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December, 1940.

Bodies are disappearing from morgues. A couple lies murdered in the street. To solve this mystery, Batman must seek the help of the most frustrating thief he's ever crossed, but the conspiracy behind the crimes may still be too powerful. Chased on the coldest night of the year, has the Dark Knight found a foe so above the law even he cannot deliver the offender to justice?

Batman 1939

The Dangers of Being Cold

By: Stewart M

Chapter 1

Ships That Pass in a Corner Diner

Cities had homeless communities. This was a universal fact, and its recognition was a fine sign of the century's progressive spirit. But what precious few cared to learn was that every homeless community was just that - a community. These weren't the warm and stable communities most citizens knew, but transients were still people; they had rules and rituals, bazaars and town halls, friends and loved ones. In the barest, skeletal sense they got by. On the thicket streets of Gotham City, the homeless were especially well-organized. Unfortunately, winter had arrived. Winter for the homeless was something between a bombing siren and a slow-motion riot. Every tiny choice might be life or death, and their meek community could fray very quickly. Compromise and civility were not common strengths in the cold and hungry.

If any pair among them was ready for the season, it was Wendell and Alice Dupree. Most people on the street were alone; couples were very rare indeed. And they were well-off by local standards. They both had their health and a pack of warm clothes. They had an understanding with the neighbors to respect each others' territory (strife over real estate was always the worst between those who didn't own real estate). And their territory was quite nice, a little nook in the rear wall of the 8th Street train station. It had an overhang to keep off rain, and they were too far from the road for beat cops to kick down their shanty. This is where they called home.

When the station clock chimed eleven they were already fast asleep. A car rolled to a stop nearby. It was far too clean for the neighborhood; in Gotham a car like that drew young hustlers like gnats to a lamp. But then three big men got out, harsh shapes in the dark, and any greedy eyes nearby slunk back into their shadows. The burly men wore gloves and low caps, the timeless uniform of professional muscle. They strode up quietly and spied the sleeping couple with a dying flashlight.

Unsmiling, two of the men bent down, each holding a thick cotton rag. Only heavy sleepers could live next to a train station, but at the last moment Alice's eyes fluttered open. Half-awake, she witnessed a

large form nearing her face. She tried to scream. Through the cloth, it came out a weak gasp.

The third man stood and watched as the two finished. They left the bodies. He found a pay phone a few streets over.

"Ma'am, it's Lieutenant Wilson. We're done. No, no interruptions. You're welcome, ma'am."

Three nights later.

Bruce Wayne stood beside the window in a dark sewing room. No one would bother him here. In fact, no one had been home in days; the owners were staying with relatives. He knew this and a hundred other details from a glance around the room.

Bruce was content to be alone. The task at hand was uncomfortable enough; he had no patience tonight for interruptions. There were two manila folders open on the table in front of him. In one folder was a thin pile of photographs and papers stamped with various city seals. The papers were bureaucracy, and the photos were of the dead.

The other folder was substantially thicker and older. It had no photos inside, but there were quite a few sketches. Some were pencil, some ink. All were clean, workmanlike efforts of a particular lady: young, medium height, slender build, dark hair styled to various lengths. A note on one picture claimed green eyes. The artist made no effort towards any sort of life or expression in the sketches, treating its subject as clinically as a zoology text, but the lady in the drawings still seemed to possess a certain energy. Each stance of hers was coiled enthusiasm.

Bruce didn't look at the folders. He knew them by heart. Instead he stared out the window, watching the building across the street below. It was a small corner diner, still open despite the hour. Through the diner's bright windows, he watched the lady from the folder sit down.

The Hughes Diner and Café was one of the city's hidden gems, the kind only neighbors and high-brow food critics knew about. It took a simple service – hot coffee – and made it perfect through a loving attention that kept the regulars coming back year after year. Like most corner diners, the Hughes was unpretentious and cozy. New faces were greeted as "Buddy" or "Mack" or "Ma'am". The air smelled like bacon grease and lemon meringue. When a tired soul sat down at the Hughes Diner and Café the future just seemed a little brighter, and in Gotham that was saying something.

Tonight that soul was Selina Kyle, sitting alone on the middlemost stool. She wore a green sweater with a reindeer on it, and there was a bandage across her nose. Selina gazed wistfully at the bric-a-brac behind the counter and her own reflection in the shiny soda spigot. On the scratchy radio, a brassy blues trumpeter played "Dream a Little Dream of Me". The neon sign in the window behind her flickered. She sighed and laid her chin in her hand, absentmindedly stirring two creams into her cup of Joe.

"You're not your usual lively self this evening, 'Lina."

The proprietor, Mister John Quigley walked over while wiping a tall glass. He was a portly man with ruddy cheeks and big jowls. In his apron and white paper hat he looked quite dapper, like Santa Claus' younger brother. He leaned his elbow on the counter and offered a disarming grin. Selina shrugged and tasted some coffee off her spoon. "You know how it is: some days you're walking on clouds and other days you're just caught in the storm."

John whistled. "That's awfully poetic. Did you think of that?"

She grinned and pointed her spoon at him. "Now Johnny, are you saying all ladies are too empty-headed to be clever or just us pretty ones?"

He held up his hands in surrender. "Geez, Selina. You know I got the utmost respect for the mind of any classy dame like you."

"You mean a paying customer like me."

"Hey, my daughters are twice as smart as me and the oldest ain't yet fourteen. And my mother's always been smarter than me. And Lily ... well, she married me so the jury's out on that one."

"She's not a fool either Johnny. She just pitied you."

"Ha. Then what a lucky schlub I am. Still, I still hate to see you down in the dumps, so what's a matter?"

"Just a boring evening, nothing worth writing home about."

"Yeah? Nobody looks as distracted and lonesome as you cause of a 'boring evening'. Nobody comes here after dark in winter cause of a 'boring evening'. Nobody with a big bandage on their face had a 'boring evening'. What's the story?"

She shrugged bashfully and scratched the bandage on her nose. "Maybe I just wanted some of your charming company."

"Sure, cause I'm Clark Gable."

"Better than Shirley Temple."

"Well as charming as I am, Green Eyes, you ain't off the hook with that fish tale."

Selina took a sip of her coffee and stared at the ceiling.

"Fair enough. This evening, I went to the Thames Street Hotel to visit a friend. When I got to her suite, a bellhop said she had gone to the opera."

"Shame."

"Tell me about it. She had borrowed a few possessions of mine last week and I came to pick them up. So, not wanting to waste the trip, I went in to have a look around. But while I'm busy inside, a repairman came in to fix a lamp. I politely tried to stay out of his way, but he sees me and gets angry. We start to have a ... misunderstanding."

"How could any dummy say a bad thing 'bout you, 'Lina?"

"Ha. Thanks, Johnny. I guess from his point of view, I looked like some kind of trespasser."

"Ooch. Sounds like rotten luck."

"So, thinking discretion is the better part of valor, I decided to just turn tail and leave." She sighed dramatically and took another sip of coffee.

"Then you came here?"

"Well ... not quite. This blockhead was all wet. He chased me into the lobby where the hotel was setting up some policeman's retirement ball. About twenty coppers saw us having a tussle. I almost managed to slip into a reception office when-

Before she could finish, the bell on the door interrupted her.

A large man in a hat and frayed trench coat entered the diner, his collar turned up and his shoulders hunched against the bitter December wind. The man shivered and took in his surroundings. He had pale skin and a hangdog look about him.

John turned to the newcomer and smiled. "Hi there! What can I get you?"

The man paused a moment before responding. His voice was soft and raspy despite his size.

"Coffee. Black."

John nodded jovially. "Sure thing, Mack. How's about I fix you with a bite to eat?"

The man paused again, staring at the ground.

"I have some jelly danishes here. Raspberry, a real treat."

"Fine. One."

John nodded and turned to prepare the order. The man ambled over to a stool and sat down. There was stillness in the diner save for the wistful jazz of the scratchy radio. It occasionally cut in with Edward R. Morrow at Trafalgar Square: broadcasts about Luftwaffe firebombs over London. The stranger sat three stools away from Selina. He didn't eye her up or address her or even turn her way, but something about him made her uneasy. She tried to look him in the eye but his hat was pulled down low. In fact, the bulky man was so bent and motionless he almost looked asleep. She frowned and sipped her coffee, stealing discreet glances when she could.

A moment passed. There was a smoky scent in air.

Selina perked up. "Something's burning."

John sniffed the air and his eyes bulged. "Yeah, it's from the backroom!"

He hustled through the door behind the counter. As soon as the daring owner had left the room, the large man swiftly stood up and threw a few coins on the counter. Selina watched him suspiciously as he strode to the entrance and opened the front door. The bell chimed. As he walked out, the man tossed a tiny ball the size of a marble over his shoulder. It arced across the room and landed in Selina's empty cup. She glanced down and by the time she looked back up the front door had slammed shut in the wind.

Something was up.

Selina jumped to her feet and barreled out into the winter night. She looked left and right, but the dim street was empty. The man had already disappeared. She exhaled in frustration. Seeing her own breath, Selina recognized she lacked a coat and decided to head back inside.

She wasn't sure what just happened, but her heart had jumped tempo in a way no coffee could match. Her fingers started tapping a rhythm against her side. Her skin was electric.

Gotham had a nightlife you couldn't find anywhere else. It was lurid and random and sometimes grotesque, but for the big shots that owned the night there was nothing quite like it. A girl could get addicted.

Now Selina's own nightlife had broken into her ... civilian life, for lack of a better term. That wasn't supposed to happen; it was time to find out why. She allowed herself a brief half-smile. This evening might be interesting after all.

Back inside, John was standing arms akimbo with a look of utter confusion. "I guess that guy left?"

Selina knew not mention the thing in the cup. Whatever it was, it was her business, and she didn't involve normal folk like Johnny in her business.

"Yeah. He just up and left. I tried to see where he was going but he disappeared."

John shrugged. "Gosh, some people, huh?"

"You said it. What was the smell in the back?"

"This." John reached into the pocket of his apron and pulled out a partially-melted candle. "Somebody lit this in the backroom. Didn't hurt anything either. It was just burning on the floor. Made a lot of smoke though; you wouldn't think so since it's so small."

Selina scrutinized the candle. Gears began to click in her mind. "Yeah, wouldn't think so."

"And it looks like our friend even paid 'fore he left. Didn't get his coffee or his danish. Wonder where he had to get to."

Selina stared into her cup. "Yeah, what a mystery. Say Johnny, I better get going myself." She covertly turned the cup so the small ball rolled into her purse. "Big day tomorrow, need some rest."

"So you drink coffee before bed? You didn't finish your story."

She put on her gloves and smiled an apology. "Next time, I promise."

"Aw, fine. Go get your beauty sleep. And come see me again sometime. Ain't nobody entertains like you do. You know how lonely it gets 'round here."

Selina Kyle retrieved her coat and cap and from the rack. "You're a good man, John Quigley, go home and kiss that beautiful wife of yours."

"Sure thing. Goodnight Selina."

"Night, Johnny."

With that, Selina walked out into the first flakes of snow.

Four blocks later, she finally found a lamp bright enough to inspect her new possession. Heedless of the wind that blew her hair into a loose halo below her knit cap, she held the tiny ball up to her eye.

With the acuity of a jeweler, Selina realized she was holding a sphere of tightly-wrapped paper. She carefully unfolded it into a delicate sheet the size of a chewing gum foil. It read:

Truce?

(Tentative)

Meet Midnight, Site of 2nd Encounter

Puzzled, Selina flipped the paper over.

She almost dropped it.

In hindsight, Selina realized she shouldn't have been surprised. There were plenty of shady characters who might want to pass her a cryptic message, and maybe, *maybe* a handful could find her in her off-hours, but no one else could be so annoyingly subtle and yet so smugly theatrical in the process.

On the back of the paper was the simple outline of a bat.

Chapter 2

Cold Feet

The King Leopold Academy of Arts was the city's smallest college. With just over three hundred undergraduates, King Leo's students found it funny that their beloved *alma mater* had more famous alumni than any three schools in the city combined. Sure, old Gotham University claimed plenty of fancy lawyers and scientists, but it couldn't offer the one group that King Leo churned out by the dozen: movie stars!

By some cosmic bolt of foresight, in 1905 the Academy's tiny School of Theater bought one of Edison's new motion picture cameras. Actors at the time thought films had the artistic merit of carnival sideshows, which is what they often were, but King Leopold's theater students were not the most ambitious thespians. Most were lucky if they found work on an out-of-town vaudeville stage. Since the students had little to look forward to, quite a few were happy to skip lessons to play with the the new camera device.

Meanwhile, crowds began to flood nickelodeons in every town, and the studios needed skilled directors to sell tickets. To their surprise, they found a pool of artists at King Leopold's third-rate acting school who not only knew how to use a camera and edit celluloid but were at the forefront of the medium's experimental techniques (or, as the students called it, goofing off with class equipment). The entire motion picture club was hired on the spot. Naturally, these budding cinematographers were happy to cast their friends from acting class in their films. It was for this reason above all that, by the late 1920s, Gotham City was the undisputed center of East Coast film-making.

This was all fine for King Leo's School of Theater, but the Academy's once-preeminent School of Painting wasn't happy about it. Prestige was important among the academic departments, and now the dumb actors had all the attention. The Dean of Painting was determined to rectify this indignity. In the summer of 1939, he bet his entire budget and whatever he could beg or borrow on a complete remodeling of his school, hoping to win painting some publicity with the gilded sons of the new idle

rich who tended to be suckers for shiny things. For months, the Painting building was surrounded by workers and moving vans. There were crystal chandeliers hung and marble bathrooms installed. Gallons of the finest paints and inks lined the storage closets. But the grandest luxury of them all was the new *Rotation of the Classics* program: twice a month the school rented a different painting from an array of museums and private collections to hang in a classroom for study. The professors were trained curators and ensured that each masterpiece was protected from the environment.

However, the professors were not trained security and did not ensure that each masterpiece was protected from Catwoman. When she heard in late September that famous paintings were being shown at some school that didn't even have the typical museum safeguards, she knew it was her solemn duty to teach them a lesson in hubris.

Or maybe just a fun way to spend a Thursday. Catwoman wasn't the crusading type.

So she pulled on the chic violet bodysuit, black gloves, and black boots. After a yawn-inducingly easy surveillance and infiltration, she made it into the classroom where the treasure, one of the less popular Brugghe's, was kept, stretched out some acid-free paper, and proceeded to work her magic. The art was off the wall and nearly packed when *he* showed up.

They had met once before, back in June that year. And what a rush it was! Tactically, that evening had been a draw, but Catwoman called it a win for the novelty alone. No one had heard of him then, this hulking figure of the dark with his frown and his cape. She was fascinated. And her interest only grew the more she heard. It took time for the babbled individual sightings to bake into a coherent myth. But by September he had earned quite a lurid reputation amongst night types like herself. Given their respective habits, she was sure they would see each other again sooner or later. She might even call their dynamic a game of cat-and-mouse except that she still had her dignity.

But their second confrontation in the painting classroom was a big disappointment: brief, nonviolent, and frankly kind of boring (by her fell-off-the-end-of-the-bell-curve standards). It was over before it began. She blamed the picture. Padding and covering that frame was a slow process; she refused to be one of those amateur hacks who just roll the canvas into a cardboard tube. Maybe she would have gotten away in time if she had cut a few corners.

Regardless, when she glanced up and saw that trademark silhouette on the wall, Catwoman knew an easy escape was out of the question. Even if she had the painting packed, the real challenge was carrying it. Going up a rope, through a window, and down an ivy trellis while carrying the art was challenging alone, but it was a fantasy when the Bat could ruin it just by standing in her way.

Her first instinct was to pick a fight, but the room was small and cluttered. Her biggest weapon on Batman was agility, and there was simply no space for a good brawl. Besides, if things got hot and heavy someone might step on the painting, and she refused to be the first klutz in three centuries to ruin the Brugghe. The only safe ending would be to knock Batman out with one hit. **Kapow!**

But you didn't just knock out the Batman.

She wasn't being modest. Some people wrote poetry, some people built birdhouses, and the Batman won fights. Period. He had been on the scene long enough that everybody knew this, and the ones that refused to get the message would learn it in person very soon. Maybe she'd get lucky, she certainly had moves of her own, but a lady didn't get far in the felony business by taking dumb risks.

So that was it. She cared too much about the art to escalate the confrontation. As for His Majesty, King Frownington, his view on art - like everything else about him - was a mystery. He did seem to care about fragile property and didn't interrupt as she hung the frame again. With a final adjustment, she let go of the painting and turned around. Deep down, she felt wary like an old gunslinger, but Catwoman was Catwoman. She put on a smile and broke the ice.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He stared impassively at her for a long moment. His eyes were hidden like usual, but there was a very strange tilt to his face, an awkward tenseness about him. This was only their second meeting, but she suspected that hesitation wasn't normally an issue for him.

It certainly wasn't for her. She planted a jaunty hand on her hip and stepped forward. "Batman, right? I don't think we were properly introduced last time."

Silence. All six foot, two inches of granite willpower focused on her. More staring. His shoulder twitched. She took another step, arched an eyebrow, "Cat got your tongue?"

No smile. He gave her a final appraisal then, to her stunned bafflement, stepped aside.

"Don't come back."

Catwoman could only blink.

... *What?*

She knew the rumors - Batman wasn't in the habit of letting criminals walk, no more than water was in the habit of flowing uphill or pigs were in the habit of flying. And she was undoubtedly a criminal. So what did this mean? Was he only in it for the challenge? Was this a reward for cooperating? Was he hallucinating? Was she?

Half in shock, she quietly picked up her gear, strode past him, and left. She had no idea what her reprieve meant, and he never let her go so easily again (nor would she have taken it). For weeks afterward, Catwoman mulled over the memory. She decided a few things:

1. No paintings for a while. Too awkward. Catwoman is the human embodiment of nimbleness, not a Laurel & Hardy skit.
2. Batman didn't swoop down on people to hurt them; he swooped down on people to make sure they followed the rules. His rules. Then he usually hurt them.
3. She wouldn't rest until she retraced every stinking step she made in the past month and figured out HOW THE HELL he tracked her there!
4. Batman was human. Almost no one else thought so yet, but she was certain. Betting odds, at least. He was just a loon in a mask, no matter what the rumors said. He put his Bat-pants on one leg at a time like anyone else (or for all she knew, he somehow judo-flipped into both simultaneously, but again, loon).

Fifteen months later, breaking into the Academy of Arts was still a piece of cake. Catwoman walked through the dark and quiet of the painting classroom, her calf-high boots the only muffled sound in the stillness. Shafts of weak moonlight painted stripes on the floor. Snowflakes gently collected along the bottoms of the windows.

The room hadn't changed much, except that there was no masterpiece on the wall this time. Her near-theft had gone undiscovered, but the program was shut down a few months later when some other punk nabbed a Copley.

That strange second meeting had been nearly a year ago. Throughout all her future encounters with the uncompromising Dark Knight, it had always stuck out, never making sense. She looked again at her tiny note.

Truce?

(Tentative)

Meet Midnight, Site of 2nd Encounter

Why ask her to come here? Admittedly, this was a pretty good place for a meeting. Batman obviously didn't want to reveal too much in case someone else saw the note; he was limited to obliquely referencing a rendezvous only they would recognize. Yet out of that short list, he chose the closest, warmest, and most likely to stay empty. It was savvy trade-craft and a nice gesture.

Or maybe he just picked a low number in case she hadn't kept count. Catwoman liked to think she had a gift for reading people, and usually that was true, but he was a tough nut to crack. What could he possibly want to talk about?

She sat on the professor's desk and idly swung her legs. The hour hand on the old wall clock made a heavy click. It was midnight. She had been waiting for nine minutes. This little college was relatively safe, sure, but the thief in her was getting itchy. The trick to trespassing was speed and stealth, not sitting on one's dainty hiney out in the open. That was trouble served up on a platter.

Yeah, and being caught in this room would be a lot of trouble.

...

Wait.

...

What if this was a trap?

She realized with growing unease that the room would be a good choice for that too. It was small; agility wouldn't help much. It was empty; there were no cavities to hide in and no platforms to climb. She didn't see anything that would make a good weapon. Collateral damage wouldn't be a concern, it

was just some mediocre paintings from spoiled rich kids. And worst of all, the escape routes were uncomfortably limited: just a single door and some hard-to-reach windows. This was why she was trapped so easily the first time.

Of course! That night here had been his only real win against her. What if he was reusing an old success story from the Bat-playbook?

And why hadn't she realized that ten minutes ago?

That slimeball!

She inhaled and exhaled, trying to calm down. Only rookies let their nerves control them in the field. The nation's jails were filled with rookies. No, this was a time to think.

Would Batman set a trap?

Sure, Batman loved traps. At least he loved setting them. He set them all the time. But his traps were always temporary and straightforward: tying a cord between two lampposts so some fat bank robbers tripped. He wouldn't lure someone to an ambush hours ahead of time. And she wasn't being a menace to society, she was having coffee! Would he set a trap like that with no provocation? And was he brazen enough to INVITE her to it?

That didn't sound like his style at all. If he wanted to arrest someone when their guard was down, he didn't deceive them with a disguise and a note, he dived through a skylight and kicked them in the face. And even if he wanted to trick her, why now? He had a year of opportunities. Catwoman couldn't remember doing anything particularly unwholesome recently. They hadn't even seen each other in weeks.

Still, there were certain rules of thumb you had to use with the Dark Knight. The Gotham underworld's favorite pastime was sharing their Bat-myths, and in those hundreds of stories there were two reoccurring lessons:

First, the Bat could hold a grudge like nobody's business.

Second, one way or another he always had a surprise.

Well, Catwoman was no illiterate leg-breaker. Batman didn't surprise her.

... At least, he didn't "always" surprise her.

Great.

She had the feeling in her gut that coming here might have been a bad idea. The other trick to trespassing was that you follow your gut. It had served her well. Catwoman pushed onto her feet and headed for the fractionally-open window where her rope hung.

Before she could cross the room, the door creaked open.

Chapter 3

Détente

Gotham City was a tough place to live. Walls were thin, rent was high, it smelled near the mills, and the weather gave Londoners depression. New buildings tended to cut corners after the Housing Commission went on strike - little details like fire escapes and termite nests. But the real millstone around the neck of the city was the people, that great rancid melting pot. A resident tended to grow edgy after the sixth or seventh mugging. Funnily enough, the brochures choose to advertise the city's diversity; they said a visitor could find just about any kind of person within twenty blocks if they looked hard enough. Unlike a lot of bombast farted out by the Board of Tourism, the locals agreed.

Indeed, a traveler with a keen eye for the streets could find all sorts of rare treasures of humanity. Outside Lowenbaum Department Store was a beggar who tried to convince passersby that he was an exiled Spanish prince. In the Narrows was a mother from Missouri who fed her ten kids by jumping in front of fancy cars to win negligence lawsuits. On 110st Street lived a respected dentist from Mumbai with constant bruises for having a funny accent and dark skin. In a Charlotte Grove high-rise lived a malpractice lawyer who got his kicks by hitting poor people with his car. And somewhere around Little Bucharest was an exiled Spanish prince.

So yes, you could find any kind of person in Gotham if you looked hard enough.

The unspoken corollary? They could also find you.

Of course, the deep end of this bell-curve, the concrete proof that you really could find anyone if you were dumb enough to try, was the Gotham celebrity criminal. Anyone could wear a silly hat and act out a shtick. Anyone could rob a bank. But very few could do both, and almost no one could do both repeatedly. That was the key. Outsiders assumed the sinister breed was famous for spectacle and panache, but what really set them apart was survival.

Of course, no regular Joe knew how the city's famed felons kept waking up on the friendly side of the dirt. Who could explain the astonishing longevity of a group whose insurance premiums rivaled the gross income of Denmark?

This ignorance didn't stop anyone from guessing, of course, though most of the theories would embarrass a tabloid editor. In truth, their trick was mundane (as opposed to their *tricks*, which were lurid and ridiculous). To start with, the costume set possessed an enormous lifetime supply of luck. They all had exceptional cunning. Keen street smarts were vital, but a robust immune system surely helped; you couldn't wait in the hospital all season for your bones to knit. They all had a natural intimidation factor, the gift to freeze a crowd with a sneer. Some said it was in the eyes, some in the way they walked. Finally, and perhaps the most vitally of all, each possessed phenomenal instincts.

It was because of those great instincts that Catwoman was leaping into a back-flip the moment the old door began to move. She landed in a crouch atop an ugly marble bust of Andrew Jackson, claws out and eyes trained on the entrance.

The door opened and Batman walked through. He stepped inside and looked up at her, not commenting on her obvious attack stance.

He waited.

She glared back, curiosity and confusion slowly eroding her pulsing battle-rage.

A gust of wind rattled the windows.

She remembered that a staring contest with Batman was like trying to out-wait a glacier. She would have to make the first move. Claws still out, Catwoman gently cleared her throat and spoke across the room. "Hi."

He nodded a micrometer. She wouldn't have noticed in the dark except that those ears made every head motion pretty obvious. "Catwoman."

Not the friendliest greeting, but his first words tended to be accusations, so she took it as an olive branch. She hopped off the bust and took a few steps forward. "You know, I've never seen you come through a front door." She stopped five paces away, retracted the claws, and crossed her arms. "So I guess this isn't a trap."

He frowned in what seemed like sincere confusion and swiftly looked around the room.

"You think I asked you here because of the close confines."

She nodded. "And the lack of nice handholds."

"The single entrance-"

"-and the raised windows." they both added simultaneously.

He paused and gave a grunt of agreement. "A misunderstanding."

"I'm disappointed." She tossed the crumpled note he gave her at the coffee shop. It bounced off his chest and he caught it. "If anyone's had practice explaining themselves in eight words, it's you."

Batman's eyes hardened at the implied jest, but he said nothing. Catwoman fiercely debated asking if there was any significance in bringing her to the one place he ever managed to corner her (as much as she hated to admit that out loud) and instead let her go, and also what the hell that meant, the cryptic jerk.

She took a subtle tack. "I don't suppose you picked this place for the fond memories."

He paused a moment. "The message had to be discreet. We both knew this site; it was least likely to be interrupted. That's all."

So he was just smart at picking meetings ... unless he was lying. She covered her scrutiny with a quip. "Or maybe you just picked a low number in case I lost count."

He looked at her impassively. "I have full confidence in your ability to count."

Catwoman rolled her eyes; it had sounded funnier in her head. *Whatever*, if this was still some absurdly-elaborate trap, she would deal with it. She turned and walked into the middle of the brightest beam of moonlight and gestured for him to follow, which Batman slowly did. They faced each other, now both easily visible.

"Let's try this again." She laid a hand over her mouth in fake astonishment. "My, if it isn't my favorite caped busybody. Did you ask me here to waltz a little? Maybe chat about the weather? How's your Christmas shopping?"

"I'm here to make a request."

"Seeing as how you've done nothing but try to make my life easier, why not?" She relished opening a few buckets of sarcasm. "What kind of favor are you looking for?"

"I came to negotiate the employment of your expertise for an illegal operation."

Catwoman cocked an eyebrow. "Do what?"

Batman frowned and repeated himself in a lower voice, "I requested your attention tonight because I wish to discuss the requisition of your particular ... skill set."

She grinned sardonically and tilted her head in mock confusion. "Pardon?"

Batman muttered again, so low that he was inaudible.

Catwoman leaned forward and cupped an ear, "Sorry, not used to hearing more than three syllables out of you."

Batman closed his eyes and breathed in a wintry dose of humility. He reluctantly enunciated, "Catwoman, there's a task I can't do alone. It's vital. I need your help."

Catwoman's mouth dropped in surprise, eyes expanding in luminous amusement. Then her gape lifted into a too-wide smile, a schoolgirl hearing the year's most scandalous gossip.

Batman forced his jaw shut so hard his teeth ground. Catwoman's satisfaction was annoying; he fiercely hated admitting weakness, especially to *her* ... insofar as she was a context of the criminal element, of course.

He held his tongue because the businessman in him recognized an opportunity. His biggest hurdle tonight would be crossing their gulf of mistrust, but she was smiling at him. In mockery, granted, but still a smile. If he didn't do anything stupid, he may have just found his bridge.

"So *you* need *my* help, huh? You must awfully desperate." Catwoman keep grinning but her tone was cautious, investigative.

His instinct said to get mean and righteous; that's how he usually motivated people. But the actor in him knew Catwoman had seen his Personification of Vengeance shtick (as she might call it) far too often. He had to go past his comfort zone. Of course, Batman's comfort zone rivaled the circumference of the Milky Way, so when the answer came, he found it both terrifying and terribly simple: it was time to be polite.

He stepped forward and looked deep into her eyes. "Catwoman, I do need your help ... please."

Inches away from each other, there was a moment of silence.

Then she whistled. "Wow."

He couldn't tell if it was awe or mockery.

Batman kept the apprehension out of his tone. "Well?"

"I'm flattered, Batman," She cupped his chin affectionately, "but you'll forgive a girl if past encounters make her a *touch* suspicious."

He stepped back and turned to the windows. "Than let me prove my sincerity. If the issue is money, you'll be handsomely paid."

"Well, you do know handsome, but I'm self-employed. Haven't taken a commission job in six months ..."

She walked a causal circle around him like she was judging a new car. When she reached his side, Catwoman leaned on his shoulder, plucked a gem out of her satchel, and held it up to the moonlight so they could both see.

"...and I doubt you can offer the kind of *scratch* I make anyway. Take this little prize. Do you have any idea how much a Suleiman emerald's worth?"

Batman resisted the urge to push her away or comment on the blatant larceny. "You're holding the Belgrade stone, smallest of the original Suleiman quartet but the only one that Napoleon the Third's niece didn't cut her initials into. It's about nine hundred dollars with your usual gem fence. Wait a

month and you might ransom it back to the museum for a thousand and a quarter."

"Of course you do." Catwoman rolled her eyes and put away the gem. "Dare I ask how you keep learning about my fences?"

He ignored the question and faced her again. "Help me and I can offer one and a half thousand for one night's work: no caped busybodies in your way, payment in cash."

He couldn't tell whether it was the "caped busybodies" or "payment in cash", but as he spoke her features lit up with sudden interest.

"Well, well. Fifteen hundred, huh? Been pickin' pockets off all those gangsters you beat up?" She paced away and tapped her lips, a bargainer's glint in her eye. "Alright, let's assume you can get the money, what's the pitch? Saving kittens from trees?"

He gave a dry look. She guessed it was the closest he got to a smile and called it a win. "No. Do you actually think I do that?"

"When you're not chasing after me that is, but I suppose everybody needs a hobby."

"I don't have hobbies."

"That's sad. What's the gig?"

"It's well-suited to your habits, though the environment's very different from your usual targets."

"You didn't answer my question, Batman."

"Fine."

Batman held out a dim photograph of a heavy door handle. There was a combination padlock on the latch constraining the handle and a large deadbolt above it.

"Here's the crux of the job. Can you open this?"

Catwoman took the photo and pulled a very small flashlight from inside her sleeve. Batman started to describe the picture, but Catwoman held out a finger and shushed him. He frowned but stopped talking.

She squinted at it for a brief moment, then turned off her light and nodded. "Yes, I can open this."

"How quickly?"

"Am I standing or hanging inverted?"

"Standing."

"Is there a lot of noise near the door?"

"Typical for a wilderness area. Wind. Footsteps. Possibly engines running nearby."

"Hmm. The padlock's the real challenge. I might crack the combination in about thirty-five seconds. Fifty at most. Depends."

"And the deadbolt?"

"*Pff*, this deadbolt's easy: five-pin, basic catalog model. Under seven seconds, no problem. Under four if it's not rusted."

"Seven seconds? Implausible."

"Implausible is you never tripping over that cape. Keep in mind, I play with bank safes. I can handle little deadbolt locks in my sleep," she poked him in the chest, "Now, assuming that's fast enough for you, where's your fifteen hundred dollar door?"

"I'd like to explain the story first."

"Oh?"

"You deserve to understand the ... gravity of the situation." He noticed the puzzled look on her face. "Problem?"

"Well, that's surprisingly thoughtful for an employer in this line of work."

He gave a modest head-tilt. "Fair warning, it may be unsettling."

"I'm a big girl, Batman. What's the story?"

He coughed primly into his fist. Batman's dark baritone suddenly turned less harsh. She noted that he almost sounded like a person, richer and using more full sentences. Catwoman wondered if this was how he normally talked when he wasn't yelling at psychopaths or splendid cat burglars.

"Since early November, I've been aware of an extensive ring of corpse thieves working in Gotham. They've stayed mostly unnoticed by targeting the unidentified deceased. The city morgues process an average of three unclaimed bodies a day, and this rate triples in winter. Their victims, usually the homeless, die with no will or relatives. The thieves have been entering the morgues with fake identities and taking these unclaimed cadavers soon after they're found, usually within a day of their arrival and cursory autopsy."

Catwoman gave a look of concern and disgust. "Why didn't you shut this group down in November?"

He frowned. "I've been busy."

She looked at him incredulously. "Really? Too busy for corpse thieves?"

"Yes." he said stiffly.

"Corpse thieves!"

"There are other considerations for-

"You've been running after pickpockets for a month when somebody's stealing bodies?"

He gave her a meaningful glare, "I respect the dead, but I protect the living. Bodies or not, the streets are desperate. Neighbors are mugging each other for food and propane! But I guess that variety of petty crime is beneath your interest."

"Hold on, I didn't mean to-

He raised his voice over her. **"I've seen stickups over children's gifts! Vagrants are fighting to the death tonight over warm places to sleep. Half the cops won't leave their cars if it drops below twenty. The road crews are in the pocket-**"

Catwoman held up her hands and yelled, "**Stop!** Alright! Fine, far be it from me to question your almighty priorities," she pointed a finger at him, "but unless you want me to walk away right now, don't you dare talk to me like I'm some heartless-" Batman almost added "thief" but kept his mouth shut. "-some heartless, privileged hedonist."

They eyed each other with bitter intensity. Under his cape, Batman thumbed the edge of a flash pellet. Catwoman discretely palmed the handle of her whip. It felt like old times.

But this time, neither moved. The wind rattled the windows.

Idiot, Batman berated himself, *provoked with one irrelevant criticism*. This was why he didn't seek allies. Now the night was ruined, but he had other contingencies; they just happened to be substantially more dangerous. Frankly, the encounter had lasted longer than he had expected. It was time to disengage. Ready to counter her inevitable strike, he idly considered an escape route.

But seconds passed and the attack didn't come. This was so amazing that Batman stopped his tactical planning and actually looked at her. Catwoman was clearly upset, a mix of wounded pride and ... dejection? Whatever it was, it wasn't hostility. She hadn't issued a threat, just a demand for respect. He only heard a threat because he was so used to hearing them.

Batman muttered internally. So they were *both* acting out of habit. *Were they just a pair of maladjusted pubescents?*

Surely his city was doomed.

He let out a breath and stood down. Recalling every lesson he knew on acting contrite (there weren't many), Batman stared at the floor. "I don't think of you as privileged. Or a hedonist. And I wouldn't have come here if I thought you were heartless."

She stared at him, forceful but undecided, a loose stick-shift hovering between third and neutral. Finally, she nodded. "I guess I accept your apology. I was just a little surprised grave-robbing was a problem these days," she shrugged, "or this century."

Catwoman tried to play it cool, but Batman could see what had stayed her hand. There was interest in her face; she was eager to hear the rest of the story.

Catwoman leaned against an easel and moved an errant lock of hair from over her shoulder. "So you've been too busy to stop the body snatchers. What's changed?"

"They've escalated. Three nights ago, a homeless couple: Wendell and Alice Dupree, were smothered in their sleep behind the 8th Street Train Station at roughly eleven o'clock. According to the coroner's report, the bodies were discovered by an anonymous bystander within ten minutes of their death. They were processed at the morgue less than half an hour later and the bodies disappeared shortly after midnight." He paused and looked her in the eye. "The odds of a corpse being found so quickly after death are slim-"

"-But the reaction time of the city is unprecedented. The coroners were in on it. It was staged."

Batman nodded. "I already knew morgue technicians had to be passively complicit, but this suggests a larger conspiracy. The prior thefts occurred long after their respective cadavers were discovered, suggesting the thieves didn't know of the deaths until the morgue reported them. In other words, crimes of opportunity."

"Like vultures."

He nodded again. "But the thieves somehow knew just when the Duprees would arrive; the murders were either performed or paid for by the thieves themselves."

"Then go rough up some morgue technicians, find the thieves, dangle them over a building, and leave them for the cops."

"It's not that simple."

"Why?"

"I haven't been the only one aware of these thefts. Other morgue employees have tried to involve the authorities, but every investigation gets stonewalled. Several of the whistle-blowers have been fired. Someone exceptionally powerful is protecting these conspirators. If I harass the drones at the bottom, the leader will see me coming and hide or retaliate. I need to destroy the program from the top."

"Do you have any idea who that powerful someone is?"

"Perhaps. Once I heard about the murders, I found evidence that the thieves carried the two cadavers away in a refrigerated truck that left the city heading northwest."

"Then they could be anywhere."

"Fortunately, a Gotham Turnpike operator fifty-nine miles upstate remembered seeing an ice truck pass through early the following morning. He said the truck was memorable because the driver tried to avoid paying the toll, claiming 'military business' and showing War Department papers."

"The War Department? Why does the Army want fresh corpses so bad they're willing to kill Americans to get them?"

"I don't know." He paused and then spoke very carefully. "The possibilities are deeply troubling."

"Isn't this just another corruption case? You've taken on the government before."

"I've stopped bureaucrats and petty officials. Military law is different. There's no telling how far up the chain of command this murder was approved, let alone what officer runs the program. The Army's been mobilizing since July. Catwoman, Washington has granted certain projects ... remarkable autonomy." She spied in his stony visage about one-fifth of what most people called dismay. "I can't begin to speculate what these conspirators are capable of."

A mouse ran across the floor and disappeared into the wall. She gave him a strange, uncomfortable look. It almost seemed like sympathy. He frowned. Was she worried about him? *No*, he decided, Batman never evoked sympathy. He must have misread her expression. She was simply concerned for her own safety. Such a massive abuse of authority might hurt anyone.

Again, Catwoman couldn't hear his internal monologue and broke the silence. "I think I'm starting to see where I come into this. The only Army property in that direction is Fort Morrison."

"Yes."

"You plan on visiting?"

"I went last evening."

"And that's where the door is?"

Batman nodded gravely. "The base was exceptionally well guarded."

"It's a military garrison."

"Even by the standards of an active Army site. Trust me."

"Okay. What did you find?"

"Our truck from the morgue. It was parked at a long brick building. One story, no windows. Unfortunately, the building had very secure entrances. Guard checkpoints. ID passes. Floodlights."

"I get the idea. How'd you take a photo this close then?"

"The building had three doors: the main personnel door in the front, guarded and frequently used; a garage door on the side, rarely needed but also guarded; and a third door in the back," he pointed at the photo, "Locked but unmanned."

"No one posted nearby?"

"Out of all static lines of sight."

Catwoman nearly purred. "Very nice."

"Even then, picking the lock and cracking the combination would have taken me at least two minutes, long enough for the patrols to find me."

"Two minutes? That's pretty amateur."

"As you said, I usually don't use the door."

"Then you realized what you were up against and left to find me?"

"No. Then I spent yesterday attempting to disguise myself as a corpse, but I realized acting dead convincingly during an autopsy would take weeks of preparation."

She laughed lightly.

"What's funny?"

"Your joke about the...oh. Really?"

He looked at her deadpan.

She waved away the comment. "Forget it. Go on."

"I realized my only sound options required a partner, a practiced infiltrator who can bypass the locks faster than I can. Someone who can take care of herself in dangerous situations. Someone with skills in-

"If you don't quit now, I just might blush. I don't suppose you've considered writing a letter to General Marshall instead? Maybe send a telegram to Roosevelt? Who has the power to stop it?"

"Depends on who's behind it. The President, certainly. The congressional military committees. Certain flag officers. Possibly a federal judge. In any case, I'd need damning proof from deep inside that building: photographs of the bodies or copies of incriminating orders. That should compel a real investigation no matter who ordered it. If it's protected all the way to the top, then we take it to the people. I know newspaper editors that might risk printing it. But that's worst case scenario. I'd rather not involve any innocents. I won't let good people get hurt for this."

She took a defiant stance with her hands on her hips. "So instead you call me."

Batman mentally slapped himself. "Catwoman, I'm...I'm sorry. That was a poor choice of words."

"Oh, your words are just fine. First 'please', now 'sorry'. I guess your mother's proud she raised you right."

For half a blink, Batman grimaced and looked past her. This reaction was so minor and brief that Catwoman barely noticed it. She could have sworn that, for a moment, her favorite human Maoi statue had looked *vulnerable*. But how could that be?

That would mean ... had she hurt his feelings?

More importantly: he had *feelings*?

No. She must have imagined it. Batman was just staring away to find clues or something, probably going through calculus proofs until she calmed down.

Still, no point in being a jerk; that was his job.

Catwoman sighed and dropped the pose.

"I get it, we're not innocents when we put on the masks," she smiled, "me especially."

Batman was wise enough to keep quiet, even if he really, really agreed. He gave a non-committal head-tilt. She began to pace around him again.

"So, to reiterate: you want my help breaking into a very tightly-defended building in Fort Morrison, a superbly well-defended military installation that Batman himself found too hot to handle? And if I'm caught, assuming I'm not shot to pieces in the process, I would be tried for high treason and thrown into the deepest, dirtiest hole they can find."

"Essentially."

"I guess it's my patriotic duty then. But I want double: three grand," she gave a grin and a wink, "and let's say twenty percent up front."

She was joking about the up-front payment, of course. Even if the Bat carried money around (and why would he?), there was no way he had that much on hand. Three thousand was nearly double what most locals made in a year.

He looked at her impassively. *Right, no sense of humor.* "I was just kidd-"

"Done."

Batman pulled out a roll of bills. To her utter astonishment, he began to count Benjamins into her hand.

"Meet sundown. Two days. Rodger's Repair Shop, it's a condemned building on the Turnpike just north of town."

Catwoman was busy staring at the crisp six hundred bucks in her hands. "Uh, yeah. Sure. Sundown. You do know I was joking about the twenty percent, right?"

"Be rested. Bring every tool you feel comfortable using. We can discuss a detailed plan then."

"Do you always carry this much green around?"

"Depends."

"On the sudden need to buy a house?"

Batman turned to leave. "Two days. Sundown."

Chapter 4

Small Talk

Bruce Wayne hated sleep. Sleep was when the demons came. For eighteen years it was the same montage: the metal click of the hammer; the bulb-flash of the muzzle turning off the night; two CRACKs of thunder; the airy musk of burnt saltpeter; a pause; then her string of weightless pearls in free fall; a strong grip fading off his shoulder; his own shaking hands, too pitiful to intervene; and finally, inevitably, his reflection in the wet cement.

And the pain didn't dull with repetition. His unconscious was Hell's own jazz band - it had a knack for inventing fresh twists on the classics. Maybe one night the assailant turned the gun on him too. Maybe the moon fell out of the sky and crushed the city. Maybe tiny worms crawled out of everyone's skin. His mind brewed misery with a variety that had not run stale in eighteen years. He passed his waking hours knowing torture hid behind his eyelids.

But even that wasn't always so simple. A few visions were far stranger than mere nightmare: abstract pastiches and alien notions, rhymes, tessellations, sense memories warped to the fringe of the inscrutable, sound and fury signifying nothing. It was the boiling opiate intersection of Picasso and Bosch. He was a man having a stroke in a carnival, a drowning kaleidoscope. These rare dreams were cold and meaningless. Though painless they unsettled him, made him question reality when he awoke. Bruce wasn't sure what brought on these psychedelic visions. It wasn't toxin exposure or heat stroke; he knew both. Bruce resented having some loose part of his psyche mocking his quest for self-knowledge.

In either case, whether violently coherent or unnervingly surreal, Bruce tried to avoid his dreams. This he mostly did by staying awake as long as possible, a harsh limit discovered through a lifetime of trial and error. Bruce occasionally wondered what this lean cycle would do to his longevity. He doubted he would reach an age to find out.

Still, all men must sleep. When forced to rest, Bruce had other ways to keep the ghosts at bay. The most

common was exercise. As a child, he discovered by happy accident that if he wore himself out swimming or playing in the schoolyard, he would sometimes fail to dream. Once he recognized this, it became his drug. And like all drugs, he had to push his limits as his tolerance grew. Bruce wasn't born an athlete; he was compelled to it.

With his superlative fitness, this trick hadn't been reliable for years. He could earn a peaceful night's rest by running a mile when he was twelve, but today he could run a marathon and his odds of peace wouldn't break fifty-fifty. So, he pursued other methods. In his traveling days, Bruce sought out the distant masters of the contemplative arts. In studying meditation, he steadily cracked the common limits of the mind. Most revolutionary of all these techniques was the art of clearing the subconscious before slumber. Yet even this was a salve, not a cure. To meditate, Bruce needed to empty his thoughts, a task which demanded patience and calm. By the time he got home he was often too tired to bother.

However burdensome meditation was, at least it was safe. The real dilemma was medicine. Sleep research was an infant field, but there were plenty of drugs that shut off dreams entirely, if only for a night. For obvious reasons, these were among the first he studied. He knew the recipes by heart. And in the bad days, the days when waking and sleeping competed in the hurt they could bring, it was a seductive option indeed. There had been evenings as a young man when he sat on the cold tile of his bathroom floor with a tiny cup of pharmaceuticals in hand. He would sit and ponder, watching the swirls of the liquid inside. But in the end he always poured it down the drain. Bruce knew far too many addicts to solve his problems with a chemical. It didn't matter how often his own screaming woke him up.

Finally, and on very seldom occasions, Bruce slept without dreaming for no reason at all. Such was the case last night: he simply fell into bed at four in the morning, brain boiling with plans and worries, then nothing. Now it was half past ten. He didn't feel anxious or bleak, just rested.

Pleasantly half-awake, he enjoyed the serenity of the moment, the texture of fine cotton sheets and the scent of the mint plant on the windowsill. In some tiny back office of his perception, Bruce heard the wall clock's minute hand click smoothly over the six.

A moment later, heavy curtains were pulled back and a regiment of sunlight pillaged every nerve endings on Bruce's face.

He blinked and saw a thin figure silhouetted in the light. The towering figure leaned over him and spoke.

"Rise and shine, Master Bruce."

Bruce Wayne was not a child. He didn't try petty tricks, pleading or turning over. They wouldn't have worked. Instead, he frowned and sat up.

"Good morning, Alfred."

"Good morning, sir. You didn't ring the trauma bell when you got in. No injuries I presume?"

"No."

"Good. Legal status?"

"Unaltered."

"Suit damage?"

"None."

"A refreshing change. And I must say you seem in high spirits this morning."

"I slept well."

Bruce wasn't smiling but did seem uncharacteristically relaxed, a nuance which spoke volumes for a practiced eye like Pennyworth's. The younger man pushed stiffly out of bed and accepted the offered glass of water. He took a sip and said no more, but Alfred wasn't fooled, having been awakened by the boy's screaming more often than the boy woke himself. But a gentleman was tactful. He let the miracle slide.

"Very good, sir. Your four newspapers are on the dresser. Breakfast is cooling downstairs." Alfred headed for the door. "Do hurry, I expect full details of last night's events when you're finished."

Bruce fought an old instinct to roll his eyes. Alfred Pennyworth had very few priorities in life that outranked knowledge of Batman's operations. Ensuring that Bruce Wayne got enough to eat was one of them.

Cities the size and age of Gotham had an almost recursive depth. Outsiders may stereotype, but Gothamites knew that each of the seven districts had its own story, and every community in those districts carried a certain attitude found nowhere else. Sometimes a single block could be its own little country.

A classic example was the Newmar-Harlow Building.

The East End was the second or third ugliest district in the city (depending on who you asked and whether it had rained that day). The general standard of living rivaled Dickensian Manchester, except the East End dealt with industrial chemicals that the Victorians hadn't invented yet. An East Enders possessed a vocabulary half the breadth of the average American but knew fourfold the obscenities. It was the only place in North America where the muskrat was both a staple food and a leading cause of death.

Yet East Enders weren't all the same. The old jokes claimed they were all Scots-Irish bachelors, but a solid third of the district was taken by the Tricolour: a residential community of poor Greeks and very poor Hungarians, all married with children. One of the worst-kept secrets of Gotham politics was that, due to a quirk in the migraine-inducing shapes of city voting precincts, the Alderman's Seat always went to whichever candidate could win both sides of the Tricolour. Thus, a savvy Alderman aimed to unite the Greeks and Hungarians long enough to get elected and then sow discord between them to ruin future contenders. That second step was the easy one; Gotham's Greeks and Hungarians hated each other with a barely-contained passion no one else understood.

But even this wasn't the whole story. In the very center of the Tricolour was the Red Hill neighborhood,

a ribbon of townhouses that ran between the Greek and Hungarian halves. Red Hill was almost exclusively a Negro area - families with deep roots and a few new faces up from Charleston. Relations with the bordering whites were cordial, but neither side passed though if they could help it, so Tricolour's two big rivals were effectively quarantined. All parties tacitly agreed this was probably for the best. City leaders prayed nightly that it stayed that way. Besides its strange role as a demographic no-man's land, Red Hill was also famous for its sandstone brick facades and Prohibition jazz clubs.

On the east side of Red Hill was Kitt Street, named for its founding resident, Benedict Kitt: 19th century German-Jamaican textile magnate, abolitionist, and attempted revolutionary. In 1863, Kitt witnessed the Draft Riots when over a hundred minority locals were killed out of racial spite. It was a solitary tragedy, but Kitt mistook it as the first tremors of a national pogrom.

Surveying Gotham, he purchased all the colored slums within three blocks of his home and bought the rights to rename the land after himself (his altruism never tempered his ego). Kitt then spent his fortune building a nation-in-miniature: a hotel, a civic center, a school, a post office, a stable, a newspaper, a public green, and even a hospital. Finally in 1865, on New Year's Day, he lit several hundred fireworks and declared independence from the Union, confidently ignoring the well-known anti-independence-from-the-Union policy the Union held at the time. Kitt's dream was that his neighbors would realize the inevitable race war and move to his glorious new country.

Kitt and six friends were arrested in minutes. It took an hour for the authorities to realize that the idiot setting off illegal fireworks was committing treason.

This weird episode would have concluded with Red Hill getting a fine set of new public buildings, but unfortunately a stray firework landed in a pile of trash, eventually burning down all of Kitt's empire save for the hotel and hospital. The charred land eventually filled back in as before, leaving the cutting-edge medical center and the four-story luxury palace out of place among the shanties and flophouses. The plumbing alone would have been a zoning nightmare had Gotham possessed a functional zoning board.

The hotel passed through many hands as such white elephants are wont to until it became a set of apartments catering to the doctors who worked in the hospital next door. The hospital, eventually called East End General, soon became famous for its local pro bono work. It was out of respect for these doctors alone that the apartments hadn't been vandalized to destruction decades ago.

Under the most recent management since 1929, Kitt's dream hotel was now called the Newmar-Harlow Building.

Selina Kyle lived on the third floor of the Newmar-Harlow Building. Its apartments were far nicer than the price implied, a real four-star treatment at a two-star cost. After all, the market for upscale housing tended to be weak on streets where the garbage cans smelled like muskrat. This lean price tag suited Selina just fine. Her personal assets were decidedly *not* liquid at the moment: you couldn't pay rent with a Nubian relic.

Furthermore, the East End in general and Red Hill in particular were very unfriendly to cops (to put it lightly). On the very slim chance the fuzz managed to catch a whiff of her less licit activities and came knocking, her neighbors would sooner lick a trash bin than snitch on a friendly local. A lady in her line of work found this trait useful.

It had been a strange night for Selina. She finally fell asleep by two-twenty and was up by six, much earlier than Bruce Wayne on both counts. Whereas his sleep was remarkably peaceful, her mind was churning the whole time; she told herself it was just the coffee. And while Bruce was met upon waking by an old friend, Selina was alone. She had to call one.

Pfeiffer's Wharf was a mere twelve blocks from the Newmar-Harlow Building. Unlike most of Gotham's beaches, it was pleasantly devoid of broken bottles or dead fish. Gulls squawked lazily overhead. A line of massive cargo ships puttered along the horizon. Here, Selina Kyle and Maven Lewis jogged along the cold sand in jackets and winter trousers, their scarves trailing behind them. The two were friends and occasional business partners. Selina ran fresh as a daisy with long, even strides. Maven didn't.

"Huuu, huuu, huu. Ste- Stop! Stop. Need to catch my *bre-huuu*-breath."

Maven hunched over and panted her lungs out. Selina, a few yards ahead of her, begrudgingly stopped and jogged in place.

"Come on Maven, if you fall over, you'll get sand in your glasses. We've gone two measly miles."

Maven lacked the strength to lift her head but raised a finger in objection, "*Huuuuu, huuu, huuu* - Two miles - *huuu, huuu* - over sand dunes - *huuuuu huuu* - in December - *huuuuu, huuu, huuuuu* - you lunatic."

"I wouldn't call these little bumps 'sand dunes'. Let's make it to the dock and then we can get breakfast. You know I can't think straight before my run."

"Do you think straight, *phuuuuuu*, ever?" Maven brushed her sweat-frazzled ponytail off her shoulder and aching stood up. "Fine, but your news had better be dynamite."

"Like you wouldn't believe, Mave."

"And you're paying."

Beside the pool in the Manor's sun parlor was a small exercise corner. It was mostly for show - Bruce hadn't used dumbbells that small since he started shaving - but he did take advantage of the corner for short warmups; it was a lot closer to the rest of the home than his main gym. The gear was of the finest brands, of course, York Barbell and Z. Ogger Athletics, but today he only needed his cheap jump-rope: four minutes, five hundred turns. Then a shower. Then breakfast.

Most mornings, Bruce Wayne ate at a small table adjacent to the kitchen in the back of the East Wing. It used to be where the Manor's retinue of servants ate, in the days when that number was much larger than one. Bruce knew from old family stories that certain ancestors of his might take offense at their scion eating in a dim corner like a scullery maid, but if the house had any indignant ghosts around, he didn't care. He refused to let Alfred go through the burden of setting up the great dining hall every day for only one diner. And eating alone in that massive room was terribly depressing. Those priggish Waynes were never the heroes in his family stories anyhow.

"Your breakfast, sir." Alfred carried over a pewter tray with a two cranberry muffins, diced pears, seven

poached eggs, and hot tea, all on fine china. Bruce nodded and began to consume with the indifferent efficiency he gave most domestic tasks.

Alfred virtually never ate with Bruce despite a lifetime of offers; the manservant had an ironclad sense of propriety about that sort of thing. Instead, he stood nearby and started the Morning Report.

The Report evolved out his breakfast reminders when Bruce was a teenager, mentioning the day's appointments and other news. When Bruce returned to the Manor as a young man, he requested that Alfred restart the tradition with a bit of an expanded scope. After all, Mr. Bruce Anthony Wayne wore many hats: business executive, philanthropist, host, travel enthusiast, real estate tycoon, serial romantic, and member of seven civic groups and three social clubs. Bruce found that keeping track of even three or four of these roles fiercely taxed his attention. Having a comprehensive four minute life summary to start the day was invaluable.

"-And at five past three, I'll supervise the weekly dusting of the fourth floor. The chaps from Wriggly Janitorial have proven thorough and discreet; if they do well this time, I'll offer them the full winter contract. The usual rates. Oh, and Mr. Fox called earlier this morning. He requested you in the office by ten. If you're willing to run the abbreviated variation of your mid-day exercise, we can easily get into the city by a quarter to one."

Bruce never stopped eating to nod or respond, but Alfred knew he was listening. Their bond was deep and needed few pleasantries. With familiar synchronicity, Bruce finished his last bite seconds after Alfred's talk concluded. Bruce dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "No need to delay, Alfred. I'm skipping exercise today."

Alfred Pennyworth nearly coughed in surprise. Unless he was in traction, Bruce loathed missing a training session. "Is that so, sir?"

"Yes, if we head to the office early then we can return early. I have a few loose ends to wrap up tonight, the sooner the better. I'll also be cutting patrol much shorter. I intend to be in by eleven."

"Careful, Master Bruce, that timetable almost sounds civilized."

Bruce gave him a look. "Risible. I'm trying to save my energy."

Alfred put the dirty plates back on the tray. "I don't suppose this rest is merely a well-deserved gift to yourself."

"My birthday was last week."

"A delayed gift, then. I seem to recall you celebrated your birthday by attending your own party for a single hour-

"And a half."

"-before slinking off to watch fungus samples under a microscope until morning."

"That fungus proved to be the lynchpin of a vital investigation."

"Indeed."

"Besides, I knew the guests had your charm and wit to entertain them, Alfred."

"Save the flattery, Master Wayne, I already made you breakfast."

"Regardless, it was a worthwhile endeavor"

Alfred gave the young man a calculating look. "And was last evening a worthwhile endeavor?"

Bruce sighed. "I suppose now I tell you how my night went?"

"Yes, Master Bruce, I suppose you do."

Selina and Maven conspired over pancakes in a corner booth at Granny Pickens, the only breakfast diner in the East End with a live fireplace during winter. They both loved pancakes, and Selina found it convenient that Granny Pickens was both religiously opposed to gossip and nearly deaf.

"-and he says that's where the truck ended up. So evidently they've transported these bodies to an Army base upstate. He needs me to crack some locks so he can get proof that Uncle Sam is in cahoots with the thieves and blow the gig wide open."

"Can you tell it again? Slowly?"

"Maven, that's the third time. It's not that difficult."

"No, not all this cloak-and-dagger hooley. I mean," she looked around to ensure they were still alone and whispered, "you actually talked to *The Batman!*"

Selina couldn't help but chuckle. Maven was usually the level-headed one. Plus, if she played it cool, it was easier to pretend that a tiny, irritating corner of her mind hadn't been playing the exact same tune since she woke up.

"Yes Mave, I talked to *The Batman.*"

"The Real McCoy?"

"His invitation."

"And? And?"

"And naturally, he was a pompous killjoy, but less so than usual. It was a nice chat," Selina gave a cavalier shrug, as if such things were weekly parlor games.

Maven whistled. "Alright, paint the scene for me. What was he like?"

"Don't you want to talk about the job I accepted? The one where I commit espionage on the federal

government? Or about the cabal of Army-sponsored body snatchers roaming the streets? Or how I'm set to jump two tax brackets if this goes through?"

"Ha. As if you reported all your income."

"Hey, you know I'm careful. That's how they got Capone."

"I was kidding, honey. I used to file your taxes. And no, I don't want to talk about any of that. Or, more accurately, I know better."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"How long have we known each other, Selina?"

"Are we counting Monaco?"

"Naturally."

"Baltimore?"

"Yes."

"Ottawa?"

Maven hissed, "*Ottawa never happened.*"

"Geesh, you'll never let that go, will you? The boxcar wasn't even that bad."

"Ottawa ... Never ... Happened."

"Fine. Ignoring Ottawa, we've known each other about six years."

"And in those six years, how many times have you done something reckless?"

Selina pursed her lips like a scholar struggling for an obscure bit of trivia. "Several ... dozen?"

"Several dozen a year, at least. If I got worked up every time you were in way over your head, I'd have a conniption. However you do it, by now I'm sure you know what you're doing," Maven nodded emphatically, "And I'm double sure I couldn't change your mind anyway."

Selina let out a dramatic sigh. "Fine. What do you want to know about Batman?"

"Is he really seven feet tall?"

"Off by about a foot."

Maven gasped. "He's eight feet tall?"

"Guess again."

"Did he appear in a gust of wind?"

"Uh, no."

Maven readjusted her glasses and leaned forward. "Were there little bats following him around in the rafters?"

"No."

"Did you smell brimstone? Did his shadow move on its own accord?"

"No and no."

"Did his eyes look into your soul?"

"You actually can't see his eyes, there's some sort of frosted glass in the way."

"Did he fly in?"

"He walked in."

"Does he grow bigger when he gets angry?"

"No."

"He's an experiment gone horribly wrong!"

"Excuse me?"

"Maybe he seems immortal because he's a clone. He dies and they send another."

"Well, I can't disprove that, but he sounded like the same guy. Moved like him too."

"A commie agent!"

"That's-"

"No, better, a team of disgruntled cops that take matters into their own hands."

"I've already said it's one guy."

"Maybe there is a group of Bat-men but you happen to meet the same one each time."

"Maven."

"Oh! Maybe it's always the same one because he's *assigned* to you!"

"By whom?"

"Moscow!"

"Honestly, Maven. Where do you hear these things?"

