known you for almost half my life, and I’ve never even seen you eat a vegetable.”

Dick smiled. Barbara waved a hand up and down in front of the section of his muscular torso that was visible above the kitchen island.

“How does—how does this happen, when you have the diet of a hyper and annoying four-year-old? All you eat is sugar. Doused in enough syrup to form a reasonable shape, which you then douse in whole milk.”

Dick swallowed the Puffs in his mouth. “You know what ardei umpluti is?”

Barbara shook her head.

“Romani dish,” Dick said. “ Basically stuffed bell peppers. They had cheese in ‘em, some onions, basically whatever was left over in the fridge, just chopped up. When we were in the circus, and pickings were slim—which was often—that’s what Mom made. Every time. Without fail.”

Barbara smiled. “Your mom was a good cook, huh?”

“No,” Dick said. “She was awful. Have you ever tried to eat a tricycle tire?”

Barbara smiled the smile that never failed to make Dick feel invincible, and said “No.”

“I can tell you what it’s like. My mom’s ardei umpluti was so tough to digest that it’s still in my system twenty-some-odd years later, providing me with the nutrients I need to eat cereal. And fight
Barbara smiled her invulnerability-bestowing smile, only moreso, if that was possible. “And…”

“And it’s too early for your head to be in the gutter. And I have a cracked rib, and I haven’t brushed my teeth yet, and a beautiful girl like you really does deserve me at my best, don’t you think?”

“It’s midnight in Peking.”

“Well, we’ll just leave that to the… to the Pekingians, then, won’t we?”

Barbara laughed. “Peking ese.”

“Peking ese,” Dick said. He smiled when it dawned on him. “Where the dogs come from!”

Barbara laughed some more as Channel 52’s Breaking News graphic appeared on the laptop.

“Hon,” Dick said as Barbara was still laughing. “It’s on.”

Barbara stopped laughing when Channel 52’s anchor Summer Gleeson came on screen. Dick thought it was weird, though. Usually the run of the mill superhero bust-ups were saved for after the weather. They didn’t cut into commercials like this.

“This is WNTJ, Gotham City, I’m Summer Gleeson, and this just in from City Hall and the Gotham Central precinct.”

It seemed that Summer Gleeson needed to compose herself for an instant, before she said:

“Batman has returned.”

Dick dropped his spoon. Barbara dropped her jaw.

“Just after two-thirty this morning, GCPD Sergeant and accused murderer Quincy Feldon walked into Gotham Central and confessed to the murder of Emily Shaddis last year. When asked what prompted this sudden confession, Colin Dennison, Sergeant Feldon’s attorney, stated in no uncertain terms that this confession was the result of what he called “direct intimidation” by Batman, who returns to Gotham City after a three year absence. It has been confirmed by both Mayor James Gordon and Police Commissioner Tamara Hayden that Batman was seen on the roof of Gotham’s Central Precinct at four this morning. When…”

Dick zoned the rest of the broadcast out.

When he first heard the words “Batman has returned,” Dick almost convinced himself that his problems in this city had multiplied, because some shnook was out there pretending to be his old mentor.

But it was when Summer Gleeson said that Batman went after Quincy Feldon that Dick knew it was Bruce under the cowl last night. He knew Bruce, and he knew that if he was going to come back as Batman, the first guy on his shit-list would be the guy who murdered a mother of two.

“It’s just like him,” Barbara said after a while.

Dick snapped out of it. “Like Bruce?”

“Yeah, like Bruce. Be as uncooperative and vague as possible, before making some grand gesture, apropos of nothing. He’s Batman again. After three years, he just pops up like he got an extra life in
a video game.”

And from the kitchen entryway, near the refrigerator, the old familiar baritone.

“You play video games?

Bruce was standing in the alcove, leading into the kitchen, not having just awoken as they assumed, but having never slept. Neither Dick nor Barbara jumped, but they were still surprised. Barbara’s mouth was opening and closing, because as Dick knew, Barbara enjoyed blasting the heads off of Super Mutants in the *Fallout* games.

He also knew that Bruce would be less than pleased with that answer.

“Just… just *Need for Speed,*” Barbara said.

Bruce nodded, and walked to the fridge to get a bottle of water. He shut the door when he was done, twisted off the cap, and took a sip while staring out the window.

“So… Did Diana find out anything from The Penguin?” Dick asked.

“She didn’t,” said Bruce, still looking out the window.

“But I take it the two of you had an enlightening conversation afterwards.”

“We did.”

“You’re Batman again.”

Bruce took a deep breath. “I am.”

Barbara narrowed her eyes. “And you have nothing else to say for yourself?”

“I do.”

Bruce put the cap back on his bottle of water, opened the fridge, and put it on the top shelf, which was *his* shelf, as was imparted to the both of them at an early age. When he was done, he shut the door and looked at them for the first time that morning, before he said:

“I’m going to bed.”

And then he left.

Dick just stared. Barbara threw up her hands and leaned into the kitchen island at Dick, as though she was going to say something most unflattering about the owner of the house, but:

“Oh, and Barbara?”

Barbara’s eyes shot to the alcove, and Bruce was standing there.

“Please don’t go into my evidence locker again.”

On the forty-fifth floor of the Delacourt Building in the Otisburg section of Founder’s Island in Gotham City, the employees of Kyle Security went about their morning routine. The custodial staff diligently cleaned the boardroom. The interns (paid, of course) brought in the mail from the ground floor. And the fine folks in Research and Development pored over their plans on how to make a
more subtle and effective pressure plate, that could be hooked up to a series of alarms in an office building for a new tech start-up firm in Manhattan called Starrware.

In the office closest to the south-most facing windows, in her large office, sat Kyle Security founder and CEO Selina Kyle.

And Selina Kyle sat staring at her computer monitor.

Selina had opened up the page for the Gotham Gazette that morning in hopes of seeing front page news on her escapades with Wonder Woman the night before, when they crashed the Iceberg Casino Hotel, scared the crap out of The Penguin, and beat up his goons. One of the things that carried over from her life as a criminal to her life as a CEO was that she loved seeing press about the things she had done.

And while there was information on the Gazette site about the previous night’s adventure (which resulted in the detainment and questioning of Oswald “The Penguin” Cobblepot by GCPD, as well as an arrest for suspected human trafficking in the hotel itself), it was, regrettably, in the news section, and not on the home page.

What was on the home page, in big banner font so as to be read from space, were two simple words.

BATMAN
RETURNS

Selina did not read the accompanying story. She just simply stared at the headline, until the letters forming the words lost all meaning as language.

She stayed this way for almost an hour, until Taffy, her assistant, knocked on the door to run some plans from R&D by her.

The look on Selina’s face was… hard to read.
Chapter 13: A Pretty Painful and Very Imposing Before

THE GIORDANO BUILDING - FOUR YEARS AGO

On Bleake Island, in a row of office buildings about fifteen blocks from Chinatown, the Giordano building was the one that stood tallest. Twenty stories high, the roof offered no view, save for the other buildings in the heart of Bleake Island that it slightly looked down upon, as though the Giordano building was the tallest kid in fifth grade.

It was one of those old gothic things with gargoyles every other floor that had equally vociferous factions among Gotham’s citizenry of people wanting to tear it down and people wanting to preserve it. The first ten floors acted as an overflow storage space for the Amazon warehouse on the mainland. The next nine served as offices for start-up companies that had a habit of quickly going out of business.

But it was the top floor that would ideally hold the most interest for any expert or layman, for they were a private depository for a rare book dealer named Jefferson Ogden. It was built like a library, with all the hardwood homeyness that entailed. The shelves on both floors were packed floor to ceiling with rarity. Correspondence from the Founding Fathers of America to each other. First editions of Swift, Woolf, Proust, Fitzgerald, Hemingway. The complete and original twenty monthly installments of Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* from 1852 and 1853. There was even, shock of shocks, an 1860 third edition of *Ben-Hur* with a duplicated line on page one-hundred sixteen.

And in the last two days, Jefferson Ogden’s depository had received the Great White Whale of rare books: A Gutenberg Bible, one of only forty-eight left in the world.

The gothic gargoyles that occured on the exterior of the Giordano building counted the last of their number on the twentieth and final floor, and it is there on this unseasonably chilly September night that Batman made his perch.

He knew why he was here. He just didn’t know why he came. There was a war within his body, a bloody and raging hostility between icy reason, a boiling in his guts, and a useless and debilitating numbness that he could feel inching closer and closer to victory.

From behind him, he could hear scraping and grunts of exertion coming from the side of the building. He knew precisely who it was.

The sound of hands grabbing the stone railing on the roof, before boots made footfalls behind him. The noise stopped. And after a moment, a familiar voice.

“Hello, Sailor,” Catwoman said.

Batman didn’t say anything.

“So you heard, huh?” Catwoman asked. “See, in the cartoons, every character has an angel on one shoulder, and a devil on the other. In my experience, I have a devil on one shoulder, and the ghost of my Cuban Catholic mother on the other, screaming at me in Spanish that I can’t remember because I’m about to steal the most expensive bible on planet Earth.”

Batman still didn’t say anything.
“So how are we doing this?” Catwoman asked. “You just gonna let me in there and steal it so you can chase me? Are the cops waiting for me downstairs? Because you’ve never showed up at a place I was about to rip off before I rip it off. You usually get me in the act, or show up after.”

He could hear her footsteps behind him as she got closer and closer.

“You being here before I am, it’s almost as though you get me. You have weird ways of flattering a girl, Batman. What’s even weirder is that they work.”

Batman turned his head to his shoulder in her direction.

“Robin’s dead.”

Then he turned his head to look at the street again.

There was nothing but silence behind him for a long time.

He tried to use this as an opportunity to absorb the sounds of the street below. The people coming from, or on their way to, better places than here.

Seeing the look of pity on Catwoman’s face, and having to think about it, would be horrible.

Seeing the look of judgement on her face, and having to think about it, would be far worse.

And turning around to see that she had silently vanished, would… tell him lot about her.

But her boots clicked on the roof even closer now, and Catwoman sat on the railing next to the gargoyle, her long legs crossed at the ankle thirty stories above the street, her red goggles on her forehead as her green eyes surveyed the traffic below.

She was quiet for a long time, before she said one simple word.

“How?”

Batman felt his face stiffen in frigid anger.

“The Joker.”

Catwoman winced. She didn’t want to know any more, and Batman wouldn’t tell her.

“At least there’s still Batgirl, right?” Catwoman asked. “I haven’t seen her in a while.”

And even that made Batman feel cold inside. Three months ago, The Joker broke into Barbara Gordon’s apartment and shot her through the spine at point blank range, not to get at Batman, as The Joker didn’t know that Barbara was Batgirl, but to get at her father, Commissioner Gordon.

And Batman couldn’t tell Catwoman any of this, not without compromising Barbara’s identity and safety. Not because he didn’t trust Catwoman in a cock-eyed fashion, but because her identity wasn’t his to reveal.

He remembered Barbara Gordon’s dead-eyed stare at her own feet in her wheelchair when she told him she’d never walk again when he said:

“She’s retired.”

Which was not a lie.
“Oh,” Catwoman said. “Well… I hope she knows I’m thinking about her. I kinda liked Batgirl, and this must have hit her hard.”

Batman nodded slightly. Jason’s death had hit Barbara hard. He saw a further dimness in her eyes, made all the more tragic by the fact that there seemed to be so little light left in them. And through all that, she still had the will to take his hand and tell him that this wasn’t his fault. Which made him feel the kind of awful that defied simile.

He and Catwoman stared at the traffic beneath them in silence for close to a minute, until Catwoman opened her mouth, thought against what she was about to say, and then plowed on through.

“You… You won’t even trust me with your name, but you trust me with this. I’d like to think…”

Catwoman seemed to struggle with what she was about to say next, but she closed her eyes and shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “This isn’t about me.

And then she was quiet again.

He had a sense of her next to him, and Batman had somewhat of an idea of what was going on; A war within her, similar to the war inside him, but on a smaller scale.

Catwoman was so used to being aloof, so used to being in control. She flirted, she teased, she stood just out of reach, daring him to attempt a grasp and make a fool of himself.

But now he could sense her parting with all that, parting with the layers of irony and inches of distance to find something within herself that could be a comfort to him in what she could clearly see was his time of need. And it almost seemed to be causing her physical pain to do so.

He thought Selina Kyle was a good person underneath it all. He had even been brave enough to tell her on occasion. But it was only now that he let dwell a thought that had only danced in his brain or flitted about the margin of his consciousness these past few years, never to be lingered upon for too long, for fear of what it might mean. And now that this thought was in the open light of his mind, there was a deep sadness to it, as this thought would never escape him. These words would never reach his lips.

I love you so much...

And the thought was gone. Replaced by the all-consuming anger and gloom that had been a fixture of his life for so long that he barely even noticed it anymore.

Batman seemed to squint at the traffic. All of the people who were laughing in their cars. Or crying. Or texting even though they weren’t supposed to. All of them unaware that a troubled and brave fifteen-year-old boy named Jason Todd died in their service and in their name.

“Look at them,” Batman said.

Catwoman started squinting herself, to see if there was a specific car down on the street that he was referring to.

“If you ask me,” Batman said, “what the capes… and the masks… and the symbols mean. It means that we’re the expendable ones.”

Catwoman stared at him, unblinking.
“We’re big,” Batman said. “We’re ostentatious. We draw fire. So that the people down there never come to harm. The brightest and the bravest of us die, so the lowest and the meanest of them can live. We bury our own so they can go home at night. And… I used to think it was a fair trade, but now…”

As Catwoman stared back down at the traffic, Batman felt his anger take the upper hand in the emotional three-way fistfight roiling within him. For a full, unworthy minute, Batman thought of the knives he wouldn’t use to slash The Joker’s throat. All of the bricks he wouldn’t use to cave in that damned clown’s skull.

While he was in this wasteful, vicious reverie, Catwoman rubbed her face.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I… I really suck at this.”

She took her eyes off the traffic, and put them on Batman, who didn’t look back at her.

“I’d like to think I know you just a little bit,” Catwoman said. “So I know that you don’t want anyone to make you feel better right now. But… Some things need to be said.”

She looked out ahead of her. “When I was little, my family had this box of Disney tapes under the VCR in the living room that we got at the thrift shop for two bucks a piece. My favorite one was Pinocchio.”

Catwoman smiled when she said “‘Always Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide.’”

Her smile faded, and her face fell. Time-lapsed footage of a face doing a half-hearted impression of its own lost innocence.

“And then,” Catwoman said, “Mom committed suicide. Dad drank himself to death. Me and my sister were split up. And I was put in a foster system where people… most definitely did not let their consciences be their guides.”

She smiled at that, bitter as gall.

“And even when I broke out of the last foster home and came back to Gotham, even when I was waitressing in a diner where everyone thought they could grab my ass, through the first abusive boyfriend, through the second, past the point where I found out how good a pickpocket I was, that little jingle always came back to me. ‘Always Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide.’”

Catwoman looked at him. “Except it was funny to me. Because it was a lie. Something you told little kids to make them more controllable. Because if there really was a little voice within everyone telling them to do the right thing, or at least not to do the wrong thing, then why is this place the way it is? Why do people get stepped on? Why do people get hurt? Why did I--”

She broke off after that. She looked back at the traffic, wincing like she’d made a mistake in a high stakes game.

But her face softened along with her voice when she said:

“And then I met you.”

Batman didn’t look at her. He didn’t dare. He always seemed to spoil and turn inside whenever anyone said nice things about him. As though they were temptations meant to lead him from whatever path he was on.
She regained some of her bravado. “Because, oh brother, if anyone let their conscience be their guide, it’s Batman. I’ve seen you take insane risks to save one life. I’ve seen you in immense pain trying to stop the worst people. I’ve seen you deny yourself every comfort if someone else is suffering.”

Catwoman looked at him again. “I’m a grown woman with faith in nothing, and… and I’ve made a junior high fool of myself time and time again, trying to get you to notice me. To get you to chase me. Because I want to know what it is in you that made me so wrong about people for most of my life.”

She scooted a little bit closer to him. “So if you’re looking for someone to judge you and damn you to Hell because you couldn’t save Robin, it’s not gonna be me. Because if you could have done it, it would have gotten done.”

Batman wanted so desperately to look at her. Wanted to warm himself in the comfort that she had just born her soul to provide. To tell her everything. To tell her anything. Not just how much pain he was in right now.

But he couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t. A mish-mash of reasons floated into and out of his mind. “Knowing me will put her in danger.” “Knowing me will expose the identities of people I care about.” But he got stuck on the third one.

“Knowing her would make me happy.”

And he didn’t get to be happy right now.

Maybe not ever.

So his only recourse was to stay perfectly still, and stare down at the world below.

Catwoman sighed, and put her face in her hands.

“Jesus,” she said. “If I had a Trapper Keeper, I’d be writing your name in it right now. And I know I said I wouldn’t make this about me, and then I did, so I’ll...”

She trailed off. She brought her head back up. She waited a moment, before…

“You know,” she said. “If you finds some mugger tonight that you’re planning on beating up, I’d be down for that.”

Batman didn’t say anything.

“Or we could stay here,” she said. “Just stop and look at the city.”

Another moment of silence.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

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THE SEWERS BENEATH THE GIORDANO BUILDING - NOW

Anyone who has ever engaged in theological debate at an age in which they were young and immature has asked the following question:

“Can an all-powerful God create a rock so big that He Himself cannot lift it?”
In the dankness of the darkened sewers beneath the Giordano building, standing over an open backpack, Selina Kyle had a similar question:

“Can Selina Kyle create a security system so effective that Catwoman herself cannot bypass it?”

Standing in this sewer in her old Catsuit (which hung just a little bit looser than she remembered, something she chalked up to a loss of muscle tone from not being Catwoman every night), holding her cowl and her goggles, looking into a backpack that contained her civilian clothing, Selina was going to put a workable theory concerning that question into practice.

She put on the cowl and the goggles. She zipped up the backpack (a blue JanSport, found on elementary school campuses the nation over), picked it up, slung it over her shoulder, and said the closest thing to a prayer that she held sacred.

“Screw George Clooney,” Catwoman said softly to herself. “He needed ten other guys to pull off a heist in Ocean’s Eleven. I just need me.”

She climbed up the separate steel rungs of the ladder jutting from the brick wall of the sewer. And shoved the manhole above her to the side.

Eighteen months ago, Jefferson Ogden, the proprietor the private book depository on the top floor, hired Kyle Security to work their magic on the twentieth floor.

Jefferson Ogden’s problem this evening, however, was that Kyle Security was never hired for the other nineteen floors.

The manhole cover that Catwoman pushed aside led into the basement floor of the building. The manhole was supposed to act as a storm drain in case of a flood, and the stevedores who lugged all the Amazon crap into this basement wisely, and in accordance Gotham City safety protocols, did not put heavy stuff over the cover.

Catwoman emerged from the manhole behind a small wall of wooden crates taller than she was. She situated herself on the basement floor, jumped a little in place to get ready for what she was about to do, before jumping at the brick wall, putting her right leg out. At the crest of her jump, she leaned into her boot before springing out, pushing herself off the wall. Her hands reached the top of the nearest crate and she pulled herself up. Standing atop the crate, she gently lowered herself back onto the floor on the other side of the crate from where she’d started. She navigated one of the many avenues between the crates and boxes neatly stacked in this basement to get to the elevator.

The twentieth floor, where the book depository was located, was equipped with sensors that told the Kyle Security offices whenever the elevator arrived or departed from the floor. Any trips that happened outside of working hours meant that the alarms sounded.

Which meant that, when the offices on storage facilities Basement through ten, and the offices on eleven through nineteen let out at nine PM, then the elevator would be on one of those floors and not the twentieth, whose business operations concluded one hour earlier at eight.

Catwoman pressed the down button, and the elevator dinged when it hit the basement. The door opened.

She stepped inside, and hit the button for the eighteenth floor.

Catwoman walked to the rear-left corner as the elevator ascended, and hopped up to get her feet on the steel rails. She dug her claws into the corner, where the cheap plastic panelling of the elevator’s wall met the roof. She leaned back, using the strength in her left arm to keep her from completely...
falling back. No, that would yank the plastic panelling off of the wall completely, and make her collapse to the floor.

She flexed her right arm and punched the ceiling of the elevator, knocking the maintenance hatch out of place. Her right hand grabbed the new climbing space at the top of the elevator. She worked her claws out of where they were dug, and quickly grabbed the top of the elevator with her left hand as well. Her dismount combined with a pull-up that brought her to the top.

Once standing atop the elevator within the elevator shaft, she placed the maintenance hatch back where she found it. The elevator had a few floors to go before it reached eighteen.

If any of the security guards saw the elevator going up, they’d stop it and look inside. Seeing no one there, they would probably call the building’s owner with a report about a malfunction.

What they would not do is call the cops because they opened the elevator and found Catwoman inside.

The elevator did not stop at any point until it reached the eighteenth floor. Once it did, Catwoman was standing at chest level to a ventilation shaft on the nineteenth floor that was big enough for her to crawl through. She used her claws to unscrew the screws to the grate, which she then put on top of the elevator. She crawled into the ventilation shaft.

Working as the CEO for a security company, she learned a few things. One of which being, if corners had to be cut (as they always did, as the people who hired her for her services were some of the stingiest she’d ever met), there was always one place where sensors were never installed. One place security cameras never covered. One place security guards never patrolled.

The supply closet.

Because who is going to plan an elaborate burglary just to steal Mr. Clean and a mop?

Fortunately for Catwoman, the supply closet on the nineteenth floor was precisely where she needed to go.

She wriggled through the cramped ventilation shaft until she came to the grate on the wall opposite a narrow door with cheap plastic plate that said “SUPPLY CLOSET.” She turned within the shaft, brought her knee back as far as it would go, and then drove it into the grate. It took a couple of tries, but it finally came off the wall. She didn’t worry about the noise. Most places had lighter security on the higher floors. Why stop them up there when you were supposed to have caught them getting in?

Once she emerged onto the ugly beige carpet of the darkened nineteenth floor, she put the grate back in place, and rounded on the door to the supply closet. She got a lockpick and a torque wrench out of the pouch she had on the left arm of her Catsuit. A few seconds later, she was inside.

And now for the most important piece of Catwoman’s on-sight appropriation for tonight’s return to public life.

The stepladder.

She placed it under one specific tile in the ceiling, and climbed up.

As the security provider, Selina Kyle had had access to the plans to the twentieth floor, and had noticed a strange quirk. There was one area of the floor that had nothing underneath it. No ventilation, no electrical wiring, nothing. The floor of the twentieth floor had a mere eleven inches of thin air between it and the ceiling of the nineteenth. And that patch of floor was right between two
bookshelves, out of reach of the book depository’s motion sensors. This wasn’t particularly an oversight, as any would-be burglars would have to know that the sensors were there in order to exploit this one particular loophole. The sensors themselves were behind fabric screens made to look like wood panelling, which fooled the outside observer, and provided a material that the sensors’ lasers could penetrate.

Catwoman most definitely knew where those sensors were.

Another quirk of the Ogden job was that he insisted, up and down, the the depository have no security cameras of any kind. Which led her to believe that he either obtained some of these books illicitly, or he had less-than-reputable buyers.

Whatever. Selina didn’t care. He paid, and they were books, and not, like, children’s penicillin or some shit like that.

She removed the ceiling tile and placed on the one next to it, revealing the eleven inches of empty space and the four inches of wood covered by a floor tile standing between her and the depository.

Catwoman unslung her bookbag from her shoulder, and opened it. Along with her civilian Selina Kyle clothes, there was a caulking gun. Instead of the standard caulking tube inside, there was a black tube filled with… something else.

For a few months some years back, Catwoman shared an apartment with Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy. One of Catwoman and Ivy’s getting-to-know-you projects was a plant-based corrosive that could eat through solid steel. It was a damn sight quieter than explosives, and a must-have for those who valued discretion.

Catwoman unscrewed the cap on the tube in the caulking gun, and aimed the caulking gun and sprayed a line of gray gunk in the shape of of a rectangle that she could fit through on the wood. Over the next fifteen seconds, as she screwed the cap back on, put the caulking gun back into her bag, and reslunng it, the line of gray gunk slowly turned black. She could hear wood crumbling and smell plastic dissolving until…

**THUNK!**

The rectangle of wood and tile just dropped into her hands.

Jefferson Ogden’s rare book depository was open for business.

She placed the rectangle on top of the ceiling tile, and stepped further up the ladder.

Standing atop the ladder, Catwoman was in ceiling and floor up to her knees, with her head coming halfway up the third shelf of two massive shelving units in the middle of the room. These two particular units house antique paperback books, which, thankfully, gave Catwoman enough leeway for what she needed to do next.

She sloooooooowly stepped from the ladder to the long metal bars in the nineteenth floor ceiling that kept those tiles in place. She dug her claws into the shelves on either side of her claws with her arms, and giiiiiiiiingerly climbed up and placed her boots on the tiles of the twentieth floor next to the handy-dandy new entryway that Poison Ivy’s corrosive gunk provided.

From there, she moved her hands from the shelves where they’d been placed, to higher ones, and dug in.

She jumped, and her boots found purchase on the sturdy shelves. She undug her claws from the
shelves, and was now up high enough that she could place her hands on the top of the shelving units themselves, with about three feet from there to the ceiling.

Catwoman dug in her claws yet again, and her legs hopped from shelf, higher and higher, until she could use her left leg to dismount and roll her entire body to the top of the unit on the right.

She lay there for a moment, on her back, atop the shelving unit, until she positioned herself on her stomach, and then moved along the shelving unit on all fours. She reached the northern edge when she saw, pressed against the far wall, a display case on a medium-sized plaster podium shaped like a Greek column.

Tonight’s target.

Well, the first one anyway.

Random House New York, 1939, a pristine and antique copy of the tie-in storybook to Walt Disney’s *Pinocchio*, based on the story by Carlo Collodi, and illustrated with stills from the animated feature film, with which this volume’s publication coincided.

At Christie’s or Sotheby’s this book would most likely be sold at auction for less than two thousand dollars. Maybe even as low as fifteen hundred. There were quite a few books up here that were worth infinitely more.

But this one was hers.

She drew her goggles down over her eyes, and switched on the infrared function. A grid criss-crossed the floor of the book depository, telling her where the sensor-lines were located. She slid off of the shelving unit, and walked over or ducked under the sensor lines on her way to the display case. Unlike the other displayed books, this one was guarded by a simple lock that she could have picked in her sleep. She opened the case, put the book under her arm, and avoided the sensor-lines on the way to the staircase which led to the roof.

Once she was on the roof and shut the door behind her, she reflected that she could have started here and worked her way down just one floor instead of up nineteen, but this exit had a keypad on the outside that relayed to Kyle Security whenever the twice-monthly randomized door code was pressed to get in. She could have come from street level up the fire escape, she could have used the Ivy Gunk to rot away the outer plating and hotwire it so the door would open without contacting her wok, but doing that would have meant that someone on the street would have seen Catwoman. It was harder going up all those floors, but it was quite a bit safer.

And more fun. The only fun she planned on having this evening.

Catwoman looked at the book, put it back under her arm, closed her eyes, and counted to ten, preparing herself for what came next.

There was a reason she picked this place.

She was going to turn the corner of the exit door and walk out onto the roof, and if she knew him… if she truly knew him… Batman would be standing there.

Catwoman opened her eyes and turned the corner.

He stood silhouetted in the moonlight. Imposing. Resolute. His cape fluttering lightly and silently behind him. It was as she had seen in her dreams, in her idle fantasies, behind the thinness of her eyelids when emotion beckoned to imagination and called him forth.
Her boots padded quietly on the tar-paper of the roof as she went to him. She dropped the book and removed the glove on her right hand.

She was less than a foot away from him now, she reached out with her bare hand and felt the roughness of his stubble. The smoothness of his cowl closest to his cheek. She took a deep breath before she pulled her hand away…

...and then slapped that bastard dead in his smug face.

Batman’s whole head rocked to his right, but he made no sound.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!” Catwoman yelled. She reared around and tore off her cowl and her goggles, throwing them onto the roof next to the book.

Selina paced back and forth for a while, putting her anger and resentment and her feelings of betrayal into words that didn’t sound like caveman gibberish.

All the while, Batman said nothing.

Selina rounded on him, hatred in her eyes.

“Three years of-- Why are you here? Did you think we’d pick up where we left off? Did you expect me to welcome you back? How---How do you know me well enough to know I’d be here tonight, but not have the slightest clue that I’d be pissed off at you?”

She started pacing again.

Batman said nothing.

Selina rounded on him again. “All those times you told me to leave the life, all those times you told me I was too talented, too good a person to go to waste on a life of crime and I never once believed you. Was that the plan? Vanish for three years so being Catwoman wasn’t fun anymore? Well congratulations, because I went legit. I’m an honest-to-God millionaire now, and I’m FUCKING MISERABLE! I… I have no one to talk to except millionaires and billionaires that I would have ripped off with a smile on my face back in the day, and I die a little every time one of them expects me to laugh at their Goddamn jokes! And if it wasn’t the plan, then…”

She looked at her feet, breathing deeply in and out, fuming. She needed something with which to hurt him. To hurt him as bad as he had hurt her.

Selina got right in his face, teeth clenched and fists shaking.

“Batman came back after three years, and the first thing that occurred to me was to steal something. How does it feel, spending ten years being wrong about something? Huh, Mister Detective? I’m not who you thought I was. I’m not who you wanted me to be, I’m not who you tried to make me. I’m not saving lives, I’m not feeding the homeless. I’m… no… hero!”

Selina hoped that got him. Batman being Batman, it was hard to tell.

But something was… wrong. She didn’t know why, but she felt as though she’d thrown a grenade that went off a second sooner than she’d anticipated, maiming them both.

She turned away from him. Her anger was about to make her cry, and that was not acceptable. She took a sharp inhale of breath through her nose to pre-emptively head off a sniffle.
Batman said nothing.

“I heard you were gone in the days after The Joker died,” Selina said, her back still turned. “I didn’t believe it. I ripped off Summer Gleeson’s penthouse. Did a sloppy job, too, set off every alarm so they’d know, so you’d know it was me. I went to the roof of my building on Harlow Street, jewelry on a towel in front of me, and just waited for you to swoop down, waited for you to tell me to put it all back.”

Selina felt tears stinging her eyes.

To Hell with it.

Let ‘em fall.

He’s the one who did this to me.

Let him watch.

“You never came,” Selina said. “I waited till dawn, and you never showed.”

Batman said nothing.

“I didn’t become Catwoman because of you,” Selina said, her voice watery. “And I told myself for years that I didn’t stay Catwoman because of you. But then you were gone. And I stopped because of you. And… And I’ve seen enough of people to really hate that I let a man do this to me. I can’t forgive myself for that. I just---I can’t. I thought I was smarter than that, I thought I was better than that, and knowing I’m not is the worst feeling in the world.”

She turned to him. She let him see the pain on her face. She let him see her cry.

“You left me, Sailor… You left me because you loved him… more than you loved me.”

And Batman, bastard that he was, said nothing. Which was fine. She wasn’t interested in a single damn thing he had to say.

With the palm of her bare hand, Selina wiped the tears from her eyes. She got more volume back into her spine. She picked up her spare glove, her goggles, and the book.

She held up the book. “I’m gonna put this back now,” Selina said. “If you want to start shit and call the cops over a B & E, fine. But when I get back up here, I want you gone. This is done. We… are done.”

Selina turned his back on him and walked back to the exit. She used the Ivy Gunk to rot away the plating on the keypad and hotwire it so it sent out no signal. She used her goggles to avoid the sensors on the way down, and put the book back.

She came back up to humid evening air.

And an empty roof.

Sherman Fine was an entity in Gotham City known only back in the heyday of Batman as “The Broker.”

His business was simple. If there were any properties in the rundown parts of Gotham that any supercriminals wanted to purchase for lairs or death-traps, The Broker was the guy who sold them.
The genius here being that his operation was strictly legal. There was no law prohibiting ex-cons from buying property, and there was no law prohibiting The Broker from selling it.

After Batman skedaddled three years ago, The Broker was just a simple seller of real-estate, although a much less successful one. He still kept the engineering and building contacts he’d picked up from Jenna “The Carpenter” Duffy, just in case.

His fortunes turned a little over a year ago when he’d received an anonymous call from someone inquiring whether or not he or anyone he knew had any expertise in the field of vehicle construction. The Broker said he didn’t, but he could easily put them into contact with people who did.

For a nominal fee, of course.

The request was simple: Deep beneath Gotham City, there were a series of abandoned subway tunnels from 1898 that had to be abandoned because the walls of the tunnels were three feet too small for the trains of the time to successfully use.

The caller needed a small five car train small enough to fit.

Hundreds of feet below the city, on the very night that Selina Kyle vented her grievously hurt feelings at Batman on the rooftop of the Giordano building, The Broker’s acquaintances were putting the finishing touches on that five car train in the very tunnels that served as a base of operations for the forces of someone known only as “The Undying.”

The Undying themself stood just off the rail as they worked, as his adoring henchmen and indifferent henchwomen milled about, performing their duties.

Standing across from The Undying was Black Manta.

“He’s back,” The Undying said.

“He most certainly is,” said Black Manta.

“Which means…”

“Tomorrow.”

“Right,” The Undying said. “And if I were to… run a little errand beforehand.”

“No,” Black Manta said. “Stick to the plan.”

The Undying laughed behind their mask. “It’s not as though we don’t have a portal to anywhere in our back pocket. Time isn’t really a factor. Neither is resources. What I need to do, a pistol can solve.”

Black Manta rolled his eyes behind his helmet. “What the Hell makes you think you run this operation when you know damn well neither of us do?”

The Undying crossed their arms. “Our… absent third party needs a fresh face for this to work. And if I do say so myself, I’ve been doing an admirable job so far. I think I’ve earned a little latitude, don’t you?”

It had been so little time between when Black Manta stopped rolling his eyes and then started up again, that someone who could see behind his helmet could be forgiven for thinking he’d never stopped at all.
The Undying took a step forward. “Relax, Manta. A quick little jaunt… and then you and I can really go public.”
Chapter 14: Bad Times at the Gotham Royal(e)

You have... THREE... new messages.

Message one from... QUEEN... OLIVER.

“Hey Bruce, it’s Ollie.

“First off, just wanna let you know, I heard you were doing the whole Batman thing again, and that’s great. We all missed you. Yes, even Wally. It’ll be great having you back in the Hall and the Watchtower again.

“Now… the reason I called.

“We have one of your guys here in Star City. The Riddler. Can, uh… Can you come get him?

“I mean, we have Merlyn here, we have Count Vertigo, we have Clock King here, even though everyone thinks he’s one of yours. Still kinda pisses me off… Like, ‘Oh, Green Arrow has a cool villain, he must be one of Batman’s guys.’ I mean, have you even heard of Citizen? He’s a great bad guy, but no one ever talks about him because I’m the one who has to deal with him, and if anyone does talk about him, they’re just gonna say he flew in from your neck of the woods. It’s just… everyone’s accusing me of trying to be you anyway, and putting up with that is just two bitches and a slightly-used bastard.

“Know what? Not the point. The point is, even though no one ever hears about it, Star City has all the supervillains it can handle right now without the Gotham rejects coming in and trying to make the magic happen with someone else.

“He’s not really difficult to handle, per se. I mean yeah, he has riddles, but half of those you can get past with a Google search. Who the hell forgot to tell this guy that cell phones have internet now? Guy leaves a riddle in spray paint next to a dead body: ‘What has twelve faces and forty-two eyes, but can’t see?’ Oh, gee, that’s a tough one, let me check my phone. What’s this? A pair of dice? You mean this jagoff in lime green clothes with question marks and shit all over ‘em is gonna try and rob a casino? Does… does he even know the mob guys in this town? They’re not gonna play with this guy. Me and Roy practically had to scrape him up from the pavement in front of the casino after the Russian gangsters who run the place kicked the living shit out of him.

“And he was a death trap guy, right? I say ‘was,’ because he probably had that girl on HGTV building his traps for him before. He’s trying to do it by himself now, and carpentry really isn’t one of The Riddler’s strong suits. He kidnapped the mayor’s daughter, with the riddle ‘What part of the road do ghosts like to travel most?’ The Dead End, right? We found her in this section of the Glades called The Dead End, after a caved-in subway tunnel. She was hooked up to this timer-activated guillotine, and--hand to God, Bruce--the damn thing fell apart before we got there. She was just strapped face down to a weight bench with a bunch of wood planks and a big-ass blade all scattered around her. She was fine. The only danger she was in was of dying of boredom… And tetanus, apparently.

“Oh, and there was this one time he put all these green question mark trophies up around the city. I think he wanted me to collect them, or something. I just called the SCPD Bomb Squad to get rid of
them.

“He’s annoying… is what I’m trying to say.

“So… y’know… can you come over here and pick your trash up?

“Dinah says Hi, by the way.

“Oh, and Roy, too.

“So does Diggle, but he’s new. You haven’t met him yet.

“Anyway, see ya!”

Message two from… FOX… LUCIUS.

“Mister Wayne, let me state how happy I am that you’re back.

“I don’t want to make myself misunderstood, my work at WayneTech is very fulfilling and I don’t have a single complaint.

“But being the guy who makes gadgets for Batman? That’s just fun.

“Not to make light of the sanctity of your mission, of course, but there are so many ways that doing what I do has been rewarding over the years of your last tenure.

“I even have the prototype for a new Batmobile in the Applied Sciences hangar. I tinkered with it over the last three years as a kind of hobby.

“And… you know… Just in case.

“There are also some cowl readjustments and visor apps that I think would help quite a bit.

“So stop on by Applied Sciences whenever you can. Let’s brainstorm some new toys.”

Message three from… PRINCE… DIANA.

(Six seconds of stifled laughter are audible.)

“That’s my boy…”

On Founder’s Island, just outside of Otisburg, stands The Gotham Royal Hotel.

Standing since 1934, The Gotham Royal Hotel was luxury made brick, steel, and glass. Presidents and foreign dignitaries, when staying in Gotham City, made it their go-to destination. Thirty-seven of the Gotham Royal’s forty-four floors held a whopping two-hundred-fifty-three rooms and suites with all the modern amenities one with a thick enough pocketbook to stay there could possibly imagine. It held both a lounge and a bistro, a spa and a state-of-the-art fitness center, and even a lounge where high-end live acts performed for private occasions, everyone from Tony Bennett to Zatanna: the Mistress of Magic.

And on the twenty-second floor was the ballroom.
On this particular evening, a gathering was held by Ezekiel Lautner (“Zeke” to his friends, for which he fancied himself to have many) in said ballroom. He was old money in Gotham, the grandson of Midas Lautner, who bought up apartment buildings during the Depression when real estate was cheap. He jacked up rents, ensuring only those who hadn’t lost money in the crash of 1929 could live there, essentially gentrifying the entirety of one of Gotham City’s three main islands. When wondering why Founder’s Island is inhabitable only by the rich (and the occasional corrupt cop like Quincy Feldon), one would do well to remember old Midas Lautner.

There was no special reason for Zeke Lautner to hold this gathering; or at least none that he was willing to state publicly. He wanted to press the flesh with the ruling class, and getting them loaded and fat in a swanky hotel ballroom was the best way to do that. But the reason for wanting to press that flesh was a simple one.

Zeke Lautner wanted to run for mayor.

For Zeke Lautner was one of the few people who could easily say that they were friends with both Sal Maroni and Carmine Falcone, and they both wanted one of their guys running the show. They looked at Bludhaven, saw how easy everything was there, and decided Zeke Lautner was the guy to run against James Gordon in three years.

Even though Gordon had proven somewhat ineffective against Gotham’s dirty and corrupt cops, he had been very effective against organized crime. While he publicly railed against Tamara Hayden and the GCPD, Gordon had very quietly altered the Gotham City tax code to allow city auditors to be more aggressive and empowered with their inquiries, meaning that in the one year Gordon had been mayor, it had become the hardest it had ever been in Gotham for men like Maroni and Falcone to set up a front business with the express purpose of laundering money made from illegal activities such as drugs, gambling, and prostitution.

“Used to be, all you needed for a front was an address and a phone number,” Falcone had told Zeke. “Now I gotta hire actual plumbers for my plumbing service. What kinda bullshit is that? You know how much you gotta pay those mooks?”

But things had gone downhill a bit in the last day-and-a-half, when Quincy Feldon had not only confessed to murdering Emily Shaddis, but had named Sal Maroni as one who had paid him to do it. Maroni’s lawyers were stonewalling as best they could, but it was only a matter of time before Maroni saw the inside of a courtroom. After that, who could say what was going to happen?

Looking over the men in tuxedos and women in expensive gowns milling about the Royal Gotham ballroom, Zeke Lautner said the first thing that came to his mind.

“Goddamn Batman…”

His wife Laura, standing next to him in a puritan red velvet dress that her grandmother wouldn’t have been caught dead wearing and nursing a champagne flute, looked at him. “Did you say something, Zeke?”

Zeke rubbed his bald head and sighed. “Nothing, hon, just thinking out loud.”

He groused, and scanned the ballroom some more, and his laid his eyes on his sixteen-year-old son Michael.

And then he groused some more.

When the campaign began, Zeke hoped to whatever God that ran this shitshow of a universe that
Michael wouldn’t embarrass him.

Now Ferris Boyle’s kid? Stanley? He was a son. Going to Hudson U on a full football scholarship, even though Ferris Boyle was richer than Croesus, and could afford to pay his son’s tuition (God bless Higher Academia).

Michael, on the other hand, was a reedy little twerp with dim eyes, lank blonde hair, no real-life friends, and a penchant for that animation from Japan where girls with massive racks wearing maid outfits got screwed by every guy within platter-dropping distance. Zeke found some on Michael’s hard drive, and the sight just confused him.

*Can’t he jerk off to real porn like a normal kid?* Zeke thought at the time.

But Michael wasn’t a normal kid, much to Zeke’s dismay. Didn’t matter if the kid’s grades were good. Didn’t matter if he stayed out of trouble. Zeke Lautner had a feeling that the son-to-son line of the Lautner family, which stretched all the way back to the 1850s, would end with his son.

Because Michael was too piss-scared to talk to a girl. And even if he weren’t, Michael only showered once a week, so no girl would talk to him.

Zeke sighed. “Do we have whiskey at this thing?”

Laura rolled her eyes. “You want to get blasted now? Before you can even talk to anyone?”

“I just…”

“Who in their right mind *starts* with--”

From the anteroom beyond the ballroom, gunshots sounded, and apart from the initial screams, the entire ballroom was silent.


Michael, who had been at the bar drinking a Soder and eating a shrimp cocktail, bolted, and ran for his father in the middle of the ballroom. He had almost gotten there when the doors to the anteroom blew off their hinges.

The fifty people inside the ballroom screamed, and ran for the rear, each weaving between the batter of tables set up, at which they were eventually to have sat and dined. It dawned on Zeke that he was the one at the very front of the crowd, which was occupying the back half of the ballroom.

From the smoke of the destroyed doors were hurled two objects. They landed in wet thumps about five feet away from where Zeke was standing. Laura had started screaming (starting a chain reaction with the people behind her) before Zeke’s eyes could register what they were.

The two objects were the two severed heads of the two off-duty GCPD officers who were working security at the elevator.

And from the smoke, people emerged. Zeke, heart pounding so hard he felt himself almost rocking back and forth, counted six men and six women. All in street clothes. The men had shotguns. The women had their fists balled up.

From behind them strode a colossus in armor, six-and-a-half feet tall with an ovular helmet and two large, red eyes. He seemed to be unarmed, but that metal body suit looked thick. He didn’t *have* to be armed.
Zeke saw this guy in the news.

Black Manta.

His footsteps rumbled as he made his slow saunter toward Zeke himself.

And with every footstep, Zeke’s anger grew and grew, the shock of seeing two severed heads right in front of him instantly dissipating.

*Just what the hell city does this punk think he’s standing in?*


“Are you Ezekiel Lautner?” Black Manta asked. His deep voice boomed with digital distortion. “I need you to tell your people to make their way down to the twenty-first floor. The ballroom’s closed.”

As Michael and Laura cowered behind Zeke, he fumed. This Black Manta had come into the city Zeke was going to run, scared the friends Zeke was counting on to pay for his campaign, wanted to use the space Zeke had paid for, presumed to give Zeke an order…

…and he had the Goddamned **gall** to use Zeke’s given name. Which was something he let no one do, save his late father.

This… This was just too much.

“Just who the hell do you think you **are**?” Zeke asked, his face turning red. “You’re standing in the city that killed The Joker! And you think I’m just gonna turn around and spread ‘em for someone whose worst enemy is a guy who talks to **fish**?”

Dead… Silence. Which was broken by Laura who, hindsight would reveal, was the only sane person participating in this conversation.

“Good **God**, Zeke!” she cried. “What are you **doing**?”

More silence, until it was broken by a sound. A sound that could cause nightmares and haunt memories forever.

Black Manta was **laughing**.

And all the fury and resistance that Zeke Lautner felt within his body snuffed out in an instant, and he felt a strange internal vertigo when that fury and resistance was replaced by absolutely nothing at all.

“You’re right!” Black Manta said, still laughing. “Good… Good ol’ Arthur does talk to fish, doesn’t he?”

And if Black Manta terrified Zeke when he started laughing, that was nothing compared to when he suddenly and instantly **stopped** laughing.

He leaned into Zeke, the eyes of his helmet searing themselves into Zeke’s memory for all of time.

“Would you like to know what I do to fish?” Black Manta asked.

Faster than Zeke could even see, Black Manta’s hand shot out over Zeke’s right shoulder, and
wrapped around the throat of Michael Lautner.

Laura screamed and tried to fling herself at Black Manta, but Zeke, sense finally entering his body again, held her back.

Amidst Laura’s screams, Black Manta lifted Michael off of the ground with one hand.

“Please!” Zeke said, guilt and fear flooding through him. “Please stop! I’m sorry! I’ll--I’ll do whatever you want! Just put my boy down!”

“Sure thing,” Black Manta said as a retractable blade came out of the free hand of his armored suit. “Which piece would you like first?”

Above the city, against a cloud in the night sky, shone the Bat-Signal…

Nightwing was the first one out of the Batcave, his Nightcycle on the road that would connect to the highway leading into Gotham.

A voice in his earpiece: “Rollcall. Batman online.”

“Nightwing online,” he said.

Three other voices joined in.

“Oracle online.”

“Penny One online.”

“Renard online.”

Nightwing’s eyes narrowed behind his motorcycle helmet. “Renard?”

“Yeah,” Lucius Fox said over the earpiece. “It’s French for…”

“Ohhhhh,” Nightwing said. “Now I get it.”

With that, the roar of the Batwing sounded above him. Nightwing looked up to see Batman’s sleek, advanced plane zoom toward the city.

“We have a hostage situation,” Oracle said. “The ballroom at the Gotham Royal Hotel. It’s Black Manta and some henchmen holding fifty of the city’s best and brightest.”

“And if Black Manta is there, The Undying must be close,” said Alfred.

“That’s the hope,” Oracle said.

“Nightwing, I’ll meet you on top of the Clayton building across the street from the hotel,” Batman said.

“Hey, remember a few days ago how you said you’d defer to my judgement because I’ve been a superhero longer than you have?” Nightwing asked.

“I do,” Batman said. “But I hope you remember Rule One.”

Nightwing did remember Rule One. Back in the old days, when he had been Robin, they’d had one
mission in Metropolis, helping Superman take down The Parasite. Unlike with Commissioner Gordon, unlike with any other hero who had ever stopped in Gotham, Batman had followed Superman’s commands to the letter and without question. Afterwards, he had asked Batman why he’d been so cooperative and diligent with Superman when he’d done no such thing with literally anyone else in the time he had known him.

At which point Batman had told him Rule One.

“Don’t give orders in a city that’s not yours.”

“I remember Rule One,” Nightwing said.

“Good,” said Batman in his ear. “And if I’m ever in Bludhaven, I’ll do what you say without a second thought.”

“Sounds fair,” said Nightwing.

And it did sound fair… Until something occurred to him.

“You’re never coming to Bludhaven, are you?”

“See you in town. Batman out.”

And the line went dead.

Nightwing snorted. “Figures.”

Oracle chimed in. “Yeah, Batman’s back, alright.”

Being Batman again felt… right.

Sitting in the cockpit of the Batwing as autopilot took him to Founder’s Island, he had time to pause and reflect. This was the only time in the past two days that he hadn’t been sleeping or fighting. Both physically and…

A jolt of pain on his cheek.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!”

Batman sighed. He knew that Selina was going to be angry. He knew Selina was going to be furious. He did not know how hurt and betrayed she would be. Batman had photographic memory, and he would remember the look of heartbreak on her face as the tears fell from her eyes, making her mascara run, forever.

He had simply presented himself to her and stayed silent while she vented her emotions, after which he would do whatever she wanted him to. Selina told him to leave, so he left.

He knew that with any other person, the hurt and the sadness would be there a while, either long or short, but then they would subside, and hopefully an actual conversation could take place about what happened and about what amends could be made.

But their lives were different. He’d be around, she’d be around, and if she wanted to get into contact with him, she would. Batman was a hard person to find, but Catwoman made it look easy.

Past the hurt and sadness that Selina felt, however, was the one thing that made Selina stand out
amongst everyone else in his life.

Her pride.

There would be a day where Selina Kyle wouldn’t be sad. There would be a day that Selina wasn’t furious. But the day may never come where she forgave him for the wounds his three year absence inflicted upon her pride.

He hoped it wasn’t the case. If it wasn’t, then he could have an honest talk with her about everything. About who he was. About why he left. But… he knew it probably was the case. Selina Kyle could carry a grudge to her grave.

But this didn’t take into account that Bruce Wayne had to see Selina over at Kyle Security tomorrow afternoon to go over an impending deal with Kord Industries.

Batman sighed.

He brought in Wonder Woman to help with The Penguin knowing full well that she wanted him to become Batman again, and also knowing full well that she was capable of talking him into it. Even now, he didn’t know whether he’d done it out of calculated risk or a hope that even he wasn’t aware of. Only in hindsight did Bruce know that the only thing he wanted as much as to not be Batman again… was to be Batman again.

And now that he was, he would deal with the fallout. He was a man who was terrified of being wrong and took every precaution against every conceivable mistake. Which meant when he was wrong, and he did make a mistake, then they were worse by a factor that mathematics had yet bothered to calculate.

But being Batman again felt right.

And that was what he clung to as the Batwing entered the city.

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Batman put the Batwing in stealth mode and had it drop him off on the roof of the Clayton building, before programming the autopilot to run an eight block loop around the Gotham Royal Hotel. The detective visors in his cowl dropped over the eye-slits, and he got to scanning the heat signatures in the building.

Four minutes later, he heard the sound of Nightwing’s grapnel gun, and footsteps on the roof behind him.

“Sitrep?” Nightwing asked.

“The Gotham Royal has been evacuated from the twentieth floor down,” Batman said. “On the twenty-first floor, I have fifty hostages packed like sardines into six hotel suites, each suite with a goon holding a shotgun at the doorway. Another six goons are in the hallway itself.”

“So they know we’re coming?”

“That’s the prevailing theory.”

“What about Black Manta?”


“By himself?” Nightwing asked.
“Seems like it. He doesn’t seem like the kind who needs help. Oracle?”

“Yeah?” Oracle said in his ear.

“Do you have access to the hotel?”

“I’m in,” Oracle said. “Anything and everything. I could turn the TVs on and off if I wanted.”

“Good,” Batman said. “Patch into Nightwing’s channel. You’re with him on this one. Nightwing, take the henchmen on twenty-one. Manta’s mine.”

“Um…” Nightwing said, “Are you sure? The guy’s no joke. He can trade punches with Superman.”

Batman took a deep breath.

A jolt of pain on his cheek.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!”

Just because he understood how angry and upset Selina had been the night before didn’t mean he wasn’t left with a surplus of negative emotions that should be exorcised… constructively.

“So can I,” Batman said. “I’m going to go get my sea legs.”

Batman grappled to the building across the street from the balcony of the twenty-second story ballroom of the Gotham Royal Hotel. He ran preliminary scans of the room and saw the heat signature of Black Manta standing at the bar. He searched for vents, fuse boxes, water lines, anything that could give him an edge.

There was one body inside. That body was in six pieces.

“Penny One,” Batman said. “Is there a security feed in the ballroom?”

“There is, sir,” Alfred said in his ear.

“Patch me in.”

“Right away, sir.”

The feed from the camera in the corner of the ballroom played on his visor. He zoomed in on the body in the middle of the room, a few feet away from where Black Manta stood at the bar.

Batman didn’t need facial recognition software to know who the pile of body parts belonged to. He could tell by the hair and the eyes.

Michael Lautner. Son of Zeke Lautner. He had seen them both at Wayne Foundation functions, and now there Michael was, his head and limbs sliced from his torso, at rest in a pool of his own rapidly congealing blood.

He was only sixteen.

Batman glowered.

“What do we know about him?” Batman asked.

“Black Manta,” Alfred said in his ear. “Real name David Hyde, age thirty-eight, father killed by
Arthur Curry, aka ‘Aquaman.’ Most recognizable by his metal suit and a diving helmet with two large red eyes that provide him with heat vision abilities, as well as infrared scanning and thermal imaging.

“Thermal imaging,” Batman said. “So stealth isn’t an option?”

“Oh, it’s an option,” Lucius said in his ear. “Just not a very good one.”

“Weak points?” Batman asked.

“There are cables running from his helmet to the the pack on his back,” Alfred said. “One can only assume that the pack, in addition to propelling him through the water at blinding speed, also acts as the helmet’s power source, and that the cables themselves act as breathing tubes.”

“Destroy the tubes,” Batman said. “Sounds like a plan. Batman out.”

Batman stood on the ledge of the building, and stepped off, falling three stories into a face-down nose dive.

He opened his cape, and that pulled him into a fast glide that carried him through the window of the ballroom.

Glass shattered around him, he aimed his feet at Black Manta at the bar, only for Black Manta to nonchalantly grab both of Batman’s boots and fling him into one of the surrounding tables as though he knew he was coming. The cacophony of shattering wood and cumbusting wine glasses surrounded him as the table disintegrated onto the floor of the ballroom.

“So,” Black Manta said as Batman got to his feet, “You’re the Batman. We’ve never fought one-on-one. I aim to be educated.”

Batman, now standing, wiped some broken glass from the shoulder of his cape, never breaking eye-contact with Black Manta the entire time.

“Now *this* I like,” Black Manta said. “No powers and nothing to say.”

Batman tilted his head to the left, and the bones in his spine popped loud.

Black Manta laughed at that.

“You think you’re bad, huh?”

A small hatch in the left shoulder of Black Manta’s armor opened, and a mini-missile launcher emerged.

“Beat me if you can, Batman… and survive if I let you.”

Nightwing, on the other hand, got into the Gotham Royal through a window on the nineteenth floor. He hit the button for the elevator to take him up to twenty-one.

“Be sure to hit it when I give the line, okay babe?”

“Sure,” said Oracle in his earpiece, “but… why the sprinklers?”

“I find they’re disorienting.”
“Well, far be it from me to argue.”

“Thank you.”

During this brief lull in the conversation, Nightwing got his escrima sticks ready.

“It’s just that… There are more stealthy ways to get up there than the elevator,” Oracle said. “You know that, right?”

“I have been doing this for twelve years,” Nightwing said. “I have never once gotten the super-cool elevator entrance, when it opens and I surprise all the bad guys. I want my Oldboy fight. Please let me have my Oldboy fight…. I showed you that movie, right?”

“Yes,” Oracle said. “You’ve tortured me with Oldboy.”

“I didn’t torture you. That movie rules.”

“Yeah, the Korean version,” Oracle said. “You showed me the Spike Lee version. You were all ‘OMG, this movie’s the best!’ with your Kmart-shoppin’ ass.”

“Josh Brolin is a-- Y’know what? We’re not having this conversation right now.”

“Embrace Jesus and admit the Korean version’s better!” Oracle said.

“The elevator’s here,” Nightwing said.

“Fine,” said Oracle in a way that established that the subject was not dead.

The elevator dinged, and Nightwing got inside.

Within the spacious elevator, Nightwing stretched his arms and got two concussive Wingdings off the small of his back, shifting both escrima sticks to one hand.

The elevator went up two floors. With a ding, the doors opened.

There were twelve of them, six men and six women, all in street clothes, within the cramped hallway. The six men were standing in open hotel room doorways, aiming shotguns into the rooms at the terrified hostages that Nightwing couldn’t see. The six women were in a row in the middle of the hallway. They all looked dangerous.

He saw them, and they saw him.

Nightwing smiled. “Well hello there.”

Oracle, hearing the line, said “Hitting ’em now!”

The sprinklers above the goons switched on, dousing them with water. Some of them even looked up.

Nightwing sped into the hallway and loosed his two concussive Wingdings on each of the two walls surrounding him and the goons.

These Wingdings were designed by Lucius Fox to detonate at a frequency that would temporarily put a massive whammy on a target’s nervous system. So there would be no muscle spasms that would cause a trigger finger to contract and discharge a firearm.
Which these two Wingdings did, launching two of the henchmen into their respective hotel rooms, and two of the henchwomen into the opposite wall.

Nightwing smiled even wider as he shifted one of his escrima sticks to his free hand.

*Four down, eight to go…*

---

Batman moved from table to table as Black Manta’s mini missiles fired, each one reducing each table to hot splinters and flaming table cloth.

“I thought they said you were *smart!*” Black Manta yelled, before he fired another missile. “You know I have thermal imaging in this helmet, right? *What the hell are you hiding under tables for when I can see you?*”

Batman was just waiting for the supply of missiles in Black Manta’s armor to require a reload. From his shelter under this most recent table, he procured a small, thin magnesium grenade from off his utility belt, and readied it in his palm.

Another firing missile required Batman’s hasty retreat to the cover of another table. And Batman was running out of tables.

Black Manta tried to fire again, but Batman could hear the noise of a high grinding whine coming from the launcher, before it descended back into the shoulder of Black Manta’s armor to reload.

*Now!*

Batman got out of cover and flung the magnesium grenade at Black Manta’s chest. It exploded into a cloud of fine white dust.

That dust was magnesium particles which reflected and amplified the heat in the room, rendering Black Manta’s thermal imaging completely useless.

But only for another eight seconds.

Batman knelt down and pressed a button on his boots, activating a high-impact concussion protocol. The treads of his boots started to glow a bright blue.

He fired his grapnel gun into the bar behind Black Manta, destroying a bottle of expensive rum.

Batman retracted the line, launching him toward Black Manta at high speed. He brought up his feet, and…

**BWOMMMM-M-M-M-M-M-M-M!**

The treads of his boots, when activated, were designed to create a shockwave that would launch a target backwards, provided they collided at a high speed.

Which they did. Black Manta was launched over the bar, and into the wall of booze behind him. He crumpled to the floor in a puddle of expensive, potent…

…and *highly flammable* booze.

Batman, getting to his feet, reached into a compartment on the back of his utility belt and got a flare, which he activated, producing a piercing head of red fire.
He threw it at Black Manta, and he went up in flames.

This wasn’t going to hurt him. In fact, if Batman had to guess, he didn’t think that the man inside of that armor would even break a sweat.

But he was on fire, and for someone who was relying on thermal imaging to see, the fact that he was on fire meant that he was, essentially, blind.

Unless he took his helmet off…

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_Eight down, four to go…_

The female henchmen were considerably well-trained.

This didn’t stick out all that much to Nightwing. He’d fought well-trained women before. In fact, about half of his villains in Bludhaven were women, which was the biggest ratio of any hero he knew outside of Wonder Woman herself. Nightwing thought someone could write a paper on that.

No, that the women were well-trained didn’t surprise him. What surprised him was that the men, by contrast, were not well-trained at all.

The last one with a gun decided he was going to try to help, and aimed his shotgun at Nightwing. The problem with this was that one of his female counterparts was directly in the line of fire.

The female henchman took it upon herself to knock out her blissfully stupid male counterpart with a savage roundhouse kick to the jaw.

_Nine down, three to go…_

The female henchman turned on Nightwing and unleashed a flurry of rights and lefts that Nightwing only barely dodged. He waited for his opening, and sent a savage kick into her stomach, knocking her back. She had to grab the doorframe of one of the open hotel rooms with her right hand to balance herself, and keep from falling.

Sensing an opportunity, Nightwing put both escrima sticks in one hand, and ducked under her arm and reached for the doorknob with his free hand. With one swift motion, he slammed the door on the poor henchwoman’s fingers.

She howled in excruciating pain, and quickly fumbled for the doorknob. She opened it, and pulled back a bleeding hand that looked like a pitchfork after it had been launched into a steel wall, its prongs bent to an unnatural uselessness.

While she was preoccupied with her mangled hand, Nightwing grabbed her by the lapel of her jacket, and brought his head right into the bridge of her nose. He heard snapping cartilage. She fell back onto the soggy wet carpet, smashed nose bleeding, out like a light.

_Ten down, two to go…_

And those two henchwomen converged on him, fists raised.

With his left hand, he grabbed the top of the doorframe, and hopped, bringing his legs out so the treads of his boots hewed close to the side of the frame. It took all the strength in his legs, but he managed to suspend himself there.

He activated the electrical charge on his escrima sticks with his right hand, and quickly, yet gently,
brushed them against the jaws of the two women coming for him.

In and of itself, they barely should have felt it. But fifty-thousand volts, combined with the water still coming down from the sprinklers, meant that both henchwomen were launched into the opposite wall so hard that the plaster dented upon impact. They fell to the ground, and while they were visibly breathing, they stopped moving.

*And that’s the ballgame.*

Nightwing got down from the doorframe.

“Oracle, cut the sprinklers,” he said.

The water ceased almost immediately.

He turned around and saw eight very soggy hostages in ruined finery waiting for him.

The one near the front, a woman in her fifties in a creme silk dress that was now essentially destroyed, pointed at him and goggled.

“You… You’re…”

“Yes,” Nightwing said, smiling. “I’m Spider-Man. Can you make it to the elevator on your own, or do you need help?”

Black Manta had managed to put himself out by diving into a table and rolling around, rightfully hoping that weight and impact would stifle the flame.

But his armor was still hot, and he was still blind… And he had unwittingly presented his back to Batman.

Not one to waste an opportunity, Batman fished two explosive Batarangs from his utility belt and threw them, hoping the last three years of relative idle hadn’t dulled his aim.

It hadn’t.

The two Batarangs exploded on impact with the cables connecting his jetpack to his helmet. The lights in the helmet’s eyes cut out.

“Son of a *bitch!* ” Black Manta said, a great deal of the bass in his voice having departed, now that he didn’t have a helmet to distort it.

Black Manta yanked his helmet off, revealing a bald black man that would be considered devastatingly handsome, were it not for the three long gashes that ran vertically down his face. Wounds picked up in a fight with Aquaman.

He saw Batman, and his face didn’t even have time to contort with rage, before the Dark Knight made his move.

Batman connected with a right-cross, and then kicked him in the stomach. It wouldn’t have hurt him, but it did send him back into the wooden bar, splintering it.

Black Manta righted himself, and the blades extended from the arms of his armor. He charged at Batman, but he ducked under his wide swing, and got back to standing.
Batman readied a standard Batarang as Black Manta roared and charged him again. He threw the Batarang, and it grazed his cheek, sending blood flying. It was enough to disrupt his balance, and Batman moved out of the way as Black Manta tumbled into the bar again, driven to his knees.

From there, Batman grabbed the collar of Black Manta’s armor with his left hand. With his right, he launched a series of hard punches, seven in all, into the side of Black Manta’s face.

**WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!**

There weren’t many people under the sun who could withstand such an onslaught from a heavy gauntlet with steel-tipped knuckles. Black Manta was no exception. His eyes rolled back into his head, before they closed altogether, and he stopped moving.

Standing over the unconscious Black Manta, only one thought echoed in Batman’s head.

*This… was too easy.*


“Goons are down, and hostages are going down the elevator in shifts,” Nightwing said through the earpiece. “I’m on my way to you now in the stairwell. I take it your scuffle with Black Manta went okay?”

“He’s down.”

Nightwing laughed. “Damn, I’m glad to have you back. Well done.”

Batman didn’t say anything.

“Batman…? You there?”

He sighed. “I have reason to believe that Black Manta was sent here as a distraction,” Batman said. “Oracle, Penny One, Renard, tell me of there’s anything at all going on in the city tonight.”

Oracle chimed in. “Uh… I’m sending a stream of Channel 52 to your holoprojector on your gauntlet. You really need to see this.”

A light on Batman’s left gauntlet started glowing red. He brought it up in front of his chest, and pressed it.

A feed from Channel 52 news popped up in front of him in and eight-by-ten holographic display. Summer Gleeson was behind the anchor’s desk.

“For those of you just joining us,” Gleeson said, “a hostage situation has developed at tonight’s Guardians-Knights game at Wayne Stadium. Police Commissioner Tamara Hayden has been taken hostage by an unknown entity in black robes and a silver mask.”

The feed cut to a close-up image of the person Gleeson had just described. There were three horizontal slits near the bottom of the silver mask that Batman assumed was how that person breathed.

“That’s him.”

Batman looked up. A soaking-wet Nightwing had finally made it up here from the floor below.

Nightwing wiped some of the water from his face, and pointed at the image on the news feed.
“That’s The Undying.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 15: Interleague Play Sucks

Tonight was to be the first night of the baseball season’s interleague play in Gotham, where the National City Guardians of the NL West were to take on the Gotham City Knights of the AL East here in Wayne Stadium.

Seating capacity for Wayne Stadium is 47,715 for a baseball game, more for assorted live events such as concerts or professional wrestling pay-per-view cards that took up the field and not just the seats. And in these doldrums of mid-July, an interleague game in a month where wins and losses in baseball didn’t matter much would draw roughly five-to-six thousand paid. But tonight’s game against National City? The attendance jumped to twenty-two thousand, and the reason was simple.

Supergirl was from National City, and she was very public about her allegiance to National City’s brand-spanking new expansion team. So much so that she even showed up at some of the away games.

Sadly, Supergirl was not in attendance this evening.

Even more sadly, there was no way she could have prevented the evening’s events even if she had been in attendance.

It was the third inning, Gotham’s Barry Jacinto was on the mound, pitching against National City’s second baseman Walt Kubler. No outs, no one on, two balls and one strike. Gotham catcher, one Francis LaMonica, was cycling through pitches with finger signals, hoping to land on one that Jacinto would agree to.

Jacinto was about to agree with the slider, when… something happened on the mound right behind him.

A circle of silver, big enough for a person to walk through, formed behind an initially oblivious Barry Jacinto. It roiled and shifted behind him like boiling mercury.

The first person through the portal was Police Commissioner Tamara Hayden. The dirt from the pitcher’s mound got on her salmon pantsuit as she oriented herself, and then crawled toward the Gotham pitcher. Her hands were bound with a zip-tie.

“Please,” Hayden said as she tried to get to her feet. “You have to--”

The second person through the portal before it closed was The Undying. They were holding a nine millimeter pistol in their right hand, with which they unloaded three bullets into Barry Jacinto’s face at point blank range. He was only twenty-two.

The fifteen thousand people that were left after first pitch, who hadn’t bothered to leave after noticing Supergirl’s absence, stampeded toward the exits amidst screaming. Players on both teams ran to their respective dugouts.

The only people who went in the opposite direction were the GCPD working the game, along with the armed security officers that Wayne Stadium had hired. Twenty in all advanced on The Undying.
with guns drawn.

The Undying looked them all over. Those close to the action could have sworn they heard The Undying laughing.

The police and media choppers were circling the nearly empty stadium now, cameras rolling and guns drawn.

At which point The Undying raised their left hand to the heavens.

Nothing happened at first, but one of the security officers, one Darius Markoe, looked down and saw that, beneath his shirt, beneath his skin, beneath even his very ribcage, he was glowing green. And everyone in the assembled party not wearing a police-issued bulletproof vest looked down and noticed the same.

Roughly five seconds later, all twenty police and security officials burst into the same kind of green flame that killed Harvey Dent in Selina Kyle’s apartment. And like Harvey Dent, they all died screaming, before the flames that consumed them into nothing left behind no trace, no stain upon the field…

...save for the scent of burnt popcorn.

The police choppers kept their distance, and no other law enforcement or security personnel even came to the field.

In fact the only person with enough nerve to approach the pitcher’s mound at Wayne Stadium was Batman.

Batman, fresh from the events at the Gotham Royal Hotel (and with Nightwing staying behind to further shepard the hostages out), flew the Batwing through the populous orbit of news and police helicopters.

It hovered near second base as the cockpit opened, and Batman emerged, leaping from the plane and onto the field. He walked toward The Undying, the smell of burnt popcorn filling his lungs.

The Undying spread their arms wide, as if greeting an old friend. “Batman!”

Batman continued his advance.

“You’re… smaller than I thought,” The Undying said. “Less mythical figure, and more random guy in a goofy costume. Must be the bright lights, though. I guess not everyone sees you this clearly.”

