

THE DARK KNIGHT RISES™

BASED ON THE WARNER BROS. PICTURES FILM



NOVELIZATION BY **GREG COX**

SCREENPLAY BY **JONATHAN NOLAN AND
CHRISTOPHER NOLAN**

STORY BY **CHRISTOPHER NOLAN & DAVID S. GOYER**

BASED UPON CHARACTERS APPEARING IN
COMIC BOOKS PUBLISHED BY **DC COMICS**

BATMAN CREATED BY **BOB KANE**

THE

DARK KNIGHT RISES

THE OFFICIAL MOVIE NOVELIZATION



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TITAN BOOKS

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THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

EIGHT YEARS AGO...



“Harvey Dent was needed. He was everything Gotham’s been crying out for.”

Police Commissioner James Gordon stood before a podium in front of the courthouse where the late district attorney, supposedly martyred in the line of duty, had once fought for justice by prosecuting the city’s powerful underworld kingpins. Somber dignitaries, including the mayor and city council, were on hand to honor Dent’s memory. A black funeral wreath framed a large color portrait of a handsome man with wavy blond hair, a strong jaw, and a winning smile. Harvey Dent looked every bit a champion of justice, but Gordon had seen his other face. The commissioner hesitated briefly, before continuing.

“He was...a hero. Not the hero we deserved. The hero we needed. Nothing less than a knight shining brightly even in Gotham’s darkest hours. But I knew Harvey Dent. I was...his friend. And it will be a long time before someone inspires us the way he did.” Gordon gathered his notes, anxious to get this over with and exit the podium.

“I believed in Harvey Dent.”

The words caught in his throat. With any luck, people would think that he was simply overcome with emotion. God forbid they should guess what he was really feeling. That was a secret he shared with only one other man, a man who had sacrificed his own legend to preserve Dent’s legacy and reputation. A man whose face Gordon had never seen. Gotham’s true dark knight.

Is he watching this? Gordon wondered, his eyes searching the crowd. Where is he now?

And will Gotham ever see him again?

CHAPTER ONE



SOMEWHERE IN EASTERN EUROPE

A land cruiser sped over a rugged mountain road, past rocky slopes devoid of human habitation. Scraggly patches of scrub and greenery dotted the barren gray hills. The cruiser had the road all to itself as it raced to make its rendezvous before the sun went down. It bounced over the rough terrain beneath a gloomy, overcast sky that was almost the same gray color as the hills. A keening wind whipped through the desolate peaks and canyons.

A bad omen, Dr. Leonid Pavel thought. The middle-aged scientist sat tensely in the middle of the vehicle, flanked by grim-faced men armed with automatic weapons. More soldiers guarded the prisoners in the rear of the cruiser: three silent figures with hoods over their heads. They sat rigidly with their hands cuffed, under the watchful gaze of the guards.

Pavel squirmed uncomfortably, feeling more like a prisoner than a passenger. He ran an anxious hand through a mop of unruly white hair. Sweat glued his shirt to his back. *Am I doing the right thing?* he fretted. *What if I'm making a terrible mistake?*

Other sounds began to be heard. Just when he had convinced himself that he should never have accepted the Americans' offer, the cruiser arrived at its destination—a remote airstrip overlooking a war-torn city. Artillery fire boomed in the distance, the reverberations echoing off the desolate hillsides. Sirens blared. The sounds of the conflict, which had been going on for months now, reminded Pavel why he had been so eager to flee the country for a safer, more civilized location. This was no place for a man of his intellect—not anymore.

The cruiser squealed to a stop, and the guards hustled him out of the vehicle. An unmarked turbojet airplane waited on the runway, along with a small reception committee consisting of a blond man in a suit and a small escort of armed guards. Although the soldiers bore no identifying uniforms or insignia, Pavel assumed they were US Special Forces, probably from the CIA's own secretive Special Activities Division. The elite paramilitary teams specialized in sabotage, assassination, counter-terrorism, reconnaissance...and extractions. Pavel hoped he could trust them to keep him safe, especially after his recent narrow escape.

His driver shoved him toward the man in the suit.

“Dr. Pavel?” The man smiled and held out his hand. “I'm CIA.” He did not volunteer his name, not that Pavel would have believed him if he had. The anonymous American agent handed a leather briefcase over to the driver of the land cruiser, who accepted it eagerly. The briefcase contained more than enough funds to make this risky delivery worth the driver's while. He gestured behind him.

“He was not alone,” the driver announced.

The CIA man spotted the hooded men in the back of the cruiser. He frowned at Pavel.

“You don’t get to bring friends.”

“They are not my friends!” the scientist protested. Indeed, he wanted to get as far away from the hooded men as possible. *You don’t know what they’re capable of doing!*

“Don’t worry,” the driver told the CIA agent. “No charge for them.”

The American contemplated the prisoners dubiously.

“Why would I want them?”