Maven shrugged sheepishly. "Here and there. Don't pretend this isn't fascinating! He's a living legend! I mean, golly, you practically just had tea with Santa Claus. Or Dracula."

"You and everybody else in the city, huh? I've told you a thousand times; he's not a demon or a ghost or whatever else you think he is. And I admit he may be fascinating-"

"Ah-ha!"

"-but so is a car wreck. That genius who went over Niagara in a barrel was fascinating. I wouldn't exactly invite him to lunch."

Maven knew Selina better than that. "Are you sure you're not downplaying this just a tiny bit?"

"Cross my heart. He's a big lug with a balled up code of morality and a poor sense of self-preservation, nothing more."

"Said the pot to the kettle."

"Hey!" Selina gave an offended pout and crossed her arms. Her companion took the opportunity to steal half her pancake.

Maven had the patience and goodwill found in the best diplomats and kindergarten teachers, so she never bothered to match Selina quip for quip. It was easy to forget she had a wit of her own, making her rare *bon mots* all the sharper.

Maven talked as she chewed. "Look - *Mmm* - I'm tired of living vicariously through you." She stifled a burp, "I'm coming to see him."

"Maven dear, trust my voice of experience. Things around Batman tend to be very ... *active*."

"So?"

"You couldn't run three miles."

"I could if I had a good reason. Just bring me along and see what he says."

"Look, I'm sure Batman, well, actually I'm not sure *how* he'd react." Selina pondered at the ceiling.

"That's an interesting question. He'd probably grunt and ignore you. Then he'd yell at me for bringing a guest."

"Shoot." Maven slumped onto the table.

Selina shrugged apologetically and took a gulp of orange juice. "Any other questions?"

"Fine. If you thought he was so unexceptional, how would you describe him?"

Selina tried to speak but paused. Her habit would naturally be to fire off a nice zinger at Sir Frowny-face's expense. It was fun and easy. But some answers weren't supposed to be fun and easy. Batman was a lot of things, but she suddenly wasn't in the mood to make him a punchline.

How would she describe him?

Big. Intense. Powerful. Sure.

Clever. Stupid. Both true.

Deceptively quiet. Yeah.

Focused. Cold. Fair enough.

But those missed the heart of it. Of him. There was something about talking to the Dark Knight when they weren't trying to eviscerate each other. Some nuance rose to the surface, underpinning all he said and did. She realized that now. But what was it exactly?

Hmm ...

"Hello! Earth to Selina?"

"Hmm?"

"It's your turn. How would you describe Batman?"

Selina looked down and fidgeted with her glass. Finally, the nuance coalesced.

"Unhappy."

Maven waved dismissively. "Everybody knows he's angry. That's his-"

Selina looked up. "No. Not angry, unhappy."

"Not angry?"

"You've just heard the stories. Batman gets in fights, so of course they say he's vicious and crazy."

"And?"

"It's a biased survey. They didn't stop and listen to him. I did."

"So, he's not angry."

"Well, no. Listen. I've seen him get vicious, sure, but only when he has to be violent. Or when his, I don't know, *values* are insulted."

She got a dry look in response.

Selina's pitch turned adamant. "I get this is hard to believe, but the rest of the time he's-"

"He's what, Selina? Pleasant?"

"Calm."

"He's calm?"

"Very calm. Even civil. But he's not happy. He's ... miserable."

"Did he mention this?"

"No."

"How could he be miserable? No one's forcing him to do this. He must get a kick out of it."

"Hey, I can tell. I've watched him and I could tell."

"Alright, then why is he miserable?"

"I ... I don't know," It hurt to admit a plain truth, "I have no idea. Who knows why the Hell he does anything? But he's not a raving psychopath."

The two ladies sat in melancholy silence. Selina regretted sucking the fun out of the room.

Fortunately, Maven was never one to brood for long. "Well, at least we learned one interesting thing from last night."

"What's that?"

Maven pointed with her fork and winked. "Psycho or not, when Batman really needed help, you were the first on his list."

"Master Bruce, pray tell again why you choose the candidate who was ninth on your list."

Bruce Wayne stood tall in front of his wardrobe mirror, applying a dab of cosmetic concealer to a small bruise on his neck. Alfred attended nearby, a selection of bold neckties draped over his arm. Alfred was giving Bruce a keenly skeptical look, his way of muttering '*... you raving psychopath.*'

It was a show of sublime respect that Bruce chose to ignore it.

"We discussed this. The first eight choices had insurmountable personal or operational shortcomings. She was the best, or if you prefer," Bruce rubbed the dab invisible, "the most tolerable."

Bruce put on a crisp white shirt and began to button. Alfred wasn't so easily assured.

"Forgive me for acting the broken record, but are you quite sure? Perhaps one more review of your options wouldn't be remiss."

After breakfast, Bruce began last night's tale: breaking up a fight in the Min Lee Marketplace, aiding an elderly couple whose car collided with a lamppost, saving the USS Gotham Bay, and so on. Bruce saved the meeting the elusive Catwoman for last. He stubbornly pretended all Bat-missions were equally worthwhile lest he cast doubt on his scrupulous prioritizing. Alfred tolerated the charade with typical patience.

When it was finally time to tell the story of the classroom encounter, Bruce kept the description brief. Just the facts. He downplayed her ... less professional remarks.

He also omitted their strange meta-conversation of body language entirely. To be fair, he was still trying to translate it.

Bruce finished the last button and straightened his cuffs. "I'm not pleased with this either, but as I said last night, at least she's not actively hostile-

"My missing yards of suture thread say differently."

"-and she's proven amiable to reason, two very rare traits in my circle of contacts."

"If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas, Master Bruce. One can only presume cats - as the less trustworthy of the two beasts - promise even nastier consequences."

Bruce studied the part of his hairline and adjusted a follicle. "Poetic."

"Every time you've mentioned this Miss Kyle in the past, you harp on her as capricious, flippant, and mercenary."

"And I'm confident that third trait will keep the first two in line."

Alfred chuckled darkly. "Oh-ho. I have a few words for your brazen show of money later, but for now I'm merely baffled and concerned that your opinion of her has improved so drastically. I fear this situation is impairing your judgment."

"Isn't it possible I've thought too little of her in the past?"

"Is it?"

"Perhaps."

"Would 'perhaps' be an acceptable standard if you hadn't imminent desire of her services?"

"No. But that doesn't make the situation any less dire. She gives this mission marginally better odds than if I acted alone. I can't say that for the rest of the list."

Seeing an impasse, the two men retreated into a heavy silence.

Alfred had his own history of military intrigue (a gripping tale for another day), and had involved himself in this operation at every step. Their "list" was a rough sketch of possible accomplices hashed out after Bruce returned from Fort Morrison a failure. The list's only criterion was that the accomplice be an expert lockbreaker. The rest was up for debate.

So they debated.

The first on the list was Hugh Gilbert: a police technician Batman once aided who was also a trusted friend of Detective Gordon, meaning he was both competent and honest. Bruce eventually nixed the idea. Hugh was indeed a master locksmith, but even if he was willing to help (a big if), they admitted he had no practice in infiltration. Plus, jeopardizing an honest cop in Gotham was like using a unicorn to check for landmines.

The second choice was Morton Brackenburger, the city's least scrupulous private investigator. He was the sort of PI with a revoked license in five states and seventeen restraining orders. Brackenburger was one of the few men on the planet who trespassed on more properties in a week than the Caped Crusader. He had a reputation for taking on any target for any customer. Unfortunately, Brackenburger was booked solid for a month and he never dropped a client.

So they continued, proposing shadier and shadier characters in growing desperation until Bruce suggested the intractable Catwoman. Alfred thought it was a joke. Bruce, sour to the notion as soon as he brought it up, skipped to the next idea. But hours passed and the prospects grew thin. Bruce, in a moment of frustrated indifference, once again nominated Catwoman and, to their astonishment, neither man was able to find anything disqualifying. The decision was made: Bruce, a resigned yes; Alfred, a begrudging no contest.

Though he still couldn't conceive of anyone better, Alfred was now having second thoughts. As Bruce turned and examined the ties, they entered a tepid stalemate. Bruce usually had an enormous tolerance for uncomfortable silences, but the tactician in him realized he needed Alfred's input now more than ever. This was no time for a grudge. He tried to recall all his recently-proven apology skills.

Bruce cleared his throat awkwardly, "You know, I succeeded last night thanks to you."

"May I suggest the gold and blue Brooks Brothers? And how so?"

Bruce selected the offered tie. "The encounter had ... emergent rhetorical challenges. I would have failed without your tactical analysis."

"Tactical analysis? I don't recall-"

"Your negotiation techniques."

"Oh." Alfred nearly rolled his eyes, "I wouldn't call my advice last night 'negotiation techniques', Master Bruce. I believe a more suitable phrase would be 'simple courtesies' or 'basic etiquette'."

Frankly, Bruce didn't care what they were called. Alfred's ideas were superb.

It was Alfred who suggested psychological judo kata like "please" and "thank you", two pleasantries

Batman suppressed out of habit.

It was Alfred who implored that he hold his temper and find emotional commonalities.

And it was Alfred who insisted he invite Catwoman to neutral territory instead of his usual opening move: breaking into her home.

Batman was skeptical at first, but he trusted Alfred so he tried the ideas. He couldn't argue with success.

For his part, Alfred was perennially bothered by how easily Bruce could view social customs as weapons, but he knew to pick his battles and let it slide.

"Well, forgetting my own qualms about the young lady, you are very welcome. And I am proud at what you managed to accomplish. With all my help it sounds like you managed to gravely insult her twice."

Bruce frowned. "In other words, better than expected?"

Alfred allowed himself a fatherly grin, "You know me too well."

Bruce slid into a pinstriped charcoal suit. A side compartment in his mind began to warm up procedures for Wayne the Company Man, Standard Edition.

"I admit her reactions were at times less than optimal-"

"What delicate, sensitive phrasing."

"But the bottom line is I've secured her assistance. We can proceed tomorrow evening."

"So you're just going to go through with this tomorrow evening?"

Selina rolled her eyes. "Whatever happened to being sure you couldn't change my mind?"

The two friends were strolling down Merriweather Street, famous for its line of stunted cherry trees along the median. They enjoyed the sharp December air.

"Maybe I'm more worried than usual. Sue me."

"Ha. Like I'll ever see a courtroom."

"Pride cometh before a fall."

"Alright, Sister Maven."

"Maybe you're heading into this a little rashly cause you want to beat that rough streak you're on."

"Excuse me? What rough streak?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Four of your last five jobs have gone sideways. I think you're looking for a novel challenge to break out of this rut."

"Rut? You're way off-base, Maven."

"And golly, lo and behold, a challenge just falls into your lap! You've told me a thousand times, 'never let the size of the score make you dumb'."

"Shut it Maven."

Maven threw up her hands in surrender. "Fine, I kept my mouth shut this long, I can keep it shut a little longer. But we're talking about it sooner or later"

"Good," Selina sighed, "Thank you."

"But you have to admit, most days you'd be tearing up the walls worried about some sort of double-cross. Forget the Army, Batman's been chasing you for a year! Suddenly he has a change of heart? I think he's neat, but he's so sneaky! How is this not bothering you?"

Selina had obviously debated that very concern since she woke up, but she had too much chutzpah to admit it now.

"Batman never sneaks up on people *verbally*, Maven. Breaking promises has never been his trick. He said we were in a truce. He seemed sincere. If he turns on me, I'll deal with it."

Selina neglected to mention the strange meta-conversation of body language they had last night. To be fair, she was still trying to translate it.

Maven huffed. "Money or not, I know how you think. You have this wacky over-the-moon gut feeling that a reckless stunt will get you back in gear. And if it means riding around with old Dracula-Claus, all the better! You're that sour at being off your game."

"You think I'm off my game? Watch this."

Selina nodded down the sidewalk. Ambling towards them was a ruddy-faced policeman with the bleary eyes of an all-night shift behind him. As they crossed paths at the corner, Selina 'stumbled' into the man, giggling mindlessly.

"Oh, I'm, *HIC*, sorry occifer, och, ox, op, um, officer."

The bemused policeman helped her stand with some stern words about temperance.

Maven gripped Selina by the shoulders and helped march her off, apologizing to the cop over her shoulder. He nodded and continued on his way. Selina dropped the act and looked back at him.

Maven glared with her hands on her hips, "And what was that supposed to prove?"

Selina held up a wallet and a class ring. Maven rolled her eyes, "Big deal. He was practically asleep."

"Wait for it."

"What?"

"Wait for it ..."

Selina gestured for them to hide behind a cherry tree. They watched the retreating officer in observant silence. "*Wait for it ...*"

Near the end of the block, the man stopped and shifted strangely. A moment later, his trousers fell.

Maven gaped at her friend, "How did you-"

Selina grinned cat-like and held up a belt.

It was a known fact among Gotham's tiny circle of auto enthusiast socialites that Bruce Wayne preferred his burgundy 1938 Cadillac for the daily commute. Most of the models inside the famous Wayne garage bore paint jobs in more stunning blacks, blues, and silvers, but they said Bruce tried for that extra touch of modesty around the office. Naturally, the contradiction of a modest Cadillac was lost on that crowd.

"Do kindly recall again what happened next, sir?"

Bruce quietly sighed from the backseat. He looked out the window at the skyscrapers passing by.

"And then she asked for a fraction of the pay in advance. She was joking, but I recognized it as another opportunity to seal our agreement. Negligible respect for property rights aside, Catwoman does seem to take formal contracts seriously. A useful quirk in this context."

"A trustworthy thief. Superb."

Alfred Pennyworth drove the Cadillac. One of Alfred's few demands when Bruce started his secret crusade was that they would be full partners. He could tolerate the boy he raised living an unhappy sham of a life and throwing himself into danger night after night - no matter how many white hairs it earned him - but he bloody well refused to be kept in the dark about it.

Bruce, in a rare show of trust, had agreed. It was a wise move. You couldn't replace fifty-seven years of savvy. Suffice it to say, the man wasn't born a butler. He knew what kings and ministers said behind closed doors. He could spot cheats, cowards, and liars from a mile away. He knew how men thought, even better than Bruce. And he knew how women thought, *much* better than Bruce.

"Bravo, sir. But as I mentioned before we left, I'm concerned about the bribery involved."

"Payment, Alfred."

"Call it what you will, it's the magnitude that worries me. Who carries around a billfold one could

purchase a house with?"

"I'll say this Maven, there was one strange thing about the whole ordeal."

"Oh? Just one strange thing?" her friend opined sarcastically.

Selina wasn't amused, "Well, the whole situation was sort of, uh ..."

"Batty?"

Selina stopped. "We're no longer friends."

"That one's free. You should use it on him. Maybe he'd smile."

Selina resumed walking and casually flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Please. If he doesn't smile at me already-

"Feeling pretty today?"

"-he'd jump into a volcano before he'd smile at that."

"Okay, what was the one strange thing? Let me guess, he wasn't gentlemanly enough to ask about that big bandage on your nose?"

"He didn't ask, but no, that's not it."

"How'd you get that, anyway?"

"Flying hotel cart."

"Another job gone south?"

"No! The strange thing last night was all the money he had. I ask for three grand and he doesn't bat an eye."

"**Bat** an eye?"

Selina turned and swung a haymaker at her friend's chin. Maven laughed and ducked. Selina took the opportunity to shove Maven into traffic. Maven tumbled over and landed on her rear, fortunately cushioned by thick winter pants and two inches of snow.

Feeling they were even, Selina helped her up and continued. "Three grand! What do you think of that?"

Maven swiped packed snow off her clothes. "I think it backs up my theory."

"Which theory? You had a dozen theories."

"If he's got money then he's got backers. An organization. Maybe the Feds. Maybe he's a new kind of G-man, keeping the streets safe."

"Batman doesn't strike me as a *team-player*."

"He teamed up with you."

"Grudgingly, trust me. Watching him ask for help was like watching a man pull out his own teeth."

"But he did it."

"Okay, let's say he works for the Feds. Then why deal with me? I'm not exactly the most law-abiding citizen. And more importantly, why would he sneak into a military base?"

"He would if his agency thinks the Army has gone rogue. He needs outside help because he can't trust anyone in the establishment. It's a secret assignment after all. Maybe from the President!"

"No offense Maven, but I'll shelve that 'part of a group' one for now. Any other ideas?"

"Maybe he likes brunettes."

Selina laughed. "I mean any other ideas on how he's rich."

"You were probably right the first time. If he isn't some kind of ghost - which I doubt - he's a bitter recluse with a few screws loose who steals from gangsters."

"And then just lets the money pile up?"

"You said he didn't have any hobbies," Maven paused to step gingerly over a wino sleeping on a pile of doormats, "I bet he sits alone all day in a crummy basement. If he steals from wise guys and never buys anything, I'm sure he has a little left over to bribe some help from you."

"Pay for help."

"Bribe."

"Pay! And look, I'm not saying he isn't dysfunctional, but I doubt he's some bum living in a cave."

"Right."

"He's not just anger and muscles. He's smart. He's ... educated."

"Smart enough to find you," Maven took a prim sip of juice from her bottle, "*again*."

"Hey! That's doesn't make him smart; that makes him an overgrown bloodhound. A very *lucky*, overgrown bloodhound."

"This is Gotham. If he were so smart, he'd buy a gun."

"Maven."

"Hey, smart people can rob wise guys ... although I guess wise people wouldn't."

"I'm serious. I really believe he doesn't steal."

"Even from crooks? Do you know how silly that sounds?"

"Can you think of a single story when Batman actually took anything?"

"Oh ... I'm sure there's one ..." Maven scratched her forehead and tried to mumble an example.

"See? I've heard them all, Mave. Nada. None. Doesn't that seem strange? People out there think he can walk through walls and shoot fire out his ears, but not one anecdote mentions him taking anything from a crime scene. And he's always moralizing: 'Robbery is wrong', 'Put down the emeralds', 'No, I don't want to split it with you'. At first I thought he was full of hot air like everyone else who comes out at night. But the more I see him, the more I'm convinced he's sincere. I wouldn't claim that lightly."

"How else would he get that much green, Selina? You think he's secretly a millionaire?"

"So you're worried she thinks I'm a millionaire?"

"I'm just saying your cavalier show of large-denomination bills might beg questions about your financial resources."

"Are you speculating that she might try to rob me, Alfred?"

"I'm speculating she might conclude that a man with a great deal of wealth might be wealthy. Hardly a leap of logic."

"It was a calculated risk to earn her cooperation. And I'm confident she could only conclude the opposite."

"How so?"

"You know I'm not prideful Alfred-"

Decades of practice in fine decorum enabled Alfred Pennyworth to stifle a snort.

"-but I'm a Wayne, and that name carries certain assumptions."

"Does it now?"

"I paid in cash. No one on the social register carries money like that. We make purchases by check or through our assistants." It occurred to Bruce that Alfred was keenly aware of this, but he was in a foul mood and didn't care, "Some of the guys at Princeton - guys whose dads could buy Greek islands - never held thirty dollars in paper currency. Only the crudest parvenu carries rolls of hundreds on their

person: nightclub owners, loan sharks, and the like. I made an excellent disguise."

Alfred chuckled. "Oh, I'm well aware how little foresight you and your gilded ilk give to personal funds. And I know how the *petit bourgeoisie* love to christen their wallets. The question is: does Miss Kyle? Imagine if, despite your deceptions, she was unfamiliar with the nuances of class and defaulted to the *commoner's* assumption that the very rich carry grand sacks of money."

Bruce rubbed his eyes. "She seems ... adequately sophisticated."

"Or Heavens, even worse: what if she is stricken with the fancy that a man dressed as a bat may have habits that don't match his social circle?"

Bruce opened his mouth but then frowned. He had no response to that. He silently damned this case for forcing him to act rashly. Then he damned himself for making excuses.

"What's done is done Alfred."

"A rare attitude for you, sir. May I proffer a suggestion?"

"Always."

When you pick the lady up, don't take the Bentley."

"Well, maybe he is a millionaire. Or friends with one. He had to get the money somehow."

"Wouldn't that be swell. He could bribe you to go home every time you meet. Save you both a scrap."

"Maven!"

Maven snickered as she waited for a fat muskrat and her line of babies to pass into an alley.

"I know rich people have some funny habits, but let's face it: any silk-pantsed old fart with enough cheddar to bankroll the Red Sox isn't spending his nights lassoing pickpockets. I'm telling you Selina, he got that cash by pillaging punks. Why do you think the cops hate him? They aren't used to a penniless crime scene. He's competition."

Selina sighed and watched her breath in the frigid air. "Maybe."

Neither spoke for a minute.

"Selina, I can't talk you out of anything, but be careful. I shouldn't have to tell you he's dangerous."

"Of course."

"And if he didn't set this up to catch you ... maybe that's even worse."

Selina lifted an inquisitive eyebrow. "How so?"

Maven looked away meekly, having used up her bravado for the day. "I mean, it's Batman."

"And?"

"If Batman, *The Batman*, needs help with something ... well ..."

Maven finished the sentence with a meaningful look. Selina knew that look. It was full of trepidation and wonder, the look Gothamites used when they wanted to imply something about the Bat, as if mentioning him too loudly might make him appear.

Selina laughed until she half-swallowed a loose scarf thread. Spitting out a thread, she rolled her eyes.

"I'm not worried, Maven. I've handled worse blindfolded. Heck, it might even be fun."

Much later that evening.

Detective James Gordon grimaced and checked his watch. His mood was the polar opposite of fun.

He lounged on the twelfth floor fire escape outside his family's chilly apartment, idly smoking his second cigarette.

He came here most evenings to clear his head. He liked to tell himself it was the stress of the damn job, but frankly he just had to get away from the old ball and chain every so often (more often every week, it seemed). Admitting this made Gordon feel like dirt. He had so little time at home and little Barbara was growing up so fast. But no, he was spending it up here, alone, hiding from the woman he married just to duck an argument. Hiding like a punk.

He glanced at the moon, or rather, at glow in the dense foundry smoke where the moon ought to be. Gordon added a wisp of his own with a cheap Chesterfield.

To be fair, coming up here also enabled covert meetings with a certain-

"Detective Gordon."

-unapproved partner.

He put out the cigarette in a blue ceramic pot and turned. Batman perched soundlessly and with perfect balance on the handrail. With no lit windows nearby he was nearly invisible: a shadow's shadow. No one would see them tonight.

"Batman. Care for a smoke?"

"I'll pass."

Detective Gordon shrugged, then he coughed roughly and thumped his chest. He hated living downwind of that foundry. Batman watched impassively. After a moment, he found his breath and

shivered.

"Right. Any luck?"

It was Gordon who alerted Batman to the corpse thieves a month ago. Gordon revealed how other cops sticking their noses in the mystery soon had those noses cut off. Gordon was responsible for alerting Batman about the recent double murder. And it was through his sources in the Turnpike Commission that Batman found where the thieves' truck had been headed.

For a litany of reasons, Batman hadn't mentioned any of this to Catwoman last night.

"We were right about the truck. It was the Fort."

Detective Gordon was suddenly all business. "And?"

Batman leaned a hairsbreadth lower, which Gordon knew by now meant frustration in Bat-gesture.

"Security was tight. I left empty-handed."

Gordon took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He wasn't disappointed *per se*. Batman wouldn't retreat from anything unless retreat was overwhelmingly necessary, but that still left them at square one.

Like any cop in Gotham, Gordon had a keen sense of when to call quits on a case. He glumly put his glasses back and tapped another cigarette from its pack. "Alright. I guess we're going to the press empty-handed. I'll take the fall for it, if it comes to that."

Batman nodded in respect, **"I know, but not yet."**

"Then what? Morrison was our last gambit."

"I'm making one more attempt on the base. With help this time."

Gordon coughed and nearly dropped his cigarette. He lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "Help? You?"

"This time."

"Care to share his name?"

"It's better you don't know."

Jim gave a harsh chuckle. "Of course, since I'm always on the straight and narrow towards unofficial consultation."

"Give me seventy-two hours. If I'm not back, go public."

There was nothing left to say. Gordon looked up at the clouds.

Batman was already gone.

Chapter 5

Driving Lessons

There was a folk tale in Gotham called the Legend of Susie Popinski ...

Years ago, a traveler arrived on the last train to Westville Station. He set out to find a certain hotel but was new to the streets and soon lost. Night fell and Gotham's night-folk slithered out of their dens. Rounding a corner near midnight, the traveler saw a pack of motley youths conspiring under a gas lamp. As the gang turned to him, wild-eyed and grinning like sharks, the traveler glimpsed a slender girl behind them, trapped beneath the lamplight. Not a day over thirteen, she wore a pretty blue dress with dainty curls in her hair. The traveler feared what dark business the gang had surrounding this young lady, but he feared for his life even more and sprinted away.

He ran nine blocks before catching his breath, his mind echoing with all the gruesome rumors of Gotham street toughs whispered across the country. Soon after, he found an inn. Weary to the bone, the traveler bought dinner at the bar and sat to eat. As he ate, he told his tale to the barkeep, a paunchy old local who knew the area well.

Soon he mentioned the young girl in the blue dress. Hearing this detail, the barkeep's eyes bulged and he gaped in awe. The barkeep asked the traveler if he had met the group on Ninth Street. The traveler supposed this was possible and the barkeep told him there was an infamous gang there called the Ninth Street Hooligans, the most terrifying in the city. Indeed, the traveler was lucky to escape! One word from their boss and the Hooligans would have chased him all the way to Bludhaven.

Morbidly curious, the traveler asked who could lead such a crew. "Was it the stocky lad with the knife?"

"No," said the barkeep, "that was Stabber Sam: a crass ruffian in the worst way, but not the boss."

"Was it the hunched boy with the droopy eye?"

"No," said the barkeep, "that was Torcher Tim: there's a bounty on him from the Fire Brigade worth a gold watch, but he's not the boss."

"Was it the brute with the baseball bat?"

"No," said the barkeep, "that was Head Trauma Jones: charismatic, I suppose, but not the boss."

"Then who orders around the Hooligans? Who's the boss?"

The barkeep glanced around to make sure his establishment was empty then leaned forward.

"That'd be Susie Popinski."

"The wee girl?"

"The same."

"But she's a child! Why would fiends like these Hooligans deign to listen to her?"

The barkeep scrutinized the traveler. He rested his old arms on the counter and shifted his head just beside his patron's ear, as if the walls might listen in. The barkeep continued in a voice forced low and calm.

"Don't be fooled, son; you cross Susie's path again; you better hoof it for the county line. She's Hell-in-polka dots and a hot spit worse than all the other jackals put together."

"How? What happened?"

"Not wise to say 'round here, but ask yourself; what sort of deeds would a sprite like her need to do to scare a group like them?"

The traveler slept fitfully that night. He awoke before dawn, hailed a carriage to the station, and never returned to Gotham again.

Like most folk tales, the great professors of lore disagreed on what it meant. Some said the lesson was the folly of making assumptions. Some read it as a warning against the violent working class. A few thought it was another example of locals bragging how tough they were, that the story had a *happy* ending.

Amanda Waller was no professor. She didn't think literary criticism was worth a plug nickel. She was new to the state and avoided its namesake city like the plague. Needless to say, Amanda Waller probably never heard this particular legend. This was a shame. She would have loved it.

Amanda Waller was a squat, formidable woman, all thighs and hips, with an intellect like a battleship and a face like a battleship. They could have carved Mount Rushmore from the chip on her shoulder. She had dark brown skin and kept her black hair in a short bob. Her voice was harsh from a lifetime of yelling at idiots and the occasional cigar. Amanda was born on the worst streets of Chicago, the

granddaughter of sharecroppers. The Wallers took nothing for granted. As far as she was concerned, the Almighty gave her grit, brains, and American citizenship; the rest was stacked against her. She recognized this at a young age, and her reaction was to man-up and fight. So she fought and she won, albeit as much of a win as a colored woman could grasp in a land where half the restaurants were segregated and Klansmen ran for office. In a different time, she could have clawed her way to the White House.

Nevertheless, she was somebody. She had clout. Just how far had she risen? That was a difficult question. Amanda Waller worked among men with distinguished titles - senators, ambassadors, admirals – but she had no title of her own. She worked in the shadows between titles, in the spider's web of quiet departments all governments sometimes needed to get anything done. Her kind was the oil that kept the cogs of power spinning. For the sake of appearances, Amanda was occasionally called an attaché, an assistant, an investigator, or a specialist. What mattered was that she could make federal agents fetch her coffee and twenty-year colonels gave her an audience at her whim.

With Amanda's limitations, this was an ascent to shame Caesar. And like old Julius, much of her success was owed to the keen recognition that if you wanted something done right, sometimes you had to do it yourself.

In this case, doing it yourself meant Amanda Waller was standing outside in an inch of half-melted snow, stuck ten miles north of the frozen butt-end of nowhere and struggling to see shapes in a patch of icy mud with the help of an overgrown child who probably started shaving last year.

"Just what are we looking at, Private?"

"Errr ..."

Private First Class Norton Hershey was a good soldier. He marched where he had to march. He saluted when he had to salute. When he fitted a bed, you could bounce a desk lamp off of it. Good soldiers follow orders. For that reason alone he kept his thoughts to himself. It wasn't easy: he had plenty of concerns to share regarding this strange black lady who showed up four months ago in a fancy car wearing a fancy coat. She looked distinctly un-military, but word came down from brass saying everyone had to dance to her song until further notice.

There was one soldier who didn't get with the program, a Lieutenant Alan Moss, who confronted her a few days after she arrived. The story went that Waller told him to clean up his disorganized workspace, but the Lieutenant spit at her feet and accused her of something unprintable. For his conduct, he was swiftly promoted to a three-year stint on an ice barge off the coast of Alaska. No one had talked back to her since.

Rumor was she was some specialist out from Washington reviewing the base doctors. The officers called her Ms. Waller. Enlisted boys weren't supposed to talk to her at all. This was the first time she had spoken to him, and it took a second for PFC Hershey to collect himself. Ms. Waller wasn't pleased with the hesitation. For a lady half his size, she sure looked more than willing to take him behind the woodshed if he didn't shape up.

She set her arms on her considerable hips and frowned. "Well?"

"It's like I just told the Sargent, ma'am. After the snow froze this morning, I found these two boot-prints outlined in the mud right here."

"Looks sort of vague. Are you sure that's a boot-print?"

"All due respect ma'am, but soldiers get a lot of experience making tracks in the dirt. That's a boot-print."

"Fine. Lots of boots around here. What's special about these?"

"Its tread ain't one we use."

"So an intruder was here last night."

"Maybe last night. Maybe earlier than that. The ground's been dry and brittle these past few days. If nothing else disturbed it, the prints may have stayed in the dirt."

"Hold on. You walk patrols between these two buildings every afternoon, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you haven't noticed the print until today?"

"I haven't, but it may have been there without me noticing."

Ms. Waller looked skeptical. "Uh-hmm."

"This ground is uneven, and there's always shadows from that wall. Small tracks would be nearly hidden without the snow, their distinguishing contours only visible when chromatically contrasted with the ice"

"Chromatically contrasted?"

"All due respect, ma'am, I know the assumptions about my chosen profession, but I am an educated individual."

"Is that so?"

"Self-taught, ma'am."

"Fine. So you're saying we can't tell whether the prints were made six hours ago or a week?"

"Not a week. I wouldn't bet on any tracks here lasting more than four or five days, even frozen. I'm just about the only one who goes though here, so no one else would contaminate it. People tend to stay on the gravel paths."

"Fine, let Colonel Tanner know I want any man who's noticed anything the least bit suspicious in the past four days to inform me. That's highest priority."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, and Private Hershey?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Don't you think it strange that there's only two prints? Why isn't there a whole line of them?"

"Now that you mention it, ma'am, it is strange. The ground was just as soft for fifteen yards in each direction, but there's no prints leading in and none walking away. It's like our intruder's footsteps just got real heavy for a spell."

"Hmm. Perhaps ..."

Amanda Waller had a sudden notion and stared upward. Strung nearly twenty feet above their heads was a black telegraph cable. The cable was a petty fixture of the base, easily forgotten. But Amanda Waller wasn't the type to ignore details. Suspicions began to percolate.

"Perhaps they got heavy because that's where he fell out of the sky."

"Um, uh, I ... suppose that's a possibility, ma'am. But aircraft don't pass by here, and we would have seen a parachute."

"Hm. Very good, Private Hershey. Dismissed. Oh, and when you talk to Colonel Tanner, let him know I would like to speak with him at his earliest convenience, and that his earliest convenience will be in half an hour."

Good economists knew that industries run in cycles. A popular business expanded until demand outpaced reason. When players realized this, the industry then fell. It happened to tulips, it happened to silver, and ten years ago in Gotham, it happened to cars.

Gotham was a classic train town. Railroads, trolleys, and shipping lines had their claws deep in city hall and the state house since the Civil War. It didn't help that Gotham was built in the twisting Old World style, all alleys and crowded squares unsuited to straight paved roads. Gotham was the last American city to accept cars as a way of life, and it didn't come easy. The automotive giants and their allies spent millions in court battles, public hearings, commercials, and union deals to break open this juicy market. The Gotham Auto War, as the struggle was called, lasted from 1922 to 1927. After the war was won, the last years of the decade were a victory lap for the car. Gotham plopped down roads, signs, gas stations, and dealerships with reckless enthusiasm, as if making up for lost time.

Then, in 1929, the stock market crashed.

Suffice it to say, the motor vehicle eventually recovered in Gotham, but the fallout wasn't pretty. Plenty of ruins remained here and there from the car's brief golden age, most famously the stretches of unfinished raised highways blotting out the sky like old Roman aqueducts. Rodger's Repair Shop was one small piece of that fallout. Built along the Gotham Turnpike a few miles outside the city, its sales nearly tripled each of the first four months it was open. Then the market collapsed and the shop closed

in the fifth month. No one had touched the building since.

Catwoman drove past the husk of the shop twice before she realized she was at the right place. In her defense, many letters had fallen off the sign, leaving a faded "*og e 's rep ir hop*" to go by. The windows were broken. The bricks were stained. A tow truck more rusted than any hunk of metal she had ever seen was decomposing in the frozen weeds. If she sneezed, she was certain the paleolithic vehicle would collapse into dust. "I guess Rodger left town", she muttered, bemused. Catwoman parked her purple Phantom III in the side lot behind a sagging wooden fence (the Royce was one of her few blatant indulgences, the gleeful consequence of a certain windfall last year). Stepping out, she pulled down her mask and adjusted her hair out the back, then took in the view. The bump on her nose had healed enough for her to lose to bandage, leaving a tiny cut. It was about five minutes until sunset. Heedless of all other concerns, she couldn't help but smile. Nighttime was her time.

Speaking of which, it was time to see if their little truce stuck. Where was he?

Catwoman did a quick half-lap of the site. Besides a scattering of debris, it was empty.

She approached the entrance. The door was nowhere to be seen. The front office was dark.

Hmm.

Catwoman nimbly scaled the unhelpful sign and leaped to the shop roof. As expected, the paper shingles were nearly collapsed at points. She found a narrow gap above the garage, brushed off the snow, and slipped inside.

Dropping to a rafter beam, Catwoman surveyed the room. Old tables. Old parts. And a tarp in the main bay covering something shaped very much like an automobile.

Hmm!

She lowered quietly to the ground. The last shades of blue twilight began to disappear from the broken windows. Catwoman circled the concealed car. She gripped the tarp and yanked it off the see ...

... a humble Ford Model 48 hardtop. Beige. She cross her arms in disbelief. "Really?"

The space behind her answered. "Catwoman."

Catwoman nearly jumped to the roof. Instead, she twisted and aimed a fierce kick at the voice.

Batman calmly evaded. "If you're ready, we should go."

She was too shocked to be angry. "Where were you?"

"I was waiting behind the desk in the office, presuming you would use the entrance."

Catwoman resumed her composure. "Since when do I use the entrance?"

He conceded the point with a fractional head-shrug. "Ready to leave?"

She thumbed over her shoulder. "In this jalopy? The Mighty Batman drives a Ford coupe?"

"The car's in good working order."

"Half the city thinks you can fly. I thought you'd at least drive something a little, I don't know ..."

"What?"

"Fierce. *Iconic*." She tapped him on the chest emblem. "You seem like a fan of icons."

He turned away from her touch. "The car is inconspicuous. We need subterfuge."

She turned after him, arms akimbo. "Said the man with the cape to the lady in a purple mask."

"Its windows are tinted. We won't be seen."

"Tinted windows are discreet? Who has tinted windows? A few mafia dons? The mayor?"

"Would anyone pull over the mayor? Regardless, the tinting won't be noticed in the dark."

"Come on, Batman, let's take my car."

"The Rolls-Royce? Far too conspicuous."

"It's cold tonight, mine's much more cozy."

"Comfort is irrelevant."

"My car's faster."

"We have plenty of time."

"I want to take my car."

"That ... doesn't ..." Catwoman could see the skin of his face shift, like a speaker vibrating a note too low for human ears. But whatever he wanted to say, he held it in. Finally, he spoke with deliberation. "... I respect your opinion, but I hope you reconsider."

She rolled her eyes and leaped over the hood to the passenger's side. "Fine, before you blow a gasket."

He grunted in acknowledgement and opened the garage latch. She smirked. "I'll take that as a thank you. Now get in, I'm eager to see how exactly a person sits on a cape."

The side roads north of the city were frosted slick, a ribbon of no-name towns and swampy forests.

Batman stayed off the highways. Gotham State Troopers had big quotas and vivid imaginations; if the pair got pulled over for some half-dreamt misdemeanor, it would be mighty difficult to explain what they were wearing.

These detours gave them lots of time stuck together. He was willing to resolve this discomfort with hours of monolithic silence. She was not.

Catwoman looked around the Ford's interior. "I'll admit it looks nicer from the inside."

Batman said nothing.

She continued, "Nice, but not ritzy, you know? I was half expecting you to pull up in a Bentley."

The quintessential actor, he glanced in honest puzzlement. "Why?"

"You were showing all that cash the other night. A girl can only wonder."

"Let's just say I've been saving up."

"Uh-huh. Your line of work isn't exactly lucrative."

"I make do."

"With a day job?"

"**My day job is preparing for the night,**" said Batman with dark conviction.

Catwoman rolled her eyes.

"So, no friends? No hidden cabal of backers with deep pockets? No mastermind ordering you around in this war against crime, moral lassitude, and all things naughty?"

"I work alone."

"Oh? What about-"

He sighed, "Present company *tentatively* excluded."

She hummed approvingly. "Damn straight, handsome. You better not expect me to follow along with just any wild idea you set off on. I'm not your little tin soldier. We plan together."

"Why do you assume I'd behave that way?"

"I work alone, too."

Batman considered this. "Fine"

"Great. So tonight we're partners-" Catwoman heard a grunt of deep discontent and laughed, "or something like that?"

"Fasten your lap buckle."

"Uhm, what?"

"That woven strap beside you. The seatbelt."

She looked at the strange device near her arm. "I'm pretty sure those are for airplanes."

"And I installed one in the car. Automotive accidents cause more deaths than violent crime by a wide margin; darkness and icy roads only magnify the threat. Put it on."

"You're not wearing it."

"I didn't want to be restrained lest I had to get out rapidly--"

"And that couldn't apply to me?"

"--but in the name of compromise, I'll put mine on." Batman dutifully dug out and fastened his seatbelt. "Now put it on."

"Nope. Besides the fact that you're trying to order me around, which we *just* talked about, this has got to be some creepy way of trapping me. No one wears seatbelts. You can forget it."

"It's not a trap."

"Said the infamous master of deception and ambush."

Batman didn't respond. A minute later, he swerved sharply to avoid a trio of deer crossing the road. Catwoman fell sideways against the door. "OWW!" She sat up and unsheathed her claws with a hiss. "*You did that on purpose!*"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"*Really!?*"

Batman shrugged. "These roads can be hard to navigate. Potholes. Fallen tree limbs--"

"**Fine!**" Catwoman retracted claws and grumpily put on her seatbelt. "*Jerk.*"

One nice thing about the Dark Knight, he didn't gloat. He was already back to business. "You said you wanted to plan together. Let's talk plans."

"Great. Take it away."

"The Army built Fort Morrison in 1918 to lead the state quarantine of the influenza epidemic."

Catwoman's perpetual half-smile disappeared. She shivered and her voice became very quiet. "*Yeah.* I remember the Flu."

Batman was watching the road and didn't respond. After a moment, she pulled herself together. "But hold on, they never quarantined Gotham."

"They planned to. Certain officials assumed the infections would surpass what the hospital system could handle. Mobs would assault pharmacies, train stations, grocers. Whole neighborhoods would be condemned. Basic goods would stop arriving. There would be anarchy."

"And if the city became unlivable ... all those people had to go somewhere."

Batman nodded grimly. "Waves of refugees would spread chaos across the Eastern Seaboard. The quarantine would stop that."

"But obviously it didn't happen."

"They realized the disease could be contained. The plans were shelved. Quietly."

"I've never heard of this."

"They covered their tracks."

"Did the Army try to quarantine other states?"

"Not that I've heard."

"Why only Gotham?"

"I suspect limited resources. Gotham was seen by some as ... uniquely vulnerable to social collapse."

"What do you mean?"

"To quote the chairman of the Senate hearing, 'this malarial Sodom, a coven of degenerates and reprobates held by the loosest threads of civility, would turn on itself like insects at the first distress before fleeing outward with a fearsome virulence.'"

"You memorized that."

He scowled. "**The quote stuck with me.**"

She quietly whistled. *Wow.* "So after the Flu passed, I guess they shut the site down."

"Right, but the Army kept the property. The Fort was reopened in '35 as a logistical depot and expanded by the CCC."

"They're taking the bodies to some warehouse?"

"There were rumors in June that part of the base was to be made into a school for field medics. No official statements confirm this, but I have a feeling it's connected."

"I guess a lot of medical gear would left behind from the quarantine planning."

He grunted agreeably. "The military is rarely in the habit of throwing things away. As for the staff, the last six commanders graduated during-

"Hold on. As much as I love history, I prefer a nice book and an afternoon on a park bench. Don't you want to talk about what we're going to see?"

"I find broad knowledge of a place offers practical benefits in a mission."

"Do you always study the places you intend to trespass this obsessively?"

"When I have time."

"So bureaucratic details from twenty years ago come in handy?"

"On occasion. Don't you want to prepare?"

"Make no mistake, Batman. when it's time to play I do my homework, but when I'm in a hurry that means I stick to what's useful."

"Fine." He reached into the glove compartment and handed her a binder. "Choose what you deem useful on your own."

She pulled out her small flashlight and read the cover.

"*Case File 1132.9A: Fort Morrison Recon*". Hmm. Sounds like a best-seller." She opened it up. "This file's fifty-seven pages long!"

He nodded. "Subject headings indexed in front."

"You typed this?"

"This morning. The last nine pages are diagrams."

Catwoman whistled and flipped to the end. "Maps. Blueprints. Badge insignia. You sketched this too?"

"Draftsmanship is a useful pursuit."

"But you were only there a few minutes. You remembered all of these details?"

He looked uncomfortable with the complement. "The file's not comprehensive."

"Wow, and humble too."

"What does that mean?"

She shrugged happily. "Nothing."

Behind his lenses, he rolled his eyes. "I suggest you start with page fourteen. Ingress and egress routes."

She read awhile, flashlight gripped in her teeth. Batman let her study. Minutes passed in amicable silence. Then the car hit a large bump. Her beam of her light was jolted and for a brief moment Catwoman noticed something curious.

"Hmm!"

She pointed her flashlight into the empty glove compartment. If she wasn't mistaken (and she rarely was), the back of the compartment was etched with strange grooves along the corners. She pressed against these grooves and tried to shift them.

Batman saw what she was doing and growled, "**Don't touch that!**"

For Catwoman, this was vindication. She winked at him and responded through clenched teeth, "Hash zhat line evar vherked?"

Batman rapidly considered his options. They were in a winding forest; he couldn't take his hands off the wheel. He knew a few restraining holds employing only the legs that *might* work sideways from a sitting position, but even the best pin was an iffy proposition with Catwoman, whom he knew from extensive experience was an excellent grappler. And here she obviously had more leverage.

Catwoman momentarily mused whether Batman would try to physically stop her. She wasn't *too* worried; she obviously had more leverage, and it wasn't like he knew any restraining holds that used the legs sideways from a sitting position. With a series of quick taps and nudges, she made another attempt on the glove compartment. Finally, a certain push slid the wall open. Jackpot! Behind this false wall was a hidden chamber wherein she spied ... a large stack of files.

Catwoman had once stolen a bevy of actual royal jewels from an actual castle. That intricate scheme took two months of preparation. Yet her smile holding those jewels was not half as wide as the smile she wore now. She pulled out an armful of files.

Batman scowled. Saying the Dark Knight was scrupulous about his equipment was like saying Mount Everest was above shoulder height: true, but gravely missing the scope of the comment. He was obsessive. Still, he was human, and humans made mistakes. In this case, his mistake was not removing some files from his hidden car chamber before a master thief climbed her way into the passenger seat.

Catwoman started to read the titles. To his supreme annoyance, she sounded more intrigued the further she went.

"Axis Submersibles Blockade North Atlantic at 50% Efficiency', 'City Councilman Scandalized by Infidelity', 'Salmonella Outbreak in Lower East Side Produce Markets.'"

"Catwoman."

"Wow, there's more: 'Axis Submersibles Blockade North Atlantic at 90% Efficiency.' Ouch. 'Rapid Inflation in the Canadian Dollar', 'Saboteurs Infect House Pets with Rabies', 'Mind-controlled Flightless Birds Fire Rockets at Major Civic Buildings', 'Sewer-dwellers Use Bribery and Fraud to

Steal Mayoral Election', 'Coca-Cola Proves Cancerous', 'Munitions Shipment Hijacked by Anarchists on Train - Variation Seven.' How many anarchists do you run into?"

"**Catwoman!**"

"Well, I guess I owe her an apology."

"What are you talking about?"

"A friend gave me the idea that you had a team supporting you. I said she was wrong, but, gosh, this settles it. There's no way you sat down on your own and did all these. I don't care how fast you type, that would be ridiculous."

Batman said nothing.

"So, what's this all about? Why do you have these in your car?"

"Those are contingency plans: basic thought experiments I refer to when I don't have the luxury of time."

"And you keep them in your car?"

"Some. I have others elsewhere."

"I bet you have a big mountain of these at home. How do you choose which to keep in the car? They seem random."

"I have a system."

"Uh-huh." She flipped through the stack some more. "Wait, what's this one. Hmm ...'*De-orbit Moon in Seventeen Steps*' ... What the-"

Batman, seeing a safe stretch of road, leaned over and swiftly snatched the stack of files off her lap, throwing them back in the glove compartment.

Catwoman gaped at him. "The moon? You have a plan to get rid of the moon?"

"It's a contingency. Not important."

"Why? How would you even get to the-"

"Not important."

"In what possible situation would it be useful to-"

"**Not. Important.**"

"Hold up, do you have a file on me?"

He said nothing and glared stoically forward out the windshield.

"Do you have *several* files on me?"

He said more nothing and glared more stoically.

"You do. Ha. Of course you do."

Batman gave a silent prayer of relief that he hadn't left that particular bundle in the car.

Catwoman shrugged and continued to read, laughing now and then at especially far-fetched hypotheticals. Soon they began to climb the foothills of the Kahontsi Range, a line of broad peaks that marked the northern border of Gotham state. After an hour, Catwoman stretched her arms up and craned her neck to get the blood flowing. She noticed Batman steal a glance and smirked.

"Glad you approve, handsome."

"What?"

"Nothing. We almost there?"

Batman nodded.

"Alright, we're working together; let's share a little bit in the meantime. You already know a little about me. How about-"

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to ask!"

"You were going to ask questions about me."

"Well, yeah."

"No."

"Come on, we might not get another chance to talk."

"One could hope."

"Just a few questions."

"If I felt like sharing, I'd write my memoirs."

"You can ask first."

"No."

"Surely there's something you want to know about me."

"Do you intend to return any valuables you've stolen?"

Catwoman frowned. "That's not what I meant."

"Then no."

Catwoman crossed her arms. "If you don't play, I'm jumping out of the car right now."

Batman paused to consider how serious she was. He glanced at her. She stared at him.

Sometimes he *really* hated dealing with night-types.

"Fine. But I reserve a veto."

"Great! First question: how old are you? You don't look old, but you sound old."

"I sound old?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong, handsome. I like your voice. Nice and husky. And most of the time it's fine. But ..."

"What?"

"Once in a while, when you get really frustrated, you start to sound like someone's great uncle, like you smoke three packs a day and gargle paving stones."

"I don't smoke."

"Heaven forbid you try something relaxing."

"This coming from you."

"What?"

"Hm. Nothing."

"Not nothing. What?"

"You make it sound like I have strange convictions, but you don't smoke either."

"What makes you think I don't smoke?"

"Teeth. Breath. Fingers. Clothes. Other minor details."

"Well I have my reasons. And at least I know other ways to relax."

"I wasn't judging."

"Please. You're always judging. You're Batman."

He grunted.

She continued. "So, your age?"

"I'll give you an approximation."

"Great. Spill."

"I was born within four years of you."

"So you're between twenty-two and thir... Wait. Hold on a second. How do you know my age?"

He shifted gears to navigate a turn.

"I'm Batman."

She rolled her eyes and looked out the window. "Fine, about the cape: you're always running around dirty industrial sites."

"... Yes?"

"Don't you get stains? This has been bothering me all year. You crawl through a sewer or an assembly line every week if the news is right a tenth of the time. I know first-hand you can't *always* stay in the dark. Why doesn't anyone see you covered in grease? Or sewage? Or blood? Or pigeon feathers?"

"I'm careful."

"Uh-huh."

"And when I **let** witnesses see me, they usually have ... more pressing concerns to focus on."

"Come on, talk shop. What's the trick?"

He sighed. "The fabric is sprayed with a polymer that repels lipid and water stains for a few hours. Most other substances turn the fabric darker which isn't a problem in the short-term."

"Wait, you invented a spray that stops stains? Why isn't this in stores? You could make a bundle!"

"Chemists have known the formula for decades. It degrades too quickly to be commercially viable and the reactants are too dangerous to mass produce."

"How haven't you poisoned yourself yet?"

"Like I said, I'm careful."

"You must be a pretty good chemist."

"Veto."

"That wasn't even a question."

"Hm."

"Alright, what do you do when you find a spill that sticks? What's your other trick?"

"Hasn't been a problem."

"Really."

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on."

"Veto."

"Come on!"

"Fine. If needed, the cape is reversible."

"Wait, so there was a time when you got, say, mustard on the cape, but you just turned it around and kept crime-fighting?"

He didn't respond.

"Well?"

"... It was white paint."

It took a few minutes for Catwoman to stop laughing.

Finally catching her breath, she sat up from his shoulder where she had collapsed and wiped her eye.

"So, still no questions for me?"

"No."

"Fine, I might as well trot out the big one."

"Which is?"

"What's your name?"

"Batman."

"No, I mean your actual name. The one on your birth certificate. You weren't born in a cape."

"Veto."

"Come on."

"Veto."

"I knew you would be like this. Just your first name."

"No."

"Whatever it is, there must a thousand guys in the city with the same name."

"Veto."

"I'm committing treason for you!"

"You volunteered. Veto."

He drove in silence for a minute.

Batman finally spoke. "Robert."

"What?" Catwoman's eyes bugged out. "Your name is Robert?"

"I lied. Veto."

She punched him in the ribs.

Chapter 6

The Anti-heroes' Guide to Trespassing

Fort Morrison was named after Major Holt Enoch Morrison, hero of the War of 1812, who barricaded the site to stop the advance of the British 46th Regiment soon after the burning of Washington. Though outnumbered eight-to-one, Major Morrison and his three bone-weary companies of Gotham volunteers held the line for sixteen hours before the survivors were encircled and captured.

Almost unanimously, military historians judge the man an idiot.

Besides choosing to make his last stand over a strategically irrelevant mountain pass, he had made next to no reconnaissance of the enemy's position and his logistical lines were a mess. His men hadn't eaten in two days - the only factor delaying mutiny was that the soldiers had no idea where they were. At the start of battle, one of Morrison's platoons was stationed in front of his stone barricade, allegedly with orders to stage a bayonet charge. British reports of the engagement suggest that his five mortars were aimed so low their first volley struck the grove of trees they hid behind. Falling tree limbs crushed three mortars and the artillery officer. In the final hour of the engagement, the Major privately retreated in the wrong direction and was slain during what was perceived by all as a one-man assault on the British ranks.

As occasionally happens in dynamic times, Major Morrison became a hero in spite of every effort to the contrary. The real reason his men were able to endure for so long was because their particular stretch of the Kahontsi Range featured a peak that happened to be one of the best defensive positions on the continent. Fort Morrison sat on a rounded plateau almost a mile broad, with three sides ending in sheer cliffs and the fourth sloping down in moderate switchbacks just wide enough for a road. A single-lane bridge on the far side connected to a path on the adjacent ridge.

Military men didn't like speaking in absolutes (except occasionally to Congress), but it was widely agreed that the Fort was secure against every conventional threat.

"Third drawer. Forensic reagents. Industrial glue. Industrial glue solvent. Magnesium fire starters. Boxes of AA, C, and D batteries. Microscope. Sewing kit. Rebreather. Dry ice. Nylon cord. Hemp rope. Turkish-to-Russian dictionary."

Catwoman interrupted. "When would you need that?"

Batman looked puzzled. "Both languages are spoken by tens of millions."

"Never mind, idiot."

The moon had climbed well into the sky when Batman and Catwoman arrived. He had parked the coupe in a dense grove of conifers beyond the sight of their final dirt road. The car was nearly invisible yet only a few minutes' hike from the edge of the Fort. When they stepped out of the car, she stretched indulgently, and he unlocked the trunk. Inside was a neurotically-prepared gear cabinet. Batman had encouraged her to take anything she needed. She had asked what exactly he was offering. That was a mistake.

"Hold up again."

"What?"

"Did you just say those tubes were dynamite?"

"Yes, then collapsible binoc -"

"You keep six sticks of dynamite in the truck of your car?"

"I admit it's not much, but tonight-"

"*Absolutely not what I meant.*" Catwoman gestured to the Ford emphatically. "You're saying that the whole time we were driving down those bumpy roads, I was sitting on enough explosives to topple City Hall?"

"That's a gross exaggeration." He thought for a moment and equivocated. "...maybe a small post office."

She groaned and sat on a nearby tree stump. "Do you not hear yourself?"

"These use a nitroglycerin substitute." He lifted a tube up and tapped it sharply. "Perfectly stable."

Catwoman's gazed at him in wide-eyed shock. He mistook her look of shock for confusion and elaborated, "Nitroglycerin is the active agent in-"

"*I know what nitroglycerin is!*"

"Good. In the fifth drawer-"

She stood and elbowed him out of the way. "I'll look through the rest on my own, thanks. *And put that dynamite back!*"

"Fine. We need to start the climb soon."

She paused. "What climb?"

"You read the report. Our climb up the east cliff face into the Fort."

"Your report said there was an '*ascent*'."

"Yes."

"I thought that meant a trail. A walking trail."

He gave her a look like factual errors were embarrassing things only children and the absent-minded suffered from. "Then ... you were incorrect."

"Fine, how long did it take you to free climb it the first time?"

"Thirty-six minutes. It's an easy route. You're a proficient climber."

She sighed. "I don't mind being outside on some mountain in December, but I didn't plan on hugging a glacier for half an hour. How's the wind-chill up there?"

"It's a concern."

"Well, as much as I hate playing the damsel in distress, you've probably noticed I'm clad a little light for the occasion." She gestured towards her slim violet outfit, which did look warm but was hardly tundra gear. "Are you sure we don't have any other options?"

"The roads into the Fort are guarded. This is the shortest cliff."

"And you're absolutely sure we can't punch our way through?"

"We can't be seen."

"It's what you usually do."

He growled. She couldn't tell whether it was disapproval or amusement.

"We can't alert the perpetrators. Until we know more, the soldiers are innocents. But I anticipated this. Open the bottom drawer, left side."

Curious, she did so and pulled out ... some sort of green, hooded ... poncho?

"Uh, Batman? What's this?"

"Insulation."

"Is that so?"

"It's my fault for not mentioning the climb during our original meeting."

"Got that right."

"So I'm rectifying the situation."

"And your solution was to let me know at the last possible minute that you wanted to play dress-up?"

He looked blankly at her. "Yes."

Ask a stupid question, Catwoman thought.

"I don't suppose you considered that a lady in my line of work might be very particular about what she's wearing? You know, to test for balance ahead of time? Or dexterity? Or noise? "

He crossed his arms. "Try it or don't. We have to get going."

She raised a finger to protest but was interrupted by a gust of bone-chilling wind. It was elementally powerful. They both crouched low to keep from falling. As the wind blew, a wall of powder rushed off the tree limbs with a *hiss* and coated the landscape. Several eye-watering seconds passed before it finally blew through.

They stood up. Catwoman frowned and struggled to brush the ice crystals off her mask and hair. Batman had a rare frivolous thought: *she looked like a cat!*

He snorted.

Catwoman glared at him, sliding on the green outfit. "See, if you had even thought for a second ab-," she paused, mouth slightly open, "Wow." Catwoman gently touched the fabric on her arm. "Oh, wow."

The poncho was really warm!

It was good material: a wool blend, light and flexible, and definitely warm. She wasn't in the mood to put up with more wind. And a hood would be nice if it snowed. Batman could be rude and pompous, but he never did anything halfway. It was even her size (which raised as many questions as it answered) and it did match her eyes (there was no way *that* was deliberate, right?)

Hmm ...

Well, she could always get rid of it later.

Several hours earlier.

Like any big organization, the Army had good postings and bad postings. If you were Johnny On The

Spot and played your cards right, you could be the lucky GI getting your tan at Pearl Harbor. But if you had bad reports or cut a rug with the wrong dame at the Easter ball, you might find yourself organizing the weekly cleaning of the mule stable in Mosquito Swamp, Mississippi.

Of course, there were certain assignments so strange that no one knew quite how to judge them. Classic military logic dictated that these were given to officers so strange that no one knew quite how to judge them.

Colonel Abner Tanner was aware of this system and didn't like what it implied about him. For the thousandth time, he considered calling up Sam Lane and demanding a reassignment. It wasn't that Fort Morrison itself was unbearable. Yes, it was remote and the weather wasn't ideal, but a man didn't become a colonel in the U.S. Army by being a weak-kneed Nancy. No, he was getting second thoughts because this operation was far too questionable for him to stomach much longer.

For Tanner, that was saying something. Some people were magnets for scandal and most ended up disgraced or hospitalized, but a few of them had a knack for always coming through the mud smelling like daisies. Abner Tanner was the smelliest daisy in the Army. His two decades of service read like a morbid Three Stooges script- showing up at every botched operation and giving testimony at every dishonorable discharge hearing. His career was the repeating story of a man in a train wreck who is miraculously flung clear but lands in another train about to wreck.

This put senior officers in a pickle. Sure, his survival was commendable; who had more integrity than the man who's proven it thirty times? But the sheer volume of bad luck smacked of carelessness. A man could be in the wrong place once or twice, but soon it got suspicious. And no one wanted to be that close to the years of dirty laundry Tanner was wrapped in. He had signed more non-disclosures than he could count. His security clearance was radioactive. The fact that he was a legitimately great officer only made things tougher. He couldn't be sidelined. No, they had to keep promoting the son of a gun. Fortunately, there were always special postings his clearance was uniquely suited for. After all, it's not like another state secret could make him *more* of a liability.

So when a guy like Colonel Abner Tanner reported that operations at this logistics depot were questionable, "questionable" became Army understatement for "Dr. Moreau-meets-Dr. Frankenstein-I thought only the Krauts did this sort of thing-equesue horror."

And now he was being 'persuaded' to order a lock-down. Great.

"Miss Waller, are you absolutely sure this isn't an overreaction? You know I'd sooner sell my mommie to a commie than jeopardize this site, but we can't be up and soiling ourselves over every little shadow."

"Colonel, any firm evidence of intrusion, no matter how isolated, deserves our most thorough attention. I hardly need remind you that secrecy is of the highest priority."