And still, Batman kept coming.

“Things’ll get ugly if you don’t slow your roll.”

Only now did Batman stop, fifteen feet away.

The Undying sighed, his breath coming through the voice modulator in his mask like a blast of static.

“This is what sucks about interleague play,” The Undying said. “A bunch of security guards die, the police commissioner gets kidnapped, and the World Series just feels less special.”


“Now why would I do that?” The Undying asked. “You need to know what the stakes are. Not
through a TV screen, but with your own eyes.”

Hayden closed her eyes tight. “Oh, Jesus…”

“What do you want?” Batman asked.

“What’s mine,” The Undying said. “What you took from me.”

“So I know you,” Batman said. “So you’re a two-bit thug I put in Blackgate or Arkham.”

The Undying laughed.

“You never put me away,” The Undying said. “And considering how splashy I’ve been in such a short amount of time, I’d like to flatter myself that I’m more of a four-bit thug.”

After this, they just stared at each other for a moment.

“Damn,” The Undying said. “I can hear the grinding in your head from all the way over here. Going through that internal rolodex of bad guys you slapped the hell out of. Keep digging, Dark Knight. You’ll never find me. Not until I want to be found. Which… shouldn’t be too long from now, relatively speaking.”

“What’s the point of all this?” Batman asked.

“To make you look a bitch in public,” The Undying said. “Superheroes in the world are a lot like Tinkerbell from *Peter Pan*. They thrive on faith. A minute or so from now, a lot fewer people are going to clap if they believe.”

The Undying holstered his pistol in the strip of black cloth that served as a belt for his robes.

“I haven’t been wearing a mask nearly as long as you have,” The Undying said, “but there’s one thing I’ve learned, and it’s a thing that I feel has brought us closer together.”

The Undying took a step back.

“Everything you love in this life… has to burn.”

And The Undying pointed to Tamara Hayden.

Batman knew what was going to happen next.

He had the capsule in his hand from the jump. He threw it at Tamara Hayden, and instantaneously, she was enveloped in an ever-expanding cloud of flame-retardant foam. He threw it right before he saw the green glow begin to bloom beneath her shirt.

And Batman began his mad dash towards The Undying.

Before he could get there, another silver portal behind them opened, and The Undying stepped through.

The portal closed as Batman made it to the pitcher’s mound.

He stopped, catching his breath, when the smell of burning popcorn renewed itself within his nostrils.

Batman didn’t expect to save Police Commissioner Hayden from whatever power The Undying had
to incinerate people from the inside, but he figured it was worth a shot.

But smoke began to emit from the top of the bubble of flame-retardant foam. That green, foul-smelling fire was eating through something that no kind of flame whatsoever was supposed to escape.

Lucius Fox had tested that foam on every kind of fire he could think of. Anything on the periodic table of elements that could come alight, that foam could stop.

But staring at the pillar of smoke, Batman knew what he was up against, and it filled him with dread.

The portals, the incinerations, they weren’t some high-tech superweapon that he and the team needed to figure out.

They were magic…

Bruce, Dick, Barbara, and Alfred gathered around the island in the kitchen the next morning. Dick, Barbara, and Alfred didn’t sleep well. Bruce didn’t sleep at all.

“Magic,” Dick said, and rubbed his face. After he took a deep breath, he continued.

“Do you know how Goddamned hard it is to do detective work in a world with metahumans and superpowers and magic flying around?” Dick asked.

“Yes,” Bruce said, adjusting his tie.

“Let him vent,” said Barbara.

“We have laws,” Dick said. “Laws of physics. Laws of physics we need to do our jobs. You can’t alibi someone who can teleport fifty miles away, you can’t assign a motive to someone who was under mind control, and you can’t prosecute a demonic possession. Can you believe that shit? No legislation has ever been placed on demonic possession?”

“Are you done?” Barbara asked.

“No,” Dick said. “The Undying said it themself. ‘Intrigue makes a body predictable.’ The only progress on this we’ll ever make on this is whatever progress The Undying lets us make. We’re being funneled down a maze, and I--for the moment, I feel helpless. The moment will pass, but the moment is here, and I have to deal with it, so…”

After a brief pause, Barbara decided to speak up.

“I hate to, uh, make the moment longer, but…”

Alfred looked at her. “What is it, Miss Gordon?”

Barbara picked up her phone. “The hotel and the stadium weren’t all The Undying was up to last night,” Barbara said. “According to the Gotham Gazette, before all of that went down, Hamilton Hill Jr. was shot dead in his high-rise apartment.”

“What makes you believe that’s The Undying?” Bruce asked.

“The prints found on the gun,” Barbara said. “I looked in on the GCPD file on the case. The department will never find out who shot Hamilton Hill Jr. without help.”
“And why is that?” Alfred asked.

“Because the GCPD deletes their computer files on prints belonging to people dead longer than a year. After that, they go to the paper records for cold cases. The prints on the gun that killed Hamilton Hill Jr... belong to Hamilton Hill Sr.”

“So this whole thing starts with a frozen woman shooting at me from a Bludhaven rooftop, and now we have an ex-mayor capping his kid after being dead for two years,” Dick said. “Goddamn magic... Jesus, that Nora Fries thing feels like it happened a year ago.”

“At the stadium,” Bruce said, “The Undying said they knew me, but I never put them away. Barbara, could you look into unsuccessful prosecutions involving Batman?”

“Yeah,” Barbara said.

“Thank you,” said Bruce. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to leave.”

Bruce turned to walk away.

“Big day at work?” Dick asked.

Bruce stopped. “I’m heading over to Kyle Security, Selina wants me to help her with the Kord Industries account.”

“I’m sorry,” Barbara said, “but… does Selina know Batman’s back?”

“Yes.”

“And... has Batman had a talk with Selina?”

“Yes.”

“How’d it go?”

Bruce was quiet for a spell before he finally said “Not well.”

David Hyde was booked and processed the night he murdered Michael Lautner and two security guards at the Gotham Royal Hotel.

Protocol was different now, as Batman hadn’t been seen in three years before a couple of nights ago. The metahuman and supervillain lock-up in Gotham’s central precinct had been converted back into normal cells, so the only place that could hold Hyde until his arraignment was Blackgate Penitentiary.

Blackgate was where he was sent the following morning, and Blackgate was where his helmet and armor were impounded.

Walking down the corridor of G Block in Blackgate, corrections officers with drawn shotguns flanking him. Hyde glared at each cell on either side of him with the soulless brown eyes in his newly swollen face.

He’d done time before. He’d even worked a spell on Amanda Waller’s juvenile little suicide squads, before he set off an EMP charge right next to his head to deactivate the explosive she’d put in his brain, and then walked off the job.
In every cell block he’d been in since he became Black Manta, he didn’t get the standard greeting from the other inmates. There were no hoots and hollers and taunts about new fish.

These hardened criminals in these hellhole prisons all averted their eyes from him in fear.

And Blackgate was no different.

His paper prison slippers shuffling on the floor, the guards escorted Hyde down to the last cell on the right side of G Block. The guard on the left opened the door, inspected the cell, exited the cell, and told Hyde to walk in. They closed the cell door behind him.

Hyde surveyed his new kingdom: a cot sticking out of the side of the brick wall. A toilet in the rear of the cell standing small and cowardly, like a hyena trying to get scraps with no back up. The sink had flies in it. The entire cell smelled like literal shit.

He sat down on the cot, straightened the blazing orange legs of his prison jumpsuit out over his knees, and felt the side of his face that Batman had swollen with his fist the night before.

Black Manta wasn’t done with The Bat. Not yet by a long shot.

Hyde looked into the cell across the hall and saw a man sitting there, making a show about how he wasn’t making a show of not making eye-contact. He had the look of ex-high school athlete going to pot, pecs and abs slowly turning to Jell-O. His brown hair was in a crew-cut, and if he had a little more testosterone in him, then maybe he could grow one of those little dick-tickler mustaches that cops the world over just loved.

Because that’s who this guy was.

“Hey,” Hyde said.

The guy, the cop, in the opposite cell said nothing.

“Hey,” Hyde said again. “Don’t I know you?”

The guy still said nothing.

“Yeah,” Hyde said. “I do. You’re that Gotham cop who murdered that woman in broad daylight. Piggy like you doesn’t rate for solitary? Please tell me you know what they do to cops in genpop in places like this.”

Only now did the cop, Quincy Feldon, look over at Hyde.

“You know what Sal Maroni does to people who snitch on the outside? You know what Batman does to guys like me? Even across the way from Black Manta, I’m safer in here.”

A smile curled its way across David Hyde’s lips. The sight could have sent lesser people running for crucifixes and holy water.

“That hurts my feelings,” Hyde said. “You know that, right?”

A new and powerful supervillain had quite literally come from nowhere to murder Gotham City’s Police Commissioner, and Gotham City’s best hope at a Cy Young award this year. They could marshal the will of someone as dangerous and as bloodthirsty as Black Manta. They touched the untouchable. They came to contest Batman himself.
Gotham City was in the grip of fear.

But Gotham City still had to go to work.

Bruce Wayne had seen this countless times during his original tenure as Batman, and now, three years later, back in the cowl, the sight still nagged at his soul. A city of nine-point-two million people trying its hardest to pretend that nothing was wrong while everything was wrong. It was as though someone had turned the volume down from a ten to that netherrealm between three and four. People who laughed suddenly silenced themselves. Breakdancers on street corners, plying their skills for spare coins, seemed to work at half speed, as though moving to music were shameful with all that thick fear in the air.

Alfred dropped Bruce off in front of the Delacourt building. Bruce walked into the lobby, and took the elevator up to forty-five, where Kyle Security was located.

Sitting in the empty boardroom, waiting for Selina to get done with other business, Bruce checked his phone for news updates.

Captain Troy Clotworthy had been appointed Police Commissioner in an impromptu vote by the Gotham City Fraternal Order of Police this afternoon. He was to address the city in a televised address tonight at the Central precinct.

The door to the boardroom opened.

A blonde girl who didn’t look a day over seventeen, sticking out in a vintage Janis Joplin t-shirt and blue jeans while everyone else on the floor was in businesswear, walked in with a pile of file folders in her arms. She was still looking down at them as she walked towards Bruce at the boardroom table.

“Miss Kyle is only going to be a few more minutes,” the blonde girl said. “She’s in R&D right now, ironing out a few…”

The blonde girl stopped moving and stopped walking. She had finally seen Bruce, and her blue eyes were as big as hubcaps.

“Holy shit, you’re Bruce Wayne,” she said.

Bruce smiled. “They keep telling me that. And you are?”

“Ste-uh… Stephanie. Stephanie Brown.”

Stephanie Brown put the folders on the table in front of Bruce, and offered her hand. Bruce shook it.

“Summer intern?” Bruce asked. “You look a little on the green side.”

“Yes,” Stephanie said. “I want to work with tech, and Kyle Security is the only place I could find that takes high school students.”

Bruce furrowed his brow. “WayneTech doesn’t?”

“Nope,” Stephanie said.

“Hm,” Bruce said as Selina walked through the door. “I should talk to HR about that.”

A broad smile appeared on Stephanie Brown’s face.
“Bruce,” Selina said as she came to the table, “if you poach my intern, I’ll take back half the good things I said about you. Thank you, Stephanie. You may go now.”

Stephanie nodded, and said “Sure thing,” before she walked out of the room with her head down.

“She’s certainly enthusiastic,” Bruce said.

Selina sighed and sat down next to Bruce at the table. “I know her dad.”

“Who’s her dad?”


Bruce was very aware of Cluemaster, but decided to play dumb.

“Isn’t that kinda like The Riddler?” Bruce asked.

“The Riddler leaves riddles,” Selina said. “Cluemaster leaves clues. Being as Arthur Brown’s in Blackgate and Edward Nygma’s out and about in Star City, you can guess which approach was more successful.”

“I see.”

Selina sighed again. “Artie was a piece of shit, though. I was in costume for a year when him, me, and Killer Croc tried to knock off the GothCorp payroll. When we planned the job, he kept talking about his bratty little daughter, and how he locked her in a closet when she talked too loud. I botched that job on purpose. Watching the cops cuff that asshole was one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“I see,” Bruce said again.

“So now, ten years later, that bratty daughter shows up and applies for a paid internship. I ask her how she’s doing, and she says she lives with her mom, who’s… I don’t even know what. All they eat are waffles, because that’s all either of them know how to make. I told the food court downstairs, she can have whatever she wants free of charge, so long as there’s a vegetable in it.”

Bruce smiled and said “That’s… That’s pretty altruistic of you.”

It was at this point that Bruce mentally tensed. He needed to stay on his toes. He didn’t feel that either of them were ready for the big reveal of his secret identity, but, as it was from the beginning, Bruce Wayne couldn’t bring himself to lie to Selina Kyle.

“What happened?” Bruce asked.

Selina tried to soften her expression, but there was still a glint in her eyes.

“No,” she said. “It’s nothing. Let’s just, uh…”

She picked up one of the file folders and opened it, before closing it and putting it back down again.

“Bruce, I did the Catwoman thing a couple of nights ago.”

It was at this point that Bruce mentally tensed. He needed to stay on his toes. He didn’t feel that either of them were ready for the big reveal of his secret identity, but, as it was from the beginning, Bruce Wayne couldn’t bring himself to lie to Selina Kyle.
“Batman and I talked,” Selina said. “I talked, rather… I yelled… I yelled and slapped him in his smug-ass face, and he deserved it, too.”

Bruce nodded. His pain wasn’t important right now. It would still be here after she vented hers.

“The damnedest thing is, he kept telling me while I was Catwoman how I was a good person underneath it all, and how I was going to waste on a life of crime. He told me I had so much to offer, before he vanished for three years without saying goodbye. And… And I’m sorry Bruce, but you telling me I’m altruistic rubs me the wrong way.”

Just because Bruce wanted Selina to let it out didn’t mean that he couldn’t put up a fight in his own small “Bruce Wayne” way. Knowing Selina as well as he did, he knew she’d be more responsive that way.

“I’m sorry I pointed out how you were feeding a disadvantaged teenage girl vegetables,” Bruce said flatly. “It’ll never happen again.”

Bruce had seen the angry smile that Selina had on her face before. It was almost always followed up with a “You know what?”

“You know what?” Selina asked, visibly trying to collect her thoughts from off the floor. “I… You… You really think I have the daughter of one of my old acquaintances here out of the kindness of my heart? If you do, then… then buddy…”

“The well-balanced diet of a growing young woman really does fit in to your diabolical master plan,” Bruce said, again flatly. “Shocking that I didn’t see it before.”

“It’s because Stephanie is Cluemaster’s daughter that I’m trying to be so nice. Because if you’re not, rich people like us are the first people they come after when they become supervillains. And now that Batman’s back, the chance of that happening is even bigger. For the price of a few vegetables and an intern’s salary, I get to keep my millions.”

It was at this point that Bruce wondered why he exerted so much effort being honest with Selina when she wasn’t even honest with herself.

She’s lying, he thought. Badly. But she thinks if she keeps saying things like this, then maybe they’ll come true.

“Are you seriously telling me Stephanie Brown is a candidate for supervillainy?” Bruce asked.

“Was Pamela Isley? Was Harleen Quinzel? Was Victor Fries?” Selina almost started laughing. “Was… was I? Everyone has someone who screwed them over, and if you can manage not to be the one, then the crazy people just might pass you by on the way to someone else. Being a CEO teaches me things, one of which is how to make a problem someone else’s.”

Selina leaned into Bruce in her chair, her vivid green eyes holding him in judgement.

“What’s it gonna take for people--for men--to stop telling me what I am? To stop telling me that I’m an angel with a shitty paint-job? To project what they want me to be onto me without my permission? If I really had a heart of gold, what makes people think I wouldn’t have sold it by now? I was a thief, Bruce. And I’ve gone from robbing the bank to owning it. All that’s changed are the clothes.”

She leaned back again. “I’m not a good person.”
Bruce saw the glint in her eyes finally dull. It was as though she kept telling herself this in every way, except for out loud, and now that she had, the notion now etched itself into eternity. She said it, and now it was true.

“I’m not…” she said again, softly.

What Bruce thought next was thought without derision or sarcasm.

*I’m not the only one here who needs therapy.*

Selina seemed to snap herself out of it, or at least tried to play it off. “And besides, I’m a wealthy CEO,” she said. “What wealthy CEO isn’t dirty just on general principle?”

Bruce calmly raised his hand. Selina looked at him and sighed.

“Yeah, but… You’re weird though.”

“Gee, thanks,” Bruce said.

“No, I mean it,” Selina said. “Is it… Is it true one time you hired a homeless person off the street? Just like that?”

It was as though the last salvo from Selina’s mouth directed at both of them had been forgotten, even though it wasn’t. Bruce knew Selina didn’t like apologizing, particularly when she knew she needed to. So Bruce opted to be nice and let her skip it.

“It wasn’t just the one time,” Bruce said. “I have a drive every November, hire as many as we can for a living wage. Custodial, service, wherever they can fit. It gets cold here in the winter, I can’t leave them out there like that.”

“And there are no tax write-offs for that?”

“None that I know of. It’s not like it’s a charitable donation. I’m hiring people to perform a service at a competitive salary.”

“Yeah, but why, though?” Selina asked.

Bruce shifted in his seat. “Gotham City is my home. I look after the people in my home.”

“Alright then,” Selina said. “So you’re apparently the nicest guy on Earth, you’re freaky NASA smart, you’re richer than both Jesus and at least eight apostles, and you’re fine as hell… And don’t look at me like that, you know it’s true.”

“I’m the nicest guy from Earth,” Bruce said. “I’m pretty sure Superman has me beat. But thanks. This time without the sarcasm.”

“You’re welcome,” Selina said. “But the big mystery here is… Why are you alone?”

Bruce just blinked.

“Boyfriend, girlfriend, other? I had a theory that you had this wild, kinky dark side that would make your stock go down, but I can smell that on people, and you don’t match. I guess being Ace is an option, but if that’s true, you found out late in life. ‘Cause up until a couple of years ago, you were screwing anything that moved.”

Which wasn’t true. He hadn’t slept with anyone in eight years. Not since… He didn’t want to think
about that. He just said nothing.

“So what is it Bruce?” Selina asked. “Tell me about yourself. And I’m an ex-supervillain, so it’s not like I can judge you.”

Bruce folded his arms.

“I…”

...am Batman.

“…have secrets.”

Whatever self-loathing Selina Kyle had displayed minutes before was completely gone now. Selina looked at him like… well… like she was a cat and he was a mouse.

“Ooooh,” Selina said, smile stretched across her lips, a new kind of fire in her eyes. “Seeeeecrets. I mean, I’d guess you were Batman, but didn’t he save your life one time?”

After his heart started beating again, Bruce remembered what she was referring to.

Deadshot had been hired by Carmine Falcone to kill Bruce Wayne at the Gotham City Stock Exchange. What everyone saw during the assassination attempt was Batman swooping in at the last possible instant to deflect the bullet.

What had really happened was that Bruce had found out about Falcone’s plot, and had asked someone else to don the Batsuit in his stead to foil the attempt and apprehend Deadshot.

That someone in question? Clark Kent. The bullet just bounced right off of him.

But, being that Bruce refused to lie to Selina, and wasn’t… ready… to reveal himself to Selina, Bruce decided to coat the truth in charm.

He smiled, raised his eyebrows, and said “That is what the papers said.”

“Right,” Selina said. “So barring you being a masked vigilante, what on Earth could you have to hide?”

Bruce needed something that was honest. And the truth was right there.

He took a deep breath. He closed his eyes slowly, and opened them again.

“The last time a woman was… serious… about me in a conventional way… It, uh… It ended badly. And ever since then, I’ve been asking myself what it was about me that I can change so that it never happens again…. Because if I can be bent in that particular way, then… people could… It would… It would just be bad.”

Selina leaned in and squinted at him as though he were a museum exhibit.

“Hmmm,” she said. “And who is this mystery lady?”

“I don’t kiss and tell,” Bruce said.

Selina would have no idea who she was.

Catwoman, on the other hand, could at least guess...
Dick and Barbara were down in the Batcave. As Barbara toiled at the Batcomputer, she left her laptop up and streaming Channel 52 on the desk. It was the midday news show now, and as Dick Grayson clobbered the hell out of a practice dummy with his bare hands, Summer Gleeson explained to an inquiring populace what the latest movings and shakings might mean for the future of Gotham City.

“Following the murder of Police Commissioner Tamara Hayden last night at the hands of of a new supervillain known only as ‘The Undying…”’

“Goddamn magic,” Dick said to himself as he drove an elbow into the bridge of the plastic dummy’s nose.

“…Gotham City’s Police Union has voted to install Captain Troy Clotworthy as the new head of the GCPD. Commissioner Clotworthy is scheduled to speak in a televised press conference tonight at Gotham’s central precinct, and WNTJ will carry those remarks live. When reached for a preliminary statement, Commissioner Clotworthy said the following:”

A graphic of Commissioner Troy Clotworthy, a man who appeared as though he had matured physically past the point of cramming high school chess club members into their own lockers, but not psychologically, popped up on screen along with text of his remarks. Summer Gleeson read them aloud.

“‘The stunning failure of Batman to save Commissioner Hayden, along with the appearance of a new supercriminal, heralds a dark time for Gotham that we will only pull through together. I will elaborate the GCPD’s plans for the future at tonight’s event.’”

Dick his the training dummy so hard that its neck bent.

“Could you turn that shit off, please?”

Barbara absent-mindedly reached out her hand and closed the laptop.

Dick wiped the sweat from his brow with his gray tank top, and walked over to Barbara.

“‘Failure of Batman to save the Commissioner,’” Dick said with a sour face. “They had twenty security and police officers on that field, and they couldn’t save her either.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Barbara said. Dick knew she wasn’t listening, but he had to vent anyway.

“She caught fire from the inside of her ribcage! And there is no way to put the fire out! They wouldn’t have done any better even under the best of circumstances!”

“Mmm-Hmmm.”

“And you know--you just know --that the department is going to use this as an excuse to get even dirtier. They’re going to use a threat they can’t fight as a reason crack down on anyone who looks suspicious. Anyone to please the mob bosses who’ve paid them off. It happened in Bludhaven, and I’ve spent the last--”

“This is weird,” Barbara said, having perked up at something on the screen of the Batcomputer.

Dick immediately parted from his tangent. He put his hand on Barbara’s shoulder.

“What is it?”
Barbara hit a few buttons on the keyboard, and brought up six mugshots of six men.

“These are the mugshots of Black Manta’s henchmen that you took out at the Royal Gotham last night,” Barbara said. “These six are all ex-cons. Stretches for armed robbery over the past ten years, but mostly henching. You’ve got a Two-Face guy here, two Joker guys, and even a Killer Moth stooge.”

“I didn’t know Killer Moth had henchmen.”

“Just a few over the years,” Barbara said, “but still. These six are known quantities, two-bit though they are. And they’re all… men.”

“Uh-huh,” said Dick. “What about the female henchmen?”

“Well,” Barbara said, bringing up the mugshots of the six henchwomen from last night, “that’s the weird part. They’re… they’re ghosts.”

“None of them have priors?”

“Not only no priors,” Barbara said, “but no matching prints in any investigations. No dental matches. They didn’t even have any ID on them. GCPD is sitting on six multiple time losers… and six Jane Does.”

Dick was still staring at the mugshots of the six henchwomen when his phone on the desk started vibrating.

“Is that your real phone, or…”

“No,” Dick said. “It’s the work phone.”

He walked over and picked it up, looking at the screen.

“It’s Administrator Pender,” Dick said. “From Arkham. The Batcave still has scramblers, right?”

“Yup,” Barbara said. “No traces.”

Dick nodded, and answered.

“Hello?”

“Nightwing?” Administrator Pender asked.

“Yeah,” Dick said. “What is it?”

“I’m afraid I have no one else to turn to in this situation,” Administrator Pender said.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Basil Karlo,” Administrator Pender said. “He’s… He’s escaped.”

Dick blinked. “Clayface escaped?”

Barbara’s eyes went wide behind him.

“I really don’t like using their former nicknames in conversation,” Administrator Pender said.

“And you didn’t call the police?”
“Well, I figured that you were better equipped to handle this situation, and... the city would use this as an excuse to cut Arkham’s funding.”

“That’s... surprisingly crooked of you,” Dick said. “How did it happen?”

“We don’t know,” Administrator Pender said. “Basil usually blends into the wall to play jokes on the orderlies, but we sent one in this morning, and-- *Ugh!*”

“What is it?” Dick asked.

“It’s just... I gave specific orders for the staff here not to bring their food into the Therapy Block, and now it smells like one of them brought their burnt microwave popcorn in from the break room.”

Dick could feel the color draining from his face.

“Lock... Down... Arkham... *Now!*”

“I... What is it?”

“Clayface didn’t escape,” Dick said. “Clayface is dead.”

Kasha led her retinue, two men and one woman, into the Delacourt building. They walked through the sparsely populated food court and to the elevator at the rear. Once the elevator came down, all four stepped in.

She hit the button for the forty-fifth floor.

“The second team is in place on the roof,” Kasha said. “The target is Selina Kyle. Kill anyone who stands in our way.”

Kasha rolled her eyes as one of the men in her retinue started giggling. She saw him take a nine millimeter pistol out of his leather jacket as he said:

“For The Undying...”

Chapter End Notes

Hi all. GeneralIrritation, here.

I have pumped out over eighty-thousand words since late November. This, combined with the fact that I may need to add a chapter (yes, this monster could get even longer), and the necessity to further map out a couple of the most pressing upcoming chapters means one thing.

I'm gonna take a few days off.

I hate to leave you with Chapter 15's cliffhangers while Chapter 16 finally gets around to answering some of the myriad questions the story has raised, but a dog-tired writer is no writer at all.

The normal Monday and Thursday schedule will resume on Monday, January 28, 2019.
Till then, pass the story around, recommend it to your friends. And if you don't like the story, recommend it to your enemies. I don't give a shit.

See you in a few. Have fun, and be safe.
Chapter 16: NOT TODAY, SHIT-FER-BRAINS!

The skies above Arkham Island played the stage for a vanguard of massive gray clouds beginning their slow loom towards Gotham proper. If it wasn’t going to rain tonight, it was going to rain tomorrow.

Nightwing checked his phone from the Nightcycle outside the building that housed the Therapy Block.

Oracle hadn’t texted him back with any results of the search Bruce ordered. The one that looked into failed prosecutions involving Batman.

And before he left Wayne Manor, Nightwing texted Zatanna. The Undying had magic, and Nightwing reckoned they needed someone on their side with the same set of skills. She hadn’t texted back.

And he got a text from the unprotected line from his boss at Hogan’s Alley in Bludhaven. Dick had been fired from his job.

Nightwing put the phone into a small compartment on the Nightcycle, and locked it. He finally got off of the vehicle when he saw Administrator Pender walking toward him from the admissions building, Julius the orderly in tow. All three entered the Therapy Block.

In the cargo elevator down, Administrator Pender asked “So I smell burning popcorn, and that means Basil Karlo is dead? How does that work?”

“The smell of burning popcorn accompanies victims of The Undying,” Nightwing said.

Administrator Pender’s eyes almost became bigger than her glasses. “The Undying? The one who killed the police commissioner and that pitcher?”

Nightwing nodded. “And Two-Face. He was the first.”

“The Undying killed Harvey Dent?”

Nightwing nodded again. “And Hamilton Hill’s son, but that story got buried.”

Administrator Pender looked away from Nightwing and glared at the elevator door. “What is it about Batman that drives people to such extraordinary lengths?”

“The Undying’s been making moves since before Batman returned.”

“And would The Undying have made any moves at all if Batman weren’t here to begin with? A man dresses up as a bat, and the mental health professionals of Gotham City have spent almost a decade-and-a-half dealing with the fallout.”

Nightwing folded his arms. Administrator Pender noticed this.

“I take it you don’t agree with my assessment? That Batman’s responsible for all this?”

“What I know,” Nightwing said, “is that at least one superhero has been protecting the earth since World War II. Even longer if you count how long the Green Lantern Corps has been operating. And
the rise of superheroes fifteen years ago was exactly that. A rise. It wasn’t a trend set by one person that everybody else followed. Someone with a gimmick and a silly costume was going to make a play for Gotham eventually, and blood was going to run in the streets. If Batman wasn’t here, we would have had to create him out of whole cloth. And trust me, the results wouldn’t have been nearly as successful.”

“So you think this was inevitable?” Administrator Pender asked, the reproach having been removed from her voice.

“I call it ‘The Douchebag Singularity,’” Nightwing said, “only instead of man communing with machine, it’s man communing with spandex and animal motifs.”

“If I write a paper on that, can I quote you?”

“Sure,” he said. “‘Nightwing’ is just the one word. No hyphen.”

The elevator stopped at the basement. The three walked the narrow corridor to Inter-Patient Therapy. Administrator Pender worked the keypad and let them all inside.

Inter-Patient Therapy was empty. Poison Ivy, Harley Quinn, Mad Hatter, and Scarecrow had all been moved elsewhere in the facility.

Nightwing stepped into the center of the cell block, the fall of his boots echoing in the empty room.

“Open his cell,” Nightwing said.

Administrator Pender got her phone out and tapped the screen a few times. The border of brick surrounding Clayface’s former cell retracted from the plexiglass front, and the plexiglass itself slid into the ceiling. The cell was open.

Nightwing stepped inside.

He got the scanner out of his boot and ran a scan. There were four gasses the scanner couldn’t identify… and silicate compounds laced with human DNA.

“What?”

She chimed in through the earpiece. “Yeah?”

“I know the answer to what I’m about to ask, but could you do a match on the DNA I just scanned?”


Nightwing sighed. Not because Clayface held any particular claim in the heart of Dick Grayson, no. It was because something was bothering him. He couldn’t quite say what.

He ran the scanner over the rest of the cell and found nothing.

“Administrator Pender?” Nightwing asked.

“Yes?”

“Could you close the cell, please?”
Administrator Pender tapped the screen on her phone a few more times. The plexiglass slid down, and Nightwing could hear the bricks locking back in place.

And that’s when he saw it.

A handprint on the glass inside the cell. It was smeared, and it was old, but…”

“Oracle?”

“Yeah, hon?”

“I have a very smudgy handprint here that I’m about to send you,” Nightwing said. “Can you reconstruct it?”

“So you just forgot who you were talking to,” Oracle said. “It’s like that, huh?”

Nightwing smiled, and ran the scanner over the handprint. “Done,” he said.

“Alright,” Oracle said as the sound of fingers hitting keys was audible. “Let’s seen what we got here.”

The tapping continued. “Running reconstruction now… And now for the match… Holy shit.”

“What is it?”

“Holy shit!”

“Oracle,” Nightwing said, “What is it?”

“It’s… It’s Nora Fries! Again!”

Nightwing blinked. And it all fell into place.

“If you didn’t see that nameplate,” Clayface had said the last time Nightwing was here, “I would have had you.”

To which Nightwing had replied:

“Yeah, probably. I didn’t know you could do sweat.”

Nightwing reckoned that if it were possible to provide a reasonable facsimile of perspiration, then it was more than possible that Clayface could provide an identical handprint.

Oh, Clayface wouldn’t know the print by heart, of course. Someone outside of the cell would have had to show them. And to verify, Clayface would have had to put the identical hand on the plexiglass of the cell, leaving the handprint that Nightwing had just scanned.

“It was Clayface,” Nightwing said.

“What?” Oracle asked.

“Nora Fries wasn’t the one who shot at me from that roof in Bludhaven. It was Clayface.”

“But how the hell did Clayface get out of his cell? How--How did he get back in?”

“The same way Harvey Dent got into Selina Kyle’s bedroom without showing up on camera or using the thumbprint scanner on the apartment door. The same way The Undying showed up on the
pitcher’s mound of Wayne Stadium.”

And now it was Oracle’s turn to repeat Dick Grayson’ morning refrain.

“Goddamn magic…”

Selina and Bruce were looking over the Kord files when the sounds of gunshots and screams were heard beyond the boardroom door.

Miss Kyle, for her part, did not hesitate.

“Get the table up,” she said to Bruce. “Now!”

Selina and Bruce both leapt out of their seats as Stephanie Brown and Selina’s assistant Taffy Jones came through the office door. As they did, Selina saw the lights into the main office area turn red, which meant that the next time the boardroom door closed, it would lock, and wouldn’t be accessible from the outside without a security code, which would need to be entered at a keypad above the handle.

*At least Taffy and Steph were smart enough to get in here first like they were supposed to, Selina thought. Someone probably panicked and tripped the security measures early.*

Taffy had tears in her eyes.

“George’s head,” Taffy said with a watery voice. “It just… It just…”

Stephanie, who had a fresh layer of sweat on her brow, put her hands on Taffy’s shoulders. “Just breathe, okay?”

Both Selina and Bruce strained, but they got the table up on its side, knocking some of the chairs away in the process, and scattering all of the Kord Industry papers onto the floor.

“No wonder it’s so heavy,” Bruce said. “Is that steel plating under here?”

“Three inches,” Selina said. “For just such an occasion. Now all of you get behind this table.”

As Stephanie and Taffy hustled around to the other side of the overturned table, Bruce seemed as though he was about to protest.

“Bruce,” Selina said. “You’re sweet, but leave this to the professionals, alright?”

He squinted at her a bit, as though she didn’t know what she was missing by refusing to drag a spoiled rich boy into an active shooter situation, but Bruce just said “Fine.”

He got behind the table with Taffy and Stephanie. Selina looked down at what she was wearing. A blue business jacket and a white blouse, with a blue miniskirt and flats. She took her jacket off, then she grabbed the slit on the right side of her miniskirt and gave a yard yank. With a ripping noise, the slit that normally went halfway up her thigh now came nearly to her waist.

*No time for modesty, Selina thought. If I’m gonna kick people, my thighs need to move.*

Stephanie looked at her. “There are four of them,” she said. “They taught us to count the people with guns in active shooter drills at school.”

What Selina wanted to say was “*Jesus H-Bomb Christ, kids have shooter drills in school, now?*”
But what Selina actually said was “Thanks, Steph.”

She quietly made her way to the door. Selina was five feet away when another gunshot sounded from the office along with a fresh chorus of screams. Taffy screamed from behind the table until it was muffled, presumably by Stephanie.

Selina was no stranger to gunshots. If she had to guess, that shot was from the maze of cubicles just outside the office.

As she slowly and quietly opened the door, Selina kicked off her shoes.

The smell of cordite and fear filled Kasha’s nostrils.

The foolish man in her retinue, whose name she did not even bother to remember, shot a man in the head as soon as they stepped off of the elevator, evacuating his skull and brains all over the redhead woman behind him. He didn’t even bother to get the lay of the floor before he let his gun do the talking for him.

The idiot...

Kasha could not hear the footsteps of Fabrizza or the two men with guns accompanying them over the screams and scattering footsteps of Selina Kyle’s employees. Kasha looked down and saw that the white carpet on the floor was thicker than the carpet in an office building had any right to be.

The retinue continued forward a few feet, as the lights above turned red. Someone had activated an emergency measure.

Kasha surveyed the labyrinth of cubicles in the main area of the floor. Kasha thought such a culture unspeakable. Human beings were not meant to toil in these little boxes, and now some of them would die in them.

Another gunshot sounded, and Kasha turned around.

The fool who had killed the first man had now shot the woman who had his remains all over her face. Kasha saw the poor woman drop in a heap with a hole in her head.

“Hey!” Kasha said.

“What?” Said the fool. “I didn’t like how she was looking at me.”

“If you kill indiscriminately,” Kasha said, “then we will get no cooperation. Lower your pistol and get to the back of the line.”

The fool frowned at her. Kasha rolled her eyes, and said the one thing that she knew would get him to behave.

“You realize The Undying will hear about this.”

The fool turned white, and did as she said.

Kasha, Fabrizza, and their two male counterparts wandered through the cluster of cubicles. Kasha looked beneath the desks, where the huddled and frightened employees of Kyle Security were collected. The next minute was spent looking for someone who looked official, and Kasha thought she found one in the center of the room. One in a red tie with gray in his hair.
“Pardon me, sir,” Kasha said to the man in the red tie. “Might I trouble you for the code to Selina Kyle’s office door?”

The man in the red tie seemed on the verge of wetting himself. “I-I-Uh…”

Kasha sighed, and looked at one of the male gun-toting fools in her retinue.

“Now you can shoot him.”

The same fool from before came forward, pistol aiming at the man with the red tie under the cubicle.

“No!” the man in the red tie said. “No, Pl--”

BANG!

The wet sound of raining blood and falling brains.

And no screams from anyone else. They weren’t panicking anymore. Their window was fading rapidly, and the police were to be here any minute.

Again, the search among the cubicles continued for another forty five seconds, until Kasha found a middle-aged brown-haired woman in a gray pantsuit.

“You,” Kasha said. “What is the code to Selina Kyle’s office?”

Before the woman in the pantsuit could say anything, someone behind her spoke.

“I wasn’t in the office.”

Kasha turned around quickly and saw Selina Kyle.

She saw that in the forty-five seconds that had passed since the last gunshot, Selina Kyle had crept into the cubicle area, and had silently incapacitated Fabrizza and the two men in Kasha’s retinue. The two guns that the men had been carrying were now in Selina’s hands, pointed at Kasha’s face.

Kasha saw the rip in Selina’s miniskirt and knew that a fight was the first thing Miss Kyle wanted.

“Bare feet on thick carpet,” Kasha said. “Allowing for maximum stealth. Befitting your sterling reputation.”

Selina said nothing.

“Do you expect me to believe that Catwoman will kill an unarmed woman in the Batman’s city?” Kasha asked.

“I’m not Catwoman anymore, and Batman’s not here,” Selina said. “Killing three of my people tends to get me a little unruly. You with The Undying?”

“I am.”

“Props to you, then. Most people standing in a grave would lie to get out.”

“You’re not going to kill me,” Kasha said.

“I get my hands bloody from a dead henchman, don’t think for a second I’ll lose sleep.”

“I am no mere henchman,” Kasha said. “And you know, it do you not? What is the expression they
have in this country? ‘Game recognizes game?’ How long has it been since the girl in the office laid her eyes upon a true professional?”

Selina’s green eyes bored into her for a moment.

“Yeah,” Selina said. “You’re right.”

With one fluid motion, Selina flung the pistols over the cubicle walls to her sides, and used the momentum to land a right cross upon Kasha’s jaw.

Bruce, Stephanie, and Taffy were still behind the table facing the window. Taffy was still sniffing, but Stephanie had her arm around her shoulders, trying to console her.

“Hey,” Stephanie said to Taffy. “It’s gonna be alright. We work for Catwoman. She’s gonna kick some ass.”

Bruce had every intention of speaking up and agreeing with the young Miss Brown, but Bruce heard something.

Thump… Thump… Thump…

It was coming from outside, and up. Something heavily pounding on the window a floor or two up.

When that which was responsible for the noise made itself visible, Stephanie was the only one to speak up.

“What… The… Shit?”

Three people, two men and a woman, in black combat gear, were rappelling down from the roof, cutting figures against the rapidly graying sky. The woman placed a small one inch disc on the window, and Bruce instantly knew what it was.

It was a military grade vibrational disc. Very high tech. Those on the right side of the disc would feel no effects. The wrong side, however, would vibrate at a frequency that could destroy hard-to-damage material.

Like plexiglass.

Of the kind which the windows of the forty-fifth floor of the Delacourt building consisted.

Bruce grabbed Selina’s discarded jacket (which was the only improvised weapon on hand at the moment) and yelled:

“GET TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE!”

Stephanie drug Taffy to the other side. Bruce leapt over as the vibrational disc went off with a BWONNNNG-G-G-G-G-G, showering half the boardroom with hard fist-sized chunks of plexiglass.

Bruce’s ears were ringing. Taffy was curled up in a ball sobbing. And Stephanie was still sitting up, sweat pouring down her forehead, looking like she was about to hyper-ventilate.

And among them, the absurd number of pages on the Kord Industries files had been unloosed by the wind from forty-five floors above the street. The boardroom became a maelstrom of pieces of paper.
He could feel the footsteps of the three coming around the corner, and he knew they would have their guns drawn. Bruce took Selina’s jacket into his two hands.

As soon as Bruce saw a drawn gun over the table, he brought up Selina’s jacket and wrapped it around the henchman’s wrist. He yanked it down, letting the gun discharge into the floor. The downward motion of the gun brought the rest of the henchman with it, and he got knocked out when his head collided with the edge of the table.

“What the…”

The henchmen didn’t come single file. The other male was on the other side of the table, standing over Stephanie and Taffy.

His gun was trained on Bruce.

There was nothing Bruce could do.

And this was when Stephanie Brown, completely unbidden, yelled, “NOT TODAY, SHIT-FER-BRAINS!”

The henchman looked down, and Stephanie took this moment of distraction to get up, grab his wrist, and point it up to the ceiling.

And now that their faces were so close together, Stephanie leaned in, took his nose into her mouth, and bit down hard.

In the moment, Bruce had to grudgingly admit that Stephanie had saved his life.

He also had to grudgingly admit that, unlike Bruce, Stephanie managed to get the henchman to drop the gun without firing it.

The henchman shrieked and grabbed Stephanie’s head. Upon finding that that hurt worse, he let go of her head and held his arms out at his side, his hands opening and closing. He screamed until Stephanie finally, mercifully, let go.

A thick ripping noise commemorated the breaking of their head-to-head contact.

The henchman covered his face, blood spewing through the gaps in his gloved hands. Stephanie, another man’s blood soaking her chin, span three-quarters of an inch of blood, skin, and cartilage onto the carpet.

“Oh…” Stephanie said. “I… Oh, crap…”

Stephanie fainted dead away.

Which left Bruce and the single henchwoman, who was still on the other side of the table.

“I guess it’s just you and me,” Bruce said.

The henchbroad was good, Selina could give her that. Every bit the professional she said she was.

The thing was, though, was something that she’d noticed in her years of fighting goons on both sides of the law: The higher one went up in skill, the less prepared one was for a smart brawler.

Selina had sat through kung-fu movie after kung-fu movie, with dumb-ass boyfriend after dumb-ass
boyfriend (and the occasional dumb-ass girlfriend), all of them complaining that it wasn’t realistic that the bad guys all attacked Jackie Chan one at a time. If they’d grouped up, they’d win.

The reply to this that Selina had always had stored up, but never unleashed, was that one did not spend countless years getting their ass handed to them in a dojo learning martial arts for a decade-and-change just to pull a bummush with one’s buddies out of the third grade playbook. Pride was tantamount in such affairs. You get better at fighting, you level up, and in your travels, you meet fighters who hold the same values, and you settle things one-on-one, using the skills you’d bled and cried to learn.

So when such a prideful fighter threw hands and feet with someone more than willing to regress and fight dirty, they entered a state of semi-helplessness, of the kind that sets in when one finds the instructions for their new television set are written in a language they don’t understand.

Back in the Catwoman days, she’d run afoul of Black Canary, who was in Gotham for whatever reason. Catwoman could tell she’d just been starting out, her standing there in her little fishnets and leather jacket, striking an amateur pose that told Catwoman she’d just stepped out of the dojo yesterday with a spring in her step and visions in her head of being a real live superhero like the ones she’d seen on TV. Had Catwoman been from the south, she’d have told Black Canary “Oh, bless your heart.”

Catwoman dodged one punch, brought out the claws, and slashed Black Canary across the face. Black Canary staggered back, blood spewing down clean gashes in her left cheek, and she just glared at her, her blue eyes wide with betrayal, her full lips puckered into an increasingly bloody frown at the mere temerity of this hoodlum breaking whatever unwritten rules there were among warriors. It was like Catwoman told her Santa Claus wasn’t real.

After which, Catwoman dissected her like a frog in a junior high science class.

By all accounts, Black Canary had improved considerably since then, running a double-act with Huntress under the eye of a major player named Oracle, whoever the hell that was. But Selina would always remember fondly the night that she taught Black Canary the hard way that sometimes the person you’re fighting just didn’t play fair.

The same phenomena applied to the henchbroad now.

Selina put her arms up to protect herself, just like Wildcat taught her, as the henchwoman who had killed three of her employees started with a right, a left, and a spinning backfist.

The kicks came next, and Selina wasn’t too proud to admit that she was too slow to get out of the way of the first one, which rocked her jaw, split her lip, and sent her back into the nearest cubicle, beneath which one of Kyle Security’s female employees was cowering.

Kicks were a funny thing to Selina. She had long legs, and she’d gotten a reputation for kicking people into oblivion, but the fact of the matter was, she thought kicks were overrated. Why sacrifice half your balance when you can just punch someone out?

And they were predictable. They came in twos. And while Selina failed to scout the first one, she saw the second one coming a mile away.

The henchwoman brought her left leg back down, and was gearing the right one for a roundhouse.

Selina ducked it, feeling the wind it brought up slightly ruffle her pixie cut. Then she leaned in close, brought up her right hand in a peace sign… and poked the henchwench in the eyes like they were
both in an old Three Stooges movie.

The henchwoman staggered back, blind and taken completely off-guard. In the time that it took her to recover, Selina had already yanked a keyboard from one of the cubicle computers. The henchwoman’s eyes opened fully, and Selina had already begun her swing.

Blood and little plastic letters erupted in an arc form the henchwoman’s freshly busted mouth. Her head snapped back, and guided the rest of her body to the floor. Selina could feel the impact tremor in her bare feet as the henchwoman’s cranium made swift and brutal contact with the white carpet.

The henchwoman shook her head, trying to get her bearings. As she did, Selina advanced on her, mangled keyboard ready for another swing.

“Telling someone you’re a professional just gives someone permission to act unprofessionally,” Selina said.

The henchwoman spat a mouthful of blood onto the pristine white carpet, and said “Then I am sure you will appreciate this.”

Quick as a hiccup, the henchwoman reached inside her leather jacket, took out a small pellet, and threw it at Selina. It detonated in mid-air.

A flashbang.

Selina’s world went white, and she could even hear a few of her employees, huddled under their cubicles, groaning in surprise.

As the whiteness receded, a loud beeping started. The world hadn’t even come into view before Selina had figured out what happened.

The henchwench popped her flashbang, and used the ensuing chaos not to strike, but to escape through the emergency doors to the stairwell, which set off a different set of alarms.

When the world came back, Selina looked behind her and saw that the three other goons that she’d disarmed and incapacitated were still unconscious. Hopefully they still would be by the time the cops got here.

She put the smashed keyboard back on the cubicle desk. She called out: “It’s safe now, everyone can get up.”

Nightwing had told him the night before that the female henchmen seemed better trained than the men, and experience was bearing that out. The two men in the company that had come in through the boardroom window had been taken out by a combination of a lucky bit of business with a jacket, and a seventeen-year-old girl with no combat training whatsoever.

The sole remaining opponent was a woman, and amidst the storm of papers, Bruce was blocking kicks with his forearms and biceps that hit like trucks.

He leaned back from a roundhouse, and threw his entire body into an uppercut that jacked her jaw. She grunted, and threw a cross of her own that knocked Bruce back, the vision in his left eye blurring.

She was shifting through styles and stances in a way that ticked the back of Bruce’s mind with familiarity, but either the current stress or the three years of layoff had slightly dulled his usually
unassailable memory.

The henchwoman charged at him, fury in her eyes. She unleashed a high kick. Bruce avoided the upward thrust of her boot, and caught it on the way down.

With both hands, Bruce brought the henchwoman’s boot back toward him, and she had no choice but dissolve her stance into a split on the carpet.

She didn’t have time to get up before Bruce used his distance to break into a short, explosive sprint, bringing his knee up and driving it powerfully into her face.

Bruce felt something crunch under the force of his kneecap. He got back to his feet to see the henchwoman unconscious, her left eye swelling, and blood pouring from a cruelly bent nose like an overturned soda bottle.

He immediately bent down over the henchwoman and checked the pockets of her combat gear, hoping for something, anything, that he could turn into a lead. He didn’t expect to find anything…...which is why his eyes went so wide when he actually did find something.

There was a matchbook in the right hip pocket of the henchwoman’s pants. Bruce turned it over.

It was a matchbook belonging to The Stacked Deck, which was a dive bar in the East End. It occupied the ground floor of a building that had absolutely nothing in the floors above it, save for a small cache of gadgets and medical supplies in a footlocker hidden behind a trick wall that Bruce and Lucius had had installed when Bruce bought the entire building itself through a shell company. It was one of many such safehouses and pick-up locations that Batman had had scattered throughout the city.

The matchbook itself had had no matches taken from it. It was pristine, barely any fingerprints on it. And who the hell shows up in combat gear to an East End dive bar? It wasn’t like the entire cadre of The Undying’s lackeys stopped by The Stacked Deck for a drink on their way to murder people in Otisburg.

The only conclusion Bruce could come to was that this was put in her pocket for someone to find. He knew without even having to look that every goon who had come to Kyle Security today with blood on their minds had identical matchbooks somewhere on their persons.

And if they were put on their persons to be found, then The Undying would have had to have known that Batman would be the one to find them. But why would The Undying want Batman to know about The Stacked Deck. No one could connect him to that place except Lucius and…

And…

Bruce felt his blood snap-freeze. He felt his spine stiffen as the cold layer of frost settled upon him.

“Oh, no,” Bruce said aloud.

He didn’t have the whole picture yet. He still didn’t know who The Undying was. But the picture was a lot clearer after he saw this matchbook than it was before. Disparate puzzle pieces flew together in his mind, and Bruce hoped both Batman and Gotham City itself would be ready for what would happen next.

He put the matchbook in the pocket of his sportcoat, and stood.
On the other side of the overturned boardroom table, Taffy stared at him, her eyes listless, her mascara having run down her cheeks in the tears she’d shed during the chaos.

Taffy and Bruce were the only ones in the room that weren’t either unconscious, or in a corner, whimpering, nursing the ragged hole were most of their nose used to be.

And Bruce, standing over an unconscious henchwoman, felt he had some explaining to do.

“I take Tae-Kwon-Do classes,” Bruce said to Taffy, trying to put “Bruce Wayne” back on. “My instructor tells me I’m pretty good.”

Arkham Asylum was the only mental health facility Nightwing had ever seen that had an interrogation room.

Gotham City gonna Gotham City.

Standing on the other side of the interrogation room, looking in through the two-way mirror, he saw the orderly Julius sitting at the table. He was calm, his hands folded in front of him, staring at nothing in particular. The word Nightwing would have used to describe him at the present moment would have been “imperious.” Julius looked for all the world that, despite the river of trouble he was in, he was about to order someone to execution by guillotine, and would roll his Rs and flick his wrist as he did so.

Nightwing had done an employee check on Arkham, and all signs had pointed to Julius. He discretely asked two security guards to bring him here.

He knows he’s caught, Nightwing thought. But it seems like he planned for this.

Nightwing exited the anteroom and took the two pace journey to the interrogation room itself, guarded by the two security personnel that had accompanied Julius. He closed the door without taking his eyes off of the orderly.

Julius saw him and smiled, his mustache and slicked back hair making him look like The Devil on an old anti-marijuana poster.

“Is this the talent portion of the pageant?” Julius asked. “This where you tell me how I did it?”

Nightwing folded his arms. “Julius Everdeen,” he said. “Just one prior. A GTA when you were twenty-five. Only did a year, but it followed you, didn’t it? This gig at Arkham must have been a good one to be here for ten years. Or maybe it didn’t, as you’ve shacked up with Gotham City’s brand new psycho. You’re working for The Undying.”

“Provide me with your proof, oh great inquisitor,” Julius said. “Wrap it up quick enough, and we can get to the swimsuit competition.”

Nightwing walked further into the room. “Clayface was the one who shot at me from a rooftop in Bludhaven. He did it while replicating Nora Fries’ handprint. So whoever put him up to it would have had to have access to both the Inter-Patient Therapy block as well as records for incoming patients where their handprints were taken, which Nora Fries technically is. She was scanned through the block of ice when she got here. But the big one, the one I threw in for fun because it doesn’t make sense any other way, is access to patients’ personal effects. The stuff they were stripped of when they were admitted.”

He sat down in the chair across from Julius. “I had Administrator Pender run an inventory on all the
goodies they have here, and three items were missing. The first is the bouncy ball full of Joker Toxin that was used to kill The Green Comet. The second is one of Mister Freeze’s old cold guns, which I personally had used on me by Black Manta. But the third is a brown porkpie hat, like the one Buster Keaton used to wear in the silent movies. It’s fitted with mind control tech because that hat was created by The Mad Hatter. That one hasn’t been used yet. So of all the staff members at Arkham who worked in Inter-Patient, Admissions, and Inventory for the last six months, yours was the only name that came up.”

“Bravo,” Julius said, and folded his arms.

“So let me put this together,” Nightwing said. “A week ago, you somehow reproduced Nora Fries’ handprint for Clayface to replicate…”

“I just used a regular office printer,” Julius said. “Basil was really good.”

“Okay,” Nightwing said. “He replicated the handprint well enough to fool my scanner. One of The Undying’s guys leaves a rifle on a rooftop with a good view of the bridge I was on when I was saving Mayor Holcomb from Hella. The Undying uses one of his portals to transport Clayface from the cell to the rooftop.”

“Very good,” Julius said.

“What did you offer Clayface to come back to his cell, though?” Nightwing asked. “He finds himself on a rooftop in Bludhaven, but he doesn’t book it and blend in somewhere else? Hell, he even did it yesterday when he shot Hamilton Hill Jr. in his own home, and he still came back.”

“If you had someone who could transport you miles away,” Julius said, “if someone has that kind of power at their disposal, would you really want them mad at you if you defied their wishes? I didn’t offer Clayface anything. I ordered him to come back.”

“Why, though?”

“Because The Undying needed Clayface to die at precisely the right place, at precisely the right time. That time being, oh… Thirty-six hours ago.”

“And that’s something else that bothers me,” Nightwing said. “Why did Clayface have to die at all? If I never investigate his cell, I never make the connection, and The Undying doesn’t have Batman and I chasing him.”

“You’re under the mistaken impression that The Undying doesn’t want you chasing him,” Julius said. “Intrigue makes a body predictable, after all.”

“That’s what The Undying said to me,” Nightwing said.

“I know. If you had no clues, who knows what unmanageable positions you might end up in. But with a healthy supply of leads, you’ll go right where he wants you.”

“So The Undying’s a guy, then?” Nightwing asked.

“Your Nightwing get up, does that correspond to a specific animal?”


“Because I think a rat would be a good animal for you,” Julius said. “Shuffling through the maze on the hunt for cheese you can smell, but can’t see.”
Nightwing scowled. “Does every henchman for The Undying talk like a *Scooby-Doo* villain? A guy with one prior for GTA, and you’re in here about to blame those meddling kids.”

“Oh, if you’ve seen what I’ve seen,” Julius said, “You’d be full of yourself, too. Being a part of something bigger.”

“I already am,” Nightwing said.

“No, not like this,” Julius said. “You’re right where he wants you… and I’m right where he wants me.”

“And you just signed up to go to prison for aiding and abetting a supercriminal?”

“But the rewards, though…”

“What rewards are those?” Nightwing asked.

Julius leaned in. “Everlasting life… See, The Undying… it isn’t just a scary name.”

He took off his watch and dropped it on the table. Nightwing looked at it…

…and saw something on the leather watchband. A small metal strip that looked an awful lot like a high-end surveillance bug.

The Undying was listening in.

Nightwing looked up to see a green glow starting to bloom beneath Julius’ ribcage.

“I go to my reward,” Julius said through clenched teeth. “You won’t be so lucky…”

Nightwing broke away from the table as Julius Everdeen burst into green flames and the acrid stench of burning popcorn.

His screams as he burned to death couldn’t be told apart from his laughs.

The police made it to the Delacourt building no more than thirty seconds after Bruce lifted the matchbook from the unconscious henchwoman.

A parade of cops, EMTs, and coroners spent the next two hours taking away bodies, treating survivors, asking questions, and getting contact information.

In a minor show of gratitude for saving his life, Bruce asked Alfred to take Stephanie Brown to her home on Bleake Island in the towncar.

He also asked that Alfred buy her a tin of Altoids, as she had bitten off a man’s nose, and she might appreciate the gesture.

They asked Bruce if he knew who these assailants were. They asked him why anyone would come into Kyle Security to shoot Selina and the people who worked for her.

Bruce lied, and said no.

They were still talking to Selina after they were done with him. He watched them from the open boardroom. A stubby detective with a bald pate and dark skin kept nodding and talking a mile a minute. The fluorescent lights in the office shone directly down on Selina, and Bruce couldn’t read
her eyes.

Eventually, the stubby detective walked away, and Selina turned toward him. There were bags under her eyes, and her lip was split from the fighting she’d done. She looked the perilous mixture of tired and sad that precedes a private cratering. She’d hold until she got home, and once the lock turned on her apartment door, she’d break down. Silently or loudly, it didn’t matter. The emotion that Selina Kyle thought was so… awful, would consume her.

She walked toward him slowly, absent-mindedly weaving between the remaining detectives until she stood in front of Bruce.

“How are you holding up?” Bruce asked, feeling stupid as it was obvious she wasn’t holding up well at all.

“You still in contact with Nightwing?”

Bruce nodded. Selina lowered her head and sighed.

“A few days ago,” Selina said, “Lex Luthor contacted me. Said he wanted me to find a prototype targeting system that he’d been working on. He called it his ‘more accurate boom.’ It’s multipurpose, and can track people through DNA, heartbeats, you name it. He was trafficking it down the eastern seaboard, but someone jacked it as soon as it came into Gotham City. I… I think The Undying was behind it. He has to be.”

Bruce let that one breathe for a moment. “Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“Because Lex waved a lot of money under my nose to get it back for him. Or destroy any proof he violated his parole. But now? Now I have three funerals to pay for. Three people are dead because they worked for a supervillain gone straight. Someone has to stop this guy.”

Selina took a step forward, and an angry light replaced the placid void in her eyes

“I’m not in the costume anymore,” Selina said. “But I still have enough of it in me to know that you don’t step to me in my city, kill my people, and get away with it. And I’ll gladly eat that huge payday from Lex if it means The Undying eats shit. I’m not a fan of Batman, but even I know Batman is the best chance anyone has of stopping this asshole. Tell Nightwing what I told you, and he’ll… He’ll get that information into the right hands.”

Bruce nodded. “I’ll tell him as soon as I can.”

“Alright,” Selina said, and looked down at her feet.

“I’m just a phone call away,” Bruce said. “But I know you want to be alone.”

“Thanks,” Selina said.

And she just walked away without saying anything.

Bruce fished his phone out of his pocket and got on the secure line to Nightwing.


“Yes,” Bruce said. “What happened on your end?”

Nightwing told Bruce about Clayface’s death, how it went down, and how The Undying had a man inside Arkham.
“What about you?” Nightwing asked. “Do you have anything?”

“A lead,” Bruce said. “A big one. As soon as the sun goes down, I need you to be at The Stacked Deck bar in the East End.”

“What’s there?” Nightwing asked.

“An answer,” Bruce said. “I don’t know who The Undying is… But I know who’s controlling him.”
I hate to announce yet another break fresh off of my last one, but Chapter 18 of the story will drop on Thursday, February 7, 2019, one week after the chapter you are about to read is posted.

I've decided to add another chapter to the story, bringing the count to an even thirty. Which means if I kept to my regular schedule, the story would end on a Monday. And I know more than one of you would make it to the following Thursday with a nagging weirdness in the back of your head. "I know the story's over, but I was expecting something today." Like how you think you have a bite of a candy bar left, only to look down and see an empty wrapper. That kind of thing messes with my head, at least. I don't know if it messes with yours.

Anyway, never fear, Chapter 18 is gonna be on the long side to make it up to you.

Because as you'll see by the end of this chapter, I will CLEARLY have a lot of stuff to explain...

Chapter 17: And You May Ask Yourself…

The sun played hide-and-seek with Gotham City today. In its journey across the sky, it always found a thick gray cloud with which to obscure itself.

And now that it had gone down, the wind came in. It was slow and thick, like the dying breath of a long-forgotten God. It blew the piss-and-garbage smell of Gotham City in on itself, through the networked canyons created by the skyscrapers, and those thousands upon thousands of citizens unfortunate enough to be outside during this hot belch of a gust had to just stand there and take it, as a truth dawned on them.

It was going to rain soon.

And that smell was going to get worse.

The press conference that new Police Commissioner Troy Clotworthy was to preside over in the press room of Gotham Central was set to begin at seven-thirty. The media assigned to cover the conference converged upon the central precinct at six. For the next hour, they set up cameras inside the press room and out, wired for sound, did the prerequisite mic checks and focus tests.

In between, the journalists mingled.

The Gotham contingent was strong in the Gotham Central press room tonight. Arturo Rodriguez from Gotham’s WNTJ Channel 52 was there in a snappy blue suit, giving death glares to the other three Gotham television correspondents from the other three networks, who didn’t share the print journalists’ sense of put-upon camaraderie. The locals weren’t the only ones there, as WMET’s makeup lady was doing touch-ups on Angela Chen from Metropolis. And being as not only was the
police commissioner that Clotworthy was to replace murdered the night before, but a pitcher for the
Gotham Knights that was famous nationwide, national cable news had a delegation there as well.
Jamie Gangel of CNN and Jacob Sobooff of MSNBC were the only TV personalities in the room
that got along, and they both joked with each other that they thanked God Fox News sent over
Claudia Cowen. Given Fox News’ reputation, if they’d sent a male correspondent, one of the female
reporters here would have been groped.

Linda Park from Keystone City’s WKEY was supposed to be in attendance, but her flight was
delayed at the last minute.

On the print side, Vicki Vale from the Gotham Herald had her customary front row seat. She tucked
a stray lock of red hair behind her ear and checked her phone. Horton Spence of the Gotham
Gazette and Cassandra Arnold of the Boston Globe were, quite callously, debating how the AL East
was going to look now that Barry Jacinto, Gotham’s best pitcher, had been set on fire by The
Undying the night before.

And Ron Troupe of Metropolis’ Daily Planet was talking to one of his fellow reporters on the
phone.

“How did I get the short straw here again?” Ron asked.

Lois Lane was on the other end. “How is this a short straw story?”

“I have to come to Gotham City,” Ron said. “Have--have you been here?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “It’s not that bad.”


“It’s not like Metropolis is paradise.”

“Compared to this place? Yeah, it is. Even the homeless people smile in Metropolis because we
have Superman, and they know they’re not going to die. Here, not so much.”

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” Lois asked. “Batman’s back.”

Ron sighed. “That doesn’t make it better. That just makes it worse. Guys like Two-Face and The
Penguin aren’t like… like Enchantadora or Metallo.”

“I thought Enchantadora was a good guy now.”

“That’s my point,” Ron said. “Superman’s villains have plans and goals they want to achieve. If
they can be convinced they’re wrong, or if they’re stopped, the collateral damage is nowhere near as
bad as it could be.”

“And Batman’s baddies?” Lois asked.

“Batman’s villains,” Ron said, “really like to wipe out innocent bystanders. It’s almost like it’s the
end instead of the means.”

“I… Yeah,” Lois said. “You got me there.”

Batman put the Batwing on autopilot nine-hundred feet above the Gotham River. He hit the switch
on the control panel, and the bottom of the cockpit retracted, sending Batman into freefall. The
Batwing would take itself back to the Manor until it was needed again.
He brought himself to an angle and continued his descent. At five hundred feet above the skyline, he deployed his cape, and he glided into the East End.

Batman aimed himself toward the Kandy Kane, which was a self-professed “Ladies Establishment” that hosted a broad array of male dancers.

Thursday night is Men’s Night, the proprietors would have you know.

The Kandy Kane was across the street from The Stacked Deck. He glided to the roof, upon which Nightwing was already present. He let go of his cape at a precision perfect three feet above the bakery roof and landed heavily on his feet with a thud. It had taken years of practice to pull a drop like that, but it was still difficult.

Nightwing knew this, and greeted Batman with a dainty golf clap as he approached.

Batman stared at Nightwing until he knocked it off.

They both surveyed at the building across the street, which was a squat five story structure that the city records called “The Stapleton Building.” The bottom floor housed The Stacked Deck, which was the kind of dive bar that made the term “dive bar” sue for defamation of character. Thugs so violent and fearsome that, back in the day, no supervillain would hire them made The Stacked Deck their prime destination for watered down drinks, fistfights, and men’s room stabbings.

A slender white guy exited the front of The Stacked Deck, stopped, emitted a truly impressive font of sepia vomit from his mouth, and then proceeded to pass out next to the puddle he’d made. Nightwing, for whatever reason, took this as his cue to speak.

“I got a text this afternoon,” Nightwing said. “I’ve been fired from my bartending job in Bludhaven because I’ve been out of town for a week.”

“There’s nothing stopping you from taking a job in the new WayneTech facility we’ll be opening in Bludhaven,” Batman said.


“Like what?”

“You’re standing on it.”

Batman looked at his feet, and then looked back at Nightwing.

“You… are going to tend bar… at the Kandy Kane?” Batman asked.

“Oh, I’m not gonna bartend,” Nightwing said with a look of mania in his eye. “I’mma work the pole.”

Batman blinked.

“You know I’m the only man I’ve ever heard of who consistently gets catcalled on the street by women?” Nightwing asked. “Thousands of years of patriarchal power imbalance reverses itself just for little old me. I don’t think I should fight it anymore. Maybe the rest of the world knows something I don’t. I’m an acrobat so I can do tricks on the pole, so that’s not a thing I need to worry about. I can dance. This ain’t just a strip club we’re standing on, it’s a goldm-”

“Why… are you talking like this to me?” Batman asked.
Nightwing turned to face him. “Because you told me you knew who was controlling The Undying over a secure line, and you refused to tell me who it was. So now I’m torturing you by saying things you can’t unhear.”

Batman turned back to the Stapleton building. He closed his eyes, and tried to exorcise his anxiety and apprehension out of himself with a deep breath. To no avail.

“If I told you who it was,” Batman said, “then you would have tried to stop me from coming here at all.”

With that, Batman took his grapnel gun from his utility belt and launched himself to the top floor of the Stapleton building.

Nightwing followed seconds later, just as Batman punched in a keycode on the roof door that led to the fifth floor.

They went down a narrow staircase the wide open fifth floor, which had no furniture whatsoever. There was only one working window on this floor, with the second having been taped over after someone on the street had thrown a rock through it. Which meant half of the room was lit by the amber street lamps outside, and the other half was shrouded in impenetrable darkness.

Within the far wall, about fifty feet away, was Batman’s emergency cache, but that’s not what they were there for tonight.

“So… we’re at your safehouse?” Nightwing asked. “What for?”

“There are only six people who know about this safehouse,” Batman said. “Myself, you, Alfred, Lucius, and Barbara.”

Nightwing blinked, and said “That’s only five.”

Batman nodded, and peered into the darkness. He closed his eyes.

“Have you noticed something strange about The Undying’s henchmen?” Batman asked.

“Yeah,” Nightwing said. “The women are a hell of a lot better trained than the men.”

“And what assumptions can you make from that?”

“That… The Undying started with women and all the men are new?”

“The mistake you’re making,” Batman said, “is that you think the women belong to The Undying at all.”

“Then whose are they?” Nightwing asked.

“Think. Is there anyone you can think of who has this many trained female soldiers? An entire honor guard, perhaps?”

Batman didn’t even need to look at Nightwing to know that his face had fallen.

“Aw, shit!” Nightwing said, and gave Batman an accusatory glare. “You’re right. I would have stopped you.”

Batman opened his eyes, and raised his hands. His gloved fingers found the automated latches on the neck of his cowl. The cowl’s plates expanded. He took the cowl off, and dropped it, which
landed with a hollow thump on the dusty hardwood floor at his feet

Bruce Wayne peered into the darkness and said:

“Come on out, Talia.”

The sound of shoes in the darkness echoed throughout the room.

From the wall of black that cut the fifth floor in half, a woman emerged. She had dark tan skin and shoulder-length brown hair that was loose, but painstakingly groomed. She had dark eyes like wells into which the unwary would fall to their death.

Her shapely body filled out a white dress shirt with four buttons undone, revealing decolletage that rode the line between alluring and indecent. The shirt was tucked into a pair of black leather pants tight enough to fully convey the taut strength of the thighs and calves beneath. She wore black boots whose heels could break a jaw with one strong, well-placed kick.

This woman was beautiful so as to make grown men scream in agony… and under her ruthless ministrations, more than a few had.

Those dark eyes looked down her nose, and fixed on Bruce Wayne.

The full lips of Talia al Ghul, Daughter of the Demon, broke into a prim, alluring smile.

“Hello, Beloved.”

The press room quieted down as Police Commissioner Troy Clotworthy took a stand at the podium in the front of the room.