“They were trying to grab your prize,” the driver explained, smirking. “They work for the mercenary. For the masked man.”

A look of excitement came over the CIA agent’s nondescript, unmemorable features. He gave the prisoners a closer look.

“Bane?”

The driver nodded.

“Get ’em on board,” the CIA agent ordered his men, swiftly revising his plans. Clearly this was an opportunity he wasn’t about to pass up. He extracted a cell phone from his jacket. “I’ll call them in.”

Pavel swallowed hard. He didn’t like the way this was going. He shuddered at the memory of the attempted kidnapping, and at the very mention of his attackers’ infamous commander. Bane had become synonymous with atrocities, at least in this part of the world. Had it not been for the militia’s timely intervention, he would now be in the killer’s clutches.

Given a choice, he would have left Bane’s men far behind them.

Within minutes, they were in the air, flying low over the remote mountains in an attempt to avoid detection. Special Agent Bill Wilson checked on Dr. Pavel, who was safely tucked into a passenger seat, before turning his attention to their prisoners. Beneath his cool, professional exterior, Wilson was thrilled at the prospect of finally getting some reliable intel on Bane. To date, the notorious mercenary had defied the Agency’s best efforts to neutralize or even co-opt him. They didn’t even know what he looked like beneath that grotesque mask of his. The man was a mystery— with a body count.

Forget Pavel, Wilson thought. If I can get the 411 on Bane, that would be quite the feather in my cap. There might even be a promotion in it for me. Maybe a post in Washington or New York.

The hooded men knelt by the cargo door, their wrists cuffed behind them. Special Forces commandoes stood guard over the prisoners. Wilson grabbed the first captive at random.

“What are you doing in the middle of my operation?” he demanded.

The prisoner kept his mouth shut.

Fine, Wilson thought. *We'll do it your way*. He hadn't expected the man to crack without a little persuasion. He pulled a semiautomatic pistol from beneath his jacket and placed the muzzle against the man's head. The prisoner flinched, but remained silent. Wilson decided to up the ante. He raised his voice so that all three prisoners could hear him even through their hoods.

"The flight plan I just filed with the Agency lists me, my men, and Dr. Pavel here. But only one of you."

He threw open the cargo door. Cold air invaded the cabin as the wind outside howled like a storm in torment. Wilson grabbed onto a strap to anchor himself. He nodded at the Special Forces guys, who seized the first prisoner and hung him out the cargo door. The wind tore at his hair and clothing, threatening to yank him out of the paramilitaries' grip. Wooded peaks waited thousands of feet below.

"First to talk gets to stay on my aircraft!" Wilson shouted over the wind. He cocked his weapon. "So...who paid you to grab Dr. Pavel?"

The men remained silent. Bane's goons were loyal, Wilson would give him that. He would have to push harder.

Time for a little sleight of hand...

He fired his weapon out the door, the sharp report of the gun blasting through the wailing wind. The SAD guys yanked the stubborn prisoner back into the plane, and then clubbed him with a baton before he could make a sound. In theory, the other two prisoners would think that their comrade was dead and thrown overboard.

Maybe that would loosen their tongues.

"He didn't fly so good," Wilson lied. "Who wants to try next?"

The Special Forces men shifted to the second hooded prisoner. Moving with practiced efficiency, they hung the would-be kidnapper out the door, high above the mountains. The drop was enough to put the fear of God into just about anyone.

"Tell me about Bane!" Wilson demanded. "Why does he wear the mask?"

Only the wind answered him.

Frustrated, Wilson placed his gun against the second man's head. He was getting fed up with the prisoners' stubborn refusal to cooperate. Did they think he was just joking around here? He cocked his gun again, but still...nothing.

"Lot of loyalty for a hired gun!"

"Or," a new voice interrupted, "maybe he's wondering why someone would shoot a man before throwing him out of an airplane."

The muffled voice came from the third prisoner, who appeared larger and better built than the other two. Muscles bulged beneath his black leather jacket and weathered fatigues. He had the build of a bouncer or professional wrestler, and held his head high despite the hood.

Giving up on the second man, Wilson had the soldiers haul the useless waste of flesh back into

the plane, and then slammed the cargo door shut to keep out the howling wind, making it easier to conduct an interrogation. It was time for some answers.

“Wise guy, huh?” He examined the third captive. “At least you can talk. Who are you?”

“We are nothing,” the man replied. “We are the dirt beneath your feet. And no one cared who was, before I put on the mask.”

Whoa, Wilson thought, caught off guard. A peculiar mixture of excitement and apprehension got his heart racing. *Did he just say what I think he said?*

He approached the prisoner warily, holding his breath, and yanked off the man’s hood, exposing a disturbing visage that Wilson immediately recognized from captured spy photos and combat footage. It was a face—and mask—that inspired nightmares in the bloodier corners of the globe.