Or, in bureaucrat-speak, *Shut your pie-hole, you dunce.*

He didn't respond; there was nothing more to say. He leaned back in his chair and downed a glass of water. It would be scotch without visitors. What self-respecting man let himself get lectured to by a woman? A woman! It was a fundamental insult to the right order of things. Yep, first light tomorrow (or whenever she turned the phones back on), he was calling Sam Lane and getting out of this farce. He

breathed deeply and tried to let go of some tension. The maze of wrinkles around his eyes shifted and settled. If Amanda Waller could read his thoughts (she sure acted like it), she didn't seem to care. She smoothly tapped a long, filtered cigarette from its case and lit it with a chrome lighter. Blue smoke hazed over his office, blotting the green lampshade, rolling over the filling cabinets, fading the flag in the corner

Colonel Tanner looked past her. Waller's pet bulldog was still relaxing against the wall with his arms crossed. When Amanda Waller arrived months ago, she brought along four valises, three footlockers, two hatboxes, and one "personal assistant": Lieutenant Slade Wilson. At least the lady made sense, her methods and agenda were obvious, but this one was a mystery. He wore a silver bar like every other lieutenant but was utterly beyond the chain of command. As a colonel, Tanner could get him to salute and that was about it. He didn't seem to do much "assisting" either. He never carried Waller's bags or took her dictation (she casually stole his enlisted men for that). No, he just followed her around except certain evenings when strange civilian cars would pick him up to leave the Fort.

He did know that Lieutenant Wilson was the most naturally threatening person he had ever encountered. He had the air of a predator, primal and unmistakable. He was muscled and tall, with shoulders as wide as a sequoia. And that impression was just unarmed. He always carried an arsenal of the most blatantly regulation-defying weapons one could imagine. It reminded the Tanner of old photos of Mexican revolutionaries or Russian partisans, figures carrying firepower up to their eyeballs. To begin with, Wilson always wore two sidearms. Then there was the bayonet or two strapped to different appendages. Sometimes he wore a Bowie knife on his hip, sometimes a naval saber, and sometimes both. When he left the base, he carried a Thompson or a Winchester trench gun, usually with an honest-to-God bandoleer. Whatever room he had left Wilson reserved for grenades- he invariably carried at least four. And all of this was evidently his own supply.

Wherever Slade Wilson came from, however he found himself in Amanda Waller's employ, and whatever he did on his excursions, Colonel Tanner was certain they weren't good.

The Colonel poured himself another glass of water. "At least tell me one thing. You've already led a mighty intense reconnaissance of the grounds and found no other proof of infiltration. But say we implement your very long list of precautions, despite its inconvenience to my subordinates."

Waller scrutinized him with lidded eyes and blew out another plume of smoke. "I didn't hear a question."

"Based solely on this ... *footprint*, how much longer do you think these measures are warranted? A day? Two days? A week? The entire warehouse staff has been reassigned for your manhunt. You've cut communication and closed the roads. Our food *might* last till the end of the month."

"When I said 'until further notice', Colonel Tanner, I meant precisely that. I will *notify* you when I feel the threat has passed." She read his sour expression and shifted tack. "Listen, I do what it takes to get results. That's why our mutual superiors trust me. Our *interactions* would be much smoother if you could too."

"So I should let the men know that it's triple shifts indefinitely?"

She chuckled and put out her cigarette in his ash tray. "Well, I wouldn't phrase it like that. But you're the grand military leader. Try to make it sound ..." she gestured vaguely to his chest of medals, "noble."

Several hours later.

Some believed that climbing a building and climbing a rock wall were wildly different beasts. As one of the rare few qualified to compare the two, Catwoman didn't think so. Once you understood the surface you were on, they both used the same toolbox of grips and maneuvers. Other laymen assumed they were both a test of upper body strength. Not really. The upper body was important, but most of a climber's thrust came from the legs. If you could climb a tall ladder, you could probably manage a basic wall. Hand grips were for holding still while you found a better foothold. Very few routes looked like a long series of pull-ups.

This was good, because Catwoman wasn't in the mood to do pull-ups for half an hour. Climbing a slick wall was slow, climbing an unfamiliar wall was even slower, and managing both in the dark was practically a line at the doctor's office. Batman actually brought a set of headlamps in his big Trunk o' Tricks, but they agreed it wasn't worth being spotted. They proceeded by touch. He went first as he already knew the wall. This helped her more than one might expect: as an expert climber, Catwoman could roughly sense his movements above her and copy them.

What Batman said was right: this was an easy wall. The problem was the wind. Heavy gusts barreled past every few seconds, almost scraping them off the cliff like a chisel against paint flecks. Her new outfit did wonders to help her stay cozy, but the extra weight was awkward, and now was NOT the time for awkward. If she turned a certain way, the hood had a tendency to catch the air like a sail and pull her sideways. To her chagrin, his cape didn't seem to have this problem. Somehow it was fastened to flap in the breeze without pulling on him. Otherwise, it settled onto his shoulders as well as any coat.

About twenty minutes in and halfway up, they crossed a small ledge. It barely offered seven inches of clearance from the wall, but it might as well have been a couch with the world-class poise of a Bat or a Cat. So they sat, staring down into space, balancing on a few inches of stone.

Catwoman rubbed her hands together, trying to get the feeling back for the next twenty minute effort. Batman was motionless beside her, looking every bit the usual gargoyle. The wind passed through, shifting the hem of her green poncho and tugging at the hood. That was annoying.

She leaned into his ear and spoke up. "Hey, hand me one of those throwing knives you carry around."

"What?"

"With that bat-shape, you know, the, uh, bat ... boomerangs, the batarangs."

He looked at her in amazement. "That's ... actually what I call them."

"Swell. Can you hand one over? Please?"

With a twitch, one instantly appeared in his palm. She made a mental note to figure out how he did that.

The gadget had a tiny hinge that opened into a fine edge four inches long. She took her impromptu knife and, with an uncanny ease considering she was on a cliff, shimmied out of the woolen poncho. The wind almost yanked the garment out of her hand but she held fast and laid it across her lap. Despite

him trying to look ever-so-disinterested, she noticed Batman watching her and smirked. With careful deliberation, Catwoman started by slicing off the annoying hood.

Then she realized a dilemma: what to do with it? She went to stuff it into her hip satchel but felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned and saw Batman make an abrupt gesture into space. The implication was pretty clear:

We'll grab it on the way back. If they're patrolling this far out before then, we'll have bigger problems to worry about.

Catwoman nodded and flung the green cloth, watching it swirl away in the wind, then returned to her work. She was glad to have the batarang; her claws could cut fabric, but they had too little leverage to do the job cleanly.

Another minute and she was done. Catwoman closed the hinge and handed back the weapon. "Thanks."

He nodded. With a twitch, the batarang was gone. He turned and began to climb. Before following him, she took a moment to tie on her new green cape.

Another eighteen minutes of painstaking ascent finally brought them to the edge of the cliff.

In swift movements, the two pulled over the top and dropped prone among some frozen shrubs to scan their surroundings. Batman and Catwoman were so accustomed to darkness that the scattering of tall searchlights was nearly blinding, seeming halos of eerie brightness floating in the distance above the landscape. When Catwoman's vision adjusted, she realized that eight yards in front of her was a towering chain link fence topped with loops of barbed wire. Beyond this, was the grounds of Fort Morrison.

The Fort's plateau was a plain of bushes and stunted trees stretching for acres in every direction - all bathed in moonlight. At the blurry edge of her perception was a speak she knew to be the encampment: lines of tents and cabins, parked trucks and oil drums, and those sturdy watchtowers gleaming above the low trees.

She heard muttering beside her. "No. No. No. No."

She crawled over. "No?"

Batman was surveying this base through his binoculars. "The cables are down. The towers are manned."

"Cables?" She pulled out her own miniature spyglass.

"The first time I came in, I-"

"Yeah, I remember the report. You climbed a tree and jumped to a telegraph cable. That's how you got over the fence."

He nodded. "Now the cables are gone. And all ten watchtowers are operational."

"Isn't that what they do at night?"

"Last time it was two."

"What are you saying?"

"We've been made. Abort mission."

Chapter 7

Arguing on the Rubicon

Batman's first trip into Fort Morrison lasted sixteen minutes. There had been a lot he wanted to do, but a good detective always made time for details.

For example, isolation and lack of domestic amenities meant families obviously did not live on the base. This was rare; the nation was at peace and military sites were largely settled communities. The Army didn't publish details on Fort Morrison - they hardly admitted it existed – but it was simple for the Dark Knight to narrow down which parts of the regional battalions weren't living with families using public records. He compared these with the patches he spied inside the Fort to determine who was home. This short list became a manpower estimate by counting barracks and latrines.

Batman considered his first trip into Fort Morrison a failure. He never said it was useless.

Best estimate: between 160 and 180 long-term occupants. The remarkable thing was that it was a hybrid camp. While most residents he saw belonged to the expected warehouse units, there were also soldiers from at least two infantry companies, a special G-4 logistics team out of Texas (almost certainly meaning R&D), a military police company, and the Surgeon General's Office, and those were just the insignia he was certain of. This sort of blended operation was next to unheard of for the stratified Army. You didn't cherry pick personnel from across the armed forces to run some tiny pet program in the middle of nowhere. Not without a signed letter from the ghost of George Washington delivered by an archangel. Whoever brought them together had cleared bureaucratic hurdles the size of the Grand Tetons. The perpetrators obviously had major league clout, the kind that could make them untouchable if they saw him coming. Not that he needed another reminder

One of the bigger mysteries in the case was the officer they stuck in charge. The commander of Fort Morrison was a colonel, which on its own demonstrated that the undertaking merited a colonel, a rank that usually commanded thousands. A little research showed that the man had a *shockingly* checkered

past. Scandal had a way of guiding a person's professional options, so this smelled like a rich vein for insight into the Fort's plans. But the colonel, Abner Tanner, had a hand in so many random and disastrous programs over the years that Batman couldn't decide which he was employed for.

As much as this whetted Batman's curiosity, he was keenly aware that the site was still a powder keg: nearly two hundred armed threats in what was effectively a few city blocks. And security only tightened closer to its secrets. The Dark Knight had spent time in a few war zones back in his wandering years. In his experience, soldiers weren't necessarily better sentries than criminals on an individual level; both knew their environment and had the same incentives to pay attention to it. But soldiers were much better than criminals at working as a team. Gaps in the Fort's guards would be few and far between. And they would be exceedingly quick at setting up a perimeter and turning the place upside-down if he was spotted.

With the element of surprise, it was a high-risk venture that demanded the utmost caution and stealth.

Without the element of surprise, well...

"No. No. No. No."

On an scale of alarm from one to ten, with a one measuring him resting in his cave and a nine being shot at while disarming a bomb, the evening had commenced at a low two. There was a brief jump when Catwoman found his protocol stash. Climbing the rock wall in the dark nudged near a solid four. When he saw the Fort and realized something was off, the needle went unstuck and floated loosely upward as he struggled to put the pieces together. When he realized what was wrong his alarm spiked to a seven. He had once skydived with a stuck parachute and hadn't reached seven.

"-All ten watchtowers are operational."

"Isn't that what they do at night?"

"Last time it was two."

He took a deep, meditative breath. This was bad news.

The public thought Batman was invincible. In truth, he was merely very shrewd at picking his battles.

"We've been made. Abort mission."

Catwoman thought of herself as the epitome of a cool customer; Kitty didn't sweat when the cards were on the table. However, her gut said something was off. She lived by very few rules, but she always followed her intuition.

"We've been made. Abort mission."

The Dark Knight rose to a low crouch and turned around.

"Batman," Catwoman whispered after him. "Wait, Batman!"

"I'll tie a rappel line. Stay down. Watch my back."

It was spoken in his regular flat affect, but Catwoman was getting pretty good at the subtle tones of Bat-speak. For example, those subtle tones were now saying the big guy was worried. This was bad news.

"Stop! Hey!"

Catwoman wasn't as flamboyant as some of her peers on the GCPD's dispatch bulletins (she didn't kidnap the mayor or install vats of acid in her home), but she certainly had a reputation: sly, flirty, easygoing, an eye for the finer things, a well-adjusted sense of humor (exceedingly rare among night-types), world-class gams, and a touch of kleptomania.

Most flirty girls who worked at night weren't brain surgeons. Words like "airhead" were tossed around. Catwoman couldn't care less what random strangers thought about her, but she happened to be a very gifted lady. Even ignoring her technical skills, no idiot could go toe-to-toe with Batman more than once and get away with it. In Gotham that was a law of physics. So, being the intelligent sort, Catwoman was more than a tad surprised that the Caped Crusader, a force of convictions so steady one could set a watch by them, was doing the unthinkable and retreating (without consulting her again, for the record). Seeing Batman run away was like seeing a solar eclipse or a lion snorkeling - every fiber of her being screamed it was against the natural order of things.

As for her, one couldn't say quite what made Catwoman tick. A healthy young woman who hid outside a military installation in an animal costume on a whim was not the easiest psyche to unpack. Freud would've had a field day. Or a conniption. Still, a few issues certainly fed her current attitude. For instance, Catwoman thrived on professional pride. The night she let a few guards and a fence stop her from getting her prize was the night she hung up the claws. Her recent string of rotten luck wasn't helping matters - first the Nelson Stones, then the Ataturk Arabesques, and then that fiasco at the Cairo Exhibition. Her lifetime record still made her Hall of Fame material seven times over, but you were only as good as your last heist. In her mind, a lady made her own luck, and she made it by being so audacious that luck couldn't help but stand and applaud.

The fact that Batman wanted to leave (and was ordering her around in the process) certainly gave her more than enough incentive to be contrary. And if the evening was a success, she could rub it in his face. What greater reward was there?

Besides, she was certainly NOT in the mood to climb down that cliff again. She was just starting to get the feeling back into her fingers.

Okay, and maybe she was angry for the sake of that poor couple who were mercilessly killed by the monsters they were after. She wasn't heartless.

Regardless, Catwoman wasn't shaken by Batman's change of plans. Nope, not her. The Feline Femme Fatale was cool as a cucumber and confronted her new partner with an eloquence and suavity befitting such dignity.

Batman felt an urgent tugging on his cape. He ignored it. Then he felt a snowball smack the back of his neck.

He turned sharply. "What?"

She hissed in his ear. "*What the Hell is going on?!*"

Catwoman was either livid or frightened. He wasn't sure which made the situation worse.

"I said it's over. The Fort's on alert. We can't risk it."

"How could they possibly see us coming?"

He grimaced. "Not sure. Doesn't matter."

He returned to work. A gust of wind swirled up eddies of loose snow. Catwoman pulled her green cape tighter and grabbed his shoulder. "Hold on just a sec--"

He curtly pushed her hand away. "Don't worry. You'll get your pay."

Catwoman blinked. Her mouth fell open very slowly.

That was the wrong thing to say.

Rage was a funny feeling. Sometimes it frothed out all at once, but sometimes the vitriol was so thick it collapsed under its own gravity and stayed hidden. A bystander wouldn't have seen anything but mild surprise in Catwoman's features. A shrewd observer like Batman might have noticed something was wrong, but he was distracted.

She briefly entertained the thought of kicking him off the cliff. It warmed her up a little. But this was Batman. He'd survive somehow, the git. And then she'd have to climb down without a guide.

Batman had taken a knee and was busy forcing a spike into the icy ground. She crept behind him and, in a fluid motion, grabbed his other thigh and pulled it backwards. He flopped onto his stomach in a very un-Batman-like way. He recovered at once and rolled onto his back, but then she was already crouched over him.

Given the circumstances (and the fact that his head was hanging a few inches over the cliff), she had to admire his poise. He looked up at her coolly. "Fine. What's your concern?"

"You're Batman."

He gave her a look. "... And?"

"And wouldn't you remember if someone saw you?"

Batman considered this. "I can make mistakes."

"Mistakes big enough to warrant *that*?" She pointed at the array of watchtowers. "A week later?"

He paused. "It's unlikely. Could be for an unrelated security breach. Could be a drill. But the consequences are the same. Too dangerous."

"I thought you had guts."

"I did until you sat on them."

Catwoman glanced down at their current ... configuration. She was the furthest thing from bashful, but her point was made. She moved off of him and tried another tack. "Listen, I read your report. You have other ways in, other exits. And they were good! I think we can still do this."

Once she wasn't straddling him, Batman rose to a crouch. He didn't respond.

She pushed her point home. "Be honest. If we leave now, what are the odds you can still bring a solid case to the Powers that Be against these wastes of oxygen?"

"The perpetrators are leaving evidence and making enemies with the City," He pondered for a moment. "Given enough time, moderately likely."

"And what are the odds that 'enough time' is before the next nice couple is murdered?"

He stiffened. People under tension normally shift or twitch, but his taut muscles were perfectly still. Ever so slowly, his head swiveled to meet hers. Catwoman had received countless Bat-glares, but this one was different. It wasn't a glare of suspicion or disapproval or anger. It was a look of hate. Hate to boil the oceans to steam. Hate to melt sand into glass. Not hate at her necessarily (at least she hoped not), but at *life* - at humanity.

Gotham criminals loved to argue over why the Bat didn't kill, but Catwoman never found the question interesting. The answer seemed obvious to her - whatever inflated altruism gene made him choose to risk his life every night also compelled him to take the moral high ground in everything, as easily as he breathed. Seeing him now, she suspected that his self-restraint didn't come quite so naturally.

Catwoman crossed her arms. It was easy to miss on the playful surface, but she had a cord of stubbornness in her as deep as the roots of an oak. And it took every inch, but she stood her ground and looked him in the eye ... lense. "Well?"

His intensity evaporated in a heartbeat, as if it was never there. He responded with typical cold indifference. "More victims mean more loose ends to tie to the guilty parties. But we can't take advantage of that if we're the victims. We're going home."

Catwoman frowned and sucked in a deep breath of courage. She did have one ultimatum left. She *reeeeally* hoped this worked.

"You're wrong, handsome. *We're* not doing anything. You can drive off in your little car, but I'm going in."

"You're not prepared for-"

"See this face?" she pointed at herself. "It's the face of someone who doesn't care. It's also the face of the best thief in the business. Get in touch in a few days and I'll show you what I find. Bye."

Catwoman stood up out of the frozen bushes and strode away, following the curve of the chain-link fence. Batman stared after her and muttered something unflattering. Sometimes he *really* hated night-types.

He turned and examined his rappel spike.

Thirty-seven seconds later.

The pair walked side-by-side along the margin between the fence and the cliff. Catwoman secretly grinned. As they sloshed through the ankle-deep slush, she snickered, "I bet this is the closest thing to a date you've had in a long time."

Batman briefly recalled the hundred and nine evenings spent with female company since the beginning of the year. "Something like that."

They eventually reached one of the maintenance gates: small entrances in the fence placed every few hundred yards and locked from the inside.

"Alright. You were eager to be here, now how do you want to get in?"

"I assume we still can't cut holes in the fence and make our lives easier?"

"We leave no evidence."

"Well, when I was reading your file, ingress route four seemed interesting."

He frowned in confusion. "We didn't bring a ladder."

"I was thinking of adding a little improvisation."

"There's timber here, but it would take half an hour to build a ladder."

"Are you willfully ignoring what I mean or just much stupider than everyone thinks?"

He grunted. "It's a foolish idea."

"It's the quickest idea."

"Quickest to lacerations."

"You of all people should know what I'm capable of."

He grunted but looked at Catwoman analytically, methodically observing from head to toe. She took the opportunity to make a cheeky pose: foot turned inward, one hand on a hip, the other behind her head.

He looked ambivalent. "Even for you, the margin of error would be just over a handspan."

"Sounds like my problem."

"Not if you get stuck in the barbed wire. Then it's my problem and your hospital stay."

"Ahhhh, that's sweet. Would you visit me?"

"With a court summons."

"Less sweet. Can't we just pole vault?"

"The pole would stand as evidence. We'll do ingress route nine."

"Please, we'll never find that many falcons. We're doing four."

With that, Catwoman paced to the edge of the cliff, turned around, and leaned into a sprinter's stance.

"Catwoman, this is unnecessary."

She took a deep breath. "You better get ready!"

"Stop."

She kicked off.

"STOP!"

Pumping her arms, Catwoman sped forward. In a flash, she was at the fence. Batman huffed in resignation. With a swift motion, he bent his knees and anchored his hands at his abdomen like he was hefting an invisible shot put. At her final step, Catwoman leapt. For a heartbeat, she stood in his palms. Then Batman pushed skyward with a Herculean burst.

Catwoman, already racing forward at eye-watering speed, rocketed into the air. With balletic grace, she swiveled into a languid high jump pose. Then, gently as a feather, she glided just above the highest loops of the barbed wire, kicked her trailing leg over, cape fluttering in the slipstream, and began to fall.

The way down wasn't so elegant.

"OW!"

"Not so loud."

Catwoman gingerly stood up. Someone was in store for a bruised hip tomorrow.

"I think I landed on a thistle."

"Get the gate."

"I'm going, I'm going."

Catwoman made remarkably short work of the lock on the maintenance gate. Batman stepped through and she relocked it behind him.

"Told you it would work!"

He nodded begrudgingly as they set off.

For the serious infiltrator, there were many advantages to operating in a city. The shadows of elaborate skylines to slink under. Walls and trash bins to hide behind. The mazes of narrow alleys, abandoned buildings, and forgotten tunnels to pursue or lose pursuit in. A million hidden nooks to lie in wait. Plenty of smog, steam, and smoke to obscure the figure. And a vertical dimension unseen anywhere else.

That said, when it came to sheer concealment per square inch, it was hard to beat the vegetation of a low forest. In the eyes of two masters of the art such as Batman and Catwoman, this was paradise. They glided like ghosts through the icy underbrush - never cracking a branch, rarely shifting a leaf. Neither led the other; they moved as two extensions of the same mind, wordlessly flowing to the smoothest path. A soft and heavy snow began to fall, muffling what little noise they made.

Some might assume their outfits were ill-suited to the task. This was a misconception. The dark greys and blacks of the Bat-suit were actually excellent against white snow, an optical trick known to winter warriors for millennia. Catwoman's violet and green ensemble, though striking up close, was a muted color and fine camouflage in the forest.

After several silent minutes, they came to a dirt trail. They followed beside it, staying several yards inside the woods. As they rounded a curve, they heard voices ahead of them. The two infiltrators instantly dissolved further into the brush and crouched down. The bushes ahead were getting sparse and small, and the lights of the distant watchtowers were growing brighter; they couldn't risk sneaking ahead here. They would have to wait.

The voices were soon joined by bodies. Three soldiers crunched leisurely through the fresh snow. They wore heavy coats and cradled rifles in their arms.

As they passed by, one soldier held up a hand to stop his compatriots. He glanced around slowly. Batman and Catwoman, a stone's throw away, tensed behind their cover.

The soldier put down his arm and nodded. "This'll work."

Without further ado, the soldier slung his rifle on his back, then faced a tree on the opposite edge of the trail and unzipped his trousers.

The sounds of nature commenced.

Batman and Catwoman collectively exhaled. The two unoccupied soldiers looked around idly and began to chat.

"So Sarge, I hear you and Iris split."

"Aye, you know how it is: we starting hating each other faster than we could lower our standards. S'fer the best."

"S'not like maintaining any sort o' emotional bond s'easy when we hardly get a weekend of leave every month."

"Ain't that the God's honest."

"Mm-yep."

The soldier relieving himself spoke up, "And can you believe this now? Triple shifts! Over some bootprint," Batman and Catwoman shared a meaningful glance, "If they wanted to put me in the dirt, I'd prefer a cigarette and a blindfold. Damn that Waller!"

This was met with coarse laughter. "Sarge" had a look of sudden insight.

"That ain't a bad idea, Hershey."

"What, damning Waller? I think that's St. Peter's job."

"No, lunkhead. As Sergeant, I order this column at ease to support a tobacco-based morale initiative."

The two not facing a tree chuckled and dug out old, bent cigarettes.

"Need a light, Denunzio?"

"Nah, Sarge. I'm good."

They each pulled out long-stem matches and lit their flames against the falling snow.

Denunzio coughed. "Jeez, Hershey! Was your momma a racehorse? You've been there a minute."

"Shove it up your ear, Denunzio."

The Sarge frowned. "Hey! You boys know the rules. No bringing mothers into things."

"Sorry, Sarge."

"Sorry, Sarge."

"That's right. But he's got a point. Are you all right, Private Hershey? Should I be callin' a medic?"

"Nah, Sarge. I drank two pots of coffee at supper when I heard about the new hours."

Denunzio nodded sagely. "Coffee's gonna mess with your sleep, buddy. None for me. Hate getting up early."

Hershey finished and zipped up. "I thought you grew up on a farm."

"Yeah, and I left!"

"You didn't like waking up early so you left ... to join the Army?"

"Seemed like a good idea at the time. Speaking of, any idea who'd sneak into camp?"

Hershey nodded. "It's got to be Jerry. The Krauts got spies all over, see? Snooping on our science for their war machines."

"For my two cents, it's the commies. No question."

The Sarge shook his head slowly. "You boys's both backwards. Some son of a gum buck private was tip-toeing 'round past when he should'a been and made that print, and now he's too afraid to speak up."

Hershey disagreed, "But Sarge, the boots weren't general issue."

"Well, then I suppose he had another pair of boots!"

"What sort of bad business would a guy want to hide so much that he'd let this happen?"

"I don't know. Maybe ... littering?"

"Littering."

Denunzio interjected, "Yeah, that's the circle of life!"

Sarge scratched his forehead, "Denunzio, what's a 'circle of life'? Is'zat fancy speak for something?"

"You know, the circle of life! People make trash ..."

"Alright."

"Trash ... um ... makes rats."

"Okay."

"And ... rats ... make ... people."

"Rats make people."

"Yeah. People make trash, trash makes rats, and rats make people - circle of life."

Private Hershey scoffed, "Denunzio, shut your pie hole."

"So's your old man, Hershey."

"Bah."

Their grunting and spitting and insults lasted a long while, as men in repose are inclined, until their smokes finally dimmed.

From the beginning of this chat, the Dark Knight forcibly suppressed a headache.

As an unseen judge of the streets, Batman spent many of his waking hours in surveillance. It was a vital task, and his ironclad worldview insisted that vital tasks stood beyond resentment or criticism. He could never consciously admit to anything but complete respect for the job in all its challenges. That said, surveillance was terrible. Catching six seconds of incriminating admission usually meant enduring forty minutes of inane chatter. As a genius and an introvert, he found the casual stupidity of strangers a special kind of purgatory.

One of the subtlest nuances in the mind of the Bat was that, while he was entirely *serious*, he wasn't entirely *mature*. The two traits looked so much alike that the distinction was next to invisible (and presently only recognized by a single old friend), but it was there. For instance, while Batman couldn't hate the surveillance itself, he was more than happy to mock the mouth-breathers he had to watch.

As the trio of Nobel laureates talked about coffee or sleeping habits or some other dreck, he gave an exhale of disdain.

Imbeciles.

Catwoman, lying a few inches away, gave a half-nod towards the three.

I know, right?

Batman was briefly stunned. Having worked alone for so long he was used to his thoughts going unanswered. Forgetting himself, Batman enthusiastically lifted his shoulders.

It's ridiculous. Have they passed the third grade?

Catwoman rested her cheek sardonically on two fingers.

If so, this is my tax dollars at work.

He gave the quietest grunt.

Like you pay taxes.

She glared with pointed reproach.

Hey, I'm not an anarchist. Someone has to keep the roads paved and the kids in school. Besides...

They shrugged in unison.

... *That's how they got Capone.*

She smiled at him bemused and looked away. Batman paused in rare astonishment. He knew abstractly that Catwoman spent time in surveillance, but it never occurred to him that they would ever share gripes about it. That was bizarre. But he had to admit, having someone to *heckle* with was...well...an unusually welcome experience.

After an interminable wait, the patrol finally ended their smoke break and continued down the trail. Batman and Catwoman waited until the three were well out of sight before they cautiously left cover. Restless now, they slipped through the snowy brush at a bolder pace.

It wasn't long before the scenery rapidly thinned out. They could see a short clearing, and beyond it the main camp of Fort Morrison. The site was surrounded by a low ring of barbed wire backed by piles of sandbags. Lines of tight-set cabins were wedged into a sad mimicry of "streets" which were laid in a grid like a small town. Between the moon, the snow, and the spotlights, the buildings were cast in a sterile gray twilight.

Catwoman whistled, "It's like the love child of Santa's village and a gulag."

Having once been in a gulag, Batman agreed. He grabbed his binoculars and observed the area.

"The sandbags are new."

"What do you think that means?"

"Not sure. Fences and barbed wire are just obstacles to deter trespassers. They presume the guards can win any real confrontation."

"And sandbags?"

"Sandbags don't stop people, they stop munitions. A tactician would only lay sandbags if he expected to be attacked by a force that might outgun his own."

"So someone thinks Fort Morrison is about to be invaded?"

"Evidently."

"Who could possibly be the threat? Canada?"

"I don't know."

Meanwhile.

At the base of the mountain, another squad crunched through the forest with considerably less stealth. Cold and sleepy, they didn't expect to see so much as a chipmunk. This was the second night of patrols beyond the Fort and no one was happy about it.

As the grumpy patrol stumbled down a small hill, a tired private thought he saw a strange glint of color in a stand of evergreens. He called this out and the group lazily halted.

The private pushed aside some heavy branches and peered ahead with his flashlight.

It fell to the dirt. In front of him sat a humble Ford Model 48 hardtop. Beige.

Chapter 8

Army Life

Sneaking was a strange skill. It was an act any child could do but very few professionals excelled at. Finding a good teacher was, by definition, next to impossible. Most masters of the art couldn't publicize even if they wanted to because they didn't operate on the friendly side of the law. The handful that were government-approved had even harsher restrictions on taking an apprentice. And trying to learn on one's own was even more perilous. Sneaking was sort of like warfare or romance, there was no way to practice the real thing safely by yourself. Doing it right meant putting your neck on the line. Otherwise, you weren't learning. As a consequence of all this, the field of expertise for moving unobserved was terribly small and exceedingly steep. Only a handful of questionable personalities sought to learn in the first place, the attrition rate for amateurs was devastating, and anyone who survived long enough to get really good had every reason to keep that knowledge to themselves.

A side-effect of this reality was that the public didn't know what great sneaking looked like. The odds of having a friendly neighbor or a talkative great aunt who was also a secret agent was extraordinarily small; this was just a somber fact of life. By contrast, a typical person could watch the Olympics to discover, for example, roughly how fast a human could run. Sneaking had no Olympics; there was no popular wisdom on what was possible. It would be as if people only saw running during grade school recess, unaware that an elite cadre of Olympic sprinters hid throughout the world. If a bystander ever saw such a sprinter perform, they would be in awe, for they would be witnessing the impossible.

This shock was an ancient response; the masters of stealth were always seen as supernatural. However, they were not. The Ninja couldn't actually turn invisible or command the weather. The Hashashian couldn't actually leap castle battlements or rise from the dead. And Batman couldn't actually smell your fear.

Nor could he expect to cross sixty yards of empty dirt without being seen.

At least without a really good plan.

Hiding prone, Batman scanned the landscape.

In his favor, it was an unseasonably dark night and the snowfall was getting thick; he guessed four inches an hour. Though the wind wasn't as fierce here as it was on the cliff face, it was enough to slant the precipitate at a nice diagonal. As a rule of thumb, the more chaotic motion there was in an environment, the harder a moving person was to spot.

Unfortunately, there was a tower nearby whose spotlight was meandering across the ground. Almost every challenge Batman faced could be negated with enough cunning, but there were a handful of risks he simply couldn't avoid. He could never be sure a roofing tile would hold his weight. He couldn't guarantee that some punk in an alley wouldn't get a lucky shot with a concealed .32. And he had no way of preventing a random spotlight from casually crossing his path.

Also to his detriment, the camp was illuminated with hanging lamps and strings of lights. It was so dark on the empty ground that he could conceivably sprint across (presuming the tower didn't spot him), but everything within spitting distance of the camp was as well lit as a bunch of cabins could be. There was no standing sentry here, but soldiers ambled past every few moments. The last steps would be the most difficult by far.

Catwoman lay next to him in the brush and spied the camp herself. She nudged his elbow

"Are you sure this is the *least* protected side?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's unfortunate."

"We have the snow to our advantage."

"Yeah, I guess they'll be as frozen as we are."

"I meant it conceals movement and covers tracks."

Catwoman shivered. "That's one way of looking at it."

"If we wait two hours, we could move under the accumulation."

"Are you suggesting you want to crawl through half a football field of snow on the chilliest night of the year?"

"Th-"

"Don't answer that."

The four men of Baker squad surrounded the Ford hardtop like an ancient tribe finding a fallen spacecraft. Private Benjamin Greene, the soldier who discovered the car, poked at a tire with a stick.

"So ... this isn't supposed to be here, right?"

Lieutenant Harrison Stephens exhaled slowly and counted backwards from ten. He didn't consider himself a proud man, but leading a dinky patrol through the woods after midnight on a snipe hunt seemed like a task beneath a lieutenant's notice. He should be reviewing his whole platoon, or at least getting some sleep, but they were all on patrols as well, and orders said all personnel of this duty shift were out in the field. That included him. One might think that actually finding something worth reporting would change his attitude. It did not; it just meant more paperwork.

Private Greene saw the expression in the Lieutenant's face. "I'm going to guess that's a negatory."

The Lieutenant slowly nodded.

Catwoman looked skeptical. "You realize that if this doesn't work, not only do we die, we die looking stupid."

"The path is clear."

"Good. I just wanted that on record."

"Ready?"

"In a fatalistic sort of way."

"Go."

In a recent survey among Gothamites who believed the so-called Bat Man existed (roughly 17%), only half thought that he had a cape. The other half was split between those who said it was a set of wings, some sort of prehensile eldritch appendage, or that his entire body was an amorphous and fluid shadow form. Among the cape theorists, almost all the respondents believed he wore it for the same reason that thespians, kings, circus strongmen, and luchadores did: to look impressive.

This was true, and it did, but Batman never carried a tool with only a single purpose. The cape had many other uses. Ironically, its second use was to *not* be seen. In a dim environment, the human eye didn't perceive people, it perceived silhouettes. If a shape that looked like a person appeared in one's field of vision, the eye would alert the conscious mind instantly. But a shape that looked nothing like a person could go unnoticed for minutes. The cape was excellent at breaking the outline of one's figure.

At the moment, two loose triangles hovered low over the empty field outside Fort's Morrison's encampment.

Some people thought Catwoman was shameless. This was untrue. For instance, crouch-walking towards a military base with her back hunched low and her arms out like a child pretending to be an airplane made her very ashamed.

Technically, crawling would be even more discreet, but veterans of the craft like Batman and Catwoman knew there were harsh tradeoffs in taking it slow. Spending time out in the open was bad. A new patrol of guards might be sent out or the weather might turn against them. No, a moderate measurable risk was almost always better than a longer list of unknowns.

The distance soon passed and they found themselves within vaulting distance of the barricade. Without a word, Batman stood and took three swift steps. He leaped over the barbed wire loop and landed gently on the pile of sandbags. Not stopping, the Dark Knight sped forward, crossed the empty lane, and climbed onto the low roof of the first cabin. Finding a shadow to hide in, he looked back and nodded.

The choice to stagger their approach was obvious. If the first across was caught by a hidden threat, the second could retreat unseen. Though that precaution seemed moot now, the coast was clear. *And not a moment too soon*, Catwoman mused, *that spotlight's wandering awfully close.*

She stood and prepared to leap, but at the last moment Batman shook his head and pointed down. In a blink, Catwoman fell and hugged the snow. A few seconds later, a pair of soldiers rounded a corner and marched gradually towards her. She had dropped just in time. Separated by eleven feet of dim lamplight and a few sandbags, Catwoman breathed very slowly and willed herself to not be seen. She shifted her head to the side. The beam of the spotlight was arcing towards her.

Great.

Batman coolly watched this from his rooftop perch. Whatever happened, it would be over in seconds. He readied two batarangs and leaned forward.

She knew there was no point in moving backwards, the beam was too wide. The only place the light wouldn't catch her was inside the camp. She could sense the two soldiers moving past, but they were going too slowly. They wouldn't pass in time.

With numbed serenity, Catwoman watched the spotlight get closer and closer. *Thirty feet. Twenty feet. Ten feet. Five feet.*

With the glow edging the hem of her splayed cape, she shot to her feet, took one bounding step, and dived...

...And landed in a handstand, wedged in those precious inches between the sandbags and the barbed wire. Propped upside down, her eye was a millimeter from a line of metal hooks. She dared not breathe. On the other side she heard the footsteps stop, sensed bodies turning. Her legs! She refused to be caught because her feet were sticking out like carrot sprouts.

With a final steadying exertion, Catwoman stretched her legs apart into a perfectly-balanced side split, her calves dipping just below the top of the barrier.

Minutes earlier

Lieutenant Harrison Stephens addressed his squad. "Alright. Jenkins, Nowitzki, hoof it up to the Fort and tell them what we found. They'll ask you for details. Tell them you don't know any because I didn't want you to wait. Greene and I will stay here."

"You got it, Lieutenant." "Sure thing, Lieutenant."

"Great. Double-time it, but keep an eye out, we don't know who drove here, but I got an itch he ain't friendly."

Privates Jenkins and Nowitzki did an about-face and jogged up the hill. Lieutenant Stephens watched them leave. He took his cap off and idly brushed away the snow.

Private Greene stood respectfully nearby. "Now what, sir?"

"That's a very good question. We have ourselves a car that managed to drive through this rocky forest nearly a tenth of a mile, presuming it arrived from that dirt path just south of here. The doors are locked and the windows are somehow tinted. I'm no mechanic, but tinted windows are a luxury feature."

"As far as I know, sir."

"As it happens, both the locks and the tinting make it very difficult to know what's inside. I suspect that may be intentional."

"We could break open a window."

"We could. But we live in strange times, Private Greene. A great many things are possible, a number of those things outrank us, and quite a few of those things would get angry if we bashed up their automobile."

"Oh. What then?"

"Do you know how to jimmy open a car lock?"

"No."

"Neither do I. This is what the philosophers call a quandary"

There were many feats that separated the true athlete from the dilettante: the marathon, the iron cross, the home run, the one-handed pushup. Catwoman wasn't sure where her current pose fell in those rankings, but it had to be awfully impressive because holding it steady was the most tiring thing she had done in a long time, and that was saying something. If she leaned forward ten degrees, she would fall onto barbed wire. If she leaned backward ten degrees, she would bounce off a wall of burlap and fall onto barbed wire. If her arms buckled, she would hit her head on the ground and then fall onto barbed wire. She had to keep her handstand split perfectly upright and perfectly stationary.

Now the blood was rushing to her head. Her hamstrings were beginning to ache, and her fingers were getting very cold. She waited as long as she could bear, then she waited a little longer. Catwoman could

hardly hear her own breath now; there was no way to tell if the soldiers had passed. She couldn't wait any longer. Gingerly lifting her feet, she tried to find traction on the top of the pile. With an errant slip, her whole body wobbled, bringing her stomach and chest and nose distressingly close to an impromptu piercing. Catwoman wasn't going to try that twice. She resumed balance with a classic knees-bent handstand and tried to think of a plan.

Despite her fatigue, Catwoman sensed a Bat the moment before he whispered.

"Catwoman."

She took a deep breath. Just responding might have knocked her over. This was embarrassing.

"They're gone," he muttered quietly above her.

She idly wondered how awkward it was for him, having to talk to her butt. Catwoman snorted. She wished she could see the look on his face. It probably didn't even register; if anyone could be stoically humorless enough to take her predicament at face value, well, he was the best candidate she knew.

"You can get up."

Thanks for that sterling insight. She closed her eyes. After a moment of struggle, she slowly hissed, "I ... Can't ... Move."

She felt a motion above her and found herself airborne.

In a move reminiscent of a figure skater's lift or the net hefting of a crab fisherman, Batman gripped Catwoman around the legs and stomach and plucked her up, sliding her past the wire without a scratch and landing her upright beside him. She fell back on the sandbags, trying to get her bearings with old-fashioned gravity.

He glanced at her. "Hurt?"

"Huh? Uh, no. Just give me a sec-"

"Good. Let's move."

He turned and raced back up the adjacent roof. She struggled but jogged after him. A few careful leaps later and they made it to the top of an empty mess hall well inside the camp. They hid between a pair of smokestacks on the second floor, far from any lights.

"We'll rest and reorient here."

"That's nice. And thanks, uh, you know, for the save."

He gave a brief head-tilt. "That was clever evasion at the barrier. Unorthodox."

She leaned forward and grinned. "I *am* pretty flexible."

"I agree, very innovative."

She sat back and blinked. "... Wow."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Anything?"

"Hard to say. Can I please get out of here, sir?"

"You have somewhere better to be?"

"Permission to speak freely?"

"Sure, Private Greene, speak away."

"All this snow is soaking my trousers, lieutenant. The moisture is cooling into very abrasive frost crystals. I am literally freezing my butt off." He coughed. "Sir."

"Where you from, Private?"

"Florida, sir. This is the second time I've seen snow."

"This year?"

"In my life."

"Fine. Get out of there."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"Whatever."

After running out of other ideas to try, Lieutenant Harrison Stephens had ordered his subordinate to search under the car for identifying markings that might help them enter the Ford or learn more about it. Private Benjamin Greene had tried to explain that underneath a modern car were floor panels, parts of the frame, elements of the drive train, exhaust pipes, and other unhelpful bits of metal. None would offer meaningful information. The Lieutenant retorted that he wasn't a "car guy" and didn't give a "hoot".

Private Greene had the stick-thin build often seen in young Army men and was able, with a great degree of discomfort, to fit just below the vehicle. Now he was shimmying out from under the mysterious Ford. With a final squeeze, Greene's last leg popped out. He unsteadily stood up, flipped off his flashlight, and stretched.

"Whew! That was ... that was something. I'm not a big fan of tiny ... uh ... tiny places. They make me,

um ..."

"Are you saying you're claustrophobic, soldier?"

"I don't know, sir. What's that mean?"

"Don't worry about it. So you're certain there's no way in?"

"I'm positive, sir."

"And you didn't notice anything useful? Anything at all?"

"I'm not awfully familiar with the nitty-gritty on these sorts of machines, sir, but I will say the suspension was peculiar."

"How?"

"I thought most mid-sized cars had the springs and shock absorbers to fit mid-sized cars."

"What do the springs on this one fit?"

The private shrugged.

"Maybe the Eiffel Tower."

The security business had many useful contradictions. For instance, most institutions had much of their scrutiny at some arbitrary perimeter, so that if you made it past that shell you could look around unopposed. Guarded buildings cared very much about the people going in and very little about what the people already inside were doing. Once inside, a clipboard and a busy attitude could get you just about anywhere. Catwoman found that the last leg of an infiltration was also the easiest surprisingly often. This was certainly true in her occasional civilian disguises, but even in costume, the occupants of a so-called "secure zone" just paid less attention.

Like so many things, that contradiction was unfortunately not proving to be the case tonight. Coming in, she had seen plenty of guards. As she ventured further, she saw even more guards. And she wasn't calling any soldier walking around tonight a guard (although this was functionally true), she was only counting the big ones standing deliberately at street corners, perpetually frowning into the middle-distance. If the trend continued, the center of camp would be a hundred armed men waiting shoulder-to-shoulder in a big square.

... Which, come to think of it, was actually a thing the military did regularly.

Ulgh, this place was unsettling. She was already sick of prefabricated structures, stenciled signs, the strangely omnipresent smell of rubber (*there couldn't possibly be that many tires around*), and the color khaki. In the faint glow of the moon and the weak lamps below, it wasn't hard to discreetly traverse the roofs and empty courtyards of the strange environment. True, the snow was slick and all the single story architecture in their corner of the camp made concealment a challenge (the warehouses were on

the other side), but at least the snow muffled their noise and, as Batman pointed out, anyone inside the cabins would be sleeping like a log at this hour.

The intrepid pair finally moved past a stack of oil drums and saw his mystery fortress. The building itself wasn't impressive: single story, dull red brick, ninety feet long, forty feet wide, no windows. The place looked boring, benign. It was all the security around the building that made it interesting. As Batman had mentioned the other night, there was an obvious main door in the front. You really couldn't miss it. She spied two soldiers flanking the door and another manning a screening station nearby. These were serious hombres - steel helmets, bayonets fixed, the whole nine yards. Bright lights shone above them in every direction. All the party needed was a chained rottweiler and a moat to complete the message: *nope, Uncle Sam says you're not getting in here, scram*. While she watched, another pair of troops marched by, undoubtedly circling the site.

Keeping a wide berth, they navigated around to the side. They soon passed the vehicle entrance, paying careful attention to its own light show and nearby complement of biceps. Sliding through and over a maze of alleys, they approached the rear with bated breath. Anything could have changed. They might have stationed a tank there tonight.

But then they saw it - as shabby and unsupervised as an orphan in the arctic - the all-important rear door. Batman and Catwoman gave each other a microscopic nod.

Suddenly, another pair of soldiers marched past, different from the circling pair before. So there were two sets of roving sentries! Batman ran some mental numbers: the building perimeter was 260 feet; a marching path around it would be about 272 feet. Standing in front of the door made them visible to a soldier occupying 28 of those feet. Assuming the two teams of sentries were evenly spaced and marched at five feet per second ...

"Worst case scenario: we have twenty-two seconds out of cover."

"That's ... going to be a challenge."

"But I doubt the pairs are optimally distant."

"How much more time might that give us?"

"Not much."

"Great."

"We can still leave."

"What? Oh no. No, no, no."

Catwoman slid a thin black case out of her hip satchel.

"Social rule number one," with a flick, her black case accorded into five layers of pockets and loops holding three dozen fine lockpicks, "you don't invite a girl to the dance and not take her out on the floor."

He wasn't amused.

She prompted him, "And then your line is, 'Grrr. Alright honey, let's dance'".

"Fine, get ready."

She rolled her eyes. "You're really bad at this."

Amanda Waller's "quarters" composed the entirety of what was once the junior officers' club, one of the few stone buildings in camp and among the rare set with indoor plumbing. By the standards of most officers they could have fit three beds inside. By the standards of the enlisted men they could have fit twelve. The official justification for all her extra room was that, as a woman, Waller needed her own space as a matter of decorum. Her private justification was, well, nonexistent; Amanda Waller didn't justify herself to anyone, not on this side of the Potomac. And privileged or not, she still found the place primitive and cramped. She had known poverty; she wasn't eager to recreate it.

Waller went to sleep most nights around eleven, but tonight she sat in her paisley nightgown on her wooden chair reading a fresh issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* with a smile. After a long day supervising military projects and sensitive affairs of state, Amanda loved nothing more than sitting down and pouring over the latest fashions, child-rearing tips, marital tiffs, and those silly comics from the body odor ads. Everybody needed a way to blow off steam, but what could a stubbornly undomestic goat like her get out of it? Mockery? Novelty? Voyeurism? Wistfulness? No one knew. She sure wasn't talking.

There was a knock at the door.

Amanda took off her reading glasses and closed the magazine. "Enter."

If it seemed strange that she answered an interruption so politely, it was because every soul in Fort Morrison knew that bothering her at night without an emergency was suicide.

Also, her guests were screened by a very effective doorman.

The door opened. Lt. Slade Wilson ducked to fit through the entrance. "Captain Roach has a message for you, ma'am."

She stood. "Thank you, lieutenant."

Behind him shuffled in a fit, balding officer roughly two feet shorter than Wilson. He put his hat under his arm and nodded. "Miss Waller, one of our radio boys just got a curious report from the traffic checkpoint at the foot of the hill."

"Yes?"

"Two members of Baker squad ran to the checkpoint claiming they found a car hidden in the woods while performing reconnaissance southeast of the Fort."

Any tiredness in Waller's features disappeared. "A car?"

"A, uh, Ford Model 48, ma'am. Unoccupied. Sitting in a grove of evergreens."

She squinted thoughtfully. "Baker squad, that's Lt. Stephens' platoon. What did he have to say?"

"He wasn't present, ma'am. The two messengers claimed he sent them on ahead with the news so he and the remainder of the squad could keep inspecting the vehicle. We've sent a pair of mechanics with a radio to meet them and find out more."

"Good. Did the messengers have anything else to say about the car?"

"Well, it had tinted windows. Besides that and the fact that it got as far as it did through a forest, nothing remarkable."

"Very well, Captain. Listen closely: we are now in a state of active intrusion. Take whatever men and measures you need, but no one gets in or out of the Fort. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I want us on alert ten minutes ago. The colonel and I will arrange search teams once your perimeter is firmly established. Dismissed."

It was seven paces from the all-important rear door to the nearest cover, a shoulder-high pile of frozen, half-rotted potatoes. Batman knew there was surely a story involved, but potato mysteries failed to spark his interest at the moment. He did find it interesting that, after watching a few circuits, the gap between patrols averaged just over a half minute, and he suspected that moving to and from cover quietly would take perhaps six seconds.

They crept up to the two locks. Catwoman held her flashlight in her teeth and for just a moment touched the cold rim of the deadbolt. The best artists had an affection for their materials that bordered on intimacy. A violinist knew the merest texture and tension of her instrument before she lifted a bow. A smith recognized the right alloy of molten steel from scent and hue alone. So it was with lock breakers, sensing infinitesimal yet useful truths of the device's temperature, quality, weight, and age from just a caress. But unlike most crafts, locks didn't lead to a loyal marriage. Lock breakers were seducers, each lock a new paramour, a fresh challenge.

Catwoman raised a pair of choice lockpicks. In moments the deadbolt fell open like wrapping paper. Out of habit, she had hunched her body to hide her light, but then noticed Batman was keeping her concealed with one cape-arm.

Once the deadbolt was loose, they scurried back to the potatoes to wait for the next opening.

"Hey, that was clever hiding me with the cape. Is that how you took photographs with a flash last time?"

He nodded indifferently, focused elsewhere. She preferred to interpret that as "*Why thank you for noticing, Catwoman. Yes I did. The cape is such a versatile accessory. Happy to help.*" Of course, she

knew this was a ridiculous translation - he would never use the word "happy".

On the next run, they faced the real monster, the combination lock. Catwoman gently knelt down and put her ear to it, teasing the knob ever so gently. Batman waited patiently as she worked, but soon time was running short and he tapped her on the shoulder. She elbowed him in his shin and kept working. He grabbed her under the arms and pulled her out of sight.

On their next try, she found the first number.

On their next try, she found the second and the third. The combination lock clicked open. They crept back to hide, readying for the final approach.

On their next try, they each put an ear to the door, waited a moment, then nodded together. This was it. Batman pulled the handle ...

... and stopped abruptly nine inches out. The hinges were so warped or rusted that the heavy door was stuck. He pulled and pulled, planting his boot on the wall for leverage, until he heard a harsh metal grinding. Any more force and he would damage the door; they wouldn't be able to hide that.

Catwoman watched helplessly. *We're not getting this open, are we?*

He glanced back. *Not without leaving a door on the ground.*

I guess that's why they stopped using it in the first place.

He scanned the building corners. *We have about eight seconds.*

Close it and we'll think of something else.

Batman nodded and shoved a shoulder into the door. It slid three inches and stuck again, narrowly open. He tried to push it closed, but the stubborn door wouldn't budge. He tried to rapidly pull then push, shaking it harshly to loosen whatever was jammed. The door barely shifted an inch in either direction.

She grabbed his arm. *Just leave it. Let's go.*

If they notice the door is open, we're compromised.

No one will notice that it's open an little, but we're definitely compromised if they see us. Go!

They hurried back to cover, not a moment too soon. The next sentry pair was right around the corner and marching towards them. Batman's thoughts raced through plans and consequences as he watched them approach. They were steps away from the incriminating entrance ...

Suddenly, a tremendous horn erupted through the camp like an air raid siren. The deep note echoed over the mountains miles away. Catwoman could feel her teeth vibrating. A cloud of nesting birds burst out of the treeline. The deafening noise almost knocked the two sentries over. They turned and sprinted away towards some distant rally point.

Batman and Catwoman slowly left cover.

She held her forehead as if it might shake loose.

"OW! It's like I fell in a tuba!"

"Hh."

"Really? That didn't startle you at all?"

Batman grunted. "I don't-"

The tremendous horn sounded again. Mounds of snow vibrated off of roofs. Yelling and running could be heard in all directions.

"ARRGG! Will they stop that?!"

"We've been compromised."

"What gave you that idea?"

Batman shot her a stern look. "We need to leave. They're starting a manhunt."

But Catwoman had already grabbed the door, planted both feet on the wall, and pried it open. She hopped lightly down and slipped through the half-open gap.

She glanced back. "Coming?"

He stared at the door. "You damaged the bracket screws."

She covered her mouth in shock. "Oh no! Now they might get mad at us!"

He frowned, but she was already gone.

Chapter 9

Horrors at the Bottom of a Pit

Colonel Abner Tanner's room was slightly smaller than Amanda Waller's, but unlike her, he was aware that the space was excessive. He stayed because there were certain things a camp's commanding officer just had to do, and one of those things was to stay in bigger quarters than his subordinates. He didn't have to enjoy it. If he compensated for this, it was by keeping the furnishings as Spartan one could without knocking out a load-bearing wall. He had a cot, a blanket, a footlocker, a gas lamp, a small sink, a small mirror, and an old phone which now didn't work.

Most nights the Colonel was asleep by ten, but tonight he was still awake, sifting through the backlog of orders and rosters stemming from the radical patrol changes. He sat on the edge of his cot, reviewing forms by lamplight with a stubby pencil. Telling one hundred and seventy-four human beings what to do every hour of the day was no easy task. Meeting the new priorities while allotting the men a chance to eat and sleep was an ugly balancing act. Double-checking that no building or shovel was assigned to two tasks at once added a set of pins to juggle. And providing enough slack in it all so that a cracked window or stomach ache didn't stop the whole operation could drive a lesser man mad.

Tanner had assistants for this sort of thing, and he was smart enough to delegate to his officers when he could, but there were still certain forms a colonel had to review personally. When he had such a large pile he preferred to make a dent in it before bed. It was very boring, but he soldiered on. Every so often he would tap his chin with his pencil and stare at his letter wall. Tanner did have one set of decorations in his room: a hanging grid of twenty-four framed letters from his time in the Army. Most letters that a soldier kept were from mothers or sweethearts. Tanner's letters were from bureaucrats and hearing boards. The Colonel was sentimental in a way: he thought of each letter as punctuation in the story of his career - some were periods, many were question or exclamation marks, and a disturbing few were ellipses. Of course, the punctuation meant little without the prose.

The authors knew this. The letters were bland and vague in the fussy style of all embarrassing federal

documents. They piled on terms like "our miscarriage of justice", "appraisals of your recent actions", "fit to reinstate at rank and grade", and "a plea of no contest regarding the aforementioned scenario". Most offered so little context and so few proper nouns that a stranger wouldn't have the first clue what specific events were being described. But Tanner knew what the coy authors weren't saying. He remembered every lurid story. He knew the context, and – to the eternal fear of certain figures – he knew every last proper noun.

In fact, when Abner Tanner looked at his letters, he didn't see "appraisals of your recent actions". No, what he saw was:

"As the only sober witness at the scene of the detonation, you're free to go."

"Sorry for the false incrimination again, here's a plaque. Have fun in Havana."

"We've negotiated with the Belgians; you can come home if we all agree that neither party at the wreckage technically declared war."

"Upon further investigation, the committee recognizes that all seventeen mules died of natural causes."

"President Coolidge assures us that you didn't mean to challenge him to a duel."

...and so on across the long wall. Some mementos made him smile, some made him cringe, but only one could bring a tear to his eye. His most cherished possession was a little wooden case displaying a burnished medal shaped in a bronze cross: the *Croix de Guerre*, awarded for gallantry in 1918 as a volunteer of the French Foreign Legion. Behind that medal was a beer-stained old telegram from 1920 informing him that because he was later discovered to be underage when he joined the Legion, he would not be allowed to display such a medal on his Army uniform.

Like most men mellowed by age and capable of recognizing irony, these days he thought it was sort of funny. He had given his life to the Army, but in that long career of mostly sitting behind a desk, the one medal he actually earned on the field of battle was the one they wouldn't let him wear.

And it was *French*, for gosh sakes.

He tried not to be bitter. *C'est la vie*, and whatnot. Actually, he was very fond of the French. The little bronze medal didn't remind him of the muddy trenches or the dysentery. It didn't even remind him of the medal ceremony. It reminded him of those golden weeks in Paris when Jean Claude, Neil, and the rest really showed him the town. The whole city was a party then. He had the best wine, the loudest dancing, and the latest mornings in his life. When Jean Claude recognized a certain implication of his youth and strait-laced upbringing, the wily romantic tried to trick him into one of Paris' busy cathouses. The young Tanner only realized why there were so many pretty ladies in dishabille at the last minute and escaped out a window.

His affection for the French ran deep. When their surrender was signed back in June, he nearly cut his hand crushing a glass of water. Those proud souls were being kicked and gutted by the bloodthirsty Ratzis, and this gnawed his conscience raw. He knew the news on the ground as well as anyone; the Brits were brilliant at that sort of thing and happy to share. He also knew that Fort Morrison was among the very few places where an American might ready the war effort in the meantime. Anything less would be disgusting. For that reason alone he hadn't left yet.

He heard crunching footsteps and a knock at the door. "You awake, Colonel?"

The voice was Staff Sergeant Hank Jackson, one of the few men in camp near Tanner's age and a friend.

Colonel Tanner spoke back, "Yeah, Jackson."

"Then open up. Got news."

It was ancient military law that old sergeants could say whatever they wanted to their commanders in private if it saved time or saved lives. The Colonel stood and unlocked the door (he didn't feel he needed a guard). Staff Sergeant Jackson briskly pushed his way inside. He was a flinty-eyed curmudgeon with a paunch and Popeye's forearms. His polished shoes were no disguise; Jackson was the sort you never wanted to cheat at cards or meet in an alley. One of the main reasons nations had armies was to give mean bruisers like him someone else to pick on.

"Queer finding jus' came in, Abner."

"What's that?"

"Baker squad found an empty car parked in the woods south o' the Fort."

"A car? Whose car?"

"Don't know. Some two-door Ford. The message has already sped along to our *lady guest*," Jackson scowled just mentioning her, "but the radio boys didn't seem to think you were worth informin' at this time a' night. Lucky for you, I heard the commotion and thought I'd rectify that." The staff sergeant growled this in a way that made it clear part of his rectifying would involve having a long talk with the "radio boys" about their priorities *vis-à-vis* the chain of command. "For now, we got a pair o' gearheads trottin' down to this car as we speak. Should know more soon."

The Corporal crossed his arms thoughtfully. "Alright. I imagine Waller will react to this with her usual reserve and sense of proportion."

"Heh. Then we ought to be hearing a general alarm any-"

Suddenly, a tremendous horn erupted through the camp like an air raid siren. The two old soldiers stared at each other, bored and annoyed. Staff Sergeant Jackson waited for the noise to die down before continuing.

"-second now."

Amateur detectives trusted their instincts.

Skilled detectives trusted only reason and observation.

And master detectives reluctantly trusted ... their instincts.

As the theologians said, pride was truly the greatest sin. Pride put unjustified faith in one's capacities, and the smarter you were, the easier a trap this was to fall into. It took a great dose of intellectual humility to recognize that the brain did half its work beneath the surface. This was bitter medicine for the thinking man because it meant losing control. The subconscious was a fickle beast from a distant land; it ran on its own accord. You couldn't graph an intuition. You couldn't peer review a feeling. Acting on "the willies" didn't hold up in a court of law.

Still, a wise man understood that his subconscious had many uses. It was always on, always finding connections and seeking meaning. And it ran on different gears than the familiar end of the brain, sidestepping the myopia and biases of old-fashioned awareness. In fairness to its detractors, translating instinct was terribly difficult. You only had that sense of unease, that tingle in your spine. What did it mean? What if it was wrong? The answer was simply, like all good things, that knowing when to trust your instincts took practice.

Batman had a substantial amount of practice and knew very well how to judge his instincts. But he still had just enough pride for it to annoy him.

The stuck door Catwoman so impetuously entered led to a cluttered mass in pitch darkness: a janitorial supply room. The sliver of moonlight from the doorway offered a scene of wooden shelves and buckets, but even before that it was obvious from the layers of scents: bleach, borax, varnish, and soap.

Something here made him uneasy. The skin on his hands and neck prickled. His gut flipped. There was something out of place, something dark. Batman scowled. He was tired of walls and secrets. It was well past time to rip this case open and drag it into the light.

The stuck door Catwoman so smoothly entered led to a cluttered mass in pitch darkness: a big mop closet. The sliver of moonlight from the doorway offered a scene of wooden shelves and buckets, but even before that it seemed likely from the scents: bleach and a few other cleaning supplies.

As Batman wrenched the door shut behind them, she pulled out her flashlight and looked around. Yep, mop closet.