To the assembled members of the press, even on a first glance, Clotworthy was Not Ready For Prime Time. He was already sweating his makeup off into the collar of his white dress shirt. Beads of sweat were visible on his scalp through his thinning red crewcut. The gray suit on his bulky frame hung off him like a sheet against a modern art sculpture in a low wind. He was squinting at the light set-up that the press had installed. A PR team and a makeup lady could only take a career hump like Clotworthy so far. Everything else was up to him, and he looked for all the world like someone eighteenth in line to the throne who had just watched the seventeen people in front of him instantly die of croup.

Clotworthy gripped the side of the podium, and looked at the teleprompter that the GCPD had set up.

“Thank you, assembled member of the press,” Clotworthy said. “The official statement of the Gotham City Police Department is as follows.”

Clotworthy looked up at the press, as though he had expected something to happen. When nothing did, he continued.

“Last night,” Clotworthy said, “Tamara Hayden, one of the most revered and respected police commissioners Gotham City has ever had, was murdered.”

Silence greeted this, save for one snicker in the front row from Vicki Vale. Whether Clotworthy missed or ignored it, he soldiered on.

“In addition, Bartolomeo Jacinto, starting pitcher for the Gotham City Knights, was killed also. And Hamilton Hill Jr., son of the late mayor Hamilton Hill Sr., was shot to death in his home yesterday.
A new supervillain known as The Undying is responsible for the first two deaths, and this individual is wanted for questioning in the third.”

Clotworthy leaned on the podium. “And the appearance of this Undying also coincides with the reappearance of the vigilante known as Batman.”

Complete silence as Clotworthy let that hang in the air.

“For three years,” Clotworthy said, “Batman was absent in Gotham City, and for three years Gotham City was a place of peace. The numbers speak for themselves. Crime is down and arrests are up.”

Another snicker from Vicki Vale up front. A sound-bite like that sounded good on a first pass, but a second revealed that the two parts contradicted each other.

Clotworthy continued. “It is the official view of the GCPD that Batman is every last bit the threat to the safety of this city’s people as the malcontents he fights. Measures must be taken to combat him. And they will be taken.”

Police Commissioner Clotworthy straightened his posture. He scanned the room like a butler scanned for dust. Whatever mojo was his to begin with, he was getting back.

“I am proud to announce the reopening of the Gotham City Major Crimes Unit.”

Vicki Vale shifted uncomfortably in her seat with a scowl on her face. She’d had reason to believe the last three years that the only reason the MCU had been shuttered in the first place was that James Gordon was out as police commissioner, and the only threats a hypothetical Major Crimes Unit would be investigating were the same threats that paid dirty Gotham cops to look the other way.

“Headed by Detective Renee Montoya,” Clotworthy said, “the MCU’s first priority will be the apprehension of Batman. Never again will the lowest among us threaten Gotham City’s citizens, hoping to either impress or destroy a rank vigilante.”

Clotworthy’s face hardened. “This is our city. Not his.”

He scanned the room again, and said “The floor is now open to questions.”

The room erupted with the sound of speech from the fifty or so reporters in the room. Clotworthy perused the people in front of him to see who he’d call upon first. Not Vale, to be sure. She wouldn’t be friendly to the agenda.

The din was so great that the sound of a shimmering silver portal coming into being behind Commissioner Clotworthy was completely silenced.

The sight, however was plain to everyone except Clotworthy, who was facing the wrong way.

The questions turned to screams when a black-clad hand reached from the portal and gently placed its hand on Clotworthy’s shoulder. His eyes widened as the security detail on either side of the teleprompter drew their guns.

The rest of the person that the black-clad arm belonged to emerged from the portal before it closed behind him.

The Undying.

He stood behind Clotworthy, and held his other hand up, and knowing what might come next, the
reporters in the room quickly silenced themselves.

The Undying’s voice came from the three vertical slits in his silver mask in a high-pitched electronic whine.

“I have a question, Commissioner,” The Undying said. “Knowing what I’m capable of… should these fine folks really be pointing their pistols at me?”

Clotworthy eyed the four uniformed officers in his security detail, and said “Stow ‘em.”

The four officers did so.

“Thank you, Commissioner,” The Undying said, before he pointed to a spot three feet away from the podium. “Stand over there, where everyone can see you.”

Clotworthy stepped to where The Undying told him to, and The Undying himself stepped to the podium.

“I was always a sucker for coverage and a live mic,” The Undying said, “so I’ve prepared a few remarks.”

The evening meal had just let out a half an hour ago, and David Hyde and the rest of his block had been escorted back to their cells.

The sun had set outside, and Hyde had time to kill.

Not a lot of time.

Just enough.

He sat on his cot, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. This was as close as Black Manta ever got to meditation.

Hyde opened his eyes again, and turned his head to the right, staring at the cell across the way.

The cell belonging to the disgraced GCPD officer Quincy Feldon.

“Hey,” Hyde said, calling out. “Hey!”

Feldon was lying on his cot with his head facing toward the bars, trying to pretend he was asleep.

“Do I make you nervous, officer?” Hyde asked. “Does the big bad Black Manta scare you now that you don’t have a gun?”

Feldon said nothing, still pretending to sleep.

Hyde turned his face to the wall. “My dad served in ‘Nam,” he said. “Navy. Volunteered when his girlfriend’s brother was drafted. Went in his place. My father… was a good man.”

David Hyde scratched his head and turned back to Feldon in his cell. “I remember… when I was four, me and dad were living in Massachusetts. Gloucester. We were going to a meeting at the VFW hall, and we hear sirens behind us. A cop was pulling us over.”

He ran his fingers down the scars on his face. “This cop, white, gut hanging over his belt, steps to the window of our car and asks my father ‘You know your tail light’s out?’ Dad says ‘It is?’ And
this cop walks behind our car all slow, takes out his nightstick, and smashes the tail light. He comes back and says 'it is now.'

"And he just stared at my father, waiting for him to make a move. Waiting for him to say something. But my dad was perfectly still. I can still see the one little bead of sweat rolling down his temple."

Hyde put his eyes back on the wall. “The cop writes his ticket and leaves. My dad was on a riverine boat in Task Force 117. Patrolled the Mekong Delta for VC soldiers, and he told me that the time in the car when I was four was the most scared he’s ever been in his life. He was wearing his uniform to the VFW that day, medal on his chest, and he said ‘There is a type of white man who has no problem destroying himself if it means taking out a black man who succeeds.’ Then he looks me dead in the eye and says ‘Son… Succeed anyway.’"

He smiled. “See, I hate cops. Hated them since that day when I was four. That’s a long time in the grand scheme. Three-and-a-half decades. That’s, what, six separate presidents?” He laughed. “That’s… that’s two whole Star Wars trilogies worth of hating pigs like you.”

Then he looked at Feldon again. “But I’ll never hate cops as much as the two kids of that woman you killed. My dad lived. Their mom didn’t.”

Hyde stood up and walked to the bars.

“If I snatched your ass off that cell and caved in your head in against these bars, would they thank me? When they say Grace over their evening meal, thanking a God that provides for the righteous and smites the wicked, would they see an old white guy with a long flowing beard… or would they see this pretty face of mine?”

Feldon stirred on his cot. Hyde laughed again.

“You… You know they say it’s creepy when someone watches someone else sleep. But you know what? I think I’m gonna do it anyway.”

Talia walked toward Bruce, and Nightwing could see the steel leaving his face, his mind clouding. He’d never questioned Bruce about this directly, how he could be in such a soggy, debilitating kind of love with the daughter of Ra’s al Ghul, but it was clear that he did love Talia. Somehow, some way, he did.

Nightwing, however, thought he was going to be sick at the sight of her.

“You were behind all of it,” Bruce said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” Talia said. Her eyes looked him up and down, as though she were appraising a side of meat.

“Why?” Bruce asked.

At which, Nightwing could neither refrain from rolling his eyes, nor from holding his tongue.

“You know damn well why,” Nightwing said. “She thinks you’ve been ignoring her for three years.”

Talia’s head turned to Nightwing before her eyes did. “I’ve never understood why you’ve approved of Bruce’s other potential amours and not myself. I expect your reasons for this will be most enlightening.”
“What?” Nightwing asked, “You mean Catwoman? Well, let’s see. She just steals stuff, she doesn’t kill people, and oh yeah, her dad’s goons didn’t kidnap me when I was thirteen to get my legal guardian’s attention. You’re a genocidal, overflowing colostomy bag that learned how to walk and apply foundation. I’ve had bouts of food poisoning that I liked more than you.”

Talia’s expression didn’t change when she said “Out of respect for my beloved, I will let five more words escape your lips. A sixth will get you killed.”

Nightwing took that as a challenge.


“Dick!” Bruce said. “Enough!”

Nightwing didn’t say anything. He saw Bruce take a deep breath.

“Dick, I think we need a moment alone,” Bruce said.

Nightwing fought hard to keep the look of betrayal from his face, and he was largely successful. He turned, and walked to the door that led to the stairway, closing it behind him as he passed.

He tapped his earpiece to bring up Oracle. “Oh, you are not gonna--”

Oracle cut him off. “Dick?”

Nightwing was going to bling, but opted not to. Oracle only broke the No-Real-Names-On-Comm rule when she was panicking.

“What is it?” Nightwing asked.

“Get to Gotham Central,” Oracle said. “Now.”

Nightwing didn’t need to know anymore right then. Oracle could fill him in on the way. He looked at the door.

He was weighing going to Gotham Central alone, or taking along a severely compromised Batman.

It was the damnedest thing about that man. He could power through Poison Ivy’s pheromones with the sheer force of his will. He could watch Selina, the woman he knew was better for him, almost marry someone else and still not tell her that he was Batman to make himself happy.

But when it came to Talia al Ghul, everything just fell apart. It was like she had the cheat codes to his brain.

And if he took Bruce away from whatever they were doing in there, he’d be thinking about her when they should be getting down to the business of protecting Gotham.

*Batman is a liability right now, Nightwing thought. He’d say so himself.*

Nightwing stood up straight, muttered a small string of profanities to himself, and walked up the stairs to the roof.

They both watched Nightwing leave.

“I knew the matchbook would bring you to me,” Talia said. “This place holds… *significance* to the
two of us.”

Bruce looked at Talia, and he couldn’t think straight.

Talia al Ghul was the daughter of Ra’s al Ghul, the head of the League of Assassins, and a man who wanted to destroy ninety percent of Earth’s population to start a new era for the planet. And he wished to arrange a marriage between daughter Talia and Batman: the only man Ra’s respected enough to consider providing his family line with a male heir.

Arranged though it was, Talia did love Bruce. And Bruce loved her back… and hated himself.

The mirage she sold was a good one. To be at the head of something great, to chart a course for the world (an idea that bore a hazy resemblance to what he sought to accomplish when he became Batman), to have a truly talented, fiercely intelligent, achingly beautiful woman at his side.

But giving into that, even for an instant, would result in an unclimbable mountain of dead bodies.

Surely Talia could see that? Surely she knew that possessing him would doom legions of innocent lives.

But Bruce knew. He knew that she fully comprehended the magnitude of what were to occur should she fully hold him to her wishes… and she went ahead with it anyway.

“But he is right, you know,” Talia said. “You have been ignoring me for three years.”

“You think I quit being Batman to get a rise out of you?”

“It is the charitable interpretation of your actions,” Talia said. “I would hate to think that the reason you abdicated your place at my side was because a whore dressed as a clown murdered a psychopath dressed as a clown. It would hurt my feelings.”

She reached out and took his cheek into her hand. Bruce closed his eyes and felt the world melt away, save for the tiny flicker of his own thought.

“Is Ra’s behind this?” Bruce asked.

“Father does not know I am here,” said Talia. “Or if he does, he has sent no one to collect me. I can only deduce that that means he approves.”

Bruce opened his eyes. “It’s… It’s well done.”

“I do not need to have a grand plan,” Talia said as she took her hand away. “I only need to know you, Beloved. How you would react. What would bring you back to prominence. All you need is a good mystery and some motivation. Although I must admit, for the latter, I did not know you would call the Amazon to talk sense into you.”

“Diana… kind of gets me.”

Talia gave him a slight, pouty frown. “Awww. She holds a place in your heart. I hope whatever physical intimacy you shared with her during the interregnum between the two of us was eventful.”

Bruce shook his head. “I didn’t… I haven’t… Not with anyone… Not since you.”

Talia’s eyes gleamed. A smile came to her lips.

“Beloved… You honor me. Eight years is a long time, and I would not have blamed you if you
Talia reached out again, and placed the tips of her fingers on the exaggerated pectoral muscles on the Batman armor.

“But eight years is eight years. We’re both here…”

Her fingers dragged themselves down the front of his armor lower and lower, until they were almost at his utility belt.

“...and the night is young, after all.”

Bruce reached out and gently took her wrist, pushing her hand away.

He needed to think. He needed to focus. He needed to breathe. Talia made it difficult to do all three.

Bruce tried to put some hardness in his eyes. Some depth in his voice.

“Where did you find The Undying?”

Talia smirked. She didn’t buy it. For some strange reason, the look of impetuousness on her regal face was the last thing he thought about if ever he thought of her before he fell asleep.

“I found him on the side of the road,” Talia said, teasing him.

“Did they start leaving people with magic powers in ditches and just not tell me?”

Her smirk grew to a smile.

“Beloved… The Undying holds no power over magic.”

The Undying gripped the side of the podium before he spoke further. The eyes of the gathered press stared at his every move, unblinking and silent.

“This,” The Undying finally said after a few seconds of posturing, “is not law enforcement. This is politics. You don’t need cameras and reporters to enforce the law. You just need will. But telling the public you’re going to do it is politics, pure and simple. You’re controlling your environment. Though I have to say…”

The Undying looked at Clotworthy, who was still standing three feet away. “I’m surprised at you, Commissioner. You strike me as the old school sort. You and your buddies in blue spent the last three years shooting innocent people in the street and lining your pockets with Maroni and Falcone money.”

Clotworthy’s eyes went wide at this, but the body language of The Undying was marbled with sympathy.

“Oh, don’t think I’m judging you,” The Undying said. “I approve. Always have. How the hell are you supposed to protect the people who matter in this city if you won’t take care of yourselves first? But this? Politics? Come on, now. Bust a head or two, and the sheep in this city will get it into their heads soon enough.”

The Undying turned back to the press. “I have some experience in politics, believe it or not, and one concept I always had a bone to pick with was ‘transparency.’ I think it’s overrated. Whatever the unwashed masses don’t know won’t hurt them. But… after putting on this mask… I don’t know.
Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I’m a leopard in need of some spot changes. Why don’t I try it now, while I have your attention?”

He stepped away from the podium.

“You all look at me,” The Undying said, “and you see Gotham’s latest wacko. With magic powers to boot. But while you may be right about the first one, you are dead wrong about the second. I don’t have magic powers but what I do have… is this.”

The Undying snapped his fingers, and a silver portal appeared behind him. The Undying stepped away to give the press a better view.

The first person to emerge from the portal was a woman in a wheelchair, followed by one of The Undying’s henchwomen, on loan from Talia al Ghul’s all-female honor guard.

The woman in the wheelchair had baggy eyes and her long black hair was tangled, and such minor issues were all that kept her from being staggeringly beautiful. Her eyes were a gorgeous shade of blue, but… they were staring off in either direction, and blinked independently of one another.

She was wearing a pair of sweatpants, and a t-shirt that proclaimed that it was the property of the Blackwell Academy Athletics Department.

But the most curious part of her ensemble was the hat she was wearing.

That morning, the things Nightwing found missing from the inventory at Arkham Asylum were a bouncy ball filled with Joker Toxin, one of Mister Freeze’s early cold guns…

...and one of Mad Hatter’s old brown porkpie hats that controlled the mind of the person wearing it.

And that brown porkpie hat was on the head of the woman in the wheelchair.

The Undying walked up to her and held his hand out, displaying her as though she was a refrigerator some slob on a game show might be winning, if he could provide the host of the nineteenth president of the United States.

“I give you… Zatanna!”

There were a few gasps from the members of the press.

“Yes, the Mistress of Magic herself is my ace in the hole. She makes the portals and she sets people on fire. Granted, she’s under mind control, I have to tell her to do it, but still. In the name of transparency, I need to reveal how I do my tricks. The irony of which would not be lost on Zatanna herself, if she were able to hear it right now. Also…”

The Undying reached behind Zatanna, into a pouch built into the back of the wheelchair. He pulled out something that looked like an iPad, but thicker, and with actual buttons. On its screen was a map of Gotham City.

“This was the targeting system that Lex Luthor had hired Selina Kyle to find.

“Not only is she connected to the mind control hat,” The Undying said, “but also to this little gizmo, which tells me that there are… nine million two-hundred-forty-eight thousand six-hundred seventeen beating hearts in Gotham City... But more on that later.”

He put the targeting system back in the pouch.
“Now then,” The Undying said. “Transparency.”

He stepped back to the podium and looked at the press again.

“Allow me to introduce myself.”

The Undying reached for his face.

He took off his mask.

“That’s impossible,” Bruce said. “I contacted Zatanna the day after Constantine said he was looking for her.”

“She has been opening portals and setting people ablaze under the suggestion of mind control,” Talia said. “I think replying to a text message is something we can pull off.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes at her. “You do realize that the villain revealing the plan to the hero is a flaw, right.”

“I am not the villain,” Talia said. “And there is a very simple reason that I am telling you all this.”

“Which is?”

Talia took a step toward him. “I want you to win.”

Bruce blinked.

“Oh, I won’t let you win,” Talia said. “Neither will The Undying. Neither will David. But it’s why I’ve spent the last two years planning. To make you back into the man who is worthy of me. To make you back into the man whose child I want to bear. The man at whose side I wish to rule the world.”

The look she had in her eyes when she said it. It was ravenous. Exultant. Bruce found it hard to breathe. He also found it weird that Talia was calling Black Manta by his first name, but that was the least of his problems right now.

Bruce took a deep breath.

“Who is The Undying?” he asked.

And there was that smirk again.

“Beloved,” Talia said. “You know who The Undying is. Or you will, once you stop… and think…”

Well, she said she wouldn’t let him win. Bruce Wayne, taking her advice, stopped and thought.

A week ago, The Undying used one of Zatanna’s portals to teleport Clayface to Bludhaven to take a shot at Nightwing with Nora Fries’ handprint to get the whole ball rolling.

Also, in the same vein, The Undying sent Clayface to do the same thing to Hamilton Hill Jr. with Hamilton Hill Sr.’s handprint yesterday, and…

…and that didn’t make any sense.
Nightwing said that Clayface had been incinerated (by a mind-controlled Zatanna, as it turned out) in his cell thirty-six hours before Nightwing had arrived at Arkham to investigate. If that was the case, then Clayface would have had to have died quite a few hours before he could have ever shot Hamilton Hill Jr. The son of Gotham’s former disgraced mayor was still active in city activities, still in the public eye trying to get a museum opened in his father’s name. There was no way he could have been shot that early without the event having made it into the previous day’s news cycle.

Which meant…

Bruce remembered the last time Talia was in Gotham, and she told Batman that she had destroyed the last Lazarus Pit in the city.

He remembered Batman not believing her.

And if that was the case, there was only one way Hamilton Hill’s fingerprints could have gotten on the murder weapon that killed his son.

*Everything you love in this life... has to burn.*

“Talia,” Bruce said. “You… You *didn’t.*”

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Half of the members of the press assembled at Gotham Central gasped when they saw the face of The Undying.

It was quite a bit of an improvement from the last time they had seen this face. The gray that had been in that black hair was gone now. The new black beard he sported made him look healthier. And his brown eyes had a fire in them that hadn’t been there before.

But it was still the same person as last time, made all the more impressive by the fact that this man had died two years earlier. Vicki Vale herself did a story on his funeral.

“My name is Hamilton Hill,” The Undying said, “and my hand to God, I will be the *last* mayor of Gotham City…”
"Well, How Did I Get Here?"

Chapter 18: “Well, How Did I Get Here?”

THE STAPLETON BUILDING - EIGHT YEARS AGO

This was the third time that Batman had crossed the path of Talia al Ghul.

The first was during the great schism in the League of Assassins four years ago, when Ebeneezer Darrk, one of Ra’s al Ghul’s most trusted lieutenants, had turned on Ra’s, and it meant war. Batman had rescued Talia from Darrk’s kidnapping attempt, and in the ensuing struggle, Talia had shot Darrk in the back of the head to save Batman’s life.

The second was when both Talia and his ward, Robin, Dick Grayson had been kidnapped three years ago. Ra’s and his manservant Ubu had even shown up in the Batcave to enlist Batman’s help in finding them. Only for it to turn out that the kidnapping had been a ruse set in motion by Ra’s to test Batman’s suitability as his successor.

For Talia al Ghul had fallen in love with Batman from the first moment she had laid eyes on him.

And tonight was the third. Talia and a small detachment of her female honor guard had been sent into Gotham City to kill someone named David Cain, who was an assassin that had somehow crossed the League. The only intel that Batman could gather was that Cain was looking for his daughter, who had vanished a year ago and had been rumored to be in Gotham.

Cain had torn through the members of Talia’s guard, and had managed to drive a knife into Talia’s left shoulder before he escaped from Batman, who had been monitoring the situation from the top of an old factory across the street from the rooftop where the fight had gone down.

Amid the scattered dead bodies of Talia’s guard, Batman helped her to her feet, and took her to the closest place where she could be helped: The cache in the safehouse in the Stapleton Building in the East End, four floors above a dive bar called The Stacked Deck.

They said nothing as they entered the empty and spacious fifth floor. Batman stood Talia against the wall as he pressed the right combination of bricks that would cause them to slide back and reveal a cache full of weapon resupplies for his utility belt, as well as first aid items.

Batman gently peeled the black leather jacket off of Talia, revealing that she was wearing nothing but a forest green brassiere underneath that was, in his estimation, rather flattering.

Which struck Batman as odd. He had always assumed that the women in this game, from Catwoman on down, wore something like a sports bra beneath their costumes. It would have been more practical after all. And here was Talia al Ghul with not even a shirt on under her leather jacket.

Batman suddenly had a multitude of questions, and no one to ask.

He swabbed away sweat from around the wound in Talia’s shoulder, and then applied a special compound Lucius had cooked up: a disinfectant that snap died and served double duty as a bandage to stop the bleeding. Nonporous, so no chance for infection.

Talia grunted in pain as he used the tube to apply it, sweat and a strand of hair distorting a usually composed, beautiful, and regal face.
Their eyes locked.

They still said nothing.

Looking back on this moment in the years to come, Batman considered this a moment of weakness. Talia quickly leaned in and kissed him. Their teeth clicked together with the needy force of it.

Batman closed his eyes and felt himself dissolve.

Talia’s clothes landed on the floor with a soft flutter. Batman’s armor with heavy and hollow thuds.

She took Bruce to the floor, her thighs wrapping around his waist. Her fingers alternated between gentle caresses on his shoulders and ragged scratches down his chest as she rocked back and forth.

His hands moved from her rib cage down the dip of warm flesh to her weaving hips, and as he tried to vanish into the slick warmth of her, Bruce Wayne closed his eyes.

He remembered every time Talia had ever looked at him. Every time those bottomless brown eyes radiated warmth or desire.

Talia looked at him as though he was the pinnacle of all mankind. As though he were the ideal to which everyone else should aspire to. And having a woman like Talia look at him made him believe it, however intermittently, however fleetingly.

She and her father wanted him to head the League of Assassins one day, and in this moment, right now, Bruce saw an opportunity there. He could change it from the inside, dispense with their credo on killing, and he would have at his hands an entire army of operatives in every major urban center on the planet, stopping criminals dead in their tracks.

And he would have a wife. He would have the child that wife so desperately wanted to give him. He hadn’t been a part of a real family since he was eight years old, and the opportunity was right here, if he reached out and took it.

And isn’t that what his parents would have wanted for him? To be surrounded by people who loved him? To do good in a world that so often bent bad?

A thought sounded itself within the recesses of his mind: I deserve this.

Bruce opened his eyes.

Talia was weaving in and out of the light through the window. The residual light illuminated the beads of sweat rolling down her bare breasts as she shifted repeatedly into the darkness. As though whatever hand guided the universe painted a starry night in miniature on Talia al Ghul’s nude form.

And seeing this, Bruce found the core.

It’s a lie…

Talia al Ghul was a murderer in a long line of murderers, and she wanted Bruce to join her in a plan for conquest that would claim the lives of billions. She had never wavered from this goal in the years he had known her, and the certainty came to him that she would never look at him the way she looked at him if she were convinced at all that he could change her mind.

She looked at him with love and lust, but what did that mean? What did it say about Bruce Wayne and Batman that a killer bent on near-total genocide wanted him so badly that she parted with all
grace and dignity and decided to screw him on a dirty floor in a bad neighborhood?

He remembered every look, every glance that Talia had given him, and he could almost see rot pulsating beneath their surfaces. She loved what she saw, but what did she see? A blunt instrument? A force of destruction? A killer yet to wet his blade with innocent blood? Batman, after all, had to bide the line every night in order to avoid taking a life.

And maybe, just maybe, she was right. His wish to be a force for good danced on a knife’s edge, and here was Talia al Ghul, waiting for him to fall—hoping he would fall—so he could be fully welcomed into her family’s embrace.

A thought sounded itself within the recesses of his mind: *I deserve this.*

Talia’s soft grunts gave way to a cry as she arched her back and ceased her motion on top of him, sweat from her chest falling onto his. She held this way, her soft thighs tightening around his waist, until she collapsed on top of him. The heady mixture of lilac and sweat filled his nostrils. Her soft, spent panting carried traces of her voice directly to his ear.

She took his left earlobe into his mouth and bit down for an instant, before she let her breathing carry into his ear.

Talia whispered a word.

“Beloved…”

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**THE STAPLETON BUILDING - NOW**

“Why Hill?” Bruce asked.

Talia put her hands on her hips. “Hamilton Hill is a man of deep grudges, Beloved. Against you for stopping him. Against the city itself for abandoning him and cheering his downfall.”

“And a crooked mayor fits the profile for becoming a killer?”

“Oh, please,” Talia said. “The League of Assassins is built upon its eye for talent. Its ability to sate the needs of all who join. Anyone can be anything we want them to be with the right motivation.”

“And the fact that exposure to Lazarus Pits can lead to insanity has nothing to do with it?” Bruce asked.

Talia shrugged her shoulders.

“Well…”

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**THE GOTHAM CENTRAL PRESS ROOM - NOW**

“Yes,” Hill said to all in attendance. “The last. I was removed from my office under unacceptable circumstances, and I will have my hand on the wheel when this city sells its soul.”

Silence.

“What?” Hill asked the stunned members of the press. “Did the fact that I called myself ‘The Undying’ not give it away?”
Vicki Vale could see from her vantage point that Hill was fighting the urge to laugh at his own joke.

Hill drummed his gloved fingers on the podium.

“Upon my suffering,” Hill said, “Batman made his name.” He looked at Vicki. “Weren’t you the one who called me Batman’s first success story? He’s the one who got me impeached after all. He’s the one who got me charged with corruption.  *Corruption in Gotham City?* That’s… that’s like charging someone with being wet in a swimming pool.”

Hill actually had the gall to wait for a laugh before he continued.

“I spent… *so* many years hating Batman for what he did to me. For ruining my career. For destroying my family’s name. For putting me into seclusion from the *shame* of it all. But… I had to literally come back from the dead to realize something. I shouldn’t have blamed Batman at all. In fact, looking back on it, I have to respect Batman. So no…”

Hill leaned forward on the podium.

“I should have blamed all of you.”

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**THE 1898 TUNNELS - TWO YEARS AGO**

There were four Lazarus Pits left in Gotham City. One of them was located in a series of subway tunnels that had begun construction in 1898, and had to be abandoned because the tunnels were three feet too small to accommodate the train cars of the time.

The Pit was located behind the tunnel of the F Line. Talia had had Kasha and three of her lieutenants take the wall down with sledgehammers, revealing the pit of green, life giving liquid within. That was two nights ago.

Last Night, Talia had had Kasha abscond from the Gotham City morgue with the body of Gotham’s late mayor, fifty-eight-year-old Hamilton Hill. The body was replaced with another of similar age and build. Post-mortem plastic surgery had been performed, as well as extensive organic modifications to make the faces match. This was an art that The League of Assassins had perfected over the span of centuries, and it was well-used here.

They had dropped Hill’s corpse into the Pit, and as the fluid in the Pit turned from a vibrant green to a dull yellow, spent from its function giving life back to the lifeless, Hamilton Hill, the gray already having vanished from his hair, emerged naked from the pit with madness in his eyes and screams in his throat.

Talia had had Kasha on standby with a tranquilizer gun, ready to subdue Hill, should he have proven to be unpliable.

He had, as it turned out.

Now, eighteen hours after his resurrection, Hamilton Hill sat in black robes at a table in one of the cafes in this network of subway tunnels that had been built a hundred twenty years ago, but had been abandoned before they had ever served a diner.

His arms were wrapped around himself. He was staring at the floor. He was muttering something so softly that Talia could not hear him.

*He is insane,* Talia thought. *I hope he is controllable.*
“How do you feel?” Talia asked.

Hill looked up at him. His brown eyes were wet. His jaw moved up and down as he tried to find words.

“I… I was dead,” Hill said.

“Yes.”

“And now I’m not.”

“Yes.”

Hill hugged himself again, and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry, Miss,” Hill said. “But I am possessed… of a great rage. It… It makes my fingers tingle.”

Talia readied herself. If he made a move, she could destroy him with her bare hands. She would have wasted a Lazarus Pit and blown her entire plan, but uncontrollable was uncontrollable.

“Why?” Talia asked.

Hill looked at her again.

“I died,” he said. “I felt myself pass, so I know this isn’t a dream, and… I did it before I could…”

He clenched his eyes shut. “They hated me.”

“Who?”

“They. Always them. When I died, how many laughed? How many smiled? Was I so bad that I deserved that? I wasn’t a monster, I wasn’t…”

“No,” Talia said softly. “No, you weren’t.”

“They hated me,” Hill said again. “I had to die before I could hate them back.”

Talia knew she had to be very careful. This man was unstable, and any carelessness on her part could spell disaster.

Softness still in her voice, Talia asked “Would you like revenge?”

Hill’s eyes shot open as he looked at her. Tears were falling down his cheeks.

“Against them?”

“I have brought you back from death itself,” Talia said, “so you know the power which I wield. Yes, against them.”

Talia leaned down until she hovered just over his face.

“Against Batman.”

Hill blinked.

“Batman’s gone,” he said.
“But if he sees *them* suffer, he will come back. And I will give you the power to feel his life in the palm of your hand before you snuff it out.”

Hill examined her face. “Do you know who he is?”

And Talia examined his face in turn. Hill was unstable, though he could prove useful.

She needed to know whether or not she could trust him.

And she knew.

“No.”

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**THE GOTHAM CENTRAL PRESS ROOM - NOW**

Hill stared into the camera closest to him.

“Every single one of you is responsible for what happened to me.”

He stood up straight. “People like to make theories and conjecture about how Batman single-handedly swooped in and cleaned up Gotham before the clowns and the penguins and cats started to contend with him. But the fact of the matter is, there was nothing single-handed about it.”

Hill spread his arms wide to accentuate his point. “Batman was *summoned!*”

He let his arms fall back to his sides. “He’s not just one man. He’s an act of collective will. He was summoned by all of you, because you cried out, begging that someone would save you from the dirty cops, and the crooked politicians, and the mob, when all we ever did was KEEP… YOU… SAFE!”

The echoes of his yell reverberated off the sides of the room.

“Whose money did I take that wasn’t giving it away?” Hill asked. “Who died except people who didn’t matter and weren’t gonna be missed? I brought order to this place, and you *threw it all away!* You looked at your betters, who moved and shook so far above you that couldn’t even see them, and you asked for what wasn’t yours. And you summoned a man dressed as a bat, who destroyed that order, and let Hell in after him! Hell like The Joker and Two-Face, who racked up more bodies that the mob and the cops ever could!”

Hill took a deep breath. “So I can’t blame Batman at all.”

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**GLOUCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS - ONE YEAR AGO**

Talia found David “Black Manta” Hyde in a graveyard standing over a gravestone with nothing on it. He turned to look at her, and he seemed to know who she was.

“I must compliment this place,” Talia said. “It is quite beautiful.”

“It’s Alabama with clam chowder,” Hyde said, and the subject died off.

As they tried to find a place to sit and converse in the New England twilight, Hyde told Talia that he had been standing at the grave of his father, who had been murdered by Aquaman. The headstone had to be left blank, for if the people of this town knew that the father of Black Manta was buried
within its city limits, then that grave would be defaced.

They found a place to sit at the unlikeliest of locations. On this evening in June, the Daughter of the Demon and the sworn enemy to the King of Atlantis sat at a picnic table outside of a Dairy Queen.

“So let me get this straight,” Hyde said after Talia had finished explaining herself. “You brought some politician back to life, and you’re hatching some plan in Gotham to bring Batman back.”

Talia felt a slight bit of anger rise within her at so curt an assessment, but she extinguished it.

“Yes.”

“And you want me to help?”

“Yes.”

“This is nuts. You know that, right?”

Talia tilted her head to the side. “Is that a problem?”

“Not from where I’m sitting,” Hyde said. “I fail to see what I get out of it, though.”

Talia smiled, and said:

“Atlantis…”

Hyde squinted his eyes in interest.

“I see I have your attention,” Talia said. “How long have you tried to take Atlantis, to kill its king, with nothing but pirates and mercenaries at your back? You need organization. You need skill. You need the League of Assassins.”

Hyde smiled.

“And the League will help me out?”

“Why would we not?” Talia asked. “My father currently holds no plans on the siege of Atlantis, and I think this is a mistake. Atlantis is a treasure trove of technology and weaponry that could be better used in hands that aren’t Aquaman’s. If this world is to be conquered, it is to be conquered from beneath.”

Hyde folded his arms. “I’d heard that Ra’s al Ghul’s little girl was all hot and bothered over Batman. I didn’t know she was ‘Overthrow Atlantis’ hot for the guy. He doesn’t know what he has, does he?”

He laughed. Talia said nothing.

When he calmed down, he said “But that’s where I’m getting caught up. See, you’re bringing me into this under the impression that I’ll fight Batman and lose. The question I have, is… What if I win? What if I turn Batman to ash?”

Talia sighed, and said “If Batman dies at your hand, he was not worthy of me to begin with.”

Hyde laughed again. “Oh, man,” he said. “I look at you, you know what I see?”

“Enlighten me,” Talia said.
"I see a beautiful woman in an ugly kind of love," Hyde said. "I see a willful woman who doesn’t like being ignored, and will move heaven and earth to make that lucky guy pay attention to her again… And I see a woman who’s gonna find out way too late that this guy really wasn’t worth it."

Talia narrowed her eyes at him. "I will crush this world beneath my feet, and he will be at my side when I do so."

"Okay," Hyde said, smiling. "Then where is he?"

Talia said nothing. Hyde folded his arms.

"I’ll help," Hyde said. "If it gets me Atlantis, I’ll help. One thing, though."

"Yes?"

Hyde seemed to hesitate before he spoke. "If you know how Batman’s gonna act before he does it, then you must know him well. You must know who he is under the mask."

Talia scanned Hyde’s face. It was beautiful, save for the scars that ran down the side from one of his many fights with Aquaman. But even those lent him a dangerous allure that gave her pause. He was impudent… and confident… and bold… and even a little terrifying.

She needed to know whether or not she could trust him.

And she knew.

"Yes."

Hyde shrugged his shoulders. "Don’t tell me," he said. "If I go into this knowing he’s been Ted the Insurance Man this whole time, I don’t think anyone’s ego would ever recover."

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**THE STAPLETON BUILDING - NOW**

"What next?" asked Bruce.

"For you?" Talia asked. "Quite a bit. We’ve tested your intellect, and now we must test your endurance. But for myself? Nothing. My quest is complete. I needed Batman to return, and Batman has returned. I will find a place to watch the rest of these events. I trust you will oblige in making them entertaining."

Bruce hung his head, took a deep breath, and asked:

"Why?"

She said nothing. Without even looking at her, he could sense a small gust of rage building up.

"'Why?'" Talia asked. "My father gave up on you. He told me he would never let his daughter lower herself by marrying a simple billionaire whom life itself had defeated. Without you, who else shall I be paired with? A mercenary? Some despot? One of the simple warriors that I myself had a hand in training? Is that what you would wish of me, Beloved?"

"That’s just it," Bruce said, finally meeting her gaze again. "That word. Why do you love me?"

Talia blinked. "Your will is unmatched."
“What else?”

“Your mind is unparalleded.”

“What… else?”

Talia blinked again, and that smirk came across her face. “If you are fishing for compliments about how beautiful I think you are…”

Bruce felt his own flash of rage rise up within him, veined by the darkest kind of sadness.

“All you’ve done,” Bruce said, “is list things that I have. Things I can pass onto a hypothetical child one day. What is it about me, you love?”

Talia sighed. “Everything else is…”

Bruce cut her off. “Am I a good man?”

“What?”

“Am I a good man?” Bruce asked, and in doing so he felt Batman and Bruce Wayne merging into each other. He’d spent his entire adult life avoiding this moment. As the smartest person in any room he was in, Bruce had never felt the urge to question himself, not in a haughty or elitist way, but in a kind of fear. As though he himself wouldn’t live up to his own scrutiny. And now that he needed outside validation from someone who genuinely loved him, his mouth and his body and his essence exuded need.

He took a step toward her. “If my father saw me across the street, would he recognize me as his son…? Or would he see what you see, and feel shame?”

Talia seemed to be at a loss. “Bruce, what--”

“I know you’ll never change,” Bruce said. “I know that there will always be a part of me that loves you. And I know you love me too. But if all those things are true, then… Then I can’t be a good man at all, can I?”

With his head down, Bruce walked to the window.

THE 1898 TUNNELS - TEN DAYS AGO

In a small chamber spattered with dried blood that would have been a men’s bathroom, had the builders of these tunnels had ever gotten around to finishing them, Talia al Ghul stood over a chained Harvey Dent.

Eighteen months ago, a member of Talia’s guard caught wind of the rumor that Two-Face was seen in a small shack in Slaughter Swamp outside of Gotham, planning his big comeback now that Batman had left the field. Talia sent six of her soldiers to investigate.

The rumors were true. All twenty of Two-Face’s men were slaughtered, and Two-Face himself had been abducted, and brought to these tunnels.

Talia had spent every day of the last eighteen months personally torturing Harvey Dent until his mind was as soft and as pliable as bread dough. He was no longer a threat to her plans, and would now even be the first salvo in The Undying’s war against Gotham City, provided David was as good as
he said he was.

Dent had his fingers in his mouth now, wondering where his teeth went.

There was a knock on the door. Talia answered it and saw Kasha waiting outside.

“Black Manta has taken the magician,” Kasha said. “He’s here with her now.”

Talia smiled, and left the room.

With Kasha at her side, Talia walked down a long hallway, dotted with some of the members of her guard, as well as the male henchmen that they picked up here in Gotham.

Degenerates all. All they’d needed was to have The Undying reveal himself as Hamilton Hill and promise them the same lease on eternal life that he’d apparently gained, and they fell right in line, almost to a religious degree. The rank and file of Gotham’s underworld had no idea what a Lazarus Pit was, so coming back to life was all new to them. This promise of everlasting life was something that neither Talia nor Hill had any intention whatsoever of honoring, but she didn’t feel she needed to share that with them. They were untrained, but they were easily controlled, and made for good shock troops.

As they walked, Talia asked Kasha “What is your opinion on our friend The Undying?”

“He is insane,” Kasha said. “And a fool.”

Normally, Talia would have removed the tongue of anyone who dared question her plans, but Kasha was correct.

“And what of Black Manta?” Talia asked.

Kasha’s footsteps stopped. Talia turned to look at her.

Her head was lowered a little, and her shoulders up. She wouldn’t look at Talia.

“I fear him,” Kasha said.

Talia smiled. “Come along, Kasha.”

The two entered the central terminal of the tunnels where, amidst the milling underlings and The Broker’s contacts continuing their work on a small five car train that would actually fit in these cramped tunnels, Black Manta and The Undying were standing over a beautiful and shabbily dressed woman in a wheelchair. She was wearing the mind-control hat that she’d had Julius liberate from the inventory room at Arkham.

“Zatanna,” Talia said.

Kasha kept her distance from them as Talia stepped in between Black Manta and The Undying to look at their prize.

“How did you get that close to Miss Sparkle-Fingers here,” The Undying asked. “She could have turned you into a toad.”

“You know these magic types aren’t worth a shit with hand-to-hand,” Black Manta said. “You just have to get close enough to them to knock them out. And this one gets all her power from talking backwards, so it’s even easier. You just gotta get close enough to them to punch their lights out, and you’re done. Hell, you dress up like the UPS guy and hold a box in front of you, and they’ll actually
open the door and let you in.”

“Where’d you get a UPS uniform?” The Undying asked.

“From the UPS man I killed.”

Talia took in Zatanna some more. With her power under their control, they could fire the first shot, sending Harvey Dent to burn alive in Selina Kyle’s apartment. That would be a message that would get to Batman most quickly.

She turned to Black Manta. “My contacts inside LexCorp tell me that the prototype targeting system is on its way into Gotham City. It will be ferried inside an ice cream truck to hide its route. Can you retrieve it?”

Black Manta stood up straight in his armor, and if Talia didn’t know any better, it was as though he wanted to make himself more imposing for her.

“Yeah,” Black Manta said. “I’m pretty sure I can manage.”

THE GOTHAM CENTRAL PRESS ROOM - NOW

Hill picked his silver mask up off the podium.

“I can’t blame Batman,” Hill said, “because I wore the mask too. I didn’t wear it as long as he did, but… I know what it’s like to be a force of will. I know what sacrifices it takes to be a symbol. I know that you have to purify yourself. Set all of the comforts upon the altar and light it ablaze. Anything that weakens you must be slashed off and set aflame.”

He set the mask back down on the podium. Vicki Vale saw (or thought she saw) a tear beginning to form in Hill’s right eye.

“Everything you love in this life,” Hill said, “has to burn.”

HAMILTON HILL JR’S BEDROOM - LAST NIGHT

Hill had used Zatanna to open a portal into his son’s bedroom. Hill had been keeping up with his son in the papers over the last two years, knew he wasn’t married.

So he’d be alone.

He had portaled in, saw his son standing there in light blue pajamas. He saw his son turn toward him, and Hill used the butt of the pistol he was carrying to knock him to the floor.

Hill descended upon him and covered his mouth. He could hear his son crying out beneath his hand, seeing his dead father’s face, but not believing it.

Hamilton Hill put the gun to his son’s head and pulled the trigger, evacuating blood and brain onto a Persian rug.

He stood over him, tears in his eyes. He knew this had to be done, but the weight of the act dragged him down from within. He put his hand to his face, accidentally smearing his mouth with his own son’s blood.

Hill had violated nature. His one and only son was dead by his own hand, and there was no
redemption to be had. Any loving God that may have existed in this universe had turned the warmth of His gaze elsewhere, leaving him forever in the cold of his own sin.

Within the shrieking of his own mind, Hill knew he had done something unforgivable. But he wouldn’t be forgiven for anything that came after this, and he needed to murder his child to prove to himself he could do what needed to be done.

He stepped through the still-open portal, back to the tunnels.

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**THE GOTHAM CENTRAL PRESS ROOM - NOW**

“I murdered my boy,” Hill said. “When I took all that dirty money from Rupert Thorne, I told myself that he was who I was doing it for. To provide for his future. I loved him... so much. And even after all this, he was trying to get a museum built in my honor. You all disgraced me, and he still loved his father!”

Hill wiped his eyes. “But I needed to do it… So I could do what comes next. Everything you love in this life has to burn, and by God, even after all that you did to me… I love Gotham City.”

He walked back to Zatanna’s wheelchair. He took the targeting system back out of the pouch in the back and held it out for the reporters and the cameras to see.

“This right here,” Hill said, “is a prototype to the best weapons targeting system known to man. It can track by DNA, but the vector most germane to us right now... is heartbeat.”

He held his hands in front of the numerous blooms of red on the targeting display’s map of Gotham City.

“This device tells me that Gotham City has nine million two-hundred-forty-eight thousand six-hundred seventeen beating hearts within it. Now, this targeting system is supposed to be hooked up to an orbital laser, but why use one of those when we have our dear friend Zatanna?”

Hill pressed the screen and zoomed the map out, revealing a circle around Gotham City. In real world distance, it spread out a mile after the city ended on any side, be it mainland or the Atlantic Ocean.

“See that circle?” Hill asked “If any of those nine point two million heartbeats passes that circle attempting to leave the city… This will happen to them.”

Hill snapped his fingers... and pointed directly at Commissioner Troy Clotworthy, who had been standing three feet away from the podium this entire time.

Zatanna perked up in her chair. Her eyes focused, and she said:

“Etarenicni.”

A green light bloomed within Clotworthy’s ribs, visible through his shirt. He looked at Hill already beginning to sweat. A few in the press started to squeal, to get up and move away from him.

“No,” Clotworthy said with pain in his voice through gritted teeth. “NOO--”

Clotworthy burst into flames, his screams filling the air along with the stench of burnt popcorn. The reporters started screaming and, and milling to the back of the room, until:
“SHUT UUUUUUUUP!”

The power of Hill’s scream overrode even the basic flight responses in all gathered.

“You’re gonna miss the best part,” Hill said as Clotworthy’s screams stilled, his body smoldering into nothing.

“Not only,” Hill said, “does this device track the heartbeats of people leaving Gotham City, it also picks up on the heartbeats of people entering Gotham City. So if any Kryptonian… any Amazon… any Atlantean… any Speedster of any kind, any Lantern of any color, any of those Goddamned Hawkpeople decide to enter this city to save the day, then five thousand people will die. At random. From this ittiest bitty baby to the oldest old fart. Just like our last two dear departed police commissioners. You want equality? Here it is.

“But there’s a catch,” Hill said. “One of the things we managed to work out in this mind control hat Zatanna’s wearing is that we’ve programmed it so it works as a dead man’s switch. Simply speaking, if she dies, so do all nine point two million souls in Gotham City. It’ll happen if I die too, so don’t get any funny ideas. Now normally that wouldn’t matter to any of you, except we kinda… sorta… forgot to feed Zatanna today. Tomorrow’s not looking good for her either. Neither does any day after that. I haven’t done any research on how long it takes for someone to starve to death. But when she does, you all burn.”

Hill walked over to Zatanna and put the targeting system back into the pouch on her wheelchair.

“Is there a way to save Gotham City?” Hill asked as he walked to the podium. “Yes. I can unhook Zatanna and destroy the targeting system without any further loss of life. Under one condition. The collective will of Gotham City must commit suicide.”

Hill looked directly into the camera.

“One of you… must kill Batman.”

He placed his hands on the side of the podium.

“And if you listen closely, you’ll hear the sound of this whole situation getting more and more interesting.”

ARKHAM ASYLUM - NOW

“And if you listen closely, you’ll hear the sound of this whole situation getting more and more interesting.”

Watching the press conference on the TV inside the central security station, Harold heard his cue from The Undying.

Julius Everdeen was not the only person The Undying had working in Arkham.

Harold To was working central security tonight, in the high tech computer station that controlled everything from the outside watchlights… to the cells themselves.

His task was simple. Once he heard the cue, execute the program he’d installed that opened every cell in Arkham, and then trigger the bomb that would destroy the entire central security station, himself included.
In normal circumstances of such catastrophic failure, they could remotely access security protocols from another terminal, but the program he was supposed to execute consolidated all of the cell controls to one location. They’d have to bring in new computers to undo the damage, and with all of the crazies overrunning the Arkham personnel (and eventually the city), stopping at Best Buy was not going to be high on anyone’s list of priorities.

Harold had the utmost faith in The Undying. He knew he would be rewarded for his sacrifice with everlasting life.

And he hoped that the mole they had in Blackgate performing the same function, letting all of their inmates out, would succeed.

Harold closed his eyes.

“For The Undying…”

He executed the program on the keyboard in front of him, releasing every patient in Arkham from their cells.

Then he triggered the bomb, destroying the computers.

And himself.

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BLACKGATE PENITENTIARY - NOW

The inmates heard the explosion coming from somewhere, and saw their cells open. The men and the women on either side of Blackgate stood, flummoxed, that freedom was just a few steps away.

All of them except David Hyde.

He’d known this was coming.

While everyone else was just standing there, Hyde immediately left his cell…

...and went straight for Quincy Feldon.

Feldon, who was still pretending to sleep, looked up when he heard the door open. He only saw Hyde when he was already up to his cell.

“No,” Feldon said. “I--ACK!”

Hyde grabbed Feldon by the throat. As he dragged him back to his cell, he could see the rest of the inmates in the block emerge from their cells. He could hear the guards way down on the other end of the wing discharge their firearms. He heard their screams moments later.

Once he got Feldon to the cell Hyde moved his hand from the disgraced cop’s throat to the back of his neck, standing him up.

“Oh please!” said Feldon. “I never--”

WHANG!

Hyde slammed Feldon’s face into the walls of the open cell.

What he pulled back barely resembled a face. The nose was squashed flat, the eyes were rolling
back into his head, and blood poured from a mouth that had a few less teeth. From what Hyde could both smell and hear, not only was Quincy Feldon bleeding everywhere, he was dousing the front of his prison scrubs with piss.

But Feldon was still twitching.

That meant he was still alive.

Hyde readied himself for one more go.

The **WHANG!** That came the first time was now accompanied by a thick, low crunch. And what he pulled back wasn’t a face at all. It was a narrow cavern of flowing blood and warped skin. The damage was so bad that both of Feldon’s dead brown eyes were now staring at each other.

Hyde dropped Feldon’s corpse into the puddle of its own refuse, and stared at the chaos slowly consuming this cell block.

“Now,” Hyde said. “Where did my armor run off to?”

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**SELINA KYLE’S HARLOW STREET APARTMENT - NOW**

Selina had been sitting on the couch in her bathrobe, trying to reckon with how she would respond after three of her employees had been murdered that day.

She had been watching the press conference on TV.

And she had heard the booms off in the distance through her open window.

She knew here they came from, and she knew things had gotten a lot more complicated.

Gotham had been through No-Man’s-Land scenarios like this, but then the city could be evacuated. The National Guard could be brought in. Superman could stop by and help out.

But according to that press conference, none of those were options now.

Selina knew how this city operated. It would protect its biggest assets first. That meant Founder’s Island and Miagani Island, where all the money was. If those two went, then there wouldn’t be a Gotham City anymore.

Which meant the more run down and interesting parts of the city, and all the innocent people therein, would be utterly defenseless.

That meant the East End.

Well… not entirely defenseless.

Selina stood up, shooing Isis off of her lap.

*This is utterly foolish*, she thought to herself as she went into the bedroom.

*There’s no percentage in anyone doing something stupid*, she thought to herself when she opened the bag she’d brought from Chinatown that contained her whip.

*You should just hole up here. No one’s gonna bust down an apartment door in Harlow Street at a time like this when there are perfectly good rich targets to hit*, she thought as she entered the closet.
and found one of her Catwoman costumes.

She was still trying to talk herself out of what she knew good and Goddamned well was sheer idiocy, when a thought, clear as a bell and totally unwanted, just popped up out of the ether within her mind.

_You’re gonna be out there in this, aren’t you Sailor?_

Selina hated herself for thinking this, now of all times.

But we can forgive her, can’t we?

Yeah, just this once.

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**THE GOTHAM CENTRAL PRESS ROOM - NOW**

No one in the room heard the explosions from Blackgate and Arkham Island, but Hill knew they had gone off.

“Now then,” Hill said. “Because I am so sporting, I will give everyone… forty-five minutes to leave the city.”

He looked at Zatanna. “Honeybunch, if you please?”

Zatanna stiffened in her wheelchair, and said **“Latrop.”**

A swirling silver portal appeared behind them, and as the reporters began a mad loud dash to leave, Hill, Zatanna, and the henchwoman walked right through.

Nightwing got to Gotham Central too late, coming to the front of the building just as the reporters fled screaming.

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**THE STAPLETON BUILDING - NOW**

Bruce heard the Blackgate and Arkham explosions as he was staring out the window.

And like Selina, he knew where they came from.

Talia walked up behind him.

“Your city is in chaos,” Talia said. “Its people in turmoil. Violence and death will come. And they will cry out in the night, hoping for Batman to save them.”

Talia was beside him now. She took his left earlobe into her mouth and bit down. Her teeth let him go and she breathed in his ear before she said:

“Welcome back, Beloved.”
Chapter 19: The Lord'll Sort 'Em

The Undying gave all nine-point-two million citizens of Gotham forty-five minutes to escape the city before he locked it down, threatening to incinerate any who passed a barrier a mile around the city limits with the weaponized magic of a mind-controlled Zatanna.

And forty-five minutes was all it took for Gotham City to descend into chaos.

The resurrected Hamilton Hill gave his head start at 7:55 PM, and the first two entities to respond to The Undying’s act of terrorism were the Federal Aeronautics Administration, and the Kane County Sheriff’s Department.

The FAA immediately suspended all flights leaving Gotham International Airport and Finger International Airport, and rerouted all flights scheduled to arrive. In addition, they immediately declared a No-Fly Zone over Gotham City itself.

The Kane County Sheriff’s Department set up checkpoints on Highway 8, leading south to Bludhaven, and north to New York a half a mile outside the Gotham City limits, which was a half a mile within Hill’s barrier. They also formed a barricade half a mile beyond the barrier to keep people from entering. For reference, the KCSD used a blurry close-up of the map of the city that Hill had displayed on the targeting system during the press conference, which was posted on their website, picked up by the media, and fleshed out by the Pentagon.

By the deadline, 8:40 PM (which was about the time the KCSD’s helicopters began patrolling the mainland looking for people trying to avoid the roads and leave the city on foot), when factoring in both cars and civilian aircraft, only fifty thousand people had left Gotham City.

The traffic congestion in Gotham City in that span of forty-five minutes was near total. Highway 8 cutting through Gotham, all major streets, and even all eight bridges connecting the three main islands were plagued by traffic jams. And all public transportation (public buses and subways) had been shut down.

The only bridge in Gotham City that wasn’t brought to a standstill was the unnamed bridge connecting Arkham Island to the mainland. Coming from Arkham, on foot, were the patients that had been freed by The Undying’s security bombing. At their head, two thousand people behind her in orange Arkham Asylum scrubs, was Margaret Pye, aka “Magpie.”

She wasn’t the leader or anything, she just got out first.

In fact, the only patient still in Arkham was Mister Freeze, whose armor that would have kept him alive in above-freezing temperatures was housed in another wing of the asylum. He wouldn’t have survived the walk to find it. Although at the time, he was so entrenched in his research that he hadn’t noticed anything had happened at all, and wouldn’t until he noticed that the orderly hadn’t come with his breakfast the following morning.

At 8:46 PM, six minutes past the deadline set by The Undying, a small civilian helicopter (whose pilot did not file a flight plan) had been noticed attempting to leave the city by KCSD helicopter pilots, and was attempting to cross the barrier.
Despite multiple attempts to wave the craft off, the helicopter crossed Hill’s barrier at 8:48.

Officers could report seeing green flames in the interior of the helicopter. Now pilotless, the helicopter crashed in between the north and southbound lanes of Highway 8 to the south.

The identity of the pilot, as well as any passengers that might have been in the craft, remains unknown.

Though this doesn’t have a specific time to it, it gradually became apparent as dispatchers in all of the GCPD precincts in the now isolated Gotham City found that roughly half of the off-duty officers that needed to be called in to restore order were not answering their radios or picking up their phones.

One officer, Leon Trank of Burnley, told GCPD dispatcher Judy Bagwell the following, before hanging up:

“What you think we’re able to help out there? Screw that and screw you. I’m going Bat-Hunting. That’s the only way to stop this.”

By midnight, thirty percent of all needed GCPD officers had not responded.

At 9:05 PM, Oswald Cobblepot stood on the balcony of the suite in the Iceberg Casino Hotel which he called home.

And he was holding a rocket launcher.

His top floor suite overlooked the shore of the Gotham River, providing a beautiful view of the mainland skyline…

…and a view of the ferry which brought people to and from the Iceberg.

The crazies were out from Arkham. The crooks were out from Blackgate. The entire city was scared right now, and that terror would lead to violence. Looting and rioting were all but inevitable.

And all that fear, all that greed, would eventually cross the river.

The Penguin aimed down the scope of the rocket launcher, and fired. The recoil of the explosive knocked him back into the suite next to the bed.

Shortly after he hit the floor, he heard the explosion.

He let go of the empty launcher, stood back up, and looked out the balcony again.

The ferry was in flaming ruins, and slowly sinking to the bottom of the Gotham River.

The Iceberg had enough food and water to last a fully occupied hotel three weeks. According to what he saw on television, The Penguin recalled that they had a maximum of two weeks before Zatanna starved to death, triggering the dead man’s switch that would set all nine million of Gotham’s citizens on green fire.

No one could leave the Iceberg now, his staff and his guests included… but that meant that no one could get to the Iceberg either, which was all The Penguin wanted.

Unless some criminal, or some enterprising citizen looking for food took a boat.
But The Penguin didn’t mind that at all.

He had plenty of rockets.

Speaking of explosives, agents of Hamilton Hill, both his own and those belonging to the honor guard of Talia al Ghul, spread about the city with their own, procured from the many arms deals they’d busted up over the past year with the aid of Black Manta.

The satellite dish atop the building containing WNTJ Channel 52 was destroyed at 9:58 PM by a rocket propelled grenade.

The satellites belonging to the three other major network affiliates were destroyed in the same manner in short order in the next few minutes in completely different areas of town.

Orders for their destruction came from The Undying himself. With no local news in Gotham City, all television coverage would have to come from cable networks who couldn’t enter the city, rending all viable information to hearsay.

The only way news would be able to get to the masses was through the masses themselves. Out of context snippets of video and audio would no doubt spread like wildfire among the citizens of Gotham City. Using their phones, of course.

Which, in the estimation of The Undying, would just make the whole thing seem scarier.

At 11:04 PM, much later than most pessimists would have assumed, the first riot broke out in Gotham.

It happened on Founder’s Island, that center of wealth and excess in the city, and it started in a most unlikely source.

A bartender from the hipster portion of Burnside named Alysia Yeoh (who’d been in a protest group with her girlfriend Jo, picketing animal testing at the Stagg Industries Gotham headquarters) had seen highlights from Hamilton Hill’s press conference on her phone. The protest pretty much broke off immediately after that, as their group, about sixty strong, wandered aimlessly down Penndecker Avenue, joining the people who had caused the traffic jam in the dash to leave the city.

They found themselves in the center of the great pit of rage that always seems palpable among thousands of terrified people. And this center was fixated on one specific storefront in particular.

Batburger was, as the name so ably described, a Batman-themed hamburger restaurant complete with costumed staff and menu items such as the eponymous Batburger, Night-Wings, Robin Nuggets, Ivy Salad, and Riddle-Me-Fish. It had opened four years ago, one year before Batman disappeared. And now that he was back, business had surged.

Until now.

As The Undying had made abundantly clear during his press conference, the only way to save the nine million citizens in Gotham City was for Batman to die. And as he’d yet to show himself this evening, the anger and confusion among the displaced and terrified who found themselves on Penndecker Avenue in Founder’s Island centered on Batman’s unofficial gaudy capitalist facade.

People, scared and furious people, were packed in front of Batburger’s storefront. The staff inside were huddled behind the counter, not sure what to do. And the throng of people outside, stinking of
fear and body odor, were slamming on the storefront’s glass, screaming and hurling profanities.

“Does he own this place? If he does, he should show himself!”

“Batman has to die, right? To save the city, one of us has to do it!”

“This restaurant glorifies a sicko! I hope you’re proud of yourself in there!”

And Alysia Yeoh, who was so kind and even-tempered in her everyday life, was not immune to the mania that held this crowd in its grip.

She angled away from Jo, who didn’t even realize she’d gone, into the alley on Batburger’s right side.

She came back with a trash can.

Alysia forced her way through the mass of people, reared back, and chucked the trashcan through Batburger’s front window.

The crowd roared its approval. People literally crawled across broken glass into Batburger to violently vent their frustrations as the staff behind the counter took off their cheap restaurant-issued cowls and high-tailed it to the rear exit, leading into the alley.

And the rest of the people outside took this as their cue to get wild.

Immediately, the hundreds on Penndecker Avenue started busting into high-end jewelry stores, men’s clothiers, electronic shops, and anywhere else that looked expensive to get their loot and pillage on.

Being as the police precincts on Founder’s Island were the center of Gotham City’s riot suppression efforts, the officers that eventually responded to the disturbance (of foot, as the roads were blocked by abandoned cars) were well-equipped, if not precisely in the numbers that the situation needed.

The problem with this was that all of the cars that were congesting the streets were driven by people and families hoping to flee the city. These people brought their belongings with them.

These belongings included their firearms.

And at the first sight of Gotham City’s Finest, some of the rioters, made completely idiotic by anger and fear, started firing at the cops… and each other.

It took four hours for what forces the GCPD could marshal to successfully quell the Founder’s Island Riot.

During these four hours, seventy-three civilians and eighteen police officers tragically lost their lives.

And even with this loss of life, this was the closest thing to a success story that the GCPD could boast about on the first night of The Undying’s lockdown of Gotham City.

At 1:21 AM, The Gotham Mob Truce was forged.

Sal Maroni called Carmine Falcone, and laid out the facts as he saw them.

Now that everyone in Arkham and Blackgate had been set loose, and now that there was essentially no law, that meant that they needed to worry about The Penguin, who’d wanted to make the jump
from gunrunner to full-tilt gangster for years now.

They also needed to worry about Roman “Black Mask” Sionis, who had been in Blackgate. Maroni
didn’t know if Black Mask could make a play against them without manpower, but it was a
possibility they couldn’t ignore.

At 2:45 AM, a hundred Maroni and Falcone foot soldiers, having set aside their differences,
converged on Bleake Island in speedboats filled to the brim with rifles, handguns, and explosives,
converged upon Bleake Island, which was where most of the mafia fronts and legitimate business
interests were located.

And they went to war with the diminished GCPD forces stationed on the island almost immediately.

From there, they destroyed all four bridges connecting Bleake Island to Founder’s Island, Miagani
Island, and the mainland itself.

Completely sealing Bleake Island off from the rest of Gotham, the Maroni and Falcone soldiers
began patrolling the island on foot, armed with rifles and bazookas, and successfully took out two
police boats… as well as one supervillain.

Charles Brown, aka “Kite-Man” tagged in the shoulder by one of Falcone’s men as he tried to glide
to Bleake Island. The bullet went through his gliding apparatus, and he fell into the water and
drowned.

From there, the mob went cop-hunting.

There were two-hundred-twelve police officers stationed on Bleake Island when Hamilton Hill
instituted his lockdown.

Only one-hundred-fourteen stayed in uniform to serve and protect its citizens.

None of those one-hundred-fourteen lived to see the sun come up.

At 3:44 AM, the warm summer rain that had been threatening to fall for most of the last day finally
fell.

Because that’s what the terrified and angry people of Gotham City needed, really. Something that
made them cold, wet, and smell terrible.

And all throughout the night, as humidity gave way to rain. The Bat-Signal did not shine above
Gotham City.

The city had been through these isolation scenarios before, and throughout all of those instances, the
Bat-Signal lit the night sky to give the people hope.

But now, in Mayor James Gordon’s estimation, it just painted a target on the man’s back that he
didn’t need right now.

One side of Gotham City was mainland that could be easily patrolled. The other side was the
Atlantic Ocean.

The only branch of the armed services that had power within the limits of Gotham was the United
States Coast Guard. And at 4:21 AM, an hour-and-a-half before sunrise, the Coast Guard began
their patrol a half a mile away from the barrier, hoping to catch anyone trying to enter or leave the city by sea.

However, a half a mile away from the barrier on the opposite side, the first instance of superheroic assistance was noted.

Beneath the water, Aquaman had dispatched a small detachment of Atlantean soldiers, led by Tempest and Dolphin, to make sure that no one entered Gotham by a submersible vehicle.

Above the waves, however, four superheroes with the power of flight, patrolling in pairs, kept watch outside the barrier, and would do so until they were relieved by others via order of the Justice League.

The first four to make their patrol? Supergirl, Miss Martian, and the Green Lanterns Kyle Rayner and John Stewart.

Supergirl and Kyle were deep in conversation as they tended to their rounds in mid-air.

“I heard Black Manta is in there,” Supergirl said.

“Yeah, I heard about that,” said Kyle.

“You know he put me on life support, right? Impaled me with a Kryptonite knife and just left it in me.”

“I was there for that,” Kyle said. “You up for it if worst comes to worst? ‘Cause you don’t have to fight him if--”

“Oh, I want to fight him,” Supergirl said. “I still have the scar on my stomach. It’s because of that jerk I feel weird wearing crop tops in front of my friends.”

Meanwhile, John Stewart and Miss Martian were having their own mid-flight conversation.

“I’ve only been doing this for a year,” Miss Martian said. “I haven’t even met Batman yet. Do… Do you think he’ll like me?”

John looked over at Miss Martian. She was pretty, and kind, and sweet enough to come with her own FDA sticker, warning diabetics not to stand within ten feet of her.

“No,” John said. “I’m pretty sure he’s gonna detest you on sight.”

At 6:16 AM, just as the sun was coming up behind a gray sky, a black four door sedan with the WayneTech logo on the side emerged from a hidden tunnel entrance a half a mile away from Wayne Manor.

The sedan made its way through the manor’s gates and to the front door, where Barbara Gordon and Alfred Pennyworth were waiting.

From the front door of the sedan stepped Lucius Fox, a black man in his fifties, a little on the chubby side, whose look would be avuncular if it didn’t bypass that altogether, and become fatherly.

Lucius was still in his lab coat. He looked like he hadn’t slept.

Alfred skipped the pleasantries.
“Your family, Mister Fox?”

“I managed to airlift Tanya and the kids out of Founder’s Island before the riot started. Took them to Wayne Tower on the mainland, which is where I’m taking you… But poor Leslie Thompkins, though. There’s nowhere to land a helicopter on that part of the mainland. I hope she’s safe.”

“I’m surprised you could get a car here at all,” said Barbara.

“There’s a tunnel linking the Applied Sciences R&D lab to a little exit about half a mile from here. The lab has a private elevator which connects to the upper floors. That’s a good thing. Looters have taken control of the ground floor. The public elevators have been shut off so they don’t go higher, and I’ve sealed off the emergency stairwells… I felt dirty doing that.”

“Thomas Wayne would be appalled at me abandoning Wayne Manor,” Alfred said.

“It’s the only way,” said Barbara.

“Listen to her, Alfred. It’s only a matter of time before whatever bad guys are out there come here. It’s high ground or nothing at all.” Lucius looked at Barbara. “The car we’re taking isn’t exactly wheelchair accessible—”

Barbara waved him off. “I’ll be fine.”

“Are there any valuables form the Manor Master Bruce would like us to retrieve, should worst come to pass?” Alfred asked.

Lucius shook his head. “According to Bruce, you two are the valuables.”

As the sun rose, as those who had been out on the street finally found home after a long and terrifying night, as those who had stayed in their apartments and barricaded the doors for their safety and the safety of their families woke up in terror, CNN started running broadcasts from what would come to be known as The Barricade.

A full mile beyond the barrier on Highway 8 north, a veritable tent city had emerged overnight.

It was mostly staffed by the Kane County Sheriff’s Department, but more and more armed service personnel had convened during the sundown hours. This was also where members of the press, be they print, television or internet, had embedded themselves, calling The Barricade home for as long as the crisis played out.

But there was one large tent on the east side of The Barricade that stood all by itself, away from everyone else. A makeshift fence had been erected around it to keep both civilians and members of the press away.

This was the the tent brought in by the Justice League.

And outside this tent, one particular reporter was talking to the most famous man on Earth…

If one had to ask Superman (or Clark Kent or Kal-El of Krypton) what it was that first drew him to Lois Lane, he’d have to say it was her eyes.

Lois was the only woman he’d ever seen on any planet that had actual lavender eyes. He could have just shrugged his shoulders and said they were purple, but he had to know the exact shade.
He looked on Google and everything. Her eyes were a light lavender or, conversely, a dark lilac.

And those lavender eyes, when she was on the trail of a story, or trying to crack a subject for an interview, seemed to flare and focus like mining lasers. He had a Fortress of Solitude in the Arctic Circle. He’d been to Oa. He’d beheld the city of Kandor in miniature… But the prettiest thing Superman had ever seen was the unique and peculiar color of Lois Lane’s eyes.

Those eyes were downcast now, looking at her phone, as she held an umbrella to keep the rain out of her reddish brown bob haircut. Superman himself was standing under the flap joined to the tent’s entrance, keeping the precipitation out of his already slick hair.

Print media in embedment situations such as these didn’t have to worry about appearing on camera, so they opted to dress for comfort. Lois was wearing a red and black flannel over a gray t-shirt and a pair of jeans that hugged her in places anyone with good taste would find rather appealing.