Dark eyes gleamed above an intimidating dark blue mask that concealed the bottom half of the man’s face, covering his nose, mouth, and chin. The mask, made of rubber with riveted metal components, was held there in part by a thick vertical strap that bisected the mercenary’s brow and hairless cranium. Two rows of coiled steel breathing tubes ran above and below some sort of built-in inhaler that covered the man’s mouth. It gave his face a vaguely skull-like appearance. Pipes ran along the edges of the mask to a pair of miniature canisters at the back of his skull. Air hissed as he breathed. No sign of fear showed in the man’s piercing eyes. He spoke calmly, and with complete assurance.

“Who we are does not matter,” Bane said. “What matters is our plan.”

Wilson was fascinated by the man’s elaborate headwear, which resembled a specialized gas mask. Was it there purely for effect, or did the breathing apparatus serve some vital function? He gestured at it.

“If I pull this off, will you die?”

“It would be extremely painful,” Bane answered.

Good to know, Wilson thought. He had no sympathy for the ruthless mercenary. Bane was a bad guy who deserved to suffer. “You’re a big guy.”

“For you,” Bane clarified.

A chill ran down Wilson’s spine, but he tried not to show it. It was important to remain in control of the interrogation.

“Was being caught part of your plan?”

“Of course,” Bane said. “Dr. Pavel refused our offer, in favor of yours. We had to know what he told you about us.”

“Nothing!” the scientist shouted from his seat. He sounded absolutely terrified by Bane’s presence, even though the mercenary was safely in custody. Pavel’s eyes were wide with fright. He called out frantically, as though he was pleading for his life. “I said nothing!”

Wilson ignored Pavel’s hysterics.

“Why not just ask him?” he said, nodding his head in the scientist’s direction.

“He would not have told us.”

“You have methods,” Wilson said.

“Him, I need healthy,” Bane explained. “You present no such problems.”

The man’s utter confidence was unnerving. Wilson laughed, mostly for his men’s benefit, then glanced up as a deep bass tone rumbled somewhere above them. The unexpected sound penetrated the plane’s fuselage, competing with the sound of the engines.

Thunder? The weather report hadn’t predicted any storms.

A massive transport plane, many times larger than the small turbojet aircraft, descended from above. Its dull gray hull gave no indication of its loyalties as it drew dangerously close to the smaller plane. A ramp opened beneath the transport and four men dropped down, hanging from cables—two on either side of their target. They were armed and ready.

The rumbling grew louder by the moment. Turbulence rattled the plane, causing it to lurch to one side. Wilson struggled to hang on to his balance. He exchanged a puzzled look with the leader of the Special Forces Group, a sergeant named Rodriguez, who peered out of one of the plane’s small windows. The soldier squinted into the fading sunlight.

“Sir?”

Wilson didn’t know what was happening, but he wasn’t about to show it. He still had an interrogation to conduct.

“Well, congratulations,” he taunted Bane. “What’s the next step of the master plan?”

“Crashing this plane.” Bane rose slowly to his feet. “With no survivors.”

An armed man suddenly appeared outside a window, thousands of feet above the ground. Startled, one of the guards spun toward the window, but not quickly enough. Shots rang out from opposite directions as a pair of snipers fired through windows. Glass shattered and Wilson’s men dropped to the floor. Blood and chaos spilled throughout the cabin. Death amended the flight plan.

No! Wilson thought. *This can’t be happening! I’m in charge here!*

* * *

Outside the plane, the other two men attached sturdy steel grapples to the fuselage. Thick, industrial-strength cables connected the two aircraft as one of the men signaled the crew aboard the transport. Powerful hoists activated, tugging on the tail of the smaller plane that flew below. Groaning winches exerted tremendous pressure on the captured turbojet. Its tail was yanked upward.

The entire cabin tilted forward at an almost ninety-degree angle, throwing the CIA agent and his men off balance. Loose baggage and debris tumbled toward the front of the plane.

The CIA man clutched onto a seat to keep from falling, but dead and wounded soldiers plunged through the upended cabin, plummeting past Dr. Pavel, who remained strapped to his seat. The frantic scientist tried to process these unexpected disasters, but things were happening too fast.

I knew it, he despaired. I shouldn't have tried to flee. There was no escape for me. Not from Bane.

Only the masked man seemed prepared for the sudden change in orientation. Falling forward, he wrapped his thick legs around the back of a nearby seat and seized the CIA agent's head with both hands. His wrists were still cuffed together, but that didn't stop him from cracking the American's neck as easily as someone else might tear open a candy wrapper.

The nameless operative died instantly, far from home.

Bane turned the corpse into a weapon, dropping it onto a young sergeant, who was slammed into the cockpit door with a heavy thud. The sergeant's own body went limp. Pavel couldn't tell if he was dead or simply unconscious. Not that it truly mattered—the panicked scientist was too frightened for his own life to worry about some unlucky American soldier.

Bane will kill us all to get what he wants.