This was a huge relief. Catwoman knew the layouts of the sites she thieved down to the last power outlet. When blueprints or a preliminary stroll through were impossible, she could normally make a few safe assumptions based on the kind of building and other hints. But she had absolutely zero familiarity with secret military corpse stealing compounds. Entering a guarded site blind was one of the stupidest things a lady in her line of work might try. Who knew what lay beyond the door? It could be a busy hallway. It could be an occupied kitchen. It could be a shark pit. Really, mop closet was a best case scenario.

But of course, Grumble-face suddenly grimaced like he had eaten a pail of hot peppers.

"What's wrong?"

He glared around suspiciously. "I'm not sure yet."

"Great. Let's get going." Catwoman went to open the exit on the other side.

"Stop."

"You know we can't stay here."

"Just a minute." Batman retrieved his own flashlight from a belt pouch and studied the shelves. "I smelled something on the way in."

"There's a lot of smells. Let's move."

"This room's important."

"If you spill soup on the carpet."

"Stop talking."

"You-"

"Stop talking now."

Catwoman was about to respond with appropriate force when he stated to mutter at the bottles. "-
Lanolin, formaldehyde, pH-neutral detergent, iodine-"

Catwoman looked over his shoulder. "What's this?"

He answered as he looked. "I smelled the formaldehyde. No janitor would need a bottle; it's mostly an embalming fluid. And there are other items that don't belong."

"Do they mean anything to you?"

Batman continued to search for a moment then turned, his face drawn tight. In his hand was a long scalpel.

"Unfortunately, they do."

Minutes later.

Fort Morrison was never intended for combat and didn't have a formal war room. Colonel Tanner's office proved the next best thing. The hastily assembled pow-wow consisted of the Colonel, a scattering of officers, Miss Waller, and her constant shadow Lieutenant Wilson. The room was dark save for the illumination of a slide projector. One of the officers, Captain Roach, stood before the rest and was busy drawing lines and circles on a projected map of the Fort. The other officers occasionally interrupted with comments or questions.

Amanda Waller leaned over and whispered to Colonel Tanner, "*Still think I overreacted?*"

The Colonel quietly responded, *"Frankly, yes. You had a footprint. Now you have an empty car. A car that, let's not forget, isn't even on Fort property. Not exactly a smoking gun, Waller."*

She raised an incredulous eyebrow. *"You think the driver was lost and ran off the road? No one would park so deep in these woods without aggressive intentions. Might as well be spitting distance."*

"I agree it's worth a reaction, but you're turning us into the Alamo. Unless they brought a helicopter, any intruders will have to come through the front door, especially on a night like this."

"I'm disappointed, Colonel Tanner. Reading your record one would never guess you possessed so little imagination."

"Looking at your record, Miss Waller, one would never guess you existed. Forgive me if I take your judgments on tactical matters with a grain of salt."

She gently smiled. *"My record is as extensive as it is spotless, Colonel; it's not my fault you aren't cleared to see it. Although I suspect seeing a sequence of unblemished field operations would confuse you. I can't imagine you know what one looks like."*

Behind them, Lt. Wilson chuckled. Though a clenched effort of will, the Colonel kept his response to himself. He was a man of honor, and there were certain things a man of honor didn't say to a lady.

The presentation up front quickly finished and the lights were turned back on. Colonel Tanner stood up and the rest of the room quickly followed.

"Thank you, Captain Roach. You know your orders gentlemen. Come morning, I'm sure we'll figure out what this is all about, but let's keep circling the wagons in the meantime. Dismissed."

The officers nodded and collected their coats and folders. Amanda spoke up. "Just one final note, if you please."

The Colonel gave a tired look but raised a hand for her to proceed.

"Officers, if we have infiltrators on site, and I strongly believe we do, this is a cause for maximum vigilance. Few of you have experience in the intelligence community, so you'll have to believe me when I say a hostile agent can be supremely clever. It was pure luck we uncovered that Ford in the woods tonight. I don't depend on getting lucky twice. In that spirit, we have to be ready for any trick. Maybe the infiltrators have cut a hole in the fence during a prior visit. Maybe they are in disguise as one of our own. Or maybe someone in our ranks has been coerced into aiding them-"

The officers responded with a chorus of angry denials. Amanda held up her hands for silence.

"I'm only saying to be ready for anything. I once attended a three-party meeting in the Polish embassy with a delegation from the Red Army. When the Polish diplomats wanted to speak privately, I noticed some of the Soviet officers excusing themselves to use the bathroom. Eventually, I got suspicious and forced the door open. The Russians were busy planting a microphone in the wall. They were spying on the meeting."

The only enlisted man present, young Private Fletcher, looked up from the projector he was taking

apart.

"I guess that bathroom had a *leak!*"

There was utter silence in the office. Private Fletcher grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. "Get it?"

Amanda Waller closed her eyes as if in pain. "Private?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How many pushups can you do?"

"Uh ... I'd say sixty-five, ma'am."

"Do eighty right now or you clean every latrine in camp for the rest of the winter."

The private gaped in fright and hopped to the floor.

The other officers walked out. The Colonel huffed and Amanda turned to him.

"I'm sorry, did I infringe on your authority?"

"Pun like that? I would've given him a hundred."

Minutes earlier.

There was no light entering the mop closet, so Batman and Catwoman felt safe to leave. One the other side was a dark locker room with several shower stalls and far too many sinks. It was a relief to be out of the cold, but the air was rank and humid. Every surface was chipped and stained. There was light shining under the far entrance. Presumably, anyone inside this strange building would have left with the alarms, but presumptions had a bad track record tonight. They huddled beside the door. There was no sound on the other side. Catwoman lowered onto her stomach and pulled out a very small mirror with a thin handle. She stuck her face up to the bottom gap and slid her mirror slowly under the door, adjusting the angle.

Batman tapped her shoulder blade.

Anything?

Catwoman shook her head and made a few gestures with her free hand.

Just a hallway. Twenty feet long. Nobody home.

He nodded.

They stood and quietly opened the door. They were in the middle of the hallway, equidistant from swinging double doors at each end. The hallway was crude like a passage in a cargo ship: bare walls

and naked light bulbs. There were black skid marks on the tile floor: heavy carts obviously rolled through regularly.

Catwoman said, "Left or right?"

"The garage has to be ahead facing left and the heavier tire marks lead right. Whatever's being carried is dropped off and-"

She snapped her fingers under his face. "Short version?"

"Go right."

They crept to the swinging doors at the right end of the hallway. The other side was dark. Batman slowly pushed one open. Catwoman steadily aimed her flashlight around the room. The dim light was a montage of haunting images. A stack of emesis basins on a shelf. A freight elevator. A large device Batman recognized as an autoclave. Shiny green floor tiles, scrubbed immaculate. The metal frame of a gurney. A handsaw.

Batman hit the light switch. It was an operating room.

He swiftly got to work searching through the drawers and cabinets. Catwoman leaned against the wall with a troubled frown.

"This is it, right? Some sort of human testing?"

He didn't answer. She looked back through the door to make sure the coast was clear.

"Anything else incriminating?"

Batman didn't look her way, but she could see the edge of his frustrated expression. "Just surgical tools. But they've been used, and formaldehyde isn't for the living."

She glanced across at him, her lips tight, eyebrows pulled together. "You ... you expected to find a place like this from the start, didn't you?"

It was hardly a question. He said nothing.

Looking at the floor, she quietly pushed her point. "You knew since November. Not only something bad, but ugly and terrible and *specific*. An-" she gestured for words, "-an abomination." Catwoman looked up at him. "All these weeks as you put the pieces together, the whole time, you were imagining this happening. You were sure."

Batman stood in meditative stillness. When he finally spoke, it harsh and slow, like he was stifling a cough. "*No. I wasn't sure. But it was always first in a short list of possibilities.*"

Catwoman never knew a person could sound so young and so old. She opened her mouth but there were no words inside. He stared evenly at her, expecting a response. She bit her lip instead. He ignored her and returned to work.

A clock ticked on the wall.

Reluctance and curiosity fought inside her, but for a cat there was no contest.

"Does it-"

He whipped around. "**What?**"

Catwoman hesitated.

He lowered his chin tepidly. "What?"

She tilted her head. "Does it ever hurt to be the World's Greatest Detective?"

He stared back and didn't answer.

Two minutes later.

The Gotham Containment Influenza Laboratory was a long, single-story brick building with no windows. The name was an anachronism, but the building's current program was far too cautious for something as bold as a title, so the old one was kept officially. Everyone just called it the Brick. It was shaped like a brick and colored like a brick and made of bricks. Also, anyone who tried to run into it received serious head trauma. The whole Fort knew about the Brick, but less than thirty were allowed inside, mostly to assist the gaggle of civilians that cycled through every season, and none of those soldiers were talking.

Amanda Waller and Lt. Slade Wilson walked briskly toward its front entrance. She had work to do in her office in light of these intrusions, but it was also for safety's sake: the Brick was obviously the last building anyone could break into. She nodded to the checkpoint sentry and flashed her ID card. Lieutenant Wilson just strode past. Reaching her office near the front, she turned to him.

"Have them send someone to man my door; I need you on the offensive. Pick the search team you like best and lead it. Find these interlopers."

"And when my little gang doesn't keep up?"

"Whatever. Go alone for all I care, but if you get into hot water because you didn't bring backup, you and I are going to have a problem."

"Right."

She stared him in the eye with a serious frown. "And you better not forget the rules."

He dryly recited. "Better a prisoner than a corpse; better a corpse than a witness. I know the drill, *mother*."

"Real funny, Wilson. Go."

Letting him have his silence, Catwoman walked in a circle around the room. "So what now? The elevator looks promising, looks like it was made to hold this gurney."

"Right, but it's loud and the search teams will see it moved. We should-."

"Don't worry, I know exactly what you're thinking."

Catwoman shut the lights off.

There were many differences between a city dweller and a city infiltrator. Work hours. Social circle. Life expectancy. But the biggest difference was in attitude towards elevators. A city dweller saw an elevator as a boxy means of conveyance. A city infiltrator saw an elevator as an inconvenient stepping stone to a rope.

Like many freight elevators, this one was nearly skeletal, not bothering with wallpaper or mirrors or other comforts. It was a cage of metal latticework; they could look through and see the weights and pulleys in the shaft outside. Keen eyes and a flashlight showed that there was one stop far below them, three stories underground.

In no time, they found the maintenance hatch above and pulled up through. The two of them crawled over to the side and nimbly climbed down the elevator's exterior to the cables. Then they rappelled.

As Batman and Catwoman quietly descended, they began to hear a soft *hum*. When they reached the bottom, they turned on their flashlights and cautiously crept forward. It was a long hallway with several branching passages. The doors along the way had glass panes, and they swept their lights through as they passed. A few were offices, but most rooms were full of research equipment, some Batman didn't even recognize.

He frowned. "This makes no sense."

"What?"

"Excavating the elevator shaft and this basement took a lot of heavy equipment. It would be ambitious to get all the workers and tools you would need up a mountain like this today, but to do it with the means available in 1918? That must have been a massive undertaking. Yet there's no hint of it in the records. They built this level in secret. Why? And then to install power, plumbing, circulated air, and dozens of machines? The utilities in this building cost more than half the camp. I don't know what the original occupants wanted to do here, but it was more than study a disease."

Catwoman didn't respond. Whatever the story was behind the place, it wouldn't make what they were doing *more* forbidden. He could respect her priorities.

They were traveling in the general direction of the *hum*, and after several halls they finally came to a metal door at the end with no glass. They glanced at each other. Catwoman opened the door and found a lightswitch. The air was chilly here. The naked lamps above were greenish and dull, casting shadows

in the corners. The whole space was cramped like a mine; the ceiling was a foot too low. Batman had to hunch to fit the ears of his cowl. There were scores of what seemed to be lockers on the wall, all three feet square. All humming.

Batman slowly rotated, putting together the room. "Wait," he paused a minute, staring into space and muttering, "... *four- ... five- ... six- ... seventeen ... seventeen ...*" Batman's face started to tick back and forth like a man speed-reading without a book. His mouth moved soundlessly. Catwoman grabbed his arm. "Hey! What is it?"

Suddenly, his trance broke and his complexion burst into passionate rage. Batman could cover ground in an instant when he really wanted to. In three steps, he was at the nearest humming locker and grasped its handle.

Catwoman stepped firmly in his way and yelled in his face. "Seventeen of what?!"

Batman paused. In a split second, his body remembered that *The Batman* kept emotions so deeply in check that they died of malnutrition. The rage in his form disappeared, leaving the old glacial cool. He looked down at her, calm and lucid.

"These are freezers. There's sixty in the room, but only seventeen are active now."

She let go of his arm. "So?"

He nodded slowly. "It's all of them. They're all here."

"What? You skipped a step."

"Watch."

Batman pulled the handle of the freezer. There was a blur of icy air. Then a long tray swiftly slid out with a putrefying body on it. The grayed corpse was missing both legs at the hip and half of one forearm. Its dessicated face was shriveled and sunken. The stench was muted but profoundly unwholesome.

Catwoman didn't even try to hide her fit of dry heaving. "*Oh, God.*" She bent double and gagged. This lasted quite some time before she caught her breath. She stared at the body numbly.

Batman looked strangely ambivalent, like an old hunch was finally proven. He closed the locker for her sake.

"I knew the the number was significant, but I didn't recognize why at first. It's the number of bodies that have been taken in Gotham. Seventeen. With the gear here, they'd get months of tests out of them. Now we have it. This is evidence."

Catwoman looked at him, looked at the locker, looked around the room, and dry heaved again.

Chapter 10

Opening Moves

When people thought about the guilty pleasures a crook might have, they imagined that heady mix of dames, dice, and liqueur normally confined to international waters. But this line of thinking was flawed: crooks loved their vices, but they sure didn't feel guilty about them.

No, to embarrass a crook, you had to look at what he valued: reputation. He couldn't be seen as a preening sissy or a slack-jawed oaf; the other crooks would give him no respect. To get respect, one had to maintain a sense of cool disinterest. So what was a crook's guilty pleasure? Vanity. Some of the biggest fans of crime stories were criminals. Rumor had it John Dillinger visited the moving pictures at least once a week to watch reels of himself with a big bag of popcorn and a smile on his face. Gangsters and stick-up men loved hearing tales about gangsters and stick-up men.

This generality did not extend to Catwoman. She liked the cinema fine, and the radio serials and the dime novels - just not crime thrillers. Okay, the tough-guy mob dramas could be fun, with their long coats and their speakeasies (though if she wanted to watch the antics of a pack of Mafiosos, she could just as easily ask one out to dinner). No, the worst by far, the truly unbearable, were cat burglar stories.

To begin with, Catwoman didn't need anyone to romanticize her job. It was flattering, but she already knew she was svelte and clever. It would be enough if they could give a little appreciation for her craft in the process, but nine in ten scriptwriters had no idea what they were talking about. Reading the adventures of a pulp thief was like watching a screen carpenter make a fine mahogany table with a meat hook and a plunger. Sure, a dunce who had no clue what woodworking looked like might be impressed, but all the carpenters in the audience would throw their drinks at the screen and demand a refund.

Yet the part Catwoman resented most was how easy they made it look. Not the technical skills necessarily, as distorted as those were, but the overall flair that fictional thieves seemed to have in

spades. They never sneezed or tripped. They could take their sweet time on every job. They always had something witty to say. Whether swinging from a chandelier in the palace of the Dauphin or breaking out of jail in Mississippi, they never broke a sweat.

This rubbed her the wrong way. True, she could make it look that easy, but that was the point: *only she* could make it look that easy! Was that vain? Of course not. They were making a buck off her style! Well, her and a few peers she could count on one hand. Yes, on a good day Catwoman could breeze through locked windows and guards and wall safes like she wasn't even trying, and she loved it, but it took tremendous practice and focus to look that casual. They never showed that. Her work was great, but it was *work*. And once in a while, even the best get blindsided and land on their metaphorical rump.

For instance, Catwoman had never heard a radio play of a classy lady-burglar sent gagging after being shown half a frozen corpse in a secret morgue. There really wasn't an opportunity to be witty or saucy in that situation. She offered a silent prayer of thanks that she rarely ate before a mission.

Batman watched silently as she recovered. If a bystander was injured, he administered first aid. If they were well, he ignored them and moved on. Catwoman didn't fit into either of those categories at the moment. He frowned. Science demanded experimentation with sufficient sample size, so he would give it more time, but so far his null hypothesis was right: working alone was much easier.

He said, "I'll stay and catalog the remains. You should ... investigate those paths."

Catwoman slowly got her bearings, head limp, stomach twisted in knots. She recognized the merciful gesture and managed a grateful nod. Neither was in the mood for eye contact (or his hollow equivalent).

"Yeah." She coughed. "Sounds like a plan."

Game theory was the study of strategic decision making. As the name implied, it often used card or board games as thought experiments to explore ideas of competition and cooperation. Game theory was only a few years old as a formal discipline and known chiefly by a small fringe of mathematicians and economists, most famously John Nash. If someone wanted to demonstrate exactly why tic-tac-toe was boring using elaborate calculus, game theory had the tools for the job.

But like many economic concepts, game theory proved lessons that smart people frequently figured out on their own. For instance, Lieutenant Slade Wilson had never talked to an economist, but he was awfully clever at what a game theorist would call "utility maximizing behavior".

His logic went like this: an intruder could either use the main hill entrance, the rear bridge entrance, or scale the perimeter somehow. Using either proper entrance was stupid. The rest of guards could handle a stupid intruder. But an intruder that scaled the perimeter might be smart. If an intruder was smart, then Wilson's unique talents might be needed. Therefore, even without knowledge of the intruder's mindset, Lieutenant Wilson knew to start his search at the perimeter.

When he left the Brick, instead of leaving the way he came, he detoured around the side of the building towards the nearest edge of the woods. Mulling over the acres of brush he would have to check, he nearly missed the one tiny detail out of place. There was a locked door in the back of the Brick. It hadn't been opened as long as he had been on base, but though the twirling snow, he absently spied a

difference in the glint of the rusted brackets. Lt. Wilson was no detective, but he was a hunter, and a tiny shift in surroundings meant everything to a hunter. He stopped and backtracked a step to take a closer look.

He was right! The screws on the upper bracket were bent and nearly skewed off the door. Was it always like that? Obviously the door was old, but for some reason he didn't think so. What if- ... wait ... something else was wrong. He peered around.

There! The padlock was open and the latch was loose! He was sure that was new. You could only close the latch from the outside. Anyone who entered would necessarily leave it was undone, and it probably meant they were still inside.

He was about to throw open the door but thought better of it. *Might as well do this the right way.* He sprinted to the Brick's front.

"Walgrave! Cortez! Haney!"

The door guards stared at him.

"The intruder's in the Brick."

Private Walgrave raised an eyebrow. No one wanted to cross the scary lieutenant, but when a man had to stand in three inches of snow at midnight there were certain things he just didn't care about.

"Look, sir. I'm sure we would have seen someone."

Wilson's glare kicked up six notches. He would break that attitude later.

"The back door's unlocked. Cortez, keep manning this screening station. You stop anyone who comes out until I return. I mean anyone. Walgrave, pass the orders along to the vehicle entrance, and then guard the back door. Haney, go inside and protect Miss Waller's office. Let's move it! Now!"

When she could walk again, Catwoman left the subterranean cadaver room and arbitrarily chose the first passage on her left. Anything to avoid the *hum* of those freezers.

The hallway was pitch black like the rest. Wanting to save her flashlight, she eventually found a switch that turned on more of those weak, greenish lamps. She wondered if everyone who worked here got eyestrain from all the poor lighting. Then she wondered if the place still used the same fixtures from its days as an influenza laboratory. It certainly looked like it hadn't had a fresh coat of paint in two decades. *Ullgh.* Catwoman loved to stroll around all sorts of old buildings in the middle of the night, but she never liked abandoned buildings and she never liked hospitals, and this place had all the charm of an abandoned hospital inside a crypt. She preferred hanging off a skyscraper to getting stuck underground any day of the week. One felt like life and freedom; the other felt like, well, the opposite.

Thanks to the creepy lights, Catwoman saw a number of doors branching off the the hallway, but only one was open. *Hmmm!*

Daniel Brewster had been a few months away from being Doctor Daniel Brewster when the Army sent a man around to the university's graduate pool looking to fill a research post. Daniel was a patriot and the money was right. He was on the first bus to Gotham state. The Fort was somewhat of a shock, but as a graduate student he was used to living in humble conditions.

Daniel wasn't the only one in his class to apply. The Army picked him for a reason. He was a discount genius, brilliant in that limited sort of brilliance the world of science always needed to polish off the leftover problems in fields the name brand geniuses – the Einsteins and Von Neumanns – already trailblazed when those legends moved on to other topics or died. In other words, Daniel was smarter than anyone you knew. He was not smarter than *everyone* you knew.

And right now he was asleep.

The room Catwoman found at the end of the hall was clearly a testing center. There was a grid of desks and workbenches. Rugged metal shelves along the sides held a variety of heavy tools. But the room's focal point was an empty cement chamber at the far end. It was dug into the wall like a bank safe with its thick door sitting open. Every surface inside was scorched and pockmarked. Heights, radii, and other distances were stenciled on the cement walls in faded black paint. Lurid caution signs surrounded the chamber, warning all sorts of gruesome fates for those poor stick figures who failed to close the door properly or forgot to ventilate. Daniel Brewster was slumped over his desk close to this chamber, bow tie askew, his head resting on a crumpled lab coat.

Catwoman saw all the details of the room - and him - when she turned on the lights. It was unbelievable to her that anyone could have slept through the sirens earlier, but tonight was proving full of surprises. Having to work around a sleeper was a challenge, but it wouldn't be her first time. Catwoman turned off both the lights in the hallway and in the room, then stepped gingerly inside, slinking to the nearest desk. She aimed her flashlight in a drawer and saw a neat folder of technical documents.

Then she realized that she had no idea what to look for.

Catwoman had a decent working knowledge of the legal system, especially as it applied to her typical felonies. Sure, she never *needed* it - that would mean actually seeing a courtroom - but it seemed like a prudent thing to know, and she was a bit of trivia nut anyway. However, the sort of case they were here to build was way out of her league. Short of a signed confession, what evidence could bring down a military conspiracy? Would a stack of research papers help? Which ones? That seemed like the sort of deep arcana only familiar to a handful of top-flight Justice Department attorneys or, well, Batman.

She could grab a random pile and hope for the best, but that seemed like an awfully big gamble. She sure didn't have time to read them all. Besides, the longer she stayed, the better chance Mr. Labcoat would wake up. That would be-

Catwoman looked up and blinked.

Wait a minute...

There was a type of thief who tended to see and solve problems in straight lines. They didn't bypass

obstacles, they smashed them. If they needed information, they didn't sneak around for clues, they found someone who knew and convinced them to share. Catwoman wasn't a fan of this school of thought. She found it vulgar and lacking in finesse. With a little caution, she could easily do five jobs without meeting anyone, let alone confronting them. That was how you survived in the business.

That said, Catwoman could appreciate a few of those less elegant skills right now. She wished Batman were here. (*first time for everything*); he was a master at this sort of "personal motivation". But, it might be fun to try something new.

Daniel Brewster awoke to find the lights in the laboratory on. He rubbed his eyes.

How long have I been asleep? Got to stop dozing off in the laboratories. Probably missed dinner.

He shifted his head to see ... a thigh? He blinked.

Did someone leave the vent off again? I'm tired of all these hallucinations. And these lights are going to give me eyestrain.

Squinting, he looked again to see that it was indeed a thigh - a thigh connected to a hip, which was attached to a torso and then an entire human frame, all clad in a fetching violet. He struggled to make sense of this, as his IQ was still trying to rev up past room temperature. The figure was evidently female? Scratch that, it was abundantly female. *Lord, I've been stuck on a mountain too long.* What was she doing here? What was a '*she*' doing here? With one unfortunate exception, the Fort was entirely male.

Catwoman sat on the desk beside Daniel's mossy-haired head, tapping his shoulder. Happy to see a response, she hopped off and crouched at his eye level.

"Hi!"

The few working circuits in Daniel's brain clicked feebly through rationales and came up short. His eyes swam as he tried to focus on her. "... Eug?"

"Don't worry about it. What's your name?"

"De ... Darangels ... Ss ... staggen."

"Nice to meet you, Darangels Ssstaggen," she said with a straight face as she read his name tag.

"What'a do? Where'a ger?"

"Great question. The Gotham Sanitation Board is just doing a quick run-through of your operation here, and there's a few concerns we'd like to talk about."

Daniel groggily stood up. He realized he was about to bump into his uncomfortably close visitor and stumbled backwards. Still a young man in the presence of a young lady, Daniel tried to make the maneuver look smooth. He settled for leaning against the desk and crossed his arms.

"You're not ... I don't think you're supposed to be here. I'm ... I'm getting to go get-"

She held a finger to his lips. "You might like me if you got to know me. After all," she unsheathed a claw under his eyes, "people seem to appreciate my *sharp wit*." She turned a little and let him see the flamethrower on her back, "And my *glowing* personality."

He leaned away from her claw and frowned, more confused than scared. Catwoman sighed. *Okay, that was corny. This interrogation shtick is harder than it looks.*

Finally, Daniel managed to parse words together. "Where'd you get the flamethrower? That's our only prototype."

"I found it on the shelf."

"Well, you better take that off. You don't even know how to use it."

She reached back and grabbed the gun-style nozzle. "True, but ask yourself: if I make a mistake with this flamethrower, is that more or less dangerous than me using a flamethrower correctly?"

He moped. "Guess that's an academic distinction."

"Well there you go! Let's get down to brass tacks..."

Batman spent roughly twelve seconds examining each refrigerated corpse. It was less time than he preferred, but it answered the meaningful questions, and he was on a deadline.

The causes of death were blatant: munitions and other battlefield hazards. The details weren't perfect; he would need a full lab and an hour to distinguish between, say, a face destroyed by a 60mm mortar shell and a face destroyed by an 81mm mortar shell, but it only took a glance to know it was firepower you couldn't find on the street.

The time was mainly to confirm identities. Batman knew the pictures and dossiers of the seventeen victims by heart, but bodies looked more and more alike past their expiration date, and it didn't help if their faces were gone. On the other hand, he didn't need to match them all; two or three would be sufficient. A proper investigation would shut the site down and do justice to all the deceased through the proper channels. The legwork was their job. He just needed to get the process started.

The biggest dilemma was what to photograph.

When it came to nightly operating expenses, Batman was a surprisingly low-cost enterprise. Flashlights were cheap. Binoculars were reasonable. Lab chemicals were cheap in bulk. Fists were free. He modified the car from off-the-shelf parts. His gear was essentially an eclectic fuse of police officer and spelunker, two professions not known for lavish budgets. There weren't many handheld tools that offered a superior version with extra zeros on the price tag. A ten dollar hammer did not strike with ten times the force of a one dollar hammer.

An exception to this rule was his camera. Batman didn't operate within the justice system. In the long run, his value would be severely limited unless he could guide those professionals who were allowed to make arrests or display evidence in court. When Batman didn't have a suspect to hand over, the best alternative to prod along the cause of justice was a photograph. There was plenty of precedent in the city's court system for using 'found' photographs to incriminate, regardless of where the photos came from. Unfortunately, typical consumer cameras were large and took blurry photos. Small cameras were expensive. High quality cameras were very expensive. A small *and* high quality camera cost a small mint.

Batman owned six.

Still, even such a masterful gadget needed film, and film took up space. He had to prepare for anything tonight. Regrettably, that meant he could only fit one roll. Every shot had to count.

Lieutenant Slade Wilson ripped off the back door of the Brick with a firm tug. He was trying to open it silently, but you can't win at everything.

Flanking him were Milo and Colt squads, fifteen crack military policemen he fortuitously found en route to the front gate. This was a fine team, and a tolerable substitute for doing the job alone. His orders to them were clear: wait five minutes for him to do a covert reconnaissance, and then sweep in if he hadn't returned. This served three purposes. One, if the uninvited guest was still inside, the top priority was capture, and that was a delicate maneuver he could handle best alone. Two, the building had many paths; someone needed to cover the exit in case the intruder came back. And three, if he succeeded and returned in time, then it wouldn't be necessary to update the security clearance on all these men who weren't allowed to see inside the Brick. That would be a major inconvenience.

Wilson crept inside. He knew the rooms by heart and didn't need a light. First, he eased through the mop closet and the locker room. Then he crept down to the operating suite. *Empty, and the elevator's still here.* At the other end of the short hallway was the garage. He stayed in the shadows, which was easy with its pair of weak lights. Briskly circling the area, he checked around and under the small convoy parked there. All empty.

The last section of the ground floor were offices. He stalked down the hallways, checking each of the doorknobs. Every unoccupied office was supposed to be locked. He avoided the final turn to Waller's office; it protected by Private Haney (he could hear the young soldier's breathing). That was fine, it was one area he didn't have to clear, and a jumpy kid like Haney might do something stupid if startled.

The sweep didn't take long to finish. Every door was locked. That left the basement.

There were two ways into the basement: the freight elevator in the operating suite and a staircase in the office complex. He had just over a minute left until his backup entered. He took the stairs. In the darkness, he glided down each flight, footsteps as silent as oil on silk. The air grew cooler. He pushed his senses through the space around him, tensed for the weakest sound or movement. Steadying himself, Lieutenant Wilson nudged through the door at the bottom.

When Batman gathered enough evidence in the morgue, he decided to follow the path opposite the one Catwoman had ventured down. Splitting up was unsafe, but he had to know what else was here and there was too much ground to cover. The doors in these hallways had no labels; he chose one at random.

Inside, he found a spacious room mostly filled with a large transparent tank of water. It could've been in the city aquarium, but instead of fish and seaweed, the water contained a strange set of pulleys, chains, harnesses, and buckles. Clearly, heavy objects were meant to be manipulated inside. The rest of the fairly well-lit room had an assortment of closets, tables, and benches. He saw diving equipment hanging on the wall.

Walking around, Batman pondered the uses of such a place.

Then he heard a noise. *Squeek*.

Lieutenant Wilson passed through several hallways until he found a door with the lights on inside, the Dunk Lab. *He's here*. The cautious soldier hugged the wall and unholstered one of his matte silver M1911 pistols. But as he strode forward, Wilson stepped on a stain from some ancient chemical spill. Man and gear together weighed two hundred and fifty pounds; this marginal new friction was just enough to cause his boot to *squeek*.

The Lieutenant grimaced and paused. Two seconds later, he saw the light in the Dunk Lab shut off. He shook his head, disgruntled. No more element of surprise. Now he had to breach a door with an unknown hostile waiting for him somewhere in the dark. *Less than ideal*.

Wilson pulled a thin red flare out of his bandoleer and readied his trench knife. Standing alongside the door (in case the intruder took potshots through it), he reached over and stabbed the wood twice in a rapid staccato until he broke a new hole in the door. Then, with a shower of angry red sparks, he lit open the flare and tossed it through this hole. He could see a vivid glow around the edges of the door frame. It had to be blindingly bright inside. Capitalizing on this, Wilson kicked his way in, pistol drawn. Shielding his eyes, Wilson scanned the lab, but he saw no one in the glare. Wilson frowned and turned on the lights. The big room seemed the same as always, save for a sparking flare on the floor. But as he stepped through the doorway, he noticed something odd under him.

There was something wrong with his shadow ...

Batman stood precariously atop the sturdy door mantle, balancing on the edge of his heels. He hoped whoever was making noises outside hadn't noticed the light before he turned it off. When a flare flew in, he knew this was not the case. The flash almost shocked him off the door. He turned his head and waited for the spots to disappear. Then a huge soldier burst in. Still, Batman knew it was possible that the soldier would perform a cursory glance and leave without looking up. Then the huge soldier turned on the lights.

Batman leaped.

A knee to the back of the head was the obvious solution, but it might be fatal, which ruled out obvious solutions to most of Batman's problems. His alternative was more exotic, a flying headlock.

Amazingly, the soldier ducked a moment before impact, hunching his shoulders and avoiding the "lock". Batman still landed on his back and they both fell. The Dark Knight hadn't even touched the floor before twisting into a ground maneuver. He found leverage and readied a vicious armbar. The soldier's huge arm stretched for a painful instant and he dropped his pistol, but the man had unexpected range of motion and bent out of the hold, pushing himself away.

Batman followed. They struggled to their feet, trading grapples and elbows. The soldier finally made space with a short headbutt and filled it with a front kick. The front kick was a versatile tool, often used like a jab - to force distance as much as to cause damage. Batman caught the impact in his guard and skipped backward a few paces.

The combatants finally eyed each other.

Batman analyzed. *Calm eyes. Linebacker's physique. Classic southpaw boxer's stance. Good footwork. More a technician of violence than an artist. Lieutenant's bar. Multiple scars on face and hands. White hair, few wrinkles - late 30's, but heavy mileage in his years. He's awfully old for a lieutenant; didn't get there the normal way. Evidently alone, but not here by accident. A lone wolf? Not reaching for his other sidearm yet - either stupid or under orders. Judging by the trick with the flare, not stupid. Weapons on every pocket and belt loop; the hardware should weigh him down, but he seems to compensate exceptionally well. Possibly stronger than me; still slower.*

Slade analyzed. *Big for a spy. Weird outfit, pretty sure even the krauts aren't that gaudy. Who is this guy? Lunatic, maybe? He's quick though, literally got the drop on me; that hadn't happened in a while. Decent wrestler. Has a cape on for some reason; should weigh him down, but he seems to compensate exceptionally well. No gun: good, can end this clean way.*

Their shadows danced in the lurid red light. Then the breath ended. Both leaped forward: Slade with a diving tackle, the intruder with a flying knee. The knee was glancing, kept them at arm's length. The men landed and lashed out. The caped man ducked Slade's hook and raced in with a palm strike to his throat. Slade flinched. *Ouch*. The strike forced a cough out of him - harsh and throttled. The caped man followed with two rib shots, deflected Slade's recovery jab, and crushed his nose with a dynamite elbow.

When elbow hit nose, there was a soft ripping noise. Stars lit up his eyes. He knew it was broken. *That hadn't happened in a while either*. The Lieutenant threw up a guard and slid back. The blow felt like it had torn the rest of his face with it. Tiny streams of hot blood already rolled down his chin. With a modest mental effort, Slade willed the pain away and cleared his vision. This was getting interesting.

The intruder didn't offer a chance to rest, but sprung towards him with an axe kick. Slade grinned inside. *Points for bravado, but that's just cocky*. A move so huge and slow was obviously meant as a finisher, but Slade wasn't nearly finished. He ducked and tripped the invader with a low sweep. Slade's move was beautiful, taking the caped fool off his feet with slapstick exaggeration, but then the victim spoiled the fun, catching himself inverted and rolling out of it. Slade tried to stomp on his fallen foe three times while he was down. The first footprint landed solidly on the intruder's arm, the second slid off the cape, and the intruder caught his ankle the third time as he rose. Slade pulled back and circled. The intruder held the stomped arm a little loosely but seemed unconcerned.

Neither opened with a flashy attack this time. They kept their heads down and boxed.

Fast volleys of jabs and crosses flew from each side. Plenty landed; none killed. Slade finally hammered home a strong left cross to the center of the stranger's forehead. The stranger rocked back from the blow but returned just as quickly with a roundhouse. Slade spit out a gob of swallowed blood in frustration. *That mask must be padded. He's not slowing.*

The intrepid soldier finally found an opening and stepped in to send a message with a hard gut punch, but the opening was a trap. Quick as a snake, the intruder caught his fist and turned it inwards, wristlocking him off-center. Then using that caught fist, he pulled Slade into grapple range and dropped for a double leg takedown.

This is getting annoying.

The takedown was textbook. Batman was sure that smacking into a hard floor wearing a bandolier and a sword had to hurt. He crouched around to finish with a collar choke. But in that instant before the choke closed, Batman felt a threat brush his abdomen. He hopped up just in time, dodging the long knife the soldier had unsheathed on the way down. The man kicked as he stood, keeping Batman at a distance. When the soldier he got to his feet, he unsheathed a navel saber in his off-hand.

The soldier coughed, his breathing labored from the broken nose. "**Alright, Bela Lugosi. Get on your knees or I cut 'em off.**"

Batman kept his fists up and said nothing. It was unwise to rush a swordsman of unknown skill.

The soldier flipped the sword so to the blade pointed down like an ice pick.

Batman raised an eyebrow. That ... wasn't supposed to happen.

In his years spent practicing the martial arts, Batman had learned many helpful tips. For instance, if a stranger assumed a fighting pose so unorthodox that no sane master would teach it, there was a 98% chance the stranger was an idiot about to fall on his face. However, there was always that 2% chance the stranger was a passionate combatant who spent a lifetime inventing a fearsome new technique with advantages no one else had the patience or creativity to develop. In this case, the safe response was to run.

Batman had the sneaking suspicion this guy was in the 2%.

The soldier rushed forward, leading with the knife. Batman was forced into a guarded retreat, dodging the knife thrusts and the precise backhand cuts of the sword. The Dark Knight's gauntlets each had a spine of steel spikes along the outside of the forearm. As the assault pushed closer and faster, he began to catch and deflect the blades on his arms, but he didn't trust any of his usual counters against such a deviant grip. He had to stay on the defensive.

Tang. Tang. Vvrrringg. Phrick. TangTangTang. The angular *screech* of metal on metal was half-deafening. Batman found the knife-work admirable, if over-cautious, but the unique sword dynamics kept surprising him. Each swing felt like it came out of nowhere. He couldn't out-think it, only surviving by making a chain of close saves fueled by dumb reflex (though "dumb" for the Caped

Crusader still had ten thousand hours of practice behind it).

Finally, miraculously, a stab approached a hair too slowly. Batman weaved left and swung his cape ahead, batting the knife arm away.

Some people thought cape fighting never existed. Others though it was a dead art. In truth, the cloak was a valid fencing accessory in any era when a brigand might try to stab you, something the soldier learned with a brief surprise. He tried to recover by swatting with the sword, but Batman had already launched a trio of side kicks: to the shin, to the arm, to the chin. The final blow was staggering. In haste, the soldier threw his long knife. Batman leaned away as the blade flew by his arm. This was enough time for the soldier to flip the sword back to its classic angle and grip it with both hands. Batman tried to approach but his foe burst forth with barbaric energy, taking surgical swipes.

With the soldier's prodigious strength, Batman knew the sword could chop off a limb, but two-handed swings with a saber were unbalanced. He would overstep soon.

Four more furious swings, each tighter than the last. Batman dodged them all. Then an artful thrust. Batman slid past and tried to grab the leading arm, but the lieutenant had expected that and brutally shoulder-checked him, fainted with a cut to the ear, and planted a boot in Batman's chest.

Briefly airborne, Batman struck the water tank neck-first. The soldier went for his spare pistol, but before he could take advantage of the distance, he found two batarangs sunk into his shoulder. The soldier barked in surprise and annoyance, struggling to pull them out. As soon as he did, a righteous uppercut rocketed through his jaw. Batman followed with a clinch, trying to pull the massive lieutenant to the ground.

But the enraged soldier was too strong. He threw the Dark Knight aside with a hateful sweep of his arm. This was followed by a blur of metal. Batman felt a cut open across his gut. The Dark Knight rolled backwards, picked up the dying flare, and pitched it from a knee. The soldier intercepted, cutting the flickering tube in twain without slowing pursuit. A fusillade of saber attacks pushed the Caped Crusader ever backward until he was suddenly pinned against a desk.

The soldier lifted the blade behind his head and set to bring it down like an axe. Batman braced himself, readying to catch the saber between his crossed arms.

The blade fell. Batman immediately pulled his forearms tight, trapping the saber. The soldier drove down, applying his impressive mass to cut past the obstructing arms. Batman redoubled his effort to resist the sword. But the strike was a deception. As Batman pushed harder to deflect the blade, the soldier simply let go. Lacking resistance, Batman's struggled against nothing, leaving his arms above his head.

With a blazing quickdraw, this time the lieutenant brought up his pistol before Batman could react. He stuck the barrel into Batman's ribs and grabbed a handful of fabric near the cowl.

Between two warriors, the understanding was mutual: *checkmate*.

Batman slowly lowered his hands. The sword fell. He heard yelling nearby, footsteps outside the door. Then a wave of bodies flooded his vision, dragging him to the floor.

Chapter 11

Pro Patria

One of the most crucial steps of the thieving business was judging the physical dimensions of the loot *before* trying to remove it. This sounded obvious, but every rookie since the beginning of time (or at least the beginning of loot) had an uh-oh story. Some of the dumb ones had nothing but uh-oh stories. What was an uh-oh story?

Take a hypothetical thief, Johnny Pants. Late one night, Mr. Pants climbed through the second-story window of a Parisian mansion. Inside was a luxuriant study, full of treasures and antiques, and on a pedestal in that study was nothing less than the legendary lance of the legendary Sir Lancelot.

Lancelot's lance was nearly as famous as Lancelot because Lancelot lanced a lot. The lance of Lancelot was used by Lancelot a lot, and because there was a lot of Lancelot, he could lift a lot of lance. Lancelot advanced lancing as he advanced his lance; foe after foe stood no chance against his enhanced lance stance. And whether romance or finance, the lance dance advanced Lancelot's lot a lot. But even legends pass away. In time, the lance found its way by happenstance to France where it entranced Johnny Pants at a glance.

The fictional thief had come intending to pilfer a few rare books, but this was too glorious a prize to ignore. He seized the lance from its pedestal and tiptoed victoriously back to the window.

The window around a corner at the edge of the study.

The corner whose two walls formed a hypotenuse shorter than the length of the lance.

The lance that therefore couldn't go around the corner.

And therefore couldn't leave the room.

At this juncture, Johnny might say many heated and vulgar things, but the first thought to fall out his mouth would inevitably be "Uh-oh".

This would be Johnny's uh-oh story. Every thief had one, even Catwoman, though the stars would fade to ash before she shared that whopper. Secret or not, it still served as a sharp reminder; Catwoman was exactly careful about what she tried to carry around.

Tonight that was proving difficult.

"And this is Dr. Pyg's femur stress tests from yesterday. The man's a hack, but he's had tenure since the last ice age so his job's friggen' bulletproof."

Catwoman stared at the door. "Uh-huh."

The pile of papers her captive scientist was adding to in her freshly-stolen briefcase looked awfully large. Large was bad. Large was heavy and awkward. Large was the foundation for an uh-oh story. This was not the time for an uh-oh story.

"Speaking of bulletproof, I added a few ballistics charts for light calibers to different extremities."

She sighed. "Uh-huh."

"Long story short: don't get shot in the extremities."

"Thanks for the tip."

"Don't mention it."

"I won't."

Once he got over the shock of his uninvited guest with her uninvited threats, Daniel - the glassy-eyed researcher she found - proved surprisingly eager to help. She could only assume the Dark Knight School of Motivating Confessions and Bean-spilling had its perks. The kid (they were probably the same age, but he seemed as gangly as any adolescent) explained to her that this chamber was where they tested combustives and pyrotechnics. Back in the day, they used the place to see what conditions the influenza virus could survive.

It seemed risky to explain the particulars of why she was here, so Catwoman had trouble articulating what she was looking for. She eventually asked to see results from the most recent tests. The clues would be freshest. At least it killed time; no doubt Batman was right behind her with better questions.

"-And the last experiment my team fit in this week was just some general sensory organ melting points." Catwoman cringed. Daniel didn't see her reaction and chuckled. "You'd think since fire's practically the oldest tool known to man, there'd be more solid data on the subject, but nope. Funny that."

"You're sadistic."

"Corpses can't feel pain."

"Still, how can you stand there and be so casually, well, *ghoulish*?"

"Look, Miss Trespasser, I respect that the ethical underpinnings for medical research are nuanced, but I save lives." He stuck out his chin with casual pride. "Every test here helps an engineer somewhere build a better helmet, better bandages, safer cars, stronger parachutes-"

"Better weapons."

"And yes, better weapons. Those save lives too. That's what happens when you donate your body to science." He shrugged. "Well, the weapon part isn't strictly spelled out in most-"

"***Donate!?***" Catwoman grabbed him by the collar and shoved him back into his chair. "*Donate?* Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Judging by the look on your face, I'm guessing the answer is no."

She backhanded him. "You're a monster."

"OW!" He rubbed his cheek. "I'm a scientist, not a *mad* scientist. There's a bold line between the two."

"Yeah, and it says: 'Don't kidnap the local peasantry for twisted experiments in the bowels of your castle!'"

He held his hands in front of his face. "Don't - wait, what? Kidnap?"

"You-" She searched his eyes. " ... You don't know."

"What? What don't I know? Please tell me what I don't know."

Catwoman frowned but didn't hit him again. She paced away thoughtfully, hands on her hips. "How many people have you researchers used?"

Daniel stood and moved so there was a desk between them. "Overall? About thirty."

"When?"

"We started back in August. Nine cadavers the first month. Not great quality either. Then the supply trickled off; we only got two in September. Messed up our workload something fierce. The Army told us it was a bureaucratic thing with the medical schools. Some paperwork snafu."

"Medical schools?"

"Yeah, there's not a lot of places to get a corpse, surprisingly enough. Most come through a ring of universities that folks will their remains to once they kick the bucket. I think its legally called a gift. The schools are the big clearinghouses."

"Okay."

He shrugged. "I heard you can also pick up executed convicts now and then, but they're sort of fried."

Catwoman winced. "I didn't need to know that."

"Sorry."

"Just- just go on with the medical schools."

"Not sure what the problem was, but the Army solved it eventually. We began to get new shipments around late October, maybe the start of November. Around two or three a week. Heh, gave us lab rats plenty to do, believe you me. Like Christmas come early for some of the new guys who missed the first batch."

Catwoman felt the stirrings of a temper behind her eyes. "Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah. Last pair they picked up was really great, not a scratch and hardly a day old; virtually no decomposition." He spoke with the relish of a sculptor finding a flawless strata of marble. "You see, they usually come from car accidents or typhoid which really limits our opportunities. This pair though? Unprecedented."

Catwoman tried very hard to keep her speech calm. "Was this pair ... a man and a woman?"

"Uh, yes."

"Young? Arrived five nights ago?"

"Yeah, friends of yours?"

She took a step towards him, voice dangerously level. "In a roundabout way."

"Wow. Um ..." Daniel swallowed and stepped back. "Sorry. If it interests you, uh, they've done a great service to humanit-"

"Shut it. What interests me is what was done to them, and furthermore, what I'm going to do to-"

A sudden stampede of noise echoed from down the hallway, a burst of yelled orders and shoving. Catwoman froze. *Batman!* It sounded like half the base was trampling through the level, right past where she had left him. Warnings about a manhunt floated through her head. Catwoman cringed. She knew as well as anyone not to underestimate the Dark Knight, but she had a sinking feeling he wasn't overcoming *that*.

The rational part of her brain narrowly pushed down the urge to dash towards the scuffle. Instead, she unwound her whip and struck the light switch, casting the lab into darkness as complete as the hallway outside. Then she turned and flicked it around Daniel's head, stifling his noise of surprise. Catwoman flew forward and pinned him against a desk.

They waited in the darkness: her anxious, him baffled. A minute later, the noise died away. Catwoman let go and cautiously turned on the lights. Daniel pulled off his impromptu gag and spit. "What was

that?"

Catwoman exhaled in relief and deftly rewound the whip. "Thanks."

"For what?!"

She raised an eyebrow in surprise. "You could have cried out for help."

"Well, yeah, until you tackled me. Rude, by the way."

She dropped her arms incredulously. "Well, why didn't you? I've been nothing but a threat to you."

"I'm aware of that."

She studied him. "In fact, you've been really calm this whole time, all things considered."

He shrugged. "I suppose."

"Why?"

He looked at her thoughtfully. "A few things."

"Enlighten me."

"Besides the threats of bodily harm, well, and then the actual bodily harm, you're one of the nicest people I've talked to in a long time."

"Oh."

"Lot of grumps around here. Furthermore lady, you got legs for *miles*. I respect that."

"Um. Thanks?"

"No, believe me. You hang out here for half a year, that's a big deal. Seeing you is nigh-on spiritual."

"..."

"Third, in regards to you being found out, it really doesn't matter what I do. I could give you a pair of ruby slippers and a map to Switzerland; there's no way you're getting off the Fort. They're gonna catch you and try you for who knows what. That's if you're not shot to pieces in the process." He held up his hands apologetically. "No offense."

"None taken."

"Right, So I think to myself, why hurry the inevitable? Didn't want to give you an excuse to slice me up 'fore they took you away. Plus, I get to see those fine stems in the meantime." He whistled appreciatively.

"Can we change the subject?"

"Sure. Fourth, and most importantly, I'm pretty sure you don't exist."

Catwoman stared at him dumbly.

"I don't know how to respond to that."

"It's not your fault, if that makes you feel any better."

"I exist."

"Round of applause for that self-esteem, but I'm pretty sure you're a figment of my imagination."

She spoke patiently, like one would to a slow child, "Daniel, I'm very confident I exist."

"Of course you are. Any psychic manifestation of mine will have read Descartes. But empirically, the odds are stacked against you."

"I'm unconvinced."

"It doesn't matter whether I convince you or not, you being a figment and all."

She raised an eyebrow. "Humor me."

"Think of it this way: what are the odds that some lady would break into the Fort in the middle of winter just to see me?"

She grudgingly shrugged. "Low."

"Low. And what are the odds that this lady would look you and, you know, dress like *that*?"

"Hey!"

"That's right, next to zero. And that was a complement, by the way."

"Hmph," She crossed her arms, "No wonder you don't see many women."

He ignored the remark. "But might a man in my circumstances *dream* of a lady who looks like you and dresses like that? Certainly. No crazier than any other dream. It's downright likely if you're feeling Freudian."

"Okay, but you're not dreaming, you're awake."

"Am I?"

"Obviously."

"But am I?"

Catwoman generally respected philosophy as a cultured pursuit until that point when she felt the urge to slap someone out of an infinite regression paradox.

She restrained herself. "Let's assume you are."

"Suppose I am awake. There are, shall we say, alternative states of wakefulness."

She eyed him suspiciously. Catwoman met her fair share of crazy people prowling the night. She tried not to judge - stoners and glass houses and all that jazz - but she knew that you could often spot the normal-looking ones if you could just get them on the right subject.

"What do you mean by that?"

"How do I put this gently? As I said, it's not easy here. Sure, we do important work, but we throw ourselves into that work, me more than most. Maybe we lose a little sleep. Go a little stir crazy. Start picking up some funny habits." Daniel was building towards a rambling rant, speaking with loose hand gestures. "Lighting things on fire sounds like a lot of fun, sure, but that only lasts a few minutes; the rest is paperwork. So much paperwork, you wouldn't believe it! Do you have a lot of paperwork in your job?"

"Not as such, no."

"Well, thank your lucky stars, lady. It's not even for the science, just bureaucracy and bookkeeping! Look, it gets *really* boring around here and-"

"Daniel, what are you getting at?"

"Do you have any idea what peyote is?"

"No."

"That's ... that's probably for the best. Listen, the moral of the story is: I don't know what you're here for, but you seem to at least *believe* you have the moral high ground, and I have a soft spot for self-righteous crusaders doing dangerous things. It's what got me into medicine. Plus, if you and your friends annoy the brass before you die, that's a plus in my book. They could stand to be taken down a peg, got no respect for workplace satisfaction"

"Wow, Daniel. That's-"

"Save it."

"Okay, but you ought to know that the Army's been taking-"

"I said can it, lady. I'm not in the mood for grand revelations. Besides, I'm going back to school after New Year's, don't much care about this place anymore. It'll be a bad dream as far as I'm concerned. You best get moving."

Catwoman was mildly shocked at the kid's major league moxie. It took one to know one. She snapped the heavy briefcase shut, strode up, and gave him a peck on the cheek.

He looked puzzled. "What was that for?"

"An apology."

"For what?"

Catwoman swung the briefcase with both hands right into his mouth.

Daniel spun and flopped onto the floor. A bruise instantly began to rise on his cheek. "OWWWW!" He looked up. "What was that for?!"

"When they come, tell them I hit you until you shared the research. That way you're in the clear."

"Oh. That's smart. Thanks."

Catwoman smiled. "No problem." Then she kicked him in the ribs. Twice.

"OWWW! *OOOWWWW!* What was *that* for?"

"For being stupid enough to work for a bunch of murderous psychopaths! Don't take jobs where you test flamethrowers in underground bunkers. Go work in a hospital or something. Got it?"

"OWWww. Fine."

"Good. I'm off for some more self-righteous crusading before they shoot me. Bye!"

"Ow."

To cope with troubling circumstances, a well-adjusted person will often recall fond memories of happier days. Batman didn't have many of those. That was okay. He wasn't the coping type.

As a rule, happy and well-adjusted people were terrible at infiltrating military sites, though he wasn't doing much better at the moment. He wished he could say this was his first time arrested by military police, but there was that winter in the gulag. In fairness, he only stayed twenty-three days, which was a terrible experience by the standards of anywhere else on the planet but very reasonable for a gulag. Besides, Aleksei had taught him how to count cards *and* treat frostbite, so his stay wasn't all a waste. Tonight might not be as fun.

After they slapped the handcuffs on, one of the MP's had the bright idea to throw a bag over his head. Laudable initiative, but it didn't matter. Trying to break away when surrounded was a challenge of tactility and body awareness, not sight. Not that he intended to try; no style of Gong Fu could overcome the physics of a seven-man dog pile handcuffed. More importantly, the lieutenant that subdued him was part of the guard detail.

That someone had, in fact, gotten the drop on him was deeply compelling to Batman. It wasn't that his pride was stung. It was, but his prime reaction was curiosity: a scholar in an ignorant land who finally meets a peer he can converse with, though the language they shared was violence. Batman was a

superlative fighter. His methods depended on an absolute confidence that he would prevail in any arbitrary encounter at fist-length. He had met or seen perhaps a hundred souls who might best him one-on-one, a list he shortened every year. Most lived in another hemisphere.

And yet he was beaten. So who was this remarkable soldier? Experience had taught Batman again and again that exceptional individuals caused ripples in the world. They were rarely the background noise of someone else's story. Sooner or later they carved their own. The lieutenant was more than just a lieutenant.

But the World's Greatest Detective had to hold his curiosity for another time. Part of his attention was spent considering the blood slowly pooling under the bandage on his sword wound, some was spent counting steps to judge where they were taking him, but mostly he worried if Catwoman had the good sense to stay out of sight. He consoled himself that it was a stupid concern - if there was one thing she could be relied upon to do, it was dodge the authorities.

Still, he worried, and he wondered why. The answer wasn't hard to figure out. Catwoman was his backup plan. She could still get the word out. Sure, that explained his concern.

They dragged him back to the freight elevator. The elevator could only fit four guards at a time. As the door shut, he judged his options. There were two schools of thought in escaping arrest. An old racketeer he once met in Bogotá called them the Jackrabbit and the Wolf. The Jackrabbit believed that the best time to get away was now. Every second in custody gave the policía time to reinforce and find tighter restraints. It was easier to flee on the street than from the back of a squad car, and it was easier to flee from a squad car than from a jail cell. Conversely, the Wolf believed you had to wait. Captors were most alert just after an arrest. Later, once the captive seemed beaten and submissive, the guards would let their guard down. Basically, the two schools differed in whether to look for the first opportunity or the perfect opportunity. Batman found both schools useful, but the Wolf seemed more prudent now: his margin for error at the moment was microscopic. He bide his time.

When they reached the surgery room, Batman was shoved onto the operating table. Six hands held him down as someone unlocked one of his handcuffs and attached it to a peg on the table. People joked about the contradiction of military efficiency, but this crew gave the phrase plenty of credit. In no time, they removed his belt (easier said than done, it wasn't a typical buckle) then stitched and dressed the wound in his side. His medic must have administered a shot: his hearing began to fade and his vision swam as they worked. His limbs grew numb and heavy.

But, fortunately or unfortunately, Batman had a fierce tolerance for anesthetics; he came to his senses a few minutes later. The bag was off his head. He was still on the operating table. Someone was talking nearby.

"-Collapsible binoculars. Seven vials of unknown liquids, presumed hazardous. Four vials of unknown powders, presumed hazardous. A small camera. A roll of film. Twenty yards of nylon rope. A folding grapnel. Half a stick of dynamite-"

"Nah, take a whiff of it. That's no dynamite; that's some nitroglycerin substitute."

"What does-"

"Means it's stable."

"How can you tell the difference?"

"Used to be a miner 'fore I enlisted. Learned the difference well."

"I thought a judge sentenced you here."

"Yeah, for blowing up the mine."

"If you blew it up, then ..."

"... I may have learned the difference the hard way."

There was silence.

"Braxton, you don't get to cook for us ever again. All in favor?"

There was a quick muttering of assent.

"Agreed. Moving on, we have a lighter. A magnifying glass. Tweezers. A flashlight. A wire brush. A syringe. A packet of sterile gauze. A large multi-tool. And seventeen throwing knives, the seventeenth sample kindly provided by Lieutenant Wilson."

So his name's Wilson. Batman turned his head to find the speaker.

Someone yelled, "He's awake!"

Bodies moved around him. Batman found it difficult to focus; the chemical hadn't yet worn off. He saw the contents of his utility belt laid on a counter beside him.

"How's he awake?"

"Murray, you got the dosage wrong!"

"Maybe he's just twitching."

"Why would he be twitching?"

"Adverse reaction?"

"So he's about to die."

"Probably."

"How's that going to make us look?"

"Hey, if he dies, we finally get to sleep."

"True."

"Shut your hole. He's not dead, idiots. He's just waking up."

"We could tell for sure if you took that mask off."

"Hey, I tried. You're welcome to try, buddy."

"Drug him again!"

"Then he might die for real."

"When you say 'might', is that a strong might or a weak might?"

The swinging doors opened.

"Atten-shun!"

All movement stopped. Batman lifted his head.

Four figures stood in the doorway. In front was Lieutenant Wilson, face thickly-bandaged. Behind him were two older men Batman recognized as Staff Sergeant Hank Jackson and Colonel Abner Tanner. He would have said that Tanner was the head of the Fort, but body language in the room was clearly giving the most deference (or fear) to the fourth visitor, a heavy-set colored woman. *Hmm.*

The Colonel glared down at him incredulously. "What in God's holy name is this man wearing?"

His guards shrugged. Lieutenant Wilson answered, his voice altered from the broken nose. "We're not sure, sir. We think he's a lunatic."

The Colonel frowned. "Obviously."

The woman briskly walked up and inspected a handful on his cape material.

The Lieutenant stepped forward, "I advise you keep a distance, ma'am. He's dangerous."

She chuckled darkly but moved away, looking at the assorted tools on the nearby table.

"Where's his gun?"

"He wasn't carrying a firearm."

"Really?" She sounded surprised. "I don't see a cudgel or a blackjack here."

"He wasn't armed-" Wilson glanced at the bloody batarang, "with that kind of weapon."

"Then if he didn't hold you at gunpoint and he didn't have a club, how do you explain the crater where your nose used to be, Lieutenant?"

"He hit me, ma'am. You can see the bloodstain on his suit elbow."

"Ah, so he ambushed you. Popped you in the face when you weren't looking."

"He did ambush me, but this strike was later."

"Are you saying that he did that in a fair fight, Slade? *With his bare hands?*"

Slade had the look of a subordinate who strongly desired to end a conversation. "Yes, ma'am."

"Huh. I don't know whether to be impressed or disappointed."

"I don't think either of us were fighting fair, ma'am."

"Well, Mr. Prizefighter here has been awfully quiet." She stared down at Batman. "Go on, sit up."

Batman slowly sat up. If the guards tensed, she didn't seem to care.

"Good. Now, who are you?"

Batman stared coolly back and said nothing.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, have I been impolite? I haven't introduced myself. My name is Amanda Waller. I'm a special investigator for the United States government vested with plenary legal powers to manage threats ordinary and extraordinary. What does this mean to you? This means I'm your Momma and your Daddy; I'm the Lord and all his angels; I'm Santa Claus; I'm all of them rolled up with sugar on top because right now I'm the only reason you're still alive. Give me what I want and I might be persuaded to continue that policy. Now: *Who. Are. You?*"

He continued his stare. "**I'm Batman.**"

The room was silent.

"Never heard of you."

The burly staff sergeant stepped forward. "Uh, excuse me, ma'am-"

Amanda pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. "Now is not the time, Sergeant."

Sergeant Jackson whispered in her ear.

Her expression turned sour, "You Gothamites are all the same with your-"

The Sergeant continued to whisper.

She turned and eyed Batman. "Are you trying to tell me that-"

The Sergeant whispered more insistently.

Amanda Waller paused, eyes shut in the timeless expression of a caretaker tired of cleaning up after

children.