“So let me get this straight,” Lois said. “On the record bullet points.”

“Shoot,” said Superman.

“There’s a magic barrier around Gotham City put up by a mind-controlled Zatanna.”

“Yes.”

“And a targeting system that detects every heartbeat in the city limits.”

“That’s right.”

“Anyone tries to leave Gotham, and Zatanna fries them.”

“Yup.”

“Anyone tries to enter Gotham, and five thousand people in the city get fried at random.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Everyone dies if Zatanna starves to death.”

“Right.”

“And no one dies if someone kills Batman.”

“Well,” Superman said, “Batman would die. I’m pretty sure that counts.”

Lois gave him a “Well, duh!” look, but didn’t say anything.

“Okay,” Lois said, putting her phone in the front pocket of her flannel shirt. “That’s it for On the Record questions. Off the record… is anyone looking?”

Superman looked through the fence surrounding the tent.

“Nope.”

“Good,” Lois said.

She walked up to him. She got on her tiptoes so they were on a more even level, and her soft, full lips met his. His arm wrapped around her waist while hers did the same beneath his cape. Their kiss
broke, and she spent a few seconds just resting her head on his chest.

“How are you holding up, Superman?” asked Lois.

“Nine million people are in danger,” Superman said.

“And how is Clark Kent holding up?”

“I know Ron knew the dangers of going to Gotham City for a story, but this is just too much.”

“And... what about my husband?”

Superman sighed. “I’m worried about my best friend.”

Lois broke the embrace first so she could look Superman in the eye.

“Would Bruce want to hear you’re losing faith in him?” Lois asked.

“I’m not losing faith,” Superman said. “But he was on the shelf for three years. I don’t know if he’s the same guy who was in the League with us.”

“But…”

“‘But…’” Superman said. “I’m worried. I’m a worrier. That’s just how I am.”


He sighed. “It’s not that Karen’s costume is revealing,” Superman said. “She likes it, and that’s all that matters. But it gets so cold in New York during the winter. If she lived in California, I wouldn’t…”

Superman trailed off when he saw his wife stifling her laughter.

“Let it out.”

“No, I’m--I’m done” Lois said, trying to wipe the smile off of her face. “Is Batman alone in there?”

“He isn’t,” Superman said. “Nightwing and Oracle are trapped in there as well.”

Lois nodded. “Is, um... Is Catwoman in there, too?”

Superman put his hands on his hips, and cocked his head. “What is it with you and Catwoman?”

Now Lois sighed. “Because I’ve never met Catwoman. If she and Batman hook up, I might actually get to.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Because she’s cool! She knocked off the count room at the Queensland Park Casino.”

“I remember that.”

“So cool!”

“To answer your question,” Superman said, “Probably. I don’t know.”

Superman’s face cracked, and he started laughing. This was not a small thing. He had his hands on his knees as he did so.

“Feel better?” Lois asked.

Superman, still hunched over laughing, gave her a thumbs up.

Once that passed, the phone in the front pocket of Lois’ flannel shirt started vibrating. She fished it out and looked at the screen.

“It’s Perry,” Lois said.

“Better you than me,” Superman said.

“Chivalry’s dead.

“And the Chief killed it. Good luck, hon. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Lois said, and got on her tiptoes again to give her husband a quick kiss. Almost as quickly, she reached her free hand beneath his cape and grabbed a handful of his backside.

She pulled away, shaking her hand as though it hurt. “Damn near broke it.”

Lois always said that. He always smiled.

As she walked away beneath her umbrella, she tapped the screen of her phone and yelled “What do you want?” to the Editor in Chief of the Daily Planet.

Superman turned around, and opened the flap of the large tent and walked in…

...to be greeted by Wonder Woman.

Superman looked at the flap he had come through, and then back at Wonder Woman.

“How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough for me to be truly happy for you,” Wonder Woman said. “And enough for quite literally anyone else on Earth to be truly disgusted.”

Superman just shrugged and said “Better you hearing it than Hal.”

He looked out at the rest of the tent.

Superman had assembled a team of seven to go into Gotham City as soon as the situation changed, for either the better or the worse, including himself and Wonder Woman.

Sitting at the table in the middle of the tent were two of that team. In addition to their abilities, Superman selected them because Barbara Gordon and Dick Grayson might need emotional support and friendly faces to see should they make it out of this situation alive.

Because he was Superman, and that was just how his mind operated.

The person who Barbara Gordon would be happiest to see was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Dinah Lance, aka “Black Canary.” A revered metahuman martial artist (armed with a “Canary Cry” that could shatter even Kryptonian ear drums), she was in the now-on-hiatus Birds of Prey alongside Helena “Huntress” Bertinelli, and overseen by Oracle herself. The relationship between Dinah and
Barbara had been so deep and so close that it had even been rumored to be romantic. Neither Barbara nor Dinah confirmed or denied anything.

Black Canary had her boots up on the table showing off her fishnet stockings, arms clad in a leather jacket folded over her stomach, talking to the person that Superman figured Dick Grayson would most like to see should the best come to pass.

Princess Koriand’r of the planet Tamaran (also known as “Kory” to her friends and “Starfire” to the rest of planet Earth) was six-and-a-half feet tall, with gold skin, entirely green eyes, and long orange hair that came down below her waist. It was on fire at the tips, but strangely, Superman had never seen that fire actually burn anything. She was wearing her usual purple costume, which more like a swimsuit than anything else.

Superman thought Starfire warranted keeping an eye on. She, as with anyone else from Tamaran, led with their emotions. If Dick Grayson got out of this alive, she’d be elated. But if Dick Grayson died, she would be so bereaved and so furious that there was no telling what she would do in her grief. And Superman knew he was one of the few people who’d be able to stop her from doing something horrible.

She was sitting up on her steel folding chair like an attentive school student, in stark contrast to how laid-back Black Canary was at the moment.

“So you spent a few days in an underground kingdom where time moves slower, and that’s why you got fired from SeaWorld?” Black Canary asked.

“I would never work at SeaWorld,” Starfire said. “They are most cruel to the beings that live there. I was working at an aquarium in Key West.”

“But why, though? You’re a superhero. You have a Justice League stipend. You don’t need a job.”

“I felt as though I must properly acclimate to life on this planet and maintain a semblance of conventional normalcy.” Starfire’s usual perkiness now fell. “I feel I need this, as I am relatively young, I have been widowed twice…and I know Dick Grayson is not coming back to me.”

Black Canary instantly looked uncomfortable. “Oh… Well, that--”

“And so,” Starfire said, “I am on the lookout for a new romantic partner. I feel as though he must be a superhero, as one of the civilians of Earth may not be amenable to my… perceived eccentricities.”

“Oh,” Black Canary said. “Anyone in particular?”

“Yes,” Starfire said brightly.

“Who?”

Starfire sat up even straighter in her chair and said “Midnighter!”

Black Canary just blinked at this. “Ohhhhh… Oh, Kory. We--We need to have a talk, the two of us.”

As Black Canary scootched in close to keep her conversation with Starfire more private, Superman looked over at the other side of the tent.

For the team’s scientific analysis, Superman drafted Professor Ryan Choi, aka “The Atom,” who had
taken the name after the original Atom, Ray Palmer, disappeared a year ago. Ryan had only found Palmer’s Bio Belt at Palmer’s old stomping grounds of Ivy University a year ago (the same Bio Belt that allowed its wearer to shrink to even an atomic level), and he’d only been on the Justice League a month.

The Atom was talking to The Flash, the pride of the Gem Cities, one Wally West. Normally, The Flash was a bundle of fun, provided you weren’t a stick in the mud (Batman just barely tolerated his presence), but today, he seemed subdued. Standing there in his red costume, his arms folded,

“Are you alright?” The Atom asked.

“Yeah,” The Flash said. “It’s just, uhh… My wife Linda was supposed to cover that press conference in Gotham. But her flight was delayed, so…”

“So she’s not trapped in there.”

“She’s at home with the twins. She’s safe.”

“Good,” The Atom said. “You… You know it’s okay to be glad about that, right?”

The seventh member of the team was not present at the moment.

Wonder Woman put her hand on Superman’s shoulder.

“What ways do we have to get past this, Kal? If that targeting system is tracking heartbeats, then can we send someone who doesn’t have one? Red Tornado? I don’t think the Doom Patrol is busy right now, so can we send Robotman?”

Superman scratched behind his ear. “Red Tornado and Robotman aren’t exactly subtle. If this Undying character caught us cheating, what do you think the worst case scenario would be?”

Wonder Woman closed her eyes and winced. “He puts a bullet in Zatanna, and nine million people die.”

“Precisely,” Superman said. “I don’t even want to risk sending Deadman into Gotham City right now, and he’s an invisible ghost.”

Wonder Woman shrugged. “Danny the Street?”

“I wouldn’t even know how to do that. I’m pretty sure they’re Danny the World now.”

“Well, it’s nice to know they got better,” Wonder Woman said.

She turned and looked at The Atom.

“Ryan?”

“Yes, miss?”

Wonder Woman smiled. “I have a name, Ryan.”

The Atom rubbed his hands on the front of his red and blue costume. If he was trying to get sweat off of them, the fact that he had apparently forgotten he was wearing gloves hindered things quite a bit. “Right. Sorry, Diana.”

“Scientifically,” Wonder Woman said, “what can you tell us?”
“I’ve been running tests of the air and soil that I collected from near the barrier since I got here four hours ago,” The Atom said. “And right now? Next to nothing. From a physical and biochemical standpoint, magic is incredibly hard to pin down. I’ll keep trying, though. There is some spectral analysis I can do in light levels, and I’m still trying to get a water sample from the Gotham River beyond the barrier.”

“Thank you, Ryan,” said Wonder Woman.

It was at this point that Starfire and Black Canary had finished their quiet conversation.

“Oh,” Starfire said. “I see. So Midnighter thinks of other men sexually and romantically.”

“Yes,” Black Canary said. “His boyfriend’s name is Apollo, and he’s really nice.”

Starfire smiled a little bit. “He thinks of them the same way you think of Barbara Gordon.”

Black Canary cringed as though someone dropped an ice cube down the back of her bodice. “I… That’s… Well… And another thing…”

And Starfire smiled a little wider still. “He thinks about them the same way I think about Jessica Cruz.”

Whatever discomfort Black Canary had been feeling at that moment was apparently nothing compared the bomb that Starfire had just dropped. “I’m sorry, what?”

“For some bizarre reason, I thought only women felt that way on this planet,” Starfire said. “Strange that I labored under this mistaken notion for so long. It is nice to know everyone is having the same kind of fun. Thank you, Dinah, for enlightening me.”

Black Canary looked at everyone else in the tent, who had all heard this conversation, and then looked back at Starfire. “Hey… Y’know… It’s cool.”

Superman, usually blissfully ignorant of the romantic escapades of his fellow League members, wondered how such a hypothetical would work. The Green Lantern Jessica Cruz suffered from intense agoraphobia and near-crippling anxiety. If a beautiful golden-skinned alien taller than a redwood tree with romantic intentions was what it would take to help Jessica acclimate to the greater world outside of her Green Lantern duties, then he wanted to assist in any way he could. He wasn’t quite sure how he could assist, though. Restaurant recommendations, maybe?

The Flash looked at The Atom. “I see comments on message boards, saying members of the Justice League care more about getting in each others’ pants than saving the world, but that just ain’t fair.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Pretty people like us in tight and revealing outfits having to save the world on a weekly basis. That’s--That’s stressful.”

“Uh…Huh.”

“People are surprised we see each other off the clock?” The Flash asked. “I’m surprised the floors of the Watchtower aren’t sticky.”

The Atom groaned, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh, dear God, they told me you were like this.”
The Flash smiled. “How about you, Ryan. You got anyone special?”

The Atom sighed. “Yes…”

“Tight. Where is she?”

The Atom sighed again. “Prison…”

It was as if that word escaping Ryan Choi’s lips summoned the seventh member of the team, for at that moment, a silver portal identical to the one that Hamilton Hill kept disappearing and reappearing into materialized next to the table in the center of the room.

If this team had a science expert, then it stood to reason that it needed a magic expert.

The bad news was that it was John Constantine.

Diana of Themyscira was filled with a great love for all of Earth’s creatures. However, John Constantine was living proof that that love had an upper limit.

As the portal closed behind him, Constantine put an unlit cigarette into his mouth, and winked at Wonder Woman.

“Miss me, love?”

“Well, let’s see,” Wonder Woman said, and turned to Superman. “Kal, did the river Styx snap-freeze since the last time we saw John?”

Superman shrugged his shoulders. “Not that I’m aware of.”

Wonder Woman turned back to Constantine. “And lo, you have your answer. What can you tell us?”

Constantine raised a lighter to the unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. “Well…”

With a quick gust of his Arctic Breath, Superman blew out the flame. Constantine looked at him with a scowl.

“Not in the tent,” Superman said.

Constantine looked at the end of the cigarette, and saw that a thin layer of frost was on the tip.

He pointed the ruined cigarette at Superman. “A bloody killjoy, you are.”

The Flash smirked. “I know, right?”

“I’ve talked to Doctor Fate and Madame Xanadu,” Constantine said. “They’re trying to manipulate the astral plane to see if they can short out Zee’s powers remotely, but… there’s something else. The League of Assassins has their own magic, and it’s right difficult to get a grip on.”

“Heavy hitters like Doctor Fate and Madame Xanadu can’t put a dent in League magic?” Superman asked.

“It’s not about strength,” Constantine said. “It’s about… You know Basque?”

Superman squinted. The people?”
“The language,” Constantine said. “A little section of Spain and France managed to develop its own language without any Latin or Germanic influences. Like the words themselves just popped out of the ground. All magic in the world since the dawn of time has either been taken or shared. Except the magic used by The League of Assassins. Because no one’s ever taken it, and they bloody well ain’t sharing it. They’re protecting Zatanna with it, or they showed Zatanna how to protect herself while she was under mind-control. It’s not like knocking down a wall. It’s like trying to learn Basque in the dark. And it’s virtually impossible in the time we have.”

“Don’t we have two weeks?” Wonder Woman asked. “That’s how long it takes for someone to starve to death.”

“Not like this,” Constantine said. “Zee’s holding over nine million heartbeats in her head right now. And that takes its toll. It burns energy. We don’t have two weeks. At the outside? We have five days. And now we’re on day two.”

The entire room was silent. Superman and Wonder Woman, who’d endured crisis after crisis with the whole of the multiverse at stake, managed to lose a bit of the color in their faces.

“Thank you,” Wonder Woman said softly. “We’ll call you if we need you.”

Superman watched Constantine survey the both of them. The two mightiest superheroes on Earth were apparently powerless to save the woman he loved from a truly grisly fate.

Constantine snapped his fingers. A portal opened up, and he walked through, with it closing shut behind him.

Wonder Woman turned to Superman, the beginnings of anger on her face. “Kal, please tell me we can do something from here besides wait.”

“It’s hard for my hearing to isolate one voice in a city of nine million scared people,” Superman said. “And with all of the lead paint in Gotham City, my vision’s no help either.”

Wonder Woman looked at the ground. Superman put his hand on her shoulder.

“We have to put our faith in Bruce,” he said.

Wonder Woman looked right at him, their blue eyes meeting.

“And if he fails?” she asked.

Superman blinked.

“If he fails, Gotham burns… And there’s nothing we can do about it.”
Chapter 20: Oh So Cavalier

The rain fell from a dirty gray sky.

This worked for Batman. That meant he could go out in the day with no one hearing him, while he cast no shadow.

He knelt on a rooftop this morning in South Hinckley on the mainland. He pressed his fingers to the part of the cowl that covered his ears.

“Renard?”

Lucius Fox spoke in his ear. “Yes, Batman?”

“Did you collect Barbara and Alfred from Wayne Manor?”

“We just got back to Wayne Tower thirty minutes ago.”

Batman sighed. “Good. Are you still making those modifications to the Batmobile prototype?”

“It’s slow going,” Lucius said. “You’re asking a lot. And given that there are roads with which to successfully drive the new Batmobile, I’m going as fast as I believe the situation warrants.”

Batman paused a bit before he spoke again.

“Do you know how they say I’m always prepared?”

“Y--Yes?” Lucius asked, sounding unsure of how his answer was going to bite him in the ass.

“Preparedness is just a fancy way of saying I take a lot of wild guesses,” Batman said. “And I’m taking a wild guess that we will need the Batmobile before this is over.”

A pause, and Lucius said “Well, given what you’ve told me you have planned, I’m praying we don’t.”

“So am I,” Batman said.

“I’ll work faster,” Lucius said.

“Be sure to spend some time with your family, too.”

“I will,” Lucius said. “Renard out.”

The connection went dead. Batman saw that a light on his gauntlet was glowing blue.

Someone from the Justice League was trying to contact him.

He put his finger to his ear again. “Batman, here.”

A woman’s voice spoke to him. “It’s Diana.”

Batman winced automatically. He was a stickler for the no-real-names-over-comms rule. But this was Wonder Woman, and he knew there really wasn’t a point to that with her.
“Hello,” Batman said. “I take it you’re on the other side of that blockade, and Superman has set up a team.”


He winced again. “I would not be happy at all to see two of those people.”

Batman heard her chuckle. “No one likes Constantine,” Wonder Woman said, “but I still don’t understand why you don’t like Starfire.”

The first thought to come to him was: Kory is a distraction. Not to me. But to Dick.

He’d always felt that way about her. When she and Dick were in the Teen Titans, he had never seen a more goofily lovestruck young man in his entire life. He felt that, at such a formative age, Dick didn’t need to be obsessing over anyone, given how he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

But… Dick was even moonier over Barbara now than he had ever been as a kid over anyone, and Nightwing was a top-notch crime fighter. He was in the Justice League, and he could very well lead it one day.

He hated being wrong. Being wrong meant being imperfect, and he tried to spread being perfect into every facet of his life and the lives of those who followed him. Because if he was wrong in the field, people died.

But this time around? This new Batman after three years of hiatus? Something had to change. Try as he might, he was not an island unto himself, and how he acted not only reflected on the people around him, it caused ripples in the city itself. He had to be perfect, but he also had to be good. In whatever sense of the word that mattered most to the people he cared about.

“I don’t know,” Batman finally said. “Maybe I was wrong about her.

He said it.

But he didn’t feel it.

There was a moment before Wonder Woman started talking again.

“How are things in there?”

“Chaos,” Batman said. “I’m not doing nearly as much as I need to, because people keep shooting at me every time I poke up my head. The city is convinced that if I die, this nightmare will end. Nightwing and I are sharing the Batwing, so mobility isn’t a problem, but…”

“But what?”

“But Hamilton Hill isn’t the brains of this operation,” Batman said. “Talia al Ghul is.”

Wonder Woman sighed, and with an edge in her voice, asked: “Why is that I have never met the charming and capable Miss al Ghul?”

“Because she doesn’t like making eye contact with people she knows can kill her,” Batman said. “It’s one of the little quirks she has.”

Wonder Woman didn’t say anything for a while, until finally:
“Constantine told us that what Zatanna is doing under The Undying’s mind control is burning her out. She’ll starve to death three days from now.”

“I figured as much.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“I’m getting there.”

More silence.

“I… I don’t think that things between people should remain unsaid,” she said. “For all the saving of the world we do, we are, in essence… Cowardly. You and I… We were almost…”

“I know,” Batman said.

“Say the word… Say the word, and I’ll tell you what I should have told you years ago.”

“Diana?”

Her voice came soft over the air: “Yes?”

He closed his eyes.

“Batman, out.”

A moment passed, and when she spoke again, she demonstrated that talent he noticed she had with her voice. Even when he wasn’t looking at her, even when they were miles or continents apart, sharing nothing but a phone line or a radio signal, he could tell when she was smiling.

“Has anyone ever told you how irritating you are?” she asked.

The sounds that had accompanied Batman most of the night, wherever he had gone, were gunshots and helicopters.

The helicopters were the only way anyone could move quickly from island to island, or to the mainland from one of the islands and back again. Most of them were police choppers. Some of them were civilian choppers. But a miniscule few had to belong to Talia and Hill. Or at the very least, that’s what Batman was betting on. Both he and Nightwing were using the Batwing to go wherever they needed to in the city, trying to track down leads on helicopters, and putting out whatever fires they could along the way.

The biggest hurdle in this was that the gunshots that accompanied the sound of helicopters had a habit of being aimed at him.

The first came about an hour after Hill’s lockdown, but at least twice an hour since then, he’d had to duck or dodge someone shooting at him. He had to plan his routes ahead of time because more than a few of the rooftops (which everyone knew Batman used to get around) were being camped upon by citizens with handguns or rifles.

Some of these people were in GCPD uniform, either breaking from where they were needed, or not reporting in at all. The GCPD had had a newfound freedom during the three years Batman had been away, so that there would be a few that would come gunning for him, doomsday scenario or no, would have been expected.
But this many? During a time when the people of the city needed their help more than ever? Batman wanted to say he was surprised at this, but he truly was not.

For right now, however, one of the situations that needed dealing with seemed much easier to tackle.

In front of a pillaged flower shop on Miagani Island, there were only two people on the street.

The first was a man in the tattered remains of a gray business suit. His wrists and ankles were bound, and he had a burlap sack over his head.

The second was the man who had captured him. He was wearing brown buckle boots. His blue trousers were loose and billowy, as was his blue shirt, which he wore beneath a red tunic. He had a white lace cravat and a wide-brimmed red hat, up from which rose a white plume. He had a meticulously styled goatee and long black hair, its thickness draping over his shoulders. There was a rapier, a dagger, and an antique flintlock pistol on his belt.

He looked like one of the Three Musketeers, which was by design.

Batman had dealt with him before.

From the rooftop next door, Batman could hear their conversation… or what of it there could be, as apparently the prisoner’s mouth had been taped shut beneath the bag.

A few groans came from him now.

And his ridiculously dressed captor responded as he paced behind him.

“Never mind that, my dear man. Your trials shall be at an end once the obsidian menace that plagues this fair city reveals himself! Until such a time, sit tight, and you shall not be harmed.”

Batman waited until his back was turned before he glided from the roof to the pavement right in front of the flower shop, landing behind the bound and gagged man. The rain meant he didn’t make a sound as his feet touched the cement.

The captor turned around and jumped when he saw Batman and tried, pathetically, to play it off.

“AH-hhhh. The Dark Knight reveals himself, as my reputation no doubt precedes me!”


Cavalier bowed, and said “At your service.”

“You’re the male Catwoman,’ Batman said.

As Cavalier came up from his bow, a little tussle between fury and confusion played itself out on his eyes.

“I… I beg your pardon?”

“You have a gimmick,” Batman said. “You have a costume. You steal things. And Catwoman pulled her first job two years before you did. I hate to break it to you, but…”

Cavalier’s goatee was quivering. “How–How dare you? I, my good man, am above such comparisons to that feline mountebank!”

“If you say so.”
“I abducted this fellow,” Cavalier said, gesturing to the prisoner at his feet “to lure you into honorable combat, so that I might save this city from the vile machinations of The Undying! But you have impugned my reputation, and that shall not stand!”

Batman rolled his eyes. “That’s me,” he said. “I impugn as a hobby when I’m not fighting crime.”

“Pray this,” Cavalier said, puffing himself up. “Could Catwoman steal into the Gotham City Museum of Natural History under cover of darkness, abscond from the establishment with the jewels in its geological exhibit, and be back outside in no less than twenty-two minutes?”

“You’re right,” Batman said.

“Thank you.”

“Catwoman couldn’t do that.”

“Thank you.”

“Because she did it in fifteen. And she didn’t get caught like you did.”

Cavalier’s eyes were a cauldron of rage, and his left cheek was twitching.

“You have sullied the fine name of Mortimer Drake for the last time, you flying rodent!” Cavaliere loosed his rapier from the scabbard on his belt and readied it.

“Have at you!”

He thrust his sword. Batman dodged to the right and held his left arm up, so that the sword got caught in the serrated protrusions on the underside of his gauntlet. With one quick wrench of his arm, Batman snapped the rapier in half.

Cavalier pulled back and looked at the useless weapon in his hand, before dropping it and going for the flintlock pistol. He pointed it at Batman.

“Have at you!”

Before Cavalier could even blink, Batman launched his right foot outward, hitting the hand that held the dagger. He was back in his starting position before the dagger landed with a clang somewhere across the street.

Cavalier looked at his empty hand, turned an even deeper shade of red, and went for the flintlock pistol. He pointed it at Batman.

“Have at you!”

Batman didn’t even bother moving, as he knew what was going to happen next.

A dry click, and absolutely nothing.

“I don’t think the rain likes your gun, there, Mort.”

As Batman saw that yes, it was possible for a human being to turn purple with rage, Cavalier put his dukes up. With his wrists curled so that his fists were facing toward him, as though he were following Marquis of Queensbury rules like the Notre Dame mascot.

“HAVE AT--”
Before he could finish, Batman heard a loud POP! From across the street, and a bright pink tranquilizer dart was sticking out of Cavalier’s neck.

“YOU UuuUuu…” Cavalier said in a real-time facsimile of slow-motion as his knees buckled and he slid to the ground next to his captive.

Batman looked across the street and saw the silhouettes of ten people eregring from the alley directly across from his location.

He got ready.

As the band of ten advanced on him, the three at the head came out of the shadows.

Batman relaxed.

On the right was the now-retired Detective Harvey Bullock. On the left was Detective and new head of the Major Crimes Unit Renee Montoya.

And in the middle, holding a tranquilizer rifle, was a welcome face indeed.

“Thanks for occupying him, Batman,” Mayor Gordon said. “Gave us a clear shot.”

She had seen this situation before, and it never looked good.

From the corner of the alley, she had seen two men in long coats and fedoras walk up and talk to Fenton Keeting, a scummy drug-runner she knew from around the way. Or she had known him. He may have come up in the world since last they spoke.

The two men exchanged a few words with Keeting, and Keeting nodded the whole time. Then Keeting put his hands out, and what he said she could read on his lips well enough.

“Wait right here…”

Keeting walked in the door next to him, which led to the back room of a condemned convenience store. The two men in long coats talked among themselves. From what she could see, they didn’t look like the kind of criminals that roamed the East End at all. The thugs, the hoods, the low-lifes of this place, even when they were the next best thing to homeless, still took a kind of pride in their appearances.

These two guys were just dressed for work.

A couple of minutes later, Keeting shoved someone out the door he had gone through. She was wearing jeans, and she had a trash bag crudely duct taped over the upper half of her body. He shoved her in front of him. She tripped and fell, landing on her knees in a puddle.

But she knew it was a girl under that bag, because even from over here, through the rain, she could hear her whimpering and her crying.

She had seen this situation before.

And it was never good.

But now, she thought it was time to introduce herself.

It was the taller one of the two men in long coats who noticed her first, who heard her boots as they
clopped along the wet pavement. He stopped and squinted through the raindrops.

“Catwoman?”

Folding her arms a few feet away, Catwoman nodded.

The other one’s head snapped to her location. As did Keeting’s.

Fenton Keeting’s bloodshot green eyes went wide. “Shit, I’m out!”

And Keeting booked it out of the alley. He left the girl behind, so Catwoman didn’t care.

“I think my eyes are playing tricks on me,” Catwoman said. “Because I could have sworn I saw the two of you trying to buy this young lady.”

She turned her eyes to the girl in the bag, and then she looked back at the two men.

“You saw true,” first one said. “But it wasn’t going down like you thought it was.”

He pushed a side of his coat away from his waist. Hanging from his belt, along with the beginning of a gut, was a GCPD badge.

“Well, Officer…”

“Sergeant,” he said. “Carmoday.”

“Alright, Sergeant Carmoday,” Catwoman said. “I’d assume you were dealing with Fenton Keeting to free this girl… But I’d be assuming wrong, wouldn’t I?”

As the other man (another cop, by her guess), put his hands in his pockets and started looking shifty, Carmoday smiled, raindrops falling from his fedora and dousing his dark blue work shirt.

“Look around you,” Carmoday said. “You know how they always say America is two missed meals from chaos? Turns out, it was just a forty-five minute deadline. People in this city have info. Info that they’re not gonna give up unless we give them something in return. And how useful do you think money is in a city where people can just take whatever they want?”

He pointed at the girl on the ground.

“But we can give them her,” Carmoday said. “To hear Keeting tell it, it’s rare catching a natural blonde in the East End.”

Catwoman didn’t blink, and her stare held no emotion. “Info on what?”

“What else?” Carmoday asked. “Batman. We pop him, and the city’s saved. Or ain’t you heard?”

“I heard,” Catwoman said. “And, uh… You’re willing to ruin a young girl’s life to do it?”

“What’s one girl against nine million lives?” Carmoday asked. “And it’s just East End trash. Who loses sleep?”

Catwoman still didn’t blink. She put her hands on her hips.

“Look,” she said. “I don’t have anything against dirty cops—”

“We’re not dirty,” Carmoday said.
“Oh, so we can take that bag off of her and she can go home, then?”

Carmoday just glared at her.

“Like I was saying,” Catwoman said. “I got nothing against dirty cops. They come around, the bad guys throw money at them, and they go away. And as someone who’s a bad guy herself more often than not, that works out well for me.”

Carmoday sneered. “If only everyone were as reasonable as you.”

“I know, right?” Catwoman asked. “You guys are like hookers. We pay you to leave.”

Catwoman pressing that button got the result she wanted. Carmoday reddened. He was going to do something stupid very soon.

“But you fellas screwed up on one major thing today,” Catwoman said.

“Yeah? What’s that.”

Catwoman looked at the girl in the bag, and then back at Carmoday.

“No one… hurts girls… in my town.”

Carmoday blinked. “Well, I’d ask what you were going to do about it, but…”

He shifted the other side of the coat, revealing the butt of his service pistol.

“You see the question asks itself,” he said.

_Tap-tap-tap._

She tried to make as big a show of it as possible without moving her arm. She was tapping her index finger on the whip at her waist.

“We’re eight feet apart,” Catwoman said. “And I have twelve feet of bullwhip. So… Draw, pilgrim.”

Sergeant Carmoday was the kind of dumbass who holstered his pistol on the opposite side of their waist from their shooting hand with the butt out. Catwoman already had her whip out by the time Carmoday’s hand had circumnavigated his stomach.

She got off two lashes. The first one came up across his arm, cutting through Carmoday’s trenchcoat to the flesh of his forearm. The second one sliced a hole through his fedora (which went flying aimlessly to the pavement), and came down across his face, letting blood fly.

From where she was standing, Catwoman thought he may have lost an eye.

_Good._

She broke into a sprint, and by the time the other cop had his gun out, he couldn’t fire without fear of hitting Carmoday.

She slid into his shin, knocking Carmoday off his feet. Speed was her forte, and as she rose, she yanked the pistol off of Carmoday’s holster. By the time she stood, she already had the gun pointed at the other cop.
Who had his gun now directly pointing at her. His hand was shaking, though. Catwoman had to bet that, in the line of duty, this asshole had never even drawn his weapon, let alone fired it at a suspect.

“Well,” the other cop said. “Looks like we--”

Catwoman flicked her wrist and fired.

The bullet hit the wall that the other cop was standing next to, right next to his head, sending hot shards of red brick into his neck. He winced, screamed, and dropped his gun.

He opened his eyes again, and saw Catwoman still had Carmoday’s gun trained on him.

“There are two ways this can play out,” Catwoman said. “Either I take these claws of mine and cut me off a side of bacon, or you can leave.”

Blinking, and holding a hand to his bleeding neck, the other cop said “I need to help the Sarge.”

“No one can help the Sarge,” Catwoman said. “Least of all you.”

The other cop looked at Carmoday, then back at Catwoman, before booking it out of the alley.

Carmoday was trying to get up with with one arm while holding his other hand to his bleeding face. “Hey!” he called out to the other cop. “Hey, where are you going?”

Catwoman levelled the gun at him. “Disappear, asshole.”

Carmoday finally got to his feet, and quickly staggered out of the alley.

Catwoman dropped the gun, coiled her whip around her waist, and turned to the girl in the bag.

“It’s alright,” Catwoman said. “I’ll get you out.”

“Quickly, please,” said the girl. “It’s getting hard to breathe in here.”

Catwoman extended her claws and poked a hole in the bag. She widened it and brought it down over the girl’s head. A plume of blonde hair was visible, which she shook to reveal her face.

“Holy shit, you’re Catwoman!” the girl said.

The wild hair and running mascara threw her for a second, but Catwoman realized that she knew this girl.

“Oh, for fu-- Stephanie?”

Stephanie Brown said “Hi, boss!”

Catwoman groaned, and continued freeing her. Once she was done, she asked “Would you mind telling me just what the hell you’re doing in the East End?”

“Well,” Stephanie said as she got to her feet, “I bit a guy’s nose off yesterday.”

“You do realize that’s not an answer, right?”

“I got home,” Stephanie said, “I heard from Tommy Russell that there was a party here, and I hopped a bus. I just… y’know… wanted to…”

Catwoman, who spent most of the last evening in a bathrobe alternating between fits of anger and...
barely restrained crying jags trying to deal with what happened at Kyle Security yesterday, understood.

“It’s alright, Catwoman said. “I get it.”

“I was at the party when that shit with the dead mayor went down. I just got to the bus station when that forty-five minute window closed, and the buses shut down. That’s when I was jumped.”

“Can you get home now?”

Stephanie shook her head. “I live on Bleake Island with my mom,” she said. “I heard from that asshole’s phone conversations that the mob blew the bridges. I can’t get back. And he took my phone, so I don’t know how she’s doing.”

Catwoman closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. She wanted to remain stoic, but…

“Shit!” she said. “Shit-shit-shit!”

She took another deep breath.

Alright,” Catwoman said, her brow furrowed. “Come with me, I guess.

Batman watched two of Gordon’s group free Cavalier’s prisoner. He was balding, and looked to be in his fifties. Even as he was being questioned, he kept adjusting the lapels of his ruined suit, like an amputee scratching an arm that wasn’t there anymore.

He gave his name as Bill Koontz.

Another two drug a nearly-comatose Cavalier off out of view. He was an Arkham patient and not well. He hoped Gordon’s people knew well enough not to beat on him while he was down and couldn’t defend himself.

“City Hall has five helicopters at its disposal,” Gordon said to Batman as they stood in the alley.

Batman looked at him.

“It’s not my fault,” Gordon said. “The last administration paid for them. All I’m saying is, with the roads blocked, getting around isn’t a factor for me and my team.”

“How did you get your team?”

“I lit the Gordon-Signal.”

Batman nodded, as opposed to smiling. They both turned and walked deeper into the alley.

“I’m still friends with people who owe me favors,” Gordon said. “Bullock came running for this little group.”

“He’s retired,” Batman said. “He must have missed beating on people.”

“You know, I could level the same accusation at you.”

“Are you feeling testy this morning, Jim?”

Gordon sighed. “I always thought this city was cranky enough to become a Mad Max movie under
the wrong circumstances, but dear God, I didn’t think it would take just forty-five minutes. Even cops—cops I’ve known for years—have abandoned their beats just to hunt you. You should be flattered, Batman. Hamilton Hill came back from the dead just because he was pissed at you. As angry as I’ve ever gotten, I still couldn’t get a fourth season of Deadwood.”

“Hill isn’t angry with me,” Batman said. “Or at least not entirely.”

“Really?” Gordon asked. “He says he’ll stop this if someone kills you. If that ain’t anger…”

“And you believe him?” Batman asked. “If I thought my death would solve this, I’d have thrown myself off of Wayne Tower the first chance I got. But he wants to see the city suffer. Because he thinks it abandoned him.”

“Christ,” Gordon said. “Please don’t tell me that asshole has some kind of tragic backstory like Croc or Freeze, and I’m supposed to feel sorry for him.”

Batman shook his head. “Pain can make you do terrible things. But in my years of doing this, I’ve found that the worst people simply haven’t suffered at all. Hill was entitled. He thought Gotham owed him something. When Gotham didn’t pay up, he became capable of this.”

Batman looked away from Gordon.

“Where are you housing the people you’re apprehending?”

“Precinct lock-ups, or at least the ones that’ll cooperate with us. Where else? They’re getting full, though. Soon, we’re going to have to just tranq people and hide them, so they’re out of danger while they’re sleeping or when they wake up.”

“No real bullets?”

“We have our hat in hand, here,” Gordon said. “The precincts need their bullets, but they have a surplus of tranquilizer darts that they just gave us like we’re the last Trick or Treaters on Halloween night. We open our bags, and they pour the whole bowl in.”

“So you’re not acting in your official capacity as mayor right now with your band of Merry Men?”

“Nope,” Gordon said. “Until this Hill situation is over, I’m a vigilante... Just like you.”

Batman turned to Gordon again. “Jim, I--”

He stopped.

Gordon was gone.

Batman scanned the rest of the alley. He looked in the dumpster next to him. He even looked up at the sky.

Finally, Batman looked down at his feet and sighed.

“I deserve that.”

He was about to walk out of the alley when he heard a man screaming from a block, maybe a block and a half away.

Batman started running.
He came out of the alley to see a few of Gordon’s people with Montoya at the head, milling about the parking lot behind the flower shop. Gordon was already there.

“Montoya, what happened?” Gordon asked.

“I don’t know,” Montoya said, “I heard a huge flapping, like someone opening and closing an umbrella real quick. I turn around, and Koontz was gone.”

“Koontz?”

“Yeah,” Montoya said. “The guy Cavalier was holding prisoner. And I hear screaming from…”

Even though the falling rain was dulling the sounds, there was no denying the sound that they all heard at that point. It was a sound that completely silenced Gordon’s crew, and caused them all to look up in terror.

It was a loud screech, still deafening, even though it sounded far away.

A man disappears amidst the sound of flapping, combined with that screech, and there was no question what they were dealing with.

Batman sighed.

“Man-Bat…”

In the old abandoned subway tunnels where The Undying and his forces made their roost, in the space that was to be a restaurant that was lit only by candlelight, Talia al Ghul had been preparing.

She was dressed in black leather pants and a black leather jacket. Her hair was tied into a tight ponytail.

Talia held in her hand a jian; a chinese straight sword. She had wielded a great many weapons in her time on this Earth, and almost all of them had drawn another person’s blood. But of them all, this was her favorite. Bestowed upon her by her father Ra’s al Ghul when she was but a girl of eleven, this sword was her instrument of choice when she needed to impress upon her foes her grace. She had wielded guns and swung daggers, she had brought down maces and thrown bombs.

But this sword was an extension of who she was.

She slid the blade into the black scabbard on her hip, and left her quarters.

Her footsteps echoed through the empty halls. The rooms were all vacant. The degenerate henchmen that Hill had picked up from the streets of Gotham were out about the city indulging themselves. Most of her honor guard were sequestered. The few that weren’t were scouring the city, looking for Kasha, who had betrayed her by running from the scene of Kyle Security instead of being captured temporarily so that she may be put to better use later.

Kasha was one of the oldest of her number, and should Talia been the kind to look with sentiment upon her soldiers she may have been proud to call Kasha her friend.

But that was the past, now. She had disobeyed orders, and so Talia al Ghul would use Kasha’s head as a footrest soon enough.

She walked into the main terminal where Hamilton Hill, his mask off, folded his arms and looked at the five car train that he had had The Broker’s associates build for him.
Hill looked at Talia, and then back at the train.

“Beauty, ain’t she?” Hill asked.

“It’s a waste of money,” Talia said.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Hill said. “Batman will find us sooner or later. I’m counting on it. He’ll chase me. And by the time this train makes it out of the tunnel a mile away, he can look out the window when I trigger the dead man’s switch. He’ll watch the city that summoned him and betrayed me… burn green.”

“Provided someone doesn’t shoot him in the street purely by accident,” Talia said. “Provided someone actually does what you ask and kills him.”

Hill looked at Talia again. “If it does, I’ll shoot the magic bitch and kill the city anyway. Do you really think some civillan will clip Batman’s wings?”

Talia had the ability to frown without moving her lips. “No, I do not. But even if all you say comes to pass, it will still be a foolish and extravagant gesture.”

“Say…” said someone coming down the steps.

They both turned to see Black Manta, clad in his armor, walking down the steps. The only sign that he had waded through chaos and destruction to get from Blackgate to here was the dried blood that Talia could smell on his black armor all the way from here.

“Did the woman who put nine million people in danger to lure Batman out of hiding just say something about extravagant gestures?” Black Manta asked.

Hill looked from Talia to Black Manta. He raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” he said, and left down the hall.

Black Manta walked up to Talia, and took off his helmet.

“Well?” Hyde asked.

“I am a woman in love,” Talia said. “Extravagant gestures are a second language.”

Hyde smiled. “I can’t help but admire a woman who would make a great girlfriend and a terrifying ex-wife.”

“Why attempt the half-measure?” Talia asked. “Should I be displeased, I could make myself a widow.”

“You know… I bet you’ve actually told Batman that.”

Talia exhaled through her nose. She had, in fact, told Bruce that.

“Speaking of which,” Hyde said. “How did your meet with America’s favorite angry furry go?”

Talia looked Hyde up and down. He was an impudent man with a disrespectful tongue. The look of placid confidence on his face made her want to hurt him somehow.

“You…” Talia said, “are a barbarian and a thug.”
“I never said I was anything but.”

“How many people did you thoughtlessly slaughter getting from prison to here?”

“I didn’t count,” Hyde said. “And you didn’t answer my question. How did your conversation with Batman go?”

Admitting weakness, fault, or hindrances to a man like David Hyde made her skin crawl. She made sure not to blink when she spoke next.

“My beloved is distracted,” she said. “It is a situation I was just on my way out to remedy.”

Hyde smiled wide. With laughter in his voice, he said “That bad, huh?”

Talia finally blinked, and her expression curdled.

“Will my misfortunes fascinate you this much when I make you eat your own entrails?”

Hyde was still smiling. “That’s the spirit,” he said. “Stop me if you’ve heard this one.”

He walked to her, helmet under his arm. He was close enough for her to smell the heady and deceptively magnetic mixture of dried blood on his armor and mint on his breath.

“You’ve been told since you were old enough to understand words that you didn’t quite rate,” Hyde said. “No woman will ever lead the League of Assassins, and even in the event one does, that power all disappears if she ever takes a husband. You have to pump out a son for The League to sustain itself. And you’ve been told so long that no matter how fearsome or dangerous or intelligent you are, you can’t do an inferior man’s job, and now… you actually believe it.”

His dark eyes were like black holes, holding no soul of their own, but somehow absorbing hers. No one had ever talked to her like this before. She’d have visited pain of death upon them if they had. Why? Why was she so afraid of the truths in her heart coming from another person’s lips?

“And believe it or not,” Hyde said, “that’s the happy Talia al Ghul. That’s the Talia with a safety net. And y’know… I actually like that Talia.”

Hyde took another step toward her. The light above them shone on Hyde’s freshly shaven cheek, and cast hoods of shadow over his eyes. The damage that Batman had done to him at the hotel days ago was obscured completely. He was no longer a man, but a truth of nature, like a joshua tree, or a mountain that showed the centuries upon centuries of sediment of which it was comprised.

And the smell of blood and mint was stronger, now. She blinked. Far too slowly to hide the intentions that wriggled beneath her subconscious like worms beneath the dirt after a fresh rain, coming up for air and moisture.

“But,” Hyde said, “the Talia with nothing to lose? With nothing to her name except the destiny that she chose for herself? Now that’s the Talia al Ghul I want to meet.”

Talia blinked slowly again, her eyes clouding over, her voice a whisper. “Do you?”

“Oh yeah,” Hyde said. “That Talia’ll sell tickets.”

And Hyde stood up straight, his entire demeanor changing. He patted her on the shoulder. Talia did not flinch or shy away.
“Now if you’ll excuse me,” he said, “I’m going to go shower prison off my body.”

He walked off, going down the same hall Hill had.

As soon as she was convinced that he had gone, her breath came out of her in a rush. Sweat immediately formed on her brow.

She clenched her eyes shut. **Remember why you’re here, you fool!**

Her hands grasped for the sword at her waist. She pulled it from the scabbard and held it in front of her.

Slowly--too slow for Talia’s taste--her purpose came back to her.

She had come to this place, she had gone through all of this effort, to claim her betrothed, her Beloved, for her own.

And this sword would help her.

This sword was the first weapon ever given to her by her father, The Demon, upon the completed initial stages of her training.

This sword was the weapon that had sliced through countless targets, the righteous and the wicked alike.

This sword would be the sword that would forge an Empire that would span the globe with Bruce Wayne and their child at her side.

So it was only fitting that this sword would be the one to carve the still-beating heart from the chest of Selina Kyle.
Chapter 21: Punt

Catwoman and Stephanie walked up the flights of stairs to get to the Harlow Street apartment in the East End of Gotham. She got the key out of the pouch on her left forearm, unlocked the door, and let them both inside.

The first thing she did was take off her cowl and goggles, depositing them on the kitchen counter.

As she walked into the bedroom, Selina said “I still have a landline phone on the wall in the kitchen. Call your mom, and then we’ll talk some more.”

Selina threw her damp gloves on the bed, and walked into the bathroom. She ran the grungy facet on hot. Her fingers burned under the water, but she still got some moisture on the tips and applied some to her eyes.

That’d keep her awake for a little while longer.

She heard Stephanie talking on the phone through the wall.

“Oh, thank God,” she could hear Stephanie say. “Yeah, I’m fine… I got rescued by Catwoman… Catwoman, Selina Kyle, my boss at… Yeah, she still has the costume and everything… So cool.”

Selina took a deep breath.

Defending the weak and taking in strays, she thought. If I didn’t know any better, I’d start to think I was acting like…

She glared at herself in the bathroom mirror.

Don’t even think it. He’s probably off somewhere in the rich part of town, defending the swealls. Wherever the money goes, the Batman follows.

Though Selina reckoned that that might be because all of the bad guys in Gotham were after money, and that would necessitate his presence more often than not.

Don’t make excuses for him. Places like the East End have no one defending them, and…

Selina shuddered. She didn’t like to call what she was doing “defending” the East End. That made her sound more heroic than she knew, deep down, she actually was.

It’s preservation, she thought. Selfish preservation. I like this part of town. It’s trashy. I like trashy. It’s like camouflage.

Selina looked herself in the mirror again. Yeah, that works.

She dried her eyes with a washcloth that was next to the faucet, and then she started reapplying her mascara (Because she was Catwoman, and she had certain standards). Thank God the rain hadn’t done anything to her black lipstick. As she tended to her delicate task, she yet again eavesdropped on Stephanie.

“Are you keeping your head down..? Okay, don’t go outside… And-And Dad hasn’t shown up..? Good.”
Selina finished off her eyes, and got her gloves back off the bed, putting them on as she walked back into the living room. By the time she arrived, Stephanie had already finished her conversation with her mother, and was rinsing off her face at the kitchen sink. She stood there until Stephanie was done.

“Thank you,” Stephanie said. Thank you so--”

Selina held up a hand to silence her. That “My Hero” shit wasn’t going to fly in her house.

“Help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge,” Selina said. “The shower’s open for you if you want to wash off the stink of dirty cop and human trafficker. I have some clothes in my closet and my drawer that might fit you. But you are, under no circumstances, allowed to go into the top drawer. I have stuff in there.”

Stephanie’s eyes went a little wide. “Is it loot from one of your heists?”

Selina just stared at her a little bit before she said “No. No it is not.”

“Then what--”

“It’s stuff,” Selina said, cutting her off. “Stuff you’re not allowed to look at.”

Selina got her cowl and goggles off of the kitchen counter and put them back on.

“Now,” Catwoman said “I’m going out again, but you need to know that this isn’t a free ride. You have a job to do while I’m gone.”

“Okay,” Stephanie said. “What is it?”

Catwoman leaned on the counter, less than a foot away from Stephanie’s still-drying face.

“I may be gone for a while,” Catwoman said, her tone gaining the weight of dire portent. “If it’s really bad out there, then there’s a chance I may not be coming back at all. But no matter what happens, no matter if The Undying sets us all on fire. No matter if Killer Croc comes back and starts eating the building. No matter… what… happens…”

Catwoman pointed out in the living room. To the recliner. Where Isis was sleeping.

“…you will feed my cat.”

From when he was a boy of four, Garfield Lynns knew he could see images and hear voices in The Flame.

That’s where Heaven was.

He adored The Flame. He wished to hold Her. Caress Her. Learn Her divine secrets. Let Her hold him in return.

Garfield took jobs to be closer to The Flame when he grew up. He studied to be a pyrotechnician, and did practical effects for action movies. And when that ended, compelled by a desire to see The Flame reach higher and higher, trying to get back to Her home in the sky, he started setting fires. He built a suit that would make him fly, so he could look down to see The Flame. Feel the rising heat on his body as a kind of embrace.

The newspapers called him “Firefly.”
The police called him a criminal, an arsonist, and a murderer.

Batman called him an enemy.

The Flame had kissed him on over ninety percent of his body. In fact, the only place visible on him while fully clothed that wasn’t host to horrific third degree burns was a strip along his face that included his eyes.

Because he needed to see The Flame. To watch Her dance and writhe as Her attempted to escape Her earthly prison. Seeing Her was almost as beautiful as when She touched him.

He found that his flying suit had been destroyed during the riot yesterday. The one that freed all the patients of Arkham Asylum. He didn’t know how pieces of it got to be strewn about the inventory room. Maybe in the mad dash for all the other patients to get their goodies and wreak havoc upon the city.

But that didn’t matter. He knew that the time had come. The time for Culmination with The Flame.

And so he walked down this abandoned street in the East End. Wearing the stained and rain-soaked orange Arkham scrubs on his back, and nothing on his charred feet, he took delight at the people who saw his burnt visage, only to turn and run on the opposite direction.

It was like they knew how sacred the day was, and fled in fear of his coming glory.

For under Garfield’s arms were two full red plastic containers of gasoline.

And between the seared thumb and forefinger of his right hand was a book of matches.

Catwoman stood and looked over the East End from a rooftop two blocks away from Harlow Street.

The rain was tapering off, which was good.

She breathed in the tangy, heavy air through her nose, and exhaled through her mouth as she heard helicopters and gunshots. She looked at the muted city under a gray shroud.

Catwoman tried not to think. Doing that would only lead to the absurdity of what she was doing. Here she was, back in her Catsuit, as almost a reflex action at the first sign of city-wide trouble. And for what?

It was almost as though she was trying to impress a guy she didn’t even want anymore.

She was still angry at Batman for disappearing for three years. Leaving her like he did. Like all the time she’d spent trying to get him to chase her meant nothing to him.

No matter how silent he stayed, how infuriating he had had a habit of being, no matter how many times he stopped her, or tried to get her to abandon a life of crime, Batman was the best man she had ever known. He had a code, that code was to help people. To save the innocent. Punish the guilty, even when the guilty included herself among their number. And he would not budge an inch.

And she tried to corrupt him. Using her intelligence, her skill, her body to get him to break just the slightest bit bad. At first, it was to confirm something to herself. There were no heroes. Everyone who did good, everyone who came on strong trying to defend the defenseless and beat the bad guys were just as flawed and foul and lost as everyone they put the boots to. Just as flawed as she was.

But that changed. She didn’t know when it changed, but it did, and Catwoman’s stomach turned at
the thought of it.

She needed to know she existed.

Selina Kyle needed to know that she had an effect on someone. That someone came into contact with her and changed forever. And even though she tried to bury it, she knew that if Batman gave just the tiniest bit, then she was alive in a way that she had seen other people be alive. That she had seen other people with a great confidence in themselves and who they were, and not just what they could do.

Yeah, she was pissed at him. Yeah, she wouldn’t take Batman back after ditching her for years. But Hamilton Hill had put the hit out on him on live TV. And thinking of Batman dead, shot in some alley, stabbed by some thug, burned alive by Zatanna’s green flame made her… feel…

Catwoman heard footsteps behind her on the rooftop.

She turned around.

Standing ten feet away was a truly beautiful woman with dark tan skin, her brown hair tied behind her in a tight ponytail. She was dressed head-to-toe in leather. She had a sword on her hip.

The beautiful woman stared at her intently.

“Selina.”

Catwoman blinked.

“Talia.”

In all of their mutual escapades in Gotham City, Catwoman had only met Talia al Ghul twice before. Both during the supervillain team-ups that had a habit of happening in Gotham. Neither time did they exchange words, and both times Talia had stared daggers into her. It wasn’t until later that she found out why.

Batman and Talia were apparently a thing.

She had wondered why someone as apparently upstanding as Batman would go for the crazy, genocidal daughter of a crazy, genocidal assassin, but then she remembered what Talia looked like.

You’d get with her too, Selina, don’t even be like that.

“Let me guess,” Catwoman said, stretching her arm out to indicate the city around her. “You did all this.”

“I did,” Talia said.

Catwoman nodded. “Figures.”

Talia took a step toward her. “I allowed my Beloved to have his little infatuation with you, because I knew nothing would come of it. That his wisdom would match his intelligence, and he would know a dead end when he saw one. I needed not worry. I have only to look at you to know that you have not possessed him the way I have. The distraction was momentary. But it is still a distraction. And that must be remedied.”

Catwoman steeled her gaze. She had at least assumed that Batman and Talia had slept together, but hearing Talia just come out and say it caused… not pain, precisely, but more irritation. Like a stray
bit of popcorn stuck between the back molars that no amount of tonguing could loosen.

But that irritation was more than he deserved.

“Hey,” Catwoman said. “You’re right. I haven’t even kissed the guy. But I’m pretty sure I dodged a bullet. He’s all yours. I don’t want him anymore.”

Talia smirked. It was dismissive, pompous… and vaguely familiar.

“How bad a liar must you be when you cannot successfully deceive yourself?” Talia asked. “Over ten years you dressed like a fool… put yourself in danger with thievery and grandstanding… and nothing came of it.”

Catwoman stayed silent. Something was building inside her. It was acidic, piss-warm, and she knew it would taste sour if it ever reached her mouth.

“You are… capricious, Selina Kyle. Apathetic. Impermanent. You tread upon this earth with minimal impact, and shall shortly pass from it with none.”

That something in Catwoman was getting stronger, now. It was almost to her throat.

“You are unaligned,” Talia said. “Uncomplicated. You are just… free-floating id. Criminality with no consequence. And when my father, and my Beloved, and the son I shall one day bear him bring order to this diseased planet, most of the bodies in the mass graves will bear your face.”

Now that something was in her mouth. And Catwoman knew where she’d seen Talia’s smirk before.

It was the one on the kids who picked on the orphan. It was the one on the adults that laughed at the poor. It was the one on the men who were dumb enough or arrogant enough to think they found a place for her, and tried with their words and their fists to put her there. Everyone who told her that she wasn’t good enough, wasn’t the right kind of person, didn’t have the status, didn’t have the brains, had some version of that look.

It shamed Catwoman that she had ever believed that look, and even now, after becoming a millionaire on her own, that look still affected her. That was the thing about being Catwoman the first time around; back when she was living off of what she stole, she used to live to sneak into high society parties and charity events, wearing stunning gowns and expensive jewelry (that she also stole), because she knew she didn’t belong there, and she got to fool everyone before she robbed them blind.

But now? Now that she was rich beyond her wildest dreams through (gasp and horror!) legitimate means? Now that she was at the very least cultured enough to name all seven course of a formal French meal off the top of her head? Now that Selina Kyle actually belonged in the places that Catwoman used to infiltrate? She felt like an imposter. A fraud. A stranger.

And she felt that way because of people who looked at her the same way Talia al Ghul was looking at her now.

Even if Batman weren’t a factor in their lives, she would still hate Talia al Ghul’s guts. Because she was everyone who stood in her way.

And it was well past time that Selina Kyle said so.

“Jesus Christ, Jessica, how does someone like you get so boring?”
Talia said nothing.

“You dressed in all black leather,” Catwoman said, “to get into a chick-fight on a Gotham City rooftop! Over a guy! What the hell is wrong with you? Y’know, it’s a good thing you have to take a dip in those Pits to make yourself live longer, Susan, because if you had to be reincarnated, you’d have come back as a cheerleader.”

Talia’s eyes narrowed. “How dare--”

“You’d have majored in Communications in college, Tiffany. You’d have pledged to Delta Gamma, and you’d have been the first one to haze the freshman girls.”

Catwoman took another step toward Talia, the spirit upon her.

“You’d have married a guy named Todd, and he would have worn backwards sunglasses whenever he went golfing. You’d own a minivan with a bumper sticker that says ‘If You’re Going to Ride my Ass, at Least Pull my Hair,’ and you are actually pedestrian enough to think it was funny! You’d have twin girls, both named Breanna, but each is somehow pronounced differently. And you’d have ‘Live Laugh Love’ tattooed on the small of your back in kanji!”

“No one--”

Catwoman went right on through. “By God, Jennifer, you’d even watch Vanderpump Rules. Not on DVR like a sane person, no, you’d watch that shit live! You’d post on your Facebook wall, asking if it was Mimosa O’Clock yet. And you’d know every single Goddamn Taylor Swift song by heart, wouldn’t you Amber? You commoner! YOU FUCKING PEASANT!”

Talia’s eyes were livid. Catwoman took a step forward.

“Has it ever occurred to you that Batman hates himself?” Catwoman asked. “That between Joker attacks, and Riddler sprees, and Robin dying, he’d deny himself some things because he thinks its all his fault. So yeah. Never slept with him. Don’t know his secret identity. Never kissed him. Could probably count on one hand the times he ever made physical contact with me instead of the other way around. But common sense working the way it does, I’m thinking he never acted on it because of some stupid urge to protect me. Or he’s cockblocking himself because he thinks he doesn’t deserve me, pointy-eared dumbass that he is.”

Catwoman took another step forward. “But he screwed your brains out, didn’t he Becky?”

She could hear Talia’s teeth grinding.

“Oh yeah,” Catwoman said. “I bet he messed up that hair of yours. And I’m not here to judge you, Christine. I’m not here to shame you for breaking off a piece I’d have broken off myself a long-ass time ago. You go ahead and you grab that ass with both hands. But you didn’t make this about who got into who’s pants first. You made this about who he likes more. And he never let me get close. But he. Let. You.”

Catwoman put her hands on her hips. “I’m fairly sure that doesn’t speak too highly of you, now does it, Melissa?”

She could see veins throbbing in Talia’s temple as she wordlessly unsheathed her sword.

Catwoman uncoiled her whip. “It’s about damn time…”
Garfield, containers of gas beneath his arms, surveyed the buildings of the East End as he passed Harlow Street.

He was about to engage in an act of worship. And he needed a proper cathedral.

It must not be too gaudy. The Flame was fickle and judgemental, and would not be swayed by shows of faith that She would deem false.

Nor should it be too small. The Flame was glory itself. A giver and taker of life who had dwelt upon this miserable planet since before mankind had eyes with which to see Her majesty. Such glory should be reflected in this altar, of this, Garfield Lynns had no doubt.

Two blocks past Harlow Street, Garfield found the perfect place.

Apart from ability, Catwoman had range. Her whip was longer than Talia’s sword.

Immediately, Catwoman had the business end of her whip around Talia’s wrist. She gave a sharp tug, bringing Talia low to the ground, sending the sword out of her hand, it clanged off of the rooftop and into the street below.

Talia looked up, fury in her eyes, and quickly got out of the way of Catwoman’s charging knee.

But apart from ability, Talia had brute strength. When it came to a simple game of tug-of-war, Talia would win.

She coiled Catwoman’s whip around her forearm and pulled back. Catwoman was stunned at how easily it left her hand.

From her position on one knee, Talia sharply brought her palm up into Catwoman’s nose. It didn’t break, but it was enough to stun her, knock her back, and loose a miniscule trickle of blood to her upper lip.

Catwoman shook her head to focus her vision, and saw Talia loosing the whip from around her forearm, and taking the handle.

And Catwoman’s eyes lit up.

She told Bruce Wayne a week ago when they were at lunch that she used a bullwhip because most of the people she would ever fight had no idea how to use one without hurting themselves. Awful nice of Talia to do Catwoman’s job for her.

She brought the whip above her head, bringing it down in a perfect arc, and a satisfying crack.

Talia knew how to use a bullwhip.

Catwoman said what she was thinking.

“Shit…”

With blinding speed, Talia cracked the whip, and Catwoman felt a slice of pain in her left forearm. Her Catsuit had been opened up, and a stream of blood was pouring out of the gash on her arm.

Talia revved up again, and Catwoman immediately backed up, successfully avoiding the follow-up lash.
Catwoman knew that the one downside to fighting with a whip was the delay, and she knew that she
needed bolt for Talia when she drew her arm back.

Talia drew her arm back.

Catwoman bolted.

The one asset that Catwoman knew she had was her blinding speed, and by the time Talia was even
thinking of bringing her arm back down, Catwoman was already on her.

She drove her shoulder into Talia’s gut, her arm wrapping around her waist. They both fell back…

...and through the skylight directly behind them, to the floor below.

Both women landed on the wooden floor of the top story of this storage building with a thud, both of
them kicking up dust and completely dirtying what they were wearing. The space was empty, save
for bits of trash left behind by the occasional homeless person.

Amid the dust and the broken glass, Talia and Catwoman got into sitting positions, and took a brief
pause in the fight to check themselves for cuts. A momentary, informal time-out.

Then their eyes met again.

Time-in!

Talia tried to bring a knee into Catwoman’s stomach from where she was sitting, but Catwoman
blocked it with her bleeding forearm (which hurt like a bastard). She drove her free fist into Talia’s
mouth.

Talia used the momentum from the blow to roll back to a better position as Catwoman got to her feet.
Talia spat blood on the floor and charged, but Catwoman ducked out of the way of a fist. She tried
to sweep Talia’s legs out from under her, and Talia evaded it.

As she fell back from Catwoman’s sweep attempt, Talia swung another fist. Even from the poor
positioning, it landed on Catwoman’s cheek. The flesh inside of her mouth slashed open on her teeth,
and Catwoman could taste blood.

Garfield thought he heard glass breaking on the roof of this storage building that he selected for the
altar of The Flame, but he ignored it. It didn’t matter.

Nothing mattered now except Culmination.

The front door to the building was unlocked. Garfield opened it into a dusty and silent hallway. His
footsteps echoed as he roamed the halls in search of a door that would lead to the basement. After a
scant couple of minutes, he finally found it.

His feet cooled on the concrete steps was he tottered into the basement, plastic containers of gasoline
sloshing beneath his arms as he walked.

In the basement, he found the old, inactive boiler amidst barrels filled with who knows what that
were covered with canvas cloth.

Garfield smiled.

He dropped the containers of gasoline, the heavy plastic kicking up dust as they made impact. He set
the matchbook on one of the cloth covered barrels.

And then Garfield Lynns started taking off his clothes.

The thing that Catwoman noticed about Talia al Ghul was that she wasn’t much of a brawler. She noticed this when Talia broke a stray beer bottle over her head.

Talia just swung straight through at full speed, shattering it across Catwoman’s cowl. Now, if she’d swung at half speed, conserving energy, you could use that bottle as a cudgel for a while. And it would hurt a hell of a lot more than just a full speed shatter.

The shatter did hurt, and one of the stray bits of glass did open Catwoman up above her left eyebrow like a minor shaving nick, but it didn’t hurt nearly as bad as it would have in the hands of someone well-versed in such affairs. If Talia were a brawler, she’d know that.

And to compound the theory, Talia just chucked the shattered bottle neck aside. A rookie mistake in both a barroom and a parking lot.

Catwoman was a brawler, in addition to many other things. And she needed to get Talia into a brawling situation. Because in a stand-up fight, there wasn’t a whole lot she could leave to chance.

Talia came at Catwoman with a missile dropkick that she couldn’t dodge. Both women landed on their backs, kicking up dust, but Talia was prepared for it. She got to her feet first and sprinted toward Catwoman, bringing her foot down.

Catwoman got away from the first stomp, and the second, by log-rolling away like an elementary schooler.

Hey, whatever worked.

She managed to get on all fours and make a grab for Talia’s leg, which Talia dodged, and gave her enough room to kick Catwoman in the left cheekbone.

Catwoman, taking a play from Talia’s book, used the momentum to roll back quicker and get to her feet. She extended her claws and swiped behind her.

The titanium-tipped claws found purchase in Talia’s leather jacket. Catwoman heard ripping, but didn’t see any blood spill to the floor.

She came at Talia with two mad swipes. Both missed. Talia grabbed Catwoman’s left arm for leverage, and planted three blindingly fast kicks into Catwoman’s ribcage. Her breath left her in a bass groan, and she dropped to her knees.

Talia brought her knee into the side of Catwoman’s face, temporarily blinding her with pain. Out of the corner of her good eye, she could see the rips in Talia’s leather jacket that her claws had made.

She took her best shot and thrust blindly with her good hand.

Talia’s cry of pain was all Catwoman needed to know that she hit paydirt. By the time her vision returned to her eye, she saw her inch-long claws dug all the way into Talia’s stomach, and the blood spewing between her fingers as Talia wrapped both of her hands around Catwoman’s wrist, trying to get them out.

But Catwoman wouldn’t give.
She got back to her feet and pressed forward, moving Talia a few paces back, leaving thick droplets of blood on the floor between them.

Talia looked at Catwoman with a newfound rage, let go of her wrist, and swung a left hook at Catwoman’s face.

It connected. Catwoman’s head snapped back, and with a nasty ripping sound and a cry of pain, Catwoman’s claws were out of Talia’s stomach.

A high kick came next, laying into Catwoman’s jaw, and knocking her back. A kick with the other foot landed directly into Catwoman’s stomach, and her knees buckled as the air was driven out of her lungs.

As she tried to breathe, Catwoman saw Talia stoop down to the floor.

She came back up with Catwoman’s whip.

Quicker than she thought possible, Talia had the end of the whip around Catwoman’s throat. She tossed the handle over the other side of a beam above them, and pulled down hard.

Catwoman couldn’t breathe. In or out. She brought her hands up to her throat, and stopped. Her claws were still extended. She wasn’t about to slash her own throat to cut the whip, but maybe she could delicately saw through it…

Talia yanked on the other end of the whip again, and ended that idea. Whatever air she could breathe in came through Catwoman’s nostrils in tiny, insufficient snorts.

And it wasn’t like Catwoman could make a swing at Talia with her claws. She couldn’t give Talia a reason to pull back or up. That would snap her neck.

Catwoman was helpless, and she knew it.

Talia leaned into Catwoman’s face. Her visage was gleaming with sweat, and dirty with dust. Her teeth were pink from the punch to the face. And her eyes were crazy.

“Has my Beloved’s weakness infected you?” Talia asked Catwoman, who was slowly turning purple from oxygen deprivation. “Or has your weakness infected him? Neither of you will land a killing blow. Neither of you will do what it takes to win.”

Talia wrenched the whip again. Catwoman could almost feel herself leaving her feet. Her pulse was pounding in her temples. Her vision was getting dark around the edges.

A pitiful jet of air left through Catwoman’s clenched teeth as Talia leaned in closer.

“You are beneath my hatred. But you are not above my pity. And this… This is how sorry I feel for you.”

Talia leaned in closer. They could have kissed, if one of them wasn’t dying and one of them wasn’t evil.

And Talia said, in a soft commanding voice:

“Bruce Wayne is Batman.”

Catwoman stopped moving. Even the urge to save her own life short-circuited for a brief instant.
“He was in front of you for three years, and you never knew,” Talia said. “Ponder this, as I send your soul to the depths.”

Catwoman’s vision was focusing to a point, now, with all-consuming darkness around her. She had seconds, at most. She needed something—anything—to get out of this.

She concentrated. Catwoman summoned all of the physical strength in her body, and visualized it going into her leg. It was just a limb, but Catwoman tried to make it into a cannon. She felt the energy sapping from the rest of her form, and migrating at high speed into her right leg. And she tried to imagine the look on Talia’s face if what she was planning worked.

With all of the energy and power her fading form could muster, Catwoman brought her right leg up…

…and kicked Talia al Ghul square in the crotch.

Of all the moves she could have pulled, this was the only one that would have resulted in Talia doubling over, instead of leaning back.

Well... Talia let go of the whip.

Catwoman dropped to her knees immediately as Talia slowly crumbled to hers. Catwoman gasped for air as the breath in Talia stammered through her teeth in short agonized grunts. She held her hand over the front of her leather pants and let her head dangle, as though she was powerless to do anything but look at the location where the atrocity that had just occurred.

When Selina Kyle was a little girl, when her mother was still alive, she had something she said whenever little Selina would disobey a rule or break something in the apartment.

With a warm smile, she would say “Mija, you’re going to Hell for doing that.”

And those words came to Catwoman now.

But in this situation, she had the perfect mental response.

Oh, cram it, Mother, I was going to Hell for lots of things. Kicking Talia al Ghul right in the oyster ditch just means I’m enjoying the elevator ride down.

Catwoman finally got her breath back. She looked over at the still agonized Talia.

“Won’t do whatever it takes to win, huh?”

Talia looked up at her with a look of supreme anger that would have levelled an entire island. Catwoman just smiled.