He stared down at the front of the cabin, which was now the bottom of what felt like an endless roller coaster. Gravity pulled on Pavel, and he propped his feet against the back of the seat in front of him, pushing away from it.

The plane shook violently—it was tearing itself apart. He could feel the destructive vibrations through the floor, the seat, and his spine. He was a physicist, not an aeronautics engineer, but even he knew the plane couldn't take much more of this.

The wind howled through the shattered windows. Staring through the broken glass, he saw the right wing shear off before his eyes. The plane lurched to one side.

This is it, he realized. We're all going to die.

* * *

Outside, the four men climbed the tail of the dangling aircraft. They moved briskly and efficiently, carrying out their mission. The second wing sheared off, plummeting toward the unforgiving peak below. A cloud of smoke and debris erupted where the severed wing hit the mountains.

The men quickened their pace. They attached explosives to the tail of the plane. Leaving little margin for error, they jumped away from the aircraft, swinging out on their tethers...

Bane snapped the handcuffs as though they were cheap plastic toys. Opening his legs, he released his grip on the chair and dropped with remarkable agility down the cabin, somersaulting through the air.

until he reached Pavel, at which point he thrust out his arms to halt his controlled descent. He clearly knew just what he was doing—and what he wanted.

Pavel's eyes widened in fear.

A deafening explosion tore off the rear door of the cabin, nearly giving him a heart attack. Acri white smoke instantly filled the cabin. Bane's men dropped into the plane through the smoke, suspended on cables. Pavel watched anxiously, uncertain what was happening.

Was Bane here to kill him—or save him?

A heavy object was lowered into the cabin. A body bag, Pavel realized. Bane laid it out atop the backs of the seats next to Pavel. *Is that for me?* the scientist wondered.

Then he realized that the ominous black plastic bag was already occupied. Bane unzipped the bag to reveal the body of a stranger, who nonetheless looked vaguely familiar. It took Pavel a moment to realize that the dead man was roughly the same size and age as himself, with the same swarthy complexion and unruly white hair. There was even a distinct resemblance to their faces.

I don't understand, he thought. *What does this mean?*

Bane didn't waste time explaining. He tore open Pavel's sleeve, then reached into a hidden pocket in his own jacket's lining, removing a length of surgical tubing. Hollow needles sprouted from both ends of the tubing. Bane kept a firm grip on Pavel's arm. He palpated a thick vein at its crook.

Wait, Pavel thought. *Don't...*

But it was no use. Bane jabbed the needle into his arm, expertly threading the vein on the first try. Pavel winced in pain. He had never liked needles.

What are you doing?

Swiftly taping the first needle in place, Bane inserted the other end of the tube into the arm of the corpse. Dark venous blood began to flow through it toward the dead man. Confused and horrified, Pavel watched aghast as Bane performed compressions upon the dead man's chest, *drawing the blood into the lifeless body.*

The scientist felt sick to his stomach.

Less than a pint later, the obscene transfusion was over. Bane withdrew the needle from Pavel's arm and gestured for him to apply pressure to the wound to keep it from bleeding out.

Meanwhile, an armed mercenary plucked the hoods from his comrades' heads, then took hold of the first captive and hooked him to a cable. He hung on tightly as it pulled them both up through the cabin toward freedom. Within moments, they had disappeared from sight.

So there is a way out, Pavel realized. *Maybe there was still hope for him—if Bane didn't kill him first. I need to get off this plane before it crashes!*

The second prisoner, no longer bound, started to clip himself to a cable.

Bane shook his head.

“Friend,” he said gently. “They expect one of us in the wreckage.”

The other man nodded in understanding. Without a word of protest, he unhooked himself from the life-saving cable. He clambered down toward Bane and clasped his leader's arm. His eyes glowed with the fervor of a true believer.

"Have we started the fire?" the man asked.

Bane squeezed his arm in return.

"The fire rises."

Evidently that was good enough, for the man handed Bane the line. He clipped it around Pavel, checking to make sure it was secure, and then produced a knife that he must have taken from one of his men— or perhaps one of the murdered American soldiers. Pavel gulped at the sight of the gleaming steel blade, imagining it slicing across his throat, but Bane merely slashed through Pavel's seat belt, cutting him loose.

Gravity seized Pavel as he began to fall forward at last. He flailed in panic, searching for something to grab onto before he plunged to the bottom of the cabin.

Help me! he thought. *I'm falling...!*

They slipped free of the seats, hanging in the chaos, several feet above the cockpit doors and the dead bodies heaped there. Smoke and blood filled the cabin. Pavel wondered if the pilot was still vainly trying to regain control of the wingless aircraft. Loose bits of ash and debris blew against his face. His ears still rang from the explosion. His legs dangled in the air.

Bane took out a small hand-held detonator, and looked him in the eyes.

"Calm, doctor. Now is not the time for fear. That comes later."