"Staff Sergeant, have the men escort Mister - ugh - *Batman* to my office. Then have them isolated to barracks until such a time as they can be properly debriefed." She walked to the doors. "And someone change his dressing. I will not have bleeding on my floor!"

It took a minute for everyone to walk (or be dragged) out of the surgery room. Then the lights were flipped off as the doors swung closed.

Six seconds later, Catwoman climbed out of the elevator shaft.

Her green "cape" was now a sling over her shoulder. The ends were tied to the handle of the heavy briefcase filled with research papers. This left her hands free to climb, or to hang awkwardly for four minutes as she listened to the commotion above her.

In Catwoman's felonious career, there had been one instance where someone tried to hire her to retrieve a person. The details didn't matter. She rejected the proposal out of hand. Managing a painting or a statuette was awkward enough, but at least those objects were inert. Trying to handle a squabbling, bumbling human being who was dumb enough to get captured in the first place was an uh-oh story waiting to happen.

Yet for some reason, the thought of simply leaving didn't occur to her.

No, that was a lie. Of course it occurred to her, but the idea didn't seem as appealing as it usually did.

Not that she had any idea what to do next, of course.

In contrast to her personal quarters, Amanda Waller's office was a modest size. It was no larger than its neighbors, with a desk and a set of filing cabinets. Inside her top desk drawer was a single-barrel sawed-off shotgun. She started their new conversation by pulling it out and chambering a shell.

Batman was handcuffed to a wooden chair in front of the desk. In the corners behind him stood Colonel Tanner and Lieutenant Wilson. They were clearly spectators; this was Waller's stage, whoever she was. The space was tight between the four of them. Batman could sense their bodies, hear their breathing (Wilson's especially, his septum sounded like a pretzel). He was used to cozy interrogations, but rarely from this end.

The lone bulb cast long shadows on the bags under Waller's eyes. She began without preamble.

"I was wrong; I heard the name once. Only it wasn't the Bat Man then, it was the Beast of the Narrows or the Dark Wing or one of the dozen other stupid monikers that cropped up last year. He was a folk tale, a sort of patron devil to gangsters and dirty cops. The question is: are you sincerely deluded into believing you're the character of this myth, like some troubled men believe themselves to be Napoleon or Christ, or is all this," she gestured at his outfit, "an elaborate disguise for some other motive?"

Batman still fought the last traces of the painkiller. He managed to raise his head and look her in the eye. **"I have no delusions. This is no disguise. I'm Batman."**

"So I heard. Fine, you're a Bat Man. What should I call you?"

He glared at her.

"Oh. Oh, dear. You're serious! Ha. You actually call yourself that. Are you suggesting you started the myth? I thought it was just some dross the newspapers in your crummy burg made up on a deadline."

"When those newspapers know your atrocities here, they'll forget all about me."

"So that's it? You came for blackmail?"

"Not blackmail. Justice."

"An idealist! I guess you are delusional. And you've wasted your time. There are no atrocities here."

"I think Wendell and Alice Dupree would disagree, if you hadn't killed them."

Waller's eyes lowered to slits. She casually pumped the lever on her shotgun and walked around the desk. The Colonel and the Lieutenant stepped discreetly away from her line of fire.

"I think I've been carried away by the dramatics tonight. It doesn't matter what costume you have on. You're here for justice? Very well, I'll administer the law." She leaned forward. As a short woman, this put her just above eye level with him. "Mr. John Doe, you are under arrest for criminal trespassing, breaking and entering, battery, and conspiracy to commit espionage, though I have a feeling that's just the tip of the iceberg. Once the details of your identity are confirmed, we'll discover what rights you have under the Constitution or the Articles of War. Anything to say on your behalf?"

He looked thoughtfully at the top of the cabinet behind her.

"That's the casing of a German S-mine. Hops upward on a propelling charge nearly three feet before it detonates to extend its shrapnel. Diabolically efficient. Not many on this side of the Atlantic. How did you get it?"

Waller rose up, mildly taken aback. "A little store called None of Your Business. If you think you can impress me with a piece of trivia, you have another thing coming. Lieutenant, why is this Halloween mask still on?"

Lieutenant Wilson frowned. "The men said they couldn't find the fastener, and their instruments couldn't cut the hood material."

"Is that so?" She tilted Batman's chin up with her shotgun. "Care to share the secret?"

Batman said nothing.

"Didn't think so. Lieutenant, willing to give it a shot?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Try not to slit his throat in the process."

Lieutenant Wilson pulled out a long, serrated knife, held it beside the Dark Knight's chin, and started to saw. After four jagged tugs, the rugged cowl began to tear. He continued on the other side. Soon, both sides had enough slack to use. Wilson grabbed hold of the mask and pulled backwards ...

... revealing another mask, a tight black fabric that hid most of his head. Whereas the cowl had holes for his eye-lenses, the lenses were actually part of this under-mask.

Amanda raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

Wilson tried to tear this second mask off, but it wouldn't shift a centimeter.

"Sorry, ma'am. It's like it's stuck to his scalp with industrial glue."

"Do I look like I carry industrial glue solvent? Cut it off."

"Much as I'd like to, the force would lop off a decent chunk of his skull."

"Well, that's just g-"

Suddenly, a sharp odor pervaded the air.

Colonel Tanner's breath stuck in his throat. His pupils dilated. He broke out in a cold sweat.

He screamed, "**Gas! Gaaaas!**"

Amanda Waller wrinkled her nose at the smell but frowned, "Colonel, please control yourself-*woaaaaah!*" Tanner grabbed her by the arm, kicked open the door, and threw her through it. Lieutenant Wilson began to undo the handcuffs, but the Colonel smacked his arms away. "**Get to fresh air 'fore it melts your eyes! That's an order! Now! Now! Now!**"

They sprinted away like men possessed.

Eight seconds later, Catwoman stuck her head into the office.

"Hi!"

Batman had just finished escaping the handcuffs. He looked up at her, mildly suspicious at his reversal of fortune.

She lifted an eyebrow, amused. "You've been Zorro this whole time?"

Batman tossed the handcuffs on the desk, unamused. He reached behind his head and pulled the cowl back over his eyes. Its hidden cords were severed, but it fit tightly enough to not slide off accidentally.

"How did ..." he paused in thought, "Chlorine bleach in the vents."

"Nothing gets past you, huh?" Catwoman sauntered in. "I brought a gift." She tossed him his utility belt.

He caught it and checked through the pouches with practiced swiftness, moving tools and vials around to match his preference.

"Thought I'd do you a favor and fill it up." She walked around him. "I can't believe you wear a mask *under* your mask."

Batman shrugged his cape aside and put on the belt. "I needed it, didn't I?"

She spotted his wound, "Hey, are you alright?"

He frowned, letting the cape hide his side again. "Three-inch laceration to the lower ribs; stitching's amateur but serviceable. I'm fine."

She moved the cape and touched his dressing in worried surprise. "You call this fine? What happened?"

He stepped away from her touch. "Naval saber."

"Are you saying you were stabbed ... with a sword?"

"A lateral cut, but yes."

"Who did it? A Cossack? A pirate?"

"A soldier. Won't happen again."

"Unless you have a time machine, I don't think it *could* happen again."

He grunted. He wanted to question why she would be so reckless as to save him; they had a mission to keep in mind. But he knew if their roles were reversed, his answer would make him a hypocrite.

Instead, he asked, "How did you know to try the bleach?"

"Your file said that Colonel Tanner suffered gas attacks in the war. I've met veterans; it's something a lot of them fixate on, and I happen to know that certain poison gases smell like chlorine. Seemed worth a try."

"I'm impressed you remembered that detail."

"Thanks."

"Or any of it."

"Funny. Remind me again: who just pulled who's leather-clad derriere out of the fire?"

"It was ... an ambitious gamble."

"Awww, is that admiration in your voice? Are you just trying to say 'Thank you'?"

Batman normally wouldn't rise to the bait, but he didn't like the implication that he was too cowardly or aloof to express himself. Also, the lingering haze of the morphine was making it hard to keep his usual reticence.

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome." She grinned, all dimples. "That was pretty genius of me."

He blinked away the blur in his vision and went to Amanda Waller's desk. "What was your plan if this hadn't worked?"

"Convince them to let you go with my natural charm and allure."

He looked through a drawer. "And when that failed?"

She slapped his shoulder. "Jerk."

"Well?"

"I found a crate downstairs with about fifty hand grenades."

This earned her an approving grunt.

She turned the question around. "Okay, what would you have done if I didn't come to your rescue?"

"If no other outside opportunity presented itself?"

"Yeah."

"Kick them."

"Weren't you handcuffed to a chair?"

"Dislocate thumbs, slip the handcuffs, and then kick them."

"Didn't they all have guns?"

"Kick them *quickly*."

"See, now I wish I had stayed out just to see that."

Chapter 12

Ghosts of a Legionnaire

Tragedy was the fall of a valiant man.

Colonel Abner Tanner possessed great calm in the face of adversity. He had only cried twice in the Army: at the wedding of his sister and the funeral of his father. Tonight, he cried a third time.

Amanda Waller watched him sit in the snow outside the Brick, lines of tears turning his face red. She hadn't seen shaking like his in a long time, not since Chicago. She used to watch the cokeheads get the shakes on their low days, their hands trembling so badly they couldn't hold soup in a spoon, and Tanner was looking worse. She couldn't tell what he was mumbling to himself, but he was clearly a wreck.

She didn't especially like the Colonel - she didn't like most of humanity - but she had a grudging respect for the man. He was a professional. Plus, he was useful. Tanner wasn't stupid, but unlike most officers who lasted as long, he wasn't political. He asked the harsh questions. It was good to have some pepper in a subordinate. Toadies could follow a plan, but a good critic kept a plan honest.

In any case, it wouldn't do to have him seen like this. Leadership was largely appearances, after all. Lieutenant Wilson was shepherding the sentries away to form a new line, offering the two of them a window of privacy. Waller heaved and struggled but managed to pull Colonel Tanner off the snow to his feet. Breathing like a mule in a sauna, she slung his arm over her shoulders and walked him forward. This was tolerable. If anyone noticed, it would just look like he was injured. There was no disrespect in that. Waller and Tanner stumbled past the quickly-organizing perimeter. Whatever had happened in her office, at least no one was sneaking out after them. She did her best to make the Colonel look upright and ambulatory, a trick she learned for FDR at a White House function. Waller led him down a side path and finally found some privacy, a shoulder-high pile of frozen, half-rotted potatoes. They sat, displacing enough tubers to make decent impromptu chairs.

The noise on the other side of the building faded in the wind and falling snow. Neither broke the semi-silence; he had nothing to say and she couldn't breathe. The back door was nearby, although door was more of a decorative term now. Someone had ripped it off its hinges - she could guess who - and someone else had welded it shut. The seam still glowed. Waller made a note to give whichever cocksure engineer thought that up a medal; it was one liability she didn't have to deal with.

When she caught her breath, she saw Tanner had stopped shaking. He looked at his knees with that endless stare.

"Colonel Tanner?"

He didn't respond.

"It's time to take command, Colonel. We have to control the situat-"

"Those ... those godless ape fiends. They did it to their own."

This non sequiter came out with such flat surprise that Amanda Waller was sure she misheard him. "Excuse me?"

He closed his eyes in pain. She shook his arm. "Abner!"

"Have you ever seen a human die, ma'am? Have you seen a man die?"

Amanda Waller was a strategist, not a shrink or a bartender or a priest. She wasn't cut out for this and right now she hated him for it.

"If you must know, yes. Yes I have. Once."

"Was he young? Was he a young man?"

"Not especially."

"Was it peaceful?"

She moved to stand. "I can't say I'm equipped to compare such-"

He snatched her sleeve. "Damn it, Waller." He glared down at her, red-eyed, "You have nothing to win or lose here. Would it kill you to speak plainly a spell? I just- I just want to know."

She sat. "As such events go, I suppose it was peaceful."

"Then I envy you, ma'am. Never had that luxury. I think that's how nature generally is, you know? Ain't peaceful most times, death. Nature's artful cruel at that. But when a man commits that to man ... to his own man ... well ..."

"What are you ... what's wrong with you, Colonel?"

"Oh. Oh-ho." He chuckled joyless. "Ain't what's wrong with me. S'what's wrong with the world. 'Spect I

owe you an apology."

"For distracting me from my investigation?"

"I came here to make ready to hurt Nazis. Made no secret of it either."

"I know that."

"I beg you, lady, hush your lips fer once. I'm saying that even then I had it wrong. Got the enemy right, but I thought the fight was on honest terms. Knew they were cruel, but I thought they had standards. I tried to run this camp the honest way. I thought you took your fly-by-night ideas too far, regardless of what muckety-muck signed off on it. Crossed lines that an American ought never cross. Fact is," he wiped some snow off his cheek with a sleeve, "You were the only one with the foresight to bring it their level. You saw their hand. They'll sink to anything."

"What are you-"

"I didn't think the Germans would do it twice. Didn't think anyone ... Old Adolph was there. He knew. He knew! How does he ... he saw what it did the first time."

"I don't know th-"

"The gas, woman! The gas! A million boys going blind; their skin-" he pulled at his shirt, "Skin burning off. Dying on their own vomit." He seized a potato and crushed it to dust. "They've had twenty years to learn the lesson, but now we find a spy, and some kraut conspirator hiding nearby sees fit to ... to use ..." He touched his face in shock, "Just to keep his lips tight!"

"Colonel-"

"Forget the fact we hardly got out safe ourselves. We left a man in the there, Waller. Won't call him an innocent, but a man. Stuck to a chair; can't even stand up as it wafts around him. Stuck in the dark. Like swine. Nowhere to go when he starts to feel it in his throat. Do you know what we're gonna find when we go back in?"

"I-"

"I do. I've seen it. The thing we find tied to that chair won't look human anymore."

" ... "

"We'll have to see if the quartermaster has some masks around here. I'm not sure how long it takes toxins to fade indoors. Was just a green enlisted at the time. Sure, they told us how long it might be, but that was outdoors, and I always suspected they knew jack. And who knows what sort of ugly spray the dogs have brewed up in the meantime?"

"Colonel-"

"Come to think of it, I bet we won't even have to hunt down the rat who did the deed. Wherever he is - next to a vent in a broom closet, I guess - he has to know we're out here. He didn't just silence his own

buddy; he tried to take us all out. He knows there won't be kiddie gloves twice. Surely, coward like that's turned his gas on and- and took a whiff."

Waller waited until she was sure he was done. "May I speak?"

Eyes closed, he gestured permission.

"Thank you. Clearly this ... event has brought up some unseemly memories. I'll forget the outburst here. But it ends now. Got it?"

Abner Tanner popped open an eye and frowned, but at least it was a thinking frown. She continued.

"Good. We won't talk of this after tonight. And I 'll remind you that we don't know what happened. You think you smelled a kind of chlorine gas. Bertholite, I presume."

"Hand to God, I know I did."

"I suppose you would be the authority. Fine, say you did. We all smelled something. But espionage is my expertise, and we can't make too many assumptions. For all we know, the gas may have been set by our John Doe."

"What?"

"Preemptively, I mean," she paused, "Perhaps as some elaborate cyanide pill."

"I ... well ..."

"And although it does seem likely, we don't have firm evidence he was or is an agent of the Axis powers. There are always other factions to consider."

"What do you mean by 'was or is'? The man's a goner, Waller."

"Well, hypothetically, the gas might have also just been a distraction."

"For the love of- Sure! I suppose death can be pretty distracting!"

"I'm no chemist. Perhaps ... perhaps it was diluted. To cause enough pain to scare us away, but weakened so their man could survive and slip free." She held up her hands. "I'll admit that's conjecture, but in my experience the sort of skillful agent we met would not plan an endgame of bombastic suicide. Not from this side of the Pacific. It's not impossible our intruder is sleuthing around inside right now, thinking he can rig up a radio or wait for a gap in our lines. Do you understand, Colonel?"

Colonel Tanner was silent for a moment. She feared he had fallen numb again, but then he stood and helped her up.

"If that's what the krauts think, they got another think coming."

In the forest outside Fort Morrison, Lieutenant Harrison Stevens and Private Benjamin Greene stood watch beside the parked Ford.

"Well, I just don't get what's got you so out of sorts, sir. I think it's good fun!"

"Alright. Here's what makes me uncomfortable, Private."

"Yeah, sir?"

"Donald Duck wears a shirt, right?"

"And a hat."

"A shirt and a hat, like a sailor. But no pants."

"Not a stitch."

"He wears a shirt but no pants. That's ridiculous."

"It's just a funny cartoon, sir."

"Nothing funny 'bout it. The way I see, there are two possibilities. He's either a talking animal or a feathery person. If he's a duck wearing clothes, that's awfully strange. Ducks don't wear clothes. Where'd he get clothes? How'd he know to put them on? And if he's a person, then he's nude from the waist down! Why even bother to wear a shirt if you go around showing your nethers all lewd and such? Why do the other characters tolerate his nudity? Why is this shown to children? All sorts of questions crop up."

"So it's the shirt that doesn't make sense to you. A normal duck wouldn't have it, and an anthropomorphic duck wouldn't *only* have it."

"I don't know what anthropomorphic means."

"How about this: maybe the shirt's only a status symbol. Maybe his society's got no shame for nakedness pants-wise."

"Not hardly. Mickey Mouse wears pants, and he's clearly the trendsetter in that community. Heck, even Goofy wears pants, and that poor soul's mind-addled."

"Maybe pants are just an optional accessory, like the hat."

"Nah. There's no way pants are as voluntary as hats. Never. Not anywhere. But here's the part that really bakes my noodle. When Donald Duck gets out of the shower, see, he wears a towel around his waist. Not to dry himself, just for modesty. But when he's ready to leave, he takes it off! What's that all about?"

"Bully if I know, Lieutenant."

The pair leaned against the car, contemplating their fourth cigarette. An owl hooted overhead.

"So ... Florida."

"Born and raised, sir. Ever been there?"

"Nope. I hear it's nice."

The Private shrugged. "It's pretty enough. Not a big fan of the mosquitoes."

"Yeah?"

"They're terrible, mess you up right good. Can't stand'em. I even told the recruiter man, I told him 'you send me so far away there ain't no bloodsuckers and I'll sign today'. Now look around." He nodded at the snowy pines. "People told me the recruiters can't be trusted, but I got to hand it to Uncle Sam. The Army came through."

"You said you've only been in the State of Gotham for a few weeks?"

"A-yep, just finished boot camp."

"Hate to break it to you kid, but these mountains are chock full of skeeters come springtime."

The private blinked. He screamed a chain of creative profanities that scared away the owl.

In the recently-vacated office of Amanda Waller, Batman and Catwoman were decidedly alive and arguing what to do next.

"I'm sure those binders are fascinating, but shouldn't we be leaving? Now?"

As Catwoman kept anxious watch by the door, Batman combed through Waller's desk drawers, occasionally picking up a folder or envelope to peruse. "The Army will stay outside. I'm taking advantage of the stalemate."

"How do you know they won't charge in bayonet-first?"

"Thanks to your deception, they believe the building's fumigated. That's a massive risk to them. Even if they have doubts, they'll tolerate waiting as long as they have us surrounded. Sieges are strategically comforting."

"How do you know they have us surrounded?"

"I'm Batman."

She rolled her eyes but spoke more quickly than she intended. "Okay. Let's say they do have us surrounded. We have to leave eventually. That sounds like the kind of thing we should be worried about. You don't seem worried. Should we be worried?"

He gave a dismissive head-shrug. "It's a concern."

"You say that like it's nothing, but then you get captured all the time." She held her wrists together like they were handcuffed and tried to imitate a grumpy Bat-scowl.

He glanced up and frowned. Her impression was pretty good. "We'll be fine."

"Is there anything I can do in the meantime?"

He held out a file. "Have you studied uranium isotopes?"

She read the title: *Technical Memos from the National Bureau of Standards*.

"No, Batman, I have not studied uranium isotopes."

He took the file back. "Then no."

"What if I read you what's inside this cabinet."

"Fine."

"That won't distract you, will it?"

"Has that ever stopped you before?"

"It's more fun when I'm not under siege by an Army battalion."

"A platoon, at most."

"Fine, a platoon."

"The difference is nearly twenty-fold."

"You knew exactly what I meant."

"Start. I'll listen."

"Glad to hear it." Catwoman deftly undid the lock on the top cabinet drawer and rolled it out.

"Um, is there something I should be searching for?"

He grunted "Hard to say. Sometimes the relevance of a file isn't obvious. Anything to do with Gotham, raids on civilians, or medical experiments."

She skimmed through the drawer. "Here's a debriefing from something called the Third Innsmouth Raid. Does that sound useful?"

"... No."

She looked further. "There's a telegram from the Santa Priscan ambassador. Maybe a sales pitch

by the looks of it. It mentions laboratories."

"Does it mention Fort Morrison?"

"No, but it mentions someone or something called *Peña Dura*."

"I don't think so."

"Okay." She looked further. "The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment?"

"Worrisome name, but doubtful."

"The storage of antiquities from the excavations of a Doctor H.W. Jones, Jr."

"No."

"How about ... huh ..." Catwoman paused and read a minute. "Hey, you might want to see this one."

"Is it about Gotham?"

"Kansas."

He paused and looked up at her strangely.

She shrugged. "Yeah, I know, but take a look at it."

Batman stepped to her side and took the brown accordion file stuffed with papers.

It was simply entitled: *The Alien(?)*

He looked inside. The papers were extensively redacted, with whole sections covered by black marker. One old photograph fell out. A penned caption dated four years ago said it was of a processing plant fire in Topeka. He squinted at it under the light.

There was a blurry ... *something* in the top right corner.

Catwoman looked over his shoulder. "Maybe it's a bird."

He made a thoughtful noise. "Or a plane."

They studied the photograph with vague unease.

Finally, he put the file aside. "I don't think we'll find any pertinent records there in the time we have. Let's try something else."

"Don't you want to know about this briefcase I'm lugging around?"

Batman had noticed it of course, but he had been busy with a rare concern that outranked

Catwoman holding something that didn't belong to her.

"Where did you get it?"

"I found a researcher inside one of the laboratories."

"Hm. And you took that without his notice. Good."

She tilted her head. "Wellllll, not quite."

His eyes narrowed. "Then how?"

"I, eh, sort of recruited him."

She could see the elaborate gear box of Batman's mind grind on this for a moment. His eyes narrowed further.

"... How?"

"I threatened him. Then I asked for his help. Sort of."

"That's different than your usual M.O."

"You think you're the only one who can be persuasive?"

"Of course not." *Yes.*

"Don't worry. He was helpful."

"What did he give you?"

"Funny you should ask," she hefted the briefcase onto the desk, "I actually have no idea. The newest tests his team did according to him."

"So it could be anything."

She untangled her carrying sling back into a cape and tied it on. "He seemed honest. He said this program originally got test cadavers legally through-

"-the university donor system."

"Yes, Captain Interruptsalot, that's what they told him. He didn't know about the thefts in Gotham. I think the supply dried up so the Army started skulking around the city to pick up the slack."

"Let's see what else your informant offered."

Batman opened the case and picked up a loose pile of documents. Catwoman was about to describe what little she remembered about the contents, but after a blink he put down the first

sheet. She looked at the page he dropped. It was a dense chart of heat and pressure measurements followed by three paragraphs of tiny, single-spaced footnotes.

"Did you just read this?"

He paused in concentration and put down his second page. "Yes."

"You didn't skim it? You read every word?"

"Yes."

"And you understood it? "

He put the third page down. "As much as I could out of context. Is there a problem?"

Catwoman picked her jaw off the floor. "No, nope. No problem."

"Our circumstances aside, his work is interesting," he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Your researcher has solid methodology."

Catwoman gave him a concerned look. A popular strain of Bat-rumors believed he was a literal monster in the Bram Stoker sense of the word. Naturally, she knew better - besides being human, he obviously had scruples - but some nights when she saw him, she couldn't shake the uncomfortable notion that Batman might have a very personal use for the tensile strength of the human ribcage or the melting point of an ear.

Finally, he put the fourth page down. "Some of this might be useful, but it'll take half an hour to sort through, and we're almost out of time."

"If you want to carry it, handsome, feel free. As long as we get back to the car."

At the car.

"Nah, it's Astaire."

"It's Rogers."

Private Benjamin Greene threw up his hands in frustration. "I'm sorry, sir, but you can't tell me you think Ginger Rogers was a better dancer than Fred Astaire. Have you been in a theater?"

Lieutenant Harrison Stevens crossed his arms and glared. "Hey, watch it, Private. And yes I do think so. That dame could cut a rug like the free world depended on it."

"Sure, they both jigged real fancy, but don't you think the better dancer is the one who looks just as keen while doing the harder job."

The Lieutenant shrugged. "I suppose."

"Well, there you go! Fred Astaire didn't just have to dance, he had to lead the dance! That surely makes his job harder."

"Fine, he had to lead, but Ginger Rogers had to do everything he did backwards and in heels."

"True, but Fred Astaire had to live with people pointing that out to him all the time."

"And that makes him the better dancer?"

"It makes him the better person."

"And?"

"And better people are better dancers."

"Yeah? What, did Saint Francis win the all-Italy waltz contest five years running?"

"That's an absurd example, Lieutenant. The waltz wasn't in fashion till the eighteenth century."

"Of course. *That's* why it's absurd."

Suddenly, there was a rustling in the treeline. The two soldiers dropped their smokes and had their rifles leveled in a moment. Lieutenant Stevens nodded and pointed to the side. Private Greene crouched and duckwalked to the other edge of the clearing to set up overwatch.

Easing his eye down the sights, the Lieutenant yelled, "Hey! The Navy can go ..."

A voice responded out of the woods, "... Suck a lemon!"

The two soldiers relaxed and lowered their weapons. The Lieutenant smiled. "You shouldn't try sneaking up on us, Jenkins."

Into the clearing stepped Private Jenkins. "I'll wear a bell next time, sir. Any luck with the car?"

Lieutenant Stevens shook his hand. "It's a mystery. Where's Nowitzki?"

"Command latched him to another patrol at camp."

"What else did command say?"

"You can ask them yourself. I brought friends."

Behind Private Jenkins slogged an engineer the Lieutenant knew faintly as Tubby Frank and a man he didn't recognize from the Signals Corps. Tubby Frank carried a heavy toolbox and the signal-man wore one of the new "Walkie-Talkie" backpacks.

Salutes were traded, and Tubby Frank got to business. He moved with the start-stop air of hurried patience seen in mechanically-minded men who have a puzzle to crack. He paced around the car,

testing the handles and muttering to himself. The radio man, who identified himself as Corporal Grimes, explained that he was there to keep headquarters informed. The Fort was dealing with some sort of intrusion and the Ford might be involved.

As Grimes radioed in their arrival, the Lieutenant and the Privates watched Frank fiddle with a long strip of metal that fit into the driver's door. A moment later, the lock clicked open. They looked inside.

Tubby Frank scratched his head. "What are those straps?"

Private Jenkins answered. "Looks like lap belts. My cousin has them on his crop duster."

Private Greene gaped, "This car can fly?"

This was ignored. Lieutenant Stevens stepped back. "Alright, this jalopy has more unexpected additions than my Nana's fruitcake. At least one of them has to be a clue toward the owner. Find it."

The team got to work.

Tubby Frank was the first to find something interesting. With a long pry-bar he forced open the trunk. He peered inside and did a double-take. "Y'should see this, sir." The Lieutenant walked over as the engineer hung a small lantern. They searched the drawers of the unexpected storage case.

As the Lieutenant thumbed through a Turkish-to-Russian dictionary, he remarked, "Good find, soldier. It's like half a department store in here."

"Doubt you'll see these at a department store." Tubby Frank held up several sticks of dynamite.

Lieutenant Stevens gingerly took one and inspected it. "No label. What kind of lunatic drives around with loose dynamite in the back of his car through the middle of the woods?"

"It's a miracle we didn't find a crater, sir."

"Hm. Keep looking."

The Lieutenant began to pace and studied the dynamite. Corporal Grimes reported the find. It continued to snow.

Then Private Jenkins yelled out, "Found something else, sir!"

Lieutenant Stevens strode over. The Private was in the passenger seat, pulling something out of the glove compartment. He showed the Lieutenant a folder: *De-orbit Moon in Seventeen Steps*.

"What's it mean, sir?"

The Lieutenant's eyes narrowed to slits. He glared at the Russian dictionary in his left hand and the dynamite in his right. The veins in his neck bulged with righteous American fury. He muttered

in a tone both oath and curse, "It's the Commies."

Back in Amanda Waller's office.

"If you want to carry it, handsome, feel free. As long as we get back to the car."

"No."

"No!?"

"You go, of course. I'll support you to the barricade. Descend the cliff. Find the Ford. Head south. Your pay is inside the passenger seat cushion. Cover your tracks. I suggest you light the car on fire once you get to Gotham. Or push it into a river. Or both."

"And in the meantime, you intend to, what? Enlist?"

"I have unfinished business here. Beyond the scope of our agreement."

"Is that business to die?"

"Our window for retreat is closing. Let's move."

"Hold on. A minute ago, you said we're stuck in stalemate. Now you want to shove me out of here. What's going on?"

He frowned. "I have another task here in the Fort, but I can reach it alone. You did your part."

"I also saved you from a firing squad. That wasn't 'my part'. Do I get a bonus for that?"

He ignored her and walked away. "Catwoman this is no time for-" Batman walked into the door frame and collapsed.

Catwoman blinked. That shouldn't have been possible. Batman was the paragon of coordinated motion, like an ever-frowning mountain goat. She once saw him hop out of a third floor window and land on a flagpole.

She stared at the crumpled heap on the floor. It occurred to Catwoman that she should ask if he was alright.

"... Did you just walk into a wall?"

Batman rolled to his knees and grabbed the door for balance. She helped him stand (or tried, the man weighed a ton). He leaned on her shoulder for a moment, gradually finding his footing. Then he grunted.

"This is no time for a discussion on-"

"Woah. Hold on, buster. You don't get to fall over, get up, and keep talking like nothing happened. What's wrong?"

He grunted. "My narcotics."

"Your *what?!?*"

"Morphine was my first guess. Could be another. It was fast-acting."

"*Excuse me?*"

"When they stitched my cut, I was shot with a needle. Anesthetized. Probably intended to double as a pacifying agent."

"And now you're flying halfway to Neverland. Great. I'm relying on a guy who can't find his nose with his hand."

"Please. I'm obviously lucid. The drug wore off in minutes."

"Then why did you just fall?"

"In my experience, the symptoms of disorientation can return in brief waves."

She raised a critical eyebrow. "What do you mean by your '*experience*'?"

He grunted dismissively. "Surgical necessities. Nothing more."

"Uh-huh. Either way, it sounds like you have a problem."

"It's immaterial. Won't happen again."

"You know what's very material? The floor."

"I'll be fine. We have to get you out of here."

"You're still running that track?"

He glared at her in disbelief. "Stubbornness aside, why would *you* possibly care to stay?"

That hurt. Catwoman glared back with a fiery riposte on the tip of her tongue, but she hesitated. The Leading Lady of Larceny closed her eyes and took a deep breath, resting her forehead on her palm. Her shoulders slumped.

Batman stared at her puzzled. *Well, this was a new trick.* They had traded blows a dozen times, leaped into thin air off skyscraper balconies; he once tackled her into an aquarium, but now was the first time Catwoman ever seemed beaten. No, not beaten - he still couldn't imagine that. She had fight left in her. No, the truth was she looked worn. Tired.

He waited. She took the favor and spoke.

"Look, you said yourself I wasn't heartless. Sure, we have our differences-" He made a skeptical head-tilt. "-And okay, that might be something of an understatement. But all this, this whole nightmare?" She gestured to the walls around her. "Well, I've seen it. I can't *un*-see it. That makes it my problem now. And as far as solutions go, you're the only game in town. So what's your big secret, and what do we have to do?"

Batman stared at her. *You're going to regret this.*

Catwoman crossed her arms and stared back. *I'm not the regretting type.*

Fine.

He stepped past and handed her a folded letter from the bowels of Amanda Waller's desk.

She held it up to the light. The other records thus far were cheap notebook pages or carbon copies. This document had class: rich cream cardstock, embossed letterhead, and a pair of neat cursive signatures. She began to read.

"Yadda, yadda - initiative by the Under Secretaries of State and War mandating Amanda Grace Waller to study and prepare innovations in war materiel and personnel pursuant to statute - yadda, yadda, yadda - extraordinary measures - yadda, yadda - adjutants on request - yadda, yadda - quarterly committee oversight - yadda, yadda - top secret." She handed the letter back to Batman. "Is that it? We knew the bureaucracy fairy had flown in and granted this lady her magic slush fund. What's new?"

"Look closely. Fourth paragraph. See the list?"

"Yeah. Something to do with 'cooperative officials and groups'. Bunch of obscure government offices. They can't all be in on this, can they? Not knowingly, anyway."

"Read the seventh."

"... Rook Ltd." She looked up. "Never heard of it."

"Fort Morrison had a research arm from day one, but it was first and foremost an administrative center for the planned quarantine. The lion's share of influenza research was conducted elsewhere, predominately Johns Hopkins. When laboratories need to transport biological samples that dangerous, they use special couriers, and Hopkins preferred a Baltimore firm called Rook Brothers."

"Why bother showing me the letter when you knew you'd have to explain things anyway?"

He ignored the comment. "With their unique track record, Rook Brothers soon won contracts with the leading hospitals and military clinics. They dominated their industry."

"Good for them."

"When the disease passed, they went bankrupt. The mothballed leftovers of the company were

bought in '32 by Lex Pharmaceuticals. The original brothers were fired, but they kept the name."

"LexCorp owns a company just to shuttle Petri dishes around?"

"If that's what they still do. I told you Fort Morrison was closed after the Flu ended. That's not entirely true. The Army wanted to keep virus cultures on permanent storage. The Fort was the most remote site they owned with the right equipment. A maintenance crew stayed behind."

Catwoman visibly tensed. "Are you saying the Spanish Flu is *in this building*?" She sounded terrified.

"No. It was until the most recent labs were installed. Now I'm certain it's been moved."

"Where?"

"That's exactly what I ... what *we* need to know. The sample might be elsewhere in the Fort, but to transport off-site calls for specialists."

"Like Rook Ltd."

"Precisely, and when a virus is stored successfully for two decades, you don't move it unless--"

"-Unless you suddenly want it for something besides storage."

He nodded. "The company might be on her list for other purposes; I hope it is, but having seen what these sanctioned murderers will do for mundane research, I need to know if they have plans to use virus samples. It could be vastly more important than stolen corpses or even someone hunting the homeless. We have to see if it's still here."

"And then we head for the car?"

"Then we head for the car."

Meanwhile, at the car.

Lieutenant Harrison Stevens dug through the glove compartment. He had already found the binder of Fort Morrison information, as shocking as that was. This small pile was a motherload of brazen plots and conspiracies judging by the titles (he didn't have time to read inside). Submarine attacks. Wild animal rampages. Bank heists. Dirigible crashes. A baffling number of threats involving clowns. Some desk jockeys in an intelligence office somewhere would fall out of their seats when they saw this. He would just look over a few more then carry them up to the Fort. A hundred analysts across the country could be combing through the pile by early next week.

As he searched, he placed a hand on the far grooves of the compartment. Something shifted. Curious, he moved his hand. The motion engaged an unseen mechanism. The back wall slid away, revealing a hidden recess with a much larger pile of files.

"Heh. Well, I'll be!"

The hidden chamber was deep, nearly out of reach. He idly took the stick of dynamite from his coat pocket and laid it in the glove compartment where it wouldn't bump or roll. Then he reached inside to seize a new stack of binders.

Little did he know, Batman had customized the Ford with one last precaution. When Catwoman had opened the glove compartment's secret chamber earlier, he had discreetly flipped a switch under the steering wheel to allow her. No one was here to deactivate it now.

Three seconds passed without the manual override being switched. The secrets were jeopardized. A small tape buried in the innards of the vehicle began to play over the radio. It was a low female voice, scratchy but unmistakable.

"Unauthorized access. These records will incinerate in five ... four ... three ..."

Lieutenant Stevens nearly jumped out of his seat at the first word. He tumbled through the door and scampered a healthy distance away. The other soldiers had already stepped far back.

"... two ... one."

There was a *pop* and a *hiss*. A tiny burst of sparks fell in the glove compartment. The papers swiftly grew to flame, lighting up the night.

Sergeant Franklin Thurbert, a thoughtful man, stared at the row of dynamite he had laid in the snow. One was missing. "Uh, sir?"

Lieutenant Stevens briefly glanced back at him, saw what his engineer was looking at, and absently patted his own pockets.

His mouth went slack with a sudden, grave realization.

...

It took two seconds for the stick of explosives inside the Ford's glove compartment to detonate. This was slightly longer than it took the squad to sprint into the trees (which caught most of the debris).

It an instant, the front third of the beige Ford Model 48 was a charred knot of steel.

In the next instant, the fire caught the row of dynamite laying nearby.

In the final instant, there was nothing of the car but slag and snow and ash.

Chapter 13

Dodge - An Exit Strategy

In his brief time on the streets, Batman had earned a long list of people who wanted him dead. This wasn't surprising: he had a gift for picking fights in a town where revenge fantasies were something of a cultural pastime. Even scum he hadn't met wanted to dig him a shallow grave on principle. But beyond the legions of lesser beasts who might *wish* to kill him, the sinister figure of the night who spent the most time actually *planning* to kill Batman was Batman.

Like a chess student, after long consideration on how to bring about the end of Batman, Batman learned to recognize Batman's endgames - situations that gave the illusion of mobility but stifled his methods and advantages so completely that all options led to defeat. For instance, if Batman was in a small, low building with thick walls and few exits, and if his opposition knew those exits and had the manpower and firepower to cover them indefinitely, and if said opposition tried to capture him alive before but had since been provoked by a bluff that defied the Geneva Protocol, that would be a sound example of an endgame.

As he pondered his options, Batman realized chess was a poor metaphor. There were no secrets in chess, but this game still had a hidden queen.

He glanced thoughtfully at Catwoman.

Then he blinked and looked again; she was stuffing packets of money into her satchel.

Catwoman sensed his disapproval beam and looked over. "Good news. I found a big envelope of cash in the bottom drawer." He frowned. For a guy shot at by the police every other week, he sure had a good cop-face. She tossed him a smile. "Think of it this way, handsome. If we let that lady keep the money, who knows what kind of evil business she'll use it for?" Catwoman struggled to close the latch

on hundreds of crisp greenbacks. "This is our - *rrrrhh* - moral obligation."

"So you intend to distribute that back to the taxpayers?"

"Sure. Boutique owners, dance halls, restauranters, the bank, my landlady - all taxpayers."

Batman resigned to pick his battles. They walked out of the office. She scanned the corridor. Twenty-six feet away through the front door, she heard voices and footsteps.

"You know how you sounded so confident a few minutes ago vis-à-vis our escape? What exactly did you have in mind?"

"That depends."

"On?"

"What's in the garage."

Four minutes later.

Colonel Abner Tanner crossed his arms and inspected his troops again. The Army was out of shape; peace and poverty did that to a country. The ranks were cluttered with too many old officers - paper-pushers, most of them. On the bright side, the draft was pumping fresh blood into the system. Wheels were turning the right direction. He just prayed it wasn't too late.

For his own men, Tanner reckoned he had done right. Eighteen troops surrounded the Brick. A wide encirclement at night wasn't the easiest small unit maneuver, but they had the building locked down in short order. Fifty more still patrolled the camp for errant enemy collaborators. It was a start. Waller had already trudged back to the war room. He couldn't fault the lady's intelligence (as often as he tried), but that was all she was: a schemer. When the talking was done and you had to stand in the snow and face the bullets, when you had to act, that took a soldier.

In fairness, they might only be facing one man, possibly one corpse. It wasn't his hardest mission.

For now, the operation waited on gas masks. He had already sent a runner to wake the quartermaster. If the Fort didn't have any, then he would sit another hour and move in regardless.

As he waited by the main entrance, he heard a large engine cough and sputter to life in the direction of the motor pool. Tanner gestured for half his squad to follow and jogged around the side of the building. The garage door was still shut, but a truck inside was revving up. Lieutenant Wilson and seven wary men stood arrayed in front of the tall metal door. The Colonel barked a few commands. The troops fanned out to flanking positions and leveled their rifles.

Twenty seconds passed. There was a loud click, and another motor began to loudly lift the door. As it rose, billows of acrid smoke rushed out. His men shuffled back, keeping their sights trained on the entrance. The Colonel peered vainly into the haze. The lights were off inside, and the shoulder-high veil of smoke blocked any illumination from the exterior lamps. They were blind.

Colonel Tanner was weighing the risks of sending in a scout when an engine inside revved fiercely. Tires squealed. There was a brief disturbance in the center of the haze, then a covered truck raced through, smoke pouring from its exposed engine block. The bulky six-wheeler barreled neatly between the flanking soldiers, skidded twenty yards on the muddy snow, and crashed to a stop with the help of a telegraph pole. The bent pole wavered for a chilly moment then fell over.

The men cautiously surrounded the idle truck. Though the engine had stopped, faint trails of smoke still leaked out. Between this and the dark, the cabin was utterly obscured.

The Colonel shouted, "You have seven seconds to exit the vehicle. Failure to comply may cause an acute case of lead poisoning. Six! ... Five! ... This is your final warning ... Four! ... Three! ..." He paused but saw no movement. "... Two! ... One! ..." Still no movement. "... Open fire!"

A salvo of rifles lit up the truck. The windshield and windows disintegrated in an instant. Every metal surface was peppered with sparks. A streak of holes stitched low across the material covering the bed. A tire deflated.

Colonel Tanner raised an arm. "Hold!"

The shooting stopped. The stench of saltpeter hung in the air. Now the truck was well and truly wrecked. Colonel Tanner signaled to Lieutenant Wilson who crept up and opened the back flap. Its cargo bed was empty. Wilson moved to the cabin and pulled open the door. There was no one inside, but he found a web of cords tied between the wheel, the stick shift, and the ignition. There was a brick on the gas pedal.

A minute ago.

In the art of stealth, students talked vision, but masters talked sound (a few deviants talked smell but rarely convinced anyone).

Batman and Catwoman understood sound intimately well. They knew that the noise of a large diesel engine with a missing hood completely masked the noise of a man stabbing through four inches of plaster ceiling, pine roof beam, asphalt shingles, and ice with the pry end of a lug wrench.

For the urban set, the skyline of a military camp from atop a single-story building was pretty underwhelming, but for Catwoman it was as beautiful as the view from any skyscraper. The arcs of the distant watchtowers cutting through the snow might as well have been the lights of Paris.

She was very, truly, exorbitantly glad to not be in that pit anymore. The pretentious literary corner of her mind suggested the word Conrad-esque. Feeling the chilled wind and sharp flakes against her face was more than joyous, it was purifying. She would have thrown her arms up into the air and stretched to Heaven except that she was still on a low roof surrounded by an Army platoon (at most).

If Batman felt any jubilation, he expressed it with a stoic work frown. He shrugged to loose some plaster chips from his shoulder and nodded.

Keeping a low crouch, they glided to the far corner of the roof and peered over the edge. Batman half-

expected the entire guard detail to have rushed to the noise, but the men were well-drilled. A few still kept their posts at the other walls. This segment of the building was still the least protected, being the furthest from any entrance. There was only two sentries in their path. They stood twenty feet away, looking perplexed towards the distant engine noises.

Privates Cooper and Lockerby stood twenty feet away from an empty stretch of wall, looking perplexed towards the distant engine noises.

Private Cooper rubbed his hands for warmth, having forgotten his gloves in the rush when Sarge mustered them out an hour ago.

"I still don't get it, we should be over there. That's where stuff's happening, right?"

Private Lockerby spit. "Feh. Who cares?"

"I care. Sure as shootin', nothing's gonna happen here. If there's a fight, we ought to go help!"

"What we ought'a do is follow orders, dummy."

"But-"

"Listen, use whatever cobwebbed bucket you have for a brain and think about it. They already have enough boys on the other side to start a baseball team. They have the Colonel with'em. They even have that huge lieutenant who follows Waller around. They can handle it on their own. And if they can't, do you really think a milk-baby like you is gonna make a difference? Save your skin and relax."

"I'm not a milk-baby."

"Just shut up and watch your corner."

Private Cooper turned and crossed his arms. "You're a milk-baby."

Suddenly, a shape rushed towards them in the dark. Private Lockerby pivoted and held out his light. "Hold up there!" He squinted in disbelief. It looked like a lady dressed in some sort of - he struggled for comparison - purple circus leotard? Maybe a classy burlesque outfit? As he came to grips with this, she sprinted between the two soldiers. He made a grab for her. "Hey!"

She ducked and Lockerby missed, but Private Cooper was a step quicker. He managed to catch the edge of her green cape. It untied with the effort. She stumbled and turned around.

Private Lockerby raised his rifle. "Hands up."

The woman meekly did so. Private Cooper dropped the cape and grinned. "Told you I wasn't a milk-baby."

With their backs turned, Batman had no trouble gliding up behind them. He knocked their heads together. *Kunnk*. The two soldiers collapsed.

Catwoman reached down and picked up her cape. "Huh. Sounded like coconuts."

He nodded sagely. "They always do."

They set off, speeding through the maze of tents and cabins. Catwoman stopped to check a corner. "You know, it was a little rude assuming I'd be okay with playing the bait. Why don't you be bait next time?"

He checked the other direction. "I don't do bait."

"Why?"

"People tend to shoot me on sight."

"Oh."

In the distance, they heard a tremendous volley of gunfire. Catwoman dived for cover. "I thought we had another minute!"

"They're done taking chances."

"Clearly. Where next?"

"The only other site in the Fort that could store virus cultures long-term is the old infirmary. Other side of the bridge."

They picked up the pace, ducking and weaving through the camp. After several corners, they came to a clearing with a squad of troops looking around. There was no quick detour that didn't leave them in the open. After a moment of observation, Catwoman nudged his arm and nodded above them. Batman looked up. They were hiding behind the leg of a water tower. He followed the path of her eyes, up the leg, along the rim, then a hop from a structural spar to the roof of a shower house on the other side of the clearing. It was a bold leap, a challenge even for his caliber.

They clambered to the top. The metal wavered but held their weight. Tip-toeing along the slush, they reached the short spar. Catwoman took a sprinting step and leaped. The wind caught her cape as she fell through the sky. With textbook smoothness, she landed with a roll on the distant roof. Batman idly thumbed the stitched wound in his side as he watched her land. The squad below was none the wiser. He brushed the snow from his lenses, tensed, then pushed off.

As his feet left the ground, a shock of nausea swept his system. His vision was taken by pins of light. His limbs half-numbed. From the far roof, Catwoman watched in horror as his form went slack. He should have tucked forward his trailing leg now, but instead it flailed in the breeze. A heartbeat later, Batman hit the side of the building like a sack of hams hitting the side of a building.

A minute ago.

The six men of Idaho Squad had been ordered to patrol the clearing in front of the East Shower House. It was a major intersection of the camp; any saboteurs hoping to make it to the bridge would likely come through. The squad wasn't happy. The alarms earlier had put everyone on edge, but they still seemed distant enough. This volley of gunfire coming from the Brick made things all too real. People were shooting at each other. This was war. And someone was waiting in the dark to hurt them.

Sergeant Getty tried to keep his restless boys in line. "I'm telling ya, any second now, they'll send up the all-clear. Rascal jus' got plugged by the Colonel. Threat's over. Jus' keep eyes on your post for a few more minutes."

Private Forez, suffering from paranoia and a runny nose, disagreed. "But Sarge, what if the Colonel didn't see all of them? We can't hardly see ten feet n'front of us now." He wiped his nose with his sleeve. "What if some spies are still hiding?"

"Boy, there ain't no more spies."

"Then what are we watching for?"

"Spies!"

"But-"

"Hush it. We're here to follow orders, I'm jus' saying as the voice o' wisdom an' experience that we'll be done soon. "

Private Trimble piped up. "I don't know Sarge. What if they's, uh ..."

"Spit it out son."

Trimble was the shifty-eyed, nervous sort who had to chase after his thoughts now and then. "This ... well, it, this feels like a Western."

"A Western?"

"Here we are in this fort here, see? We're the Army in a fort. Who always comes tip-toeing around? Apaches."

"You're worried 'bout Indians?"

"Could be Apaches, could be rustlers."

Forez added, "Or banditos."

The other soldiers muttered agreement. Trimble nodded. "Or banditos."

The Sargent was baffled. "What?"

"That's what always happens. They knew how to sneak up on you in the Westerns. Some varmint hides behind a barrel or a cactus or somesuch till Johnny Soldier walks on by. Then he get an arrow in the

back. Happens every time."

The other soldiers muttered agreement.

"Private, that's a load of phooey. Get that out of your head."

"I can't stop imagining it, Sarge - some sneaky spy sneaking past our lines. Jumping out the shadows right on our heads."

At that moment, Batman jumped out of the shadows and smacked into a wall.

There was silence in the group. The intruder on the ground twitched.

Sergeant Getty grunted smugly. "See there! I told you nobody was going to hit us in the back!"

Catwoman dropped out of the darkness and hit him in the back.

There was a myth among fans of the more exotic fighting styles that being small was an advantage, either from seeing the underdog win in too many works of fiction or by taking the notion of "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" too literally. Schools did boast that a diminutive practitioner could use leverage to limit the strength of a larger foe. This was true. The fallacy came in projecting that to being actively better than the larger foe, that the tall and hefty were waiting to be toppled like half-cut trees. This was stupid. Anatomy didn't scale like that. If it was true, wrestlers would always win against elephants.

In reality, when two fighters of equal skill met, size won. This was why combat sports had weight classes. This was also why Catwoman daring to confront six men was even more incredible than many would assume.

Batman, for all his dash and theatrics, was a kick-boxer at heart, a brawler made perfect. Catwoman's moves were not so simple; she couldn't afford to be. Her form was her own, it led itself to no obvious comparisons. What could be said? She was liquid. Her balance was sublime on every limb, and she moved between the four with ease. Her attacks revolved around the legs, literally and figuratively, but it would be faint praise to say she kicked. No, she used her feet with a versatility and surety that few had in their hands. Jabs, trips, clubs, feints, winches. Off-the-wall dropkicks. Handsprings into flying rubber guard. And once in range, the claws came out. Her hand speed was phenomenal. As every knife fighter knows, it's not power, it's proximity.

With all this flexibility and skill, Catwoman managed to dispose of two with sheer surprise and knocked out a third after a heated pummeling. But that left three standing, ready and closing in. Speed did only so much against six arms. She played keep-away, let them stumble in the snow. Then one soldier over-reached. In a wink, she ducked the hand and sprung forward, driving a knee into his cheekbone. As he fell sideways, she leapfrogged over his shoulder and planted both feet in the chin of the next soldier beside him.

But the third caught her hip. She twisted away and raked his face, but this one had the tenacity of a farm boy grappler. He pushed forward into a loose shoulder hold, using his deadweight to bring her to the muddy snow. She rolled out of the hold with ease, but her momentum was lost. They closed in. The soldier with the bruised jaw was already on her back, scrambling for a neck hold. She twisted and

rolled again to put him in a knee lock, but farm boy was up and getting near. She disengaged and stood, shoving away his next tackle and stepping in for a hip throw.

The throw was flawless, but no sooner had she let go then the stock of a rifle hit her in the small of her back. She cried out and fell to a knee. It was the sergeant, her first target, one she thought was out of the fight. He limped, and the gash across his forehead wasn't pretty, but he was standing again. In a rush, Catwoman leapt at him, but she was rebuffed. She tried to push past the rifle in her way, but her lower back burned, and her strength left her. The two other soldiers grabbed her. She struggled in a half-nelson, found herself briefly airborne, and crashed face-first into the slush. With every move, the pair only pinned tighter. She tried to claw out, but the rifle struck her arm.

Flinching in pain, Catwoman had a singular moment of clarity. Laying prone, she could see out of one eye (praying the other was only blinded by mud or sweat). Viewing the world sideways, she saw past the hostile bodies on top of her and into the dark haze beyond. Though the falling snow moved a sinister figure, a demon of the night.

It was over in five motions. Three were strikes into meat. The fourth bent a rifle barrel. The fifth made a wet snap.

Batman helped her up. They heard footsteps approaching and fled around the next wall. Both were keenly aware her slugfest could have been heard by half the camp. A few turns later brought them to a mechanic's shed to hide in.

He eyed her scuffed outfit. "You alright?"

"Yeah." She stretched out her arm gingerly and winced. "Thanks."

He half-nodded. "Thank you. How's your back?"

"Nearly as nice as my front."

They sat in silence for a moment.

Catwoman looked up. "You missed the jump." She said this in a tone like he had tripped over his shoelaces.

Batman's voice was hoarse and quiet. "When I moved, I nearly blacked out."

She scrutinized him. His body language was clinched to breaking. He radiated waves of passionate intensity, all of it a struggle to keep his expression neutral. Whatever that meant, she tread lightly.

"The drugs again?"

He nodded. "This hasn't happened before."

Catwoman grinned weakly. "I'd say there's a joke in that."

He was unamused. "The anesthetic shouldn't be symptomatic now. Could be trauma."

"What do you mean?"

"I was in a fight in the lab"

"The one where you were stabbed with a sword."

"Before I was cut, I took a few blows to the head."

"Someone punched you, then stabbed you."

"I was also thrown and hit a glass container with the base of my skull. That might be relevant."

"Someone punched you, then stabbed you, then threw you."

"It was an interesting encounter."

"You really need a hobby."

"I don't feel concussed, but if I am, head trauma affects medication."

"That's a mild way of putting it."

"Or my medic used an inappropriate drug. Or too much of one. Or some combination thereof."

"How do you feel now?"

"Fine, strangely. The bouts of nausea lasted seconds. But both triggered without warning. I have no idea when it-

They heard an octet of boots nearby and froze. The soldiers soon passed.

Catwoman rose and looked around. "Whatever comes, we'll deal with it. Let's go."

"We're near the edge of camp, but we'll never get to the bridge on foot. There's too much attention."

"What do you have in mind?"

He looked pointedly past her. Catwoman turned and saw he was focused on a Harley-Davidson motorcycle leaning against a work bench. She put her hands on her hips doubtfully. "Alright, but where's the second one?"

He stared at her evenly. She frowned. "What?"

"July ninth."

"July ni-" She paused in thought. "... Ohhhh, no. Not happening."

Five months ago.

It was a balmy night in Gotham City. The best jazz and swing bands in the world had just started their sets, and all the clubs were packed to the walls. Block parties flooded the streets in every neighborhood. Even the stars seemed to dance. There was a rhythm in the air.

Batman was busy hiding in a packing crate of lima beans. He didn't like lima beans.

He heard a familiar motion and burst out. Catwoman, catching her breath nearby, did a double take. She thought she had lost him three blocks ago on the balcony of the Mansfield Building. In truth, he let her pull ahead and raced around to hide in this riverside shipping depot. Scant yards away, he gave chase once more. She ran deftly up a wall and caught the edge of the southbound elevated railway. She pulled herself up, checking that the six centuries old porcelain Tonkinese of Katmandu was still safe in her satchel, then ran off. Following step for step, Batman chased her onto the tracks. This didn't make sense. There was nowhere to hide up here, just an open path, and Catwoman rarely tried to out-sprint him.

His confusion was answered a moment later as the northbound line rocketed past on the neighboring rail. If this was their first meeting, he would yell to warn her not to risk her life on a stunt, but now he knew better. Indeed, she hopped and caught the top edge of a passing train car with ease. In a blink, Catwoman was whisked in the opposite direction. He grimaced and followed suit. They hung on for a minute, buffeted by the wind. Then she pushed off and rolled down a loose market awning below, braking with her claws. By the time Batman saw her drop, it was too late to follow.

For a moment, it seemed like a lost cause. As cavalier as Catwoman made it look, finding a landing zone for an unscheduled train dismount was difficult. He couldn't just fall to the cement. The next safe point might be twenty blocks away. Then fortune struck: the southbound train sped by. In an arm-straining maneuver, Batman spun from one train to the other. When the awning came into view, he leapt off and - with considerably less grace than she showed - tumbled to the ground.

Of course, she was nowhere in sight. Only eight seconds had passed since she disappeared, but on the street that was a big head start. Still, he had his clues. He knew Catwoman tried almost as hard as he did to stay out of crowds, meaning she would climb something as soon as possible. He hadn't found her newest hideout yet, but he had a strong hunch it was close and east. Finally, he recently figured out that when Catwoman thought she was safe, she liked to take what he could only bewilderingly describe as "the scenic route", meaning he had to rank the nearby views aesthetically.

Two minutes later he found her trail. Four minutes later he caught sight of her. Three seconds after that she caught sight of him. They were climbing sideways on the stone cornices of a tunnel mouth just above one of Gotham's famous raised roads. Then fortune came his way again: Catwoman ran out of handholds. He carefully approached, trying to think of a way to restrain her while they were both clinging to a wall. Just when he was close enough to see her face, she hopped off again, this time landing in a crouch on the pillion of a slow motorcycle. The cycle wobbled a moment but kept on, soon turning out of sight.

The present day.

"Ohhhh, no. Not happening."

"You seemed pleased with yourself the first time."

"I made that guy crash about two seconds after he turned. You know that, right?"

Batman looked away in surprise. "No, actually. I had left."

"Yeah, I caused a three car pile-up. It took a week for the scrape on my elbow to heal. You make me do the dumbest things, do you know that?"

He scoffed. "I could say the same."

"It's a miracle I didn't knock the guy's cycle over as soon as I landed."

"But here you won't have to land."

"At least that bike had a backseat. On this little thing, I'd be standing with one foot on the edge your cushion and one on the rear fender. That's, what, four square inches of space? I might as well be standing on your shoulders. We could make a circus act."

"It's the only way."

"I could sit on your lap."

"Even if there was room, I couldn't see."

"I could call out the turns."

"No. Just balance and hold on. It's a rugged model. I'll be careful."

"Says the drugged guy with a sword wound. Can't we find a car?"

"Fort traffic has been shut down. All cars will be in locked motor pools if they're not being used to search for us. We're lucky the owner had to leave this cycle out in a hurry. You can see he was repairing that crack in the front suspension."

"Oh. Crack in the suspension. Lucky us."

They heard yelling and another stampede of footsteps nearby. Catwoman sighed and tightened her gloves. "Well, I never thought I'd die in so spectacular a fashion."

Batman unhooked the evidence briefcase from a latch on his belt and handed it to her. "Here. I can't drive with this."

"You want me to hold this."

"I'd appreciate it."

"So we're clear: not only am I standing on a strip of metal that couldn't fit a chihuahua, I'll have one less hand to hold on to you."

"Yes."

"You could jump around with it, but you can't sit with it."

"I can't sit on it; the latch is on my back."

Batman brushed the icicles off the frame of the Harley. He sat and started it up. The bike gave a few dead starts, but soon he had the engine letting out its trademark rumble.

"Get on. Please."

She stepped up and planted her feet as best she could; there was hardly room for her toes. She hugged the briefcase close with one arm and slung the other around Batman's neck.

As they eased into the path, Catwoman heard yelling behind them. A bullet whistled by her ear. She was about to turn and look when Batman gunned the throttle.

In the long list of miracles in Catwoman's life, not tumbling off the bike right then was an instant hall-of-famer.

They shot onto a main road. Ahead stood the rear entrance of the camp near where they had jumped in. It was a simple gap in the sandbags with a rolling gate across it. Orders said the infiltrators would be on foot, so the gate was open. And as the infiltrators would be on foot, the two guards assumed the approaching engine which they couldn't see through the snow was a friendly. By the time they knew better, Batman had up-shifted and raced through the gap along the packed slush of a recent tire track. More shots followed and a spotlight tried to keep pace, but in seconds they left the camp behind.

He slowed once they reached the woods and the path got rough. In a few minutes, they saw the bridge. One of the entrances to Fort Morrison was somewhere beyond the other side of this gorge. From here they could see the silhouettes of a few buildings on the other side too, but they couldn't see any soldiers. Batman mused that getting caught in the laboratory had at least one advantage: it gave the commanders a reason to call back the more distant patrols he might have run into here. With luck, it would be a few minutes before the camp could send another vehicle after them. By then, they'd be out of sight.

They were two-thirds of the way across the bridge when his luck ran out. The iron grille path would have offered little traction in perfect conditions. With a sheet of ice on it, it was a skating rink. As hard as he tried, he couldn't stop the cycle from fishtailing towards the guardrail. Finally, the rear tire tapped the rail. The bike leaned. Catwoman, already focusing on staying upright, let go of the briefcase, which fell over the edge. In a blink, she jumped after it. Even swifter still, he dived after her.