Talia made her move.

Catwoman made hers faster.

With her right hand, she grabbed the lapel of Talia’s leather jacket, blocking the weak punch Talia tried to throw. Catwoman drove her right elbow into Talia’s face face. She could both hear and feel the sweet, satisfying crunch of Talia al Ghul’s nose breaking.

It dropped Talia onto her back. Catwoman straddled her, and continued pummeling her with her
elbow again, and again, and again. Talia’s nails scratched at the back of Catwoman’s suit, but they slowly stopped as she went limp and ragdolled.

Catwoman lost count of how many times she drove her elbow into Talia’s face. She only stopped when her entire forearm went numb.

She got off of Talia and sat up. She hocked a glob of blood on the floor between her legs.

Talia stirred next to her. Her face didn’t look like a face anymore, and her breathing sounded… weird.

“I will take him for my own,” Talia finally said weakly. “Our armies will march upon the earth… and we won’t even remember your name.”

Catwoman nodded at this, and noticed that her claws were still extended.

She reached across and dragged her titanium-tipped claws deep and hard across the bloody and swollen mess that was Talia al Ghul’s face. Talia cried out in pain and terror.

Catwoman sat back up again as Talia whimpered.

“Oh, I dunno Tammy, I’m pretty sure you’ll remember that.”

Garfield Lynns’ scarred and burned body was completely nude, and drenched in both cans of gasoline. So much so that that the cement floor of the cramped boiler room was nothing but a puddle.

And Garfield held the dry matchbook in his hands.

A smile came to his burned lips.

“I’m ready now,” he said to the matchbook. “I’m ready to know your secrets. I’m ready to feel your love. I was weak before, but now? Now I’m strong. And you made me strong. I love you… And I’m ready to be with you now.”

Without a single moment of hesitation, Garfield “Firefly” Lynns opened the matchbook, took out a single match, and lit it.

Just the spark was enough to cause ignition.

The heat brought joy. The flame brought splendor. As he burned alive, Garfield smiled.

Because he saw it.

Garfield Lynns saw the Kingdom of Heaven within The Flame. Spires so massive and so majestic that they had neither beginning nor end. And before his eyes danced angels, unencumbered by neither gender nor form. They danced before him on pure light, and told him in sweet, high voices secrets of existence and the universe that evaded the most enlightened philosophers and confounded the smartest minds.

As Garfield burned alive, he knew he had found home…

...For two seconds.

Because this was an old storage building, and the old owners, through an error of paperwork that
was not their fault, had not removed the barrels that had been moved to this very boiler room.

Barrels containing kerosene.

Two seconds into Firefly’s holy reverie, the barrels of kerosene ignited with enough force to completely vaporize Garfield Lynns.

And bring down the entire building.

Catwoman remembered something as she was sitting, collecting her thoughts.

“Wait a minute…”

She turned and looked at the weakened, defeated, bloodied Talia.

“Bruce Wayne is Batman?”

BOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMM!

The entire building buckled beneath them, and caused all of the dust on this top floor to kick up instantly. For a moment, it was as though both Catwoman and Talia existed within a cloud.

Without thinking, Catwoman reached out and grabbed Talia’s wrist.

“Get up,” Catwoman said. “The building is coming down.”

“My father will dest--”

“ON YOUR FEET, MARJORIE!”

Catwoman put Talia’s arm over her shoulders and, leaving her whip behind, guided her to the stairs leading to the roof.

Once they were out into the open afternoon air, the building was still rumbling so hard that Catwoman’s vision was shaking.

She dragged Talia to the edge of the roof.

Some of the buildings in the East End were ancient and were built so close together because they were erected in a time before widespread automobile usage.

Thankfully, Catwoman and Talia were standing on one such building. It made what needed to happen next much easier.

“Alright,” Catwoman said. “See that window over there? We’re going to jump through it on three, okay? One… Two…”

The building gave one final buckle before it began to implode in earnest.

"...SHIT!"

They jumped.

Catwoman hit her target, crashing through the fourth floor window of the building across the street. Talia could not jump as far. She fell through the third floor window.
Catwoman’s head hit the hardwood floor of the fourth floor so hard that she was knocked out cold.

Talia was the next best thing to unconscious anyway, and she was out like a light as soon as she made impact.

Both unconscious women rested on their respective floors as the storage building came down with a massive rumble, sending dust in through the shattered windows, coating them both.

Two very different mean found both women within forty-five minutes of the implosion.

Black Manta had planted a tracker on Talia during their conversation together in the 1898 tunnels. He knew somehow that she was going to get herself into trouble.

He found her on the third floor, and effortlessly picked her up with one arm, thanks to the strength given to him by his armor. He carried her bridal-style out of the building, having no idea that an equally unconscious Catwoman was on the floor above them.

But someone else did have an idea.

He had come to see the destroyed building, and began rooting around the site for chemical components. His quest took him inside the building and up to the fourth floor.


A subject!

The man was wearing old slacks and the remains of a lab coat. A burlap sack was over his head with eye-holes and nose-holes cut out. And the sack was secured around his neck with a loosely-tied noose.

He ran a finger across Catwoman’s unresponsive cheek, and smiled to himself.

“Well, well,” Scarecrow said. “What have we here?”
Chapter 22: #WeGotBatman

He came to after the sun had set. Someone was shaking him awake.

And he had a bag over his head.

The young man, seventeen years of age, had been working his summer job as a stock boy at the Wal-Mart on Bleake Island when The Undying had his press conference. He and his fellow employees were let into the massive stock room in the rear to wait the whole thing out, so long as no one used the inventory to feed, clothe, or otherwise sustain themselves. He left as soon as the sun came up out of general principle.

By the time he left Wal-Mart, the mob had taken over Bleake Island and blew the bridges connecting it to the rest of Gotham. He lived on Miagani, so there was no way he was getting back to his parents. The stock boy called them, told them he was alright, and set off into the rest of Bleake Island to forage for food and see what was what.

He didn’t do well on the food front, but seeing what was what? The stock boy did just that.

On the corner of tenth and Ostrander, he saw nine dead bodies scattered in front of a restaurant called Georgio’s. He had learned from his Twitter feed on his phone that the mob had taken over the island and killed all the cops, but the nine dead bodies didn’t strike the stock boy as either.

They were all women, for one.

And they were dressed head-to-toe in black leather.

So unless the GCPD or the Maroni and Falcone families had been recruiting from some of the more entertaining dreams the stock boy had been having, these dead women belonged to another party altogether.

The stock boy took a picture of the scene, and was about to take another, when someone came out of the front door of Georgio’s. The stock boy hid in an alley, and stuck his head out.

It was another woman. Similarly dressed to the dead woman on the ground. She sported a bruise along her jawline and a black eye. But even from his vantage point, he could see that this mystery woman had raw and bloody knuckles.

The stock boy figured that the nine dead women on the ground went into Georgio’s, the woman with the bloody knuckles killed them with her bare hands, and dragged them out of the restaurant.

The stock boy fancied himself an amateur detective.

He had also been taking self-defense classes for eight years, since he was nine, as he knew what kind of city he lived in.

Neither of these did him any good, as just when he was about to take a picture of the woman with the bloody knuckles, someone crept up behind him and knocked the stock boy out cold with a wrench.

Which led to his current predicament: his hands and feet tied, a bag over his head, and someone
shaking him awake.

“Wake up,” someone with a deep voice said. “I’m going to talk, and you’re going to listen.”

From what he could gather, the stock boy knew he was outdoors. He could still the sound of distant gunshots and helicopters coming from the other islands.

And he was wet, which was most likely from the rain. His ass was wet, which told him he was on the ground. He was leaning against something metal, most likely a dumpster. This meant he was in an alley. He didn’t hear any rain falling, so it must have stopped for now.

His captor started speaking.

“Seven came out when I was a kid,” he said. “David Fincher, 1995. John Doe kills people in an unnamed city according to the Seven Deadly Sins. I became a huge fan of Fincher. My favorite’s Fight Club, but anyway…”

The stock boy could hear his captor coming closer.

“I reenacted the Envy killing with our cat Churchill. Put his head in a box. My mom and Dad sent me to therapy after that.”

The stock boy’s mouth was not gagged. And it wasn’t like anything he was going to say was going to make his predicament worse.

“I take it the therapy didn’t take?” the stock boy asked.

His captor laughed. “No,” he said. “I guess it didn’t.”

The captor tapped something on the stock boy’s head. The stock boy figured it was most likely a knife.

“Another favorite,” the captor said, “is Silence of the Lambs. 1991, by Jonathan Demme, God rest his soul. Buffalo Bill skins his victims to make a person suit. Didn’t age well, but the suspense is still there. Ideally, I’d have a plus-sized woman for this, but times are tight, and you’ll do in a pinch.”

The stock boy could smell his captor’s breath through the bag.

“You ever wonder if Batman has good taste?” the captor asked. “What, uh… What kind of movies he watches?”

“No,” the stock boy said, trying to sound less than the piss-scared that he actually was.

“I guess it’s just one of those things I worry about,” the captor said. “In an ideal world, I’d be like the Riddler, only instead of leaving riddles, I’d reenact crimes from movies. Instead of testing Batman’s knowledge, I’d test his taste… Of course with my luck, he’d be the kind of guy who watched nothing but Fast and--”

Another thing that the stock boy could detect about his surroundings was that he was sitting on the pavement, next to a dumpster, and underneath a fire escape.

He knew that last one, because he could hear someone jumping from that fire escape and coming down on his captor. He could hear his captor scream for a bit, the sound of a foot hitting someone in the face, and then nothing.

And he could tell that his rescuer was a teenage girl, because she started to speak.
“Your favorite movie is *Fight Club*?” the girl asked his unconscious captor. “Tumblr warned me about guys like you.”

The stock boy could hear someone else coming down the fire escape. The teenage girl called out to them.

“Could you untie this one so I can drag our freaky film friend here out of the alley? I don’t want him waking up so close to us.”

“Sure thing,” someone who sounded like a teenage boy said.

The stock boy could hear the teenage girl dragging his captor out of the alley with a “*God, you’re heavy*…”

The bag came off of the stock boy’s head, and he found himself staring at the teenage boy who had come down the fire escape. He had shaggy brown hair and blue eyes similar to his own, and seemed to be just a couple of years younger than he was.

And he just… stared at the stock boy for a moment, eyes wide and mouth agape, as though he were water in the Sahara.

“Wow,” the teenage boy finally said. “You’re pretty!”

“Uhh… Thanks?” the stock boy said.

The teenage boy turned around and called to the teenage girl who was dragging the captor out of the alley.

“Hey, Harper! Look at how pretty this kid is!”

The teenage girl stood up from her exertions. She was about the stock boy’s age, with short purple and blue hair, and blue eyes. She had a pierced septum and a Monroe on the left side of her upper lip.

She saw the stock boy, and then her eyebrows raised while her eyes themselves narrowed. The stock boy felt like a specimen of bug to be added to a collection by an entomologist who didn’t expect to see his particular breed in an alley on Bleake Island.

“He is pretty,” Harper said. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, too, I guess,” the stock boy said.

“I’m Cullen,” the teenage boy said. “Cullen Row. That’s my sister Harper. And who might you be?”

The oddity of the situation made the stock boy forget his name for a second, but it came back.

“Tim,” the stock boy said. “Tim Drake.”

Cullen held his hand out to shake Tim’s hand, looked him up and down, and said “I haven’t untied you yet, have I?”

“No,” Tim said. “No, you haven’t.”

Cullen untied Tim and got him to his feet.
“We’re up on the roof,” Cullen said. “We have food, stuff to drink, a laptop we can watch anime on. You should join us!”

“Cullen?”

Harper had returned.

“What?” Cullen asked.

“Stop making eyes at the straight boy,” Harper said.

Cullen looked at Tim, and then back at Harper. “You don’t know he’s straight.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “You don’t know I’m straight.”

“Are you?” Harper asked.

“Well… Yeah,” Tim said. “But you shouldn’t make assumptions like that without some kind of evidence.”

“That how you go through life?” Harper asked. “Looking for evidence on every little thing before opening your mouth? Let me guess: you’re the type of guy who trolls Twitter, asking random women to debate you.”

Cullen, who was so friendly before, immediately recoiled from Tim. “Oh, gross.”

Tim looked between the two of them, the look of a man who accidentally farted in church firmly on his face. “I… What? … I… Look, I just try to keep an eye out for things, that’s all. I mean, look…”

He patted the pockets of his jeans and hoodie. “Crap, he took my phone.”

Harper reached into the pocket of her leather jacket and pulled out Tim’s phone. “This yours?”

“Yeah… Wait, you robbed that guy?”

“He was about to murder you,” Harper said. “Yes, I robbed that guy.”

Tim took his phone. The battery was at six percent. He brought up the picture he took.

“Okay,” Tim said. “What are we looking at?”

“Dead people,” Harper said. “Jesus, what kind of…”

“No,” Tim said. “Look at them. Does something about them seem off to you?”

“Their clothes,” Cullen said. “They’re all dressed the same.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “They’re all women, which means they’re not the mob, and they’re not cops, either.”

“So who are they?” Harper asked.

“They’re with The Undying,” Tim said. “I mean, they have to be.”

“That’s a reach,” Harper said.

“No,” Tim said, “it isn’t. An all-female group of… ninjas, apparently, isn’t gonna come to the
middle of a warzone to do their business. And the fact that they’re even in Gotham at all right now means…”

“It means,” said a voice above them, “that they were already in Gotham to begin with when Hill locked the city down.”

Tim, Harper, and Cullen looked up. On the fire escape, two floors above them, was Nightwing.

“I was in the neighborhood,” he said. “Heard a fight. I take it you won?”

The three of them stared at him for a moment, before Cullen said “Damn!”

“That’s what they all say,” Nightwing said, and then he looked at Tim. “That’s good work.”

“Thank you,” Tim said. “How did you get to this island? I thought the mob was shooting everyone down.”

“They were,” Nightwing said, “but I have a plane that shoots rubber bullets. Falcone and Maroni’s men are very upset right now, and very unable to do anything about it. Mind if I have a look at that phone?”

Tim was quiet for a moment, before he said “Sure… Up on the roof.”

“Why the roof?” Nightwing asked.

“It’s… private.”

Nightwing shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said, before he started walking up the fire escape.

Tim looked at Cullen, shrugged his shoulders, and said “Sorry I’m… y’know… straight.”

Cullen put his hand on Tim’s shoulder and said “At least you’re man enough to apologize.”

Standing next to each other, the Rows watched the two of them leave.

Harper, staring at Tim go up the fire escape, said “Y’know, today wasn’t so bad.”

Cullen, staring at Nightwing going up the fire escape, said “I know, right?”

Nightwing looked at Tim’s phone. “That’s them, alright. Where is this place?”

“Georgio’s,” Tim said. “On the corner of tenth and Ostrander… Wait, where am I now?”

“Eighth and Ostrander,” Nightwing said. “That guy your friends knocked out didn’t take you too far.”

The conversation lapsed into a silence that was itchy on Tim’s end.

And Tim Drake… just couldn’t help himself.

“So… are you and him back together now?”

Nightwing looked at Tim. “Me and who?”

“You and Batman,” Tim said. “You doing the whole partner thing now that he’s back?”
Nightwing shook his head. “I was never Batman’s partner.”

Tim put his hands on his hips, debated himself, and lost. He’d been sitting on something he knew to be true for years now, and he wasn’t going to get a better time to tell someone that was in a position to confirm or deny anything.

“Dude… You’re the first Robin. You’re Dick Grayson.”

Nightwing slowly turned his head to look at Tim. His expression was… not kind.

Tim sighed. “When I was nine, my mom and dad got me a DVD from Goodwill of Haley’s Circus. On the back of the case, it said it featured the Flying Graysons trapeze act, with Dick Grayson, the only person on Earth who could perform the quadruple somersault. A year after that, I’m watching Batman and Robin footage on Youtube of the two of them fighting Calendar Man on a rooftop. And there’s Robin—there’s you—performing a quadruple somersault.”

Nightwing blinked.

“I look into Dick Grayson, and see that he was assigned by the state as a ward to Bruce Wayne after his parents were killed. If Dick Grayson is Robin, then Bruce Wayne must be Batman.”

“Bruce Wayne can’t be Batman,” Nightwing said. “He saved Bruce Wayne’s life at the Gotham Stock Exchange, remember?”

“Bruce Wayne can be Batman,” Tim said, “because it was Superman in the Batsuit.”

Nightwing didn’t say anything.

“The bullet just bounced right off him,” Tim said.

“And… have you told anyone about this?” Nightwing asked.

“No,” Tim said. “Sitting on something like that, you don’t just tell people. Not if you want Batman and Robin to still be Batman and Robin. Anyway, I see Nightwing fighting Blockbuster in Bludhaven on the news a couple of years ago, and wouldn’t you know it? Quadruple somersault. Which means there was a second Robin who…”

“Hey,” Nightwing said with some stank on his voice. “The ice is pretty thin up here.”

Tim saw the pile of shit he almost stepped in, and nodded.

“If you work from the assumption that Batman is Bruce Wayne, there is evidence. You’re Robin, he’s Batman, Jason Todd… y’know… God rest his soul, and Barbara Gordon was Batgirl… I think. Bruce has a cousin named Kate that also has red hair. It’s a deeper shade though, and the Batgirl pictures I’ve been able to find….”

Nightwing stared at Tim some more. “Okay,” he said. “Now tell me who Superman is.”

Tim snorted and smirked. “Are you kidding? Superman’s just Superman. He doesn’t have a secret identity. Why would he?”

Nightwing smiled a smile that he immediately had to wipe off of his face.

“What’s your name?”

“Tim Drake.”
“Okay, Tim Drake,” Nightwing said as he handed him back his phone. “Take your wacky-ass conspiracy theories downstairs to your friends. I think one of them like-likes you.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “He’s… I mean I’m straight, so…”

“I didn’t say it was the boy, genius.”

As Tim tried to fathom this, Nightwing stepped to the edge of the roof.

“Hey,” Tim said.

Nightwing turned his head to his side to listen.

“Batman needs Robin,” Tim said. “He needs somebody. He’s more effective that way. And I can’t help but feel that doing what you do just… weighs on you.”

Nightwing didn’t say anything as he jumped off the roof.

And Tim couldn’t help but notice that he performed a quadruple somersault before he deployed his grapnel gun to get to the next rooftop.

Years ago, Doctor Kirk Langstrom developed a serum to aid the deaf and the blind. The serum contained an augmented DNA cocktail from the hairy-legged, white winged, and common vampire bats. Langstrom, a man with little funding beyond what he could procure through private donations, performed the first round of tests on himself, as he had hoped that it would alleviate his own failing hearing.

To say that the serum had side-effects would be putting it rather mildly.

He turned into a terrifying creature, half man, half bat, that the papers dubbed “Man-Bat.”

So as not to be confused with Batman, of course.

This serum had been coveted by Gotham’s underworld, and Batman would have to stop some henchman or thug that had somehow gotten their hands on Langstrom’s serum every eight months or so.

Batman stood on a rooftop in midtown, a few blocks from the Gotham River and about half a mile from the East End. The sound of helicopters criss-crossing the city was still present, but the sound of gunshots had, thankfully, decreased dramatically as the sun had gone down.

He had called Lucius to provide the antidote for Langstrom’s serum (which he had synthesized and ready to go at a moment’s notice) as well as a sonic emitter that would draw Man-Bat to his location. The Batwing, on autopilot, had hovered in place above the helipad on the roof of Wayne Tower. Lucius put the package in the drop chute, and the Batwing spat the package onto this very rooftop, before it continued its circuit around the city.

Despite everything, Batman thought that Kirk Langstrom was a good man. But the serum was addictive, and if given the chance, Langstrom would use it, if he’d had any on hand.

There must have been plenty in the Arkham inventory room when The Undying let everyone loose. If Langstrom had been let out of his cell, it was the first place he would have gone.

Batman reckoned that the best-case scenario was that he could apply the antidote (which was mixed with a powerful sedative), and Langstrom would wake up on this rooftop in a couple of days naked
and confused, but very much alive.

The worst case scenario was that the people on rooftops, mistaking Man-Bat for Batman, would put a bullet in him, or at least scare him away from the city… at which point he would pass the barrier around Gotham, and the mind-controlled Zatanna would consume him in green fire.

Batman loaded two capsules of antidote into his gauntlet, ready to fire at the first sign of Man-Bat.

He placed the small egg-shaped emitter on the ground in front of him, and turned it on.

Seven hundred feet beyond the main terminal of the 1898 tunnels, where the five car bullet train built by The Broker was located, a small hotel had been built into the vaulted ceilings of the location.

It wasn’t to have been a large hotel, no more than twenty rooms, but at the time of its initial planning, it was to have been reserved only for the decadently rich. The prices were to have been exorbitant, the luxury was to have been unparalleled, and the splendor was to have been unmatched.

It was never built, of course. What remained over one-hundred twenty years later was a series of twenty rooms that hadn’t even had the doors installed. The place was lit by numerous cords of white Christmas lights.

This was where Hamilton Hill lived, now that he was back from the dead and playing the supervillain game.

He stood on the small bridge overlooking the F Line tunnel. It was boxed in by windows, and he surveyed the track beneath him as though he were Ishmael, listlessly staring over the starboard side of the Pequod.

Hill, having no more need to wear the robes associated with The Undying, was now wearing two pieces of a three-piece charcoal gray suit. Shiny black shoes, well-fitting slacks and a matching vest. No tie, and no jacket.

He’d asked Talia to get him this suit if they pulled this off, and as soon as he came back from the press conference, it was in his bedroom.

Things had changed for him since he had come out of the Lazarus Pit. He was a sixty-year-old man who looked like he was forty and felt like he was twenty. He had even had Kasha, Talia’s right hand woman, train him in martial arts over the past year. Not because he felt he needed it, he was more of a thinking man, a talking man.

No, he had energy to burn.

He wondered where Kasha was right now. He hadn’t seen her in a couple of days.

Hamilton Hill reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He went to Twitter and checked the trends for Gotham City.

Right up there at the top was the hashtag that had given him joy since he discovered it last night.

#WeGotBatman.

An ear-splitting screech echoed across midtown Gotham.

Batman prepared himself.
Three blocks away, six-and-a-half feet of hair and muscle emerged from behind a building on leather wings.

Batman pointed his gauntlet at the approaching Man-Bat, ready to fire one of the two syringe-tipped capsules of antidote straight at him.

He could hear the flapping now, and Man-Bat screeched again. Even with the dampeners in his cowl, Batman could feel his ears ringing.

Man-Bat was a block away now.

Batman held his breath.

He could see the gore dripping from Man-Bat’s fangs.

Now was the time to fire.

The antidote capsule left Batman’s gauntlet with a loud, popping gust of Co2.

At the very last instant, Man-Bat barrel-rolled, diving out of the way of the capsule.

Batman’s eyes went wide.

And Man-Bat was upon him, grabbing Batman by the waist with his powerful, clawed feet and lifting him above Gotham City.

The #WeGotBatman hashtag was filled with photos of horror and blood.

Hill had told Gotham City that all of the madness and terror would stop if some enterprising citizen took it upon themselves to kill Batman.

And the fools believed him.

Men of all shapes, sizes, and ages in every kind of Batman costume under the sun, sporting bullet holes and stab wounds, all sporting the hashtag #WeGotBatman.

Guys in costume shop Batman suits shot by their neighbors. Guys in cosplay Batman suits stabbed by their friends. Guys in homemade Batman suits bludgeoned by their families.

But one of these pictures in particular gave Hamilton Hill pause…

Man-Bat roared in Batman’s face. He could see a severed human finger as well as a crow feather in Man-Bat’s filthy maw. He smelled the rotten flesh laced to Man-Bat’s breath. His long, pointed ears stuck straight up to spite the wind. His flat, gnarly nose had a transparent well of snot at its base. His eerie yellow eyes bore a hole in whatever they looked at.

Batman tried to adjust himself as he was being carried through the air, tried to aim his gauntlet at Man-Bat to fire off that second capsule of antidote.

But he kept getting jostled mid-flight, knocking his arm out of position. He wouldn’t have assumed that firing a small projectile at a six-and-a-half foot tall bat creature would be the ordeal it had become, but lo and behold.

Batman closed his eyes, and tried to time Batman’s wing-flaps.
And he had noticed that Man-Bat’s claws had worked their way between his utility belt and his armor.

In the third doorless room on the left in the hotel, Zatanna sat in her wheelchair, wearing the porkpie hat that controlled her mind.

Constantine had said that keeping track of nine million heartbeats in Gotham City would burn her out, and right now, it showed. Her eyes were sunken into her skull and her cheeks were hollow. The bit of collarbone that was visible through the collar of her Blackwell Academy t-shirt stuck out like the handle to an old refrigerator.

Hamilton Hill, now back in his suit jacket, ran a finger through Zatanna’s hair beneath the brim of the hat.

A clump of it fell out, and down the front of her shirt.

Hill put his hand back at his side and just stared at her.

He heard footsteps coming to the doorway. Hill didn’t even look to see who they belonged to.

“Talia’s fine,” Hyde said. “If you care, I mean. I have her stitched up and doped up. She’s gonna be mad when she comes to.”

Hill didn’t say anything.

“I knew she was going to go after Catwoman. But I had no idea she’d lose. If I ever believed in the Tooth Fairy, this is what it’d feel like when I found out he wasn’t real.”

Hill still didn’t say anything.

“I’d like to meet this Selina Kyle,” Hyde said with a bit more gravel in his voice. “Tell her what I think of her in the polite and friendly way I’m known for.”

Wordlessly, Hill took his phone out of his pocket, and held it out. Hyde walked in, took it, and looked at it.

“Hashtag We Got Batman,” Hyde said as he scrolled through the tweets and pictures.

“Have you been following it?” Hill asked.

“Do I look like the kind of man who has shit else to do but go on Twitter?”

“Look at the one at the bottom,” Hill said.

Hyde did, and all he had to say was “Hmm.”

“How old do you think that kid is?” Hill asked. “Fourteen? Fifteen, maybe?”

“If you’re trying to get me to pity this kid,” Hyde said, “you should know I’ve killed younger than this one.”

“That’s not even a Batman suit he’s wearing,” Hill said. “It’s a gray sweatshirt with a black do-rag over his eyes. That’s a paper plate with a M written on it there on his chest because whoever shot this kid couldn’t draw a Bat-Symbol. But they shot this kid anyway, and posted it to Twitter under the hashtag ‘We Got Batman,’ and said that they did what we wanted and we should let the city go.”
Hyde paused before he asked “You’re not going to get all squirrely and regretful, are you?”

“No,” Hill said. “The thing is, I died two years ago. And what I remember after that is this hazy
dream of walking out of a Lazarus Pit, and there’s Talia and two of her lady bodyguards waiting to
pump me full of tranquilizers. However… I only have Talia’s word that I’ve come back to life.”

“What do you mean her word?”

“The prospect that I am still dead and am in fact in Hell right now has not entirely left my mind,” Hill
said.

He reached inside his suit jacket, pulled out the nine millimeter pistol that took the life of his son, and
pressed the barrel against Zatanna’s head.

“So you’ll forgive me if the consequences to my actions don’t hold as much weight as they used to.”

Now!

Batman waited until Man-Bat’s wings were extended, before firing the capsule from his gauntlet
right into the pink and foul expanse of Man-Bat’s open mouth.

The small green capsule embedded itself right behind the upper row of Man-Bat’s razor sharp teeth.

Man-Bat screeched and yanked back, sending Batman into freefall hundreds of feet above the city.

He heard the groan of destroyed metal, and he knew what it was immediately.

Falling back, Batman saw the remains of his utility belt plummeting to the earth hundreds of feet
away from him now.

Batman turned in the air, and spread his cape wide, gliding the rest of the way down.

He landed on a rooftop, his boots hitting the tar-paper with a thud.

Batman surveyed his surroundings, and looked down at his waist. His utility belt was gone. He’d
have to signal the Batwing to get a spare from Lucius at Wayne Tower.

He pressed a button on his right gauntlet, which glowed red.

That meant Nightwing was using the Batwing right now. He let his breath out angrily through his
nose. He looked up…

…and saw a little boy on the rooftop with him.

He couldn’t have been a day older than eight. He was wearing jean shorts and sneakers with a green
t-shirt. He had a blonde bowl cut, and his brown eyes were wide with shock. He had his hands
behind his back.

Words that Alfred had said to him echoed in Batman’s mind.

“You could put the fear of the almighty Himself into adults, but every child in Gotham City could
look into the night sky, see the symbol you chose for yourself, and never have to fear for their safety.”

“Hello,” Batman said to the little boy. “Are you alright? Are you safe?”
The little boy didn’t say anything. His eyes seemed to have tears welling in them, and he was breathing so heavily that he seemed on the verge of hyperventilating.

“Hey,” Batman said. “It’s okay. I’m not going to…”

The little boy brought his hands from behind his back.

They were holding a small pistol, a thirty-eight with no more that five shots in the magazine.

And the little boy pointed it directly at him.

“If she dies,” Hill said, grinding the barrel of the pistol into the unresponsive Zatanna’s forehead, “everyone in Gotham City goes with her. One twitch of my finger, and this gun sings the song that ends the world.”

“Are you, me, or Talia hooked up to that targeting system?” Hyde asked.

“No.”

“Then I really don’t give a shit whether you pull the trigger or don’t.”

Hill blinked. “The city hated me. That hate brought rise to Batman. And now I’m back, and I gave this city incentive to turn on him. And they did. Gotham City is eating itself. They’re turning on strangers, on their loved ones, and all these fresh new corpses bear the symbol of the Bat. That… That is magnitudes worse than burning someone in effigy. I’m finding it hard to see how I haven’t already won.”

“Oh, you want to know if it gets worse?” Hyde asked. “Trust me. It always gets worse. I’m the expert in things getting worse.”

Hill thought about this for a second.

“Good,” Hill said. “This city’s devouring itself… But I don’t think it’s full yet.”

Hill pulled the gun away from Zatanna’s head. He holstered it on the inside of his jacket, and finally turned and made eye-contact with Hyde. He was wearing the wetsuit that he wore under the Black Manta armor. Come to think of it, Hill had only seen him in either that wetsuit or the armor itself.

“I’ve only been The Undying for a hot minute,” Hill said. “And that came with sacrifices. This life costs. I murdered my own son to prove to myself that I could murder nine million other people. I did, and I can. But the thing I’m curious about is… What did you give up?”

“Me?” Hyde asked.

“Yes,” Hill said. “What essential part of yourself did you carve off to become Black Manta?”

Hyde leaned against the door frame and folded his arms.

“My dad is buried in the next best thing to an unmarked grave,” Hyde said. “Just a blank headstone in a cemetery in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Can’t dare put the Hyde name on it, for fear that some… shithead with more vinegar in his veins than blood will desecrate it. My dad was a Navy man. Proud of his service. Purple Heart, Distinguished Service Medal for what he did in Vietnam. And no one can know where he rests because his son’s a supervillain. His son’s gonna be the one that kills Aquaman and everyone else in Atlantis. But my dad’s death has to be avenged. There’s no other way this can go.”
“Your dad’s the only thing you’re sentimental about, isn’t it?”

Hyde shrugged his shoulders. “One of two things, maybe.”

“In whatever capacity I have,” Hill said, “just know that the former mayor of Gotham City commends and appreciates your father for his service to this country.”

Hyde looked like that actually meant something to him. But if it did, he didn’t say anything.

“Now what do you suppose Batman gave up to be Batman?” Hill asked.

Hyde squinted his eyes as he pondered a bit.

“Dignity? He had to leave the house for the first time wondering whether those ears on his cowl looked silly.”

“Happiness,” Hill said. “I mean, everyone who lives this life has to, to one extent or another, but that was the main one for him. He’s tireless. Indefatigable. He devotes everything to being Batman, and that doesn’t leave room for a whole lot else. He thinks his misery is what makes him so powerful. And do you know what? I think he’s right.”

Hyde nodded. Hill put his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

“Now answer this,” Hill said. “All that misery, all that bravery in the face of certain death to protect this city, only to find that the city is turning on its own just to forsake him. That that bravery he showed hasn’t actually rubbed off on the people he’s defending. Knowing all that… Would Batman say it was worth it?”

No doubt this little boy had seen the news.

No doubt this little boy had heard his parents talk about how if the Batman were killed than the city would be saved.

No doubt this little boy had snuck into his parents’ room, removed this pistol from wherever they had stored it, and kept sentry on this rooftop hoping to be the one that liberated nine million people.

The Undying had made this little boy terrified of Batman.

The tears were rolling down his round cheeks now. His deep breathing was getting louder.

“It’s okay,” Batman said. “I’m not going to hurt you. But you really don’t want to--”

_BANG!_

The recoil from the weapon knocked the little boy clean off of his feet.

The bullet caught Batman between the shoulder joints of his armor, and lodged itself in the flesh between his right shoulder and the top of his ribcage.

Batman groaned, staggered back, and fell off the roof of the building.

His back banged against the fire escape a couple of floors down, flipping him over in mid-air, making sure he landed face-first in the half-full dumpster on ground level.

His entire right arm was on fire. Batman, struggled to his feet, trying to find footing on the half full
garbage bags, and used his left arm to haul himself out of the dumpster.

He landed on the wet pavement in a heap, directly on his bad right shoulder, and he grunted in pain before he got to his feet.

Batman looked down at his shoulder.

He was bleeding.

_Bad._

In normal circumstances, he could stitch himself up, but Man-Bat had pried his utility belt off of him in their struggle.

He could signal the Batwing on his gauntlet, he could contact Nightwing, but getting the Batwing would be a problem because without his grapnel gun, he couldn’t get to a rooftop. And contacting Nightwing meant he would have to summon the Batwing, and being that he didn’t know where he was, he ran the risk of bleeding out before he got here.

Batman racked his brain, mentally searching for the locations of his safehouses and caches in this part of town.

None of them were in walking distance. Or at the very least a distance he could walk to without raising unwanted attention or going into shock.

But… there was _one_ place.

And as he began to walk, attempting to stick to the shadows along the way, Batman hoped that his welcome would be a somewhat warm one.
Chapter 23: Those Things on Cop Cars that Make Noise

NINETY MINUTES EARLIER...

“Selina…”

The dreams where she fell were the most common. But here she stood on air, above a mountain range bathed in purple twilight.

And his arms were around her waist.

“Selina…”

She looked down and saw the arms across her naked stomach were decked out in black gauntlets and gray armor.

And his voice came again.

“Selina…”

His breath was in her ear, raising the hairs on the back of her neck, raising gooseflesh on her bare arms. She closed her eyes, smiled, and asked a question she knew was important, but she wasn’t sure why.

“Sailor,” she said, “has anyone ever told you that you sound a whole lot like Bruce Wayne?”

A deep chuckle sounded in her ear. Oh that’s got to be Bruce, she thought. Batman doesn’t chuckle. Or giggle. Or laugh. He’d set his suit on fire if he ever did. Bruce is wearing a Batman costume just to tease me, that’s all.

“Turn around and find out,” he said.

Her bare feet somehow found purchase on the nothing that she was standing on. Her naked back brushed against the chest of his armor. She turned to him and--

Catwoman woke up, and immediately saw that she was tied to a chair.

I gave up a sex dream for this?

She looked around the room in which she sat. There were meathooks on the wall, telling her she was in an old slaughterhouse. Given how cramped the room she was in actually was, she had to guess she was in the loading bay. She’d have bet that if she turned around, she’d have seen two big doors chained shut. There were no more trucks coming to this place to take meat away anymore.

Catwoman looked back down at her hands bound to the chair, saw that her black Catsuit was coated in dust from the imploding building from which she had escaped. She started to struggle, and then stopped when she noticed something.

During the fight with Talia when she attacked her with her own whip (a whip that she lost when the building came down) she had given her a crack that opened up her catsuit and sliced her open along her left forearm.
It seemed that the person who had tied her to this chair had also stitched up her wound.

She went back to struggling her way out of the bungee cords binding her to this old wooden chair, when a voice came in over a loudspeaker above her.

“Subject eight,” the voice said. “Kyle, Selina. Prior exposure to gasses and toxins… None.”

It was a voice that was paradoxically low and wispy. It was a voice that could curdle milk all on its lonesome.

And Catwoman knew who the voice belonged to.

“Scarecrow!” she called out.

“Hello, Catwoman,” Scarecrow said. “I thought you retired when the Batman went away. But now that he’s back, so are you. Predicting that would have been like predicting a sunrise.”

Catwoman struggled harder against her restraints. “What do you want, Crane?”

“To know what scares you,” Scarecrow said.

*Stupid question.*

Scarecrow had gassed all of the heroes in Gotham at one time or another, and most of the villains as well.

“In all of our years of lighting up Gotham,” Scarecrow said, “I’ve never once exposed you to my wares. Someone who can leap across rooftops and dally with Batman without a care in the world? My-my-my-my, it must take something *special* to put the fear in you…”

She ran across a number of smart-ass things to say. None of them were particularly threatening or funny, so she just continued to struggle.

“Let’s find out,” Scarecrow said. “I think this experience will be *most* enlightening.”

Then it came. The hiss of Scarecrow’s fear gas coming from nozzles embedded in the ceiling. Catwoman took a deep breath, and held it.

“You do realize that my toxin can be absorbed through the skin?” Scarecrow asked over the loudspeaker. “Holding your breath will just make you turn blue.”

Catwoman let her breath out, and started struggling against her binds again.

It was too late now. She had never asked herself what terrified her the most in this world, and now she would find out.

What if what scared her most in life was just the simple act of getting gassed by Scarecrow?

*What if that’s what she was seeing right now?*

Because if that was the case, then… Then that’s actually kind of lame.

She’d been exposed to Scarecrow’s gas for, what, twenty seconds now? And she hadn’t seen anything. No hallucinations of dead relatives, or sharp-toothed beasts, or vaguely phallic monsters loosed from the collective subconscious. Just a shitty slaughterhouse that was so old that grass was
growing out of the cracks in the concrete floor.

“Why… isn’t… It… WORKING?”

Scarecrow himself, rail thin and still in his noose and burlap bag, busted out of the small side room from which he had been observing the proceedings. He came up to her and stopped when he was a few feet away.

“Is--Is it the nozzles?” Scarecrow asked himself. “It can’t be! They worked on the first… seven…”

Scarecrow stopped when he saw something. Catwoman checked his eyeline and stared at what he was staring at.

There were small tufts of grass growing out of the cracks in the floor, and above them were little orange spires, no more than an inch high. It took her a second to work it out, but she finally figured out what was going on.

The grass was sucking up the fear gas.

Even through his mask, Catwoman could see the agitation building in Scarecrow. It showed in the shoulders, and how they were tensely rising and falling as he breathed.

“No,” he said. “It’s her!”

There was a knock on the small exit door on the other side of the room. It was so loud that both Catwoman and Scarecrow jumped.

Scarecrow slowly walked to the door and slowly opened it. And Catwoman could hear the person on the other side of the door say two simple words.

“Hiya, Doc!”

Scarecrow immediately slammed the door and locked it.

Catwoman didn’t actually see the person on the other side of the door… But she would know that tragically New York voice anywhere.

“HARLEY!” Catwoman yelled. “IT’S SELINA! HE’S TAKEN--”

Scarecrow turned on her. “Will you shut up?”

“Now that ain’t no way to treat a lady, Doc,” Harley Quinn said from the street beyond the door. “I come all the way from Arkham to see how you were doin’ now that our sessions had been called off, only find you tyin’ up broads and slammin’ doors in my face!”

Harley knocked on the door again, and Scarecrow started backing up.

“You know what I’ll hafta to if you don’t open this door, right?” Harley asked from outside. “I’ll huuuuuuuuuf… And I’ll puuuuuuuf… Annnnnd I’llllll get-my-smokin’-hot-plant-lady-girlfriend-to-make-big-long-vines-come-out-of-the-ground-in-there-and-have-her-jam-them-up-your peeeeeee-hooaaaaaaole.”

The ground inside the slaughterhouse began to rumble. The concrete on the floor began to crack.

And two massive vines emerged from the floor directly in front of Catwoman, kicking up enough debris and dust to necessitate her closing her eyes.
While they were clenched shut, she heard Scarecrow cry out in surprise and shock.

When she opened them again, Catwoman saw that one of the vines was dangling Scarecrow upside down. His burlap mask had fallen off, and his thin, sandy hair was dangling below his thin, pinched-looking head.

The other vine ripped the door clean off of its hinges, before it receded back into the ground.

Harley was the first to enter. She was wearing cut-off jeans beneath a t-shirt that helpfully informed all who read it that its wearer had successfully completed the Meat Tornado Challenge at Big Belly Burger. She had sandals on, and a wooden baseball bat over her shoulder. Her blonde hair was in pigtails, and her face had a lot more color than the last time Catwoman had seen her.

Then Catwoman realized that what she was seeing was Harley “in a better place in her life,” and all of her interior recoiled.

Poison Ivy came in behind her. Vivid green eyes, lustrous red hair in a braid coming down over her right shoulder. She swayed as she moved, her upper and lower torso as well as her feet covered in what Catwoman could only classify as “cabbagey bits.”

“How’s been too long.”

“You think to scare me, witch?” Scarecrow asked. “Nothing scares me.”

“Nothing except Batman,” Ivy said. “And people have been dying because of that. Not that I’m complaining. A few less sacks of angry, stupid meat in the world make Ivy a happy girl. And besides…”

She leaned forward. Her mint ice cream skin seemed to get more vivid. Her hair looked like it became a deeper and more enticing shade of red. Her already full ruby lips appeared to plump further.

“…who said anything about scaring you?”

Catwoman had seen this before.

In fact, Catwoman had had this done to her previously, before Robin of all people stepped in and saved her.

“I’ve always respected and admired you, Jonny,” Poison Ivy said as she slinked toward him.

Scarecrow seemed to know what was about to happen.

“No!”

He reached his arm out, and a jet of fear toxin erupted from a jet hidden in the sleeve of his lab coat. It coated Ivy’s face… and had no effect at all.

Of course it wouldn’t, Catwoman thought. The toxin used plant bases, so Ivy was immune. It wouldn’t affect Harley either, as she used to huff fear toxin for fun back in the day, and had developed an immunity of her own, even to the stronger strains.

“Why do you want to resist me, Jonny?” Poison Ivy asked. “Do you mind if I call you Jonny?”
All resistance within Scarecrow seemed to vanish in the span of a sentence. “I… Well… No. No I don’t at all.”

Ivy smiled. “Good. Such a smart man you are. It seems strange that we never teamed up in the old days.”

“It does,” Scarecrow said listlessly. “Now that I look back on it.”

Harley was looking back and forth between the two of them, knowing what was about to happen.

Catwoman knew what was about to happen as well, and her stomach turned at the thought of it. The effects of Ivy’s poisons varied, depending on her antipathy toward her target. And Catwoman knew she really hated Scarecrow.

“Intelligent minds such as ours could have made such a difference.”

“Yes…”

“And they still could,” Ivy said. “Would you like that, Jonny?”

“Yes,” Scarecrow said. “Yes I would.”

“Good,” Ivy said. “Now… Give me a kiss.”

She leaned in. Their lips were mere inches apart now.

Catwoman piped up. “Uh… Pammy?”

Ivy turned to Catwoman, the effects of her pheromones and powers of seduction instantly ceasing. She did not look happy.

“What?”

“I’ve seen you do that to people before, and I really don’t want see Scarecrow puke blood from his eye sockets.” Catwoman looked down at her restraints, then back at Ivy. “I’m kind of in a delicate place right now.”

Ivy threw up her hands. “Well what do you suggest I do with him, Selina?”

“Um… Knock him out?”

At this, Harley’s eyes lit up.

“Dibs!”

THWACK!

With blinding speed, Harley had lugged the baseball bat off of her shoulder, and cracked Scarecrow across the face with it. Blood from his mouth was dripping off the floor.

Ivy shrugged her shoulders. Her vine let Scarecrow go, and he landed on the busted concrete floor directly on his neck.

“You wouldn’t mind untying me, would you?” Catwoman asked.

“Ugh,” Ivy said as she started walking toward her. “I have to do everything for you, don’t I?”
Ivy worked the bungee cords tying Catwoman to the chair as her vine receded back into the earth. And all the while, Harley stood over the unconscious Scarecrow.

“Some of his teeth came out,” Harley said. “He’s gonna need a dentist… Aw, but he gets the laughin’ gas, and I don’t… Now I made myself sad…”

When Selina Kyle, Pamela Isley, and Harleen Quinzel shared an old animal shelter in Robinson Park that they had converted into an apartment, Selina asked Pam what she saw in Harley.

“I have no power over her. I have no means to compel her to do my bidding, and yet… she stays with me anyway. I need to know what that means.”

Conversely, Selina had asked Harley what she saw in Pam. Her response was a great deal less solemn.

“Red hair? Green skin? IT’S LIKE GOIN’ DOWN ON CHRISTMAS!”

Selina thought there was more to it than that, but thought better of pressing the issue.

Whenever Harley and The Joker were on the outs, Harley always came sniffing around Ivy, and Ivy always took her in. And whenever Harley inevitably went back to The Joker, Ivy tried her hardest to impress upon her that The Joker was only going to hurt her again.

And then Harley killed The Joker, so something apparently worked.

Standing in the alley outside the slaughterhouse on this balmy July evening, the sound of distant helicopters and nearby crickets being their only accompaniment, Poison Ivy was working her tongue along her gums.

“Inhaling Crane’s toxin always gives me dry mouth,” she said, and went back to working her mouth.

Harley looked at Catwoman and smiled. “How ya been, Kitten?”

“I've been... Actually, you have no idea how confusing a question that is,” Catwoman said. "How did you know I was here?”

"We was in the neighborhood,” Harley said. "Saw Doc back there draggin' ya behind him like, well, a dead cat. Couldn't let that slide. Anyway, I hear you're a millionaire now.”

“Yes,” Catwoman said. “Yes, I am.”

“Gotta quarter?”

Catwoman looked down at her dusty Catsuit, then back at Harley. “On me? No.”

Harley made a Pfft sound, and said “Rich folks are all the same.”

Catwoman smiled. “I almost got married, too.”

“I heard about that,” Harley said. “Broke it off?”

Catwoman nodded.

“I thought so,” Harley said. “I’d say it was because a lack of a stable model for intimacy in your youth manifests as a fear of commitment combined with unresolved feelings for Batman, but then I’d
And it was at this point that Catwoman stopped smiling.

“How’s this whole Undyin’ thing been treatin’ ya?” Harley asked.

“Well,” Catwoman said. “I lost my whip.”

Harley made a pouty face. “Awwwwww.”

“I kicked Talia al Ghul in the crotch.”

Harley looked scandalized. “Oh, Kitten. Ya just don’t do that to another lady.”

“I wanted to live,” Catwoman said, “So yes I did.”

Harley shrugged.

Catwoman’s mind drifted to the thought that she hadn’t had time to deal with, outside of a dream.

“And…” Catwoman said, “I found out Batman’s secret identity.”

This caught both Harley and Ivy’s attention. Ivy’s eyebrows were slightly raised in interest, but Harley’s eyes were wide, her mouth agape. She tiptoed over to Catwoman, took her hand, and came in close, as though they were going to share a secret.

“Is it Bruce Wayne?” Harley asked.

Catwoman found it impossible to hide her incredulity. “What?”

Ivy groaned. “For the last time, Harley, Bruce Wayne is not Batman.”

Harley looked at Ivy defiantly. “Oh, how do you know? Have ya ever seen Bruce Wayne and Batman in the same place at the same time?”

“Yes,” Ivy said. “Yes, I have.”

Come to think of it, so had Catwoman. That time Batman saved Bruce from Deadshot at the Gotham Stock Exchange.

So that means Bruce can’t be Batman… Right?

“And besides,” Ivy said. “Not seeing two people in the same place at the same time can’t be the only criteria. You haven’t seen Hugh Jackman and Batman in the same place at the same time either.”

Harley rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s just…”

Then she stopped. Harley’s brow furrowed. Her lips puckered into a little frown. Her pale blue eyes darted back and forth, as though she were solving equations upon thin air.

Then her face lit up in a Eureka moment. She thrust her arms to the heavens in victory and proclaimed, for all the world to hear:

“HUGH JACKMAN IS BATMAN!”

Ivy blinked, and flatly looked at Catwoman.
Catwoman shrugged as if to say “I dunno.” Because she didn’t.

“I’m going to try to steal a bottle of water,” Ivy said. “This dry mouth is killing me.”

As she walked away, Harley called out “Have fun, Red!”

Ivy gave a thumbs up over her shoulder, and disappeared around the corner. Catwoman saw Harley look after her with a dreamy, wistful expression.

“Love looks good on you,” Catwoman said.

“I know,” Harley said.

There was a knot of worry within Catwoman’s chest. She wanted to let it go, seeing how truly happy Harley was…

…but she just couldn’t.

“She’s going to try to get you to do something terrible,” Catwoman said. “You know that, right? Say what you want about Talia al Ghul, but she only wants to kill ninety percent of the people in the world. Ivy wants to kill all of them. Except maybe, on a good day, you.”

The smile slowly eroded from Harley’s face. Some of the light left her eyes.

“I know,” Harley said.

“You know?”

Harley looked at the ground, put her hands in the pockets of her cut-offs, and turned to Catwoman.

“Everyone gets to thinkin’ I’m stupid,” Harley said. “That I’ll fall in love at the drop of a hat, and do anything the other person says ‘cause I got no mind of my own. And yeah, I get why people think that, stickin’ with Mistah J as long as I did.”

Harley looked Catwoman in the eye. “But no one ever considers how if Red tries to kill everybody, I’d be the only one who could stop her.”

Catwoman tilted her head.

“Red kept tellin’ me and tellin’ me I was too good for Mistah J, and I kept on goin’ back… Until one day I just believed her, and I used my mallet to turn Puddin’s brains into actual puddin’. If I didn’t show the same faith in her that she showed in me, then… I’d just suck.”

“So the power of love is gonna turn Poison Ivy into one of the good guys?” Catwoman asked.

“Sounds silly, don’t it?”

“It does a lot more than sound silly.”

“But it worked for me, though.”

*That caught Catwoman off-guard.* “Are you seriously telling me you pulled a face turn?”

“Why not?” Harley asked. “It ain’t like I’m not better off now than I was then. You hear about what I’m doin’ in Arkham?”
“Yeah,” Catwoman said. “You’re giving out therapy to the patients in a wing in Arkham…”

“Yup!”

“…in exchange for sharing a cell with Ivy.”

Harley put her hands on her hips. “It ain’t the booty call privileges I do it for… Well, not just the booty call privileges. There’s this thing Red does with her pinkie while I’m--”

Catwoman held up her hand. “Just… skip to the end, please.”

“I’m actually tryin’ to help people in there,” Harley said. “It’s what I wanted to do before I met Mistah J, and now I’m doin’ it! I might not be successful a hundred percent of the time, but just tryin’ to be one of the good guys feels better than bein’ a villain ever did.”

Catwoman opened her mouth, then closed it, before she finally said “So Harley Quinn is the only thing standing between the world and plant-based genocide.”

Harley winked at her.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying this,” Catwoman said, “but that is far from a perfect situation.”

Harley shrugged her shoulders. “Who said anything about perfect? It’s just better than what we had.”

Catwoman...really couldn’t argue with that. She held out her arm and gestured for Harley to move closer. She did, and Catwoman wrapped her in a hug.

“This whole situation works out,” Catwoman said, “put me on the visitor’s list at Arkham, alright? I worry about you.”

“Mmmmmmm,” Harley said as she rubbed Catwoman’s back a little too slowly. “If ya really feel that way, Kitten, all ya had to do was ask.”

Catwoman broke the hug. “Harley, no. Well... No.”

Harley shrugged. “Your loss.”

The sound of footsteps in the alley meant that Poison Ivy had finally returned. Harley saw her and held her arms wide.

“Red!” Harley said, walking toward her. “Ya get your dry mouth situation taken care of?”

Ivy held up a half-empty bottle of water to signify that yes, she had.

“Lemme check,” Harley said.

She took Ivy’s cheeks in her hands, and got on her tiptoes. Harley kissed Ivy with a depth and a passion that Catwoman found both heartwarming and disturbing in equal measure.

Harley broke the kiss. She put her arm around Ivy’s waist, Ivy lifted up the back of Harley’s t-shirt so she could put her hand in one of the rear pockets of Harley’s cut-offs.

As they made to leave the alley, Harley called out behind her.

“See ya ’round, Kitten” Harley said. “And if you see B-Man, tell him I really liked that circus
musical he was in.”

They started walking away, and Catwoman could still hear a bit of the conversation they were having.

“Ya give any more thought to the thing we talked about?”

“Harley, I am not growing marijuana in my greenhouse.”

“Whaddya got against the little Mary Jane plants?”

“I have nothing against the little Mary Jane plants, but what you plan on doing with them sincerely gives me pause.”

As Harley and Ivy left the alley, Catwoman folded her arms and reflected on what the last half hour had given her to think about…

...and then she skipped past all of the uncomfortable stuff, and realized that she had talked to three certifiably insane people in the last thirty minutes, and they all had doctorates.

Catwoman took a deep breath, and said “Thank Christ I dropped out of high school.”

The world came back to Talia al Ghul with a shrill whistle and the warm bloom of plain white Christmas lights.

She was on a bed in the hotel section of the 1898 tunnels, the whistling entering the forefront of her brain and making her headache worse.

Until it stopped. She looked to her left, her head lolling on the pillow, opening the one eye she could still open, and saw David Hyde in his wetsuit, his back to her, taking a tea kettle off of a small, portable stove.

She was in David’s room.

Talia looked down at herself. Her leather jacket and her boots had been removed, though her leather pants were still on, and dusty from her fight with Catwoman.

Her arms were marbled with bruises. She lifted her black tank top undershirt and saw that the wounds she had suffered from Selina Kyle’s claws had been stitched closed.

She looked back up and saw Hyde standing over her, plain mug of tea in hand, the string and tag from a bag of Twining’s Earl Grey hanging loosely over the side.

The cheap stuff.

“This is for you, by the way,” Hyde said, using the mug of tea to gesture at her. “Can you sit up?”

Talia looked at him a bit, before she said “We will have to find out eventually.”

Everything hurt as Talia lifted herself with her arms. She brought her legs down to the side of the bed, and felt a voluminous throb starting in her groin, and spreading out to the bottom of her stomach, to the tops of her thighs.

Oh, dear God, I hate Selina Kyle so much…
But now she was sitting up, her feet on the dull, ancient red carpet. Hyde held out the mug of tea, and she took it.

The tea tasted… cheap.

“We are in your bedroom,” Talia said, the stretching of her muscles in her face as she spoke making her headache worse.

“Yeah,” Hyde said.

“Why are we in your bedroom?”

“Because you told everyone not to go into your bedroom,” Hyde said.

She took another sip of tea, and set it down on the end table. She lowered her head, and stared at her own feet. She stretched her face, even though it hurt, because she was trying to open the eye that was swollen shut. When she couldn’t she sighed, and looked up at Hyde.

“I would like to see a mirror, please.”

Hyde folded his arms. “I don’t second-guess people like you when their minds are made up… Is your mind made up?”

No, Talia thought, but I cannot avoid this.

“I would like to see a mirror, please.”

Hyde nodded. He walked to the dresser, pulled a small hand mirror out of the top drawer, and came back with it.

Talia took it, and looked.

Her left eye was swollen shut, as the entire left side of her face was swollen to the extent that it looked as though a stalk of rotten cauliflower had taken bloom just beneath her skin, distorting the shape of her face and discoloring it. Her right eye was entirely bloodshot, her brown iris lonely in a sea of red.

And her face was dominated by four long, vertical slashes, extending from the middle of her forehead, going down her cheeks and nose. They were deep, they looked to be permanent, and they appeared to be closed by…

“Super glue,” Hyde said.

Talia looked at him.

“Non-porous,” Hyde said. “No chance for infection. It’s how I closed these.”

He pointed to the three long scars on the side of his face that he had gotten while fighting Aquaman.

Talia stared at him a while, and weakly said “We match.”

“That’s one way of looking at it.

Talia looked back at the mirror and tried to see beyond herself. Past the appearance and surface emotions to what was underneath. To see where she was to go.
And she saw defeat.

Talia al Ghul had lost fights before. This was nothing new. The simple fact that she had lost to Selina Kyle (through low and unfair means, but still) did not, in and of itself, bother her to the extent someone on the outside looking in would assume.

But it was what that loss represented that hollowed her out.

She had been planning for years to bring her Beloved out of his self-imposed exile. She had brought a man back from the dead, hired one of the most dangerous people on Earth to assist her, set a plan in motion to destroy Gotham City itself. She had toiled, and toiled, and when she had revealed herself to Bruce, he had turned her away.

Which he had done before. What he had not done before, was ask her a simple question:

“Am I a good man?”

And Talia… couldn’t answer that.

She knew how her Beloved would define “a good man,” and that definition reeked of weakness. Of a man who would stoop low, spending infinitely more energy than warranted to protect those whom the world would not miss from harm and death.

And he had done it before. His definition of “a good man” had not stopped them from their respective moves in the tango that was their relationship over the past decade, but it was here, it was now, that presented him with difficulty. His aspiration to live up to his own foolish notions had frozen him in place.

So it must have been a distraction! It must have been the Kyle woman who linked him to the dirt and detritus of the world that he fought so doltishly to protect. And so she would meet Selina Kyle on the field of battle, and remove her heart from her chest.

But Selina Kyle had not only defeated her, but had battered and permanently disfigured her. And to add insult to injury, it was during this fight that she had lost her sword, her jian, the weapon given to her by her father at age eleven. Her favorite weapon, the weapon she used to express herself.

Coming to this city was a long and humiliating process of being parted with the things that mattered to her the most. Her sword. Her dignity. Her love.

The foremost image in her mind as she broke down the damage done to her face into its basic component shapes was that of her Beloved and the son they were to have turning gray, turning to ash, dissolving in the air around her. Leaving her with nothing.

And the four slashes on her face were evidence--permanent evidence--that she had irretrievably wasted the last ten years of her life.

She put the hand mirror down next to the mug of tea that she was not going to drink, and slowly rose to her feet. She did not want Hyde to help her… and he must have sensed that, because he did not.

“What next?” Hyde asked.

Talia took a deep breath.
“I am leaving Gotham City,” she said. “There is nothing here for me now. I am not on the LexCorp targeting system, and I have ways to evade the patrols outside of the perimeter.”

Hyde nodded. “And… the offer about the League helping me take Atlantis?”

“It still stands,” Talia said, not looking at him. “No matter what happens here, you will have our help, when the time comes.”

“Good,” Hyde said, and after that, Talia some movement out of the corner of her eye.

She looked at him and saw that he had his hand out, as though he expected her to put her hand in his.

And, driven by some urge she could neither interrogate nor explain, she put her hand in his.

“Daughter of the Demon,” Hyde said. “I am honored to have entered your employ…”

Hyde bent down and kissed the back of Talia’s hand. His full lips seemed to spread their warmth to her entire arm.

“...and I am grateful to have made your acquaintance.”

She took her hand away. Possessed by whatever force that drove her to put her hand in his in the first place, Talia said:

“You are not bound to this place anymore than I am. You can leave Gotham City if you so wish.”

Hyde stood up straight, and said “I came here to fight Batman. So fighting Batman is what I’ll do.”

A series of images strode across the mind of Talia al Ghul.

David Hyde stomping Bruce Wayne’s face into a red mulch. Gutting Selina Kyle with his bare, calloused hands. Beating Dick Grayson to death with one of his own severed limbs. Twisting Barbara Gordon’s head all the way around, and popping it off like a champagne cork in a velvety spray of crimson blood.

And that warmth that had spread throughout her arm quickly spread to her whole body.

Talia limped to the door. When she got there, Hyde spoke again.

“When we take Atlantis,” he said, “that’s a lot of empty real estate left over after everyone’s dead. Thinking maybe I’ll settle down in whatever’s left. Hell of a lot better than up here. But do you know what would really be nice?”

Talia closed her eyes, and immediately felt every inch of her skin crawl. She knew where this was going. She was practically broadcasting how vulnerable she was, and David Hyde, which she had at least a small degree of respect for until just now, had decided to descend like the scavenger he was.

“A queen?” Talia asked, with no small amount of irritation. “An ornament at your side as you survey a land of ash? A symbol of status to bring you above your pitiful station?”

Hyde squinted at her. “It sounds silly when you say it.”

“Because it is silly, David.”

Hyde nodded. “But… you said it. Not me.”
Talia stared unblinkingly at him.

“I was gonna say a submarine,” Hyde said. “One with a nuclear reactor, not the kind you can get on the black market.”

Talia closed her eyes, and let her breath out through her nose in a hiss.

“Are all men so infuriating?”

“Around you,” Hyde said, “I imagine they pick up the habit. But since you put the thought in my head, once I’m done here, maybe I should look you up.”

Talia looked down her nose at him.

“The League of Assassins has secret lairs and safehouses all over the world. We are trained in stealth and evasion. If I do not wish to be found, then I shall not be found.”

Hyde grinned, and folded his arms.

“I used to find buried treasure before I got into the supervillain game,” he said. “Doubloons underneath derelict tankers in the Caribbean. Ancient statuary behind dead reefs off the coast of Crete. My job was finding rare and wonderful things in a shitty world… You won’t be hard to find at all.”

Talia looked at him.

She felt like smiling at this strange man David Hyde, before she turned and left the room. Before she collected her things. Before she left Gotham City.

She didn’t.

But she felt like it.

As she avoided the street lights on the way back to Harlow Street, Catwoman was left alone with her thoughts.

Thought, rather.

Just the one.

Bruce Wayne is Batman.

It was absurd.

As she stepped onto Harlow Street proper, keeping an eye out, Catwoman reckoned that if Bruce Wayne was Batman, then there came a point in the day that Bruce Wayne quite literally gave up being Bruce Wayne.

One of the richest men in the world, head of Wayne Enterprises, playboy of legend, actually parted with that to put on a bat costume to fight bad guys and put himself in grave danger. Not the rich boy grave danger like racing cars or spelunking, no. Actual grave danger.

And that was just silly. Who would do something like that? Who would take the time off from plowing through models and actresses to…
Wait…

That wasn’t right.

She’d said herself, to his face, that she’d noticed he wasn’t actually dating anyone, in direct defiance of his reputation. Hell, she’d hit on him herself at that last Christmas party after she called off her engagement to Josh, and she’d turned him down, saying that they shouldn’t do something they’d both regret.

Selina Kyle had thrown herself at Bruce Wayne, and Bruce Wayne turned her down.

Which…

Which is…

“Which is something **Batman** would have done,” Catwoman said softly to herself as she skirted another street light a block away from her apartment building.

*Yeah, someone with a guilt complex and monstrous self-loathing issues talking about regret?  Yup, that’s Batman alright.*

Okay, what about that whole Gotham Stock Exchange thing? The one where Batman saved Bruce Wayne from Deadshot? That had to be evidence that Bruce Wayne and Batman were two different people, right?

Catwoman asked herself: *Is it possible for a human being to be in two places at once?*

To which Catwoman responded: *No.*

Catwoman asked herself: *Okay… But is it possible for Batman to be in two places at once?*

To which Catwoman responded: *...Maybe.*

Batman had a reputation for the impossible. A mortal man with no powers, keeping up with heavy hitters like Superman and Wonder Woman. He could pull something like that off. With, like, tech or something.

WayneTech.

*Goddammit!*

Oh, and there was another log on the Bruce-Wayne-is-Batman pile: *Bruce knew Wonder Woman!*

Yeah, Wonder Woman was an ambassador from that island she came from, and she knew a ton of public figures. But industrialists and tech guys? She hadn’t seen any pictures of Wonder Woman hanging out with Elon Musk. Or that chode who ran Twitter.

But the guy who ran Twitter was a white supremacist, though. If she’d seen pictures of Wonder Woman hanging out with Herr Manbun, she’d have had questions.

Catwoman now stood on the stoop of her apartment building. She let out a long sigh, and at the end, she just said: “Shit!”

It echoed down the street a little, but she didn’t care right now.

With each step she took up the stairs to her apartment, she felt more and more foolish. He was in
front of her the whole time, and…

She stopped on the poorly lit hallway leading to her apartment, her eyes wide. That one idea seemed to consume her entire body with its ramifications.

*He was in front of me the entire time.*

And if that was true, then… then that meant…

**Thump… Thump… Thump…**

It was coming from the stairs behind her.

Footsteps.

Heavy ones.

**Thump… Thump… Thump…**

Catwoman turned around. She didn’t know anyone who lived on this floor. She didn’t know if anyone lived on this floor *at all,* come to think.

She extended her claws, and backed up. Whoever this was sounded big.

**Thump… Thump… Thump…**

Catwoman saw a shadow forming at the top of the stairs. Dark… Vast…

**Thump… Thump…**

They were at the top of the stairs now, their silhouette in full view… And it was one Catwoman recognized immediately.

Catwoman peered into the shadows and called out.

*“Batman?***

Batman stepped into the light. The face visible beneath his cowl was dripping with sweat.

At first, Catwoman thought he’d changed up his armor design, going for a darker look instead of the gray. But a more careful glance told her something else.

That wasn’t a darker armor.

That was his regular armor covered by an almost obscene amount of blood.

Catwoman saw that Batman was bleeding from a wound on his shoulder.

He opened his mouth to say something, before his eyes rolled back, and he collapsed a few feet away from her.
Chapter 24: The Batman Who Laughs

GOTHAM PORT - ELEVEN YEARS AGO

Batman had heard of this new thief, but he’d never seen them in person before.

There had been reports of robberies. Low-level mob guys and their mistresses. Cash and jewelry. The jobs were both discrete and thorough.

Whoever did this had talent. And this talented individual would get delusions of grandeur soon enough.

Bruce Wayne was supposed to be with his girlfriend Mallory Moxon, attending the Mad Mod fashion show at the Tynion Ballroom on Fourth, but he spotted out of the corner of his eye on the way over, a silhouette in the rain standing atop one of the boats in the port. He called Mallory, and said he wouldn’t be able to make it.

And he would be tending to this mission solo. Dick Grayson had a Social Studies test in the morning.

As Batman, he watched the silhouette nimbly hop from yacht to yacht and break into, of all ships, the Lysistrata, which was owned by Mallory.

He was standing on the deck when the silhouette’s owner emerged from the cabin, crawling up what appeared to be a bullwhip.

It was a woman.

And she was dressed in a skintight cat costume.

Lightning flashed behind him, sending his own silhouette as his vanguard. This “Catwoman” rounded at him and gasped.

“Batman!”

The moon shone directly in her face, and showed him she was beautiful. Full lips beneath black lipstick, high sharp cheekbones, and vivid green eyes.

“I’ve had my eye on you,” he said. “You were the one who stole jewelry out of Rita Nunzio’s apartment three months ago.”

Catwoman sneered. “That jewelry didn’t look good on her anyway.”

“This doesn’t fit your MO.”

“I have an MO?”

“Everyone has an MO,” Batman said. “I was more than willing to let you go on your way, so long as you were targeting other criminals. But you’re here tonight taking something that doesn’t belong to you.”

He stepped toward her. He could see that she was breathing heavily.
“You have one chance to return what you stole,” he said. “After that, you’re just one more criminal I have to deal with.”

Catwoman’s lower lip thrust up in an open-mouthed scowl. Her green eyes narrowed in anger.

_Fight or Flight?_

“Listen, freak,” Catwoman said, bringing her shoulders back. “I’m no one’s just one more _anything_. And if you want this ugly, tacky crap…”

_Flight._

“…you’re just gonna have to catch me.”

His hand was already on his utility belt when Catwoman broke for it. He fired his grapnel gun into the pale wood of the deck, and launched himself off the yacht.

Batman glided across the dock as Catwoman made it to the stairs leading up to the street. He launched his grapnel at the archway to give himself more altitude.

He made it up to street level, high above the assorted citizens having left the seven o’clock screenings of whatever movies they had gone to see, and saw Catwoman jump onto a parked car, and use her bullwhip to swing onto a moving bus. She threw the whip to the roof, scrambled up the side, and stood, a goofy grin on her face, impressing even herself with the neat maneuver she had just pulled off.

Catwoman wobbled slightly, hunching over a few inches, no doubt to maintain her balance on the moving vehicle...

...but, to Batman, it almost looked as though she was going to take a bow.

And the image, the very notion, of Catwoman taking a bow, accepting plaudits and laurels from her audience of zero in appreciation for her marvelous feat of daring, ingenuity, and acrobatics… triggered something in Batman. Something that he thought not possible on this night, on this mission, in this life, in this costume.

For Batman… _laughed._

It tore out of his belly, charged up his throat, and surfaced from his mouth in a rampage. It was the kind of sudden, unexpected laugh that blasts through all veneer of manners and flimsy preconceptions of self. For Batman, who used his deep voice to intimidate and frighten, had an embarrassingly high-pitched laugh. A little more than elfin, but a little less than girlish.