He pressed the firing button. Pavel couldn't hear the click over the roar of the wind, but he definitely heard the explosions that released the CIA plane from the grapples. All at once, the entire cabin dropped away, leaving them hanging thousands of feet above the mountains. The man who had sacrificed his life fell with what was left of the plane, along with the pilots and the dead bodies.

Pavel stared down at the heart-stopping drop beneath them. The wingless cockpit and cabin crashed into the rugged wilderness, throwing up a huge geyser of dust and rubble. Fuel tanks ignited, triggering a fiery explosion. Smoke and flames rose from the wreckage.

Leonid Pavel, distinguished scientist and engineer, screamed in utter terror as he was hoisted into the sky.

CHAPTER TWO



“Harvey Dent Day may not be our oldest public holiday,” Mayor Anthony Garcia declared, “but we’re here tonight because it’s one of the most important. Harvey Dent’s uncompromising stand against organized crime and, yes, ultimately, his sacrifice, have made Gotham a safer place than it was at the time of his death, eight years ago.” Behind him stood a large mounted photo of Dent.

A fashionable crowd filled the moonlit grounds of the Wayne estate. Elegant men and women representing the cream of Gotham society, listened politely to the mayor’s speech as they mingled and chatted amongst themselves. Bright lights dispelled the shadow of the looming manor in all of its restored Gothic splendor, revealing not a hint that the entire edifice had burned to the ground several years before.

Expensive jewelry glittered on women in designer evening gowns, who were escorted by men in tailored silk suits and tuxedos. Champagne glasses clinked. Waiters wove through the party, offering fresh drinks and refreshments. It was a beautiful fall night, and the weather was perfect.

“This city has seen a historic turnaround,” the mayor continued from his position at the podium. He was a lean man whose slick black hair and photogenic good looks had survived several years in office. “No city is without crime. But this city is without *organized* crime, because the Dent Act gave law enforcement teeth in its fight against the mob.

“Now people are talking about repealing the Dent Act. And to them I say...not on my watch!”

An enthusiastic round of applause greeted his words. Everyone in the crowd had benefited from the city’s improved climate. One could confidently invest in Gotham again, and expect to reap a handsome profit. Small wonder the mayor had been re-elected to a third consecutive term.

“I want to thank the Wayne Foundation for hosting this event,” he continued, humbly accepting the applause. “I’m told Mr. Wayne couldn’t be with us tonight, but I’m sure he’s with us in spirit.”

Or maybe he’s closer than we think, Jim Gordon thought. The commissioner sat alone at an open bar not far from the dais. He was an ex-Chicago cop in his late fifties, with graying brown hair and a mustache. World-weary blue eyes gazed out from behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. Glancing up at the stately marble façade of the manor house, he spotted a solitary figure gazing down on the festivities from one of the upper balconies. The figure was so still and silent that he might have been mistaken for a chimney, or a gargoyle, but Gordon knew a lurker when he saw one. He suspected that this particular lurker owned everything in sight.

“Now I’m going to give way to an important voice,” the mayor promised, snagging Gordon’s attention away from the lonely shadow on the balcony. The commissioner’s heart sank, and he wished

he had time to fortify himself with another stiff drink. He fumbled unenthusiastically with the sheets of paper laid out in front of him, reviewing his handwritten speech one more time. He'd sweated blood over every word, but still wasn't sure he had the nerve to read them out loud.

Then he braced himself for what was to come.

Am I really going to go through with this? he asked himself. *After all these years?*

"Commissioner."

A hearty voice intruded on his reverie. Gordon looked up to see Congressman Byron Gilg muscling his way toward the bar. Judging from the man's ruddy complexion, Gordon guessed that Gilg had already tossed back a drink or two...or three. He was a stocky man, flush with prosperity. His haircut probably cost more than a beat cop's weekly salary.

"Congressman."

Gilg glanced around the sprawling grounds. Manicured lawns and gardens, adorned with tasteful stone fountains and statuary, played host to the annual celebration.

"Ever lay eyes on Wayne at one of these things?"

Gordon chose not to mention the figure on the balcony. He shook his head.

"No one has," a third party cut in. "Not for years."

Peter Foley, Gordon's deputy commissioner, joined them at the bar. A real up-and-comer, he was half a decade younger than Gordon, but was already making a name for himself downtown. Dapper and well-groomed, with thick brown hair as yet untouched by gray, he wore his tailored suit more comfortably than Gordon, whose attire was already rumpled despite his halfhearted efforts to dress up for the occasion.

Gordon glanced down at his clothes and grimaced. There had been a time when his wife made sure he was presentable at these affairs. But, then again, times had changed.

The mayor's voice continued from the podium.

"He can tell you about the bad old days," he continued, apparently in no hurry to surrender the spotlight. "When the criminals and the corrupt ran this town with such a tight grasp that people put their faith in a murderous thug in a mask and cape. A thug who showed his true nature when he betrayed the trust of this great man." He turned toward the large color portrait of Dent. "And murdered him in cold blood."