Batman hung motionless in the air, clutching the maintenance catwalk's edge with his left hand. His right hand gripped Catwoman's wrist. She swung below him, kicking vainly two hundred feet above the ground.

Incredibly, Catwoman held the suitcase tightly to her chest with her free arm.

Batman's upper body began to tremble with exertion. He inhaled deeply. "WHY...IN GOD'S NAME...DID YOU JUMP?"

Catwoman stared wide-eyed at the expanse of nothing below her. Her wrist felt like a bus had parked on it: Batman had the grip of a machine press. Given the circumstances, she found the crushing sensation oddly comforting. Catwoman raised her voice over the wind.

"WE NEEDED THE CASE."

Batman's shoulders began to twitch.

"SO YOU FOLLOW IT OVER A CLIFF?"

"I KNEW YOU'D CATCH ME."

He looked down in bewilderment. "WHY DID YOU ASSUME THAT?"

"YOU'RE BATMAN!"

He had no response to this, so he focused on their bigger concern. "I CAN'T DO A ONE-ARMED PULL-UP WHILE HOLDING SOMEONE."

"... REALLY?"

"NOT LEFT-HANDED."

"CAN YOU LIFT ME SO I CAN GRAB THE RAIL?"

"IF I BEND MY ARM FROM THIS ANGLE I MIGHT DROP YOU."

She could almost hear his ligaments stretch. The guy was strong, but he couldn't keep this up forever. It was her turn.

"I HAVE A PLAN! HOLD ON!"

Batman wanted to comment how stupidly unnecessary that instruction was, but his lungs hurt.

Catwoman deftly bit the briefcase handle, holding it firmly in her mouth. With that hand now free, she bucked upward and grabbed Batman's ankle. Bucking up again, she wrapped her elbow tightly around it, clinging to his boot.

Now marginally secure, she didn't need him to hold on to her arm. Catwoman shook the clasped arm to indicate this. If Batman got the message, he clearly didn't agree. Somehow, he squeezed even tighter, not trusting that she wouldn't fall. Typical hero. It was sweet in a way, but she had a job to do. Unable to speak with a case in her mouth, she had to find a way to convince him of her plan's finer points.

The seized arm had next to no circulation left, but she still gave a practiced hand flick to unsheathe her claws. From where he held her, her thumb was already pressed against his wrist. Using her scant leverage, Catwoman started to push her thumb inward.

Batman ignored this razor stabbing his flesh for an astonishing period of time, but after several seconds he let her go. She shook her clawed hand to get some feeling back, then reached up and grabbed cape fabric. Batman lifted his own bleeding hand and grasped the catwalk, now holding on with both. Seeing a stable 'ladder', Catwoman swiftly climbed up his cape and back and arms.

Finally standing on the Dark Knight's shoulders, she pulled herself once more onto the catwalk. Batman awkwardly followed her, his arms spent.

She spit out the suitcase.

Chapter 14

When It Snows, My Eyes Become Large

At the scrap heap formerly known as the Ford.

Lieutenant Harrison Stevens, Private Benjamin Greene, Private Elroy Jenkins, Corporal John Grimes, and Sergeant Franklin "Tubby Frank" Thurber were ... alive, for lack of a better term.

A simpleton might think that, since hot and cold were opposites, second-degree burns could be healed by snow. This was untrue. In fact, skin was meant to insulate, so burned flesh actually made issues like hypothermia and frostbite worse. On the other hand, the weather did numb the pain, and when burns covered a fair fraction of anatomical real estate, a man had to appreciate the little blessings in life. For example, much of Lieutenant Stevens' pants had melted into a waxy substance that straddled the line between clothing and plaster and had flash-glued to his butt and precious regions. However, the air had cooled the new substance almost instantly, which was great because the worst possible thing for a pair of pants to be was molten.

Tubby Frank had come through much better than the others, which was remarkable considering he was the slowest runner and the biggest target. When he dared open his eyes, the first thing he saw was a bent steering wheel gently smoking beside his head. He wiggled his fingers and his toes to make sure everything was attached, then slowly rose to his feet. The car was trash. There weren't many parts large enough to recognize. This was visible to him because a few pieces were still on fire. It helped that there was a great deal of new moon-glow around: the blast had stripped all trees in a six yard radius down to the trunk.

Frank wasn't a people person, even by engineer standards, but after a minute he decided he should probably see if anyone was dead. They were not, although Corporal Grimes was the only soldier willing to stand at the moment. Grimes carefully took off his radio and discovered that the backpack

had several long shards of glass stuck in it. He took this as a fortunate outcome since it meant they weren't stuck in him. Grimes toggled the device's transmitter and found he was lucky again - the radio still worked.

As Corporal Grimes tried to bend the antenna flat and signal camp, Sergeant Thurber pulled an apple out of his pocket and offered a bite. The Corporal waved it away. The Sergeant shrugged and ate some himself.

He mused as he chewed. "You know, in the hard-boiled detective stories, they always say that life is cheap."

Corporal Grimes was busy trying to hear through the static on the handset. "Huh?"

"That's a quote they always use. They say 'Oh, look at this ugly town, where justice ends at the barrel of a gun and life is cheap' or something to that effect."

"I've read a mystery or two. What of it?"

"What I want to know is, where ain't life cheap? They never say that."

"So you want to know where life is, what, expensive?"

"Well, valuable. Wherever it is, I'd like to move there."

Grimes put the handset down and shrugged. "Where ain't life cheap? I dunno. Switzerland? Connecticut, maybe?"

Thurber nodded. "I'd live in Connecticut."

Private Greene, laying on the ground beside them, pulled a twig out of his arm and groaned, "I'd live in Connecticut."

Grimes chuckled. "Who wouldn't?" There was a loud squawking from his radio. "Hold on guys, I got something."

The Fort Morrison bridge.

Batman stood still and quietly rode his bolts of pain. Four of the threaded stitches in his side had snapped, and he felt warm blood seep through the yellowed gauze. He had pulled a muscle in his shoulder. There was a new puncture wound in his wrist, courtesy of Catwoman. Then he had the dozen other aches and bruises accrued tonight that didn't bear mentioning. He lowered his chin, letting the wet snow slide from his cowl.

They stood before the crashed motorcycle, its front suspension fully broken. Catwoman carefully opened and closed her hand, trying to get the feeling back.

"I guess we're on foot."

He grunted.

They set off at a sprint. Catwoman quickly pulled ahead. She was typically a hair faster, but now the difference was stark. He moved with an uneven gait to keep the rest of his stitches from tearing, while she ran with the poise of an afternoon jog. He marveled at this. Obviously, she hadn't been wounded as deeply as him, thank God for that, but she ran like she hadn't been touched. She ran like she hadn't been clubbed in the back with a wooden rifle stock, like heavy hands hadn't wrenched her arm out and crushed her face in the mud. She ran like it was nothing, like she flew above it all.

Batman didn't share her peace of mind. He had seen her in pain. That memory and the realization of what it made him do burdened him more than all his other wounds combined.

The adult skeleton was made of two hundred and six bones. The methods to fracture them were similarly legion. Bone was superbly strong for its weight, but even the strongest was vulnerable to the force another human body could produce. Batman was a scholar of bodily mechanics and could, in theory, fracture all two hundred and six had he reason. If this theory were held to more realistic standards, Batman judged that he would only target a hundred or so. The rest of the skeleton would either be too challenging, like the pelvis, or too debilitating, like the vertebrae. But in practice, the number of bones Batman broke in any fight rounded to zero.

He didn't remember the day he decided this, but that was where he drew a line. There was nothing special about bones among the organs, bruises and scrapes could be worse, but fractures took far too long to mend and were rarely the only option. To resort to them would be an excess, and this he could not abide. Batman was human, and he knew humans were capable of anything in the heat of the moment if they didn't police their intentions. In his case, he hated injustice, and he would do what it took to stop injustice. But he couldn't hurt the unjust beyond that, because then he wouldn't be hating injustice, he would be hating people. Down that path he would lose his soul.

Of course, combat wasn't surgery (and even surgeons made mistakes), but it was a tactic he only knowingly resorted to in moments of gravest need. He certainly didn't need to break an arm to subdue an unwitting target from behind. Yet when he saw the leader of that squad assault Catwoman with the blunt end of a gun, knocking her to the ground, making her cry in pain, it was no decision at all. A dark part of him rationalized that a fractured humerus rarely needed surgery. The discomfort wouldn't be exceptional. Put it in a sling and it would be healed in a few months. He hadn't ruined a life. But the quorum of his conscience knew none of that mattered. He had broken that arm to punish. For an instant, he had been nothing but a beast.

Catwoman knew none of this. She could only tell that something was wrong.

He caught up to her at the end of the bridge. They moved off the road to a scattering of bushes, working their way towards the infirmary. At this slower pace, they could talk.

"Hey, you alright?"

Batman naturally swept past what was actually on his mind until he found an issue he felt was safe to share.

He grunted. "Pulled stitches climbing back on the bridge."

"Ouch. Sorry."

He dismissed her sympathy with a head-shrug.

Colonel Tanner's office, the makeshift "War Room".

In the field, Amanda Waller did what she wanted, and she had little regard for the procedures and niceties that tied down other civil servants. That said, she had her own brand of professionalism. One of her rules was to not sit in a person's chair. It didn't matter whether that person was the President or a junior mail sorter from Omaha. It didn't matter if no one would ever know. You did not sit in a person's chair.

So she deigned to deposit herself in one of the less-cushioned guest chairs and not the Colonel's own. A few mid-level officers hovered around her, each with a few aides and functionaries hovering around them, making the room somewhat crowded but mostly quiet. The officers whispered to each other and drew new movements on old maps. Most of the aides were posted at two-way radios, trading reports and orders with stations and mobile operators at every corner of the camp. Waller was content to sit and watch.

They had heard shots fired outside several minutes ago. A broadcast announced that a runaway truck from the Brick had been used for target practice and thereafter found empty. Then things quieted down. That is to say, quieted down in the office. The troops heard the shots as well, and as far as they knew the Nazis had parachuted in. It wasn't long before two guards at the Brick detail were discovered semi-conscious, claiming the last thing they remembered was catching a fleeing burlesque dancer. This wouldn't be the first wild sighting a man made after long hours in the snow, but two witnesses gave the story odd credibility.

While this was puzzled over, more shots were reported near the rear camp entrance. Responders found Idaho squad looking like they had been mauled by a gang of bears. The on-site radio operator could hardly keep pace with the claims: a huge caped monster had jumped into a wall, then some purple or green lady or maybe several ladies came down from the sky and started attacking. When a few troops managed to catch her, another intruder or possibly three crept up behind and struck them down with a heavy club - a wrench or a lead pipe perhaps. The only certain fact was that Sergeant Getty's arm was broken. The origin of the shooting was eventually sussed out: it wasn't Idaho squad or the interlopers; nearby Cooper squad had seen a strange pair leaving on a motorcycle and opened fire. Opinions varied on whether they hit anyone, but Watchtower C announced a motorcycle racing though the rear gate and into the forest.

Waller didn't bother asking what numbskull left the gate open. Transports had been ferrying troops around the Fort all night. They were only supposed to have one intruder, and their one intruder was supposed to be stuck in the Brick or walking out to face a wall of sentries. Leaving the gate open was the prudent move. It sickened her to say so, but this wasn't anyone's fault. It was simply that *every single factor was failing to make sense tonight*. Waller's frown deepened. Only minutes ago, she thought she had either one or two intruders trapped in the Brick and

possibly dead. Now she was dealing with between two and eight intruders neutralizing patrols at a whim and commandeering vehicles that were supposed to be under lock and key. At least two were outside the camp altogether.

Making an effort to keep her cool, she considered the facts. Unless the interlopers could sprout wings, they were still only on a motorbike. Fort Morrison sat in the middle of a mountain range, nine miles from the nearest gas station and fifteen from the nearest town. Every road outside the Fort (and many in it) was covered with five inches of snow. She still wasn't sure how they entered the Fort, but even if they somehow made it down the mountain, where could they go? She could plug in the phone and have every sheriff in three counties combing the woods before breakfast. The storm wouldn't hide them forever.

That would be a last resort, of course. It was always best to handle such things internally. Involving the military was a tiresome necessity; involving law enforcement would be a nightmare.

Though it was a comfort to know this farce would end soon enough, Amanda had seen far too many surprises to relax. She pondered how this "Batman" and his posse might slip through her net again. Then she remembered the car. That's how they had arrived. And the interlopers had no way of knowing the Army had found it. The team at the Ford hadn't sent an update in awhile, but last time they hinted at finding all sorts of wild things - hidden documents and strange tools. If the car was modified for snow, they could be in St. Louis by tomorrow morning.

She was about to order a status report when irony struck.

"SSzzzSSZZZZ - Uh, B - SSSsszzz - camp. Base Camp. Do you r - SSSss - over?"

Specialist Haverford picked up the radio. "This is Base Camp Alpha. Please identify."

"SSSSZZZZZZZZ - wit - zzzsszzz - help - szzs."

"You're fading out. Please identify. I say again, please identify."

"ZZzs - the best we c -SSzzSSS - signal's shot to H - Zsszzssssss."

"I say again, please identify. We can't hear you."

"ZZZZZ - I alm - ssssszzzZZZZ - requery. Think I got it. How's this? Can you hear this? Hello?"

"Reading you five by three. Please identify."

"This is Corporal John Grimes wi - SsSSzzzs - he Special Reconnaissance Team."

Amanda Waller dashed over and took the handset. "Corporal, this is Amanda Waller."

"Oh! Miss Waller. Um. Can - SSzzz - help you, ma'am?"

"Proceed with your report, soldier."

"Uh, wel - sSs - I guess what I'm trying to sa - ZZZzzzzss - um ..."

"Spit it out, Corporal."

"SSSSZSSzzSS - car blew up, ma'am. It's gone. The car's gone."

"Excuse me?!"

"We need medical assis - ZZssszzz - ight now, ma'am. We have two immobilized. I repeat, two immo - ZZzzzzzzss."

Amanda Waller snapped her fingers and pointed at Specialist Haverford. He nodded and picked up an open radio. "Help is on the way, Corporal, sit tight. If you have any way to signal the rescue team, use it."

"Already done, ma'am. Sergeant Thurber's started a fire."

"Good. Now, who destroyed the Ford? Have you been attacked?"

"Not exactly, ma'am. No one's attacked us. I'm not one to - SzzsSZzz - easier to explain in person."

"You're babbling, Corporal. What happened to the car?"

"ZZzzssssz - utenant Stevens might want to tell you himself."

"Then put him on!"

"He's one of the incapacitated, ma'am. He can talk, but mostly he's just crying."

"I'm getting impatient, Corporal Grimes. What happened down there?"

"There was a case of equipment in the trunk. All sorts of things."

"Yes, you informed me last time."

"Well, - SsssszzzZss - case was some dynamite."

"I see. And you triggered the trap."

"Not exactly, ma'am. It wasn't as a trap. There w - ZsszsSS - a few sticks of dynamite in the back. Like for storage."

"Then what? Did you light this dynamite?"

"No! I mean, no one - sSSss - to light it. The Lieutenant was carrying a stick when h - SSzSssZZzzZ - the glove compartment."

"... And?"

"How many people did you say worked at this Fort?"

"Around one hundred and seventy."

"Then why does this infirmary have more beds than a furniture store?"

"It used to be a field hospital for-"

"Let me guess, the Flu."

He nodded. "They kept it out of the main camp for a reason."

Catwoman looked around, uncomfortable. "Uh-huh."

A sudden beam of light swept past the windows. The pair crouched and whispered simultaneously, "Truck on the bridge."

Catwoman glanced over. "Maybe they'll stop to check the Harley."

He frowned doubtfully and locked the door behind them. They kept low and crossed to the other side. This led to a hallway of smaller examination rooms.

Catwoman asked, "Any idea where these samples might be?"

"If they're here, someone low. Secure. A basement. They won't be subtle."

"Good."

There was a distant hammering. Someone was trying to open the door.

She grimaced in disbelief. "There's no way those dolts had the chops to track us."

He looked annoyed. "They didn't. They're sweeping every building."

While they heard voices slowly spread through the rooms behind them, Batman and Catwoman slipped through the maze of paths until they found a stairwell. They descended in pitch darkness. Two floors down, there was another hallway. Here, they risked flashlights. Offices, offices, a corner, more offices, and then ...

A heavy door with a sign that read: *hazardous containment*.

The pair nodded to each other. Wordlessly, Catwoman started on the lock. It was leagues ahead of the other locks she had seen that night, though not ahead of her. She just needed time. They heard footsteps on the landing of the staircase. They clicked off their flashlights. Batman turned around. A lesser adventurer might beg her to hurry up. He merely waited, a calm man prepared for violence.

As the boots neared the corner, the lock clicked. Praying the hinge was smooth this time, she eased the door open. It was quiet as a feather. They slipped inside.

This room was cold. Deep, bitter, choking cold.

The footsteps approached and then stopped. There was silence. The rim of a lamp's light lit up the margin of the opening. A man in a helmet peaked his head inside. The pair pressed against the opposite corner of the door.

A breath.

Then the soldier shivered and shut the vault door behind them. The steps outside faded away.

They exhaled. Batman found a switch. The room was cramped like a walk-in closet. The air was a harsh clinical smell. The walls were metal. The bulb was dim. A sheen of frost covered every surface. There were shelves and boxes stored around them. He noticed a nigh-inaudible buzzing from the center. It was a freezer. Catwoman held back, wrapping her cape tightly around herself.

An old proverb said to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. Like many old proverbs, Batman agreed with half of it. He opened the lid.

Vials. Two dozen. No slots were empty. He lifted one and read the label: *Influenza*.

He lowered his head in the slightest gesture of relief. "It's here."

Catwoman shivered. "Great. Let's scram." She turned and paused. "There's no knob."

"Hmm?" He put the vial back and closed the freezer.

"This door has no knob. Look."

He went beside her and examined the shut door. Indeed, the inside had no knob or lever or any feature at all. It hardly had a seam.

Batman laid a hand on the door and closed his eyes as if in pain.

Catwoman elbowed his arm and chuckled half-heartedly. "Wow. Locked *inside* a vault. Don't I feel dumb." She smiled modestly and looked over at him.

He glanced sideways at her for a moment then closed his eyes again.

"Nothing? No reciprocal self-deprecation? No tiny share of empathy?"

His remained a statue.

She sighed, "Nope, no empathy from the Batman. Fine, get it over with."

"What?"

"Look, I don't carry explosives. Making noise and getting caught is your cup of tea, so use a flashy Bat-bomb and melt a hole in the ceiling."

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"We're not under another floor. This ceiling is well below thaw depth; at least twenty feet underground. That causes two problems. One: even a perfect cavity charge detonated upward would dislodge the tons of stone and soil above us, along with any masonry." They looked at the ceiling together. He frowned reproachfully, "And two: no, I don't carry enough explosives to displace twenty feet of stone." He thought a moment and added in a growl, "Yet."

Catwoman raised an intrigued eyebrow. She shivered again and clutched her arms to herself, trying to make it look casual. "What about the door? I'm not eager to meet the locals waiting on the other side when they hear it, but that seems to be our only option." She bit her lip in frustration, "If they just had the lock assembly on this side I would've cracked it like a First National safe and been out five minutes ago."

He gave her a deadpan look.

"I mean, *we* would have been out five minutes ago ... to do more good deeds in the world." Catwoman nodded enthusiastically. "Guiding old ladies across the street or saving orphans from bears."

"Or helping kittens caught in cellars."

There was silence. Catwoman cocked her head incredulously.

"Do you ... Did you just make a joke?"

"No."

She coughed. "I mean, it wasn't a great joke."

"I did not make a joke."

"It was a really bad joke but still, *meow* for effort."

Trying to change the subject, Batman leaned an ear to the door and tapped a knuckle on the metal. "The ceiling is just wooden studs covered in tin, but this door and the walls are sheeted with three-sixteenths inch mild steel." He considered this for a moment. "If we create a half-inch diameter hole in the steel here-" he pointed at a point on the door, "-we could reach a cord through and unlock the bolt. But puncturing that much steel requires about ... eight-point-nine force tons on impact."

Catwoman didn't have the energy to hide her shivering now. She spoke quietly. "Can we make eight-point-nine force-tons of impact?"

He said nothing.

The last hints of mirth fell from her face. "Batman?"

"I can, but a room this size," he paused, "We'd be caught in the blast."

She said nothing.

He offered an afterthought, "So would the freezer."

"Pff. Would that be so bad?"

His voice turned darker. "Depends on how carefully they clean it up." He glared at the door. "I also have a corrosive solution, but it's not quite enough. It would just soften the metal."

She stared quietly at the ground.

Finally, he looked at her. "It's well below freezing. How long will you be alright?"

Catwoman tried to laugh but it came out as a cough. "You do have a shred of sympathy."

He head-shrugged indifferently. "You operate outdoors in winter; I assume your ... outfit is moderately insulated?"

"Hey buster, my outfit is fine for what I do. Running around keeps a body warm. I don't hide in a trash heap for six hours a night."

"I'm prepared for-

"No wonder you aren't cold, wearing a hardware store wrapped under a circus tent like that. Extra fabric is extra weight, dear, which is why I'm the quick one," she shivered too hard to talk for a moment, "... and I've proven it all sixteen times I've seen you."

"We've met fourteen times."

"Exactly."

He thought for a minute. "September 4th, mezzanine of the Opal Hotel."

"And that makes fifteen, one to go." She brushed the ice crystals off a crate and sat down, hunching under the cape like a blanket. "Heh, this must feel right at home to you."

"Why is that?"

"Sorry, just another theory my friend had. She thinks you must be a deranged sociopath hiding in some dank basement as you wait for nightfall."

"You have an interesting choice in friends."

"It's a compelling argument. You don't seem the type to need creature comforts. Or human contact. Or, you know, light."

"But you don't think so."

"I'm an open-minded sort of gal. You could be a sociopath hiding in a clock tower. Maybe the cellars beneath an opera house."

"Flattering."

"Don't take it personally. Her main theory is that you're a ghost."

"Hm." Batman looked at the walls around him. "Closer than she knows."

"That was morbid." She patted the spot beside her. "Come on, tell me another joke."

"Why?"

Catwoman rolled her eyes, "Well, if we're going to die, we might as well go out doing something unbelievable."

He carefully sat, something he virtually never did in field, and winced slightly as his sword wound burned. "I don't tell jokes."

Her voice started to slur. "Please, everybody knows a joke. You're must have overheard one at some point. Don't be a ..." She paused in confusion. "A stick in the mud."

"No."

Of course, Bruce Life-o-the-party Wayne knew a hundred jokes canned and had the wit to play off any topic one could ask. But the strain of even admitting that to himself while in the cowl could force an embolism. There were things that Batman. Did. Not. Do.

Catwoman's shivers turned briefly into a spasm and she leaned forward. He saw her lips were turning pale. She laughed faintly. "F-f-fine, I'll start. And I have the perfect one for this place."

He said nothing. She took this as a request to continue. "There's this military base. A young soldier is standing guard one night, when out of a tent comes the old general walking his dog. The soldier salutes and tells the general that he has a nice dog. The general smiles and says 'Thank you, he's a Labrador' and the soldier says 'Yes, sir'. Then the general says 'Labradors are the best kind of dog' and the soldier says 'Yes, sir'. Then the general says 'I got him for my wife' and the soldier says 'Good trade, sir'."

Batman's expression didn't change a micron. He was busy looking at the faded color in her cheeks.

She shrugged. "Well, I thought it was funny."

Batman said nothing. She continued to shiver. He looked at his hands.

Catwoman stared at the floor. Her voice was very slow now, "Sure you don't know any? Seems

like we're going to be together for the rest of our lives. Might as well make the best of it."

He looked at her puzzled.

She rolled her eyes. "You know what I meant."

"I did think of a joke once."

She mock-gasped. "Really? Thought of it all on your own?"

He frowned. "It seemed funny. You may not think so."

"Oh, now I *have* to hear it."

"Fine." He spoke deliberately. "What do you call a criminal falling down a staircase?"

"What?"

"Condescending."

She looked at him blankly for about three seconds, then it landed.

"HA! Condescending. Con. Descending. Condescending." She wheezed a laugh, her eyelids fluttering. "That's a good one."

"You liked it?"

"Heh. Yeah, I really did."

She fell silent for a moment. Her breathing was shallow. He could feel his own senses numbing, but he wouldn't be as far gone as her for another hour. After all, resisting the elements was why capes were invented, and he was nearly twice her mass in muscle, but that was only part of it. The dangers of temperature were psychological and psychosomatic long before they were strictly physical - a pair of twins raised apart in Finland and Panama would attest to that. There was no such thing as a superpower, but there were methods to build a tolerance of the cold. A man could will himself warm for a time if he had the training, and she did not.

With her eyes heavy-lidded, Catwoman spoke again, "Now that we're having so much fun, do you want to see a movie sometime?" She sounded very tired. He decided to humor her.

"What do you have in mind?"

She shrugged, eyes now closed. "The Philadelphia Story is out in a week or two. Heard of it?"

"I've seen a poster."

"Just think, Cary Grant: the quintessential leading man. Then Jimmy Stewart, oh! Always a gem. And Hepburn, naturally. Katherine Hepburn. Isn't she beautiful? That lady is a national treasure."

He nodded. Her skin was nearly white. She had stopped shivering.

"It's going to be a laugh and a half. Should be grand." Catwoman started to nod forward, half-awake.

She was going into shock. He knew she gravely needed heat. Batman lifted a hand and moved it toward her shoulder. He frowned and stopped. Then he began to put an arm across her back, but paused and pulled it away before he touched her. He went to do it again, but again retreated. He sat in thought. Then he unfastened his cape and leaned over to gently wrap it around her shoulders.

Fed up with his indecision, she feebly grabbed his arm and pulled it around her.

Time passed.

He wasn't sure how much. Twenty seconds or ten minutes, it didn't seem to matter. A faint corner of his mind berated him for such ill-discipline. He was usually so good with time. The chill must be getting to him.

He had faced death before, usually quick, but a few just as slow. He didn't want to die. He still feared death, still felt despair and dread as keenly as anyone. But even so, this was an odd feeling, a strange way to go.

When the answer came, he didn't have energy left to hate himself. He still called himself an *imbecile, a child, a fraud saved by the dumb luck of inspiration*. He told himself that he deserved to fail. *Why hadn't he thought of it earlier?* A half-wit would have thought of it sooner. But there was no passion behind this. Self-loathing that mild was reflex.

He stood. Catwoman was asleep by this point. Thinking sluggishly, he tried to recall some classroom heuristics. Guesses, really. Eight-point-nine force tons. How much would it be reduced?

... Enough. It would have to be enough.

Trembling, he pulled a small glass container from his belt and poured a powder into it. Then he pressed the container opening against the door. The solution frothed violently and the point of contact started to smoke. Batman held his breath and turned away until it was done. He fanned the last fumes and put away the container. There was now a circular pockmark in the door, not quite a hole.

He settled himself, drawing his body low, balancing his frame. He moved his arms through a few poses, harnessing their flow, steadying his pulse. He inhaled and drew his shoulder back.

With a harsh bark, his muscles uncoiled. Every proper joint engaged. His body weight turned like a triphammer and launched the middle knuckle of a perfect fist through the steel.

Chapter 15

Doors Closing

Catwoman woke up in stages.

Still in the dark, her first sensation was pressure. There was a stifling weight across her chest and limbs. Each breath was a struggle.

Her second sensation was that she was breathing. That was nice.

After a cottony passage of time, her mind sputtered to life, cycling slowly through a few memories and thoughts. Cold. Fear. Disease. A pair of arms. A fight. A joke. Bodies on slabs. Anger. Snow. Watchtowers. Zorro.

Then she remembered the pain. Or the pain remembered her, since there was no question who was in charge. Her back was putty thrown under a tractor. From head to toe, her clammy skin itched like ant-bites. Her joints ached. There were sore spots on her forehead.

As she struggled to tolerate the pain, she heard the hissing. It was a low noise, the sibilating susurration of whispers and sighs. There was a crackling too, a subharmonic of gravel on foil.

She opened her eyes.

It was a small dark room. She couldn't move her arms. Batman was crouched a distance away, holding a table lamp over some device.

Catwoman tried to talk. It came out a hoarse cough. He moved to her side, placing the lamp nearby.

She tried again, "H- Hi." She offered an awkward half-smile with the side of her mouth that still worked.

He looked down impassively. "How do you feel?"

"I've had worse days." She tried to shrug and winced. "Admittedly, not many."

"Any numbness?"

"You know that pinprick feeling when your foot falls asleep?"

"Yes."

"I feel that in my ... everything."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Discomfort means the nerve endings are intact. It'll pass."

"Oh. Good." She took the opportunity to raise her head and look down. Her body was covered with a stack of six wool blankets. The weight was keeping her from moving. "Where did-"

"Supply closet. You were in shock."

"Right, then ... wait ... wait a second." Catwoman wiggled her fingers. "Did you take my gloves?"

"To check for frostbite."

"My ... hold on ... is that ... and my boots?"

"Frostbite and gangrene. Had to check your hands and feet for gangrene. They're-"

"Is privacy not a concept on your planet?"

"They're especially vulnerable."

"No, I get it."

"And they're fine."

"My feet are fine?"

"Your extremities are fine. No gangrene."

"Great. Thanks. Boo gangrene." She nodded thoughtfully. "So, uh, what happened?"

Fourteen minutes ago.

Batman settled himself, drawing his body low. He inhaled and pulled his shoulder back. With a harsh bark, his muscles uncoiled. Turning like a triphammer, he launched the middle knuckle of a perfect fist through the steel target. A circle of distended metal the size of a half dollar shot through the wooden body of the door like a cork from a bottle. A rain of splinters followed, dusting the hallway.

Batman fell to a knee, his face contorted in pain. "Aughghh."

The red haze passed. He took a few harsh breaths. *Probable fractures in the second and third metacarpals. Wrist sprain. Bruising. Swelling imminent.*

Gritting his teeth, he rose to his feet and knocked over a wire frame shelf. Boxes scattered to the floor. He stepped on the shelf and gripped a wire leg with his good hand. Batman strained upward and slowly pried the wire out. Then, bending it against his knee, he crimped the end into a hook. He fed the wire through the hole in the door, caught the handle, and twisted.

He didn't need to kick the door open, but he felt like it.

It wasn't easy pulling Catwoman over his shoulders with one arm, but she was lighter than most people he had to carry. Setting her briefly down outside, he bit his glove off. A shred of cape severed as a makeshift hand wrap. He pulled it tight with his teeth. It would hold for a few hours.

"So, uh, what happened?"

"I managed to open the door then lifted you out."

"How'd you do that?"

"Basic fireman's carry."

"No, I meant the door. How did you open it?"

"The corrosive agent was stronger than I expected."

"Nice. How long have I been, you know ..."

"Not long."

"So what now?" She tried to prop herself up on an elbow. "I think I can run if-"

He held out a hand. "Rest. When we make our move, I need you at your best. You dodged a bullet as it is."

"Heh heh. I think I already-"

He frowned. "A metaphorical bullet. Not in addition to the literal bullets earlier, obviously."

"Fine. I'll take it easy a little while, Doctor Batman. We're safe here?"

"We have time. The patrol's off our trail."

Eleven minutes ago.

Batman plodded in a gray fog. It wasn't difficult finding an office and placing Catwoman on the desk, but that was only half the battle. Now he had to find something warm. There was no hot water in the building. In fact, the infirmary hadn't housed the infirm in years; any provisions left behind would be an accident, or in his case, a miracle.

He was seconds away from breaking more furniture to start a fire when he found the supply closet. Its hallway was lit by a line of old-fashioned sconces, and he almost missed it. It was eminently *the* supply closet, not *a* supply closet, because every other closet in the building seemed to be empty.

Having stuffed as many coarse green hospital blankets under an arm as he could, Batman shuffled out the door, turned, and found himself face-to-face with Specialist Russell Pritchard.

Specialist Pritchard was tired. His feet hurt. He missed his fiancé, and his girlfriend, and his dog (though not in that order). The radio on his back chafed something fierce. This had to be his tenth time down this drafty hallway.

Then he ran into a huge, fearsome figure walking out of a closet with some stolen blankets. They saw each other. Pritchard gaped. "Hey!"

Batman threw the blankets in his face. Then he tucked an arm and shoulder-checked the soldier into the wall, breaking the sconce. The glass hit the ground. The soldier yelled and tried to paw the wool from his eyes. Batman seized his rifle and used it for a leg sweep. Specialist Pritchard, still yelling, tripped and swung with a blind haymaker on the way down. Batman took it to the ribs and stumbled back. Pritchard scrambled like a turtle to roll off his radio and launched at Batman's knees. They both tumbled.

Batman landed on his wrapped fist and cried out. The Specialist yelled even louder, no longer in fear but in bloodlust, throwing careless punches in a rage.

"DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM, SLIME? I'M THE LIGHTNING AND THE THUNDER! I'M RUSTY PRITCHARD! AND WHEN YOU ENTER THE HOUSE OF PRITCHARD, YOU SEAL YOUR DOOM!"

Batman groaned, partly from the pain in his ribs but mostly from the shtick. He ran into these every so often: walking delusions of grandeur who needed to vent an overactive pathos gland, bellowing oaths like he was their fated antagonist in life's grand opera. It wasn't the weirdest way he had seen strangers react to him, but it was high on the list.

"TASTE THE PAIN! DRINK IT DOWN!"

He took a few hits as he tried to clear his thoughts. As huge as the infirmary was, backup could only be moments away. He was injured, running blind, and he still had an ally incapacitated. If this grunt or his team managed to get a message out, the whole Fort would be on him in minutes. The radio would be a ... the radio!

A plan weaved itself together. Batman kept his arms up, staving off the blows as gently as possible. The longer this Pritchard talked, the better. He couldn't end things too quickly. Putting up modest resistance, Batman moved to the wall and stood up. The soldier kept up the attack. "I WILL BURN YOUR CROPS AND SALT YOUR FIELDS!" Batman ducked past a headbutt and caught the soldier in a rear bear hug. The soldier predictably threw his arms up and turned - a valid counter, but also half the motion of sliding out of his shoulder straps. "YOU CAN'T CATCH A FORCE OF NATURE!" Batman let go, grabbed the radio backpack, and yanked it off. He smacked the soldier in the nose with it. The man fell backwards and landed on a blanket. Batman dropped the radio, threw the other end of the blanket over the soldier like a roll of salami, and held him down with an elbow. Then with his free hand, Batman unspooled a length of rope from his utility belt, bit through the middle to separate a piece, and tied it one-handed around the blanket roll.

"MMmmmMmmmMM! YOU FIEND! YOU FIEND! COUNT YOUR HOURS, 'CAUSE I'M BRINGING THE HAMMER DOWN!" Batman scooped up the blanket-load and awkwardly tossed it into the closet. "THEN YOU'LL FEEL THE WRATH OF - URFF! ... OW! ... THAT WAS MY FUNNY BONE!"

There was a clatter of approaching footsteps. The other three members of the infirmary search team had heard Specialist Pritchard from the first bleating of his theatrical debut. They could have arrived in seconds had they known the way, but they had never been in the building before, the lighting was bad even by Great War standards, and the walls had a nasty echo. The three eventually reached the hallway of their trapped compatriot at nearly the same time. Weapons ready, they jogged toward the sound and saw that one of the lights was broken, there was a pile of blankets and a radio on the floor, and across from them was an open closet.

Holding out a light, they peered into the large supply closet.

They saw a loud hospital blanket trying to stand. "-SO WHEN I CATCH YOU, YOU - GEFF! - PLETH! PLETH! BLEEHGH! I THINK I ATE A THREAD!"

The soldiers rushed in to untie Specialist Pritchard. Batman, propped between the walls above the door, dropped silently down behind them, stepped out into the hall, closed the door, and bent the knob. There was a bookcase nearby. He quickly pushed it in front of the door and knocked it over so it was pinned against the far wall. A body bounced off the other side of the door, but his barricade held. After a few seconds of silence, there was a rifle shot and a new hole in the door. Then several more holes appeared. Then one of the shots ricocheted off a hinge and bounced inside the closet. No one was hit, but there were no more shots after that.

Catwoman closed her eyes and tried to relax.

"I'll take it easy a little while, Doctor Batman. We're safe here?"

"We have time. The patrol's off our trail."

She cracked open an eye. "You scared them away?"

"More or less."

"You're not worried they'll call for help?"

He held up a radio backpack. "I doubt it."

"I *knew* I heard something crackling when I woke up."

"I've been eavesdropping on broadcasts around camp."

"Naturally." She nodded sleepily. "You think you're the smartest person on Earth, don't you?"

"Of course not."

She looked up patiently and raised an eyebrow.

He faced her for a moment then looked away with a noise that wasn't quite a snort. "Some days."

"So. Any juicy news?"

"Unfortunately."

Seven minutes ago.

Batman smoothed down the blankets around her shoulders. Catwoman's breathing was steady, but her skin was still very pale. His lips drew tight. He had seen victims who didn't possess half her constitution pull through graver shocks than this, but such cases were always touch and go. It would have to suffice.

He pulled away the desk chair and collapsed on it, preparing to restitch his sword wound. Eyes closed, he proceeded in silence. Needle in. Needle out. Needle in. Needle out. Needle in. Needle out. Cut. Clean gauze. Tape. It burned, of course. The flesh along the edge of the cut had been rubbed raw from hours of movement, scabbing and pulling apart, and now two attempts at being sewn tight. It would have to do.

He left the dirty gauze on the floor. Anonymity was a beautiful ideal, but compromises had to be made. One he accepted long ago was blood. Scrubbing all trace of himself off the dirt and concrete of the world was impossible. He had to leave it in the field, and this was tolerable. Serology was a rare discipline. Even if a forensics expert found his plasma type, that left several thousand men of his stature in the city alone to sift through. The risk didn't keep him up at night.

He sat and rested, letting his breathing slow, centering his energy. He had just a little further, then he would be out of the woods. And when he slept, he would be too damaged to dream. He could tell. The prospect warmed him a tiny bit.

The radio hissed on. "SzzzsSSSZz - Dixie Squad, Dixie Squ -ZZzz - is Base Camp Alpha, come in Dixie Squad, over."

Batman picked up the handset and readied himself. He had only heard the man yelling, and his mimicry chops were badly out of practice. He toggled the receiver. The voice that left his mouth wasn't a perfect match for Specialist Russell Pritchard. The man's dog would know the difference, probably his fiancé too. But at least the timbre was spot on, and the pitch was decent. It was enough for radio.

"Uh, this is Specialist Pritchard. Hey there, Alpha, what can I do you for?"

"Cut - ZSSZsz - mall talk, Specialist. You're three minutes lat -SSzzss - your scheduled call-in. What's your malfunction?"

"Sorry Alpha. We've been real focused out here is all. Sarge didn't want to us makin' too much noise, you know? Thought he saw something a few minutes ago. Trying to keep our ears to the ground and all that."

"You know bet - FSsssssZssSsf - ot your call to make, Specialist! You and your team better shape up. Put the Sargent on the h -SSSzzzZZZs."

"Uh, negatory Alpha. The team's split. Sarge headed down to the basement level last I saw. I'm the only man at the entrance. Can't move without leaving our rear open." Batman took a deep breath. "If you maybe sent a few more boys this way, we wouldn't be so spread out."

"Gosh d - SSSzzzsszsssszzsz - Specialist! I told you before, we're spread thin everywhere. The infirmary is not our only priority. Hold your post and - SSzzszszZffZ - the moment your noncom shows his mug. And don't be late with your report next time! That's twenty-one minutes from now. Base Camp Alpha out."

Batman lowered the handset and exhaled. Alfred would flay him if he heard acting that bad. And that was a stupid bluff. Utterly unnecessary. He slid through on dumb luck. He hated relying on luck.

He took a knee and played with the radio, checking on Catwoman from time to time. With a little tweaking, he occasionally picked up reports from the private channels of other squads. Batman had a keen mental map of the Fort. With the help of the radio, he gradually added different units to his map as they announced their position and heading. Forming plans like other men breathed, he contemplated paths around them, like navigating rocks in a stream.

Then all his imagined paths collapsed.

"Szzzsszs - Attention! This is an open call for assistance to all Fort personnel. If - szzZZzzsz - ctical unit is near sector nine, I say again, if any tactical unit is near the south forest, Rescue Team Charlie needs immediate aide. We have - zsSsszs - tiple wounded and two of Charlie's stretchers broke. They need some extra hands."

Batman readied another voice. "Base Camp, this is-" He hissed into the receiver for a minute, "-near the eastern edge of sector nine. Moving with all speed towards Rescue Team Charlie. Little dark out here, Alpha. What am I looking for?"

"Uh, repeat that, soldier. Who is this?"

"This is-" Batman hissed into the receiver a little longer, "-under the command of-" More hissing, "-now how can I help?"

"You're breaking up - szzzffFzzzZzsss - eposition your antenna. We didn't think any of you off-Fort patrols had swung that far -zzzSSzzszs."

"We've been double-timing it, Base Camp."

"Then keep pushing west. You should see a bonfire any second now. All the trees are broken. Probably car parts on the ground. Can't miss it."

"On it, Alpha. What was that about a car?"

"The Special Reconna - ffzzfffff - eam went to a report of a car found in the woods. - SSSSSSsssSSS - an explosion. Now it's a wreck. Ask them when you get there."

"... You got it Alpha. Out."

Batman put down the radio. He suddenly felt very cold.

"Any juicy news?"

"Unfortunately."

Her grin fell a degree. "What happened?"

He only paused a moment. "The car's gone."

"Um. What?"

"The Ford. It's destroyed."

"How did-"

"I don't know what happened."

"But then-"

"I don't know."

"Then how are we getting out?"

"I ..." He grit his teeth. "Tell me again how you feel."

"I'm in the best shape of my life, handsome. Heck, I'm in the best shape of most people's lives."

"Catwoman."

She looked down and lifted her arms over the blankets. Her skin was still too pale. "I can run. Maybe another hour. Not looking forward to climbing down that cliff, but I'll do it." She laughed sadly until she coughed. "For all the good that would do."

"I have another plan."

"Great. What?"

He looked down, his voice slow with heavy conviction. "We need to share what we discovered here. The mission is everything."

"Not my usual philosophy, but sure. So what?"

"Even at our best, we couldn't make it out on foot. Fort Morrison has only a few vehicles that go through snow. There's a motor pool and airfield a quarter of a mile northeast of this infirmary towards the gate. You should be able to find a heavy truck inside. Ram the gate."

She eyed him for a moment. Her voice lowered. "I should find a truck?"

"I'll be-"

"You better not say what I think you're about to."

"Listen carefully. The briefcase is beside the door. I added a few items while you were asleep. Take it with you. Once you're back in Gotham," Batman paused, but there was no way around this, "I have a collaborator in the police. A detective. His address is on the case. It's imperative that he sees it in the next day and a half. That's all I ask."

"Yeah? And what about you?"

Batman stared evenly. "The Army knows we're on this side of the bridge. They've saturated all routes between us and the gate with sentries and patrols. I'll draw-"

"No."

"I'll draw them away. Use that opening to leave with the evidence."

"No! We'll make the run together. We can beat a few more patrols."

"No. We can't."

"What if," She mouthed silently in search of an idea, "What if we fly!"

"Excuse me?"

"You said there's an airfield. Airfields have aircraft. We skip the gate. I bet you know how to fly."

He did, technically. It was once, a commercial single engine. And it was five years ago. He shook his head.

"Not in this weather. Not in the dark. Even if they have a plane fueled in the hanger, it will be an old military model."

"So? A plane's a plane. It'll fly."

"You don't get it. In these conditions, it would be nothing more than a useless relic of a bygone age."

"Like badminton."

He gave a passionate nod. "Precisely."

"Fine, then what's your masterful plan once you make a scene? You always get through, after all."

He couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic. "I'll cross the bridge. Cause havoc to draw attention. Security will converge on me."

"Then?"

"Once you've had an opening, I'll escape."

"How?"

"We'll see."

"We'll see?"

"Get home. Rest. Reconvene tonight, same time and place."

"Come on, let's think about this a little." She noticed his right hand was clenched. That was strange, even by his standards. She strained to sit up and caught his arm. "What happened here?"

He fumed in frustration. The woman couldn't even stay on a topic she started. "Nothing."

"Not nothing. What?"

"Just an ache."

He tried to gently pull away, but she held fast and moved his arm closer to the light.

"Hold still."

"Catwoman, what are you doing?"

After some struggle, she wiggled his glove off. There was a tight wrap around his fist. The knuckles and wrist were badly swelled. Even in the dim, she couldn't miss the ugly discoloration. Catwoman recognized it as a classic boxer's injury, but a more hideous case than she'd ever seen.

She gaped. "What happened?"

"I told you earlier I opened the vault door with a chemical."

"And?"

He pulled away and fit his glove back on. "It took a little more than that."

A misbehaving corner of her mind whispered that this was the first time she had seen his hand. What old wounds did the rest of the costume hide? Batman had been Batman-ing at least a year; she knew he had been through worse than this. What was holding the man together? Stubbornness and scar tissue? No wonder he covered up like a photophobic Puritan.

"That looks bad. Maybe you should wait. We can find some ice for it."

He moved to the door. "Keep the radio on. They'll announce when I'm sighted and order the patrols back to the camp. When you hear that, go."

She called over his shoulder. "I heard you were bulletproof; I didn't know you were invulnerable to criticism!"

He didn't look back as he walked out.

Chapter 16

Compromising Positions

The Israel Putnam Military Academy. 1923.

Brigadier General Burt Waxman, one year retired from the Corps, had one star on his shoulder, one semester of teaching experience, one hundred students, one brandy since one o'clock, one lifetime mustache achievement award, one arm, and one mighty headache. As a rule, the sort of men who lose an arm in their autumn years don't let a headache interrupt their job. So he stood tall in front of his class, lecture pointer held stiffly down like a fencing instructor. He nodded at some equations on the chalkboard.

"This is the Lanchester Square Law of Force Concentration." He tapped the board with his pointer for emphasis. "Much like Euler's Formula and Pythagoras' Theorem, Lanchester's Power Laws are a wonderment of logical beauty that you all should know. Proposed in 1914 by Frederick William Lanchester, all recent models of combat dynamics are based on it. The algorithms posit that when two homogeneous forces meet - two infantry companies, two fighter squadrons, and so forth - the causality-causing power of the larger force is their size ratio between the two squared." He pointed to a second diagram. "What does that mean? Say two armies meet on the field of honor, with a hundred men and fifty men respectively. The larger force, being twice as large, has a size ratio of two. The square of two is four. Thus, the nature of modern weapons enables the larger force to be four times more attrition-causing."

He paused for breath then continued with a more aggressive bent. "Now! The less dim among you might be wondering why I'm extemporizing on the topic's fundamentals. What's got my focus all cattywampus? After all, were you not assigned a chapter on this last week? Did you not write four

pages on the matter to be deposited in my office this morning?"

The hundred cadets squirmed and said nothing. Besides their confusion, it was always awkward when a professor phrased a question in the negative.

General Waxman pressed on, "Surely you've all read Lanchester's Square Law. But by my count, there are one hundred students in this hall and only ninety-seven papers on my desk. How can this be? Well, it is the first project of the new term; maybe I should be permissive to your inability to follow instructions. Or here's a thought: perhaps three of you studied so masterfully over break that now you're too shrewd for poor Mr. Lanchester. Perhaps the three of you would like to stand and share the insights you were busy pulling from the great intellectual firmament instead of writing my dowdy assignment!" He drummed the desk with his fingers. It echoed in the stillness. "Hmm? Any offers? No? That's fine, that's fine. I wasn't born yesterday. If it were just those three, I would chalk it up to the distant relationship a few cadets always have with sobriety and call it an afternoon! But no, no, no, life is rarely so simple. For instance, seven of you found the strength of character to turn in a paper, but wrote less than three pages. Less than three pages! 'Well, Goodness' I said to myself, 'What budding Socrates in my class has taken the lesson to such a pinnacle of the art that he can summarize every rhetorical detail more briefly than I can?' Then I read the papers and was impressed even further. Not only did these seven sublime scholars manage to hide their brilliance from the Academy thus far, they hid their brilliance from this assignment. Accolades, gentlemen. Modesty is always very becoming. It really begs the question for the rest of you: has anyone plumbed the fathomless depths of your ignorance, or does it go on forever?"

The General paced some more, mulling a thought. Then he laid down his pointer and plucked a paper off the desk.

"But one submission above all takes the cake. One cadet went beyond the limits in the other direction and chose to write a *thirteen* page response. And this cadet used the opportunity not merely to explain the Law, but to criticize it!" He shook the paper. "What we have here is a thirteen page condemnation! I know what I'm about to ask is frowned upon, but I'm pretty sure I outrank the Dean, and I'd like to meet this author. If Cadet Nineteen has the spine, stand up. Stand and be recognized for your candor, son. Cadet Nineteen."

From the last row of the lecture hall, Amanda Waller hesitantly stood. "I'm Cadet Nineteen, sir."

There was silence. The General took a few slow steps forward and squinted up at her. "Well. I'll be."

Cadet Waller said nothing.

The General's voice took a wry tone. "Miss, I don't believe I saw you here last week."

Amanda coughed politely. "Due respect, sir, but I was here. Quietly."

The General harrumphed. The girl was on the shortish side, and the cadet sitting in front of her was quite large. "Hmm. More to the point, what are you doing here at all, young lady? And where'd you get that uniform? This is a military school; no colored folk are enrolled here. Certainly no young women"

There were uncomfortable chuckles from the class. Amanda stayed stiffly calm. "I'm here on a scholarship, General Waxman, the Blixby Merit Award. I'm enrolled with a special dispensation from

the, um," she faltered, "The review board chair."

"The chairman? That would have to mean- Missy, are you saying our fine senator signed off on this aberration?"

Amanda nodded. It was true. Senator Tennyson P. Dietrich of the great state of Illinois had approved her, but he wouldn't like her advertising the fact. The Senator was recently in hot water over allegations that he was involved with bootleggers. It wasn't much hassle for a man with his connections to dodge the Prohibition Unit, but the news had rattled a mighty hornet's nest with the voters. The Anti-Saloon League had picketed his house and office for weeks. Desperate to rebuild his power base, the Senator recognized that the easiest voting bloc to attract would be a certain poor district of Chicago. The residents had no reason to like him, but they had no reason to like his competition either, so he dug deep into the bucket of favors all senators kept for such occasions and commenced to schmooze.

One of those favors was a deciding vote on a state-wide scholarship to a local military college. After perusing local school records, he found a girl from the appropriate neighborhood who had finished school a few years ago with remarkable grades. She obviously didn't qualify - many constituents would be bothered by a girl attending college, military or not - but Senator Dietrich was desperate, and rules were made to be broken, or in his case, made to be remade. She wouldn't ever *join* the military, of course. The young thing would just have her well-publicized education then go off to start a family or be a teacher or a nun or some-such; he didn't care at that point. Once this all was arranged, the Senator announced her award to the district he wanted to woo, but made it clear there should be absolute silence on the topic even one block beyond.

If nothing else, Amanda found the politics behind the ordeal enlightening.

The General wasn't so entertained. "You really are a cadet."

"Yessir."

"Really."

"Yessir."

"Hrmp. And for this assignment, you wrote a thirteen page paper critiquing Lanchester, knowing that modern strategic models respect his principles."

"I respected him too, sir. I liked a lot of what he said, but I just thought there were, uh, a few points that might deserve, well, maybe more consideration." She finished weakly.

"More consideration! Hmmm. Well, why don't you share with the class a few criticisms you had with the work. They could use a lesson. 'Specially from a bright bulb like yourself."

The students who weren't already ogling turned her way. She felt the keen sensation of a hundred pairs of eyes. Amanda swallowed and tried not to wipe the sweat under her collar. "Well ..."

"Come now, Cadet. Don't keep us waiting."

"The equations of the Square Law make sense on their own, but I feel ... no, I think that they treat the

armies like, well, toy soldiers. Like chess."

The General tapped his chin. "Elaborate."

"If two forces are already on the battlefield, and they have their orders and the artillery is firing behind them, maybe events would proceed like Lanchester says."

"But?"

"But these Laws aren't just used to predict behavior on the battlefield, planners have taken them for granted from the very start of the logistical process, before the Army is even sent to the front."

"What does that matter, my dear? The soldiers will get there sooner or later. The officers need certain numbers for what to expect in order to chart their campaigns."

She held out her hands, pleading. "I'm sorry, but that ignores so much. The forces he describes aren't wind-up dolls. Maybe the boat is sabotaged. Someone slipped laxative in the food. Maybe the commander's been misled by an agent provocateur. Or bribed! All these moves and a hundred more could cause cracks in the strength of a combat unit far more than their cost would suggest. What if there's a fight in Congress and the soldiers don't know who to obey? Or-"

"Please, please!" The General winced and frowned. "This is too much. I admire a creative thinker, but we don't live in such a wild age. You're not dealing with a band of Renaissance mercenaries who deal with schemes behind every action. You future American leaders won't be facing the tricks of the Boers or some frontier aboriginals. No, the Great War has taught us that the modern army is a vast and well-crafted machine." He rapped the desk with his pointer. "Reliable." *RAP*. "Industrial." *RAP*. "And scientific! An efficient tool of state, vulnerable only to another mass force of similar design, far too large to feel the ripples of underhanded tactics. I'll concede no model is perfect, but one needn't bother addressing such things as agents when modern scale and modern precautions have made their impact ... outliers at best."

"But the Easter Rising-

"-Was throughly quashed."

"T.E. Lawrence led the Arabs to revolt against the Ottomans!"

"A modest coup against a third-rate power."

"Germany sent Lenin into Russia on a sealed train, and the armies of the Tzar collapsed. One train, sir."

"That's oversimplifying events, Miss. One lone man did not cause the fall of the House of Romanov. As strategists, we deal with thousands; one lone man can't be expected to change much of anything unless the winds of society already blow his way."

"Napoleon was one man."

"And a once-a-century genius."

"And it's a new century."

The students expected General Waxman to go beet red at the insubordinate tone - other professors would - but to their surprise his face was inscrutable. "Yes, it is a new century." He turned away. "Thank you for sharing, Cadet Nineteen. You may sit."

"Uh." Momentum cut off, Amanda Waller looked at her feet and awkwardly sat down. "Yessir."

The General began write on the board, their debate evidently forgotten, but after a minute he turned back. "Oh, and Cadet Nineteen?"

"Yessir?"

"See me after class."

Fort Morrison. 1940.

"Ma'am, it's been an hour since we've heard anything. I think they've left the Fort." Specialist Haverford was speaking to Amanda Waller from behind his silent radio.

She half-listened as she sipped her coffee. "No. Not yet. They crossed the bridge, which means they weren't heading for their car. And they had easier paths if their goal was just to leave on foot." She snorted with dry amusement. "Lord knows what they're after, but unless they hid a snow plow somewhere, they haven't left."

"If I may say so ma'am, you're giving these spies a lot of credit; more than a few of us think the pair's a few candles short of a cake."

She blew on her coffee. "You don't believe they're rational. You think they've just been reacting without a plan at all."

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am, we think so."

"Hmmm." She took another sip. "Maybe. I doubt it, though. I talked to one of them. Showed no nerves, no hesitation. He was smart. He might be wrong, and yes, he might be crazy, but the boy had purpose. He at least *thinks* he knows what he's doing. I can promise you that."

Batman had no idea what he was doing.

He was a planner, and in nine plans out of ten, the first goal was to not be seen. When he choose to make himself known, it was under painstakingly controlled conditions. Staging a scene was an art; every glimpse was choreographed. At a minimum, he had to know know the places of everyone in the scene, where he would enter, what he would do, and where he could leave in a hurry (preferably with a backup exit or three). If he wasn't sure where he was going, who would be there, what he would do, or how he would get out, he didn't go.

Except tonight, of course.

The Infirmary was a clearing in a forest like most of the Fort. A road curved away beyond sight to each side and the bridge lay ahead in the distance. No one else was here. Batman was confident from radio chatter that the nearest patrols were clustered near the entrance. It was his job to move them, preferably not so quickly that they caught up to him.

As he pondered this, he noticed there was a car parked at the front door: drab green with a white star on the side. He should have expected that: the soldiers he met inside had to arrive somehow. Batman frowned. The night's distractions were clawing him down. He had to focus.

Hot-wiring an ignition with one hand was difficult. Speeding to the bridge with the gas to the floor was easy.

On her fourteenth attempt, Catwoman finally managed to stand. She promptly fell to the floor.

"Ow."

She had lost count of her bruises, but that was probably another one. At least no one had seen her fall.

It took a minute for some semblance of feeling to return to her legs. She wasn't cold anymore; that was certainly a plus. Moving gingerly, she put on her boots and gloves. Batman had left them neatly beside her makeshift bed. She rolled her eyes. *Of course he did.* He probably arranged his pencils by lead content.

Speaking of things he arranged, the radio was mostly static. Every so often, a voice would come through to report that nothing was happening. She didn't recognize the people or the acronyms and started to worry whether the radio would actually help. On the other hand, she didn't have any better ideas.

Catwoman crawled to her feet and found a chair (blissfully not noticing the blood on the floor nearby). She closed her eyes, breathing deeply. Thieving was mostly a patience game, but physically speaking, it was better to have speed than endurance. If you had to exert yourself at all, it was to get out in a hurry. A shrewd thief looked for those rare opportunities to rest before that final burst.

The four men of Fox squad were posted at the end of the Fort Morrison bridge.

They were supposed to stand guard in a line. However, their sergeant decided to alter the plan when he recognized a grave tactical risk: it was chilly out. Instead, once their portable lights were set up, Fox squad cycled one man standing guard while the other three hid from the wind in their car.

The guard, a specialist, knocked on the car window. A corporal inside nudged the door open a crack. "What?"

"I heard a car start over there."

"What?"

"Over there!"

"What?"

"Over - Near the Infirmary."

"A what start?"

"A car!"

"A car?"

"Look, just turn off your engine."

"Right, you heard an engine."

"AURRR!" The specialist yanked the door to bleats of protest open and stuck his head in. "LISTEN! DID BASE CAMP ANNOUNCE THAT THE INFIRMARY TEAM WAS SUPPOSED TO BE HEADED OUR WAY?"

The troops inside traded glances. The corporal shrugged. "No."

The specialist slapped his chair. "THEN EVERYBODY OUT! MOVE!"

Already tuned to purr of the engine, Batman shifted into third the moment the gearbox allowed. When the Dark Knight made things look natural, it was usually after years of practice, but he really did have a way with cars. He debated whether to use the headlights. On the one hand, he would be more elusive in the dark. On the other hand, the lights would blind anyone in front of him, and he would be less likely to drive into a tree.

He kept them off.

Near the bridge, he spotted cones of light and the silhouette of another car blocking most of the entrance. As he sped closer, he saw forms moving out of the car. One of them raised a long shape at him.

POP! POP! POP!

A third of the windshield blew inward. Shards of glass bounced off his suit. He cut the wheel back and forth, fishtailing on the ice. The soldiers dived for cover. At the last moment his traction caught. Batman grinned. He hit the barrier on the side of the bridge at a slight angle, hopped onto two tires, and screeched past the obstructing vehicle. Sparks flew between the cars. Batman wobbled on two tires for another heartbeat then landed, bouncing on the suspension. His rear fender fell off. The car slid loose

for a moment, fighting, almost going into a spin, but he finally straightened out and burned rubber. In two seconds, the Dark Knight was out of sight.

"Ma'am, we're getting something."

"Yes?"

"Fox squad just saw one of our vehicles pass them on the bridge."

"Wasn't Fox squad supposed to be *prevent* anyone from crossing the bridge?"

"The squad says they blocked the lane and opened fire, but the hostile car, it ... um ... hold on ... I don't think I'm hearing the next part right."

Waller stared deadpan. "What did they say?"

"That the car ... it hit the side of the bridge and ... slid past them on the railing? I don't ... I ... no, I can't imagine how that's possible."

"Fortunately, the size of your imagination isn't critical here. You're telling me we have a vehicle heading towards the camp?"

"Sounds like it, ma'am. Fox squad says they're almost ready to pursue."

"Almost ready?"

"Their car was knocked aside in the event. They claim it's time-consuming to do a j-turn on ice when you're wedged sideways in a single lane."

"Uh-huh."

"Should I order our camp units to prepare?"

"Do that. And for the love of all things holy, make sure they close the gate this time."

"Yes, ma'am."