He let out three sudden, shrill “HA!”s, and when he breathed in again, he clamped his mouth down in an exaggerated, showy frown, as though his face was making a grand display to his greater self that no further displays of flippancy or frivolousness would be escaping his mouth this evening.

Catwoman jumped from the bus to a fire escape on a small office building, and he knew she was going to climb her way to the roof.

Batman hooked a traffic light to give himself a bit more altitude, and glided around to the other side of the building.

He hooked to the side of the roof and rose. He saw a water tower beneath him, and the shape of Catwoman looked up. He glided the entire length of the rooftop and made landfall, kicking up
gravel all over her.

He stood up straight, and surveyed her.

“‘The jewelry,” he said. “Now.”

The expression on her face didn’t match the stance of her body. Her face was defiance herself, the rain pouring down her goggles as she slightly bared her teeth. But she was one unsightly case of knocking-knees away from broadcasting utter terror with the rest of her frame.

“You say I steal from criminals,” she said with derision. “I just steal from people who have more than me.”

“That’s not an excuse.”

Catwoman shifted her goggles to her forehead.

“Are you prepared to hit a woman to get Mallory Moxon’s crap back for her?”

“Not first,” Batman said.

Looking back on this night years later, he would consider this the one and only out-and-out lie he had ever told Selina Kyle.

He had fought women before. In fact, he had put Query (of Echo and Query, henchwomen of The Riddler) in the hospital with a broken jaw after she tried to kill Robin with an ancient Celtic battle axe during one of Nygma’s museum heists.

That was the thing, though. Query held lethal intent. Catwoman, apparently, did not. She was dressed for stealth and speed. Her weapon, the bullwhip on her hip, he had only seen used for infiltration and traversal. Unless she had poisons or acids hidden somewhere on her form-fitting attire, Batman deduced that she operated in a manner that almost required violence of any kind be a last resort.

It was more than that, though.

It was less than that, though.

Catwoman gave Batman the first genuine, loud, spontaneous laugh he’d had in what must have been years, and he didn’t want to hurt her.

He would if he had to. Otherwise, it was poor payment.

Catwoman smirked. “You can’t believe everything you hear on the street… ‘Cause they said you were smart.”

He heard the click of claws extending from the tips of her gloves.

She swung at him.

And the eleven year epic of flirtation and pain, tension, and regret between Batman and Catwoman truly began in earnest.

Violence is a form of communication. It declares intent. It bespeaks a mindset. It tells a story.

And oh, what he learned about Catwoman.
Moving fluidly between fists and raindrops, he saw how well trained she was, but she fought as though she had something to prove. As though she was trying to escape from something. But not to something. The look in her eyes, the broad passion in each of her movements, spoke of someone trying to outrun a great and widening chasm in the earth, threatening to swallow her whole.

And yet, ironically, she needed to improve her footwork. Longer strides would have meant that she would have actually landed a blow during this encounter.

Catwoman lived and died in every punch and kick, and as her movement told him her story, a warmth rose in his chest. A realization became more and more apparent, and it made him feel strange.

This was fun.

Not the low and mean kind of satisfaction that he took with levelling someone who deserved it. Not the smug delight of winning, be it a fight or a bet or some foolish game that others among the wealthy elite expected him to play.

This was edifying. This was illuminating. He’d say it was joyous, but he hadn’t felt something that pure in so long that the sensation would have been unfamiliar to him. This was someone declaring how alive they were to him.

This was dancing with a beautiful woman in the rain.

Catwoman went for her whip. Fearing the spell she had on him would break, he retrieved a Batarang form his utility belt, and launched it, severing the whip before it came down.

She screamed and charged him, claw held above her head, hoping to slash him to pieces.

He waited until the last possible second before he ducked out of the way of the one-woman stampede. His speed and alacrity allowed him to pilfer the belt of jewelry from her waist, but also to handcuff her to the water tower in one swift and decisive motion.

The night ended.

The spell broke.

She was a criminal.

And he was Batman.

He held up the belt full of jewelry. She tried charging at him again, only to see that she was held back by the cuffs. The rage on her face depleted instantly, replaced by a stunned wonder.

“How?” Catwoman asked, her jaw hanging open.

And the only thing Batman could say to her was:

“The police will be here shortly.”

Batman turned and walked away, letting his breath out through his nose in a slow, glum sigh.

He leapt from the roof, and grappled away.

Batman didn’t get far, just two blocks, before he ducked behind a rooftop billboard advertising Soder Cola. He put his hand against the rear of the billboard, out of anyone’s view, and leaned on it, trying
to puzzle what all of this meant.

One of his problems that he knew about, but only vaguely, was honesty. He could be secretive with Alfred and Dick to keep them out of danger, hoping to keep them from the fallout of whatever or danger or travesty that could remotely befall Batman and Robin in a given day. But this deficiency of honesty, he knew, could spread even to himself. He’d a habit of hypocrisy that he was completely unaware of, until he was rightfully, sometimes painfully, called on it.

But in the years that followed, after he had learned who Selina Kyle was, where she came from, how she came up in the world, after the continuous game of nudges toward revelation they would eventually engage in for almost a decade, there was one fact that he was honest with himself about, no matter how much it made him feel immature and small and sentimental.

Every time he met Selina past this point, he had been trying to get this night back.

His self-loathing halted him. His responsibilities stymied him. But he wanted someone to express themselves so fully to him like Catwoman just had. To declare their humanity in such broad ways.

Batman wiped some rain from his face.

When he was a boy, he became obsessed with a movie. While his rich friends wore out their VHS copies of Star Wars, young Bruce Wayne had found in their tape library a copy of The Mark of Zorro from 1940. Directed by Rouben Mamoulian, and starring Tyrone Power and Basil Rathbone.

There were weird blips in the tape at regular intervals, which lead Bruce to believe that his father Thomas had had Alfred tape the movie off of the Late Late Show, and pause the recording during the commercial breaks, only to start it up again when the movie came back on.

He didn’t share this with his friends. He didn’t go to their mansions, tape in hand, and tell them about the cool thing he saw. It would make it less his.

And the person who watched The Mark of Zorro the most with young Bruce was his mother Martha.

They must have watched it countless times. And every time the ninety-four minute feature ended, Martha would turn to Bruce and say:

“Alright, we watched your movie, and now we have to watch mine.”

And so Martha Wayne subjected her son to all one-hundred seventy minutes of My Fair Lady.

Bruce loathed the film with the kind of intensity only found in a certain strain of self-serious young boys. The Bruce of the present, however, tried to watch it every year. Always by himself.

But even then, when he hated the movie, there was one song in its interminable runtime that always wormed itself into his head, so much so that he went up to his room to blast whatever was on the radio through his headphones to clean his brain out.

And Batman, having shared in the life of Catwoman on a rainy rooftop, had that song in his head now.

He didn’t sing the title, no, but he spoke it. In a voice so soft only ghosts could hear.

“I Could Have Danced All Night...”
She was wrong.

She was so wrong.

Catwoman thought Poison Ivy sucked up all of Scarecrow’s fear gas in that slaughterhouse.

But it must have worked on a time delay, or something.

Batman was bleeding to death at her feet, and it was the scariest thing she could think of.

She was paralyzed for a few seconds as Batman tried to get back up again. The thump on the floor when he failed convinced her she needed a second opinion. She ran to her apartment door five feet away, and started banging on the door.

“STEPHANIE, IT’S ME, OPEN UP!”

She kept hammering on it with her fist until it opened.

Stephanie, in a pair of Selina’s gym shorts and her Fiona Apple shirt, her hair in a ponytail behind her, squinted.

“Where have you--”

Catwoman cut her off. She pointed down the hall to the seriously wounded Dark Knight on the floor, and said “Tell me you see that!”

Stephanie’s eyes scanned the floor, then went wide.

“Holy shit, it’s Batman!”

Catwoman sighed for what little relief she could get at the moment.

“Come on,” she said, “help me get him inside.”

Catwoman and Stephanie walked down the hall, and each took one of Batman’s arms. Stephanie had the bad luck of grabbing the left arm that had the bullet in the shoulder, and Batman groaned at her touch.

“Oh, Jesus,” Stephanie said.

“He’s in plate armor,” Catwoman said. “I can’t do this by myself. And for the love of God, don’t puke.”

They both drug him into the open apartment, Stephanie grunting as she did so. Batman left a trail of blood on the hallway carpet.

And Selina’s living room carpet.

And Selina’s bedroom carpet.

“We’re almost done,” Catwoman said. “Now lift with your legs…”

Catwoman and Stephanie finally managed to get Batman’s upper torso onto Selina’s queen-sized bed. They pushed his lower torso up the rest of the way.
Both women had sweat pouring from their foreheads, due to both exertion and shock.

“Go on into the living room,” Catwoman said. “I’ll be out when I’m done.”

Stephanie wordlessly nodded, and left.

“Shut the door,” Catwoman said.

And Stephanie did.

Catwoman peeled off her gloves, leaving them on the floor as she tore into the bathroom. She washed her hands thoroughly, before she bent down and opened the cabinet beneath the sink. She rummaged past the toilet paper rolls, past the tampons, past the spare thing of Nutrogena, until she came up with her first aid kit.

This would not be the first time she removed a bullet from a body.

It would, however, be the first time she removed a bullet from a body that wasn’t her own.

She reached into the cabinet and got her bag of cotton balls before she went back into the bedroom. In case she ran out of gauze.

Catwoman dropped the cotton and the kit on the bed next to Batman, who was breathing heavily and sweating profusely, in addition to bleeding profusely.

She leaned over and removed his gauntlets. She worked the plates on his arm guards, removing them. She found the latches on his chest plate, removing the front. She had to work him up, through pained protestations, to get the back piece of his torso armor connected to the cape off of him, and on the the floor with the rest of it.

That just left the blood-drenched black t-shirt beneath the armor…

…and the cowl.

Catwoman peeled off her own cowl, along with her goggles, and threw them over near the dresser. She opened the kit, and fished out a small pair of scissors. She cut up the front of the t-shirt, and along the arms, opening it all the way up, leaving him bare chested.

Her hands, stained with his blood, reached for his cowl. And his hands grabbed her by the wrists.

“I just need to--”

He held her wrists tighter.

She looked at him.

Slight dimple to the chin.

Square jaw.

Lips a bit on the southern side of full.

Yeah… Yeah, it’s him.

Selina leaned over him, and put her lips to the right side of the cowl where his right ear would be. She whispered harshly:
“Bruce…”

He stopped struggling.

“Either I take it off,” Selina said, “or you do.”

His own fingers pressed plates on the side of the cowl, and they slid outward with a mechanical whine.

He took it off.

And this is how, for the first time in her life, she saw Batman become Bruce Wayne.

His face was slathered in sweat, and his cobalt blue eyes were half closed.

Selina leaned over and examined the actual bullet wound. It looked worse than it actually was. It didn’t hit anything, the bullet itself embedded mere centimeters below the flesh, so shallow that she could actually see it. It may have bypassed the armor, but the material between the joints must have dulled the impact.

It was just going to be a flesh wound, but he was going to be low at least two pints of blood.

She got the bottle of disinfectant out of the kit, unscrewed the bottle, and looked at Bruce.

His pained eyes lolled over to her.

“I… am so sorry,” he said.

Selina blinked. There were more delicate ways to do this.

*Screw it.*

She dumped half the bottle into Bruce’s bullet wound. He groaned through clenched teeth.

*Serves you right, you prick.*

Selina got up and went to the dresser, setting the open bottle of disinfectant down on the top. She opened the top drawer.

The drawer she had specifically told Stephanie not to open.

After she did her six months in Blackgate, she went back to the rooftop of the office building where she had first met Batman. She looked over what she could see of this patch of Miagani Island and tried to reason out what it all meant. Being Catwoman, for the few months it had lasted, was the first time in the life of Selina Kyle that she had felt true power or freedom. There were no limits to going wherever she wanted. No boundaries to stealing something expensive and shiny.

And she’d gone to prison for it.

So was the good feeling she’d had being a masked cat burglar worth the potential downside?

As she scanned the rooftop, she saw something buried in the gravel near the water tower.

In the six months she had been away, no one had bothered to remove from the scene the Batarang that Batman had used to sever her bullwhip.
It was larger than the ones he’d later use: about half the size of an actual boomerang, and sharp, but not the modified shurikens that he’d utilize in the future.

She’d picked it up, examined it, checked its weight and its balance.

*If Batman can go wherever he wants and do whatever he wants, why can’t I?*

Holding this Batarang, she’d decided to be Catwoman as long as she possibly could.

And this Batarang was the one and only occupant of this top drawer of her dresser. She’d kept it for ten and a half years.

She retrieved it, and walked over to the bed. She found a suitably blunt edge, and held it over Bruce’s mouth.

“Bite,” she said. “This is gonna suck.”

Bruce bit down on the Batarang.

Selina sat back down on the bed, and got a pair of scissor-like surgical clamps out of her kit. She leaned over, dug in, and plucked the bullet out of the wound.

Bruce grunted around the batarang.

More blood flowed onto the patch of clean skin made by the disinfectant, but that couldn’t be helped.

Selina took the Batarang out of Bruce’s mouth. She threw it into the wall for shits and giggles.

She chucked the bullet onto the floor as she delved into her kit for the stitches, the curved needle, and driver. It took her a bit to get everything set to go, before she leaned over the slowly oozing wound and got in close.

“Se--”

“Shut up, I’m trying to concentrate.”

The process took two minutes that felt like two hours. Bruce breathed heavily through clenched teeth the entire time.

Now that the stitching was over, she got back up, got the bottle of disinfectant from the dresser, and carefully poured some disinfectant onto a gauze swab, before doing secondary clean-up on the area.

“I thought you had a little belt that had all sorts of little goodies in there that could take care of this for you.”

“I did,” Bruce said, finally breathing normally. “Man-Bat got it off me.”

“I thought the belt was electric, though. Shocked anybody but you.”

“That,” Bruce said, “would create more problems than it solves.”

As she applied the bandage to the stitched-up wound, and applied a wrap all the way around the shoulder itself, Bruce asked:

“How did you find out?”
“Talia,” Selina replied with no tone in her voice.

Bruce said nothing.

“Y’know, Sailor,” Selina said, “only you could put me in a love triangle where I’m the good girl.”

“How did you escape her?”

Selina stopped what she was doing, and looked at him. “Escape her? I won, you jackass.”

“Oh,” Bruce said. “You improved your footwork. Good.”

She remembered the full-on, open-mouthed, wide-eyed Home Alone Macauley Culkin look Talia had on her face when Selina kicked her in the crotch.

Selina smirked, and said “Yes... Yes I did.”

The area of the wound was clean, stitched and bandaged. The rest of him, however, was still a bloody mess.

She wordlessly got up and left the bedroom for the living room, quickly closing the door behind her.

Stephanie was at the sink, hands in the pockets of Selina’s gym shorts, apparently wondering just what the hell it was she was supposed to do.

“Done?” Stephanie asked?

“No,” Selina said. “Move please.”

Stephanie moved away from the sink. Selina bent over and got a mop bucket from beneath.

She went into the bedroom again, walked into the bathroom, and filled the mop bucket with hot water. While it was filling, she got a few towels off of the rack.

Towels and water in hand, she sat back down on the bed again. She dunked a towel in the water, and began cleaning Bruce off.

The display of taut, hard muscle on the upper body of Bruce Wayne did not go unappreciated by her, film of blood, or no film of blood.

Jesus, she thought. I can’t stop being Selina Kyle for ten seconds, can I?

It was only after she had made some headway toward cleaning him off that she saw the scars.

Cuts, slashes, slices, burns of both the fire and acid variety. The number and variety of them, all faded save for the new bullet wound, made her want to cringe. And his handsome face was totally unblemished. The public face and the body that face belonged to lived completely different lives.

Selina wanted to say something right now. Needed to. But all she could settle on was:

“Y’know… Harley really liked that circus musical you were in.”

Bruce looked at her, brow lowered in confusion.

Selina looked back down at the work she was doing.

“Finding out Bruce Wayne is Batman, is like… i dunno… the opposite of finding out Superman is
just some schmuck with a day job.”

Bruce didn’t say anything. The look on his face, in fact, told her that he was being quite loud about not saying anything.

Selina stopped wiping him down. “Superman’s just some schmuck with a day job, isn’t he?”

“I won’t tell you who he is,” Bruce said, “but yes.”

“You could just lie about who he is,” Selina said, continuing her work. “Worked great for you so far.”

“I didn’t lie to you,” Bruce said.

“Bull shit. Lies of omission are still lies.”

Bruce sighed. “If I didn’t catch you that first time, if Catwoman never got arrested and had her identity revealed to the public, you wouldn’t have tried to protect that secret?”

Selina didn’t say anything. He had her there, but she wasn’t about to tell him that.

“I hid things from you,” Bruce said. “But I never lied. I won’t lie to you.”

“Won’t or can’t?”

Bruce lifted his head up off the pillow slightly. “I know there’s a difference, but I’m not detecting what you mean.”

“Can you not lie to me because you don’t lie to anyone,” Selina asked, “or can you not lie to me because I’m me?”

“The second one.”

“Oh, well aren’t I special?”

“Yes.”

Selina glanced at him without the expression on her face changing. She started wiping him down near his waistline.

“Okay, Mister Won’t-Lie-to-Me… What’s the most irritating thing about Superman?”

“Whenever he’s out in the field with the Justice League,” Bruce said, “and he becomes Superman, he always has me mail his street clothes back to him in Metropolis.”

Selina smiled at this. “And he wants to pay you back?”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “Jokes on him, though. I just use four dollars in stamps every time. No priority mail, no Fed Ex.”

“Can’t he just fly over and pick up his clothes?”

“He keeps forgetting. He’s Superman. He’s busy.”

“And you can’t just fly his clothes over to him?”

“Then he’d try to pay for the helicopter fuel.”
Selina forced her smile back down. “Okay… What’s the most annoying thing about Wonder Woman?”

Bruce exhaled through his nose. “Whenever someone asks me how my life is, Diana is the only one who still looks sad when I tell them.”

Selina tilted her head.

“The only thing I do in my free time is this,” Bruce said, “and the only person in my life is my butler, who helps me do this. People in my line of work who hear it enough times, they get the point or stop asking. But Diana still asks… and still looks sad. It makes me feel… I don’t know.”

Selina didn’t want the conversation to get this dour just quite yet.

“What’s the most annoying thing about… Aquaman?”

Bruce’s brow flattened. His eyes hardened. And he said, with the grim tone of a man who faces the most outlandish evil on a daily basis:

“He’s a fan of the New England Patriots.”

“Oh,” Selina said. “Ew.”

“If it were possible for everyone in the Justice League to take a sabbatical on the first day of January, and come back in the middle of February after the Super Bowl is over, we’d do it.”

Selina tossed the wet towel she had in her hand through the bedroom, and onto the bathroom floor, where it landed with a thick splat. Then she got another towel to dry him off.

“Who’s the last person you slept with?”


“I figured,” Selina said quickly. “How long ago was that?”

“Eight years ago,” Bruce said.

Selina stopped drying him off. She looked at him as though he’d admitted to a diagnosis of projectile leprosy.

“Eight years?”

Bruce nodded.

“Wow. I… Wow. I thought I had it bad not getting it in six months. How—How close have you gotten to sleeping with someone in the past eight years?”

“Diana.”

“And how close was that?”

“Nowhere near,” Bruce said. “We were close to dating, though.”

“Then what happened?”

“We got really far apart from dating.”
“Uh-huh,” Selina said. “So all those times Bruce Wayne showed up at parties with socialites and models and shit, that was an act.”

“Yes.”

“And Bruce Wayne stopped dating three years ago because you weren’t Batman anymore, and you didn’t need to keep the act up.”

“Yes.”

“Uh-huh,” Selina said again, and decided that this painful and private revelation on the part of Bruce Wayne was the absolute perfect time to start screwing with him.

“Shame I can’t say the same thing,” Selina said.

Bruce looked at her.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you didn’t know?” Selina asked. “I’ve been running through superheroes like Spinal Tap goes through drummers. You’d think the World’s Greatest Detective would have caught something like that.”

“Like who?” Bruce asked.

Selina picked a name out of a hat.

“Nightwing.”

Selina didn’t know what the reaction would be. But she did not expect that said reaction would be this sudden, or loud.

Bruce… laughed.

She had heard Bruce laugh before. It was kind of a quiet, wheezy thing. But this was something different altogether. It was high, and…

…and creepy.

There was something else, though. She threw the towel on the floor, thinking Screw it, let him air-dry.

“And what, may I ask, is so Goddamn funny?”

“Nightwing,” Bruce said through his laughter, “is… is the first Robin!”

Selina blinked.

“He’d… He’d have thought it was so weird!”

The first thing that occurred to Selina was Bruce’s use of the term “first Robin.” Thus meaning there was a second Robin, and that he was the one who was murdered by The Joker.

The second thing that occurred to her was something altogether scarier.

“Oh my God,” Selina said.
Bruce laughed.

“Do you have any idea how close I came to grabbing the first Robin’s ass when he showed up here a few days ago?” Selina asked. She held her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “This close!”

Bruce laughed harder.

“It’s not funny!”

Bruce rode through his laughter long enough to say “Yes it is!”

As Bruce laughed himself out, Selina looked away at the wall, the expression on her face matching the thought in her head.

Are we that old?

And Bruce, to his credit, seemed to sense this.

Laughs subsiding, smile coming back to normal, he looked at her.

“You know,” Bruce said, “Wonder Woman asked if you were seeing anyone.”

Selina looked at him, her face lightening. “Really?”

“I won’t lie to you, remember?”

A smile curled across her lips. “What did she say about me?”

He did an impression of Wonder Woman. Not using his voice, but rather using his head and his eyes.

“’No wonder she took up so much of your time. She’s elegant, and... earthy at the same time. I can’t quite explain it.’ Diana said she was just teasing me. Funny thing is, though, she’s not one to lie, even for a joke.”

Selina was still smiling.

So of course, she had to ruin it.

She gradually stopped smiling. Her eyes lost their light to sadness.

“Did you ever love me?” Selina asked. “At all?”

The eye contact Bruce held with her had its own backbone.

Without hesitation, Bruce Wayne told Selina Kyle “Yes. With all my heart, from almost the first moment I saw you.”

Selina closed her eyes, and let that wash over her. She believed him. She didn’t feel the need for him to clarify if it was lust. Or infatuation. Or paternal bullshit. No. It was love. It carried on his voice. It had the kind of ache to it that evaded simile or comparison.

With her eyes still closed, Selina said: “I spent three... long... years hating you for vanishing without saying goodbye. I thought I meant more to you than that.”

She opened her eyes to look at him. His brows were steepled with concern.
“But… six months after you vanish, I decide to start my own business, and none other than Bruce Wayne is my first customer. Tells the world about me, and makes me a millionaire. Batman tells me I have more to offer the world than a life of crime, and the second I decide to humor him, Bruce Wayne helps me see it through.”

She felt tears pricking the back of her eyes. “I was angry at you for three years for leaving me, but… You didn’t leave me at all, did you Sailor? You were there the whole time. And… I’m still pissed at you, because I can’t stop my emotions on a dime, but…”

Selina blinked. One tear fell down her cheek. She leaned over him.

“Why the hell didn’t you say anything?” Selina asked.

“I told—”

“No,” Selina said. “No, not before. After. After you stopped being Batman, and I stopped being Catwoman. For two and a half years, we were free and clear. You can’t say you did it to protect me, because there was nothing to protect me from. We’ve lost so much time! I… Jesus, Bruce, I almost got married! And--And if you love me the way you say you do, the way you sound like you do, that must have killed you inside!”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I was so happy when you found Josh,” he said. “And I was so sad when it didn’t work out between you two.”

Selina opened her mouth in confusion.

Bruce used his good arm to bring himself into a sitting position. Selina didn’t even try to stop him. He sat up, looking down, but they were at such odd positions on the bed, he wound up just looking at her shoulder.

“Nightwing,” Bruce said. “The first Robin. His parents were murdered right in front of him. Same as me. Felt the same need for vengeance, for justice, for closure as I did… A few years after I took him in, when he was still Robin, I offered to adopt him. ‘Offered,’ I wanted to adopt him.”

He looked into her eyes. “He said no. He said… that he was still his mother’s son. I can’t blame him for that, because if the roles were reversed, I’d have said no too, said the same thing, and this is something else he and I have in common. And… And in the simple process of just being myself, I drove him away. Away from Gotham. Away from being Robin. And after that, things… changed.”

Bruce adjusted himself on the bed. “When he was Robin, working with the Titans, he was moody. He was secretive. He was controlling. But when he became Nightwing, he was--and this is a quote from Donna Troy-- ‘a lot less of an asshole.’”

A gust of breath escaped Selina Kyle in a flimsy approximation of a laugh.

“He moved to Bludhaven,” Bruce said. “He started living independently. He has a woman he loves, who loves him back, and they can’t keep their damned hands off of each other. This life hasn’t done to him what it did to me. He’s… he’s amazing.”

He broke eye contact, and looked back at her shoulder again.

“I’m so proud of him, and I can’t tell him that. I’m afraid I’ll draw him back in, and things will get worse. That I’ll get him the same kind of dirty and broken that I get everyone else. So… can you
really blame me if I wanted you at a distance? If I wanted you to stay away? Your happiness matters to me, Selina. It matters so much, and..."

Bruce closed his eyes, and leaned back down on the bed, his head hitting the pillow. He turned his head the other way, eyes still closed, toward the opposite wall.

“Everyone’s happier the further they are away from me.”

Selina’s breath escaped her slowly. She just had to look at Bruce to know that the evening’s conversation was over.

She started clean up, gathering the discarded resources from her first aid kit, throwing away what needed throwing away and putting back what needed put back. She threw the wet, bloody towels in the hamper, and put the clean ones she hadn’t used yet back in the bathroom. She dumped the mop bucket of bloody water down the drain in the bathtub.

Selina walked over to her dresser. She opened the bottom drawer and pulled out a pair of gray sweatpants. She opened the second drawer and got a pair of black underwear. She dipped into the closet, found a red and black flannel shirt, and went into the bathroom.

She put her fresh clothes on the toilet lid. She took off her boots, and stripped off her Catsuit, as well as the sports bra and underwear underneath.

Examining herself in the bathroom mirror, Selina surveyed the damage today had done to her.

There was a ribbon of raw skin around her throat from when Talia strangled her with her own whip. The fight proper gave her a bruise along her left cheekbone, and a small cut above her left eyebrow. And yeah, there was the slash on her left forearm from when Talia used the whip on her, but Scarecrow stitched that one up.

Her leap from an imploding building into another left her with an ugly bruise on her right shoulder blade, and an even uglier bruise on the back of her right thigh.

All things considered, things could have been much worse. She stepped into the shower under water as hot as she could handle, and cleaned herself up while trying to think of nothing at all.

Her Catsuit piled into a corner of the bathroom, fresh clothes on her back, Selina stepped back into the bedroom, her bare feet padding along the carpet.

Bruce was asleep. The bed was wet and bloody anyway, so he could have it.

As she snuck to the door and turned off the light, Selina thought to herself that he must not have slept in days.

She closed the bedroom door behind her, stepped to one side of the blood stain that Batman left on the living room carpet, and sat cross-legged against the wall, staring off into space.

Selina heard someone coming toward her.

Stephanie Brown was standing above her, holding the bottle of Stolichnaya that she kept in the freezer.

She held it out to Selina, and asked “Boy trouble?”

Selina looked at the bottle, then at Stephanie, and thought to herself To Hell with it, it'll help me
She took the bottle as Stephanie sat down next to her.

Selina took a swig. She winced as it went down hard.

“Yes,” Selina said. “I mean, don’t say it like that, but yes.”

“My dad was Cluemaster,” Stephanie said. “He said if any hero were gonna gonna get with any villain, it’d be Batman to Catwoman.”

Stephanie took the bottle from Selina. “My dad was smart,” Stephanie said. “He was an idiot, but… he was smart.”

She brought the bottle to her lips, but Selina put her hand over the mouth and stopped her. Stephanie looked back at her with surprise.

“What?”

“You’re how old?” Selina asked.

“Oh, c’mon,” Stephanie said. “Don’t tell me you weren’t drinking at seventeen.”

“You wanna join the Broken-Down Supervillain Club?”

“No,” Stephanie said, “I wanna join the Millionaire Hottie With A Superhero In Her Bed Club. Gimme.”

Stephanie moved the bottle out from under Selina’s hand, and took a swig of vodka. Selina caught herself thinking If you puke or spit it out, I’ll lose whatever respect I had for you.

She did neither. Stephanie held a grimace for a couple of seconds, but she opened her eyes wide, flashed a brilliant smile, and said “Ahhhhhhhhhh,” like she was in an old Coke commercial.

Through such gestures lifelong friendships can be forged, and Selina Kyle found her self suddenly and genuinely liking Stephanie Brown.

Stephanie handed the bottle back. Selina palmed it, and felt the cold spread to her hand.

“If you really want a half-dead, bloody superhero with extreme self-worth issues, he’s in there,” Selina said. “I mean, don’t, because he’s twice your age, but…”

Selina shrugged, and took a swig.

“Dude, please.” Stephanie said. “If I got my nurse game on with a superhero, I’d have no problems after that. If this goes tits up, it is so, so, so on you.”
Chapter 25: The Last Ride of Barbara Gordon

Selina slept on the recliner, while Stephanie took the couch.

The sun rose behind a dingy gray sky the following morning, and Selina was lured from her sleep like a beast from its lair by a high, sweet smell. Selina’s eyes fluttered open.

Stephanie was in the kitchen, making waffles.

This was confusing for Selina on more than one level.

“Good morning,” Stephanie said, before applying syrup to the rectangular waffles on a light green plate in front of her. “These are for you, by the way.”

Selina sat up in the recliner, and rubbed the crud out of her eyes. “I have stuff to make waffles?”

“You didn’t,” Stephanie said. “I snuck out when you were sleeping and lifted it out of a gas station a couple of blocks from here. Oh, and I took your key so I could get back in.”

She took Selina’s key out of the pocket of the gym shorts she was wearing. It clanged lightly on the counter when she dropped it.

Stephanie said “Sorry.”

“Normally,” Selina said, the early morning rasp trying to work its way out of her voice, “I’d be pissed at you for going through my things… But then again, I made a living going through other people’s things for damn near a third of my life, so… Way to show initiative.”

Stephanie smiled.

“Did you lift the waffle iron, too?”

“No.”

Selina blinked. “Then where did you get it?”

“From the cupboard down here,” Stephanie said. “Where you keep your pots and pans.”

Selina squinted at the metal and red plastic contraption that Stephanie had been slaving over.

“When I got this place,” Selina said, “all the pots and pans and stuff were already here. That’s a waffle iron?”

“Yeah,” Stephanie said. “What did you think it was?”

“I thought it was one of those things that made grilled cheeses.”

Stephanie looked at Selina in the way reserved for Alzheimer’s scares among close relatives. “What?”

“Yeah,” Selina said. “They have those. You put it in there so you don’t have to flip it? What, you don’t believe me?”
“Oh, I believe you,” Stephanie said. “But, uh…”

Stephanie carefully turned the hot waffle iron so Selina could see inside.

“See many grid-based grilled cheeses, then, do ya?”

“I never opened it,” Selina said.

“You never opened the thing that was in your home?”

“No,” Selina said. “Because I don’t like grilled cheese. They’re gloppy and they get stuck in your gum line.”

Stephanie just shook her head, and said “Dude, your waffles are getting cold.”

Selina got up off the recliner, feeling the ache in her muscles and hearing her joints pop, and trundled over to the kitchen counter, where she pulled up a barstool and sat. Stephanie handed her a fork.

“You happen to boost any vegetables when you were out?”

“No,” Stephanie said, pouring some batter for her own. “They were taken already. The meat, too.”

Selina took a bite and swallowed. “You know, if you eat nothing but this garbage…”

Stephanie made a face.

“…this golden, buttery, delicious garbage…”

Stephanie’s face went away.

“…then you’re gonna die of scurvy,” Selina said. “Like a pirate. Or of dysentery, like in that Oregon Trail game they used to make us play in history class.”

“I’m pretty sure the Oregon Trail was, y’know, an actual thing, too,” Stephanie said.

“You know what dysentery is?” Selina asked. “It’s shitting yourself to death.”

“You had to say that just when I was about to eat, didn’t you?”

“Because I’m trying to stop you from shitting yourself to death.”

Stephanie looked at the bedroom door, and then back at Selina.

“You mean when I can die of thirst like you apparently plan to?” Stephanie asked. “Perish the thought.”

For the sake of their newfound friendship, Selina decided to let that one slide.

Oracle was looking over the plans for Georgio’s for Nightwing.

By the time he got to the restaurant this morning, staking out from the roof of the flower shop across the street, the nine dead bodies outside of the restaurant had bloomed to twelve.

Talia or Hill must have been sending them in threes.

But why?
“So let me get this straight,” Oracle said in his ear. “A kid you met on a rooftop not only pointed you to the only lead you have right now, but he figured out you and Batman’s secret identities before he hit puberty. And, y’know, mine.”

Nightwing sighed. “That’s the jist. But he doesn’t know you’re Oracle, I don’t think. Just that you used to be Batgirl.”

“And this kid’s name is Tim Drake? Did I hear that properly?”

“Yeah.”

A moment as Oracle typed. “Timothy Jackson Drake. Pretty average young man, from what I see. Straight As, no extracurriculars. Self-defense classes, though, good for him. Summer job at Wal-Mart. Parents Jack and Janet, barely making ends meet with a little start-up they have going, Drake Industries, had to take poor Tim out of boarding school and put him in public… All signs point to him being Jewish, so prospects for racist 8chan posts will be considerably lower, but there has to be some creepy porn preferences I can find on his hard drive. Or I can put in a keylogger, maybe.”

Nightwing grimaced. “Why in God’s name are you looking for racist posts and porn?”

When Barbara Gordon paused, Dick Grayson could tell it was because he was failing to grasp the obvious.

“Because he knows who you and Batman are,” Oracle finally said. “We’re blackmailing him.”

“We are not blackmailing Tim Drake.”

Oracle groaned. “Enlighten me as to why we shouldn’t silence the kid who found out one of the most closely guarded secrets in the world.”

“Because if he were gonna talk,” Nightwing said, “he would have done it before now. And… He said Batman needed Robin. I dunno. Just something about the kid.”

“One day,” Oracle said, “this silly faith you have in humanity is gonna humble you hard.”

“Why on Earth would I be humble?” Nightwing asked. “I’m dating a ginger computer genius with an amazing rack.”

“Ugh,” Oracle said. “And I am so beating her ass when I find her. You at Giorgio’s?”

“Yuuuuup.”

“You going in?”

“Yuuuuup.”

“Have fun,” Oracle said. “And don’t die.”

Bruce had spent the last half hour cleaning the blood off of his armor.

Bare-chested, now that the t-shirt he would have worn beneath his armor had been slashed to ribbons during the impromptu surgery the night before, he had a choice between using one of Selina’s towels, or toilet paper.

Towel. Of course.
He even used his bad shoulder to clean it off to his exacting standards, to get him used to the pain. He had a day ahead of him. He always did.

Bruce put his armor and gauntlets on. He found his cowl on the bedroom floor, and placed it on his head.

“Penny One, come in,” Batman said.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Alfred said in his ear. “I feared the worst. You haven’t been in contact in hours. What on Earth happened last night?”

Batman remembered a terrified young boy with a gun in his hand, and tried to suppress it.

“I got shot last night.”

“Oh my,” Alfred said.

“But I’m fine. I’m at Selina’s right now.”

“Oh… My?”

Batman grunted. “Nothing happened, if that’s what you’re wondering. She just patched me up.”

“Hmph,” Alfred said. “And Pinocchio’s quest to become a real live boy continues ever onward.”

Batman scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If one is to question the meaning behind such a statement,” Alfred said, “one already knows the meaning behind such a statement. I will, of course, radio in if any change comes to our mission status. Penny One out.”

The line went dead.

Alfred always did have a soft spot for Selina Kyle. And for Clark Kent. And for anyone, it seemed, that would make Batman a little less… Batman.

He clicked two buttons on his gauntlet, and a holographic display appeared over his forearm. He needed to check social media sites to see what was happening in Gotham. To see if he needed to change his strategy depending on the general tenor of the city.

The first site he checked was Twitter.

Things that will irrevocably change a person do not always arrive with a bang. Nor, as the poets might posit, do they even begin with a whimper.

Sometimes the things that alter a human being to their very core arrive under a pall of dead silence.

So it was, when Batman checked the highest trending topic in Gotham City.

#WeGotBatman…

Selina and Stephanie decided to have seconds.

“What’s the weirdest thing you ever stole?” Stephanie asked.

Selina frowned as she used her fork to corral the remnants of her maple syrup into a pool in the
middle of her plate.

“Campfire,” Selina finally said.

“How the hell do you steal a campfire?” Stephanie asked.

“No,” Selina said. “It’s…”

She set her fork down. “Please tell me you aren’t too young to know who Bob Ross is.”

“Yeah,” Stephanie said. “The painter on PBS with the fro. The Happy Little Trees guy.”

“Right, Selina said. “The Happy Little Trees guy. He had that show on PBS for God knows how long, and he painted nothing but landscapes. Of all the paintings he ever painted on that show, he only had one painting that had a person in it. Just one. And it was called ‘Campfire.’”

“Really.”

“Yeah. It’s not even an actual person. It was a shadow of a person cast on a post from the light of said campfire. But that apparently mattered to my buyer.”

“Who hired you to steal a Bob Ross painting?” Stephanie asked.

“You’re a supervillain’s daughter, and you don’t know snitches get stitches?”

“Sorry.”

“It’s weird for two reasons,” Selina said. “The first is for every painting on the show, there were two copies. The first was the one Bob Ross did in private so he knew what he was going to do on the show, and the second one is the one that Bob Ross actually did on camera. My buyer was really, really specific that he wanted the on-camera version. Told me ten or twelve times, past the point that even an idiot would have eventually gotten it.”

“And the second reason?”

“The second reason,” Selina said, “was the security. I traced it back to this ex-wife of a mob capo in Pittsburgh named Ginny DeMarco. She turned states in the divorce proceedings, and saw her ex-hubby go to prison and cleaned out his wallet at the same time.”

“It’s nice to know someone hit the American Dream.”

“No doubt,” Selina said. “Got a shit-ton of money, custody of the kids, and the mansion by the time it was all said and done. And an entire wing of the mansion was devoted just to housing Campfire. There was nothing else there except two thumbprint scanners, a retinal scan, and a breath scanner.”

“A breath scanner?”

“I’ve been working security for a few years now,” Selina said, “and I’ve been breaking into places for a lot longer than that. The house holding the frigging Bob Ross painting is the only breath scanner I’ve ever seen. There was a brief fad for them a few years ago, I guess, because the world is full of idiots, and a breath scanner is an idiot’s version of a cool idea.”

“How’d you get past it?” Stephanie asked.

“I yanked it off the wall and the door opened,” Selina said. “Breath scanners are stupid, they don’t work. All that security to protect that painting. I got paid thirty large for something that barely would
have gone for ten at auction.”

Selina finished off her orange juice, set her glass down on the counter, and said “I guess some people must really love Bob Ross.”

Stephanie smiled. “You’re cool.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m not cool.”

“You’re cool enough.”

Stephanie scoffed. “I’m not Stealing-a-Bob-Ross-Painting Cool. I’m not Rooftop-Rendezvous-with-Sexy-Superpeople cool. I’m not even cool for high school, and that’s… That’s a low bar.”

“Wow,” Selina said. “You’d think being a daughter of a supervillain would get you some points.”

“I know,” Stephanie said. “Like… I don’t even know how to fight.”

“Huh…” Selina said. “But, hey, it’s not like you don’t know how to take care of yourself. You bit off a henchman’s nose the other day, so…”

“I don’t think acts of cannibalism constitute knowing how to take care of yourself.”

“Is it technically cannibalism if you spit the nose out, though?”

“If you have to get technical about something like cannibalism,” Stephanie said, “then yes, it still counts.”

It should be noted at this point that Selina Kyle was well-rested, well-fed, and she had just gotten to tell a Catwoman story. In such instances, she had a habit of being more generous and permissible than she otherwise might have been.

How was Selina Kyle supposed to know that what she was about to say was going to change Gotham City forever?

“Tell you what,” Selina said as she folded her hands in her lap. “If we make it out of this… I will train you how to fight.”

Stephanie didn’t react at all for a second. But then her eyes widened, and her lips back into an open-mouthed smile that, while genuine, would still have frightened small children.

“Really?” Stephanie asked, her voice rising to a squeak.

“It’s gonna be brutal,” Selina said. “I’ll teach you the same way I was taught. That means welts. Bruises. Bloody noses. Your knees will develop time travel powers because they will age three times faster than the rest of you… But yes… Really.”

Stephanie’s eyes now clenched shut and, still smiling, she opened and closed her hands rapidly.

“Stephanie, what are you doing?”

“The only thing I can do with my hands right now that doesn’t feel weird!”
Under a cloud of anguish, Batman opened Selina’s bedroom door, and stepped out into the living room.

The images he had seen, innocent people murdered by their fellow citizens and dressed, after death, in his garb, in his symbol, began a slow process of settling upon his brain and seeping into his soul.

More than making him feel a certain way, Batman knew that what he saw would “say something” about him. He dreaded it. Batman was loathe to chart his flaws, but he knew that, near the top, was a lack of self-awareness. He knew that this would “say something,” but as to what that might be, Batman also knew that he himself may wind up being among the last to hear it.

And the only thing that could have conceivably thrown Batman from the course of his self-pity was the sight that greeted him upon entering the living room.

That of Stephanie Brown, standing in the kitchen, her eyes clenched shut, her mouth open in what could only generously be described as a smile, opening and closing her hands.

Apparently, she hadn’t heard the door open.

“Uh… Steph?” Selina said.

Stephanie opened her eyes, saw Batman, and immediately dropped her hands.

A brief moment of silence fell over the room that Batman felt compelled to puncture.

“Stephanie, may Selina and I have a moment alone?”

Stephanie squinted at him.

“How do you know my name?”

Batman was not in the mood for a conversation with anyone but Selina right now, so he put some extra bass in his voice, looked down the nose of his cowl at Stephanie, and said:

“I know everything.”

Stephanie Brown did not appear to be intimidated. In fact, Stephanie did not even appear to be impressed. She put her hand out and leaned on the kitchen counter.

“Did… Did you get bitten by a radioactive asshole when you were a kid, and that’s how you became Batman?”

Selina snorted, and desperately tried to wipe the smile off her face.

“Um…” Selina said once she got herself under control. “If you don’t mind? I’d really appreciate it.”

Stephanie pointed at Selina, and looked at Batman. “See that? Manners. Move, please.”

Batman stepped out of the doorway, and to the side. Stephanie moved past him without further comment, and closed the door behind her.

“Please tell me you used just the one towel to get all that blood off your armor?” Selina asked. “Because if I see a bunch of washcloths piled up in there, I am gonna be so pissed.”

Batman said nothing. He walked over to the corner of the living room, where it was darkest. He could see Selina smirking, as though she just knew that was what he was going to do.
“The Undying hasn’t been stopped yet,” Batman said. “Zatanna doesn’t have a whole lot of time left. I need to know if I can count on your support to end this.”

“No,” Selina said. “No, you can’t.”

Batman didn’t say anything. Selina got off of her barstool so she could put her back into what she was about to say next.

“How many times have I told you over the past eleven years that I am nothing like you? I’m not a hero. I don’t have the other Justice League members on speed dial. I steal from the rich and give to myself. If I could sneak down chimneys to ruin Christmas for all the good little boys and girls, I’d do it if my percentage was good enough. And if I ever see Superman, I’m stepping on his Goddamn cape.”

“You’re more like me than even I knew a few minutes ago.”

Selina snorted. “This oughta be good.”

“You’re not the one who’s been defending the East End these past few days?”

Selina sighed. “If I didn’t do what I’ve been doing, rich folks, like some people I could mention, will come across the pile of rubble that used to be the East End and buy it up cheap. The extent of my altruism only goes so far that I don’t want to see ugly-ass condos screwing up the skyline. And that’s a little thing. Not a big thing. The Undying’s a big thing, and that makes it your thing. You’re Batman. You can get along just fine without me.”

That came a little too fast.

“You’ve been rehearsing that, haven’t you?”

“The truth just rolls naturally off my tongue,” Selina said. “Unlike a certain Caped Crusader I know.”

She leaned towards him and whispered “Bruuuuuuuuce.”

“Alright,” Batman said. “How about something a little more recent.”

And he pointed at the bedroom door.

“Stephanie?” Selina asked. “What about her?”

“How did you find her in all this?”

“She got caught by a trafficker,” Selina said. “And hey, I needed someone to feed my cat.”

“I couldn’t help but overhear through the door that you plan on teaching her how to fight.”

“Eavesdropping is an awful habit, but billionaires have no people skills, so it’d be like being mad at a dog for not being able to design a space shuttle. Yes, I’m training Stephanie to fight. What about it?”

Batman tilted his head. “You have no idea what just happened, do you?”

“What?” Selina said, losing her patience. “What just happened?”

He felt like smiling during the act of bringing down the hammer on Selina Kyle, but he refrained from doing so.
“Selina… You have a Robin.”

She just… stared at him, unblinking, mouth agape, during a span of time that, for her, must have felt like centuries.

“A costumed vigilante saved her from certain death,” Batman said. “She took her in, kept her safe, and is now going to teach her how to defend herself. Tell me what you seriously think is going to happen next.”

The face of Selina Kyle went from slack-jawed confusion to steely determination. She marched to the bedroom door, opened it a crack, and peeked her head in.

“Hey, Steph,” Selina said. “Uhh… Settle a bet, okay? If I train you how to fight, you’re not gonna do anything stupid like becoming a superhero, are you?”

A moment passed, laden with suspense. Until Stephanie Brown, incredulity in her voice, cried out:

“Fuck yes, I’m becoming a superhero!”

Selina slowly brought her head out of the doorway, and closed the door. She started her journey back to her barstool as though she were under sentence of death, dragging her feet. She held up a finger to silence Batman before he actually said anything.

“Not… One… Word. Not until I sit down.”

She eventually sat down, her right hand propping her head up.

“You could just rescind the offer to train her,” Batman said. “But now that I said that before you thought of it, you have to train her, because you can’t let me be right about anything.”

Selina groaned. “Oh, God damn you straight to Hell.”

She straightened out her flannel shirt, and only now did she deign to look at him.

“Alright,” Selina said. “I know you have a big judgemental speech lined up about potentially putting a kid in danger. Let’s hear it.”

“I have no judgement for you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Two Robins, remember?”

“Well, that’s just it, isn’t it?” Selina asked. “Everything’s fine when you do it. When someone else does it, that’s when the Batarangs come out.”

Batman didn’t have anything to say to that. He closed his eyes, and the images of dozens dead, all wearing his symbol, flashed before him by the time he opened them.

When he did, he saw that some of the defiance had gone out of Selina’s face. It was replaced with concern, which was something she wasn’t used to feeling, and she looked like she was trying to blink her way out of the sensation.

“Are you alright?” Selina asked.

No.
He wasn’t.

“I know I have work I need to do on myself,” Batman said. “I know… that I have been wrong to an extent that even I am not aware of, and what I will have to say about myself by the time this is over genuinely terrifies me.”

Selina looked stunned. Batman had admitted both fault and fear. And he knew that if Dick, Barbara, Alfred, or Lucius were here, their faces would have borne the same look.

“But I’m not wrong about this,” Batman said. “If you tell someone as young as she is that one person can make a difference, she will believe you. Give her the skills and the resources to work for the common good, and she will. I know you don’t like thinking good things about yourself. But if Stephanie Brown, using the skills you teach her, stops one mugging. Retrieves one stolen purse. Saves one life… Then that’s good you brought into the world. Add enough of that up, and it really won’t matter what you think about yourself at all.”

Batman took a step forward. “I’ve told you more times than I can count that you are a good person with a lot to offer the world. Not to control you or manipulate you, but because it’s the truth. And you keep proving me right, but you keep telling me I’m wrong. Because you know that acting on what you know is true about Selina Kyle is a hell of a lot scarier than the alternative.”

“What’s the alternative?” Selina asked.

“Hating yourself,” Batman said. “Time passes, things change, seasons fade in and fade out, but the part of you that doesn’t like what you see when you look in the mirror is always there. It never changes. It looks like a friend after a while. Or a blanket you can wrap yourself up in when the pressure gets to you. But the thing about bravery is, it isn’t about a lack of fear. It’s about being absolutely petrified, and doing what needs to be done anyway.”

Batman, raised his hands, and took off his cowl. Bruce Wayne levelled his gaze at her.

“Are you brave?” Bruce asked. “Can you walk away from the pain you keep yourself in so you can tell yourself you’re in control? Can you see what I see when I look at you?”

Bruce didn’t know how Selina was going to respond. Given ample time to mull the matter over, however, he could not have predicted what actually happened.

Selina Kyle folded her arms, and raised the eyebrow she always raised when she spotted a fool.

“You go first.”

There was a small hatch built into the air conditioning unit on the roof of Giorgio’s.

And wouldn’t you know it? It was Nightwing’s size.

He landed on the red tile floor in the darkened kitchen without making a sound. He readied his escrima sticks and silently padded to the dining area.

Nightwing saw overturned tables and shattered glasses when he got there. The place was lit solely by the small red tiki lamps behind the bar.

And the room was silent.

But in that silence, Nightwing sensed something. Felt it in the air.
“You’re good,” Nightwing said. “I didn’t even hear you.”

“Thank you,” said the woman behind him. “I know you are not here to kill me, but otherwise, are you here to visit violence upon my person?”

“I’m here for the lunch specials,” Nightwing said. “I hear you guys make mean chicken parmesan, but you don’t appear to be open.”


“My wit is famous?”

A beautiful brunette with bruises on her face walked past Nightwing with a sword on her hip. She headed straight for the bar.

“Only as the less preferable option to death,” she said. “Hell is more appealing than your jokes.”

Nightwing sheathed his escrima sticks and put his hand on his hip.

“So,” Nightwing said. “Leather get-up, sexy accent, you know my real name, and you don’t like me. You’re one of Talia’s little minions.”

“My name is Kasha,” she said as she picked out a bottle of wine from the shelf behind the bar. “Aperitif?”

“I don’t drink,” Nightwing said.

Kasha looked at the bottle of wine as she absent-mindedly retrieved a glass from the rack above the bar.

“I hear such good things about the 1990 Bordeaux,” she said, “and now I have no one to share it with.”

She poured herself a glass.

“Hell of a cemetery you have out front,” Nightwing said.

“And how else is one to get the attention of a costumed crimefighter in Gotham City without such extreme measures?”

“You took out your own people to flag me or Batman down?”

Kasha took another sip. “Oh, my people were coming to kill me,” Kasha said. “I just left them outside.”

“And why are the rest of Talia’s guard coming to kill you?”

Kasha coughed. “Because I betrayed her,” she said. “And I plan to do so again.”

Nightwing walked up to the bar. “And how did you betray her the first time?”

Kasha pinched the bridge of her nose. “I was at my mistress’ side for over half my lifetime,” she said. “Thirteen years. I was her right hand. And do you know what she did?”

Nightwing shrugged.
Kasha coughed again, and took another sip. “She sent me to Kyle Security for grunt work.”

Nightwing’s face hardened. “You’re the one who killed all those people?”

She scowled. “I was with one of Hill’s idiots,” Kasha said. “He killed all of those people. I was to lead them, to kill Selina Kyle if I could, and be apprehended by the police if I could not.”


“I am from a time,” Kasha said, “when my mistress would collect my head herself, if I failed. I found waiting in a prison cell… personally demeaning. But my mistress is in love with your mentor. A man who has known my mistress for less time than I have. Yet I was the one who was forsaken, and not he.”

“There’s no accounting for taste,” Nightwing said.

Kasha wiped sweat from her forehead, and coughed. “I know you do not mean it the way I do, but indeed, you are correct.”

Nightwing was under the growing impression that something about this entire situation was off.

“And how do you plan on betraying Talia a second time?”

Her response was broken up by coughing. “F--funny you--should…”

Kasha’s knees slid out from under her, and she collapsed behind the bar. Nightwing ran to her, leaping over the bar as she did so. When he saw her on the floor, bloody foam was coming out of the corner of her mouth.

Nightwing knew that the members of the League of Assassins kept poison capsules in fake back molars, to crack in unfavorable situations like abandonment or interrogation. That must be what she had done. Nightwing had a couple of antidotes on him, but those were antidotes to conventional poisons. The poisons the League used, however, were a trade secret.

There was nothing he could do.

“The construction site… in The Cauldron…” Kasha said. “It leads… to the tunnels…”

“Why did you do this?”

“I do not… fear… my mistress’ vengeance… but I fear… Black Manta… Stop him… He will… lead her astray.”

Kasha reached out with a trembling hand, and touched Nightwing’s cheek.

“I die… with Bordeaux on my lips… and beholding… a beautiful man…”

“I thought you said you hated my jokes,” Nightwing said.

Kasha managed a weak smile as she expired.

“I did not say… things… were perfect…”

Bruce was still trying to figure out what to say to Selina in response, when he heard Nightwing’s voice in his cowl.
Batman put his cowl on as Selina got up and walked into the bedroom. He put his finger to his ear.

“Nightwing online,” Nightwing said. “All hands report in.”

“Batman online,” Batman said.

The others started chiming in.

“Renard online.”

“Oracle online.”

“Penny One online.”

“Report,” Batman said.

“I investigated a restaurant on Bleake Island,” Nightwing said. “Kasha, one of Talia’s bodyguards, gave me a location. A construction site in The Cauldron on the mainland that leads to some tunnels. I’m en route in the Batwing.”

“Can we trust this information?” Alfred asked.

“She poisoned herself for betraying Talia,” Nightwing said. “That’s not the act of someone with a stake in how the game ends. Batman… We’ve got him. We’ve got Hill.”

“Excellent,” Batman said. “Renard, have the modifications been made to the new Batmobile?”

Lucius sighed. “Yes,” he said.

“Good,” Batman said. “Activate the protocol.”

Lucius sighed again. “Very well. Oracle, if you’d be so kind as to meet me at the elevator? Oh, and do be so kind as to put in your contacts.”


The entirety of Wayne Tower’s floor 103 was devoted to being the office of Bruce Wayne. And Bruce Wayne, in his foresight, had had a series of suites built on this floor if anyone needed to stay there for a prolonged period of time.

Like, say, a siege by the technically undead former mayor of Gotham City, for example.

This array of suites on the top floor of Wayne Tower were where Barbara Gordon and Lucius Fox had been living since the morning after Hamilton Hill took over the city. They stayed there alongside Alfred Pennyworth, Lucius’ wife Tanya, and Lucius’ three children, Luke, Tamora, and Tiffany.

Barbara met Lucius at the elevator next to Bruce’s office. She was wearing a light purple leather jacket over a green t-shirt. She had knee-high leather boots over a pair of skinny jeans.

And she was wearing her contact lenses, which itched like hell.

As soon as she got to the elevator, Lucius wordlessly held out a pair of brown leather gloves to her.

“Put them on,” he said.
Barbara took them, confusion reigning on her face.

“Lucius,” Barbara said, “what the hell are we doing down there?”

“You’ll see,” Lucius said, “and you will know that I do not approve.”

Barbara wheeled in behind him, and Lucius hit the button for the sub basement.

Where the WayneTech Applied Sciences lab was located.

The place where Batman got all of his wonderful toys.

After a long, silent, and anxious elevator ride down, the doors opened upon Crazed Vigilante Valhalla. The walls of the surprisingly cramped room were decked with every gadget, gizmo, knick-knack, tchotchke, contraption, gimmick, and widget that made Batman a feared and formidable adversary to the criminal element that dwelt within Gotham City.

“You know,” Barbara said as she wheeled into the lab behind Lucius, “I’ve only been down here the one time, and that was when you brought Alfred and me here a couple of days ago. I didn’t get a chance to just stop and… admire everything.”

“You want a job down here,” Lucius said, “you can have one. It’s rewarding, doing this, but it’s a pain in the ass doing it by myself.”

“I’m a coder,” Barbara said. “Engineering’s not really my bag. Any work I can do for you, I can do from home.”

“Then do it from home,” Lucius said. “A paycheck’s a paycheck.”

Barbara smiled. “I’ll think about it. So what’s this thing that you don’t approve of?”

Lucius took a small device out of his green tweed jacket.

“This is.”

He pressed a button on the device, and the rear walls of the lab slid back…

...revealing the new Batmobile, resting on a platform next to the giant tunnel that led to that exit a half a mile away from Wayne Manor.

Except, to Barbara, it didn’t look like any of the other Batmobiles she’d seen. It looked more like…

“It’s a friggin’ tank,” Barbara said.

“Nine inch plating,” Lucius said. “Made of an alloy consisting of titanium… and Nth metal.”

Barbara looked at Lucius in shock. “Nth metal?”

Lucius rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. “A gift from the people of Thanagar in appreciation of Batman’s aid in defeating Vandal Savage four years ago. If this planet dies in nuclear hellfire, the only things that will survive the apocalypse are cockroaches, Keith Richards, and that Batmobile. Two separate traversal modes; pursuit and combat. It’s decked out with all the non-lethal riot-supressing goodies a Bat could hope for. Options for both stealth and submersible water travel. Two front seats. Plenty of legroom.”

“No cup holders?”
“There are certain things mankind will never have the technology for,” Lucius said with a wink.

Barbara smiled.

“The fact of the matter,” Lucius said, his voice taking on a gravity, “is that we are outnumbered. We have Batman, we have Nightwing, we might have Catwoman, but we can’t depend on her. We need to neutralize Hamilton Hill, Talia al Ghul, and Black Manta. We have to save Zatanna before it’s too late, and there are too many variables for Bruce and Dick to do that in a manner that we can predict, in a manner we can bet on.”

Barbara’s smile faded as it occurred to her.

“Lucius, don’t tell me you’re going out there to fight bad guys.”

He looked down at her and smiled. “Oh, I’m not… You are.”

Barbara literally felt herself going pale. “What?”

Lucius pressed another button on the device he had. The side plates of the Batmobile slid back, revealing the driver’s seat, which slid out (armrests included), and turned so that it was facing her.

“It’s wheelchair accessible,” Lucius said. “After a fashion. Your mission is to neutralize Hill’s forces within the Batmobile and locate Zatanna with the Batmobile’s sonar functions so that either Batman or Nightwing can intercept. You’ll radio instructions to the one who opts to disconnect her from Tetch’s mind-control apparatus and the LexCorp targeting system. You won’t have to leave the car at all.”

The enormity of the situation was still settling in on her. “But… But you still disapprove?”

“So many things can go wrong,” Lucius said. “Oracle is too valuable an asset to waste in the field.”

“And here I was, thinking you liked me, and didn’t want to see me getting hurt.”

“I can hold two ideas in my head at the same time,” Lucius said, smiling warmly at her.

Barbara smiled back, and examined the inside of the Batmobile from her vantage point. Her smile faded.

“There’s no throttle on the steering wheel that I can see,” Barbara said, and looked down at her legs. “Uhhh, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“That’s what this is for,” Lucius said, and he walked to a nearby table that held a lone, plain, white cardboard box. He removed the lid, took out what was inside, and presented it to her.

Barbara was still reeling from the enormity of the situation, so much so that it took her a second to realize that Lucius was handing her…

“A Playstation 4 controller?”

Lucius smiled, and said “Batman told me you play Need for Speed.”

Barbara chuckled.

“He also told me that I should give you the opportunity to say no.”

Barbara looked at him with a smile.
“Lucius… Gimme the pad.”

He grinned, and handed her the controller. She put it in the right pocket of her leather jacket.

Barbara wheeled over to the inviting driver’s seat of the new Batmobile. It took a little bit of awkward positioning, but she finally moved from her wheelchair to the seat, which reeled back, and deposited her inside, the plates of the vehicle closing behind her.

As she got the controller out of her pocket, she noticed yet another white cardboard box in the passenger’s seat. She placed the controller in her lap.

Her hands moved toward the box, and opened it, and what she saw stopped her from breathing.

It wasn’t the three Batarangs inside (color coded, one being explosive, one being electric, and one being filled with a viscous, quickly hardening foam). Nor was it the grapnel gun. No, those were put there by Bruce in case of an emergency, and she’d have been surprised if they hadn’t been there.

No. What took Barbara Gordon’s breath away was the cowl.

It was completely identical to her old one, its plates spread out, waiting to wrap around her head.

Of course, Bruce would want her wearing something out there in the field to conceal her identity. But… wow.

Barbara placed the cowl on her head. She pressed the side plates, and it formed a perfect fit on her skull. It was only now that she found out how much she truly, truly missed this. She knew she was formidable as Oracle, but…

A voice came into her ear.

“Are you ready?”

“Whenever you are, Renard,” Barbara said.

“Good,” Lucius said. “Just press that little PS button on the controller, and we’ll get started.”

She did, and the Batmobile came alive beneath her, first with a loud roar, and then slowly quieting, until it was almost silent.

“Readings look good,” Lucius said. “There’s a field about a quarter of a mile north of the tunnel exit. Wait there. The Batwing will pick the car up and drop it off at the location Nightwing provided. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Barbara said, her words leaving her mouth in a distracted gasp.

“Then she’s all yours…”

She slightly pressed the R2 shoulder button on the controller, and the Batmobile edged forward. She pressed down with a little more force, and Barbara Gordon…

...and Batgirl…

...tore out of the lab, and down the tunnel.
“Hey,” Stephanie said. “I snagged you some protein bars.”

Batman, who had not moved from his position in the dark corner of the living room since Selina went into the bedroom and Stephanie came back out again, saw the two small bars wrapped in red plastic on the kitchen counter. He walked up to them, picked them up, and spied the two dirty plates in the sink, still sticky with maple syrup.

He looked at Stephanie, who was stretched out on the couch, Isis on her stomach.

And she looked back.

She seemed to know what he was thinking.

Stephanie scowled, put some gravel in her voice, and said, in her best Batman impression:

“The Night does not eat waffles…”

Batman didn’t know what to say to that.

“Why are you still here?” Stephanie asked.

“I’m waiting for my ride.”

Stephanie was about to say something, when the bedroom door opened.

There stood Catwoman, spare Catsuit on her body, makeup freshly applied, sporting a look of defeat crossed with sheepishness.

Batman and Catwoman looked at each other for a moment or two, taking each other in.

He couldn’t find the words. She couldn’t either, though if it were a race, she’d have gotten there before he did.

“So,” Catwoman said, looking at her feet. “Where are we going?”

Catwoman led him out to the front of the building. The sky above them was still blustery, but no rain seemed to be coming.

“Do you have a method of conveyance?” Batman asked.

“What?”

“A ride.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?” Catwoman asked. “Yeah, I have a motorcycle… I think. If one of the looters around here got to it…”
“Get it,” Batman said, and he held up the two empty red wrappers form the protein bars he ate on the way down the stairs. “I need to find a trash can so I can throw these away.”

“The city went to shit,” she said. “Just throw them on the ground.”

Batman didn’t listen to her. He checked along the long row of abandoned cars clogging the street, looking for a trash can.

Catwoman, thinking Batman could not be serious right now, turned and stepped in between the cars to get across the street.

She walked a block to the storage unit, and found it relatively unmolested. She went to her unit, unlocked the sliding door, slid it open, and saw her black Ducati motorcycle.

*If I ever have children, Catwoman thought, this would still be my baby.*

She walked the Ducati back to the street across from the Harlow Street apartment building, and was gobsmacked by what she saw.

Batman was standing on top of an abandoned semi-truck, and above him, hovering silently, was the plane he had. She thought she remembered it being called *“The Batwing.”*

Beneath it, suspended from clamps attached to the plane itself, was a motorcycle from a mediocre cyberpunk author’s wet dream. Big wide wheels on the front and back, an enormous and dirty-looking engine beneath the seat. The Batwing dropped the Batpod onto the flat roof of the semi’s trailer, and silently lifted off.

She saw him collect a spare utility belt from the seat of the Batpod, and quickly put it on the waist of his armor. He checked a black steel compartment hanging off the seat, and took something out. He scanned the area, saw her, and jumped off the semi and onto the roof of an old teal Geo Metro, trying to get to her.

Once he was on ground level on the other side of the street, he walked to her, and handed her what he was carrying.

It was a small bit of plastic with a little bit of metal webbing on the underside.

“Aww,” Catwoman said, “but I didn’t get *you* anything.”

“It’s an earpiece,” Batman said. “Put it in.”

Selina peeled off her cowl and goggles, and put the earpiece in her right ear.

*“Batman online,” he said. “Batman to all hands, report in.”*

A collection of voices sounded off in her ear.

*“Penny One online.”*

*“Nightwing online.”*

*“Renard online.”*

Batman looked at her expectantly… and Selina rolled her eyes.

*“Uh… Catwoman online, I guess.”*
There was a brief moment of silence that carried its surprise well enough over radio waves. It was not broken until the voice that she knew belonged to Bruce Wayne’s butler Alfred said:

“My word!”

Nightwing actually sounded excited when he said “Hi, Selina! Wait… Oracle didn’t chime in.”

The guy who called himself Renard said “She’ll be with you soon.”

“Catwoman and I have transpo,” Batman said. “We’re en route to the location.”

“I’m already there,” Nightwing said. “I’ll be waiting.”


Batman started to walk back to the semi where the Batpod was located, when something occurred to Selina.

“Hey,” she said.

Batman stopped and turned around.

Selina pointed to her ear. “You’ve dreamed of the day you’d give me one of these, haven’t you? Actual, literal *dreams*.”

“Stick to the sidewalks,” Batman said. “We’ll get there quicker.”

As Batman and Catwoman traversed the empty sidewalks of the Gotham City mainland on their motorcycles to get to The Cauldron, The vivid images of what Batman saw on social media kept foxtrotting into and out of his brain.

He had a photographic memory.

They would be with him forever. Every drop of blood, every gleaming knife, every slack-jawed and dead face.

All wearing his symbol. All wearing the thing that, emblazoned on a cloud in the night sky, was supposed to tell them they were safe.

*I have failed…*

This was the one thought that was slowly dripping down the rest of his mind. Working itself into the dark corners and the forgotten crannies. He knew he had failed the city that was his home, the city that he loved, but as to what he was to do going forward? He didn’t know.

But he felt he was on the *cusp* of knowing.

And he feared what that would tell him.

The Cauldron was an irredeemably crummy part of the mainland that was so foul that not even the beat cops ventured there. Less a center for criminal activity, The Cauldron was more a magnet for it. Completely disorganized, undeniably petty, intractably foul, The Cauldron was the flypaper upon which degenerates too violent and scatter-brained from mob work or henchman duties got stuck.

But help was coming. Wayne Enterprises lobbied the city for construction permits to erect low-cost
housing in The Cauldron, in addition to setting up community centers in the area, so that the general, free-floating scumminess of the neighborhood might one day stabilize, and eventually recede.

Bruce Wayne himself was at the groundbreaking ceremony for the first building, and it was at that construction site that Hill, Talia, and Black Manta had apparently used as an entry for their underground lair. There was a walled-off tunnel near the site that…

…that led to an old network of tunnels from the turn of the twentieth century. Gotham’s first stab at a subway line. That’s where they were.

A bridge almost a quarter of a mile away from the site was one of the only stretches of street in Gotham City that wasn’t clogged with abandoned cars. All that was there was Nightwing, leaning up against his Nightcycle.

Batman’s Batpod and Catwoman’s Ducati slowed to a stop on the sidewalk a few feet away from him. They both got off their bikes and walked to him.

“If we live through this,” Nightwing said, “remind me to tell you about Tim Drake.”

“Who’s Tim Drake?” Batman asked.

“The kid who gave us this lead.”

“A kid…”

Catwoman walked up to Nightwing, cutting off the rest of the conversation the two men were having. “So you’re the first Robin.”

“Huh?” Nightwing asked.

“It’s alright,” Catwoman said. “Bruce told me.”

“Who told you?”

“Br… Oh, yeah, I guess I know that, too.”

Nightwing looked over Catwoman’s shoulder to Batman. “Any other surprises you want to tell me about?”

Batman looked for something to say, before settling on plain, boring “No.”

Nightwing looked back at Catwoman, and held out his hand. “Believe it or not, I’ve actually been waiting eleven years to introduce myself to you properly. I’m Dick.”

“Well, you’ve been a pretty nice--Oh my God, that’s embarrassing.”

“I’d say it makes me a hit with the ladies, but…”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure there are six or seven other things about you that make you a hit with the ladies before being named ‘Dick’ would,” she said as she shook his hand.

“What are we looking at?” Batman asked Nightwing.

Nightwing walked over to the side of the bridge and pointed to the site.