Ignoring the mayor's speech, Gilg grinned as he spotted an attractive young server who breezed by bearing a tray of canapes. A black maid's uniform, complete with a pressed white apron, cuffs, and collar, flattered the brunette's slender figure. She froze as the congressman rudely grabbed her derrière.

"Sweetheart," he scolded her. "Not so fast with the chow."

She turned to face him, deftly extricating herself from his grasp. A tight smile belied the indignation lurking behind her large brown eyes. She held out a tray.

“Shrimp balls?”

Gordon repressed a smirk.

The dig flew over Gilly’s well-coifed head as he snatched a pair of the snacks and stuffed them into his mouth. The maid quickly made her escape, not that Gordon could blame her. Congressman or not, Gilly needed to keep his hands to himself.

“Jim Gordon,” the mayor said, “can tell you the truth about Harvey Dent—”

Talking with his mouth full, Gilly nodded at the sheets of paper Gordon had been reviewing.

“Jesus, Gordon, is that your speech?” he said, spewing crumbs. “We’re gonna be here all night.” Gordon hastily covered the papers.

“Maybe the truth about Harvey isn’t so simple, congressman.”

“—so I’ll let him tell you himself,” the mayor concluded. He stepped away from the podium. “Commissioner Gordon?”

Another round of applause rose from the assembled partygoers.

That’s my cue, Gordon thought glumly. He gulped down the last of his drink and made his way to the dais, feeling like a convicted felon approaching the gallows. He stepped up to the mike and took out his speech, even as a battery of doubts assailed him.

“The truth?” he began.

Unwanted, an ugly memory flashed before his mind’s eye. He saw Harvey Dent as he truly remembered him. The left half of Dent’s face had been burnt away, leaving behind a hideous expanse of charred muscle and scar tissue. A bloodshot eye, ablaze with madness, bulged from a naked socket. A ragged gap in his cheek offered a glimpse of exposed jawbone, while a strip of raw gristle stretched vertically across what remained of Harvey’s smile.

By contrast, the right side of his face remained just as handsome as ever.

No longer the crusading district attorney, Harvey menaced a small boy with a loaded handgun. The boy, Gordon’s own precious son, trembled in the madman’s clutches, trying bravely not to cry even as Gordon pleaded desperately for his child’s life.

Unmoved, Dent flipped a coin. . .

Gordon forced the ghastly memory from his mind. He gazed out at the audience, wondering if they were finally ready to hear what he had to say. Harvey’s portrait, the portrait of a hero, loomed silently behind him. Gordon pondered his options—and his motives. Was clearing his own conscience worth risking all that had been accomplished in Harvey’s name?

“I *have* written a speech telling the truth about Harvey Dent,” Gordon admitted, making up his mind. He folded up his papers and stuffed them inside his jacket, close to his chest. “But maybe the time isn’t right.”

“Thank Christ for that,” Gilly muttered at the bar, a tad too loudly.

“Maybe all you need to know,” Gordon said, “is that there are a thousand inmates in Blackgar

Prison as a direct result of the Dent Act. These are violent criminals, essential cogs in the organized crime machine that terrorized Gotham for so long. Maybe for now all I should say about Harvey Dent's death is this—it has not been for nothing.”

The crowd clapped enthusiastically—all except for the figure on the balcony, who silently turned away and disappeared into the upper reaches of the mansion. Watching him out of the corner of his eye, Gordon saw him vanish.

Can't blame him, Gordon thought. I didn't say anything worth hearing.

Feeling like a coward, he retreated from the dais. Doubts followed him, as they had every day for eight long years. Had he done the right thing? Or had he simply chickened out?

He found Foley at the bar.

“The second shift reports in?” Gordon asked.

“On your desk,” Foley assured him. “But you should put in more time with the mayor.”

Gordon snorted.

“That's your department.” Foley was better at working City Hall, and stroking the egos of politicians. Gordon preferred the nuts-and-bolts of old-fashioned police work.

With one last, rueful glance at the portrait on the dais, he decided he'd done his part for Harvey Dent Day this year. So he headed for the gravel driveway in front of the mansion, where a long row of spotless town cars waited for their powerful and/or affluent passengers. He couldn't wait to get out of here.

This got harder every year.

Back at the bar, the congressman shook his head at Gordon's abrupt departure. He couldn't believe the dumb schmuck was actually abandoning this fancy spread to go back to work, especially now that the war against crime had already been won.

“Anyone shown him the crime stats?” he said.

Foley shrugged.

“He goes by his gut, and it's been bothering him lately, whatever the numbers.”

“Must be popular with the wife,” Gilly cracked. His own ball-and-chain was conveniently home with a migraine.

“Not really,” Foley replied. “She took the kids and moved to Cleveland.”

“Well, he'll have plenty of time for visits soon.” Gilly lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. He leaned in toward the younger man. “Mayor's dumping him in the spring.”