"ZBBBbbzzbbbbbZZzz-ilo! Cooper! Yankee! Bravo! Hector! Gold! Incoming! Incoming on the main L.M.L.C.L.L.M.L. Unidentified vehicle, I say again, Uni-bbbzZZZZZ ... ZsssssSSSSSSsszzszszss ... svvvvvvvvvvvVVvvvVVVvvvvvv ... vvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvv-ower watchtower, one, two, three. Tower A, Tower C at east-southeast, winds easterly, low angle, high caliber for the continu-vVVVVvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvv ... vvvvvvVvvvvvvvvvvvvvv ... vvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvv ... vvvvvvvvvvvvvv-oving salvo three to sector four on three-fourths t-vvvvvvvvVVvv- then exchange the downrange ranging hinge for the interior pivot fringe Cooper actual, copy?"

Catwoman sat with her knees hugged to her chest under a blanket. She squinted at the radio on the floor and pursed her lips.

"... What?"

An accelerant was a broad term for a substance that hastened a chemical reaction, especially fire.

Wood was not strictly an accelerant. It was a fuel. The two terms were commonly confused.

Some considered gasoline an accelerant, though of course it was also a fuel.

Acetone and turpentine were definitely accelerants. Batman kept a small bottle for just that purpose.

After crossing the bridge and entering the forest again, he finally turned on his headlights. There were many fallen and half-fallen trees around, no surprise given the storms in the region. After a minute, he finally spied a certain bent tree beside the road that served his intentions. Batman gunned the engine. The right half of the car ramped up the tree trunk, neatly flipping the vehicle on its side. It slid like this, crushing bushes and saplings, until it was caught sideways between several more trees.

Batman wished the car had seatbelts, but the crash left him more or less intact. He cut the engine and crawled out the broken windshield. With the car on its side, the gas tank was easily exposed. He used the wrench on his multi-tool to undo the gasket connecting the filler tube. Now the tank was loose and hung a few inches out from the chassis. Batman undid his cape and tied the ends to nearby branches, forming a makeshift bowl under the spout.

He pulled the tank as far down as it would go. It was like pouring a twenty pound pitcher stuck to a spring. Gasoline filled the cape. He pulled out his acetone and turpentine. Then he pulled out his lighter.

Batman knew every arson trick ever used and a few he invented. He rarely needed them in the field, but being a chemist kept him in practice. Another interesting fact about accelerants: they were especially useful when igniting imperfect fuels. For example: cold, wet timber.

"Still no news, Haverford?"

"No, ma'am. You'd think a car could easily make it to the camp by now. The bridge road only goes one way."

"Yes, I would think that. No news from Fox squad?"

"They've just set out, Miss Waller. Don't you worry. We'll pincer Fritz."

"Careful, Specialist. We don't know who our trespassers are."

"Of course, ma'am. I ... hold on a moment, I'm getting something. Yes. Yes, this is Alpha. Are you sure,

captain? Alright, keep an eye on it, sir."

"What is it?"

"Ma'am, the watchtowers have spotted a small forest fire."

"A forest fire."

"Yes, from the direction of road."

"In all this snow?"

"Apparently, ma'am."

"Hmmm. That is an interesting move."

"I don't mean to presume, but shouldn't we go put it out? Before it grows out of control?"

"Specialist, if we can see the flames from here, I'd say it's a tad too large for a bucket brigade."

"We're just going to let the blaze spread?"

"This camp is clear cut fifty yards from the treeline. Send a term to standby with water and shovels, certainly, but we shouldn't see embers this far out."

"If you say so, ma'am."

"Buck up, soldier. The fire's not the problem. It's the man who would set fire to a forest he's hiding in that concerns me."

Colonel Abner Tanner sat in the guardhouse at the east gate. When he heard at least a few and possibly all of the infiltrators had been seen leaving the camp in this direction, he ordered half his garrison to mount up. After finding the crashed motorcycle, they knew their quarry was on foot, and the race became a hunt. Normally, Tanner would concede that trying to catch someone beyond the bridge was a hefty challenge. Their targets weren't stuck on a plateau any longer. A fugitive could leave in any direction if they managed to hop the fence. However, the Colonel had brought enough men to cover the area twice over. Not even a mouse could slip through his lines now (flying or otherwise). It was only a matter of time.

The guardhouse was built with a watchtower, currently manned by a private whose name he didn't know. The boy screamed down at him, "Sir, it's a fire!"

After the night he'd had, the Colonel wouldn't be surprised by anything short of the Soviets flying in on technicolor dragons. He slowly rose to his feet and ambled towards the tower's ladder. "Where?"

The kid hastily watched the horizon with his binoculars. "Somewhere near camp, sir. I see all the smoke rising towards the sky!"

"Well, son, fires tend to do that."

"It's big, sir! Real big! Huge!"

Colonel Tanner climbed the ladder and took the binoculars. "Huh, a fire. Good call, Private. Keep watching. Let me know if it does anything different."

"Different, sir?"

"Different. Grows, shrinks, learns to dance. I don't know, fire things. Use your imagination, Private."

"Yes, sir."

The Colonel climbed down and took the microphone from his radio operator.

"Waller, you there?"

He heard some white noise that sounded suspiciously like a sigh. "This is Waller. How c-vvvvBbbbvv-elp you, Colonel?"

"I believe there's some news you ain't told me."

"Such as?"

"Well, it looks from here like my camp is on fire. And since this is my camp, that means I'm on fire. Don't you think a man deserves to know when he's on fire, Waller?"

"The situation is under control, Colonel. I was about to inform you that the interlop-bbzzbb-ve crossed the bridge again in one of our cars and lit a fire in the forest near the camp."

"You were about to inform me, sure. Figure you were."

"Colonel-"

"So they have one of our cars."

"My assistants are ascertaining which squad's vehicle was compromised as we speak."

"And they got through the bridge team."

"Yes, but Fox squad's unharmed."

"I should have been told immediately, Waller! But at least we know where they are. I can flank from this side, take em' down. I'll have my detachment moving out in three."

"Maintain position, Colonel Tanner! Your zo-ZZbbbzzZzz-ll top priority. The infiltrators may have split up, or t-vvvvvVVVvvvzv-more comrades than we've seen hiding in your neck of the woods. The fire is a distraction. Keep that exit sealed tight, understand?"

He scowled. "You best be right about this, Waller. If a worm gives you the slip because I wasn't there or any more of my men get hurt, then it's on your shoulders. Then you and I are gonna have friction. Tanner out."

He lowered the microphone and told the radio operator to open a general broadcast on all local channels. After a moment of dial tweaking, the Colonel received a thumbs up. He raised the microphone again.

"All squads in the Mobile Detachment, this is Colonel Tanner. Some of you may be seeing a fire from the direction of camp. You may be concerned, but I want to assure you that everything over there is being ably managed and is not our problem. Do not leave your posts. Keep running your patrols. Stay sharp towards your surroundings and ignore the fire. I say again, do not leave your posts; ignore the fire. That is all."

Catwoman fiddled with the radio's antenna. It was dented and bent in a few directions, like the wearer had rolled across the floor and maybe knocked into a wall five or six times, which again brought up the question of how exactly Batman had come to possess it. Electronics wasn't her strong suit, but the antenna's connection to the body of the radio seemed loose, and she concluded that this was probably bad.

As she held it up to her eye, the speaker squealed to life.

"zzBBbbBbbbvzz-he Mobile Detachment, this is Colonel Tanner. S-bbbbzzzzbvbbbbBBb-g a fire from the direction of camp-vvvvVVVVVvvvvv-t I want-zzz ... -you-vvzv-verything over there-VVVVvvvvvzzzZZZZZZZZZZvvvvzzZ-our problem. D-Fffvvvvv- leave your posts. Keep running-VVvvvvZzZzv-sharp towards-fvvffzzzzzz- ... -zzzVVzz-re the fire. I say agai-zzv- leave your posts; -fffv- re the fire. That is all.

Catwoman cringed and rubbed her ear. "Finally."

Batman stuck his head up for air. A whirl of snowflakes blew up his nose. He had found a small depression in the dirt where the slush was deeper for a few yards. By slipping between these deep sections, he kept most of his body concealed, even from the new floodlights.

Earlier that evening, Batman had suggested to Catwoman that if they waited two hours, they could cross the empty ground between the forest and the camp by crawling through the snow. She was skeptical. That was at least two hours ago. Now he knew he was correct, but given the circumstances of his return, that was cold comfort.

Mostly it was just cold.

Yet Batman was optimistic. He gave solid odds that the fire alone would draw away most of the patrols blocking Catwoman's escape. The glare also doubled as cover for his own movements. It was one of the easiest concealment tactics in the book: fire distracts everyone. You could put hours of effort into

being hard to see, or you could give the world something else to look at.

"Ma'am, we're finished our check. Milo, Hammer, and Dixie squads haven't reported in and aren't responding."

"Well, let's see ... Milo's scouting beyond the north face, so their reception might be out."

"And they didn't have a car."

Waller nodded. "Hammer is part of the outer ring of the Colonel's Detachment. They have a car, and they should easily hear us."

"Hammer's radio man is Private Docker."

"Ugggh."

Private Bobby Docker, grandnephew of General Clarence Docker, was one of the few compromises Waller had to make in fielding her roster. The kid wasn't cut out to use a radio; he wasn't cut out to use a spoon.

"Between you and me, Specialist, he probably forgot to turn it on. Let's call that a maybe. See if you can get any nearby teams to confirm them."

"Yes, ma'am. What about Dixie?"

"I can't think why Dixie would have a problem. Who was their radio man? Pratchett? Powell? Porter? Something with 'p'."

"Pritchard."

"Ah, yes. An odd duck, that one, but he could use his machine."

"And they would have parked closest to the bridge."

"Yes. They would have. Hmm. Fox didn't get through the fire, did they?"

"Fox? They did not, ma'am. They're standing by on the far edge of the woods."

"Have them check out the Infirmary."

"Yes, ma'am."

It took time to walk again. Until then, Catwoman leaned on the banister for support. One clumsy step at a time, she eased up the Infirmary staircases. The briefcase was heavy. The first few times she stumbled, Catwoman was tempted to leave it behind, but she didn't. It wasn't that she felt she owed him

anything, but professionals had standards, and she'd sooner jump off the roof than get this far with nothing to show for it. Halfway up, Catwoman swore she heard the faint noise of desperate yelling and banging on a door nearby, but this only convinced her to pick up the pace.

By the time she reached the entrance, most of the numbness was gone. She almost felt herself again. This was useful, because her first sight upon opening the door was a pair of headlight beams motoring in the direction. Too tired to be shocked, Catwoman's only thought upon seeing this was that radios were unreliable.

For an instant, the light crossed her. Sighted, the car swerved her way. Catwoman hastily stepped back and shut the door.

Seconds later, Fox squad barreled through the door, rifles at the ready. They swept around, eyes like hawks, riding the adrenaline.

Nothing.

It took a minute for the squad to notice that a window near the back had a woman-sized hole in it. By the time the soldiers ran out the entrance again, Catwoman had already sprinted into the trees.

Batman found it easier to leap inside the camp than he had the first time. Although he was cold and injured and now they were looking for him, half the Fort had been sent elsewhere. You could only post so many lookouts with half a crew. And most of them were positioned to block the road coming from the fire. He was more than happy to go around the side. Discovering a point on the perimeter where no one was looking for five seconds was easy.

Now he faced the difficult part: finding the nerve center. He crept until he found a sergeant, then trailed the sergeant until he found a lieutenant, then followed the lieutenant until he found a captain. Though they all wandered on their own tasks, Batman noticed each orbit brought him closer and closer to a larger furnished building with windows near the center of camp. It was the only one with lights on inside. Batman hid behind some bushes (there was trimmed shrubbery as well) and spied a sign: Office of the Commander. He crept further until he was under a window. The ice had frosted it nearly opaque, but he could hear just fine.

"News from Fox squad, ma'am! They just saw an individual trying to leave the Infirmary. The stranger gave them the slip, but they found fresh footsteps leading north into the woods"

"Well, tell them to pursue!"

"The squad already gave chase, ma'am. One stayed back to make the report. He's requesting backup to surround the woods."

"Get word to the Colonel. Tell him he can sic his hounds on this one, any means authorized. Then tell Fox's man to stay at the Infirmary in case this runner doubles back."

"On it, ma'am. I'll-"

Suddenly, an elbow broke through the window. As the six people inside jumped, two small glass jars were thrown through the hole. They bounced off a table and cracked on the ground. The odorous liquid inside splashed out and vaporized into heavy smoke.

Coughing, the occupants swiftly left the office.

Out in the waiting room, Amanda Waller found her bearings. "Kaath. Kooth. Hooth. Hwooo. Hooo. Haa." She glanced around to see if anyone had toxic symptoms. They seemed fine; it was merely smoke. "Haverford with me. Everyone else, go! Subdue the intruder!"

The soldiers drew their sidearms and hustled out. Specialist Haverford flanked the doorway to the office with his own weapon drawn. He tried to peer through the smoke. "Don't you want to keep a security detail, ma'am?"

"No, Specialist, if he wanted to hurt us, he'd have used a grenade."

"What if the spy's just waiting for us to split up."

"Please. He's already two buildings away. I sent them all because spreading the alarm on foot is a numbers game. They'll explain the noise to the door guard and move out. If we're lucky, we might cut him off before he hides again."

The Specialist glowered in frustration. "What could he possibly think he'd accomplish by alerting us and running off? That's not a strategy, that's a prank."

Amanda raised a speculative eyebrow and watched the smoke. "Good question. For such a risky stunt, he cut off communication for a meager interval and gave me cause to send out my planners and radio personnel. Why would an operative do that?"

"I still say he's a few cookies short of a-"

"Why would a *sane* operative do that?"

"Well, it sounds like a delaying tactic. He's making ruckus to buy time for some friends elsewhere."

"Let's presume you're correct. What would he do next?"

"Head for the hills."

"No. He's putting his skin on the line. Safety isn't his goal. What would he do next?"

"I guess he'd try to cause more ruckus."

"Oh?"

"Not here, though." He saw her look expectantly and pushed ahead. "Somewhere we don't expect him. Little strikes here and there to keep us tripping over ourselves. He's willing to play just out of reach

because that friend's goal is important to him. If he really is alone here, then, well, he knows he's caught; he's just rushing to hold out those few extra minutes."

For the first time ever, Specialist Haverford saw Amanda Waller smile. "You're not as dumb as you look, Specialist. After this you might be in line for a promotion."

"Um, uh, thank you, ma'am. Thank you very much."

"Don't gush, Mr. Haverford. I reward talent - nothing more, nothing less. As soon as you are able, relay the messages I spoke of to Colonel Tanner and Fox squad. Then inform Lieutenant Slade Wilson to come here on the double."

"Forgive me, ma'am, but are you sure you want to draw the Lieutenant away? He's managing a third of the camp by now."

"The camp will do as well as it will, Specialist. You may not feel it yet, but the night's over. The last few pieces are rolling to a stop. As for the Lieutenant, I may not need a security detail, but he has other uses, hard as that may be to believe, and I'll require them soon."

"Sure thing, ma'am."

They watched the smoke as it dispersed.

Up on the surveillance deck of Watchtower E, Private Thomas Ashley idly swung the spotlight across the frozen ground, but his eyes kept darting back to the fire. He had seen forest fires once or twice before in his native Arizona. They scared him, but it was fun to be scared. If anything, these flames looked all the more eerie in the snowfall.

He felt a presence behind him and turned, puzzled that he hadn't heard motion on the ladder. In a moment of shock, a dark form appeared over his shoulder and covered his mouth, pulling him away from the edge. Private Ashley flailed and tried to yell, but his sounds were utterly stifled. With irresistible force, the dark form shoved him to the deck and held him down by the jaw. When his vision stopped spinning, he saw the the bone-white eyes of a demonic mask, the mouth under it pulled tightly into a killer's thin line. The horizon of smoke behind him curled with menace. The Private noted that it wasn't always fun to be scared.

"Listen carefully. Are you listening?"

Private Ashley couldn't move his mouth but nodded a centimeter.

The huge man produced a small tube. **"This is dynamite. Once lit, you have seven seconds to climb down before it detonates. Understand?"**

Private Ashley nodded fiercely.

"Good, but I'll only let you go if you do a favor for me. Will you do a favor for me?"

More nodding.

"It's very simple. When you get down, tell everyone you met me and pass along this message. Tell them I didn't come alone. My legions are ready. We'll take these towers down one by one, and there's nothing you can do, and there's nowhere you can hide. And when every tower's gone to ash and the grounds are dark, we're coming. We're coming from every side, and we're hungry."

Private Ashley's eyes had grown wide. He stopped nodding.

"Repeat it!"

Catwoman leaned against a pine and tried to stretch out the kink in her shoulder. Whatever inner gush of will gave her the energy to race full sprint into the forest had sputtered out about seventy trees ago. She swore her ankles had personally deforested more small plants than the Hudson Bay Company. Batman had said to travel a quarter of a mile northeast; it didn't occur to her at the time to ask for a compass. She had no idea how long she had been jogging, or how fast, or whether she was traveling in a straight line. Her own pulse was giving her a headache.

Worst of all, she had no idea what caused the huge fire beyond the trees. If she could see it from here, it had to be massive up close.

What if he got ... with all that ... He wouldn't have, would he? What else could have happened? That's an awfully big fire! No, no. This is all part of some plan. The fire was ... deliberate. Sure, because Batman sets fires all the time. After all, he's the Well-lit Knight. Heh. Well-lit night, like with a fire, cause it's a pun. Heh.

She shook her head. Yes, it was frigid, but this was no time to daze off. Whatever was wrong with her, she could soak in a tub for the next decade to deal with it, but first she had to get out of here. And in the meantime, she had to assume Batman was fine. She didn't really have a reason, but Catwoman was dead-set on holding on to that hope, because she sure didn't have many others to buoy her at the moment.

She heard heavy panting and the crack of branches behind her. Catwoman tucked her head and set off again.

"Colonel Tanner, I got a message."

"What's the old goat want now?"

"It's not Miss Waller, sir. It's straight from Captain Roach at the camp gate."

"It's 'bout time they tied me into their little knitting group. What'd the Captain say?"

"It was hard to understand, but he said one of the infiltrators made it into camp. Miss Waller's o- I mean, your office was, um, smoke-bombed."

The Colonel rubbed his eyes. "Smoke-bombed."

"Yes, sir. And they broke a window."

"And they broke my window. Did they catch the perpetrator alive?"

"They didn't catch him at all. This was several minutes ago. Apparently, Miss Waller would have told you but, well, she couldn't use the radio."

"Uh-huh."

"On account of the smoke."

"Uh-huh."

"But the Captain wasn't calling for her sake. He says he wants your recommendation since Watchtower E just blew up."

"What?"

"There was an explosion and then an electrical fire started on the searchlight. The soldier there, Private Ashley, he got out just fine. He says he saw the infiltrator that did it."

"What else did he say?"

"He says the infiltrator told him that he was going to burn down all the towers, and that the infiltrator had an army of his own that's heading our way. And they're all, uh ..."

"What?"

"Cannibals."

"The infiltrator told him he had brought an army of cannibals?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Roach I trust him to keep a handle on affairs till I get there. Then tell Delaney he has command of the patrols here at the gate. I'm taking Farmer's platoon back with me. I'll sort this out myself."

"Yes, sir."

It took only minutes for the new orders to be arranged. Soon, Colonel Tanner was in the passenger's seat of a truck. His operator drove and managed the dash radio.

"Sir, Waller's finally on the line. She says to stay put."

"Oh, I heard her yelling just fine through your earpiece, soldier. Don't worry 'bout her. I've got bigger issues, like if we can make it through that fire."

"Yes, sir." His operator had a pensive look. "This is really it, isn't it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, this is really serious, sir. Are we starting a war?"

"Maybe. Don't think so, though. Not a war, but something serious. Something local. It's gonna be close and hot for awhile." He blew air through his teeth. "Guess we're having ourselves a stabcuff."

"I'm sorry sir, a ... stabcuff?"

"Heh, I suppose you wouldn't know. Years ago, I had occasion to visit a penitentiary in Arkansas. Bad crowd. Don't know if this is allowed anymore, but they had a custom there called a stubcuff. Y'see, it was decided in those days that your garden variety prison knife fight was too gentlemanly and methodical for the discerning Arkie inmate. Instead, when two lifers wanted to resolve a disagreement, or show off, or they were bored, they would borrow a set of handcuffs, cuff their left hands together, and then fight with a small blade held in their free hand, just an inch or so long. It went on until the loser cried 'uncle' or stopped moving. That's a stabcuff."

"Oh."

"It's a portmanteau of stabbing and handcuff."

"I think I gleaned that, sir."

"Anyway, the theory went that this offered a truer test of one's bravery, since there was no defensive maneuvering - you were just too close. I watched a few: no fatalities, surprisingly. Lots of cuts though. Lot of blood. Never before has the line between man and honey badger been so fleeting."

Suddenly, they saw a lady in a cape pop out of the woods, cross the road in the shine of their headlights, then rush into the woods on the other side.

"Should I stop here, sir?"

"Yes, I reckon you should."

Lieutenant Slade Wilson stepped into the Commander's Office, now completely clear of smoke. Amanda Waller glanced over and snapped her fingers for him to join her. "Took you long enough."

The Lieutenant gave a dry look. "I was dealing with a friendly fire incident. Gold squad thought they saw your little ghost run around a corner and opened up on Cooper squad. Cooper didn't take kindly to this and shot back. Visibility's about eight feet so none of them hit anything. I stepped in before they could try again. You're welcome."

"So it's bad out there?"

"They're tired. They're shook up, don't know what's going on. Most haven't slept in twenty hours."

"How are our sweeps."

"Frankly, if they do find anyone before morning, it'll be from sheer numbers and sheer luck."

"You really think so, Wilson?"

"Maybe I'm just a cynic."

"Maybe your nose is just sore."

"That's real funny, ma'am. What did you need me for?"

"On the slim chance this doesn't end soon, I need to get the message out for reinforcements. I can't spare any teams to fix the phones, so you and I are taking a trip into town."

"And you'd be getting yourself out of the line of fire."

"What's that supposed to mean, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing ma'am, your safety is always my priority."

"Very reassuring. I need to finish some matters here. Go to the warehouse and warm the truck up, Slade. I'll be with you in about ten minutes."

"Yes, ma'am."

Batman crawled to the edge of the roof and watched Lieutenant Wilson leave. They had a pair of grunts guarding the bushes now, but no one checked the roof. He waited a minute to give the Lieutenant some distance then climbed down and followed.

Catwoman could hear the distant, muted crunch of two dozen feet sweeping closer. She ran while her sinew burned and she felt nauseous, because every time she hesitated or caught her breath, she would hear boots gradually approach.

Nearly tripping down a small embankment, Catwoman realized she had exited the woods. There was a large paved clearing here with several buildings that looked like garages.

The motor pool!

A few soldiers loitered near the largest building in the middle distance. One of them turned in her direction and squinted, uncertain. She quickly rushed behind the wall of the nearest structure. It had a strange rounded roof, like half an oil drum knocked on its side.

For all its recent intrigue, Fort Morrison was a logistical depot: a quiet, out of the way site to keep warehouses. Much of the camp was covered with them, and most of the soldiers were warehouse staff. When Amanda Waller reorganized Fort Morrison to root out trespassers, the huge storage sector had been abandoned.

Lieutenant Slade Wilson strode briskly through the snow flurries towards a certain broad building in the center of the silent quarter. Row after row of huge structures rose beside him like gray cliffs in the night. The street here would comfortably fit six train cars abreast if the vast gap between the rows could be called that. No traffic had passed through this intersection in days, but the scent of engine grease and moldy wooden pallets was stuck in the air. The present emptiness was the exception; this was clearly a place of work.

Wilson found a side door, kicked a pile of snow to the side, and muscled it open. He closed it behind him. Batman followed twenty-one seconds later. The interior was dim, save for the pool of yellow light around the nearby loading bay wall and the faintest moonlight through the high windows. The floor was cracked cement. A dozen lines of shelves reached towards the ceiling, each half-filled with boxes and heavy machine parts. The Dark Knight shut the door as smoothly as he could. He slipped between crates and forklifts, stopping beside a partly-disassembled furnace and stepping around a stack of potatoes.

The Lieutenant was crouched beside the grille of a large truck, ratcheting a snowplow to the front. Batman crept up in a ghoulish pose, lifting his cape across his body just beneath his eyes. The last twelve paces were clear and illuminated. He took a step into the light.

The soldier spun, pointing a Thompson submachine gun at his chest from eleven paces. *Calm eyes. Superb rifleman's stance. Did he hear me at the door?*

Lieutenant Wilson barked, "**Kiss the dirt, Lugosi.**"

Batman rushed him. The Dark Knight would have usually covered the distance before the fourth word, but now he was sluggish, accelerating more like a bull than a raptor.

The Lieutenant didn't flinch. Set on his target's center of mass, he pulled the trigger.

The 1928 Thompson fired a hefty .45 caliber cartridge at 720 rounds per minute. Hollywood loved to show off its 50-round drum in the gangster pictures, but actual soldiers thought the drum was heavy and unreliable. They far preferred the 20-round box magazine. Lieutenant Wilson agreed. If he needed twenty-one bullets to kill something, it wasn't the gun's fault.

He could have emptied his magazine in two seconds. He didn't, of course. Lined down the sights, he fired twice to drop the intruder. Tap, tap. Bullseye.

The Batman hardly stumbled.

This was so unexpected that Wilson didn't react until his target reached seven paces. He fired another round. Batman still picked up speed. That wasn't supposed to happen.

At five paces, he fired a controlled four round burst. Batman was racing at a lumbering sprint and showed no effect.

Lieutenant Wilson was supremely quick-witted in a fight, but anyone will falter when their worldview breaks apart. In his case, the Lieutenant lived by the mantra that bullets solve problems. Sure, a wild man might stand up if you wing him with a lady's pistol, but a human that takes seven heavy rounds to the sternum WILL collapse - this was a gospel truth. And yet Batman kept coming.

So Wilson hesitated. Instead of dodging the obvious rush, he stood there and crushed the trigger until the very last moment. Batman crashed through this lance of automatic fire. He struck the Lieutenant like a locomotive, knocking him onto his back and sending the weapon flipping into the air.

Batman stumbled to a stop. He let go of his cape. Then he dropped the sixty pound steel furnace plate he gripped like a shield in his other hand. It hit the ground with a note like a gong. The surface was pockmarked with hot bullet dents. He paused to stretch his arm which was arthritically stiff. As anticipated, a soldier cocky enough to hunt alone and allowed such armaments had excellent aim – right to his center of mass.

But Batman wasn't immune to surprises either. He assumed that anyone clobbered at a run with a metal battering ram could be safely ignored for a minute. But when he glanced down, the soldier was already rising backwards. This Lieutenant, not half as disoriented as he should have been, deftly unholstered his sidearm, the matte silver 1911.

But no one outdrew Batman twice. In a blink, a batarang struck the gun askew. Another sunk into the meat of his collarbone, and another flew towards his chin, but the Lieutenant caught that one out of the air and dropped it.

That was rare.

Batman followed behind his projectile with a flying knee. The soldier was still getting his balance but put up an admirable block, backpeddling with the momentum. He steadied himself and put up an arm in time to cushion a backfist followed by a raking chop that stripped the Colt out of his hand. Pressing the offensive, Batman faked a jab and stomped the side of the Lieutenant's knee. Wilson tripped sideways. Batman finished with an elbow strike to the jaw.

A thin line of blood flew from the Lieutenant's mouth. He whiplashed from the impact, but in a heartbeat Batman knew the dynamics were wrong. The soldier kept spinning, slicing at his thigh on the way around with a combat stiletto. The soldier's cheek had a deep gash, but he seemed unfazed. Batman weaved backwards, dodging a few stabs. One nicked low on his stomach. These continued in a whip-quick chain of attacks until one thrust was too ambitious. Batman seized the outstretched wrist and rotated into a one-armed hip throw.

But in a marvel of balance and reflex, Wilson twisted with the throw and landed on his feet. He countered and pulled Batman's arm towards him for a leg reap. Batman moved in the predictable diagonal to avoid the reap and fell into the stiletto held at his bicep. By luck the blade bounced off the tip of his forearm guard. Batman didn't waste this opportunity, disarming the knife and sending a volley of chops and elbows at his opponent's head and neck.

Lieutenant Wilson ducked and stumbled backwards, coughing from a blow to the throat. He grabbed a

grenade from his coat, thumbed the pin, and went to drop it. Batman dived forward and held the grenade's fuse lever closed. Wilson let go and, as Batman was holding the grenade, drew another knife and stabbed him in the side of the cowl, just below the ear.

The cowl was no flimsy cloth. Made of the rugged, ex-convict older cousin of armor-grade leather, its material didn't puncture, but the blow still had all the force of being struck with a metal spike. Batman fell. The Lieutenant ripped the grenade away and reinserted the pin.

Chapter 17

The Road Home

Private Hershey, Private Denunzio, and their Sarge stood in front of Garage Bay B at the east Motor Pool, smoking their ninth cigarette of the night.

The Sarge spit. "Snow's gettin' worse."

Private Hershey nodded. "Yep."

Private Denunzio nodded. "Yep."

They looked around dully. Hershey thought he saw a shape move near the tree-line. He blew some smoke to the side and peered forward. "Hey, Sarge, I think I see something."

Sarge shook his head. "No, you don't."

Private Hershey took a few steps forward and craned his neck. The shape slipped out of sight. "I think I do. It's movement over there, just came out of the woods."

Sarge put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back. "No. You don't. You've had six false alarms, Hershey. I'm not checking out a seventh."

"But-"

"Face it, son. You got to accept that there is such a thing as too much coffee."

"Never."

Sarge sighed and took another drag. He exhaled. "Fine by me, but we're not checking out any more of your hunches."

"So I'm just supposed to stand here."

"Yep. You ain't paid by the hour."

Private Denunzio elbowed Private Hershey in the side, "Hey, if you have all this pep, what do you say to another round of gin rummy? Three bucks on the line, eh? Three bucks?"

Hershey shook his head. "No thanks, buddy."

"Come on."

"I'd rather not."

"You're just worried I'll take you down again like the Tacoma Narrows."

Private Hershey gasped. "Whoa, too soon."

Sarge frowned and smacked him upside the head. "Too soon!"

Denunzio shrugged incredulously. "Too soon?"

Hershey crossed his arms. "Too soon."

"Too soon."

"Too soon?"

"Too soon!"

Sarge wagged a disproving finger "Yeah, that was a callous thing to say."

"It's been over a month. It was just a bridge."

Sarge spit. "A landmark!"

"No one even got hurt."

"False. A dog died on that bridge, Private. A Cocker Spaniel named Tubby."

Hershey reproached, "Yeah, you're making fun of a dead dog. For shame."

"Excuse me?"

As they spoke, a large squad hustled out of the woods, panting. The trio jogged over. They saw one of the newcomers was the Colonel and quickly hid their cigarettes.

Sarge nodded respectfully. "What's the news, sir?"

Colonel Tanner addressed them. "An infiltrator just ran this way. Have you seen anything?"

The three looked at each other. Private Hershey frowned. Sarge pretended he hadn't noticed. "We don't think so, Colonel. Of course, it's hard to see anything tonight."

"We can't let that hold us back now, Sergeant. We're going to sweep the motor pool, and more help is on the way. There's a woman here. Our aim is to flush her out. Let's move."

Catwoman quickly found the back door of the supposed garage, but her numbed fingers kept shaking as she tried to pick the lock. Finding herself beaten by a simple door because her body betrayed her was a very special hell for Catwoman. She heard troops marching in the near distance, hunting through other buildings and circling the woods in their cars. It was only a matter of time. She closed her eyes and continued, determined to work the lock out of principle until they dragged her away.

A stuck tumbler shifted. The lock fell open. Catwoman, who had curled her body against the door (to hide from the wind as much as anything), was already pressing against the handle and fell inward. She nearly bounced off the ground in a scramble to close it behind her. The marginally-warmer air inside hit her like a wave. She sat against the door and took a few deep breaths.

There were voices approaching outside. Catwoman pulled out her flashlight and spun around. She was inside what seemed like a cave of old crates. The nearest was as tall as she was and weighted at least a hundred pounds. Hunching down like a center on the line of scrimmage, she threw her shoulder into the crate. It shifted an inch. She put her back against it, stretching out her legs to screech the container across the floor.

The voices muttered loudly and raced to the door. Someone on the other side tried the handle, but the crate was already wedged in front of the frame. They slammed the door against it a few times, and it started to shift. Holding her flashlight in her teeth, Catwoman raced to find smaller boxes weigh the crate down. After a minute, she had moved a walk-in closet's worth of storage. The door wouldn't budge for anything short of a hippo, and Catwoman was pretty sure the Army didn't have hippos.

Having earned her stalemate, Catwoman brushed the snow off her sleeves and legs. She found a gap in the crates and slipped through. Navigating by the narrow beam of her flashlight, she moved aimlessly through a maze of boxes and tarps, hoping they didn't fill the entire room. At some point she knocked into the arm of a record player. A scratchy yet ethereal boy's choir started to sing. After a few bars, she even recognized the piece. It was Handel's Messiah nearing the close of Act Two: the Hallelujah Chorus.

"- *Omnipotent reigneth.*
Hallelujah! Hallelujah! -"

Catwoman gave a rueful grin. She couldn't imagine a less appropriate mood for the evening. Fighting

through the jungle of obstacles along the wall, she came out of the pile next to a huge overhead door. Fortunately, this metal door seemed firmly locked to a latch on the floor inside. She idly wondered what sort of tanks or buses they intended to fit in this garage to justify a door that large.

*"- of His Christ;
And He shall reign for ever and ever,
For ever and ever, -"*

Not that it mattered. Even in a bus, the Army would chase her down before she went a mile. She remembered how they shot up the truck at the Brick. And she certainly couldn't stay here forever. The soldiers would think of a way to break in sooner or later. As Catwoman considered the feasibility of going through the ceiling again, she found a light-switch.

*"- King of kings, and Lord of lords,
And He shall reign,
And He shall reign forever and -"*

The room was larger than she first assumed. The corrugated tin roof curved upward towards the center like a long igloo.

*"- King of kings! and Lord of lords!
Hallelujah! -"*

As she slowly turned, she realized the piles of crates were all to one side. The room was large and most of the space was open

Then she saw salvation.

"- Hallelujah! Hallelujah! -"

This wasn't a garage; it was a hanger. Catwoman smiled and shed a single tear.

"- Hallelujah! Hallelujah! -"

Parked in front of her was an airplane.

"... Hallelujah!"

"You thought I'd waste both of us?" Lieutenant Slade Wilson slid the grenade into his coat and crouched down. He took a knee, putting his weight on Batman's right fist. Batman couldn't hold back a guttural moan of pain. A halo of dark spots swam through his vision. He struggled to stay lucid. Wilson calmly pried the batarang out of his shoulder and flicked it aside. **"You weren't using this hand at all. What happened to it?"**

One side of Batman's face was lost in a deep puffy ache. He hazily wondered if the knife had chipped a bone. The Lieutenant now held the serrated knife edge to Batman's throat, right under the chin where the cowl ended. **"It's not personal interest, by the way, just professional curiosity. Got to know the**

foe. He hooked his free arm under Batman's shoulder and lifted him against the door of the truck, face to the glass. Batman steadied his weight over his feet and stretched his jaw side-to-side, testing if anything was broken. The Lieutenant held the blade tight against his skin. **"Now we take a walk. Nothing to say in the meantime?"**

Batman swallowed, feeling the prick of the serrations on his trachea. He spoke, **"You should know one thing."**

"What?"

"Femoral bleed-outs are a killer."

Lieutenant Wilson glanced down: Batman's arm was tucked inward, and he held another batarang pressing point-first against the top of Wilson's thigh. The Lieutenant reacted, turning away and wrenching Batman with him. The small motion was enough gap for Batman to drop the batarang and slip his good hand under the knife. Wilson dug the weapon inward, trying to cut through the gauntlet and reach the throat. Batman held the blade, feeling it eat into his hand. Drops of blood slid through the fraying material.

The soldier was tremendously strong. They struggled in stalemate, then the Lieutenant slipped his other arm out and punched Batman in his stitches.

The Dark Knight grimaced and nearly let go of the knife. The Lieutenant punched again, a deep blow below the ribs where the laceration made his whole flank sore. Batman tried to block the next punch with his wrapped hand, but it was too weak; the soldier grabbed it away and punched again. Batman was almost blind with pain. He set his teeth and strained to keep his footing. Another rocking punch. Batman's grip wavered, and two fingers slipped off the knife.

Batman took a deep breath and yelled, launching his broken fist up over his shoulder and into the Lieutenant's broken nose.

The Lieutenant's whole body twitched in shock. He made a noise between a scream and a gurgle, and his next stitch-punch missed. Meanwhile, Batman's fist was on fire; bee strings ran along the inflamed joints and tendons. Batman took a shaky breath and punched again. The Lieutenant tried to duck away but was too close. With the uncanny aim of a prizefighter, Batman landed another one on his bandaged snout.

For the first time, the Lieutenant's knife-hand shook. He tucked his head and tried another gut-punch. Batman retaliated again, missing the nose but hitting the soft bone under the eye. This trade of punishing strikes continued for three more rounds, each more disabling than the last. Finally, Batman landed one last blind hammer-fist to the nose, forcing Lieutenant Wilson to stumble back. In a blink, Batman turned the knife away and slipped out.

They faced each other, nearly blind, lungs heaving like bellows. Batman's hands were slabs of agony; his limbs were lead, yet he had only a second before the giant caught himself. The Dark Knight shuffled forward and delivered a headbutt into Lieutenant Wilson's face. They both rocked from the impact, but Batman's will to break the face of crime knew no bounds. He shrugged away the weakened hands trying to stop him and headbutted again. And again. And again. And again.

Amanda Waller trudged through the snow as her five escorts scanned the roofs and windows. Truth be told, Amanda was eager to leave. This farce was a thorny diversion from more important programs; her responsibilities certainly stretched beyond the narrow affairs of Fort Morrison. She had considered moving to her next post in a few weeks anyway. Morrison was one of the simpler research projects she had a hand in. Her subordinates here could manage without her.

Amanda's entourage approached the appropriate warehouse. A loading bay door was open and lights were on. As they neared, they could hear an engine sputtering inside. The group peered in. Her truck was sat idling under a light. Lieutenant Slade Wilson leaned casually against its snowplow, arms propped on top, lieutenant's cap pulled down over his eyes.

Amanda turned to her escort squad. "Gentlemen, there's my ride. Double time it back to your patrol route. Dismissed."

There was a scattering of affirmatives as the squad jogged back around the corner. She took off her winter cap and walked towards the truck, announcing, "Let's hit the road, Lieutenant."

He stayed perfectly still.

Amanda realized something was wrong with commendable speed, but it too late. Before she could turn or cry for help, a rope fell behind her, and Batman rappelled down. He seized her by the collar and gagged her with a piece of masking tape.

Batman had a well-honed eye for how much surprise he evoked. Amanda Waller jumped at his appearance, her pupils contracted, but her reaction was tepid overall. Batman paced around and taped her wrists together. He towered over her. She tried to express through her eyes that she was unimpressed. He glared down. "Get in the truck, passenger's side."

She scowled but complied. When Amanda climbed inside and shut the door, he went to Lieutenant Wilson and pulled the broomstick out of the back of his shirt. Batman lifted the Lieutenant's limp body, dragging him to a partly-disassembled furnace where he tied the soldier's hands to its cast iron leg with a length of cord. He returned to the truck and took the driver's seat. She glared at him. He ignored her, put the truck into drive, and left the warehouse. A few turns later brought them to the dead end of a particularly remote alley.

He ripped the tape off her mouth. She winced and stuck her tongue out at the taste.

They stared at each other. She raised an eyebrow. "My, you look like you've been through Hell."

"I guess that makes you the Devil."

"Clever. What do you want?"

"You're after my associate near the east gate. How close are the pursuers?"

Amanda chuckled. "I have to say, you've got some big brass ones, don't you?"

"That wasn't an answer."

"Why should I tell you a single damn thing?"

"When I'm hindered, I can be ... coercive."

She scowled. "I'd like to see you try."

"Or I might disappear. You'll never find me outside these walls. I'll haunt you forever. But every minute we talk is another minute your men might catch me before I leave."

Amanda was a pragmatist. She considered this a moment. "Fine. Last I heard, your girlfriend got away."

"You're lying." Batman seized her by the ear and pulled. She gasped. **"Lie one more time, and I'm gone."** He let go.

Amanda took a few breaths to collect herself. "She was seen heading through the woods towards a motor pool near the gate."

"And?"

"And that's it. Maybe they snatched her by now, maybe not. I don't know."

"Order a report."

"Excuse me?"

"Get on the radio and ask for the status of the pursuing forces. You've done it all night; I think you remember how."

She lifted her taped arms. "Mind cutting this?"

He handed her the microphone instead. **"Improvise."**

Colonel Abner Tanner wasn't going to fall for the same trick twice.

A patrol had heard noises coming from the old hanger. The doors were blocked and locked respectively. That was fine as far as he was concerned: the target inside was a known threat, a real wildcat who broke a man's arm and bent a rifle in half if certain witnesses were to be believed. Most of Idaho squad was getting patched up from her cuts and gashes. He didn't know what kind of quack medicine could give a lady such inhuman strength, but he hoped it was illegal. He did know that sending anyone into a dark, cluttered building with her inside was a boneheaded idea.

But that wasn't the trick he was going to avoid. No, the trick was having paid too much attention to the main door. He learned his lesson: this time he spread out. He had over twenty men with him; more

would arrive soon. He had them spaced in a even circle, well away from the walls. He even had a pair of guards climb on the roof.

His radio operator walked up to him. "It's Miss Waller, sir."

He took the receiver. "How can I help you ... Uh-huh ... Yeah, we found her ... What was that? ... Yes, the intruder's in the old hanger at the east Motor Pool ... Don't worry, we have the place closed down tighter than a prohibitionist rally at Mardi Gras, she's not going any- ... Yes, that was a joke ... No! I'm not going to apologize for having a sense of jocular embellishment ... Yes, I intend to wait her out, at least for half an hour or so- ... That's correct, if she leaves, she won't get a step past us, and yes, unless she begs for mercy, we will go in after her ... That's all you wanted? ... Okay, good 1- ... Hello? ... Hello? ... She hung up on me. Unbelievable." Colonel Tanner returned the receiver to the backpack. "That woman is unbelievable."

From inside the hanger, he heard an engine start. It sounded strange, like it was turning a prop. Was there still a plane inside? No one had ventured in for months, not since he'd been assigned to the Fort. Gasoline could last that long, but still ...

A few officers looked at him expectantly.

He shrugged. Even if the lady spy opened the hanger without his notice, no one was stupid enough to launch a moldy antique in this weather. It was the same slip-out-the corner trick as before. He told his officers to focus on the back and sides, and to keep a healthy distance. She wouldn't sprint past them again.

Batman watched Amanda Waller end the transmission. His head was bowed in seething frustration. He sat up quickly when he saw her watching.

"Sorry, kiddo, I guess her story's done."

"No. Tell them to stand down."

"I hold a lot of the cards around here, but that Colonel's got a proud streak. Do you really think he'd walk away this close to the prize? He's out for blood. He broke my instructions chasing after her in the first place.

"Tell him there's mitigating circumstances. You see a platoon of hostiles attacking the camp."

"He'd double-check with somebody at camp first. He'd assume I'm off my rocker or compromised."

"Then say you've been compromised. You're my hostage. If he wants you back, he let's her go."

"You think you can pull a hostage trade under all our noses and live to tell about it? No one's that smooth."

"Only fools presume to know what I'm capable of."

"Well, he might go for that, or maybe he'd cheat you, or maybe he'd kill her out of spite when you ask. I'm not the most popular lady here. Although," She pretended to ponder for a moment, "Given the competition, maybe I am."

Batman willed himself to ignore her smug look. **"You're not working very hard to save yourself, Waller. You know how this place runs. Make a suggestion."**

"Hmmm." She scrutinized him oddly. "I take it you're not some kind of Bolshevik?"

"How does that-"

"It's a simple question. Answer it: are you a socialist?"

Batman paused. By one estimate, he privately managed a twelfth of a percent of the American economy.

"... No. Now what are you proposing?"

"You're not affiliated with any subversive group? If you are, I'll find out."

"I work for myself. Spit it out."

"I'll be blunt. At the heart of things, I'm a manager. I connect talented individuals with special tasks. To that end, I'm given a certain latitude in where or how I find my talent."

"The point?"

"Let me finish. You're capable. So is your lady friend, I imagine, but this is about you. You're here for justice? I hunt the biggest scum on Earth. I could use you."

"You're offering me a job?"

"You get on the radio: the Colonel knows your voice. Tell him you've surrendered into my custody, then I'll ask him to hold his fire. I'll explain to him that we will visit him together, and you'll convince your partner to come out peacefully. No one gets hurt. You get a job. She gets offered a job. If she refuses, she walks away, minus anything she's carrying. That's a plan the Colonel will tolerate."

"And we walk away scot-free?"

"You're skeptical. I respect that. I told you I have latitude to make things happen, and you've seen a little of that already. Nothing you've done tonight can't be swept under the rug; you didn't kill anyone, after all." She turned with sudden doubt. "Wait, you didn't kill my lieutenant, did you?"

"The big one's alive."

"Good, good. Then your friend gets dropped off in town and, as far as Uncle Sam cares, she was nothing but a bad dream. Scot-free. You stay with me on a tight leash and get the chance to serve under the auspices of American authority."

Batman stared at the radio, blood boiling. He forced himself to recall that this lady was a murderer, that her whole organization was a cabal of murderers. They didn't merit anything short of a long sentence in a dark pit. But if he said no ...

"I'd choose quickly. Your partner's dead in twenty minutes or so. Maybe sooner."

He fought it, he really did, but he imagined Catwoman. He imagined her face. He imagined her under siege. The fear. The moment of violence. He imagined the aftermath. His gut knotted, filled with ice.

Batman reached for the radio and depressed the toggle. **"Thi-**" He heard a sudden heavy buzzing.

The pair leaned forward and peered up.

Scant yards above the tops of the buildings, a shaky aircraft weaved overhead like a drunken goose.

Waller sighed.

The Airco DH.4B was a British bomber and scout plane modified to satisfy the reckless daredevils of the U.S. Postal Service. Thirty-one feet long, this workhorse was the jewel of 1919 civil aviation with a range of 350 miles and an average speed of 115 miles per hour. The Air Mail pilots, most of whom had a crash or three under their belts by their second year, cut as glamorous a figure as any of the era. These were the rootin'-tootin', seat-of-the-pants cowboys of the early days, men who navigated by the wind in their face and checked their speed by the singing of the wires. They had a compass that failed to always work and an altimeter that always failed. If the helmet-and-goggles boys held one criticism of the craft, it was that ice had a tendency to collect on the wings, a problem not shared by the most popular plane of the time, the Curtiss Jenny, whose carburetor vibrated so badly the ice fell off.

Catwoman knew none of this. She didn't know the model or its history. She didn't know how to ease the stick along to ride a heavy crosswind. She didn't know that if you couldn't hear the wires sing or the fabric beat like a drum, that meant you were going too slow to maintain altitude. She had no idea just how quickly ice could weigh down a wing, even outside of a snowstorm, and she was only casually aware that the wind chill at typical airborne cruising speeds made the ground temperature seem a balmy September afternoon by comparison. In fact, she had never even been in an airplane.

Fortunately, she had seen biplanes started in the movies. It didn't look that difficult. They had the pilot turn a crank in the cockpit for the engine, while a hasty assistant yanked a propeller blade clockwise so it spun. Of course, she didn't have an assistant (or a pilot's license), but she could improvise. She turned the magneto crank and pulled the ignition.

The engine hadn't been oiled or degreased in two years; the gasoline in the tank was half as old and one-third full, and there was a nest of ants in the exhaust pipe, but somehow the engine started to cough and chug, sounding faintly like a diseased elk through the membrane of a timpani drum. Praying it didn't die on her or explode, Catwoman hopped out and tugged at the propeller. It wavered a little. She tried again. It shifted like she was pulling it through molasses. She jumped and hung onto the blade, letting her body weight drag them down. The blade resisted for half a second then spun freely like a pinwheel. She fell onto her back, the propeller nearly slicing open her knee.

She dragged the chocks from the tires. After a minute, the Airco DH.4B started to inch forward. Catwoman nimbly tumbled to the side. As a tire rolled over the edge of her cape, she realized the plane wasn't driving straight. As it gracefully curved towards a wall, Catwoman raced back up the cockpit. The craft's long tail swung around and knocked over a few boxes. She flung half her body into the cockpit and hugged the stick back and forth, struggling to correct course. The plane, rolling at a brisk foot per second now, started to turn at the speed of a small glacier. A crate broke open, spilling potatoes along the floor. Catwoman stood, stepped along along the fuselage, hopped atop the wing, and then leaped past the spinning propeller, landing in front of the overhead door. Its latch was locked to the floor, and even she couldn't pick it open in time - there was a loud saw blade approaching, after all. So, resigned to the least glamorous of thieving techniques, Catwoman took her briefcase, lined its metal hinge up to the small latch, and gave her best golf swing.

Her arms shook on impact. The latch stayed. The propeller scooted closer. She hitched her arms and swung again. The lock popped off. She set her feet and pushed. The vast door swung slowly up. Catwoman turned and dropped to the floor as the plane rolled above her.

In the snowy dark outside, a loose semi-circle of troops faced the door at twenty paces. Three of these soldiers were Private Hershey, Private Denunzio, and their Sarge.

Sarge peered forward. "The door's opening!"

Hershey tilted an ear. "It sounds like a diseased elk!"

Denunzio nodded. "Yeah, from inside a timpani drum!"

Sarge held an arm out. "Now you boys remember, we hold our place. Look around for anyone using the plane as a distraction."

They tried to peer into the hanger. The Airco gradually picked up speed. In moments it passed them.

"It's empty, sir."

"Good eyes, Hershey. Keep looking."

A moment later, Catwoman clawed up from where she clung under the fuselage. With a few deft movements, she shimmied over the wing and slid into the cockpit.

Denunzio noticed some movement behind him. He saw her as she slid inside. "THERE SHE IS!"

Catwoman ducked, curled up under the lip of the cockpit, and closed her eyes. Five rifles opened fire. The fusillade ripped holes in the rudder and the wings. A bullet pinged off the steel tube around her. The next one punched through under her arm and cracked open the dashboard. More soldiers ran over, firing on the move, but the plane was too fast to catch. The margin of Catwoman's mind not preoccupied with being perforated remembered that the hanger entrance was perpendicular to the long dimension of the clearing. In other words, she was about to crash into the forest.

She reluctantly peeked above the cockpit and confirmed that, yes, her plane was about to cuddle a pine tree the size of her impending hospital bill. She grasped the stick and turned. Turning a speeding airplane on the ground was not the same as turning a car. It dipped as it turned, banking so low the

wing nearly touched the ground. Still curled on her side, Catwoman had an instant of nauseous weightlessness. Sitting up would have helped, but the stragglers chasing behind her were still trying to bother her with high-velocity distractions, so she stayed put.

The snow on the path thus far had been soft and even, slowing the plane like a half-pressed brake. However, the turn aligned her with the direction of the clearing where plenty of vehicles had passed already. They had left scores of ruts through the snow, exposing the slick pavement. Catwoman dared to sit up and aimed at the widest rut. After a moment of skating, the Airco slotted into the grove in with a series of shuddering bumps. It caught the pavement and sped forward. It was in that moment of speed that Catwoman realized she had no idea how high to set the throttle; she had innocently pushed it to the limit to get going, not realizing the snow was slowing her down. At this pace it might stall out on the takeoff climb or do a flip or something. That would be bad.

She pawed around, trying to find the throttle again by touch (the blast of frigid wet air had effectively blinded her), until she suddenly felt the world lean back and heard the wheels leave the ground.

Private Hershey numbly reset the safety catch on his smoking rifle. Colonel Tanner strode up beside him, his expression unreadable. The Private hung his head. "Sorry, sir."

The Colonel let out a tired snort and slapped Hershey fondly on the back. "Don't apologize, son. You did your job."

"But that spy got away."

"What that spy got was an uncommonly fancy coffin, Private. If that wreck stays in the air three minutes, I'll eat my hat. 'Bout the only thing out there's mountains n' steeper mountains. Go get some sleep."

Amanda Waller covertly ran a finger along the passenger door latch. She scrunched her nose. It would hurt to jump out, snow or no snow, and she didn't like that at all. She didn't fear pain, but having to suffer was almost an insult. Amanda firmly believed that the point of being clever and cautious was that you could get what you wanted in life without much discomfort, or at least you could get someone else to suffer it. In her eyes, humanity was bad at this, and the armed forces were worse. She saw most of the military as a club of rowdy yahoos who crashed and stumbled from problem to problem like a donkey caught in a thornbush. This offered plenty of opportunities for a lady of her gifts to make herself useful, but it was embarrassing to watch. Even a somewhat sophisticated operator like this so-called Bat Man looked as beaten as a training dummy in a school of attack dogs. Who knew what wild dreams he was willing to suffer for? Long story short, jumping out of moving vehicles was a fool's game.

"Don't even think about it."

Then again, perhaps she wasn't as subtle as she thought.

Amanda took her taped hands off the door. "Just stretching."

"Uh-huh."

Batman drove slowly through the quiet back paths of the Fort. Neither conceded to face the other.

"So what's your endgame here, champ?"

He said nothing.

"You won't get past the gate, you know. I'm not sure what you think your options are."

"You're slow on the uptake, Waller. It's in your hands now."

"How?"

He turned a final corner. Sixty yards ahead was the camp gate, a sliding barricade flanked by lights and soldiers and a watchtower.

"Option one: you smile and spin a story so they let us though."

She lowered her voice. "And option two?"

"Option two: you hesitate and I step on the gas. Maybe I break through the gate, maybe we crash and burn."

"If you so much as touch the pedal funny, the-"

"Your guards will open fire? I've been shot at all night. Care to join me?"

She frowned but bit back what she was going to say. Getting shot at was a fool's game.

"... Fine. Go."

He cut her hands apart and gave a short grunt of approval. It sounded a little too smug for her taste.

To call what Catwoman was doing piloting would be an insult to pilots. The fairest description was that, in wrestling frantically with the controls, she managed to consistently miss the ground. For the first time in her life, she desperately wished she wore a big pair of goggles. The air rubbed her face raw. Breathing was a pain, but at least it was something. She couldn't feel any skin above the neck. Her ears were a distant memory.

The moon was her only guide. it offered faint monochrome silhouettes of the slopes and cliffs she struggled to rise above. The engine was weak, and the dancing crosswinds buffeted her down and sideways. She knew intellectually to head south, but that meant nothing up here. She could only turn and turn, racing towards the next gap in the jigsaw horizon. Once she caught sight of a gray ribbon snaking along the valley below. Could it be a road? She couldn't tell, and when she looked again it was gone.

As she crested a particularly harrowing peak, brushing the tops of the massive pines, Catwoman realized she heard nothing. It was a very loud and sudden nothing, and she didn't recognize what was wasn't hearing for several seconds: the engine had stopped.

"-so you see, Sergeant Connolly. I'm just escorting Capitán Alvarado here off the Fort to avert a diplomatic incident. The Mexican high command wouldn't take kindly if their visiting observer was hurt by a saboteur."

Sergeant Connolly and the seven other soldiers of the gate garrison traded glances. The Sergeant looked back into the truck's cabin. "Forgive me ma'am, I didn't realize we had a, uh, dignitary with us."

Amanda Waller nodded graciously. "That's quite all right, Sergeant. We've kept it very hush-hush."

"So you're escorting him back to ..."

"We'll stop at a hotel downstate where he can take a taxi to the consulate."

"And he's driving?"

"Oh, you know, Latin machismo and all that. And a lady like myself, well, could you imagine me behind the wheel of this dirty contraption? Heavens."

The Sergeant shone his flashlight through the open window and scrutinized Batman, who had eyed him steadily the whole conversation without shifting a muscle.

"And this is a Mexican Army uniform?"

Amanda chuckled. "Well, not standard issue. It's a special camouflage our two nations have been jointly innovating. I'm afraid the details are above your pay grade, soldier."

"It doesn't look like camouflage."

"We're still working out a few issues."

"He looks badly injured."

"The poor man was caught in one of the attacks earlier. Didn't you hear it? That's why it's critical we get him to a safe place along with the prototype."

The Sergeant squinted closer at Batman. "And you're Mexican?"

Batman gave a slow nod. "**Sí.**" He held out a hand. "**Hola.**"

Sergeant Connolly accepted the awkward handshake. He looked at the gate and whistled uncomfortably. "Alright ma'am, we'll open the gate. Sorry for slowing you down. We're under orders to keep a tight lid on things."

"Yes, perfectly understandable, soldier. Keep up the good work."

"Thank you, ma'am. And drive safe, uh, sir."

"**Gracias, mi compañero.**" Batman looked ahead and stepped off the brake. "**Ahora, vamos.**"

When Catwoman got over her shock (her emotional shock, at least; she was still freezing), she realized that her airplane hadn't become an anvil, it had become a glider - a very bad glider.

Basic physics commanded that all flying surfaces maintained forward momentum when falling. A wing's surface was diagonal when descending: its lift vector was partly vertical and partly horizontal. Consequently, pressure pushing under the wing both slowed a craft's fall (like a parachute) and pushed it forward (like a sail). The efficiency of this was measured by the equation of lift over drag, also known as L/D or the glide ratio. A glide ratio of three meant the craft would travel three yards forward for every yard it fell.

The glide ratio of Great War aircraft typically varied between seven and nine under ideal conditions and around five in practice. If a Sopwith Camel, for instance, was cruising at a reasonable 5,000 feet and turned off its engines, a good pilot could expect to travel at least five miles before landing.

Catwoman was not a good pilot. The Airco DH.4B was a tad more modern than its wartime cousins, but the particular bird Catwoman flew limited that advantage with the sort of regular upkeep one found in lost Aztec tombs. On a positive note, cold air was dense and helped to slow a descent, and this air was nearly broth. This broth merely delayed the inevitable, however, as she had no idea how fast she was traveling, her altitude, or where she was going. Her best guesses were: "A mountain every three minutes," "I can see the branches from here," and "Ummm."

The seat under her rumbled as she sped lower. Pulling up haltingly, Catwoman barely managed to clear a ridge, but that was the last ounce of climb she had: the nose dipped with a vengeance and she knew she wouldn't be able to rise over any more obstacles. It was all downhill now. The plane was gliding well below the peaks, slipping through the steep valley.

Then the valley opened up into a grand circle of mountains, and in the center was a moon-flecked field of snow, round and flat as a dinner plate.

Fueled by a new hope, Catwoman aimed down, hoping to gain enough speed to pull into a gentle curve that would run parallel to the ground just just before she ran out of altitude.

She discovered that this sort of precision was very difficult. The final stretch passed in terrifying silence.

She pulled up a moment early, leveling out twenty feet above the ice. Compensating in fright, she tipped the craft down. The plane stopped floating like a feather and dropped the last twenty feet like a bowling ball.

The Airco DH.4B bounced off the ice with a frame-bending shake, bounced again, then crashed into

the lake beneath.

Batman and Amanda Waller traveled down the long switchbacks of Fort Morrison without speaking. It wasn't until they pulled onto the main road fifteen minutes later when he broke the silence.

"A Mexican military observer?"

She crossed her arms. "I'd like to see you invent a cover on short notice for someone as ridiculous as you."

"Mm."

"And what now? Are we off to some Podunk county lockup?" She chuckled. "Am I under citizen's arrest?"

"Your case will be ready soon enough."

"Is this when you tell me to 'count my hours' and sprinkle in something about the wrath of God?"

"You think I resort to melodrama?"

"If the shoe fits."

"I know my audience."

"You do. So you know it's no use yelling at me, and it seems for all the hot sauce someone poured in your ear, you aren't going to slap me around like a self-respecting vigilante."

He glared, daring her to tempt him. **"Even with the blood of two homicides on your hands, you have the hubris to act like your crimes were operational expenses. You deserve worse."**

"Now look, for what it's worth, that poor vagrant couple wasn't my idea. I learned the details at the last minute. That's not how I operate. "

"If you're making a confession, I don't absolve sins."

"No, that was an argument that if you're out for justice, your efforts are misguided. We're--"

"Misguided? Were the murderers punished? Did you step down for letting it happen under your watch? Forget your so-called intentions, do you really think you can convince me you haven't nurtured a conspiracy to make your problems disappear by any means necessary?"