“About fifty henchmen, not counting the ones who must be inside the tunnels. A small fleet of
helicopters, and a few crates of weapons. Have a plan?”

Batman stared at the site, and said “I’ll tell you in a minute.”

Catwoman looked back at Nightwing. “I’d ask if he’s always this vague, but I’ve known him for over a decade and just found out his first name yesterday.”

“The monster.”

“The absolute cad.”

As Catwoman and Nightwing talked to each other, the images of the dead of Gotham came back to him. Dozens of them. All dressed as Batman.

The people of Gotham visited death upon each other and dressed them in his garb after the fact to save themselves.

Batman walked to the edge of the bridge and put his hand on the rail.

The answer was coming to him.

No.

He knew the answer all along. But even the Batman feared it.

Barring a three year interval, Batman had been doing this for thirteen years, and… while it wasn’t for nothing, he knew, knew in a certainty that was spreading from his heart outward, that he did it wrong.

Thirteen years of broken bones. Thirteen years of rended skin. Thirteen years of blood. Thirteen years of death. Thirteen years of horror. And he bore it all. He took the guilt upon himself, and let it bury him further and further, until something emerged that not even he would recognize as human.

But guilt was useless. Without the will to change, his guilt was just simple vanity, bringing himself to a place of prominence that he did not deserve. Without the will to change, his suffering was performative, playing to a paltry audience of one.

It crept upon him, ever so slowly, that the amount of pain he was in impressed no one. And his willingness to cling to it at all costs, shoving everyone out of his life to preserve it, his suffused into his every thought, his every action, until it touched the people who lived in the place he swore to defend.

He was the wrong messenger, sending the wrong message.

Looking out at the site where the henchmen of The Undying milled, his eyes lost focus as his thoughts consumed each other. They chomped and devoured, until only one remained, and that one thought dominated him. It reigned over him without a single shred of mercy.

Batman could not fight Hill, or Black Manta, or anyone until he finally and at long last gave voice to the one thing he feared was right about him. The one thing he was terrified of having to admit.

He had to come to grips with it.

He had say it.

And he had to say it now.
So as he looked over the bridge, as Nightwing and Catwoman joked with each other, Batman said it, only loud enough for the others to hear.

“I can’t do this anymore.”

Nightwing and Catwoman stopped talking.

Batman raised his hands and unlocked the plates of his cowl. Bruce Wayne took it off, and dropped it on the pavement.

“Bruce,” Nightwing said, “if you’re quitting again, so help me God…”

He turned to look at them with unfocused eyes. He could feel his hands shake, his pulse quicken, his mouth open.

“An eight-year-old boy shot me on a rooftop last night,” Bruce said.

Nightwing squinted, and looked at Catwoman.

“That’s who shot you?” Catwoman asked. “A little kid?”

“Diana was right,” Bruce said. “A city… it reflects back on people like us. People who protect it.”

Bruce rubbed his face. “When I was that kid’s age, my parents were murdered by a mugger right in front of me. And last night… that kid’s face was so familiar because it was mine. In his fear, in his anger, he got his parents’ gun, and tried to kill me. And…”

He looked down. He took two of the kind of deep breaths that makes a person puff out their cheeks.

“And the people of Gotham City have been killing each other for the past few days. Dressing the corpses up in Batman costumes trying to fool The Undying into letting them go. And… I’m to blame for it.”

“Bruce,” Catwoman said, the concern in her eyes warring with utter incomprehension, “you seriously can’t blame yourself for what complete strangers do when they’re scared.”

“I can,” Bruce said. He looked at Nightwing. “Why do I do this? When you asked me years ago why I was still Batman when the man who murdered parents went to prison, what did I say?”

“You wanted to be The Symbol,” Nightwing said. “You wanted to be the one they feared when they went to bed at night.”

“Right,” Bruce said. “And they do fear me. They fear me so much that they will murder each other to sell me out. And if that’s what they’ve learned, then I’ve been doing this whole thing wrong. I can’t just be The Symbol any longer. I have to be something more.”

“Like what?” Nightwing asked.

Bruce looked at him with a fire he could feel in his eyes.

“The Example,” he said. “The one they look to so they can see they can protect one another, and not just the one who leaps from the shadows and punishes the guilty.”

He looked up, over them, at the enormous city that wrapped around them.

“Every night I go out there, I go out there with my rage. I go out there with my guilt. I go out there
with my sadness, and… and the whole city’s been paying for it ever since. My anger and despair are
being rubbed in my face, and I’ve done nothing about it because I thought that’s what I needed to do
this. I pushed everyone I loved away because I thought being alone gave me an edge, and after I
realized that was a lie, I did it because I thought they’d be better off without me. And that was fine,
because I thought that if I was the only one getting hurt, then that was a small price to pay for what
needed to be done. But look around you! I’m not the only one getting hurt now!”

He looked down at the pavement. He felt the steam leave him, until only the truth remained.

“There are… so many things wrong with me. More than I care to admit. And… And I know I can’t
fix them myself. For the sake of my home, for the sake of everyone I love, I have to change… And I
need to start now.”

Bruce slowly looked up at Nightwing. He looked nervous. This was so unlike Bruce, and Bruce
knew that. He felt he need to step slowly toward Nightwing, so that he knew he wasn’t going to
freak out and try to hurt him.

“Dick,” Bruce said. “I’m in a place right now where I’m questioning every little thing I’ve done, and
I’m not liking the answers I see. All of it… Except you. You’re exactly like me, but without all the
problems, and I still don’t know how you pulled that off. And I’ve tried—I’ve tried so hard to be the
one you look to to try to be a good man, but I have to look to you now. Because I’m hanging by a
string, here, and I am terrified.”

Nightwing was visibly and audibly looking for something to say to that. Bruce tried not to think of a
chicken with a sore throat trying to cluck, but now that was all he could think of.

“Uh, well, y’know, hey,” Nightwing finally said. “I didn’t get here on my own, and uh… I mean…
as far as mentors go, I had a good one.”

Bruce unblinkingly locked eyes with Nightwing.

“You’re my son.”

Nightwing stopped looking for something to say. All that was left was what Bruce could only call a
kind of still shock.

“I don’t believe in God,” Bruce said, “but I’ll have Him as a witness when I tell you I’ll spend the
rest of my life trying to deserve that.”

Nightwing finally blinked.

And then…

...Bruce finally turned to Catwoman.

As he slowly walked toward her, she took off her cowl and goggles, placing them on the seat of her
Ducati. She was the opposite of Nightwing. In fact, Selina Kyle’s green eyes lit up in curiosity of
what Bruce might say.

He stopped until he was mere inches from her.

“Selina…” he said.

After that, nothing. He looked into her eyes and just… kinda got lost.
Selina raised her fool-spotting eyebrow, and said:

“Well, go on Goddamm--”

He gripped her face in his hands, and pressed his lips to hers.

This was the opposite of what the movies told him. No score swelling. No fireworks popping off in the distance.

Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle were center stage when the world itself, finally and at long last gaining a sense of fairness, turned down the house lights and cut the volume to the speakers. A long calm. A great silence. All light in the gray sky faded. The population of Gotham City dropped from nine million to a mere two.

The only thing tethering Bruce to the here and now… was Nightwing trying to be quiet while talking into his ear piece.

“Alfred… Dude… *Bruce is totally kissing Selina right now!*”

Their lips finally parted. Thy still had their eyes closed as they rested their foreheads on each other, each slowly expelling their held breath into each others’ mouths.

“I’m late,” Bruce said, his eyes still closed. “I’m eleven years late, and I’m so sorry.”

Selina worked her left arm around his waist. Her right hand worked its way into his thick black hair.

“Sailor,” Selina said, “you got here just in time.”

Her right hand tightly gripped Bruce’s hair, and brought his head back down for more. She pressed herself so hard that their teeth clicked together. He was surprised when her tongue tentatively found it way into his mouth, but he did not, for one instant, open his eyes. He did not let go.

Bruce couldn’t have expected Selina to be a Disney Princess about something he knew she’d been waiting eleven years for. Pushed to the end of all things, Selina Kyle was always going to be Selina Kyle.

It’s one of the reasons he loved her, after all.

When the pocket eternity they both occupied finally expired, and they finally broke their second kiss, Selina pulled her head back, and let her breath out. She blinked a few times, under a condition remarkably similar to shock. Once that was over:

“Stubble and protein bar breath,” she said. “Not a good look for anyone except you. Don’t know why that is.”

Bruce smiled.

And he only stopped smiling when he heard the whine of a jet engine off in the distance.

It was the Batwing.

And it was carrying something huge and black underneath it.

Nightwing, Bruce, and Selina stopped what they were doing and just stared at it.

“What the hell is that?” Nightwing asked.
Bruce only smiled.

Not the kind of smile he just had when Selina picked on him a second ago, no, this was an altogether different kind of smile. The kind of smile one has when the last piece of a plan has finally come into place, and one is certain that one’s adversaries have something less than a prayer.

“That,” Bruce said, “is my new Batmobile.”

Within the Batmobile being held aloft by the Batwing, Batgirl felt as though she was about to puke. The ratio of nervousness to the Batwing’s jostling of the vehicle in which she was sitting was hard for her to parse.

Looking out of the large wrap-around screen that served as the Batmobile’s windshield, she saw that the ground was getting closer a whole lot faster than she was comfortable with.

And the one thought she had in her head came out of her mouth as though it were a mantra or a prayer.

“Shitshitshitshitshitshitshitshit…”

The Batwing carrying the Batmobile was getting closer to the bridge. Batman and Catwoman had quickly put their cowls back on, and now they just helplessly stared at the plane bearing down on their position.

The plane actually buzzed their position, causing them all to duck before pulling up at the last second. With a loud THUNK! the Batwing deployed the new Batmobile, sending it plummeting to Earth, its trajectory making sure it landed right in the middle of the construction site.

Immediately before the Batmobile landed, the earpieces of Batman, Catwoman, and Nightwing bloomed with a loud, thrilled woman’s voice screaming two words that hadn’t been heard in Gotham City in years.

“BATGIRL ONLINE!”

And as the Batmobile finally made impact with the muddy center of the construction site, Nightwing put his finger to his earpiece.

“Wait, who online?”

WHUMP!

The Batmobile landed in the middle of the construction site, and Batgirl almost got whiplash from the impact.

The henchmen of The Undying paused for a second, all staring at the monstrous hunk of metal that just kicked up about a half a ton of mud when it fell from the sky.

Then the second passed, and they all unslung their AK-47s from their shoulders and started firing at the Batmobile.

Batgirl recoiled, for as evidently safe as the Batmobile was (the bullets each making a Ping! Sound as the bounced futilely off the Batmobile’s plating), no one gets used to the site of someone firing
automatic weapons at them.

She bore down on the PS4 controller’s L2 trigger, and the Batmobile slowly crawled backwards out of the crater that its landfall had created.

“Renard,” Batgirl said, “you said this thing has a Combat Mode?”

“R3,” Lucius said in her ear.

Batgirl pressed down on the right thumbstick of the PS4 controller, and the four wheels of the Batmobile spread out, the car itself squatted lower to the ground, and two separate cannons sprang from opposite side of the Batmobile’s roof.

Her own voice came from a speaker in between the two seats.

“Combat Mode engaged.”

A small targeting reticle appeared in the center of the Batmobile’s windshield.

“R2 fires rubber bullets,” Lucius said, “and L2 fires the beanbag cannon. Go nuts.”

There are times, when one is granted a certain amount of power, where a certain strain of people try to handle said power with dignity and grace.

Barbara Joan Gordon… did not belong to that strain of people.

Batgirl smiled an ugly smile, and successfully verbalized the emotion that she was feeling at the moment. And it sounded an awful lot like:

“Mwahahahahahahahahahahaha!”

Chaos down in the tunnels.

The remnants of The Undying’s forces scurried about the main terminal, collecting whatever weapons they could find from where they had been stashed.

Hamilton Hill, still in his gray suit, and David Hyde in his wetsuit stood in their midst.

“What the hell is going on?” Hill asked.

“Up on the site,” Hyde said. “The Batmobile’s tearing through everyone on the surface.”

“He’s here?”

Hyde nodded.

Hill scanned the terminal. “How many do we have left down here?”

“Thirty-five tops.”

Hill smiled.

“No more resources go up top. Get them all on the train. If Batman’s here, he’s not alone. I take off as soon as he arrives, and we divide and conquer.”

He stepped to Hyde.
“You stay here and guard the witch. Nothing gets past you.”

Hyde leered. “Nothing ever does.”

As the Batmobile tore around the construction site, the THOOM! of its cannon and the DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH! of its gun knocking The Undying’s henchmen all about, Nightwing stood on the bridge, arms folded, frown firmly in place.

“She’s driving the Batmobile… I never got to drive the Batmobile… Bruce, if we don’t all die, can I drive the Batmobile?”

Batman, who had gone to get something out of the Batpod, had come back.

“Here,” he said, and held out his hands.

He was holding what appeared to be four sets of brass knuckles. Except they appeared to be silver instead of brass, and the glowing blue lights, or… whatever the hell they were in the actual knuckles themselves. He handed two a piece to Catwoman and Nightwing.

“What are they?” Catwoman asked.

“They’re concussive knuckles,” Batman said. “If we have to face Black Manta, you’ll need an edge.”

“He shouldn’t be too hard,” she said. “Didn’t you beat that guy at a hotel a few days ago?”

“In a fight he threw,” Batman said. “Do not, under any circumstances, underestimate him. We’re going down now. Stay on the edges of the site, and wait for Batgirl to blow the door to the tunnels. Stay out of the lines of fire. Good luck.”

Batman turned to walk to the Batpod. Catwoman walked after him.

“Hey,” she said. He turned around.

“I’m only ever gonna follow your orders if you follow mine.”

She grabbed him by the neck of his cowl, brought his head down a little bit, and gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

“Come back to me, alright?”

And immediately, Catwoman felt like the girl in every old movie wishing her soldier boyfriend goodbye before they inevitably got maimed on D-Day. All sappy and trite.

“Because,” Catwoman added, “you are way too good a kisser for someone who hasn’t been laid in eight years.”

There. All better.

Stiffly smiling, Batman said “We’re going to get through this. When the sun finally shines on this place again, we’ll be alive to see it.”

“Is that hope coming from you?”

“You do have this annoying habit of being right about a lot of stuff,” Catwoman said.

“I picked you, didn’t I?”

And Catwoman genuinely didn’t know what to say to that.

As Batman turned around, she called out again.

“Just what do you see in me, anyway?”

He turned back to her, and she saw a warmth that she was not used to seeing in the blue eyes behind the cowl.

“You make me laugh,” he said.

__________________________________________________________

THOOM!

The beanbag cannon knocked a female henchman ass-backwards into the side of a forklift.

DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH!

The rubber bullets dropped one of the guys to his stomach, his AK-47 flying from his hand.

Batgirl saw a few henchmen run toward a helicopter at the west edge of the site.

“Does this thing have EMP capability?”

“That would be the triangle button,” Lucius said in her ear.

Batgirl wheeled the Batmobile around, focusing the targeting reticle on the chopper as its propellers started spinning.

She hit the triangle button.

A fat gob of blue light fired from the grille of the Batmobile, and toward the helicopter. Once it made contact, she could see the lights inside the chopper immediately switch off, and the propeller blades slow back down to a halt.

The two henchmen inside quickly escaped the helicopter and made a break for it off to the side of the site.

Batgirl's eyes widened.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH!

She laughed as she saw them drop to the dirt, writhing in pain.

A female voice said something through her earpiece. “Uhhh… Batgirl?”

Batgirl blinked. “Selina?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow,” Batgirl said. “I thought you were unaffiliated.”
“And I thought you were reti--SHIT!”

BOOOOM!

The entire Batmobile rocked around her. Catwoman’s deeply impressed voice filled her ear.

“That thing can tank a rocket launcher?”

“Who’s got the rocket launcher?”

“Your six,” Nightwing said in her ear.

Batgirl swiveled the Batmobile a hundred and eighty degrees to see one of the male henchmen, standing behind a bulldozer for cover, reloading a rocket launcher.

THOOM!

The beanbag cannon was powerful enough to knock the blade of the bulldozer back about six inches. Enough to collide with the henchman, knocking him into the mud, and sending the rocket launcher from his hands.

Batgirl cackled.

“Hate to rain on your parade,” Catwoman said, “but could you open the Goddamn door, please?”

“Oh,” Batgirl said. “Right.”

She swiveled the Batmobile. She lined up the targeting reticle with the massive, circular wooden door that capped off a sewer tunnel built into the side of a retaining wall beneath street level.

Three quick blasts from the beanbag cannon, and the wooden door was demolished.

“You’re all clear kid!” Batgirl said, “now let’s blow this thing and go home!”

And the last thing she heard from the three superheroes on their motorcycles before they disappeared past the blasted wooden door and into the sewers was Nightwing screaming:

“NERRRRRRRRRRRRRRD!”

The sewers reeked.

Catwoman was on her Ducati, next to Nightwing on his Nightcycle, with Batman on the Batpod taking the lead.

They traveled for three stinky, stinky minutes, until she saw Batman slow, and gently creep the Batpod through a hole in the left wall of the sewer. Catwoman and Nightwing followed suit.

Through that hole in the wall was a set of antique tracks in an ancient tunnel that had no interior light. All three switched on the headlights for the bikes.

They went down…

…down…

…down deeper into the tunnel, the dirt on the walls eventually giving way to white tiles that had been
so starved for light that they hadn’t even yellowed in the hundred twenty years since they’d been installed.

They passed under a sign in the dark, ornate and old, done in the art nouveau style that was vogue at the turn of the twentieth century.

**GOTHAM CITY F LINE.**

“There’s a light down there,” Batman said, his voice coming into her earpiece.

Catwoman squinted, and she began to see it as well.

All three sped up.

Catwoman pressed the side of her goggles for the magnification function. Her vision zoomed down toward the light.

In the light of the F Line main terminal, she saw the rear car of a small, compact train.

Hamilton Hill was standing the window. Almost like he saw them coming.

He waved.

“The Undying is taking off in the train,” Batman said. “You two stop at the terminal. Find Zatanna, and wait for instructions from Batgirl on how to power down what she’s hooked up to.”

“We’re on it,” Catwoman said.

Nightwing chimed in next. “Good luck!”

As the Batpod sped up (Catwoman had to wonder how fast that thing could go at top speed), the Ducati and the Nightcycle slowed down, until they were finally at the main terminal where the train had been.

It was abandoned. There wasn’t even any dust on the floors for how old it was. No clutter at all, save for a couple of trash cans filled with fast food wrappers and the odd beer bottle. The floors were white marble with veins of black running throughout, and every few feet there were pillars plated in white tile, leading up to the vaulted ceilings above them.

From beyond the terminal, footsteps echoed.

They were deep, methodical, and heavy, so heavy that Catwoman could almost feel their impact tremors in her teeth.

From beyond a pillar at at edge of the terminal, Black Manta entered.

Catwoman had never seen him before, and she was momentarily shocked by how… big he was. His black armor glinted from the generator-powered lights above them. His helmet shone silver, and the lights in that helmet, the two red ones that acted as eyes and weapons, were dark as headlights that weren’t switched on.

“Well,” Black Manta said, his voice coming from his helmet in a deep, electronic rumble. “I’ve been sent the pretty ones.”

He pressed a button on his suit, and the low drone of something powering down came from his armor.
“I’ll go half on this one,” Black Manta said. “Killing the two of you is going to be fun. I’m gonna make it last a while.”

Catwoman looked at Nightwing as she lowered her goggles. The look of steely determination on his face matched her own. She looked back at Black Manta, and clenched her fists around the concussion knuckles that Batman had given her.

“No jokes?” Black Manta asked. He looked at Nightwing. “You’re learning.”

Nightwing and Catwoman charged him.

Chapter End Notes

Due to pacing and length issues, I've opted to consolidate the planned twenty-seventh and twenty-eight chapters into just one. The expected chapter count has dropped form thirty to twenty-nine.

Given that the planned Chapter 27 will be both intricate and, well, *long*, I am sorry to say that there will be no chapter on Monday.

Come back on THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2019 for Chapter 27, which is the first of the final three chapters of The Undying.

After that... Who knows what might happen?
Hi all. GeneralIrritation here.

First, yeah yeah, I dropped the chapter a day early. I was done, and I was impatient.

Second, there are some of you who will be deeply, almost personally offended by the final segment of this chapter. I don't mean this in a way, like I made a storytelling decision you won't like. I never apologize for those. But the choice I made, the choice you will soon see, goes beyond that. For some of you, it may make your day just a little bit worse. And stuff like that I should apologize for. So before I get into excuses and justification, I should let that stand. On its own. In its own separate paragraph.

I'm sorry, in advance, for what I do at the end of this chapter.

Just know that there was no other way this story could play out and have it hew to the same level of quality that I strive to attain. There were other ways out, there always are, and let no one tell you different. But none of them would have been as good. And know three things.

The first is that I understand the nature of your complaints, and I respect them.

The second is that, if I were in your shoes, reading the same thing you're about to, I would also complain. Most likely with the same words you would use.

And the third, is that so would the character in question.

Let it be known that I didn't do it lightly. I went in with a plan, both for this story, and for any sequel material that might materialize. I didn't just throw this out there hoping it would stick. I do have a plan.

But these are, as I've said, excuses and justifications. They may not matter to you, and if they don't, they shouldn't.

Again, I am truly sorry. If this rubbed you the wrong way, feel free to tell me in the comments how much I suck. I wish you'd go along with me just a little bit further to see how this all plays out, but if you can't, no hard feelings.

Chapter 27: The Fantabulous Emancipation of One Selina Kyle

The Batpod trailed behind Hill’s train, accelerating fast. The lights of the F Line terminal faded out as he passed, and he was plunged into darkness again, the interior lights of the train and the headlights of his vehicle providing the only illumination.

Batman took a hand off the bike’s handlebar, and reached for his utility belt. He brought out his grapnel hook and tried to steady his aim.

He readied his legs.
Satisfied there would be no curves to the tunnel, in one swift motion, he jumped so that his feet were on the seat of the Batpod, and fired the grapnel gun.

The hook sailed through the air and shattered the glass at the back of the fifth train car, and it embedded in the car’s floor.

Batman’s cape spread out behind him, and he glided in the air behind the train as the Batpod, now driverless, flipped and crashed on the tracks.

He figured there wouldn’t be damage to the Batpod after a crash like that. And if things went well, he’d be in great need of it.

Batman slammed down on the grapnel gun button that reeled him in. He brought his head down and straightened his body out, so the cape narrowed, and he sailed through the air at a blistering speed.

He crashed through the window of the fifth car, rolled into the impact, and quickly got to his feet.

Ten very impressed henchmen with either swords or pistols were waiting for him.

Batman got a smoke pellet out of the quick-release dispenser on his utility belt, and threw it to the floor. The car immediately filled with smoke. One of the henchmen fired their pistol into the roof in a panic.

He moved among the henchmen, and dispatched them quickly, handing out elbows to the temple or knees to the bridge of the nose like an earnest college kid hands out climate change pamphlets.

Ten goons.

Twelve seconds to disarm them all.

He’d have to go easy on the smoke pellets. Batman only had two left.

He opened the door that led to the fourth car, and took the small step over the little hitch that connected it to the fifth. Once he was across, he immediately knelt down next to the windowless door on that end of the fourth car. He procured a small tube of explosive gel from the back of his utility belt, and smeared a small dollop of the beige gel onto the hitch.

He brought up his cape to protect his face, and pressed the button on the dispenser.

With a muffled Boom, the explosive gel destroyed the hitch, and the fifth car started falling behind as it lost speed with nothing pulling it along.

Even if the unconscious thugs in the car came to, they’d have no choice but to walk back the way they came, having to go through Batgirl, Catwoman, and Nightwing.

He didn’t like their odds.

Batgirl fired another EMP burst into the fifth helicopter on the site.

That was the last one.

The remaining henchmen, she had to guess about fifteen, were starting to scatter, heading off the site and into the rest of Gotham City.

And the quicker they did so, the quicker Batgirl herself could get down into the tunnels.
As she swivelled the Batmobile around, she heard something—some one—scrabble across the roof.

*And what kind of host would I be if I didn’t open up?*

“How do I retract the roof?”

“The third red button on the dashboard,” Lucius said in her ear. “Why?”

“I’m expecting company.”

She hit the third red button on the dashboard, and the roof of the Batmobile slid back like a guillotine in reverse.

One of The Undying’s henchwomen, a blocky one with short blonde hair and blue eyes, brought half her torso down through the roof, stabbing blindly with a Yemeni *janbiya* dagger.

Batgirl caught her by the wrist with her right hand. The two locked eyes.

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“You have three seconds to drop that dagger and get off Batman’s car,” Batgirl said.

*One…*

The henchwoman was well-trained, broad, muscular. She strained against Batgirl’s wrist, trying to bring the dagger down. Sweat was forming on her brow. But Batgirl was showing very little strain at all. In fact, she was openly smiling.

*Two…*

Ever since The Joker took her legs from her, Barbara Gordon had gladly, almost obsessively, been working out and developing her upper body, in particular her arms. And now, after four years of hoping, she was finally… finally… in the arm wrestling match she’d been waiting for.

*Three.*

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*Three.*

“Suit yourself,” Batgirl said.

She wrenched her hand to the right, and the henchwoman screamed and dropped the *janbiya* as Batgirl shattered her wrist with a low, muffled snap.

Batgirl yanked the rest of the henchwoman inside the Batmobile, which allowed her to savagely bring her cowl up under the henchwoman’s chin as she fell.

*Annnnnd she’s out.*

It took a little bit of maneuvering (an a lot less strain than she imagined), but she finally got the unconscious henchwoman into a sitting position in the passenger’s seat.

Batgirl strapped her in.

“Now,” she said as she examined the underside of the passenger’s seat, “where is… here we go.”

She found a red button on the underside of the passenger’s seat, and she pressed it.

Barbara Gordon remembered the long sessions in an impromptu sound booth that Batman had constructed in the Batcave, reading every last word in Webster’s Dictionary so that all of the Bat-dooohickies that needed a voice had one.
So it came as no surprise when her own voice came back to her through the speaker in between the seats, and said:

“Passenger ejection in five seconds. Press the button again to override.”

Batgirl most decidedly did not press the button again to override.

Five seconds silently passed. Then a loud hiss came from under the passenger’s seat, and the seat itself launched out of the Batmobile.

Batgirl knew that a chute would deploy once the ejected seat reached the apex of its journey to wherever it was going. She smiled.

“When she wakes up, she’s gonna be so confused.”

“Company left already?” Lucius asked.

“Yeah,” Batgirl said, looking down on the passenger’s side floorboard at the *janbiya* the henchwoman had dropped. “She was rude, but she gave me a present.”

Batgirl hit the third red button on the dashboard to close the roof, and then pressed the right thumbstick on the PS4 controller again to bring the Batmobile back into traversal mode.

She kicked up globs of mud in the Batmobile's wake as she headed toward the tunnels.

________________________

**BWOMMMMM-M-M-M-M-M-M-M!**

Catwoman’s left fist and Nightwing’s right (each bearing the concussion knuckles) made contact at the same time with Black Manta’s helmet.

He skidded back about six feet, only stopping when the jetpack on the back of his armor collided with one of the terminal’s pillars, sending up chunks of tile and chalky white dust.

“You brought some toys,” Black Manta said as he righted himself. “I brought some too.”

His back erupted in a cloud of steam, and Black Manta leapt forward powered by his jetpack, and came down between them, his feet leaving cracks in the marble.

As Catwoman leapt away, she tried to assess the advantages she and Nightwing had over Black Manta.

Speed was the big one. No matter his other attributes, Black Manta was just a guy in a big suit of armor, and that put him on the slow side.

His helmet could be a liability as well. It was big enough and unwieldy enough that he couldn’t go for kicks, lest he tumble over. No matter how good a fighter he was, physics was a bitch.

But more than his armor or whatever powers that armor provided, the biggest advantage Black Manta had over the two of them at the moment was range.

Because as soon as he saw Nightwing bring out his escrima sticks, Black Manta’s retractable blades emerged from the wrists of his armor. Nightwing went for a swipe, and Black Manta slashed with his right arm, sending the electrified top of the escrima stick flying, and rendering it useless.

In the battle of Atlantean steel against an unbreakable polymer, Atlantean steel apparently won.
Before Nightwing could even counter with the other stick, Black Manta brought his left blade around, and over the top of Nightwing’s left thigh.

Catwoman was shocked to see that Black Manta’s blade could slice through kevlar, as that’s exactly what it did, sending a small gout of blood into the air around Nightwing’s left leg. Nightwing’s yelp of pain was cut short as Black Manta sent a shoulder into his chest, knocking him into one of the pillars. His back made a nasty sound upon impact, and the back of his head thudded off the tile.

Without thinking, Catwoman reached into the pack on her left shoulder, and came out with a glass vial of Poison Ivy’s nasty corrosive goop, of the same kind she used to get into the book depository days earlier.

The wind-up…

The pitch…

The vial shattered on impact with Black Manta’s jet pack. The gray gunk started smoking immediately, and sparks from the jet pack’s circuitry started flying.

She smiled.

This was not a wise decision.

Black Manta, quicker than she could have anticipated, retracted his blades back into his armor, and whirled around to give her a right cross to the face.

Her mind howled in pain as she felt her left cheekbone splinter. Her vision blurred and went gray.

Oh God, please don’t black out.

Reversing course, he sent his left fist hard into her stomach, which knocked her off of her feet and onto her back.

She struggled to get her breath back. She hadn’t made a list of the times she’d been punched hardest, but she reckoned that this one had to be up there. He hit her so hard, she could have sworn his fist bounced off her spine from the front.

From her position, she could see Nightwing run up behind him and drive his fist into Black Manta’s back, the sound of the concussive knuckles deafening as he skidded helmet-first into the wall.

Catwoman tried to get up, but she stopped.

She could feel her hands shaking, and she felt the blood drain out of her face. And her stomach felt like it housed angry hornets.

Something’s not right here…

Car four…

Batman had already dispatched four of The Undying’s goons into the realm of unconsciousness when the fifth one decided to pull a gun.

Those aren’t effective in such tight quarters when you’re surrounded by your own guys, Batman thought. You’d think they’d have learned that by now.
Batman swatted the hand holding the gun to the left just in time for the Glock to put a hole in the side of the car. He brought up his right foot and brought it down on the hapless henchman’s kneecap, and Batman could hear the guy’s screams intermingling with the sickening crunch of pulverised cartilage.

He brought his hand up, took a handful of the henchman’s hair, and rammed his head into the side of the car with a loud DWOMMMMM!

Batman dropped the unconscious henchman, and turned his attention to another henchman with red hair, reaching into the pocket of his jean jacket.

He reached for his utility belt.

It was a quick-draw contest.

Batman won.

He had the grapnel gun aimed and raised before the redheaded henchman had gotten his pistol put. Batman fired, and the hook from the grapnel gun lodged the the henchman’s right shoulder.

The redheaded henchman bleated in pain as the line to the grapnel gun reeled him toward Batman at breakneck speed, sending him on a collision course with the forehead of Batman’s cowl.

It was like colliding with the Rock of Gibraltar, and just as likely to put a person in the hospital.

The redheaded henchman dropped, and as Batman put his grapnel gun back on his utility belt, he saw two more goons advancing: another man with a gun, and one of Talia’s leather-clad honor guard brandishing a sword.

Batman took one step forward, grabbed a handful of the side of his cape, and swung hard.

The tips of the serrations at the bottom of his cape were both sharp and weighted with ball bearings. The lash across the faces of the two goons left them with slashed faces and one broken nose.

The two dropped their weapons and clutched their faces, blood seeping through their fingers. There weren’t unconscious, but they wouldn’t be up to fighting for a while.

Which just left the two honor guard at the rear of the car, swords out and charging.

Batman raised both of his gauntlets and pulled back his wrists.

Two taser darts fired from the wrists of his gauntlets at hit the two sword-wielding henchwomen at center mass. They dropped their swords as thirty-thousand volts of electricity rooted them to the spot. After the two second charge of the taser darts expired, they both collapsed.

Batman stepped over them, and opened the door to get to car three.

And as he applied the explosive gel to the hitch connecting the two cars, Batman considered that the point of this gauntlet may have been to make him tired and force him to run out of gadgets.

If so… It was working.

Black Manta struck Nightwing in the chest with the nearest object he could find.

That object just so happened to be Catwoman’s entire body.
Holding her by the ankles of her boots and swinging her like a cudgel, Black Manta swung her back into Nightwing’s torso, and let go, sending them both flying after the impact. They rolled to a stop on the marble floor next to one of the terminal’s pillars.

Nightwing looked over to Catwoman as he got up. Her face was white with dust from displaced tile and chipped marble, but… that wasn’t it.

Despite all that, the only color on her face was the swelling from Manta’s first punch to the head, and some blood coming from a split lip. She was getting paler and paler, which was the opposite of how one’s face was supposed to look during a fight.

He saw Catwoman’s brow lower, her teeth bare, and she came to her feet with a roar.

She charged Black Manta and savagely swung at him with her concussive knuckles…

…and missed.

He brought his right, armor-clad fist into Catwoman’s mouth so hard that Nightwing winced when he saw it. A heavy arc of blood flew from her mouth as he grabbed a handful of her Catsuit and flung her into the nearest wall. She dropped in a heap.

Then he advanced on Nightwing, his heavy steps kicking up dust. Nightwing got to his feet, judged his distance, and swung his fist.

Black Manta caught him by the wrist with one hand, and used the other one to grab the top of his head.

Despite his struggles, Black Manta marched Nightwing to the pillar behind him. He brought Nightwing in close, then brutally slammed the back of his head into the pillar.

Nightwing’s vision went white, and the blunt force of the pain caused him to groan. He feebly grasped at Black Manta’s wrist.

WHAM! A second time, and Nightwing went limp, the entire weight of his body suspended above the floor by the vice-like grip Black Manta held on his head.

Black Manta pulled back a third time… and then dropped Nightwing.

He looked up to see that Catwoman had jumped on Black Manta’s back, and was running her claws down the wires that Poison Ivy’s corrosive gunk had exposed. She was screaming, and in her bloody maw, Nightwing could see that, between the top and bottom rows, Catwoman was missing at least four of her front teeth.

Black Manta reached behind him, grabbed Catwoman by the neck, and flung her over his helmet, throwing her to the marble floor so hard that she bounced when her back made landfall. Nightwing could hear her screech as she tried to bring air back into her lungs.

As Catwoman rolled out of the way, Black Manta bent over to further manhandle Nightwing.

But he stopped.

At first, Nightwing wondered why, but then… then he heard it.

A rumbling that had come into earshot.

Both Nightwing and Black Manta looked toward the F Line tracks.
There, on the ancient tracks, was the Batmobile that Batgirl was driving.

“Wanna see something funny?” Black Manta asked.

Black Manta readied himself as he turned his helmet toward the Batmobile, and Nightwing saw the giant eyes in that ovular helm glow a bright red.

Nightwing tried to scrabble up. “NO!”

But the lights of Black Manta’s helmet dimmed again, as sparks erupted from what remained of his jetpack.

Whatever Catwoman did back there, Nightwing had to assume it worked.

“Hey Renard,” Batgirl said as she clicked the right thumbstick of the PS4 controller, bringing the Batmobile into Combat Mode. “What do we have in the way of ordinance?”

“If you press the square button,” Lucius said in her ear, “the beanbag cannon fires fifty millimeter rounds. Why?”

Batgirl pressed the square button on the controller, and she could hear a loud clunking noise to the left above her. The sound of one type of ammo being switched out for another.

“Oh… No reason.”

“Aw, shit,” Black Manta said.

THOOM!

A fifty millimeter shell erupted from one of the cannons on the Batmobile’s roof, and hit Black Manta’s armor right in the chest, knocking him into the rear wall of the terminal… and through it.

The wall collapsed as Black Manta flew into the darkness beyond, sending up a cloud of white dust, and sending down a cascade of shattered tile and plaster.

Nightwing looked toward the Batmobile. He waved it further down the tracks, and managed to collect enough of his faculties and his breath to yell “Thanks, honey!”

As the Batmobile shifted back into traversal mode and started driving further down, Batgirl honked the horn.

Nightwing struggled to his feet. As he finally stood, he heard footsteps behind him.

Black Manta stood in the newly created hole in the wall. His armor was smeared white with dust, and the center of the chest piece was dented inward.

And so it was Nightwing’s turn to say “Aw, shit…”

“I’m not gonna lie,” Black Manta said, looking down at the dent in his armor. “I’m a little upset right now.”
Car three...

Batman had deployed the second of his smoke bombs for the seven henchmen in this third car.

Seven goons.

Twelve seconds to disarm them all.

But he’d poured his energy into fighting twenty people already, and this combined with the fact that he was still low on blood from getting shot the night before slowed him down some.

He had only dispatched five by the time the thirteenth second rolled around.

On the thirteenth second, one of Talia’s female guard emerged from the waning fog, sword in hand, and struck.

The blade scratched on the side of his cowl, but manage to leave a gash on his cheek about an inch and a half long.

Blood pouring down his face, Batman took the woman’s measure, and squared up.

The henchwoman rained precise slashes and thrusts on Batman, and Batman dodged them all deftly.

She came in with a broad slash at shoulder height, and Batman raised left gauntlet to block it. The clang of the sword against the armor cause the sword to bounce, and the henchwoman used the momentum to switch sword hands and come around with a spinning backsplash with her right hand.

This maneuver would have removed the head of any other opponent.

So it was her most unfortunate luck that, at the present moment, she was facing Batman.

In the middle of the maneuver (which he had scouted), Batman kicked the back of her left leg, dropping her to her knees.

Once she was down, his right hand gripped her sword hand, his left hand gripped her left shoulder, and he drove his knee hard into the back of her head.

The henchwoman ragdolled and flopped to the floor, down for the count.

The final remaining henchwoman, sword unsheathed, rushed Batman, and stopped.

Batman was holding the other woman’s sword, pointing it at her.

The henchwoman stared at him for a moment. Batman knew what she was thinking.

Batman fights with a sword?

Yes, Batman does indeed fight with a sword.

After the shock wore off, the final henchwoman charged. Every thrust was dodged, and every slash was blocked.

The henchwoman raised the sword for a mighty blow, and this was when Batman thrust his sword at her body.

But he wasn’t aiming for her body.
No, he was aiming for the scabbard hanging from the waist of her leather pants.

His sword firmly placed inside the henchwoman’s scabbard, he took one hand off of the sword and sent it to his utility belt, while the other savagely whirled her around, so her back was facing him.

He produced a small syringe, about the size of the final joint on a toddler’s pinky, and jammed it into her neck, before shoving her away.

The henchwoman turned around, looked down and noticed that Batman’s sword was in her scabbard. She looked at Batman, smiled a sinister smile, and charged him.

She got about two feet before she froze in place.

Batman had injected her with a paralytic, and she would stay that way, teeth bared, sword above her head, and eyes widened in unblinking fury… for another two hours.

He walked past her, and put his hand on the door that led to car two.

And the Dark Knight, the World’s Greatest Detective, the creature that struck fear into the hearts of the criminals of Gotham after the sun went down… just couldn’t help himself.

Before he made his exit, Batman turned and looked at the petrified henchwoman.

“Hey, don’t go anywhere.”

Dirt and pebbles ground under the treads of the Batmobile’s tires, as Batgirl kept pressing the circle button on the PS4 controller as she drove, utilizing the vehicle’s sonar capabilities to look for lifesigns.

And she got seven hundred feet away from the site of the rumble Nightwing and Catwoman had had with Black Manta when she finally found one.

She stopped the Batmobile beneath the small bridge above the tracks, boxed in by windows. The sonar’s display (which was of the holographic variety, projected onto the windshield) spotted a singular lifesign about a hundred feet beyond the bridge, upstairs.

Batgirl put a finger to the ear of her cowl.

“Nightwing, come in.”

Nothing.

“Nightwing, do you read?”

Still nothing.

_Don’t tell me a fifty millimeter bullet from ten feet away couldn’t incapacitate Black Manta. I didn’t try to kill him, I just wanted to wreck his armor, but if he’s still up and fighting, then…_

She had told Nightwing herself a few nights ago.

_“He can take hits off of Aquaman, Wonder Woman, Superman and still get back up and fight.”_

Eidetic memory was a bastard sometimes. She still remembered the panic she felt when he told her Black Manta was in Gotham. And it was only compounding the panic she was feeling now.
If Black Manta was still up and fighting, then… then…

No.

*You don’t get to think about that now.*

Batgirl closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

The fact was that in order to save Gotham City, Zatanna had to be disconnected from the targeting system that kept track of everyone’s heartbeat.

And between Batman having gone off to apprehend Hill, and Nightwing and Catwoman potentially…

No.

...then Batgirl, and Batgirl alone was the only one who could set all of this right.

She opened her eyes, looked out the windshield, and up at the top of the tunnel.

*I am about to do something incredibly stupid.*

Batgirl unzipped her leather jacket. The three different Batarangs were in her right interior pocket… and the grapnel gun was on the left.

She took out the grapnel gun, rezipped her jacket, and undid the safety harness that was holding her to the driver’s seat.

*Incredibly… Incredibly stupid.*

She hit the third red button on the dash that retracted the Batmobile’s roof. She looked at the ceiling of the tunnel, looked at the boxed in bridge above the track, and tried to do the math in her head.

She readied the grapnel gun in her right hand, and with her left, she fumbled under the seat for a button.

She pressed it, and heard her own voice come out of the Batmobile’s speakers.

*“Driver ejection in five seconds. Press the button again to override.”*

The next five seconds passed by at a glacial pace while Batgirl’s heart did its damnedest to beat its way out of her chest.

Then a hissing started to sound beneath her. Her seat started to shake slightly.

And then she was launched into the air.

The driver’s seat rose quickly, *too* quickly. She found herself having to fire her grapnel through the window and into the floor of the bridge instead of the ceiling.

The hook reeled in, taking her out of her collision course with the ceiling of the tunnel, and taking her right shoulder out of its socket.

Batgirl screamed in pain as she crashed through the windows boxing in the bridge. She had brought up her left arm to her face to protect herself from the broken glass, and she landed on the floor of the bridge in a heap, bad shoulder first.
She groaned, and heard a FWUMP! coming from the track below. The driver’s seat that had ejected her had smashed into the ceiling, and then crashed to the floor, and it had only just now deployed its chute.

Distracting herself from the agony in her shoulder, Batgirl decided to fixate on the fact that hey, at least the parachutes work.

Batgirl looked down the bridge and noticed that it led to a hall of rooms with no doors, lit from above by plain white Christmas lights.

The bad news here was that she hadn’t just taken out the window she crashed through, but every window on this side of the bridge.

Zatanna was a hundred feet past this bridge, in the hallway beyond.

And Batgirl was going to have to crawl through broken glass on only one functioning limb to get to her.

This was no longer a fight. Nightwing didn’t even know if it ever had been.

This was a torture session.

On the floor, his vision blurred. He was fighting off nausea.

Concussion.

He raised a hand to his head, and even the briefest contact made him want to scream in pain.

And a skull fracture.

Nightwing’s vision cleared enough to see Black Manta fling Catwoman into one of the pillars. Her back wrapped around it, before she fell to the floor, knocking one of the wastebaskets over.

A single beer bottle rolled a few feet away.

Nightwing could see Catwoman get on all fours, and try to crawl away. She was slow, and he noticed, even from this far away, that her face had somehow gotten even paler.

And Black Manta slowly walked up behind her as she tried to retreat and regroup.

Nightwing tried to get up to help her, but his legs were not cooperating with his will.

Black Manta lightly stepped on the back of Catwoman’s knee, and she couldn’t advance any further. She tugged slowly, soundlessly, pathetically, trying to get away.

Nightwing noticed that Catwoman’s head was directly above the stray beer bottle.

“You know,” Black Manta said. “You messed up the face of a woman I’m quite fond of… So now, then.”

With lightning speed, Black Manta removed his foot from the back of Catwoman’s knee and brought it down hard on the back of her head. Her face collided with the beer bottle on the floor, shattering it.

Catwoman shrieked in pain, and Nightwing, even in his own precarious situation, had to cringe. She
curled up into a fetal position, and he could see \textit{way} too much blood pooling around her head.

Then Black Manta set his sights on him. And Nightwing at least felt shame that \textit{that} was what got him on his feet, and not the horrific plight of Selina Kyle.

He stumbled toward Black Manta, raised his fist to swing his concussion knuckles, and let loose with all the speed he could muster.

It was not enough.

Black Manta caught him by the wrist with his right hand. With his left, he punched Nightwing in the side.

\textbf{WHAM!}

The rib that had been cracked in his first encounter with Black Manta a few nights ago was now completely broken off from the rest of his ribcage, and floating around above his organs.

\textbf{WHAM!}

So was the one underneath it.

\textbf{WHAM!}

Nightwing couldn’t breathe.

He knew exactly what had just happened.

Black Manta had driven one of those floating ribs into Nightwing’s right lung, which was now in the process of collapsing.

Nightwing’s mouth opened and closed, nothing coming in or going out, as Black Manta examined him.

“Got something in your throat?” he asked.

Black Manta slapped Nightwing’s chest three times in rapid succession.

The blood that had been filling Nightwing’s lung now emerged in a thick stream out of his mouth, spattering onto the marble floor.

Nightwing hunched over, coughing, letting it all out.

And Black Manta laughed.

“Man,” he said. “Sucks when it goes down the wrong pipe, huh?”

Black Manta let go of Nightwing’s wrist and unleashed a right hook that broke his jaw.

\underline{Car two…}

Only five goons left.

Three women and two men.
And Batman needed to conserve his strength however he could, but he didn’t see any other way past this besides savagery.

He brought up his gauntlets and slammed the knuckles of each hand together.

The six serrations on his gauntlet, three on the left and three on the right, ejected. They flew in an arc in front of him, and embedded themselves in the three women who were charging him. They stopped and screamed.

Batman needed to act fast.

He took the one on the right first. He unloaded a right cross into her chin, which spun her around. From there, he took her head in both hands. Batman drove a knee into her back to unbalance her, and then spiked her head onto the floor of the subway car.

From there, Batman kicked out with his right foot, throwing the one in the middle off balance, making her fall forward into the elbow he was bringing up. It caught her in the temple and shut her down.

Then he whirled, bringing his left foot up into the final henchwoman’s face, hitting the sweet spot right there on the tip of the chin. Her head slammed into the window of the car, and she slid down as though she were Wile E. Coyote after he had flung himself into the side of a rock face trying to catch the Road Runner.

He turned his attention to the final two henchmen. They both had their guns drawn… but neither fired.

They were terrified.

Batman decided to use this to his advantage.

“You know I’ll win,” he said. “I made it through everyone else, and I’ll make it through you. Give me your guns, and step to the other side of the car.”

The two henchmen stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, before the one on the left turned to the one on the right.

“That… That sounds good to me.”

The one on the right nodded, and held his gun out to Batman. The one on the left did the same. They walked past him, as Batman opened the door to the last car, and walked through.

He chucked the guns onto the tracks before he destroyed the hitch connecting the two cars.

Batgirl thanked God she was wearing leather gloves.

She thanked God her leather jacket was zipped all the way up.

And she thanked God, even if it was just in this one particular instance, that she couldn’t feel anything from the waist down, because the only thing protecting her from where her hacket ended to where her knee-high boots began, was the thin denim layer provided by her skinny jeans. She knew--she just knew--that crawling through all that broken glass had left a trail of rusty blood on the carpet behind her.
She found Zatanna in the third room down, and even with the pain in her shoulder, even haunted by the specter of the blood she had to have been losing, even terrified by the fact that Black Manta might be slaughtering the man she loved at that very moment, Batgirl still found it within her to gasp at what she saw.

Zatanna was skeletal. There was no other word for it. Her teeth extended from an open, drooling mouth. The collar of the loose Blackwell Academy t-shirt she was wearing had drooped down past her protruding collarbone to the second rib of her chest. Her cheeks were deflated. Her blue eyes were sunken deep into her skull.

Batgirl crawled toward the wheelchair in which Zatanna sat as fast as she could, letting out low, pained moans as she dragged her bad shoulder on the ground.

She made her way around to the back of the wheelchair, and Batgirl saw that she had, indeed, left a streak of grimy blood behind her.

I’ll think about that later.

Batgirl reached up for the targeting system in the pouch at the rear of the wheelchair, and removed it, bringing it down to the floor on her eye level.

She examined the surface of the touchscreen, looking for some point of ingress where she could use her skills, when she glanced at the corner of the device, and was dumbfounded by what she saw.

Batgirl was under the impression that this targeting system was a LexCorp prototype, and prototypes, by and large, were not engineered or coded for ease of use. They were, after all, supposed to be handled by professionals, and idiot-proofing came later in the Research and Development process.

Nevertheless, there was a small circular icon in the lower left-hand corner of the touchscreen, right next to the map of Gotham City that tracked everyone’s pulse that simply said:

“Off.”

Batgirl stared at it a little bit more, and her thought was so loud that she didn’t even hear it come out of her mouth.

“I crawled… through broken glass… to press a Goddamn off switch?”

She shook her head, and pressed the icon.

Though the lives of the people in these subway tunnels were very much in the gravest of doubt, with the press of a button, Batgirl had just saved the lives of all nine-point-two million people on the surface of Gotham City.

Batgirl threw the targeting system off to the side.

This still left the problem of Zatanna. She was still hooked to the Mad Hatter’s porkpie hat that was controlling her mind. With no one giving her orders at the moment, Zatanna was just sitting there.

Batgirl reached up, actually having to put her weight on her bad shoulder to do so. Her fingers found their way around one of the handles of the wheelchair, and with the considerable might of her one good arm, she yanked down.

Zatanna fell backwards to the floor, the porkpie hat tumbling off of her head as she made impact.
She groaned, and Batgirl tried to get through to her.

“Hey,” Batgirl said. “Listen to me, alright? You’ve been under mind control for God knows how long, and you’re very weak. Uh… Say something backwards like you do, I don’t know what, but just do it fast!”

Batman stood on the small platform that led to the final car, nothing behind him tracks and darkness.

He wiped his face. Blood and sweat came off on his gauntlet.

Batman felt spent. He had fought through so many people in the past God knows how long that he didn’t even bother counting them.

He stared at the door in front of him.

Batman took a deep breath.

And another.

And another.

And on the fourth, he yanked the door to the car open, and--

**BANG!**

The bullet caught Batman in the stomach. He lurched back and almost fell off the car to the tracks below, but he reached out and grabbed the side of the doorway. He pulled with all of his strength, and wound up falling flat on his face in the interior of the train car.

He looked up.

There was only one person inside. Standing there in a gray tailored suit, smoking gun in one hand and a smart phone in the other, was Hamilton Hill.

Hill’s face was blank as he studied the prone Batman.

“Hi,” he said. “Aside from the fact that you got me impeached and tried to have me thrown in prison, we haven’t been formally introduced. My name’s Hamilton Hill, and in spite of everything, I’m a really big fan.”

Batman got on all fours, and brought his cowl down to the floor of the car to try to see how his bullet wound looked.

No blood.

The armor must have caught it.

So even though it hurt like Hell, he was going to be fine.

Batman thought Hill didn’t need to know this.

He looked up at Hill.

“I’m a fan,” Hill said, “because I was The Undying for a second or two. I know what being someone like you takes. Big masked symbol and all that. So I have to ask…”
Hill crouched down. Too far away for Batman to actually do anything.

“What did you give up? To be Batman, I mean. Everybody’s gotta give up something to do what you do… It was happiness, wasn’t it? The price you pay for putting that cape on every night is that you have to be just… just a miserable prick. C’mon, don’t be shy.”

Batman looked at Hill… and smiled.

“This is the happiest I’ve been in almost thirty years,” Batman said. “Just so long as we’re being honest with each other.”

Everything hurt.

She was so tired, in so much pain, that she couldn’t even pluck the shards of broken beer bottle out of her face.

The only sounds she could hear, beyond her own breathing, were the sounds of metal hands punching meat, and blood spattering on the floor.

From what she could hear, Catwoman thought that Nightwing didn’t even have it in him to groan in pain anymore.

Her stomach, which had buzzed since the first time Black Manta struck her there, was now on the verge of eruption.

And she was so cold.

Catwoman summoned everything she had to get on her hands and knees. With her eyes still closed, she opened her mouth and vomited.

It was mostly blood, save for the stray bit of partially digested waffle, and the front teeth that Black Manta had punched down her throat.

Even here, at the end of all things, Catwoman still had enough vanity and esteem for herself within her to make sure that when she fell, she fell on her side, so that she didn’t land in the now-former contents of her own stomach.

Her impact with the marble floor sent a jolt of pain all throughout her body that made her lock up.

The monotony of raining blows and falling blood finally ended with a loud SNAP! and Nightwing finally groaning in pain.

A body landed right next to her, and Catwoman slowly opened her eyes.

Nightwing’s face was swollen and doused in blood. His jaw was listing off to the right. His nose was smashed flat to the side of his right cheek, and where his nose used to be, a thin fin of smashed cartilage emerged from the flatness like a pathetic rhino horn.

That wasn’t the worst of it.

His left leg below the knee was bent like a checkmark. There was a jagged edge of bone protruding from the shattered kevlar of his armor.

Nightwing couldn’t stand.
If Nightwing couldn’t stand, Nightwing couldn’t fight.

And if Nightwing couldn’t fight, Nightwing was going to die.

Just like she was.

He seemed to know it. He slowly raised his arm and put his finger to his ear. He spoke in a voice that was weak and watery.

“B--Babs?... Honey?... I… I’d really like to hear your voice right now.”

Catwoman closed her eyes again, and waited.

For what, she didn’t know.

But she didn’t have to wait long.

She heard a voice calling to her clearly, speaking in a gruff voice that she had heard just a short time ago.

“I’ve told you more times than I can count that you’re a good person with a lot to offer the world. Not to control you or manipulate you, but because it’s the truth. And you keep proving me right, but you keep telling me I’m wrong.”

And Catwoman’s own thoughts arose in protest.

I am right. You are wrong. You threw me at a psycho in power armor and hoped for the best, and now here I am dead, or the closest thing to it. I don’t have a last full measure to give. I’m giving up. I’m staying right here on this floor.

Then a short-lived nothing, before another batch of words came, this time garbled after having been buried in years.

“We’re big. We’re ostentatious. We draw fire. So the people down there never come to harm. The brightest and the bravest of us die, so the lowest and the meanest of them can live. We bury our own so they can go home at night.”

And again, Catwoman’s thought shook off their rust and fought back.

That’s them. That’s you. That’s not me. This entire city is going to go up in flames because you stupidly bet on a professional thief. Blow your hero act out your well-sculpted ass and leave me alone to die, Sailor.

Nothing for a moment. But she felt the rumble of her own memories within her painfully throbbing head. What was coming next was going to be big.

It came to her clearly, not just in sound, but in vivid and clear sight. Sitting on a couch in a tiny apartment, head resting on her mom’s shoulder, wearing a pair of jeans and the worn-out Care Bears t-shirt that her parents got her from Goodwill. Watching TV, a rapidly-thinning VHS tape that they had also bought from Goodwill spooling from reel to reel in the VCR beneath it.

One about wooden puppet trying to become a real boy, and the little bug on his shoulder telling him to straighten up and fly right.

And that little bug said, in a voice clear as a bell…
“Always Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide.”

And Catwoman… really couldn’t argue with that.

Alright. I’ll get up.

She summoned her will, fought through the pain, and turned over as she opened her eyes. She slowly got to all fours, and sent a bolt of soreness and pain through her arms as she got to her feet.

Catwoman turned around at a glacial pace, and saw Black Manta leaning against the wall, arms folded over the dent in the front of his armor.

“Hello there,” he said.

Catwoman just stared at him.

“You’re dying,” Black Manta said. “It was that first punch to the gut, wasn’t it? Ruptured your stomach, I bet. Maybe opened up your intestines? I noticed you’ve been getting paler and paler, slower and slower. I figure you have… ninety minutes before you bleed to death on the inside. Two hours if you’re lucky. But then again, if you met me at all, you haven’t had a lucky life.”

Black Manta unfolded his arms, and pushed himself off the wall so he stood up straight.

“Thing about cats is, when they’re dying, they try to hide. Try to keep their suffering their own problem.”

He took a step forward.

“Go hide, Selina. Die off in peace.”

Black Manta craned his neck so that the dim eyes of his helmet set on Nightwing.

“I’ll have my little fun with One Direction over there, give him that Columbian Necktie I told him he had coming to him, and I’ll just sit and wait. Won’t lay another finger on you. And if whatever passes for a God in this shitty universe decides he likes you enough, then you’ll bleed out before your boyfriend in the Batsuit comes back and I drown him in a pool of his own guts.”

Black Manta folded his arms again. “You can have two hours of your life, or two seconds of my respect. You can’t have both.”

Her head shook as she looked down at Nightwing, blood from the multiple lacerations on her face spattering on the front of her Catsuit, and dripping onto the floor.

The poor bastard.

Catwoman blinked.

And as she had her eyes closed during this infinitesimal fraction of time, something the size of a universe made itself known to her.

The truth.

At long last.

She was standing at death’s door no matter what she did, and all the anger and self-pity she was capable of feeling at this moment vanished during that blink.
Why should she be angry?

Why should she feel sorry for herself?

She spent all thirty-five years of her life getting here. The sorrow, the beatings she took, the jail time she served, the pain, the loneliness, the waiting, all transpired so she could bring herself here to this old tunnel, so she could stand over a broken and doomed superhero and find the truth at the end of everything.

How much of the life of Selina Kyle had been devoted to self-deception? How many times had she tried to be a good person? How many times had she failed? How many times had she laughed? Played it off? Said ‘I meant to do that’ to all of her failures?

How much of the life of Selina Kyle had been spent waging a successful one woman war against who she was terrified to know she was? And why? So she could place herself in the same easy slots, give herself the same easy labels she gave everyone else?

Selina Kyle was going to die in this tunnel.

It was too late to lie to herself.

And so the blink ended, and once again, her eyes rested on Nightwing.

The poor bastard.

The guy lying there, at the same death’s door she was standing in, hoping against hope that this Babs--Batgirl, most likely--would call him back on his earpiece. So he could hear the voice of the woman he loved before Black Manta yanked his tongue through a ragged hole in his throat, and sent him off to The Great Crossfit Class In The Sky.

Catwoman could let Black Manta slice him to pieces while she crawled off and died.

Or she could stand between them, shielding Nightwing from harm… and then get killed in two seconds, and then Black Manta would slice him to pieces anyway.

But that was two more seconds he got to live.

That was two more seconds of hoping Babs would call him back.

And who knows? Maybe she would.

Catwoman asked herself what her own life was against that.

What her own life was against hope.

And she had an answer.

As she beheld Nightwing on the floor, drenched in blood, gasping for air, one of the great mysteries of life was answered for her.

This is why he does it. This is why he goes out there every night.

Catwoman looked down at the floor and shuffled her feet to get where she was going, until she stood between Black Manta and Nightwing.

And then she looked at the man in the armor.
She struggled to stay on her feet. She struggled to stop shaking. She struggled to even keep her eyes open.

But the steel in her face? That took no effort at all.

It was just who she was. Finally and at long last, she found that out.

Catwoman took Black Manta’s measure. Her tongue gingerly worked its way around a mouth that had a few less teeth in it than she was used to, and she spoke what she knew were the final words she would ever say in this life.

“You… Go… Through… Me…”

Black Manta cocked his helmet to one side. He raised his right arm, and that retractable blade emerged from his wrist.

“Respect it is.”

Batgirl saw Zatanna’s eyes come into a little better focus. Her lips quivered as she tried to speak.

“E...E...viv...er…”

“Yeah,” Batgirl said, and he reached out for Zatanna’s hand. “Yeah, that’s it. Just concentrate. I have faith in you.”

Zatanna took a couple more shallow breaths, until she held in the third, and closed her eyes tight.

“Eviver.”

Zatanna was bathed in a gold light so bright that Batgirl had to shut her eyes. When she reopened them, Zatanna was still lying on the floor, but her cheeks had regained their regular plumpness. The clumps of her hair that had fallen out had grown back. Her skeletal frame had reverted to the state it had been in before she had been abducted, all curve and swell. And her eyes were clear.

She stood up, her bare feet mere inches away from Batgirl’s trail of blood.

“I don’t know how effective something like that is,” the newly revived Zatanna said. “I should, uh… I should really go to the hospital after this.”

Batgirl wanted to tell her what she missed. To what extent she’d been bent to nefarious aims. But… there was one thing that overrode any rational thought right now.

“You… own sweatpants?”

Zatanna looked down at herself, and then back at Batgirl. The expression on her face was of one talking to someone who had just admitted that they used toilet water to mop their floors.

“Babs, do you seriously think I sit around my apartment in my work clothes? Speaking of which…”

Zatanna held her hands out in front of her and said:

“Krow Sehtolc.”

It was like someone had poured Zatanna’s work attire onto her from the bottom. Her sweatpants were replaced with black knee-high boots and gray nylons that led up to a pair of black lycra briefs.
Her Blackwell Academy t-shirt was replaced with a white waistcoat, white tuxedo shirt, white bowtie, and an old-time tuxedo jacket with tails that had a white carnation in the left lapel. Her hands were covered with white silk gloves.

And atop her head appeared a black top hat.

To hear Zatanna herself tell it, she was a magician who wanted to dress like her own assistant.

“There,” Zatanna said as she adjusted the cuffs of her jacket. “Much better.”

“Where do your old clothes go, though?” Batgirl asked.


A shimmer of transparent energy appeared around her head as she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, those blue eyes were wide with horror and fear.

She looked down at Batgirl. She opened her mouth, and then closed it again, repeating once again, trying to find the words.

Until finally, Zatanna threw up her hands.

“Aw, screw it, we don’t have time right now.”

Zatanna walked to Batgirl, knelt down, and put her hand on the small of Batgirl’s back.

Batgirl’s eyes went wide.

She knew what was coming.

“Wait, don--”

“Leah dna dnem.”

Batgirl shuddered as a jolt of… something … went through her entire body. It wasn’t entirely unpleasant, but it just… Batgirl didn’t know what.

“Oh my God,” she said.

She knew what had just happened.

Batgirl… wiggled her toes.

Her breath escaped her body. She curled her legs beneath her. There were no pins and needles, no soreness, no getting used to something she had gone so long without. It seemed Zatanna’s spell had taken cared of all of that for her.

For the first time in four years, Barbara Gordon stood on her own two feet.

She looked down at her legs, and saw that her jeans had holes in them. At first she couldn’t understand why, but then she remembered that she had crawled through broken glass to get into this room. She looked at the carpet and saw that the blood she had left on the carpet had vanished, presumably put back into her body.

So struck with emotion was she, that she hadn’t noticed her shoulder had popped back into its
Batgirl lifted up her shirt and looked at her stomach. There was no surgery scar. No bullet wound from The Joker. Just pale skin stretched over abdominal muscles threatening to go to washboard status.

*Wait... No surgery scar... Did my appendix just grow back?*

She dropped the front of her shirt, closed her eyes, and let the gravity of the situation fall on her.

Once it had, Batgirl looked at Zatanna.

And it was a look of the utmost, bone-deep betrayal.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Zatanna said, trying to put some stank on her voice while the rest of her body tried to cringe away. “Black Manta is going to murder Nightwing and Catwoman unless we get down there and do something!”

Batgirl’s anger flared within her. “*You don’t-*”

Then she stopped.

A voice, thin and hindered by something in its lungs, but nonetheless as familiar as the back of her own hand, came into the ears of her cowl.

“B--Babs?” Nightwing asked. “Honey?... I’d *really* like to hear your voice right now.”

Batgirl could feel herself going pale. She could feel her anger filing itself away, to be dealt with later.

She looked at Zatanna, who asked her a very important question.

“You still remember how to kick people, right?”
Chapter 28: Zatanna Ex Machina

“Bullshit,” Hill said, standing over the prone Batman. He could see Hill’s eyes widen. His lips draw back to reveal his teeth.

“No one… No one puts on a mask and walks away clean,” Hill said. “In order to give Gotham City what it had coming to it, I had to murder my own son with this pistol. I needed to prove to myself I could do it. Everything I loved in this life had to burn!”

He brandished the pistol in his hand at Batman.

“I have suffered to put things back in balance,” Hill said. “I had to suffer to become who I needed to be this whole time.”

Batman had has right hand over an imaginary gunshot wound on his stomach, faking an injury to lull Hill into a false sense of security. But even taking this into mind, Batman couldn’t help sneering at Hill.

“Hill, no one told you to shoot your son,” Batman said. “No one told you to take this city hostage. No one even told you to take the mob money that got this whole thing started. I’ve fought every kind of scum this place has to offer, from costumed psychos, to street muggers, to corporate fiends, to politicians. And the one thing I learned is that the worst people, the scum that cause nightmares… never suffered at all. You’ve been blathering like an idiot, trying to tell me how alike we are just because we both wear masks. But you’re more alien to me than even the aliens I’ve met.”

“You don’t think I’ve suffered?”

“I think you brought it on yourself,” Batman said. “You’re entitled, Hill. You’re crooked, and this is the tantrum you threw when nine million people called you on it.”

This sole subway car smashed through something loud enough for both men to start. They had rushed through a flimsy wooden barrier at the end of the tunnel, and were now on a set of old abandoned tracks leading through the long-forgotten Gotham Stockyards on the mainland.

The view from the car, looking at the huddled clumps of old tall buildings in the East End, was breathtaking in its odd way, made all the more so by the fact that, in the time Batman had been down in that tunnel, the clouds had parted, and the sun was now shining upon Gotham City. Daylight flooded the subway car.

Hill looked at him and smiled.

“The guy who said sunlight was the best disinfectant,” Hill said. “That guy was on to something. You’ve terrified this city for over ten years now, but now you’re lying on the floor in the harsh light of day, and you’re not scary at all. You’re sad.”

Hill squatted down to get to Batman’s eye level.

“Let me guess. The city did you dirty, you put on this suit to get revenge, and you have the gall to tell me we’re not alike. At least I admit it.”

“I admit I’m trying to leave that behind.”

Zatanna Ex Machina
Hill grinned. “As I recall, you tried walking away from it for three years, and all I had to do was work my magic, and here you are again.”

“No,” Batman said. “Not The Bat. The revenge. The pain.”

“That’s all either of us are,” Hill said. “You leave that behind, what’s left? What do you replace it with?”

Batman dropped his gunshot victim act for a second. Just long enough to glare at Hill and tell him the truth.

“A friend of mine in Metropolis is a big fan of hope,” Batman said. “I’m thinking I might start there.”

Catwoman swung weakly and slowly at Black Manta, almost falling over to do it, sending thick spatters of her own blood to the marble floor. Black Manta didn’t so much dodge the swing, as gingerly step aside, and grabbed Catwoman by the throat.

She stared into the red lights in his helmet that worked as eyes. Catwoman wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of looking scared.

Black Manta raised the blade extending from his wrist, and brought it an inch away from her nose.

His voice was still an electronic rumble. “This won’t hurt a--”

**BOOM!**

The terminal shook. Dust and white plaster fell on them both. Black Manta retracted his blade.

And they both looked up.

There was a massive hole in in one of the arches beneath the vaulted ceiling. Smoke and dust obscured what lay beyond.

And from that hole emerged a figure, vaulting from a running jump. The figure descended into the terminal toward them.

She was wearing knee-high boots, skinny jeans with fresh holes in the thighs, a purple leather jacket unzipped over a forest green tank top.

And a Batcowl over long red hair.

Catwoman’s thoughts were faster than her mouth.

_Batgirl._

The vigilante’s feet clanged off the top of Black Manta’s helmet, and jostled him just enough to let Catwoman go. She fell, and a fresh new onset of pain and soreness caused her to lock up on the floor.

She opened her eyes and saw that Nightwing was on his elbow, unblinking, staring at the scene, mesmerised by what he saw.

As Batgirl was ducking and running from Black Manta, a shimmering silver portal opened behind Catwoman and Nightwing, and Zatanna, familiar from her billboards and TV specials, emerged.
She saw the two of them, and immediately cringed.

“Uhhhhoooh my God,” Zatanna said, holding her stomach. “What did he--Oh, ewwwww. You look like you walked out of a Hellraiser movie.”

She gulped. “Uh.. Y’know what? Never mind. Here.”

Zatanna held out her hands. Without being told, Catwoman and Nightwing put their hands in hers.

She closed her eyes, and:

“Laeh dna dnem.”

Catwoman didn’t know what had just happened, but her first instinct was to let off a massive sneeze.

She sneezed because her teeth had grown back, and that messed with her sinuses.

The shards of broken beer bottle that had been lodged in her face painlessly extruded themselves, and tinkled lightly onto the marble floor

Her ruptured stomach felt... fine. She didn’t feel any pain. She didn’t even feel particularly tired. She looked around her. All the blood that had been everywhere was now gone. The only evidence that anything had happened to her at all were the pale globs of undigested waffle on the floor.