“Really?” Foley was surprised by the revelation— or at least seemed to be. “He's a hero.”

“War hero,” Gilly said. “This is peacetime.” He poked Foley in the chest. “Stay smart, the job's yours.”

While he let Foley mull that over, Gilly glanced around the party. It was picking up, now that the

speeches were finally over and done with. Unlike Gordon, he had better things to do than burn the midnight oil.

Say, the congressman thought, whatever happened to that cute piece of ass in the maid outfit?

She could still feel the congressman's grabby fingers on her butt. Her ire rose at the memory. *How lucky I didn't teach him a painful lesson in manners.*

The mansion's kitchen offered a temporary refuge from the demanding partygoers out on the lawn. A small army of waiters, caterers, and cooks were deployed throughout the spacious area, working overtime to keep the guests lavishly fed and watered. Discarding her empty tray, she dove into the bustling activity, blending in with the rest of the wait staff. Nobody gave her a second look.

Forget the congressman for now, she reminded herself. Focus.

She overheard a small cluster of maids gossiping in the corner.

"They say he never leaves the east wing."

"I heard he had an accident, that he's disfigured."

Another maid hurriedly signaled them to shut up. All chatter died as a distinguished old gentleman in a butler's uniform entered the kitchen. His silvery hair complemented his gentle, careworn features.

Alfred Pennyworth, she identified him. The faithful family retainer.

"Mr. Till," he said, addressing the chief caterer. A cultured British accent betrayed his roots.

"Why are your people using the main stairs?"

Mr. Till murmured an apology that she didn't bother to hear. Instead she watched carefully as Pennyworth placed a glass of fresh water on a tray beside an assortment of covered plates and dishes. The butler glanced around the kitchen.

"Where's Mrs. Bolton?"

Briskly the maid stepped forward.

"She's at the bar, sir," she said. "Can I help?"

He sighed, as though not entirely happy with the situation, but handed her the tray and an old-fashioned brass key.

"The east drawing room," he instructed. "Unlock the door, place the tray on the table, lock the door again." He paused for emphasis. "Nothing more."

She nodded meekly, keeping her head down, and accepted the key.

Slipping out of the kitchen before anything could go awry, she made her way through the gigantic mansion toward the east wing. Austere white walls and heavy draperies gave the house a cold, unwelcoming feel. The hubbub of the party gradually died away as she left the celebration behind. She couldn't help noticing the valuable antiques, tapestries, and paintings gracing the halls, as well as how hushed and lifeless the place seemed. Less like a home than a museum.

A large oak door barred the entrance to the wing. She tried the key, and the door swung open before her, revealing a richly appointed drawing room that was probably twice the size of her crummy apartment back in Old Town. Hand-turned mahogany furniture had begun life as trees in the Wayn plantations in Belize, she knew. Pricy china, vases, and other knick-knacks adorned the mantle of a large unlit fireplace. Despite its opulence, the room was dimly lit and quiet as a tomb.

Not exactly the Playboy Mansion, she noted. All this tired old money—just going to waste.

She glanced around, but didn't see anybody, not even the famously reclusive master of the house. Placing the tray down on a polished walnut table, she did *not* exit the chamber as instructed. Instead, her eyes locked on an inner door at the other side of the room. It had conveniently been left ajar.

She grinned mischievously.

How perfect was that?

CHAPTER THREE



“I’m sorry, Miss Tate, but I’ve tried. He won’t see you.”

Alfred lingered in the hallway to converse with the stylish younger woman who had attempted to enlist his assistance. Miranda Tate—a member of the board of directors of Wayne Enterprises—was probably the most attractive business executive Alfred had encountered in his many decades of service. Lustrous dark hair framed a classically beautiful face. Striking gray-blue eyes shone with intelligence and determination.

“It’s important, Mr. Pennyworth,” she insisted. Her voice held a faint accent that, despite his extensive travels throughout Europe and elsewhere, he couldn’t quite place.

“Mr. Wayne is as determined to ignore important things as trivial ones,” he replied wryly.

A derisive chuckle interrupted their conversation. John Daggett strolled up to them, looking smug and obnoxious—as usual. The business tycoon, who had inherited a thriving construction company, boasted a head of sculpted brown hair that would put Donald Trump to shame. His bespoke suit could barely contain his self-importance.

“Don’t take it personally, Miranda,” he told her. “Everyone knows Wayne’s holed up in there with eight-inch fingernails, peeing into Mason jars.” Turning, he added belatedly, “Alfred...good of you to let me on the grounds.”

The butler did nothing to conceal his distaste. Daggett was the epitome of greed and vulgarity—quite unlike the Waynes, who had always used their wealth to better the world around them.

“The Dent Act is about Gotham,” Alfred replied evenly. “Even you, Mr. Daggett.” He bowed his head politely toward Miranda. “Miss Tate, always a pleasure.” He took his leave of them, but could not help overhearing their voices as they echoed down the hall. Alfred stopped some distance away and turned to look.