"Are you trying to shame me, boy? I don't have the blessed privilege of your private morality. The world's too small, and we're living in a neighborhood of warlords and mass graves. You have no idea how close Kriegsmarine U-boats are to turning our coast into a daily shooting gallery, let alone the webs of agents just waiting to carve us up from the inside. And those are just the threats we understand." Batman became very still at this remark. Amanda chuckled darkly. "Oh, you're a smart

one. You've noticed the edge of the rabbit hole, haven't you? This nation is on the cusp of a great and terrible endeavor, and we've got our pants around our ankles. You think you have me judged? You don't know your rear from a hole in the ground."

"Enlighten me."

"Fact is, I'm the closest this little democracy has to a survival plan. I do what I must - never one iota less. Why? Because every kind of service necessary to the public good becomes honorable by being necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claim to perform that service are imperious."

"Nathan Hale."

"You stayed awake in civics class, very good. So, to continue my original question, why I am I still along for your little ride? Hoping to make me bleat another secret before we get to town? Or are we in for another round of the silent treatment?"

"No. Bringing you're along serves two purposes. First, a chance to make one fact clear."

"All ears."

"At your old infirmary, you'll find a hole in the vault that holds the influenza cultures."

"How did you-"

"Do not speak." He silenced her with a glare. **"The virus is still there, and it will stay there."**

"Oh?" Her features pulled tight with scorn. "Pray tell why?"

"You and I aren't finished, but that just makes you one more scum on the corner of my agenda. I have other monsters to cage. But if you start weaponizing a disease or any program that threatens innocents on that scale, then it's over. You become my only priority. I hunt you to the ends of the Earth, and I won't be gentle next time. This is your only warning."

"Starting a plague is low on my to-do list. That said, if you sincerely believe you can coerce me or the United States government with a threat, then you've gravely misread your hand."

"Force my hand and we'll see."

"And what was your other purpose for keeping me this long?"

Batman hit the brakes. **"A punishment in advance. Get out."**

"Uh, what?"

"Get out of the truck now or I throw you out."

"Be serious, we must be three miles out by now."

"If you don't think I'm serious, you're an idiot."

"I'll be half-frozen before I reach the nearest outpost."

"If you're lucky."

"But-"

"Four seconds."

Amanda huffed and tightened the belt on her coat. She opened the door and climbed down. As she closed the door, she offered her final words in a smooth and level tone, "Sooner or later you'll recognize the real threats. When that happens, give me a call."

Most aircraft did not float in water. However, because they were lightweight in proportion to their surface area, they did not sink very quickly either. Just how long until they submerged was a matter of some debate.

Catwoman wasn't sure if she had been unconscious or merely blinded by the splash. All she knew was that there had been a great hurly-burly of motion, time had passed, and now there was a terrible pain on her right side - a deep bruise from her chest to just above her hip. She gingerly reached up and rubbed her whiplashed neck as she slumped back, wanting nothing more than to rest here in the warmth and stillness of not being airborne.

Then the plane wiggled and, with a low gurgling noise, she felt herself lowering.

Many words sparked through Catwoman's mind - few fit for print and none in complete sentences. She hustled to stand then winced and fell back again. Catwoman had never broken a rib, which was sort of miraculous given her lifestyle, and she wondered if this was what a broken rib felt like. Maybe it was just a sprain. She tried to remember if rib sprains were a thing, or if it was strains, and what the difference was.

The plane lowered again. A few sprays of water started to form puddles in the cockpit out of unseen cracks. Taking pride that her boots were waterproof, Catwoman looked around. Her landing had fractured the ice surprisingly little. There was slushy lake water for a few feet out, then a periphery of man-sized fragments of doubtful stability, and finally the edge of the ice sheet not nine feet away.

She took her briefcase by the handle and threw it before collapsing in pain. The briefcase spun through the air and skidded along the ice. Another four streams began to leak into the cockpit. Moving her wounded side as little as possible, Catwoman gently pulled herself up onto the fuselage. What remained of the lower wings had already sunk into the lake, but the upper wings were high and dry. She worked her way onto one and dragged herself to the edge. As she slid further from the center, the plane began an agonizing tilt. When she finally rolled off the tip, the wing was almost level with ice. It still hurt though.

The cakes of cracked ice under her were barely enough to hold her weight, but if there was one thing Catwoman knew it was crawling on fragile platforms. Catwoman gently moved toward the thicker

sheet as chunks broke off behind her. When she could finally get to her feet, Catwoman found the briefcase and pulled out her flashlight. The beam faded at about ten yards, and it was at least a hundred to the nearest shore.

"Well, no rest for the wicked."

Catwoman slowly started walking. Her foot broke through a few times, but she kept her balance and pressed on. There was no wind on the lake, and the snow had nearly stopped. Also, no one was shooting at her. It was almost pleasant. When she reached the shore, she found some fallen branches and set about making a fire. Being a dyed-in-the-wool city girl, this turned out to be several orders of magnitude more difficult than she imagined. It figured that she was the one lady in in Gotham who didn't carry a lighter. Batman could probably start a blaze with sand and a wet stick, if he didn't have six gadgets to do the job already (a habit she found ironic for a self-proclaimed creature of darkness).

Eventually, after grueling experimentation, she managed to spark a few warm embers by rubbing the flashlight's battery against the steel of her claws. Catwoman huddled over her miniscule flame to hide it from the snow. There was nothing to do but wait as it grew. The stillness was almost meditative. She had made it. There was no big sprint to rest for and no obstacle to climb.

The silence gave her far too much time to wonder what had happened to her self-proclaimed creature of darkness. It was an odd discomfort, almost a cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, while she was the first to point out that Batman was "just" human, she really couldn't imagine him failing, not in the abstract. Sure, he had setbacks, but he was always hunting again the next night: the consummate survivor. That was half his mystique. Otherwise he would have just been a strange obituary.

On the other hand, she only escaped the Fort patrols by dint of the biggest chain of flukes in her career, and at least she had been trying to escape. He set out to do the opposite! Unless he suddenly grew wings, she couldn't imagine him punching his way past the whole camp. No, like all self-important renegades, he was looking for his blaze of glory. When he finally ... when it did happen, would they say in the news? Probably not. Too embarrassing. He'd be one more secret to sweep under the rug. She'd never hear the details.

Well, at least she could finish what he started. That was worth something. Catwoman put out her fire and picked up the briefcase. The frozen lake stretched out into the darkness. If she followed the shore, maybe she could find a river. Rivers led to civilization. It was better than the woods.

An interminable period later (no more than an hour in hindsight), she spied a strange shape along the water. A pier! No boats were moored, but with some searching she found a broad footpath up the hill. At the top of the hill was a dirt road through the foliage. There was a cluster of small buildings and a sign on a tall pole:

Hank's Tanks

Gas / Food / Ammo / Bait / Road maps

Souvenirs / More Ammo / Boat rentals

None of the windows were lit. The place seemed deserted. Catwoman walked up the the largest building. It had two gas pumps in front and a phone line running out along the road. That was

promising. This was clearly the store; she could see lines of shelves through the windows. A snack would be nice.

On any other night, Catwoman would carefully pick the lock on the door. Her fingers weren't feeling cooperative tonight so she kicked a hole in the window. It was dark inside. She hunted for the phone. It turned out to be behind the counter, an old wall model with a cone speaker. As she reached for the rotary dial, she heard footsteps behind her.

"Might want to step back there."

Catwoman turned. A tall, lanky man in long underwear and untied boots was stepping through her hole in the window. He held a bright lantern in one hand and a rifle in the other. She bashfully turned off her flashlight.

"Hi. Who are you?"

The man placed the lantern on the counter. "I own the joint. Important question is, who're you?"

"I, uh ..."

"Cause you don't look like the kind of lady who'd steal things, but it is night and you did break my window."

"I don't look like ... right! Stealing? Course not." She coughed primly. "You must be Hank." He raised an eyebrow. The store name was painted in huge letters on the wall. She nodded awkwardly. "Right, well I'm ... a pilot."

"Pilots carry whips?"

"Oh, sure. This is a ... a pilot's whip. We use it for piloting things. Keeps the, uh ... wings ... tight."

"You don't look like an aviatrix."

"I'm a stunt pilot. They call me the ... Amazing ... er ... Cat."

The man pulled at his lip thoughtfully. "Oh, like a barnstormer. Well, that would explain your fanciful get-up. Got'r impress the kiddies."

"Oh, the costume, yes. I wear this for ... the children."

"That's swell, but it still don't say what you're doing in my store."

"Big misunderstanding, Hank. See, I was pulling an all-nighter to get to Gotham City for a show, racing there like I stole the plane, and I had a little crash. I walked here to find help. I would have knocked but I thought your shop was deserted."

"You were flying through this big storm?"

"That's right."

He whistled. "If that's true then you really do belong in the City. But where's the wreck?"

"It sort of sunk into your lake."

Hank was skeptical. "It sunk through the ice, but you got out?"

She put her hands on her hips. "I am a stunt pilot, you know. We eat little crashes for breakfast."

"Hmm. I guess that would explain the smell."

"What smell?"

"Geez, is your nose deaf? You smell like smoke."

"Well-"

"And motor oil."

"I guess-"

"Cause boy, it's powerful. Did you take a nap in the exhaust pipe?"

She forced a laugh. "Well, I guess that shows I am a pilot. Who has been piloting. A plane. Recently. And not a thief."

"Hmm."

"Come on, would a thief have a briefcase?"

"Okay, I suppose you might just be a dame caught in a bad stroke of luck."

"Beautiful. Look, I'm very sorry about the window. I'll make it up to you. I just need to make a phone call. That's all."

Hank considered this and shrugged. "A'ight. Make the call."

"Thank you." Catwoman turned and dialed a number.

It rang. A voice picked up.

"Errr-llo?"

"Maven!"

"... Selina? What's the- Don't you know what time it is?"

"Actually, I don't. Long story. Listen, I need some-"

"Yeah, and I need six more hours of sleep. My job's riding on a huge presentation tomorrow. Or today, I guess. It's a whole big thing. Try me in the morning."

Catwoman yelled into the receiver. "Hey! Hey!"

"Bye."

"Hold on! I'm calling in the Favor!"

There was silence on the other end of the line. Catwoman pressed the point. "Did you hear me, Mave? Remember the Favor?"

"... This had better be important, 'Lina."

"It is, it is, listen: get a paper and a pen. Write this down."

"M'kay."

"You have your car, right?"

"You want me to write down that I have a car?"

"No, just-"

"Yes, geesh, I have my car. Of course I do. It's parked out back."

"Good. At the end of this call, get in the car and go north on the Turnpike. Keep going until ... hold on." She looked at Hank. "Hey buddy, how do you get here from Gotham City?"

"Get here? Through those hills? If you're in a car tonight, miss, you don't."

"Okay, then where's the nearest route that can take a car?"

"Highway's 'bout seven miles down Baker's Mill Road. Once you get there it ought'a be clear enough."

"Seven miles! I can't walk that."

"Shame."

"Hey, you live here. How do you get around?"

"Mostly I don't. Truck's in the shop."

"What about emergencies?"

"Well, I do have a haulin' tractor in the shed. Faster than she looks."

"A tractor."

"Yep."

"Well, thanks. I guess that's one relie-."

"Pfff. Hold on, I didn't say I'd taxi you around, Amelia Air-Fart. You think I want to be exposing my delicate self to the elements at this hour? For the lady who broke my nice window?"

Catwoman pursed her lips and eyed him dangerously. "You won't?"

"Nope. Nothing doing."

"Buddy, if you had any idea what I went through to get here ..." She reached discreetly into her satchel.

The owner leveled his rifle with a glare. "Now watch yourself."

Catwoman pulled out a few bills. "I'll give you twenty bucks."

He ran his tongue against his cheek. "Twenty-five. And eight more for the window."

Catwoman grinned. "You have a deal."

Grand old cities were home to many weird specimens of humanity. Some observers assumed they grew there, the dank urban conditions behaving like the soil under a bed of fungi. This was partly true, but it was just as common for oddballs and outcasts to come from elsewhere. To these pilgrims, Gotham was the center of the world. It rivaled the grandest and oldest towns on the continent, but it also had a certain cryptic quality that attracted the deviant like moths to a lamp. And among the human curiosities who found their way there, the most curious seemed to arrive by bus. And among those travelers who arrived by bus, the strangest of all rode the midnight line. Only a truly exceptional life ever reached a point when traveling cross-state on a rickety old bus in the wee hours of the morning in the middle of winter to the middle of Gotham sounded like a good idea.

Batman found a small town just north of the City, parked his snow-plow truck in front of a quiet fire hall, left the keys, and walked four blocks to the bus stop. When the bus arrived, he climbed aboard and took a seat, wearing his Bat-suit and covered with bandages and dried blood. He looked around and found himself the third strangest person aboard.

Chapter 18

Being Cold

As the miles passed and the hills steadily grew to hide the moon, Maven Lewis began to regret getting out of bed. Parents across America told spooky bedtime stories about the sinister things lurking in the alleys in Gotham, but locals just called those anecdotes. When Gothamites told spooky bedtime stories, they were about the sinister things lurking in the woods when your car broke down. Maven frowned as she struggled to glimpse the road. The snowfall had stopped, but the path was only just clear enough to navigate in her Plymouth. Every other mile seemed to run alongside a gully or cliff for her to slide over. A deer crossed the road minutes ago and gave her half a heart attack. She wore two sweaters and a coat but still shivered the whole ride. Maven couldn't imagine any sane person being *outside* in this weather.

Which brought her back to Selina. If it wasn't for the sacred invoking of the Favor, Maven would have sworn this was all a prank. The set-up might be more elaborate than her past pranks but not by much. It wasn't until an hour into the drive that Maven was awake enough to remember this was the night Selina intended to sneak into that base.

*Why does she need a ride? She has a car - that gaudy honking Phantom she's so proud of. Yugh. How could she lose her car? What could possibly- Wait! Maybe she lost her car because she's on the run! What if she's been captured? No, they wouldn't give her a phone if she was captured. Dumb thought, Maven. But what then? If she is on the lam, what if they catch up to her before I arrive? What if they catch her **as** I arrive? Could I just drive past and pretend I'm not involved? Sure, that's the prude- No, the Favor. But then what? Would there be a chase? Am I about to be in a car chase? Better not be. My insurance is high enough as it is. This is not the set of wheels you want in a car chase. And I will not be an accessory again; that's the first rule of our friendship, after all. I am going to lose my job. Why*

doesn't she have anyone else that can help her? Didn't she go along with -

Maven nearly swerved off the road.

- Holy gosh! That's right, she went with Batman! Oh, gosh, oh gosh, am I going to see Batman? Am I going to give Batman a ride? I shortchanged the hotdog lady last week; maybe he can still smell it on me - the guilt, not the hotdog. What if he doesn't like my car? What if he doesn't fit? I guess he can just ride on the roof. Wait, I thought he flew. Or teleported. Doesn't he just show up wherever he's needed because of some ancient curse? Like, a spiritual thing? Wait, Batman being there sounds like the sort of thing Selina would have mentioned on the phone, and she certainly did not. Was there a betrayal? Did he turn on her? Or did she turn on him? Who started it? I mean, Batman is the bloody predator of the unjust with an unslakeable thrust for vengeance, but Selina can be really annoying sometimes. They might be fighting when I show up. Am I going to have to fight Batman? How? I didn't bring a roscoe. I don't own a roscoe. I don't even know a Roscoe.

As her thoughts frothed out her ears, Maven finally caught sight of her instructed destination: an abandoned diner about fifty miles north of what her dad called "the boonies". She rolled to a stop and stepped out, keeping the engine running.

Maven yelled, "Hello?"

Munching from a bag of off-brand cookies, Catwoman walked unsteadily through the diner door. "Maven, are you a sight for sore eyes. I wasn't sure you'd come."

"Oh my gosh, Selina, you're white as a sheet! What have you been doing? And why are you wearing a cape?"

"Look, Mave," she coughed. "I'd love to talk, but maybe a little later. Be a dear and grab the briefcase on that bench. I've been carrying it for about a year and if I have to touch it again I'm going to hurt someone."

"Sure, we can talk on the way home."

"That sounds lovely, but I'd rather catch a nap."

"What happened?"

Selina winced as she crawled into the passenger seat. "See, that's the paradox: if I told you, I wouldn't have time to sleep. Wake me when we hit the city. 'Kay?"

"I don't think that's what a paradox is."

"Great. G'night."

Detective James Gordon sat at a booth in the corner of Shucky's Bar beside a pile of crumpled paper. All bars stank - this was a cosmic constant, like the speed of light - but along that stink spectrum, Shucky's was slightly worse than most. There was the classic spilled beer, the dead rat in the corner, the ashtrays being put through their paces (not his own for once), and whatever dust

and grime rolled off the coats of the dockworkers who shuffled in every night save for the Sabbath.

Gordon didn't like bars. He preferred his drink at home. He did hold affection for a few Scottish pubs his dad had introduced him to as a young man, though he never had time to visit. If he was the sort to indulge in more self-interest, he would try responsible watering holes like McHaggasey's or the Duchess and the Gentleman: the two cop bars in his precinct. His popularity on the force was ragged at best, and making a few new friends would do wonders for his career. But more often than not, Gordon ended up here at Shucky's or one of the other dives that found it useful to have an off-duty cop around for the hours before last call and were willing to compensate him for the privilege. He missed the sleep, but Barbara was going to get an education if it killed him.

Speaking of killing him, the balled notepad papers beside Gordon were rough drafts for an unofficial press release to announce the case of the stolen cadavers and the murder of Wendell and Alice Dupree. He wrote here because this dirty, tepidly unpleasant corner was the closest he had to a sanctuary. At work he had to work, and at home he had to provide, but here he could merely be. The pile of rejects was because Detective Gordon had no gift for tact, and this case already caused more professional damage to its investigators than most he saw in a year. It wasn't even open, but detectives in the GCPD could follow their own trails off the books and slide hints to the press from time to time. That was one advantage of the Department: some rules were so bent they even let a outcast like him slip by. If everything went smoothly, the brass tended towards a "no harm done" attitude. Of course, this liberty also meant he was on his own. If he provoked whoever was handing down censures - and he was certain he would - then the whole mess would all be on his head.

Gordon had agreed to wait one more day before taking his few leads public. That meant one more day to edit and second-guess, so he didn't write with any particular haste. He rubbed his eyes and checked the clock: nine minutes until he could leave.

The place was nearly empty. His last three drafts had more misspellings than words. He turned to the bar, "Hey, Shucky!"

The shlub manning the taps looked over. "Yeah, Jim?"

"Mind if I cut out early?"

Skucky shrugged with a loose jaw, "Ehhhhhhh. Yeah, alright. Get out'a here."

"Thanks." Detective Gordon ran a thumb under his loose necktie and pulled the knot. "See you next week?"

The barkeep had already turned back to his drink. "Mm."

"Thank you."

Gordon slouched into his tan longcoat and buffed his glasses poorly on the sleeve.

Shuffling outside, James Gordon took a moment to appreciate that it had stopped snowing and

began his seven blocks home. Two blocks later, he heard a gentle '*clink*' as he passed an alley. An empty bottle slid out of the darkness and rolled to a stop against his foot. He glanced around, dangerously awake in an instant, and palmed the top on his holster. He leaned forward, struggling to glimpse beyond the the hazy edge of the moonlight. Nothing moved.

A voice beside him said, "**Detective Gordon.**"

"Jeez!"

Batman leaned against the brick alley wall with his arms crossed, much closer than Gordon expected a person could hide in the dim. The Dark Knight's outline only became clear when he offered a small nod.

"**Let's talk.**"

Gordon exhaled and rubbed a hand over his face. "Yeah, alright."

Batman turned and led deeper into the alley. Gordon checked the street then followed. He had accepted long ago that Batman could apparently find him anywhere at any hour, but it still terrified him. It was like being followed by a stray dog that could read minds and used its endless cunning to hunt people. Sure, he was friendly now, but a stray could always turn and bite. Gordon needed a smoke.

They stopped at a dead end around a corner. No windows faced the alley here and no starlight passed below the eaves far above them. The snow was piled high against the tight corners.

Gordon pulled his collar up to his ears. "Glad to see you made it back. By now I had my doubts."

"**You haven't announced the case?**"

"No, no. I kept my word."

"**Of course.**"

"What's the news? Anything solid this time?"

Batman paused. That was a bad sign. "**Fort Morrison is housing a clandestine research program that experiments on cadavers. They used our streets as a source for corpses when the legal supply dried up. The program is sanctioned by at least one intelligence service and a pair of cabinet departments.**"

Gordon was too tired to curse. No judge could issue a warrant for 'The Whole Blasted Government'. He winced and looked down.

"And the Duprees?"

"**Not sure. I suspect it was either an isolated move from the field team to cut corners or a deliberate attempt for fresher test subjects.**"

"At least we know the score, and these cutthroats are none the wiser. Now let's pin 'em to the wall."

"My associate and I ... our operation fell apart. We were seen. I was briefly apprehended and questioned."

"Please tell me you didn't announce who you were."

Batman frowned. **"I said nothing of substance. My appearance is message enough."**

"So someone finally got the mask off, huh?"

"They couldn't see my face. I took precautions."

"As curious as I am how you did that, let's talk evidence. If they know they're being hounded by you, they're gonna send some boys to put an ear to Gotham. We'll have to sit on the goods till the heat dies down. Where are you keeping it?"

Batman paused again. **"I don't have it."**

"Pardon?"

"We were surrounded, I set a distraction so my partner could get the evidence to you. But it didn't-"

"*To me?*" Gordon grabbed Batman's shoulder and snarled. "You told someone who I am?"

"It was the surest way."

"Do you have any idea of how far I stick my neck out whenever we work together? Are you trying to put a little more grease on that guillotine?"

"I'm sorry, Detective."

Gordon stepped back and pounded the wall. "No, you're right. I'm off base. Paranoid type like you wouldn't trust someone without a good reason." He gestured to the empty walls. "But no one's met me tonight. When's your pal arriving?"

"My partner tried to escape on an aircraft, but-"

"He's a pilot?"

"No."

"Oh. So you split up and now your friend's buried halfway into a peak somewhere."

"The Kahontsi Range interior."

"Then we're back to square one! No, worse! Now the government's going to be breathing down

your neck, your buddy's dead, Lord knows you can't have many of those, and we still don't have a case to build."

Batman waited patiently for him to finish. **"The soldiers only cornered me on their home turf. They won't get lucky twice. Now I know the faces of the conspiracy. I don't need to raid an armed camp. I'll find them when they move, when they sleep. The murderers have other programs."**

Gordon appraised him with a look that might have been disbelief once, but now was closer to pity. "So it's come to this, huh? If you're starting your own little war, you know I can't help you."

"I know."

Gordon had a family and a job and a face. He could be hurt in so many ways that the Dark Knight couldn't be. Batman had never doubted which of them was braver.

"Then I guess I'm out till you find more proof. We sure can't make a release now, not with you in the picture. The Army's going to clean up after itself real quick. Plus, I've heard stories of guys who push against the Feds without tying their own loose ends. It isn't pretty." A weak eddy of wind whispered up the alley and spun some snow. Detective Gordon sighed. "Mind if I light up?" It was a perfunctory request. He pulled out his pack of Chesterfields and a lighter. With a flick, he saw Batman in the full glow of the flame and recoiled.

"Holy Moses, did you fall in a wood chipper?"

"It's not as bad as it looks."

"It couldn't be. You're still standing."

"Mm."

"What exactly did you do up there?"

"I survived."

"I wouldn't speak too soon. The hospital might give a discount on blood if you buy in bulk."

"I'll tend to these wounds and start work on my new leads this evening. You should go home."

Detective Gordon nodded, cupping his cigarette as he walked around the corner. He muttered to himself and the universe, "Good luck."

The Dark Knight had hidden nine vehicles around the city in case he was ever stuck on foot. The nearest was parked in a partially-collapsed maintenance basement in the south abutment of the Old Cleveland Bridge a third of a mile away. Climbing would be foolish with the icy roofs and his pulled muscles; walking was enough of a challenge. But staying on the ground meant facing the

wildlife. The safest route to the bridge would take him through Sweethearts territory and a few properties protected by the Moonshine King. They wouldn't feel very territorial in this weather, but Batman didn't want to risk an encounter. He had no friends here, and his condition might force him to do something drastic. So he crept covertly through the side-streets and abandoned stores. The trip to the bridge lasted an hour but offered no witnesses.

Finding a gap in the low fence, Batman slid down the steep embankment to the rocky shore of the frozen West River. The looming span of the Old Cleveland Bridge above cast a giant shadow over the shore. Here a moisture-warped door hid in the huge wall of rugged stone masonry. It was a challenge pushing the small motorcycle up the short staircase. Fortunately, the steps had worn down to almost to a ramp over the decades. The bike was his own hand-customized machine: light, but twice the engine its size promised. He warmed her up and cruised along the shore to the massive drainage pipes beside the river. The pipes were built to handle the week-long storms of the wet season; it was practically a train tunnel now. Batman knew every route by heart.

To the unfamiliar, it was a challenge to physically leave Gotham City. Even ignoring the senseless road design, there were many points where the urban sprawl seemed to thin but only led to another zone just as congested. Because the Gotham colony was built on a marsh, the only space to grow was up across the low surrounding hills. Viewed from downtown, these hills tended to conceal their neighborhoods, so a traveler would reach what looked like the open road three or four times before actually crossing the city limits. Batman knew better. The tunnels led into a shallow drainage ditch in the meatpacking district close to the city's edge.

Soon he had left the townhouses behind and cruised the coastal road that hugged the bay. Several quiet roads looped through these woods like long fingers on the hand of the city. He passed the brick drives of million dollar estates nestled in the pines. Traveling gently uphill, the properties grew more isolated and opulent. A minute past the latest home, Batman turned onto a pebbly fire break in the woods. Down a small dip was a line of boulders spread amongst the trees. He parked and pulled at a certain branch which slid inorganically and clicked back into position. One of the boulders began to hum with the movement of heavy gears. A door slid open revealing the mouth of a cave.

Alfred Pennyworth sat reading an old issue of The Saturday Evening Post disinterestedly when he heard the tintinnabulation of the trauma bell. In the old days of this strange war, the poor man used to keep vigil every night so there would be no delay when Master Bruce arrived needing an arm sewn on or any of the other calamities his nightmares suggested. But time passed and Bruce, though rarely untouched, also rarely arrived in a state that demanded sudden care; it took a minimum of fitness to make it home, after all. So Alfred, with more than a little prodding from his tentative patient, decided that at least one of them needed regular sleep.

Still, on certain nights Bruce went forth to face a mission that seemed especially grave, and on these nights Alfred maintained the vigil. At the lonesome sound of the bell, he rose from his chair in the study and strode swiftly to the secret chamber and down the stairs, pulling his robe tight against the draft.

There was something primordial about the Cave, something ancient and unformed. It was a

hollow Earth in unhallowed ground, a Chthonic afterlife. The two men had only visited a few of the more accessible chambers, but Bruce suspected it was one of the most extensive subterranean systems east of the Mississippi. In the early days, the young master often insisted that if only the site didn't suit his purposes so well (and, Alfred noted, his temperament), he would invite every geologist and explorer in the state to study the place. He was a man of science, after all. But as time wore on, Bruce voiced this regret less and less. The endless caverns had won his favor. Alfred could scarcely describe it, but on some level the man had become the place, or perhaps the place had become the man.

As it was, Batman's inner sanctum was a makeshift affair. It took weeks of part-time carpentry for the two men to install the most basic stairs and footbridges so they could safely reach the flat stretch of rock Bruce choose as the center. Every month or so they brought down another tool or cabinet to furnish the operation. It was still about as sophisticated as a large campsite in Alfred's eyes, though he admitted their little camp couldn't be outdone for isolation.

By the time Alfred reached the foot of the final staircase, Bruce was sitting mostly undressed at the medical station. Even at a distance, Alfred could see that this would be a long night.

Bruce's face had the sticky appearance of a recently unglued mask. His eyes were bloodshot and hollow.

"Hello, Alfred."

Alfred looked him over clinically. "Well?"

In well-drilled staccato, Bruce recited, "Three inch laceration: lower ribs, wide but not intestinal, sanitized, stitched twice. Bruise: base of the skull, concussion uncertain, fracture to occipital bone unlikely. Broken right hand: second and third metacarpal fracture, aggravated by repeated impacts longitudinal and dorsal. Moderate hypothermia: multiple exposures, no current symptoms. Cushioned stab wound: upper jaw, no puncture but severe bruising. Strained shoulder muscle ..."

He finished two minutes later.

Alfred got to work treating the wounds, asking occasional questions as necessary. When these were satisfied and much of the work was done, he had Bruce sit up and brought him a glass of water. Bruce sipped carefully with an ice pack on his cheek held in place by a band around his head.

"I see you arrived on one of your squirreled-away motorcycles."

Bruce stared dully ahead. "The Ford's destroyed."

"And your suit seems beyond repair. I could mend the rips, but the padding's shot."

Bruce head-shrugged. "I have ideas for the upgrade. Ask the question, Alfred."

Alfred looked him in the eye. "Legal status?"

For the first time in a year, Bruce didn't have a comforting reply. "I've incurred the wrath of the United States of America."

Alfred offered a wan smile. "Take heart, Master Bruce, I hear it's a phase all young men go through."

Bruce didn't respond. He continued staring at the wall.

Alfred checked a clock. "Well, you've best to bed. Everything looks better in the morning. You can tell the tale then."

"Catwoman's dead."

Alfred's soft grin bled away. Bruce continued, unblinking. "I was spotted. Interrogated. She helped me out. We hid, but security had the exits. I planned a diversion so she could leave with the evidence. But she didn't follow the plan. She ... she found an aircraft."

"This Catwoman is a pilot?"

"No."

"Oh dear."

"Those mountains have no fields to serve as a runway. I've tried to imagine another outcome, but even if she survived the landing, there would be no shelter. The Army will find the crash when the sun comes up. Either she's dead or she's facing a grand jury by the end of the week."

"Bruce, I'm-"

"You're right, Alfred, a body needs sleep." He stood. "Consequences to consider. Unrelated threats to gauge. Can't afford ... fatigue." He steadily walked to the stairs. "Thank you for the treatment. Suspend my wake-up call. Start ploy seven for the orthopedic consult or your best judgement if impractical. Tell Lucius no on the Havershem proposal. Hold my calls."

Five hours later.

Detective James Gordon opened his front door and straightened his hat. He went to the elevator and headed down. On the way, he pushed his tongue around his gums and reminded himself for the thousandth time not to brush after drinking orange juice. Exiting the elevator, he tipped his hat to Mrs. Swenson from 3A and petted her huge dog, Percival. Percival slobbered affectionately on his shoe. Gordon walked out of the building and quickly rubbed the slobber off on a paving stone. The purple-gray of the early morning cast shadows from the rooftops. He yawned and crossed the street to his car.

On the passenger seat of his locked vehicle, he found a heavy briefcase covered with dents and scuff marks.

On top was a note. It read:

Our mutual accomplice wanted me to get this to you.

I don't think he made it. Sorry.

The next section was crossed-out several times. The final version read:

If you knew him, perhaps you can imagine what he went through to gather the contents of this case, but I doubt it.

He seemed to trust you. Please don't waste this.

I've seen the bodies.

P.S. There were details he didn't see; I'll leave my own testimony soon. I'm sure an anonymous note won't be any good in court, but neither will I. Hope it helps anyway.

Twenty-seven minutes later.

In the empty study of stately Wayne Manor, the red phone rang. Bruce originally named it the Bilateral Auxiliary Test phone but decided to call it by its color once he wrote that name down. The red phone was not especially loud, but it had a unique ring that could be mistaken for a cicada or a bad furnace. It echoed subtly across the Manor through speakers at the far end of the building and on the lawn and in the Cave.

Alfred Pennyworth swiftly awoke and made his way to the study, passing tall windows shining with the too-bright gleam of sunlight off fresh snow. He arrived on the seventh ring. Circling the desk, Alfred pressed the hidden button inside the bust of Shakespeare to connect the call then, pausing to harness the mighty powers of the thespian, he picked up the red phone.

It was Detective Gordon. "Batman!"

Alfred scowled dramatically. "**What's the news, Detective?**"

"There was a briefcase inside my car this morning. From your lady. She's alive!"

"**Describe it.**"

"Oh, it's got to be the one. I've looked inside, and, boy, you don't do things halfway, do you? I don't understand most of the technical papers, but the other files are awfully intriguing. I'll have the photos developed by this time tomorrow. Ha, when those dirty feds see this mother lode missing they'll be running around like a flock of headless chickens!"

"Detective, what did you mean, 'she's' alive?"

"Yeah, clever job trying to sneak that by me. Guess I should be reassured you'll go the extra mile to keep a secret."

Alfred had not been aware there was a secret. "... **What?**"

"Please. The handwriting on the note was too nice, and she was all sentimental like a dame. Wasn't your slip, if that makes you feel better."

"I-"

"Whoever she is, she's smart too - knew how to use a semicolon. Not sure what lady'd be convinced to go with you, Batman, but she came through. Oh, and she thinks you're dead, so I suggest you find her and let her know otherwise."

"Of course."

"My shift's about to start so I better wrap this up. Keep your head down." The line went dead.

Alfred returned the receiver to the phone's cradle. He left the study and went briskly up to Bruce's door. Alfred gave a sharp knock. There was a hesitation of several seconds before a semi-cogent moan uttered from inside, "Alfred, I declined a wake-up call."

Alfred replied loudly through the door. "A crying shame, Master Bruce. Detective Gordon called. He just received your evidence."

Lying in bed, Bruce Wayne blinked and shot to his feet. When a normal man's joints were worn from a long night of work and laid to stiffen, there were certain noises he made upon trying to stand. To his credit, Bruce only made most of them. He hobbled to the door and flung it open.

"What did he say?"

"That your companion left a briefcase of documents in his car sometime early this morning."

Bruce stared ahead at nothing. "She made it."

"It seem she did."

"Was that all?"

"He suspects your compatriot is a woman by virtue of-"

"Her handwriting."

Alfred closed his mouth and gave a long-suffering nod. "She believes you to be dead."

Bruce, clad in nightwear, stepped into the corridor and pressed a hand against the wall, patting down his unkempt hair with the other. "I see."

"But surely you can find your Catwoman again without much trouble."

Bruce snorted and turned back. "She wouldn't be happy you presume that." Alfred looked perplexed. Bruce gestured for him to forget it. "I'll resolve this. We've planned to meet tonight."

"Ah. Good. You can close this long chapter properly and move on."

"Yes." Bruce hobbled to a bright window and looked out, talking mostly to himself. "Next is subverting the killers' privileges. Study the evidence. Need time. Hm. Keep the meeting brief ..." He continued to mumble quietly until he lapsed into silent thought.

Alfred watched pensively. He noted the dressing on Bruce's head needed changing, and the bruise on his neck had turned a dark indigo. His patient didn't seem concerned and, in fact, had stopped moving.

"Sir?"

Bruce looked back. "Mm?"

"Are you well?"

Bruce tilted his head quizzically and touched the large wrap bandage under his nightshirt. "I ... believe I'm stable, Alfred."

Alfred moved beside him. "An ally just rose from the dead, Master Bruce. I thought you'd be a notch more jubilant."

Bruce exhaled and said nothing for a moment. "It is wonderful news. A miracle. But it's the ..." He bit back a thought and tried again. "I've made grave mistakes."

"I don't understand. Mistakes in thinking you lost her?"

"No. Well, yes. but I accept that was likely unavoidable."

"Then what mistakes?"

"Too many, I suppose. She reminds me of so many. And when I make mistakes, it causes the sort of misery that-

"Stop that, sir! You're being maudlin."

"No, I can't ignore that people die when I fail, Alfred. That's the truth. I fail and they die." Bruce looked down. His voice was grim. "Claiming anything less is rationalization."

"Even if I accepted that lurid claim, there's been no harm this time. You prevailed against your captors, brought home the prize, and the young lady sounds hale and chipper. Her only ailment is a concern for you, a sentiment I can understand. Now what's this about?"

"I'm relieved she survived. Of course I am. But in a perverse way - and it's a wretched thought, I know

-but she ..."

"I can't read your thoughts, Master Bruce."

"Last night when I knew she was lost, on the path home I sought a sense of closure. I had to."

"There's no shame in dealing with grief."

"It would've driven me mad, so I found an acceptance of her being gone. Frankly, I was so numb that it wasn't a challenge. I closed those thoughts and buried them. But now she's back," He balled his fists. "to tear the callus open."

"Master Bruce!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. It wasn't just an act to stave off grief for the sake of my composure. There's been something else that I-"

In his bedroom, the phone rang.

Bruce paused mid-syllable, his body corded with tension. The two men shared a look. With a grimace, Bruce went to his bedside and picked up the phone. His voice rose half an octave and dropped two letter grades.

"Heellooo? Bruce Wayne speaking."

He heard an airy woman's voice. "Bruce dear, it's Beverly. Good morning."

Bruce put on a saccharine smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Beverly! We haven't talked in ages. How is every little thing?"

"Oh, I can't complain. How are you?"

"A lot better now that I've heard your voice."

"Hahaha. Oh Bruce, you wonderful cad."

"Anything new with Tom and the children?"

"Everyone is just divine, thank you. I'm calling to see if you'd like to have an early supper tomorrow here at the Molyneux residence. Tom just had a new Badminton net installed, you see, and he's been ever so eager for a game."

"Badminton ... *great*."

"Oh, goody. Then it's a date. Can't wait to see you there."

"Beverly, if I had a nickel for every time I heard that, well, it wouldn't really change my account much."

"Oh ho ho. You take care now, Brucie. Too-da-loo!"

Bruce hung up the phone. Alfred stood behind him. "I'm sorry, Master Bruce, you were saying?"

Bruce looked annoyed but finally empty of tension. "Forget it. Maybe later. I think I'll take a walk around the grounds."

That evening, near midnight.

Like last time, it was a piece of cake breaking into the King Leopold Academy of Arts. Catwoman walked through the dark and quiet of the painting classroom, her calf-high boots the only muffled sound in the stillness. Shafts of weak moonlight painted stripes on the floor. She had slept through most of the morning, waking on her couch just before noon with a cat on her face. She had a hour-long bath and spent the remainder of the afternoon in a daze, finishing little chores as slowly as possible and trying to banish the flashes of bodies on slabs. It was a close-run decision, her choosing to come. Part stubbornness, part dark curiosity, part whim, Catwoman wasn't in a mood to self-analyze, but the reasons she finally came were the mostly same reasons she did anything.

Still, those excuses alone wouldn't have been enough. Tonight those impulses were guided by an uncomfortable sense of duty. She had a promise to see though, even if that meant walking a stupid lone vigil through a stupid empty room.

Off in the distance, the bells of Makepeace Tower rang. It was midnight. Catwoman quickly glanced over her shoulder. She was convinced Batman was gone, but there was a difference between knowing something and letting your guard down, and slipping in under the noise of a bell was *exactly* the sort of thing Batman did.

The room was still empty.

Catwoman frowned and rubbed her neck. That morning she discovered that whiplash was apparently one of her injuries, though she couldn't remember how she earned it. She took another careful look then turned around.

The air behind her spoke, "Catwoman."

Straining her bruised ribs, Catwoman twisted and aimed a fierce kick at the voice. Her heel connected with Batman's jaw. He rocked slightly from the blow. She cringed, "Jeez!" but Batman was unfazed. He looked down at her. She looked back, thoughts tumbling over each other and falling down. He noticed that she was wearing the same violet outfit as last night - washed and mended, but clearly the same. She noticed that his outfit was new. After this quick, mutual scan, they stared each other in the eye again.

Catwoman remembered that a staring contest with Batman was like trying to out-wait a glacier.

She gently cleared her throat. "Hi."

"My colleague told me you made it. I'm glad."

"I'm glad he got it." She rubbed her neck. "I thought you were in prison. Or worse."

"How did you make it back?"

"I heard orders on the radio for the guards to deal with that fire I assume you set, but a patrol was there when I got out. They saw me leave the infirmary and chased me through the woods. I made it inside one of the garages and locked the door."

"And the aircraft?"

"It just so happened that, uh, the garage was a hanger."

"How did you know the procedure to start it?"

"Luck, I suppose. Turns out they aren't that complex. The tricky part was taking off."

"I'm surprised they didn't shoot the plane."

"Oh, they did, but those turkeys couldn't aim. They only hit the rudder and the wings and the instruments." She grinned. "But those aren't important, right?"

He looked at her gravely.

"That was a joke."

"Hm."

"I mean, the fact that they shot the plane wasn't a joke. That happened."

He grunted. "Then?"

"Turns out I'm not very good at flying. I landed on a frozen lake. Actually, I landed *in* a frozen lake."

"Let me guess, the ice was just thick enough for you to come to a stop, then it broke and the plane sank, neatly hiding all proof from anyone who might look later."

"Yep, that's about it."

"Then, stuck randomly in the huge forest, you quickly found a gas station, or the home of a kindly widow, or a park ranger's post - somewhere to call for a ride. Is that right?"

"How'd you know?"

Batman closed his eyes tiredly. He had dealt with night-types for a long time. "Call it a hunch."

"By the way, your green poncho-cape was sort of ruined. I hope you didn't want it back."

"Don't worry about it."

"So what about you?"

"I did set the fire as a diversion."

"How'd you start a fire that fast?"

"I flipped a car and burned it."

"Of course."

"At the camp, I eavesdropped on their headquarters and learned my diversion wasn't successful. They were still after you, so I took extra measures to draw their attention."

"What did you blow up?"

"Just a watchtower."

"Nice, but I don't think it worked. They kept me surrounded the whole time."

He nodded. "The bureaucrat in charge mentioned that when I kidnapped her."

"You *what*?"

"I tried to convince her to let you go. She was surprisingly defiant. She counter-offered with ... unacceptable alternatives."

"What do you mean? What did she offer you?"

"Nothing reasonable. Doesn't matter. Your escape ended the stalemate before you forced me to do something drastic."

"Hold on, what do you mean, 'I forced you'? What did she ask you to do?"

"It's unimportant."

"Call me crazy, but you sound like my life was some sort of burden you were coerced with. You can imagine how a girl might take that the wrong way." She played it off with a hollow chuckle but eyed him carefully. "But that's silly ... right?"

"I didn't mean to imply you were a burden. It was nothing like that."

"Great. Then what did she say?" Catwoman took a two steps forward and stopped beside his shoulder. "I think I'd like to know."

Batman stood motionless. After a moment he produced a small envelope and handed it to her. She looked inside and found twenty-four hundred dollar bills. He spoke coldly, "That concludes our arrangement." He turned to leave.

Catwoman looked up from the payment. "That's it? No words?"

He didn't respond.

She crossed her arms. "I used to think it was funny, people cracking wise about the Big Grumpy Bat, but your act is really starting to wear thin."

He stopped and glanced back at her. It was a dismissal as much as a question.

"I get it. You're not nice. You're not ... happy. And you obviously never liked me very much. But after all we've been through ..."

"What?"

"After all we've done, you still treat me like some tagalong you barely tolerate! Like dirt!"

This got a rise out of him. "I never said-"

She got in his face. "I'm not expecting some big show of camaraderie, but are you truly this damaged? I'm not joking, I sincerely want to know: are you so beyond the rest of us that you don't feel empathy? Or any reaction besides your damn grim stoicism? God, you almost died ten times." She gently grasped the glove of his broken hand. "Does anything affect you at all?"

He repressed a twinge and pulled the hand away. "I manage."

"Fine. Numb away the world." She let go. "But you don't fool me. I used to think you had these high walls inside, that you didn't let anything through, but I don't believe that metaphor anymore."

"What are you possibly talking about?"

"It's not walls. The world does get to you. You're not that perfect. No, what you have is a pit, deep as the Grand Canyon. You start to feel something? Oops, better shovel it into the pit. Anything that might hurt you, that might challenge those twisted things you call your convictions, you bury so deeply that it never sees the light of day. And I say fine! Ignore it all. That's your business. But why do you despise me so much?"

"I don-"

"What have I done to offend you? Is your moral code so puritanically hidebound that you're still bitter over some missing jewels? After the fires I pulled you out of, can't you at least pretend to care?"

"You don't know the first-"

"Every marginally nice thing you said, every pleasant gesture was an act, wasn't it? Just enough string to keep me in the game because you needed your little tool."

"**Stop!**" Batman rose to his imposing height and glared down. "You helped me pursue a killer, and my gratitude is sincere, but I don't justify myself." He paused and dropped in volume. "Not to you."

"Excuse me?"

Batman continued in a level voice. "I promised you a truce. I won't pretend I can redeem you, but as long as beasts use my city to hunt, I'll have bigger concerns than petty larceny. Consider that my best-

"No," Catwoman shoved her way past him and walked briskly to the door. "You don't get the last word. Not tonight. Keep your self-gratifying platitudes. I'm out of here."

Cities had homeless communities. This was a universal fact, and its recognition was a fine sign of the century's progressive spirit, but what precious few cared to learn was that every homeless community was just that - a community. And in the streets of the East End, Peggy Newton was the closest the local homeless had to a mayor. If an unfortunate soul was newly dispossessed, she would teach them the rules and help them along for a spell. When a dispute arose or someone needed to talk to the cops, she was their mediator and advocate. No one had elected her, and she never asked for the job. As far as Peggy saw it, she was just a friendly neighbor doing a favor from time to time.

One of her neighbors was Catwoman. In the winters, Peggy slept in a certain condemned building in a secluded courtyard that Catwoman often used as a shortcut. They occasionally stopped to chat, trading the sort of useful gossip and observations that each woman was uniquely privileged to know. Tonight, Peggy was relaxing in front of a small fire on her building's stoop when she saw the Leading Lady of Larceny pass by.

Peggy called out. "Hey there, fancy lady. Where'r you up to this night?"

Catwoman was so caught up in her fuming thoughts that being called was a surprise. She chuckled despite herself. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Peg."

"Suppose not. Just you look unhappy though. Care to warm y'self? Can't imagine it's too nice in those pajamas."

"Heh, sure." Catwoman took a seat on the crate and held her hands to the fire. After a moment of simple pleasure, she remembered what she was holding and had a spark of inspiration. "Hey, Peggy?"

"Yes?"

"Sorry to bring this up, but did you hear about a couple who disappeared around 8th street recently?"

"Mmmmmmm, yes I did hear. Shameful bad news, that. Had everyone scared. It was the, uh, the uh-

"The Duprees."

"Yes, that's it. What brings them to mind?"

"Well, nothing I suppose. I just had a question."

"Shoot."

"You know all the people around here right?"

"That's what they say."

"You know whenever people really need help? You try to help them out, right?"

"I know folks. What'r you getting at?"

"I want you to do me a favor. This winter's tough. Whoever needs a little boost, I want you to pass along a gift. Spread it around." Catwoman handed over a small envelope.

Peggy opened the envelope. "Oh my stars!"

Catwoman smiled and stood up. "Just remember that you didn't get it from me, Peg. Merry Christmas."

After showering and reapplying his dressings, Bruce was determined to catch on work he missed from resting all day. He paced through the dim Manor in no mood to sleep. As the quiet darkness of the early morning made mirrors of the windows, he reached his favorite room of the home, the great Wayne Library (not to be confused with the various Wayne Libraries of the public and university sort). He found a few legal texts that might illuminate his options with what he was tentatively calling the Waller cabal. As he read, a quiet record player in the corner crooned Glenn Miller, Bing Crosby, The Andrews Sisters, a concerto by Barber, and a symphony by Bantock. Bruce thought it prudent to keep up to date musically. Some pieces were a chore, and some he enjoyed.

When Alfred visited him after a respectful interval, he was writing the recent mission's report with both hands (the wrapped and splinted fist was just the right shape to hold a pen). Usually Bruce used a typewriter, but every so often he tried two pens instead: it was almost as fast as typing once he found his pace, writing different pages simultaneously was wonderful mental exercise, and it kept his off-hand in practice. Bruce was naturally left-handed, but he used his right in the rare cases that he needed to jot down a note in disguise.

Alfred placed a mug of tea in front of him and began to sip his own, an old tradition of theirs.

"Thank you, Alfred."

"My pleasure, sir. If you've reached a spot to pause, I was hoping to hear more of your thoughts that were interrupted early yesterday by Mrs. Molyneux."

Bruce nodded absently, having expected this sooner or later. "Alright. Where was I?"

"If I recall, you expressed dismay that your Catwoman managed to make it home, and before that implied it involved the guilt you felt at some mistake."

Bruce gave an amused eyebrow twitch. Alfred's memory for old conversations was awe-inspiring.

"Yes, that's right. Of course I'm relieved she made it."

"Then what was the concern?"

"I act on principle. Otherwise, I'm the beast my worst slanderers paint me as. Without principles, I'm nothing."

Alfred nodded encouragingly. His young ward liked to sound dispassionate and objective. He had a habit of waxing philosophical when he drifted near any deep emotion. For Alfred, it was as revealing as a blush.

"That makes sense, sir."

"I am my principles, and a part of me worries she can break them."

"How do you mean?"

"It was ... the second time we met, at the painting classroom in September."

"Last September?"

"Over a year ago. I had cornered her. For anyone else, it would have been a forgone conclusion. I would have restrained her and called the authorities, but you have to understand that she was ..."

"She was what?"

"As I stood in front of her, I realized that she was too elusive. Even then I suspected how skilled she was. If I left her alone, no restraint I carried would hold her for long. And if I stayed, the police would have shot me on sight, certainly back in those days. I didn't have the time or the means to carry her to Blackgate myself. I had caught what I couldn't hold."

"A most perplexing dilemma."

"In an instant, I realized the only alternative. It was ..." Bruce paused and looked down at his mug. "I had to hurt her. Just enough. Something minor. I've hurt men and women before, all justified. It wouldn't even be unprovoked. She would fight if I approached. But I wasn't willing to do that Alfred. She beat me without even trying. She won."

"So you fear that you acted with mercy?"

"No, that's not it. It- It changed me. I've second-guessed that night a hundred times. She didn't deserve to walk away. It's crippled me."

"Come now, sir."

"There have been at least a dozen instances since then with other targets when I've held back out of this ... this mistaken notion of gentleness. I can't afford to doubt like that. If I hesitate, someone dies, probably me. Before that moment of weakness, before her, I was decisive. I acted with certainty. Now I never know if I might lose my nerve."

"Are matters really so stark? It's not like you've been avoiding her since then."

"I've been bluffing. When I confront her, it's just to scare her off, hoping one night she makes a mistake so I can arrest her safely." Bruce shrugged. "I've also ruined or scared off her fences and customers. That's worked fairly well."

"Accepting your grievances for a minute, Bruce - though I'm surprised now is the first I've heard of it," Bruce looked away at this mild rebuke and sipped his tea. "The matter sounds settled. You were even willing to work with her. What about her sudden survival has you discomfited?"

Bruce looked at the floor and collected his thoughts. "There was a point last night when I confronted the leader of the Fort's project. She-

"*She?*"

"The leader was woman."

"Of a military operation?"

Bruce nodded that he would share the details later. "This leader is some sort of spymaster. She showed me that Catwoman's life was in jeopardy, then she offered an alternative. She wanted to recruit me."

Alfred frowned. "I see."

"That's when I broke. I almost did it, Alfred. I almost agreed. If Catwoman hadn't escaped at that moment, I would have given it all up to save her. Even joining a band of murderers."

"Surely, you would have found some opportunity to give this woman the slip when the opportunity arose."

Bruce frowned. "I know that now, but that didn't occur to me then. And that's the problem, don't you see? I was ready to sacrifice everything."

"To save a life."

"I've saved many lives, Alfred, and sometimes that means pretending to give up, but I've never actually surrendered, not in my mind. No matter how bleak the circumstances, it was always a longer plan to get away clean. But this time I was truly ready to surrender. I was saved by dumb luck."

"And you feel you surrendered because she was the victim?"

Bruce held his mug against his forehead. "I don't know. I think so."

"Why?"

Bruce closed his eyes, lost in a memory.

...

He was back to that September night in the classroom, brasher and a few scars lighter. Catwoman was

re-hanging the painting in front of him. She knew he was there. Amateurs panicked around him; only the diehard pros took their time.

With a final adjustment, she turned with a smile, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He stared back impassively. Their original meeting was brief and chaotic, this was his first close look at her. The Dark Knight was the furthest thing from sentimental, but he was in his own way an artist, a genius of movement and control, and genius in any art recognized beauty.

She planted a jaunty hand on her hip and stepped forward. "Batman, right? I don't think we were properly introduced last time."

A raw corner of his mind whispered that she could have modeled for Vargas. Of course, Bruce Wayne met elegant ladies all the time. He wasn't unappreciative, but static loveliness rarely got under his skin. He only had eyes for motion. Years of self-improvement had honed his appreciation and whetted his passion for grace in movement. That was the acme. That was perfection.

She took another step, arched an eyebrow, "Cat got your tongue?"

There was a quality in ballet called *ballon* - the appearance of being lightweight and effortless while jumping. The dancer with *ballon* would float through her motions, never faltering, a master of her form. He wondered if she had been a dancer. He told himself to step forward. He told himself subdue the threat. He waited for his impulses to agree, but for once his demons were silent.

He stepped aside.

...

Bruce opened his eyes, the memory banished. "I'm not sure. First I let her go and now I lose my cool when she's threatened. I broke a man's arm last night for hurting her, did I mention that? It was a moment of rage. I thought I was beyond that." He flashed a sneer of bitter contempt, "Beyond that weakness."

"Rage was always the millstone 'round your neck, sir. I fear a man's lower nature can rise long after he thinks it's been laid to rest. And you've had far crasser excuses for your sin than protecting a lady."

"It's no excuse. You asked why I've worried? I suppose I have an odd sympathy for her, and that disturbs me. I compromised, Alfred. I gave in."

"Then what will you do, sir?"

"What I always do. I'll try harder tomorrow." He exhaled slowly, grimacing at a soreness in his ribs. "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow."

Alfred recognized the line and continued, "Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time. And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death." Alfred gave a wan smile. "You know, Master Bruce, Macbeth was a tragedy."

"Yes." Bruce nodded. "Yes, it was."

Five days later.

Washington D.C.

Amanda Waller never drank. She learned that lesson after an ill-advised boat trip with Hemingway a few years ago. But right now she was awfully tempted to head down to the lobby bar for something high-proof and distilled. The Fremont Hotel was decent enough, but she couldn't wait her new housing in Washington to be arranged. Waller never spent longer than a month at a time in the capital. She liked to manage her projects in person.

She learned back in her chair and stared at the sloppy collection of notes and depositions about the Fort Morrison debacle on her desk . Most were in an open manila folder titled:

Top Secret

Department of War Case File #V183: Project Galen

[suspended pending review]

Special Investigator A. Waller

Addendum C – Trespasser Dossier #1

She had to give a report tomorrow in front a panel of senior officials. Waller could count on one hand the number of her operations that ended in an investigative review, at least half as many of anyone else at her level. Her performance wasn't an accident. She couldn't just be good, she had to be beyond reproach.

For the fifth time in an hour, she turned on her tape recorder.

"Another thing I should mention, if a bit unrelated, is that the presence of portable radios was exceptionally useful. I know the Army can't hope to supply every company with one anytime soon, let alone every platoon, but some day small radios will be so commonplace that every squad will carry one. I expect the entire infantry doctrine will have to be rewritten to take advantage of this strategic nimbleness.

"But back to the Bat Man. Nationality: unknown, presumed American given his accent. He speaks English and at least modest Spanish. Age: unknown. Height: six feet and between two and five inches; his costume is deceiving on this point - probably by design. I'm told he weighs just over two hundred pounds, naturally also an estimate. He clearly has an athlete's body. He's white. His eye color is unknown. His hair color is black, unless he dyes the hint of stubble I managed to glimpse. Frankly, that's not a precaution I would put past him. We can safely assume he now has a deep scar along his lower abdomen.

"Above all that, his knowledge is the fascinating factor. Not only is he educated, university-level

certainly, he's *informed*. He sees the big game. Good gracious, that's rare for an operative. Every lesson in the book says that you can't reach his level of field sophistication without backers - a proper government, or at least something respectable like a fruit company. No good Samaritan actually runs around trying to single-handedly enforce their worldview and gets that far. I don't know what to think. We still don't know how he faked that gas attack.

"Officially, our trespasser is a John Doe. He could be lying or mentally ill, but I'm strangely convinced to accept his story, at least for now. Naturally, I looked up this Gotham Bat myth my first day back, borrowing a few assistants to compile every clipping that mentions him. They've been busy as beavers, of course. There's plenty of chaff to sort through and very little wheat when it comes to urban legends, and that tendency seems to run tenfold in Gotham. The twopenny rags are fascinated with their little wonder and mention him monthly, but they also have the journalistic integrity of fever dreams. Meanwhile, to the respectable papers he might as well not exist, just a few hesitant mentions in his early days. This disparity begs the question: is his audacity a ruse so that no authority takes him seriously? It sounds preposterous, but I honestly can't say. I'm starting to think it's almost brilliant. There's no consensus over who he is, who he works for, or even *what* he is. Half the witnesses think he can fly. Don't get me started on what they think the cape can do.

"After all this, I'm almost morbidly eager to hear the GCPD's opinion. Lord, do I pity the soul who has to manage that case file. Of course, I haven't approached them yet. City cops can be very tribal around Washington operators like myself. It's been challenging enough pulling strings with the Justice Department to stop their case on Project Galen's loose ends. I'll have to find a worthwhile gift or threat before I say hello for something this size. They're supposed to hate the guy, but everyone knows how dirty the force is in Gotham. That's the funny thing about dirty cops, they might be friends with anyone. We'll see.

"Regardless, what I've read confirms what I heard in the past. The Bat Man habitually assaults criminals of every stripe, including the police, usually catching them red-handed. Never known to kill. What's curious is that he hasn't paid attention to the government besides local authorities, and there's been no account of him leaving the city. Perhaps he noticed Project Galen's collection teams, fine, but is this the first time he's followed a trail beyond the city? Why the Fort? Is he escalating or has he already attacked us in the past and we didn't notice? Nothing in the papers contradicts what he claims his motivation was, but this is still the biggest question mark of all as far as our next action.

"For now, he and his accomplice are wanted felons. We're still bickering on what exactly to put on the wanted posters. Some of my peers, and I use that term loosely, are going to call them foreign agents. That entirely contradicts what we know, though admittedly, we know very little. I'm going to recommend domestic anarchists. It's not true, at least not in the sense the brass will interpret, but I think that's the cleanest label we have. As a bonus, if I do manage to turn one or both of them, the paperwork is slightly easier under 'anarchist' than 'spy'. Funny that.

"Speaking of turning them, I'll admit I was impressed. These Bat stories are fancified claptrap, but if even a ounce of them is true, well, that's awfully something. I saw enough in person. The gloves, for instance. I have to mention this in case I forget. His hands and forearms were covered in a heavy glove, either a leather or a very stiff fabric, with a spine of metal points along the outside. Anecdotes from Gotham as well as my subordinate's encounter make it clear that these gloves are designed to catch and ward off blades and other weapons. The notion that anyone would seek to confront a dagger with their empty hands astounds me, but I'm told a few martial experts do specialize in this sort of lunacy, the main vulnerability being cuts to the hands and arms. My subordinate claims that Bat Man is something

of a virtuoso, and the Lieutenant isn't one to exaggerate. This, of course, begs the question: why practice so many extra hours for such an obscure skill? Even if he faced blades every day, why not carry a simple parrying weapon of his own? Perhaps the extra challenge or danger is some perverse thrill. He seemed too purposeful to be that kind of thrill-seeker, but I think it's safe to say his psyche isn't predictable by any common model.

"It's a shame our operation at the Fort was breached. Those missing files have me in more hot water than a Turkish bath. I wouldn't be surprised if Hoover sends a dozen extra boys to the local branch to turn over some stones. There would already be a proper dragnet if we didn't think he was hiding in the least governable city in the country. That said, I'd almost call the night a net win for the novelty alone. That's always been my vice, I suppose. I still haven't heard any credible theories on how he entered the Fort in the first place. Imagine sending someone so gifted to go plant a mine on Mussolini's toilet. And he doesn't seem to have any resentment about working on a team. In fact, now that I think about it, it might be worth the effort to find the partner again just for his sake. Won't be easy, but I'm sure there can't be too many ladies who prance around at night, not even in Gotham. Not off a stage, anyway.

"Of course I don't want to sound too cavalier. He's obviously a hostile, and it won't do to underestimate him. Who knows what scores of allies he has? He's lasted this long, after all. Using him is an intriguing idea, but as a matter of practicality someone's probably going to have to stop him sooner or later. A shame. Let's just hope they don't ask me to do it before I can make a deal. I hate to waste good talent."

The End.