She lightly rubbed her face, pulled her hand away, and there was nothing here.

*If she put my blood back in my body, I hope she cleaned it. This place is filthy.*

As they got to their feet, she looked over at Nightwing, who was still staring at Batgirl, his freshly mended jaw agape, his blue eyes gawking from a clean, blood-free face.

“It’s just Batgirl,” Catwoman said. “She’s out of retirement, that’s all.”

“Uhhhh,’ Zatanna said. “She was in a wheelchair until, like, thirty seconds ago.”

Catwoman looked at Zatanna, down at herself, and back to Zatanna.

“Oh, you’re good.”

Catwoman heard the **ZZZZZT** of charging electricity and looked back at the fight at hand. Batgirl had ducked behind Black Manta and jammed an electric Batarang into the wires of his jetpack that Poison Ivy’s gunk had exposed.

*I hope Batgirl thanks me for softening him up for her.*

“We should do something,” Nightwing said.

“Both of you stand back,” said Zatanna. “I’m waiting for my moment.”

The charge of the electric Batarang had worn off. Batgirl unleashed a missile dropkick to the dent on the front of Black Manta’s armor.

The first problem was that this dropkick did not knock Black Manta down.

The second problem was that the missile dropkick is a move that knocks the person delivering it onto their back.
Black Manta stepped on Batgirl’s stomach to keep her in place. His blade extended from his right wrist. He aimed, and brought it down.

“Etaroireted.”

Black Manta’s blade stopped an inch from Batgirl’s face.

A great bloom of hideous rust spread from the tip of the blade, infecting its way backward. The last three inches of the blade snapped off, and the soft rusty thing that it had become harmlessly booped the nose of Batgirl’s cowl.

The rust spread from all the joints of his armor. From the knees, going up. From the shoulders going down.

Black Manta struggled to stand straight up again, and turned to Catwoman, Nightwing, and Zatanna. He struggled even further to slide a panel of armor back on the inside of his left forearm revealing a series of buttons.

He pressed the blue one in the middle.

It was the ejection protocol.

The back of the armor split open, and its rusty husk fell to the floor. David Hyde ejected from the armor about eight feet in the air as the rest of his armor crumbled into dirty brown scrap, that vaunted and terrifying helmet of his splitting in two upon contact with the floor.

And Hyde came down on Zatanna, knocking her to the ground and the hat off her head, and wrapping his hands around her throat. His eyes were wild, and his mouth was turned down in fury.

“YOU DESTROYED MY ARMOR, YOU BITCH!”

Three separate sets of hands reached down and grabbed Hyde by the shoulders. They brought him up, yanking him off of the prone Zatanna, who curled up, coughing.

Hyde staggered back, reared back to face his assailants, and stopped, his face a storm of confusion.

Right, Catwoman thought. He didn’t know Zatanna patched us up. This must be a nasty shock to him.

Two sets of footsteps sounded off on either side of her.

Batgirl was on her left, yanking off her leather jacket and throwing it to the ground, revealing pale arms with impressively cultivated lean muscles. She clenched her fists and struck her pose.

Nightwing was on her right. He got out his one remaining escrima stick, and started flipping it in his hand.

Catwoman looked at David Hyde, standing there in his wetsuit in front of them. She ran her tongue along the top row of her freshly reinstalled teeth, and smiled wide.

“Ready for round two, asshole?”

Hill turned and looked out the window of the subway car at the formidable skyline of Gotham City.

“In 1840,” Hill said, “Judge Solomon Wayne and an architect named Cyrus Pinkney laid down their
plans for a place called Gotham City. Pinkney was a horrifying white supremacist, even by the standards of the time. He said his designs were supposed to be ‘a bulwark against godlessness,’ which pretty much just means Native Americans in old-timey speak. Pinkney was the one who put the gargoyles everywhere. Put in rounded edges to confuse evil spirits, and thick walls to keep in virtue.”

He looked at Batman before he looked back at the city.

“It wasn’t virtue he kept in. It was every last bit of awful that could possibly be spat from the soil. Guys like you. Guys like me.”

Hill held his phone out in front of him.

“I push a button,” Hill said, “and Gotham goes up in flame.”

Batman fixed him with his gaze.

“We deserve it,” Hill said. “A hundred and eighty years was a good run, anyway.”

A steady stream of thoughts marched legibly through Batman’s head.

_They did it._

_Dick, Selina, and Barbara saved Zatanna. They stopped Black Manta._

_I don’t have to hope._

_I just know._

Hill looked at Batman and grinned.

“Everything you love in this life… has to burn.”

And with that, Hill pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

Hill was most acutely aware of the nothing happening, as Batman stubbornly refused to burst in green flame.

He pressed the button again. And again. The nothing still kept happening. He looked to the city skyline, where nothing was also happening. No green flames. No burnt popcorn smell that one could smell along the eastern seaboard.

Hill’s face contorted into rage and inconsolability. His eyes bulged, his nostrils flared, his lips peeled back from his teeth.

“How?” Hill asked Batman. “HOW?”

Batman didn’t even bother to dignify Hill with a response.

The hand that was on his stomach, selling a gunshot wound that wasn’t there, shifted down to his utility belt.

The third and final smoke pellet in hand, Batman flung it directly at Hill’s feet.
Nightwing exploded into a run, and caught Hyde high in the chest with a running kick he didn’t appear to be ready for. Hyde fell back and careened into the wall.

He came in for a punch, and Hyde managed to duck it. He dodged to the left…and ran right into Batgirl.

Batgirl threw a left hook, and Hyde’s face got rocked for his troubles. Catwoman cringed inwardly.

_Dear Lord, she must have been blasting those arms while she was in that wheelchair._

Batgirl threw another, but the groggy Hyde managed to duck it. He wasn’t in in his armor anymore, so he could throw kicks now.

A right side kick caught Batgirl in the midsection, knocking her to the marble floor. Hyde looked to his right, and saw a length of steel rebar sticking out of the pillar that he had almost sundered when crashing into it earlier.

He yanked it out of the pillar, raised it high over his head, and…

_“Loop eldoon.”_

..brought it down on Batgirl’s chest, only for it to snap in half, as Zatanna had turned this length of steel rebar into a pink foam pool noodle.

Hyde looked at the remains of the weapon that he had once had in his hands, and that’s when Catwoman leaped over Batgirl, and drove a shoulder into his chest.

He dropped to the floor. Catwoman charged after him, bringing her feet down in aggressive stomps that Hyde kept dodging by backing up.

Hyde was cornered into the wall. Catwoman brought her foot up, and Hyde pivoted to sweep Catwoman’s leg out from under her. She hit the floor hard, and Hyde tried to line up his own kick to her head while they were both on the floor, which she dodged by log rolling out of the way.

They were both so far apart now, that they had time to regroup and get to their feet. They charged one another.

Hyde threw out a left a left that Catwoman dodged by leaning back, as though she were going under a limbo bar.

She contorted to get to a standing position, and as she did so, that’s when the claws came out.

Catwoman swung with her right hand, and caught Hyde across the front of his face. He recoiled, screaming, and Catwoman noticed that her horizontal slashes cross-hatched with the three vertical cuts that Aquaman had given him years before.

She started laughing.

_“Holy shit! I can play Tic-Tac-Toe on your face!”_
“Hamilton Hill.”

Hill froze, and then stood up straight, trying to get his head above the smoke.

“You have threatened my city. You have threatened the people I care about. You have threatened the people who care about me.”

Hill whirled around and aimed his pistol at eye level, trying to peer through the thinning smoke.

“So tell me, Hill. Does that make me less dangerous… or more?”

Hill laughed.

“Don’t pull that shit with me, you freak,” Hill said. “Something put you in that armor. Something terrible. That pain is all you are. It’s all any of us are. And you’re telling me you’re gonna try and put on your happy face? You’re gonna revel in your own misery, and you’re gonna do it alone, because that what makes us strong! Walk away from it, and you’re weakening yourself on purpose. Walk away, and you lose your edge. Walk away from it... and you’re a fool!”

Batman rose above the chest-high line of smoke, behind Hill’s back. He towered above him, head bent down, passing judgement on a wayward soul.

“No.”

Hill turned around and saw him, saw the protector of Gotham, in all his resplendence.

And Hamilton Hill knew fear.

Hill dropped his gun. He almost hunched over in his cowardice as he tried to back away. He beheld the figure that had spawned urban legends for more than a decade with wide eyes and a quivering lip. The thing that was not quite human. The vengeful specter that stalked Gotham City by night, laying low the wicked and punishing the guilty. Against iniquity and danger, against death and evil, stood a Dark Knight.

And the Dark Knight surveyed the pathetic man cowering before him. He lowered his head. A sneer spread across his bloody face. And he said:

“I’m Batman.”

THWACK!

The right hook delivered to the side of Hamilton Hill’s head almost knocked him clean out of his shoes. If the punch itself didn’t knock him out, his head colliding with the window of the train car certainly would have.

Hill fell beneath the line of rapidly thinning smoke.

Batman turned and saw the control panel near the front of the car. He walked to it and turned it off, bringing the train to a slow halt.

He pushed a few buttons on his gauntlet. The Batpod that he had abandoned in the tunnel had pistons that could bring it up from an overturned position, as well as ancillary wheels in the hubs that could keep it up right for autopilot purposes.

Batman brought the Batpod up and set a course for his present position.
He wasn’t about to walk all the way back to the terminal lugging Hill over his shoulder.

Was David Hyde a gifted fighter outside of his Black Manta armor?

Yes, he was.

Was David Hyde gifted enough to fight Catwoman, Nightwing, and Batgirl with Zatanna providing support from the rear without his armor and have any hope of success?

He tried to be. It wasn’t that Hyde wasn’t an agile and nimble warrior. It’s that Catwoman, Nightwing and Batgirl were faster.

Batgirl kicked Hyde in the stomach, knocking him backward into Nightwing.

Nightwing whacked Hyde in the back of the head with his Escrima stick, which sent him stumbling into Catwoman.

And Catwoman held up the bloody, battered, and beaten David Hyde by his face.

“If you see Talia,” Catwoman said. “...Actually, y’know what? Just do this.”

Catwoman kicked Hyde in the balls. He groaned in agony.

“Trust me,” Catwoman said. “She’ll know it’s from me.”

Catwoman brought her head down into the bridge of Hyde’s nose. As he fell unconscious to the floor, she saw his eyes roll into the back of his head.

And her first thought was not the sense of exultant satisfaction that she thought it would be.

No, her first thought was that headbutts really hurt, and she shouldn’t try them anymore.

Batgirl stood over the unconscious David Hyde. Catwoman flanked her on the right. Nightwing to her left.

“Is it over?” Batgirl asked.

Catwoman, rubbing the sore spot on her forehead, said “It’s over.”

Batgirl sighed. “Good,” she said after a moment. “First thing’s first.”

She turned to her left, and set her eyes upon Nightwing. She took his face in her hands, and kissed him. It was long, but still too short. Gentle, but still with the undercurrent of the things she was trying to avoid thinking about.

And no one said a word.

When she broke the kiss, she looked in his eyes.

Please don’t say something stupid, Batgirl thought. Please don’t say it’s glad to have me back.

Please don’t tell me I haven’t lost a step. Because I never went anywhere. And telling me I haven’t lost a step is a crappy thing to say to someone who was in a wheelchair for a good chunk of her life.

But Nightwing just smiled a dreamy smile, and said “Well, then.”
And Batgirl smiled in turn.

*You pass, Boy Wonder.*

Her smile faded.

“Second thing’s second,” she said.

And Batgirl turned to Zatanna.

She had every intention of telling her how she felt. She had every intention of being calm and rational. Zatanna did save her boyfriend’s life, and she was, after all, only trying to help, and Batgirl was trying not to lose sight of that.

But Zatanna had her hands behind her back. Her eyebrows were raised. A smile was beginning to form on her full lips.

*She’s expecting a Thank You.*

Noticing this, a great swell of fury blossomed within Batgirl.

Not in her stomach, where her anger usually dwelt.

This time it was in her fist.

Batgirl reared back, and decked Zatanna in the face.

Zatanna grunted as she fell, her top hat zooming off of her skull. She landed in a heap.

Batgirl could sense Catwoman and Nightwing recoiling at the sight.

“Holy shit,” Catwoman said.

Zatanna, on the ground, rubbed her face and looked at Batgirl.

“What the hell?”

“You could have done anything,” Batgirl said, letting her rage take her. “You could have Black Manta into a cupcake. You could have given Catwoman and Nightwing armor of their own, but instead you decided to use my body without my fucking permission!”

Zatanna got to her feet. “I was only trying to--”

“You were only trying to help?” Batgirl asked. “What am I gonna tell my doctors, huh? Jesus Christ, what am I gonna tell my Dad? How am I gonna spin this in a way that doesn’t compromise my identity as Oracle?”

“Wait,” Catwoman said, “You’re Oracle, too?”

Nightwing folded his arms. “Uh, we might want to be quiet right now.”

“I told you, I told everyone else in the League that this wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want some cheat or a shortcut out of that chair that I could thank my position as a superhero for. And you did it anyway. Why? Because you wanted gratitude from someone you looked down on?”

“Barbara, that wasn’t what it was like *at all.*”
“Then what was it like?”

“Nightwing and Catwoman were dying, I couldn’t--”

Batgirl pointed at them while still keeping her eyes on Zatanna.

“They look okay to me! Seems like you solved that problem, and you didn’t need to turn my entire life upside down to do it!”

Batgirl stepped to her, unblinking, and brought her voice down to an intense rasp.

“Let me lay it out for you. Four years ago, The Joker wadded up my entire body and threw it at a problem he wanted to solve. At a point he was trying to make… And you just did it again.”

Zatanna almost turned pale at that. She turned her head slightly to look at Nightwing, silently begging for intervention.

Wrong move.

“Hey. Hey! You don’t get to look at my boyfriend and hope he tries to calm the crazy woman down. No one gets to tell me how I feel about this except me!”

And Zatanna just stared at her. As her face and her posture got sadder and sadder, Batgirl lost her patience.

“Just leave,” Batgirl said. “Go to the hospital like you said you were going to. I’m done talking to you.”

Zatanna opened her mouth to say something. Batgirl got right in her face.

“Get out, or get laid out.”

Zatanna closed her mouth. Downcast, she turned around and said “Latrop.”

A silver, shimmering portal opened in front of her. She stepped through, and the portal dissolved a second later.

A moment of silence passed, until Catwoman broke the ice.

“Thanks for the save in any case, though,” Catwoman said. “Manta was going to drive a blade through my face, so… You came in the nick.”

Batgirl took a deep breath, and said “You’re welcome, Selina.”

“So… So your name’s Barbara?”

Batgirl sighed. “So she screwed with my body and my identity. I swear to--”

“It’s cool,” Nightwing said. “She, uh… She knows who Bruce is.”

That… Batgirl was not expecting.

And as though he had been summoned by mere mention of his name, Batman himself pulled up on the tracks of the F Line. He was on the Batpod. With Hamilton Hill zip-tied and unconscious on the back.
Seeing him step off the bike. Seeing him stop and stare when he saw her standing--actually standing there, made something click within her.

*You son of a bitch...*

Batgirl held out a hand, and Batman stopped his advance.

“Did you do this?” Batgirl asked.

Batman cocked his head to the side, in so doing pouring kerosene on Batgirl’s rage.

“You don’t get to play dumb,” Batgirl said, almost spitting the words at him. “You’re the guy with the plan. You’re the guy who knows what’s going to happen before it happens. How much of your Goddamn prep time did it take to get me out of that chair?”

Batman opened his mouth to speak. Batgirl spoke faster, cutting him off.

“No,” she said. “You’re Batman. The only thing you like more than beating the shit out of bad guys is manipulating the people who care about you. You did it to Dick, you did it to the League, you did it to me. After three years, you’re wearing the cape again. You wanted an extra soldier for your mission, and the girl in the wheelchair just didn’t cut it anymore, is that it? I don’t even know why I’m surprised. This is you all over.”

She took a step forward.

“Did you put me in that Batmobile knowing Zatanna was going to get me out of that wheelchair?”

And immediately after the question left her mouth, she knew it wasn’t true.

Barbara Gordon wouldn’t admit this to anyone, and she had a hard time admitting it to herself, but while she respected what the Batman did and what he meant to Gotham City, and while, for the sake of Dick Grayson, she loved Bruce Wayne like family, as a person... she just didn’t like him very much.

Yet he stood there, on that subway platform, and while it wasn’t particularly pronounced, she noticed Batman almost... wither. As though he was seeing himself through her eyes, with her rage, and he had the common damned courtesy to feel shame.

She’d seen the look on Batman’s blood-spattered face before. It was the same kind Roy Harper had on his face from time to time.

Roy Harper went by Arsenal, formerly Red Arrow, and Speedy before that, as the sidekick to Green Arrow. When he was about sixteen, Roy had become addicted to heroin. The Green Arrow, Oliver Queen, didn’t handle it well, firing Roy and kicking him out. Roy got himself clean, and even had a kid, Lian, who he took good care of. Even though the two worked together on occasion, Roy never did forgive Oliver for abandoning him when he needed him the most.

She’d seen Roy and Dick talk about the old days, the Teen Titan days, whenever they got together. And while Dick went on one of his monologues, Roy got that look on his face. That no matter how he had improved from that time, no matter how better he got as a person, there was always something there to remind him of when he was at his weakest. As though the middle distance he stared into was the only refuge from the past’s long shadow.

“Barbara,” Batman said, “I had no idea this was going to happen. And I’m sorry that I’ve acted in a way that you would even think that.”
And she believed him.

An almost interminable moment of silence passed.

“You might need a hug right now,” Batman said. “I’m bad at this, so I thought I would tell you before I walked toward you.”

Batgirl squinted at him, and thought *I think you need one right now more than I do, and that’s saying something.*

She didn’t say it, though. She just nodded, and said “Alright, then.”

He walked toward her, and they embraced. She was about to break it, when--

*Beepbeepbeepbeepbeep…*

They stopped, and all four of them looked at the source of the noise.

David Hyde was back on his feet. He was standing above the remains of his Black Manta armor.

In his hand, he was holding what appeared to be a fuel cell from the now dessicated shell of his plate. It was roughly the size of a Q-Tip, and it was the cause of the beeping.

He overhand threw it at the four of them.

They didn’t have time to react.

There was nothing they could do.

---

However…

Immediately upon hearing the beeping, Batman pressed a small button on his utility belt.

He’d meant to press it as soon as he’d arrived at the terminal, but the drama with Batgirl stayed his hand.

The press of the button emitted a signal, and that signal was at a frequency so high that none of the people in the terminal had actually heard it.

But someone *had* heard it.

Through the mainland of Gotham City, past the city limits, and two miles beyond, one person heard the signal coming from Batman’s belt.

This one person knew what it meant.

And it is in the interest of clarity to note that this one person who heard the signal was neither a bird nor a plane.

---

In the time it took between Batman pressing the signal button on his belt, to the time that David Hyde’s explosive fuel cell was two feet away from Batman’s chest, Superman erupted from The Barricade outside the city, flew through the mainland, found the entrance at the Cauldron construction site, navigated the sewers and the tunnels, and caught the fuel cell in the nick of time.
He closed his hands around it, and stared at Hyde.

The fuel cell exploded within Superman’s hands, but instead of the loud boom meant to kill Batman, Catwoman, Batgirl and Nightwing, it instead erupted with a shrill PHEEET! as though someone had just let out a squeaky fart inside a church with breathtaking acoustics.

Superman opened his hands, and his palms were black with soot. He let the sandy remains of the fuel cell itself tumble to the marble floor.

He looked down his nose at Hyde.

“Manta,” Superman said, “please tell me you have something better than that. Don’t ruin my opinion of you.”

Just then, a bright streak of red light, wreathed in golden lightning, made its way through the tunnel, and stopped right next to Superman, before it coalesced into human form.

His name is Wally West.

And he’s the fastest man alive.

As The Flash folded his arms and stared down Hyde, a boiling silver portal materialized next to him. Figures emerged from it in single file.

John Constantine, muttering an incantation to keep the portal open.

Wonder Woman, sword drawn and shield bared.

Black Canary, cracking her knuckles.

Starfire, her hands glowing green with energy.

The portal closed behind them, and David Hyde was staring down a whopping ten superheroes ready to subdue him.

And to his credit, Hyde still wanted to fight.

However, as he put up his fists, a small speck of dust fell from above him.

This small speck of dust landed on his cheek.

And this small speck of dust knocked David Hyde out cold.

As the ten heroes jumped back in surprise, this speck of dust slowly fell to the floor, before it grew into a human size in the blink of an eye.

The Atom looked down at the unconscious David Hyde, and then looked at the assembled heroes with a beaming smile.

“Wow!” The Atom said. “I just knocked out Black Manta!”

Starfire clapped.

And then Starfire stopped clapping, when she realized she was the only one doing it.

“Flash,” Superman said, “If you’d be so kind.”
“Alright, alright,” The Flash said, and in a streak, he had taken both Hyde and Hill out of the tunnel and to the surface, no doubt back to The Barricade where they could be detained and processed.

And all that was left were ten people in an abandoned subway terminal, some of whom hadn’t talked to each other in years. Some of whom had never spoken to each other at all.

Now, an efficient narrative would simply end the chapter here, before picking up in the grand finale with the next most important thing that happened to the story’s subjects, instead of eavesdropping on their silly and quite frankly meaningless conversations.

But this narrative has been far from efficient up to this point, so why start now?

As they started to mingle, Constantine walked up to Batman.

“Where’s Zee?”

Batman said nothing, but looked at Batgirl.

“She portaled out to a hospital,” Batgirl said.

“Which one?”

“Don’t know.”

Constantine grunted, and turned around. Then he turned back again to look at Batman.

“Just tell me I was right,” Constantine said.

Batman said nothing.

Constantine grunted again. “Plonker.”

He snapped his fingers, and portaled out himself.

Starfire hugged Batgirl.

Once they broke the embrace, Starfire almost hugged Nightwing, but stopped herself. She put her hands behind her back and looked at the floor.

Batgirl rolled her eyes. “You don’t need my permission to hug your friend, Kory.”

Starfire beamed, and wrapped her arms around Nightwing. “I was so worried about you,”

“I appreciate that,” Nightwing said. “Thank you.”

It took a while, but Starfire finally stopped hugging her ex. She looked at Batgirl.

“You are walking again.”

“Yes,” Batgirl said with an edge to her voice. “Yes, I am.”

Starfire looked between the two of them.

“I am trying to be as supportive as I can of my friend, who is going out with a man I still have feelings for, but the worry I have that I am not being supportive enough in the face of my own
lingering emotions is giving me anxiety that makes me feel as though I am going to vomit.”

Now it was Nightwing’s turn to look at the floor. Batgirl just put her hand on Starfire’s arm and said “Kory, honey, you’re doing fine.”

“But I want you to be happy,” Starfire said. “I truly do. I also want Batman and Catwoman to be happy, even though Batman has somewhat of a distaste for me.”

Batgirl furrowed her brow. “That, uh… That came out of nowhere.”

“Oh, they have not told you?” Starfire asked.

She stopped and looked at Batman and Catwoman standing a few feet away. Nightwing and Batgirl followed suit.

“I can tell just by looking at them,” Starfire said softly. “They are going to do the sex at each other.”

At this, Batgirl snorted. “No, they’re not!”

“They did kiss on the bridge before you got here,” Nightwing said.

“And he slept with Talia a million years ago,” Batgirl said, “but they’ve never actually been official. Bruce Wayne is too committed a promise he made when he was eight to be any earthly good another human being in that capacity. He’ll tempt himself, and the he’ll… brood… about…”

Batgirl trailed off as she stared at them.

Something was off about the two of them. She didn’t know if it was the way they were standing there or what, but Batgirl caught a whiff of a great tectonic change in the shape of all things that, given this minor evidence, she was only dimly aware of.

She tried to listen to what they were saying.

“Now that I’m Batman’s girlfriend, can I still smoke weed?”

“As long as you don’t do it inside Wayne Manor, I really don’t care.”

Batgirl’s eyes widened. Her mouth hung open like a rusty hatch.

“My God,” she said. “They are going to do the sex at each other.”

“So… did you plan it?”

“Did I plan what?” Batman asked.

Catwoman looked around, before she leaned into him.

“Did you really not know Zatanna was gonna get Batgirl out of her wheelchair?” she asked. “I won’t tell anybody if you did.”

Now Batman looked around.

“Between you and me?”

Catwoman nodded.
He leaned in further and put his lips to the ear of her cowl.

“I had no idea,” Batman whispered. “If anything, I’d have bet on Zatanna knowing better than to mess with her.”

As he pulled away, Catwoman thought about that, and was satisfied. Bruce Wayne couldn’t lie to Selina Kyle, after all.

“You’ve never told me why you call me ‘Sailor,’” Batman said.

“It’s a Fiona Apple song,” Catwoman said. “‘O’ Sailor.’ Fiona Apple’s been narrating my life for the last twenty years, and she doesn’t even know it. If it bothers you, we can call each other Bat and Cat. That won’t get annoying at all.”

“Your pet name for me came from a Fiona Apple song?”

“Just to look at you,” Catwoman said, “I’d think of you as the kind of guy who just listens to classical music. Maybe some jazz. But you can’t stand Rock and Roll.”

Batman sighed. “Why does everyone think that?”

Catwoman smiled. “I’m gonna find Pat Boone records in your bedroom the same way you find nudie mags in anyone else’s, right?”

Batman lowered his head. “I still have the Misfits t-shirt I bought in high school.”

She blinked. “Wow,” she said. “I’m gonna have to get used to shit like that coming out of Batman’s mouth.”

Someone next to them cleared their throat.

They looked, and saw Wonder Woman standing there. And she was looking down between them. They followed her eye-line.

Batman and Catwoman were holding hands.

And for the life of them, neither could remember reaching for the other.

Wonder Woman looked back up at them. Her lips were smiling and her tone was jovial… but Catwoman couldn’t help but notice that there was a hint of sadness behind her eyes that she was desperately trying to hide.

“Fine,” Wonder Woman said. “Both of you be that way.”

And off she walked.

As she watched Wonder Woman walk away, Catwoman turned to Batman.

“You gonna walk me home?”

“We both have bikes down here,” Batman said. “I’ll ride next to you, sure.”

“You staying for dinner?”

Batman cocked his head at her.
She smiled. “You staying for breakfast?”

Batman didn’t say anything.

“Ohhhh,” Catwoman said. “You haven’t had The Talk yet. Well, when an unstable Creature-of-the-Night vigilante and the greatest thief with the juiciest ass in the world love each other very much, he puts his Batmobile in her—”

“Stop,” Batman said. “We haven’t even gone on our first date yet.”

Catwoman put her hand on her hip, and looked at him disbelievingly.

“Please don’t tell me you’re the guy who only Frenches after the third date.”

“Of course I am,” Batman said. “Who else did you think I was?”

Catwoman was about to say something, but then thought against it, deciding on something else.

“Y’know what? That’s fair.”

Over on the other side of the terminal, The Flash had returned, and had struck up a conversation.

“Look,” The Flash said. “All I’m saying is that I could have come in, disconnected the thing Zatanna was hooked up to, and stopped them all before anything could have happened.”

“Did you want to risk it?”

“No,” The Flash said. “But I’m saying if I did want to risk it, we could have been out of here on Day One with fewer casualties all around. I mean, I’m The Flash, why shouldn’t I do what I do best?”

Wonder Woman looked confused.

“What you do best is sexually harass Power Girl about her outfit. How would that have helped us?”

The Flash was about to reply to this, but something caught his eye.

“Hey,” he said. “Who brought the pool noodle?”

“So you’re saying if Zatanna just asked you about what she was going to do, you’d have said no?”

Batgirl sighed. “I would have said yes. You were dying, Dick. I just wanted the option to say no. She used my body against my will.”

Nightwing hunched his shoulders. “About that,” he said. “You… you do know that Zatanna was used the same way you were, right? I mean, I know I’m comparing apples to oranges here, but she was used to set a bunch of people on fire.”

Batgirl hadn’t thought of that. And she didn’t want to think about that until she was done being pissed off at her.

“If that’s the case,” Batgirl said, “then she of all people should have known better.”

“She was under mind control,” Nightwing said. “She didn’t know better. I don’t think she knows
what happened over the last few days at all. She portals herself into the hospital, how are the people there gonna look at her?"

Batgirl felt like getting her glare on, but Nightwing cut her off.

“I’m not trying to tell you how to feel,” Nightwing said. “I’m not trying to guilt you into… whatever the hell. I’m just trying to forewarn you and forewarn you. The two of you are in the Justice League, which means the two of you are inevitably gonna have another conversation. I’m just getting Oracle the info she needs.”

She felt herself calm down a little.

“Speaking of which,” Nightwing said, “Now that what’s happened… happened, how are you gonna play the immediate future? You Batgirl full time again?”

Batgirl smirked.

“Let’s say,” she said, “just for the sake of argument, that as soon as I leave this tunnel, a giant anvil with ‘ACME’ written on the side falls out of the sky and kills me. Once I’m in the ground, either someone’s gonna come out of the wilderness to become the next Batgirl, or someone else will become the next Oracle.”

She took a step toward him.

“There might be a better Batgirl out there. Maybe. But no one will ever be a better Oracle than me.”

Nightwing smiled. “So you’re Oracle.”

Batgirl took her cowl off.

“Oracle till I die,” said Barbara Gordon.

At this point, a great cry arose.

Not a Canary Cry, precisely, but close enough.

Black Canary ran up to Barbara and picked her up in her arms, jumping up and down and laughing wildly as she did so. Once she set her down, she looked at Barbara with a beaming face, before putting her hands on Barbara’s shoulders and kissing her full on the lips.

Rest assured, the look on Nightwing’s face was priceless.

Once she broke the kiss, Black Canary looked at Barbara, her smile, somehow actually having gotten wider.

“Huntress is in Bludhaven,” she said. “I can get her here in ninety minutes. Just… Oh my God! Black Canary! Huntress! Batgirl! Birds of Prey! Kicking ass in Gotham for the first time ever! It’s gonna be TIGHT!”

And with that, Black Canary smacked Barbara Gordon on the ass as though she were a fellow baseball player, and walked away, getting her phone out of her leather jacket.

Barbara stared off into the middle distance for a bit, before she said:

“Okay, one last night as Batgirl.”
Nightwing seemed to be hung up on something else.

“Do, uh… Do I wanna know what you and Dinah get up to when we’re not dating?”

Batgirl, her cowl back on her head, looked him dead in the eye.

“That depends,” she said. “Do I get to ask what you get up to when we’re not dating?”

“That won’t work on me,” Nightwing said. “You already know all about me and Kory.”

“I’m not asking about you and Kory,” Batgirl said. “I’m asking about you and Helena.”


And he also smacked Batgirl on the ass.

She actually looked behind her at her own posterior on both sides, before she spoke again.

“I didn’t know my ass was so popular,” Batgirl said. “This is what it must be like to be you.”

Nightwing nodded. “Pretty much, yeah.”

As Batgirl walked toward Batman, Black Canary had finished her phone call. She was putting her phone back into her pocket, when she saw someone on the other side of the terminal, and called out.

“YO, BITCH!”

The Atom looked at her.

“No, not you.”

Catwoman looked at her.

“Yeah, you. I want my rematch.”

Nightwing saw The Atom talking to The Flash, and walked up to them.

“Dude,” he said to The Flash.

“Duuuuuuuuuuude,” said The Flash as he went in for a hug.

Once that was done, Nightwing turned to The Atom.

“Hey, Ryan,” Nightwing said. “How’s your first month going?”

“Well,” The Atom said, “this is the first time I’ve been to Gotham City, and I had to take a small leave from my teaching job to come down here and man The Barricade. That’s a thing. Other than that, I’m just trying to be likeable.”

“You’re likeable,” said The Flash.

“You are,” Nightwing said. “Know how I know? Because you’ve known me for a month, and you haven’t once told a Dick Joke.”

He pointed at The Flash. “This one? He’s known me since we were sidekicks in the Teen Titans ten years ago, and he makes Dick Jokes all the time.”
“Because Dick Jokes are funny,” said The Flash.

“I tell Catwoman who I am,” Nightwing said. “First thing out of her mouth? Dick Joke. Gets me to thinking maybe I should change it.”

“Your name?” asked The Atom.

“I should go by… I dunno… Ric. Without the K, like Ric Flair.”

The Flash nodded. “You do style and profile.”

But The Atom shook his head. “I don’t know. Ric Grayson? That… That just sounds stupid.”

The Flash laughed. He looked at Nightwing, and pointed at The Atom.

“See? Likeable.”

Catwoman eavesdropped as Batgirl talked to Batman.

“I need to get back to the manor. That’s where my suit is, after all.”

“I’ll have the Batwing take you there. Take one of my spare Batpods for the evening. How did the Batmobile do?”

“Great. I, uh… used up both of the ejector seats, though.”

“So they work. I’ll have it airlifted out, too.”

Catwoman turned around…

…and found herself face to face with Superman.

“Hi,” he said.

“Uh… Hi.”

“So,” Superman said, “You and Batman?”

“Me and Batman.”

He smiled. “Finally. That’s great. If anyone deserves to be happy, it’s Bruce.”

“Did he ever talk about me at all?” Catwoman asked.

“Knowing him the way I do,” Superman said, “the fact that he didn’t talk about you would be the higher compliment.”

“That makes sense.”

Superman leaned in close to her.

“This is big for him,” he said. “And because of the gravity of Bruce Wayne letting someone into his life, it is all the more fragile. Please be careful with him.”

Catwoman tilted her head,
“I will,” she said. “But for a second there, I thought you were gonna threaten me.”

“I don’t have to,” Superman said. “Because if you break his heart… then I will look at you the same way I look at anyone else that I’m disappointed in.”

Catwoman looked at Superman, and the very prospect of the Big Blue Boy Scout, the beacon of hope for whom no problem was too big or too small turning his gaze to her with glum sadness was actually, viscerally horrifying.

“Message received.”

“Good,” Superman said. He patted her on the shoulder, and started to walk away.

But something was bugging her.

“Superman?”

He turned to her.

“The, uh, the possibility that you’re just a guy with a day job, is…”

“What about it?” Superman asked.

“Well, I’ve been thinking,” Catwoman said. “You have a habit of showing up right where the action in Metropolis takes place. Big events, openings, corporate stuff, things like that.”

“Yeah?”

“Now, you could get there really fast because you’re Superman… or you could get there really fast because you’re a member of the press pool that was covering those events anyway. You’re not a reporter, are you?”

Superman blinked at Catwoman with a stony expression, and then looked at the rest of the room.

“Everyone?”

All assembled stopped and looked at him.

“I hate to be a pain about this,” Superman said, “but Gotham City is still in turmoil, and we’re the ones to save it, so…”

“Right,” The Flash said, and he turned to The Atom. “Shrink down, buddy, you’re taking The Flash Express out of here.”

Black Canary looked at Starfire. “Can I catch a ride?”

“Of course,” Starfire said.

And everyone else had rides.

Superman flew out, as did Wonder Woman. Starfire flew out, carrying Black Canary in her arms. The Flash ran out with a shrunken The Atom in the palm of his hand. Batgirl rode on the back of Nightwing’s Nightcycle.

“I’m not gonna lie,” she said before they peeled out. “I really missed this part.”
Batman and Catwoman looked at each other.

“Are you ready?” Batman asked.

“Um… Actually…”

“You’re looking for Lex Luthor’s targeting system.”

Catwoman sighed. “He offered me a blank check to get it back. Can you blame me?”

“No,” Batman said. “I can’t. If he made it illegally, then he hasn’t patented the design. If the Justice League analyzes it before you shake him down for God knows how much money, then he can literally pay us to make his own illegal technology obsolete when WayneTech builds something to safeguard against it.”

“Uh-huh,” Catwoman said. “And if I asked for a hefty finder’s fee from the Justice League?”

“Maybe not the Justice League,” Batman said, “but certainly from Wayne Enterprises. You did do a lot of work to find it, after all.”

“That’s sneaky.”

“It is.”

“It’s underhanded.”

“I know.”

“Have I told you how much I love you?”

“Not yet.”

“Remind me to later,” Catwoman said.

She reached up and rubbed his lips with her glove.

“What are you doing?” Batman asked.

“Wiping the dried blood off your lips,” she said.

Once she had done this to her satisfaction, she leaned in and softly kissed him on the lips.

She broke the kiss, and said “And I managed to do it without third date tongue. Be right back.”

Catwoman almost skipped away from Batman, disappearing beyond a terminal toward the upstairs luxury hotel where the LexCorp system was located.

Batman was the sole occupant of the terminal, now.

He was alone.

But not for long, though.
Chapter 29: La Famiglia del Pipistrello

Three very important things occurred in the hours between when the collection of superheroes in the old tunnels defeated The Undying and Black Manta, and the following morning, when enough law enforcement and armed service personnel had converged upon Gotham City to effectively stabilize it…

At 6:21 AM the following morning, two motorcycles, with Batgirl (in her old Batgirl armor she had retrieved from the display case in the Batcave) and Nightwing driving them, left the most populated areas of the mainland for a side road leading into the open marshes that bordered Slaughter Swamp. A rock face a quarter of a mile away from Wayne Manor held a tunnel, with a holographic camouflage routine concealing the entrance. And this is where Batgirl and Nightwing entered to go to the Batcave.

An hour later, Barbara Gordon and Dick Grayson emerged from Wayne Manor, getting on the motorcycle upon which they had come to Gotham City, heading home for Bludhaven.

Barbara drove. Dick sat behind her, holding her by the waist all the while. The sidecar that had carried Barbara on the way now carried their luggage.

Peering through the goggles on her motorcycle helmet down the open road, Barbara’s face was… Resolute? Confused? Disturbed?

Whatever Barbara Gordon was thinking, she was in no hurry to share.

An hour and a half earlier, at 4:49 AM, before the sun had even risen, the Batmobile pulled up to Gotham Central station.

The on-duty officers, what few there were, were running about the main bullpen attending to business, now that the city was no longer under siege and superheroes had apparently filed into the city to aid them.

When Batman stepped into the bullpen, all motion stopped. He surveyed the room.

The cops were silent, their faces a mix of fear and antipathy.

They hated Batman.

They hated Batman for coming back, ruining the three halcyon years of having minimal to no accountability.

They hated Batman because a psychopath had made him the focal point of his rampage, endangering the lives of nine million people.

And they definitely hated Batman because he had saved the city, succeeding where they failed.

“I am to understand that Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy turned themselves in to this precinct?”

He took the next couple of seconds of hostile silence as an affirmative.
“I would like to see Harley Quinn in an interrogation room, please. *Alone.*”

They still didn’t say anything. But they gave him what he wanted.

Five minutes later, the door closed on a small interrogation room. Harley sat in a metal folding chair at a table. She was still in the Big Belly Burger t-shirt and cutoffs in which she had saved Catwoman from Scarecrow.

A moment of silence, before Harley spoke.

“S-So, um—”

Batman held up a hand to silence her. He turned to the two-way mirror.

“I know you’re in there.”

A couple of seconds later, both Batman and Harley heard a slamming door from beyond the mirror. Batman took a small signal interceptor out of his utility belt, and placed it on the two-way mirror. Just in case someone on the other side had left a camera running, then that signal interceptor would disrupt the feed.

He finally turned to Harley.

“I’m going to ask you a very important question,” Batman said. “Your answer will determine the tenor of the rest of the conversation. Are you ready?”

Harley, wide-eyed and mouth hanging open, nodded.

Batman put his hands on the table, and seemingly peered into Harley Quinn’s very soul.

“Did you… have anything to do… with the murder of my partner?”

Harley squinted at him, blinking. “Ya mean Robin?”

Batman nodded.

Harley gasped.

“No!” she said. “I was in Arkham when that went down! Yeah, I was in love with Mistah J, but even then, doin’ in a kid the way I heard Robin was done in woulda… just… No!”

“But that didn’t stop you from running to his side later.”

Harley sighed. “Co-dependency’s a bitch, ain’t it?”

Batman looked at Harley some more… and he was convinced she was telling the truth.

“I’ve become aware of the fact that you’ve been offering your skills as a therapist to your fellow patients at Arkham.”

“Yeah?”

“How would you describe you success so far?”

Harley shrugged. “Hard to tell. Some people are easier to get a bead on. Like… I’d say you were sufferin’ from adult antisocial behaviors and a negative mood cluster stemmin’ from post-traumatic
stress…”

Batman tilted his head at her, and she seemed to get a little more nervous than she already was.

“I--If I was to just eyeball ya, I mean. Some people are easier to eyeball than others. And--And even then, though? Not a lotta people in Arkham are, y’know, receptive to gettin’ treatment.”

Batman nodded. “And if someone were receptive to getting treatment… How well do you think you would do?”

Harley shrugged. “I dunno… I think I’d do pretty good. Why?”

Batman pulled out the chair on the other end of the table, and sat down.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, before he raised his hands.

His fingers brushed the side of his cowl, causing the connective plates to part.

Bruce Wayne removed his cowl, and set it down on the table, before locking eyes with a clearly shocked Harley Quinn.

“Because I need your help, Doctor Quinzel.”

Forty-five minutes later, after Batman had left, and Harley was taken back into the small holding cell that neighbored the one of her partner, Ivy asked Her what it was that Batman wanted.

Only for Harley to tell her that what they talked about was covered under Doctor-Patient Confidentiality.

However, the most important thing that happened was something that happened mere seconds after the first wave of heroes had either run or flown out of the sewer entrance of the construction site.

Atop an abandoned building in The Cauldron, overlooking the site, there was no one.

In the next instant, with only the echo of snapping fingers acting as their herald, two figures appeared.

The one on the right was a woman, gorgeous and statuesque. She had long and lustrous black hair, and she was dressed like a 1940s pin-up model, with red shorts and a flower-patterned halter top. She had a big floppy sun hat, and her eyes were covered by vintage cat-eye sunglasses. In her hands, she held a copy of Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, which she was reading. She was chuckling to herself warmly, as though she were reading a six-year-old’s poorly spelled attempt at interpreting Proust.

The one on the left was her opposite in almost every respect. He was roughly three feet tall, which didn’t seem to matter as much to him, as he was floating next to her instead of standing. He was clad in an ugly orange jumpsuit with purple shoes, belt, and highlights. Tufts of white hair extended from either side of his bald pate like dying weeds achingly leaning toward the sun. Atop his head was a small purple derby hat with a daisy sticking up from the hat band. And a cigar was sticking out of the mouth in his exceptionally homely face.

If one were to describe the fellow on the left, the most common noun employed might be… “Imp.”

The Imp took the cigar out of his mouth, and looked about himself with a expression of confusion.
“I don’t think… I don’t think I’ve been here before. Sugar, have we been here before?”

The beautiful woman looked from the book to her companion. She opened her mouth to say something, but decided to use the least amount of effort at the last second, and just shrugged her shoulders instead, before going back to her book.

The Imp looked back out over Gotham.

“Yeah,” The Imp said. “We haven’t been here before. This place still has that New Universe Smell.”

SIX DAYS LATER…

The previous six days passed with little out of the ordinary of note, for a city recovering from a hostage siege situation.

While Mayor James Gordon and the GCPD figured out what to do with the thirty percent of officers who abandoned their shifts to hunt Batman independently, the National Guard had been dispatched to Gotham City to maintain peacekeeping duties. Supplemented, of course, by whatever superheroes within the Justice League and without could spare at least two hours in a given day to patrol.

On Day Two, Mayor Gordon held a press conference, wherein he gave the people of the city a two month window to replace the depleted officers on the force, at least provisionally, with officers from nearby cities and towns. Once this two month window had expired, Gordon would resign his office as Mayor and rejoin the GCPD as Commissioner, leaving Deputy Mayor Mattia Bardolo in charge.

In fact, the only event that might be considered noteworthy in terms of its strangeness was when Maxie Zeus tried to start a lightning fight on Day Three.

The escaped inmates of Blackgate Penitentiary and the patients of Arkham Asylum, by and large, surrendered without incident. This, of course, was after the nature of the situation had been made known to them. That not only did they have to compete with Batman on the streets of Gotham, but Superman could swoop down and pick them up. Black Canary could shatter their eardrums. Beast Boy could turn into a gorilla and smack them through a wall. There was even talk of Doctor Fate out in these streets, turning people into toads if they got all mouthy. It wasn’t true, but that didn’t stop the superstitious and cowardly from talking about it.

But Maxie Zeus wanted to start a lightning fight.

He was holed up in a warehouse on Snyder Avenue on Miagani Island when a collection of superheroes doing a sweep found him. It should be noted that Maxie Zeus was, in fact, not endowed with any superhuman ability at all. He was just a man under a severe psychological delusion that he was Zeus: the Greek god of thunder. He did, however, have a lightning gun that he had procured from the inventory room once he had escaped from Arkham. This lightning gun, sadly, had no batteries in it.

It was his misfortune, however, that the person he had decided to start his little lightning fight with was Crazy Jane.

Crazy Jane, whose real name was Kay Challis, was a member of the Doom Patrol, which operated out of New Jersey. Crazy Jane was perhaps insensitively named such because she suffered from Dissociative Personality Disorder. Each of her sixty-four different personalities had their own powers.
So while Maxie Zeus did not use real lightning, Crazy Jane (then under the dominant personality designated by one Doctor Niles Caulder as “Sun Daddy”) did in fact use real fire.

After the altercation, Maxie Zeus was apprehended, and taken back to Arkham Asylum for treatment.

The orderlies have taken bets among themselves as to when Maxie’s eyebrows are going to grow back.

Bruce Wayne stood in black slacks and a white button-up on the deck of his yacht in Gotham Harbor as the sun went down. He swirled amber liquid and ice in a glass he was holding.

Most would think it was whiskey.

It was just apple juice.

He stood and stared at the skyline of the city he had helped save, absently sipping his drink, until he heard Selina walk up the ramp and board the yacht.

Bruce turned to her. She was wearing black leggings and a black leather jacket over a black tank top.

They didn’t say hello. They just looked at each other.

“What’s the name of this boat?” Selina asked.

“Don’t have one,” Bruce said. “It’s just a serial number.”

“Y’know,” Selina said, “when I go to rich people places like this, whenever I have the chance, I always dress like I am now. So I’m all inappropriate and underdressed. So I look how I feel.”

Bruce nodded. “The rest of the world might be over dressed. You ever think about that?”

Selina smiled, and looked at her feet. When she finally looked back up, she said:

“I’m not your partner.”

Bruce just looked at her.

“Or I should say,” she said, “that I’m not your sidekick. I’m a completely independent entity that may or may not team up with you every now and then.”

“I’m not going to ask if you’ll stay on the right side. I know you will.”

Selina snorted. “Please. It’s not like there aren’t bad people I can steal from. Yeah, I could rob law-abiding Richies and have the cops shoot at me, but they don’t mean it. They don’t mean it because they know I’m tight with you, and there’ll be Hell to pay later. Now stealing from guys like Falcone and The Penguin? They mean it when they shoot at me, so… I can get my thrill-seek on, and still be on the side of the angels. Which I apparently am.”

Bruce nodded. “Speaking of sidekicks… How’s Stephanie?”

Selina sighed. “We start training tomorrow. I still can’t believe I stepped in this.”

“Don’t quit on that girl,” Bruce said. “If you do, she’s just going to go out there on her own in an
outfit she made herself out of construction paper. It won’t end well.”

“I know.”

“So if you’re Catwoman, does that make her… Catgirl?”

Selina looked at him as though he’d just belched at a funeral.

“Young punishment for saying something so silly is to go home and google ‘Catgirl.’ You will never
sleep again.”

Bruce smiled.

“I just think I should have my head examined for doing something this stupid,” Selina said. “Know
any good shrinks?”

Bruce furrowed his brow. “Funny.”

“I’m not the funny one,” Selina said. “I’m not the one having therapy sessions with Harley Quinn.”

“I need help,” Bruce said. “It’s not like I can go to Doctor Jones down the street and tell him I’m
Batman.”

“How did she react to that, by the way?”

Bruce folded his arms. “She said… ‘I was right the first time.’ Do you have any idea what that
means?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“No.”

Bruce nodded. “Anyway, I trust her. She seems to want to make a go of things. Stick to the rules,
and all that by not telling anyone who I am.”

“And if she decides to tell everyone Bruce Wayne is Batman, she’s Harley Quinn, and no one will
believe her,” Selina said.

“Yes,” Bruce said. “That too.”

“So how’s it gonna work?”

“An hour a week on Thursday nights at Arkham,” Bruce said. “Four AM. It’ll be the last thing I do
before I hang up the cape for the night. I checked the hourly rates on the highest paid shrunks in
Gotham, and upped hers by twenty percent, putting it in escrow. When Harleen Quinzel leaves
Arkham, she’s going to be a very surprised, very wealthy woman.”

“You’re not telling her you’re paying her?”

“And miss the look on her face when I hand her the check?”

Selina smiled.

“It’s… It’s a damn sight from perfect,” said Bruce.
“Who said anything about perfect?” Selina asked. “It’s just better than what you had.”

Bruce sighed. “It’s just… I can’t offer redemption for people who do wrong when I’m the way I am now.”

Selina looked down at the deck of the yacht, put her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket, and walked toward him.

She was still looking at the deck when she began to speak. And she spoke softly.

“I was dead in that tunnel,” she said. “For all intents and purposes, I died, and the last thing I did with what little time I had left, was stand between Black Manta and Dick Grayson. To take the hit for him, even though he was gonna take the hit later. And then I lived. Zatanna put me back together, and I kicked me some ass, but that second that I knew was dead stayed with me. And I’ve tried to put on a whole bunch of explanations for it. Tried to find a way it served me, a way it played to my advantage, tried to filter it through all seven deadly sins and I just can’t do it. I even had a choice in the matter. I could have walked away and had a couple of more hours of life, and I didn’t take it. Not because I wanted to show Black Manta how awesome and fearless I was, but because Dick needed help, and I was the only one who could do it.”

She sighed, before finally looking at him.

“How the hell did you know who I was before I did?” Selina asked. “You’ve been telling me for years how good I was deep down, and I didn’t find that out for myself until a few days ago. I’m one of the good guys, and… and that doesn’t feel weird to me anymore. Because it’s the truth.”

Selina put her hand on his arm.

“I can tell you I love you, and I don’t feel like I’m giving anything up. I love that you know me better than I know myself. I love that you never gave up on me. I love that you never left me. I love… that you’re an irritating, pain-in-the-ass, stick-in-the-mud chronic do-gooder who never lets me have any fun, and is best friends with a dweeb like Superman. And I’m happy you’re doing the therapy thing, no matter who it’s with. Because that means it’s my turn to not give up on you. And I even love that I know you’re shrinking on the inside right now because you don’t like hearing good things about yourself.”

Bruce ran a hand through the thick black hair of Selina’s pixie cut.

“I love you too.”

They stared at each other a moment longer.

“That word still kinda tastes funny,” she said.

Bruce nodded.

Selina grabbed him by the collar, and brought his head down. They kissed just as the sun finally disappeared behind the immense buildings of Miagani Island. Her lips were arm and full against his. Bruce remembered when he was a kid, his mother told him that if he kept making funny faces, his face would get stuck like that. He wished it were true. He wished if he and Selina stayed like this, they’d be statues on the deck of this boat, lips forever touching, his arms eternally around her.

He knew he wasn't going to abandon being Batman just to shack up with Selina forever. But he felt that just having the option made a world of difference.
They broke the kiss, and she rested her head on his chest with her eyes closed.

Breathing in the sweetness of her hair, Bruce wondered if this was how it was like for everyone else. This sense of lightness. This warmth. Because if it was, then he got here too late.

“Say something stupid,” she said. “I still have some vanity left, so say something completely dumb and ruin the moment, so I can laugh at you. Just let me forget how happy I am for one hot second, while I still know what not being happy looks like.”

“You don’t like the moment?”

“I don’t want to wear it out.”

“Okay,” Bruce said. He thought for a moment, and said:

“Think of all the fun you can have as Catwoman when you have WayneTech prototypes to play with.”

Selina raised her head from his chest, looked him in the eye with an expression that bordered on the dreamy.

“That is the sexiest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

Bruce laughed.

“That is… like… the total opposite of what I told you to do,” Selina said.

He put his arm around her shoulder, and guided her to his side, so they could both look at the city together.

“I need to be better,” Bruce said. “I need to be more than what I have been.”

“Eh, you’re doing pretty okay so far.”

“I mean as Batman,” Bruce said. “The people of this city turned on each other instead of protecting one another. If that’s the sum total of my influence, then I’ve failed. I can’t be the light at the end of anyone’s tunnel they way I am now. I can’t leave people with broken bones in a pool of their own blood and tell them, with a straight face, that I hope they get better. It needs to change. It has to start with me being a good man. To you, to Dick, to Barbara. To everyone. If the city reflects the people that protect it, then I need it to reflect that. I need it to come back to me. The people of Gotham City need to look out for one another. Maybe… just maybe… it’ll bring more in.”

Selina looked up at him quizzically. “More people? You mean superheroes?”

Bruce nodded. “If I stumble. If I fail. Then I can’t be the only one the city can look to.”

Selina blinked. “So… You’re raising an army?”

Bruce shook his head. “I can’t be a General. I need to be a resource. There are so many ways the people of a city can look out for one another. Sometimes it means working at a homeless shelter. Sometimes it means being the one honest cop in a dirty department… And sometimes it means dressing up in a goofy outfit and beating the hell out of some very bad people.”

He looked down at her. “I’m pretty good at that third one.”

Selina smirked. “So I noticed.”
She worked her way out from under his arm. She took him by the hand and tried to guide him to the stairs that led below deck.

Bruce didn’t move.

“What are you doing?”

She looked at him. “Oh, I’m sorry, let me rephrase the question.”

Selina let go of his hand, grabbed him by the waistband of his slacks, and tried to lead him below deck.

“Selina, no.”

She let go of the front of his pants, hunched over, and threw her head back; the signs of an adult throwing a tantrum.

“Oh, come oooooooooon,” Selina said. “You’re gonna make me wait three dates to kiss you the right way, and we haven’t even gone on one yet.”

“What is it about me that tells you that I’ve been in a normal relationship ever in my life?”

“Well I’ve been on a lot of them,” Selina said. “You’re not missing anything. And that deafening silence you hear is both me dying of thirst, and my ass unable to spank itself. C’mon, it’s Batman’s cheat day.”

Bruce just looked at her. Selina sighed.

“Fine,” she said. “When can we go on the first date?”

“Does right now work for you?”

“Right now works great for me,” Selina said. “And an hour after that works great for the second one.”

Bruce was about to smile, and tell Selina that there was a movie theater not even a block form here, when the evening air was assaulted with the sound of microphone feedback.

And an all-too-familiar voice sounded from every hijacked audio frequency in the city.

“Greetings, Gotham City, it is I: The Riddler! Back from my sabbatical in Star City! Returning home to a grateful populace ever eager for me to match wits with The Dark Knight himself!”

Bruce furrowed his brow. Selina handled the situation far less stoically.

“Oh, GODDAMMIT, EDDIE!”

“Now then, if a particular Caped Crusader happens to be listening in, lives depend upon his paying attention… What is at the end of a rainbow?”

The sound of feedback erupted again, signalling the end of the transmission.

“The letter W,’ Bruce said.

“Right,” said Selina, “but what does… Oh, duh, The Riddler’s attacking Wayne Tower. Big building with a W on the front… Eddie’s gonna try and jack your shit.”
“Are you alright to get home?” Bruce asked.

“Actually,” Selina said, “I brought my Catwoman crap in a suitcase on the back of my Ducati. Because I planned on having a good time tonight, so I just knew some stupid bullshit was gonna happen.”

“I have a Batsuit below deck.”

“Of course you do.”

Bruce shrugged. “I guess the first date’s going to have to wait.”

Selina rolled her eyes, grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, and kissed him again. When she broke it off, she lightly patted him on the cheek, and said:

“Sailor… This is the first date.”

Daylight is not kind to Gotham City.

That which glimmers heavenly in the moonlight, from the gothic grandeur of Gotham Village, to the gleaming skyscrapers of the Financial District are rendered quaint at best, or tacky at worst by the unforgiving sun.

But she is glorious by night.

Its odds and ends, its ramshackle tenements, its solemn cathedrals, its vast towers, its places of business, all interlock like pieces to an odd yet absorbing puzzle.

And the people. The models on the catwalk at tonight’s fashion show in the Tynion Ballroom. The dealers on Saginaw Street in the East End, shoving their stashes deep in their pockets as soon as the squad car rolls past. The bored-looking teenagers manning the counter at the Big Belly Burger on Devereaux and Finger in Founder’s Island, watching swells and tourists file past the window.

Even the guests are intriguing: like the visitors from far-off flyover places like Kansas and Nebraska, eagerly looking up at the skyscrapers, slowing their pace, and pissing off the locals behind them on the crowded streets. Which is to say nothing of the fine folks from the Army Corps of Engineers, surveying the damage on Bleake Island, thinking of effective ways to erect new bridges after the mob blew them up.

A CEO here, a cop there, vagrants, sex workers, clergy, athletes. Some rich men, plenty of poor men, a platoon of beggar-men, and an army of thieves.

All manner of sterling specimen and crude side-effect of The American Experiment roam the streets of Gotham City. Rubbing shoulders with each other and ignoring each other. Sharing comfortable silences and exchanging heated invective. Making love to each other and robbing each other blind.

If you can’t find something beautiful in Gotham City, step five feet to the left.

And if you can’t find something tragic, do the same.

It was upon this strange, this curious, this fair-looking and foul-smelling mosaic, that Bruce Wayne wished in the same manner that naive children wish upon stars.

That if he could be a good enough man, in the guise of Batman and out, then the people of Gotham
City would follow suit. They they would help their fellow citizen instead of turning on them. Stay their hands instead of raising them in anger.

And among their number, in the kind of foolish and silly hope that Bruce Wayne would only utter aloud to the woman he loved, a few would rise. They would join him in a fight never-ending, in an ideal that was so much greater than any one person that it would require others. Those under their own helm. Those who would risk life and raise fist against the darkness.

But Gotham City is a strange place. It is every bit as strange as it is terrifying, as it is unique, as it is welcoming, as it is damning, as it is beautiful.

It is the city that Bruce Wayne wished upon.

And it is the city that would grant that wish…

Tim Drake was one of the first people airlifted off of Bleake Island after Batman stopped The Undying. He was taken to the mainland and had to wait a day at an outdoor staging area set up by the GCPD until Superman and Supergirl were able to remove the cars clogging up the bridges to Mlagani Island, where he lived.

He had spent the intervening four days leading up to this point being waited upon by his father Jack and his mother Janet, so happy and relieved were they that nothing had happened to their boy in the time the city was under siege.

“You don’t have to do that,” Jack said to him as Tim was washing the dishes after dinner. He had taken off one of the yellow rubber gloves to actually pick off a tough spot of food from a plate with the nail of his left thumb.

“I know I don’t,” Tim said, “but I want to. I’m gonna go nuts around here unless I do something.”

He put the plate down in the sink.

“Look, dad, I appreciate that you’re happy I’m alive and everything, but if nothing happened, then you’d yell at me for not doing the dishes.”

“But something did happen, Tim.”

“I know,” Tim said, “but do the math here. The Undying had magic powers and Black Manta on his side, and he only managed to hold the city for thirty-nine hours before Batman stopped him. That’s really not a whole lot of time.”

“It felt like an eternity,” Jack Drake said.

“For you, maybe,” said Tim. “I spent most of it watching anime on a rooftop with a couple of Bleake Island kids.”

And yeah, he was almost killed by a deranged movie buff, but Tim felt his father didn’t need to know that.

Jack was about to say something, but he stopped himself. Tim dried off that last plate, and put it away.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Tim said, “I’m gonna go to my room and look for a new job.”

Jack sighed. “Tim, if you need money…”
“If I need money, then I’ll make money. That’s what you told me to do when you told me to get a job in the first place.”

Jack shrugged. “I’m just glad my son’s home, is all.”

Tim powered past the guilt trip. “I’m glad to be home, too, Dad.”

He walked past his dad, out of the kitchen, and down the apartment hallway, to his room.

Tim sat down in his chair at the folding table that he called a desk, next to the window.

Before he put his hands to the keyboard of his PC to open Google Chrome and begin the search for his next place of employment, he looked at the shelf of DVDs and Blu-Rays next to his TV.

The faded yellow of the DVD case that his parents had gotten him when he was little called to him. He reached out a hand and pulled it out.

*The Best of Haley’s Circus.*

There in the corner, underneath the clown and next to the tiger, were the smiling faces of The Flying Graysons.

The youngest of which he’d met days prior. Before he’d helped Batman save the city for the umpteenth time.

Tim Drake looked out the window, holding the DVD case, thinking of nothing in particular.

A Lyft pulled up to an apartment building in Tricorner, and after paying her driver, The Soldier stepped out.

She stood on the street in the evening air, running a hand through her short red hair and tugging on the shoulder of her green jacket.

The Soldier usually looked better than she did right now. People from money often did. But she’d been away from Gotham for a year training. She hadn’t even been home yet, where all her good clothes were. But this was the stop she had to make.

She walked up the concrete steps, and buzzed for Apartment 826.

“Who is it?” asked a man’s voice over the speaker.

The Soldier pressed the button. “You know who it is.”

A few seconds of silence before the man’s voice returned “I’ll be right down.”

Minutes later, a tall man with thinning brown hair and a pinched, weathered face opened the front door of the apartment building, and regarded her.

“Soldier,” he said.

“Colonel,” she replied.

“You know he’s back, don’t you?” The Colonel asked. “He called off his little sabbatical a few days ago and saved the city from an undead former politician.”
“Good for him.”

“Batman is back,” The Colonel said. “You don’t have to do this.”

The Soldier set her suitcase down. She took her right arm out of her green jacket. Among the well-defined muscles and the odd tattoo was a startling series of scars, bruises, and welts.

“Your daughter didn’t get dressed up for nothing,” The Soldier said.

The Colonel sighed. “Follow me.”

They walked into the apartment building, and took the elevator up to the eighth floor. The Soldier set her suitcase down next to the door as soon as they were in the small confines of apartment 826.

“I have to use the commode,” The Colonel said.

“Classy.”

“The plans are on the coffee table in the living room,” The Colonel said as he walked down the hall. “Fix yourself something to drink.”

The Soldier walked the couple of feet into the living room. There was a bottle of scotch on the coffee table (Ardbeg, Dad’s favorite, of course) next to a couple of glasses and a green three ring binder.

She poured herself a finger of scotch and opened the binder to a random page.

It was a sketch by The Colonel, purely an idea. A black skin-tight suit with a black mask to fit snug over the face. Red boots and a red belt. A black cape with a red lining.

And a big red Bat over the chest, of course.

The problem The Soldier had was the long red wig. The notes next to the sketch said it was detachable.

As she walked over to the screen door to the balcony that looked out over this tiny stretch of Gotham City, Kate Kane took a drink.

The Homeless Girl was in Gotham City again.

She had been here once three years ago. She’d have stayed, but the Batman left. She saw no purpose in it.

The Homeless Girl, seventeen years of age, walked into The Spetz Diner on Washoe and Sixteenth, about eight blocks north of Chinatown on the mainland. She pulled the hood of her black hoodie down over her greasy black hair to obscure her dirty face, and she walked briskly past the other diners, so they wouldn’t react to how bad she smelled.

But even at her quick pace, she could read the six people in the main dining area as easily as she thought others could read books.

The fat man in the trucker hat at the counter was loose and slow with the movements of his shoulders and hand as he talked on his phone, like the few drunk people she had met in her nine years on the run, after…
She didn’t want to think about that, so she didn’t.

A waitress walked past, favoring her right knee in a way that she imagined must have been near-imperceptible to others, but glaringly obvious to her. A kick at a quarter of her strength, and that waitress would never walk on that leg again.

The Homeless Girl sat down in a red vinyl booth, and scooted all the way over to the window.

She hoped she wouldn’t be given a menu, as she could not read. She scanned the rest of the restaurant, and looked for other people eating, so when asked what she wanted, she could just point to it.

Failing that, though, she did know one phrase that she could use in a restaurant whose meaning she could comprehend.

“Surprise me.”

The Homeless Girl hoped it wouldn’t come to that, though, as she could barely talk. Not only was she woefully unprepared for any follow-up questions, she was quite insecure about how her voice sounded. She knew that what she looked like did not match up with how she sounded. She was an Asian girl who barely rose above five feet and four inches, yet when she opened her mouth to use one of the few words to which she knew the meaning, out came this raspy bass croak that made her sound thirty years older than she actually was.

Such is the way it must have been for someone who hadn’t used their voice for most of their seventeen years on Earth.

The Homeless Girl did have money to pay for her meal, though. It had been given to her not an hour before by a woman whom she had saved from two muggers four blocks up. The Homeless Girl had every intention to walk away, but something in the way the woman held herself told her that it was best that she take her money.

But The Homeless Girl wasn’t wise to how money worked, though. She had paid for something once, and the man whom she had paid had yelled at her when she wouldn’t let him give her more money in return, different money with pictures of old white people on them, as well as a collection of little metal discs with yet even more visages of old white people emblazoned on their fronts.

Whatever that meant. No, she’d just slap the bill on the table when she was done, and walk out.

There were many things The Homeless Girl did not know.

She was trained to fight, yet not taught how to read.

She was trained to kill, yet not taught how to speak.

She didn’t even know that her name, given to her at birth by the man who trained her, was Cassandra Cain.

But she knew that Batman was back. He was here, in this city. If there was a way forward for her after what she had… done … then it was though him.

Above Gotham City, in the clear night sky, shone the Bat Signal.

And though they all saw it, they each saw different things.
Tim Drake saw it, and saw a world that made much more sense than the one in which he lived.

Kate Kane saw it, and saw a chance to serve the common good that was denied her so many years ago.

Cassandra Cain saw it, and saw an ideal and a redemption, both wrapped in one perfect emblem.

On Third Street on Miagani Island, the buildings on either side of the street forming a cavern around her, Catwoman tore down the street on her motorcycle.

She chanced looking away from the road, just for an instant, to look up.

Above her, gliding through this cavern of concrete and glass, was Batman, his cape erect behind him. He fired his grapnel gun to gain altitude. To go faster.

A thought occurred to Catwoman as she looked back down to the road. A thought so absurd and yet so perfect and right that it made her laugh. The proudest and most liberating laugh she’d had in years.

She was chasing him.

Y’know… For a change.

TO BE CONTINUED
Hi, all. GeneralIrritation, here…

I left the story you just read with a big, fat “To Be Continued” down at the bottom. And when I did it, I did it with visions of some time off after having written a six-hundred page book in the span of five months dancing in my head.

The time off is over.

The sequel is coming.

And it is coming sooner than you think.

The thing is, though, it’s not just a sequel. In the interest of keeping the narrative less ungainly and the word count down, I have opted, instead of writing one big story, to bridge The Undying to its sequel with three separate one-shots. The goal of which being to set up character dynamics and backstories in and of themselves without having to stop the sequel itself and explain everything.

As you can see, I’ve collected this, and all future stories into a series called Eight-Oh-Three, which you can bookmark or subscribe to if you want to keep up to date.

The first one-shot is called The Quick Brown Fox. It centers on Oracle and Orphan. It drops on Monday, April 22, 2019. It’s the scary one.

The second one-shot is called Through the Pink Door. It centers on Batwoman. It drops on Monday, April 29, 2019. It’s the other scary one.

The third one-shot is called Altmanesque. It centers on (INFORMATION REDACTED). It drops on Monday, May 6, 2019. It’s the funny one.

Then we get to the novel-length sequel to The Undying. What can I tell you about it?

-It’s Batfamily-centric.

-So Batfamily-centric, in fact, that Bruce technically isn’t the lead anymore. He’s in it a lot, don’t get me wrong, but he’s at the front of a big-ass ensemble.

-Y’all seemed to like my take on Wonder Woman, so I’m happy to report that she’s graduated from glorified cameo to full-fledged supporting character.

-Bruce Wayne is not a sitcom dad. He doesn’t forget what he learns in between episodes. What I’m trying to say is that the growth and development that he showed in The Undying not only sticks, but forms the center of the story.

-Why yes, we do see a therapy session between Bruce and Harley. Why do you ask?

-Remember in The Undying where the situation prevented any other superheroes from swooping in on Gotham City and helping out? Well, no such situation occurs in the sequel. Put two and two together on that one, friends, and that’ll tell you how crap-your-pants insane the last few chapters are gonna be.

-The sequel is twenty-six chapters long.
The sequel is Rated M for cool stuff.

The sequel is entitled *A Faulty Sword*.

And the first chapter of the sequel drops on **Monday, May 13, 2019**.

Yup, *A Faulty Sword* is gonna be that familiar blend of action, laughs, romance, and perhaps, most essentially… free balloons for the kids.

*See you on Monday!*

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!