“Why waste your time,” Daggett asked Miranda, “trying to talk to the man who threw away your investment on some save-the-world vanity project?” His voice was thick with derision. “He can’t help you get your money back.

“But I can.”

She replied coolly.

“I could try explaining that a save-the-world project, vain or not, is worth investing in, whatever the return. I could try, Mr. Daggett, but you understand only money and the power you think it buys, so why waste my time, indeed.” She spun about and left him standing in the hall. Scowling, he watched her go.

Bravo, Miss Tate, Alfred thought. Bravo.

Bruce Wayne had grown up in Wayne Manor, at least in its original incarnation, so he barely noticed the drawing room's sumptuous decor as he limped toward his dinner. The sole remaining heir to the Wayne fortune leaned heavily upon a single wooden cane, favoring his injured left leg.

His face was gaunt and drawn. Dark circles haunted his eyes. Traces of gray had infiltrated the dark hair at his temples. A rumpled silk dressing gown was draped over his slumped shoulders. His slippered feet padded noiselessly across the floor.

A tempting aroma rose from the dinner tray. Bruce lifted a lid, mildly curious to see what Alfred had come up with this evening, only to freeze in mid-motion. His gaze shifted from the tray to the open door leading to the sitting room. Was it just his imagination or was the door slightly more ajar than he had left it before?

Cool brown eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Interesting, he thought. What do we have here?

* * *

The sitting room was just as expensively furnished as the rest of the mansion. Despite the urgency of her mission, she couldn't resist taking a moment to snoop around.

Careful, she warned herself. Don't dawdle too long.

A set of framed photos, some noticeably singed around the edges, occupied a place of honor upon a table. She recognized Thomas and Martha Wayne, tragically murdered in an alley more than three decades ago. A third frame held a portrait of an attractive brunette who somehow managed to look serious, even when she was smiling for the camera.

Rachel Dawes, realized the maid, who had done her homework. Harvey Dent's dead girlfriend. Killed by the Joker—or so they say—shortly before Dent was killed by the Batman.

The row of pictures was like a miniature cemetery, complete with headstones. The maid ran her fingers over the gilded frames before moving on to the most conspicuous oddity in the room—a full-sized archery target mounted to a large wooden cabinet. More than a dozen arrows were stuck in the target, clustered around the bulls-eye. Intrigued, she reached out to inspect one of them, only to yank her hand back as a new arrow *thwacked* into place, only inches from her fingers.

Startled, she spun around to see Bruce Wayne himself, looking rather more haggard than the dashing billionaire playboy the world remembered. He stood at the other end of the room, clutching a large compound bow. She was impressed, despite herself.

She couldn't remember the last time someone had snuck up on her.

Bruce lowered the bow. He put it aside and picked up his cane.

“I’m...I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Wayne,” the maid stammered sheepishly. She struck him as very young and embarrassed. “It is Mr. Wayne, isn’t it?”

He nodded and limped toward her.

“Although you don’t have any long nails,” she babbled nervously, “or facial scars...” Her voice trailed off.

Bruce inspected the inquisitive young intruder. He didn’t recognize her as one of the regular maids. *Must be a temp taken on for tonight’s festivities*, he figured. *Couldn’t resist snooping around.*

“Is that what they say about me?” he asked. She shrugged.

“It’s just that...nobody ever sees you.”

That’s the idea, he thought.

A flawless pearl necklace graced her slender neck. Bruce came closer.

“That’s a beautiful necklace,” he commented. “Reminds me of one that belonged to my mother. It can’t be the same one, though. Her pearls are in this safe—”

A large mahogany bureau rested against a wall. He used his cane to press down on a recessed wooden panel, which slid aside to reveal a hidden compartment.

“—which the manufacturer assured me was uncrackable.”

The door of the safe swung open.

“Oops,” the maid said. “Nobody told *me* it was supposed to be uncrackable.”

Her whole attitude changed in an instant. She dropped the coy, girlish act and took on a cockier, more confident posture. It reminded him of the way he had once discarded the role of a careless, immature playboy, whenever it was time to let his true self out. He was impressed, despite himself.

Bruce nodded at the pearls.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you take those.” They had been a gift from his father, which his mother had worn on the night they were both murdered. In a very real sense, they had cost his parents their lives. He wasn’t about to let anyone walk away with them.

“Look,” she said, smiling, as she stepped toward him, acting not at all concerned about being caught red-handed. She sized him up with a look. “You wouldn’t hit a woman any more than I would beat up a cripple...”

Without warning, she kicked the cane out from under him. A karate chop to his shoulder dropped him to the floor. His bad knee screamed in protest as he hit the carpet. He clutched the injured joint.

“Of course,” she added, “sometimes exceptions have to be made.”

With a move worthy of an Olympic gymnast, she vaulted onto the bureau, taking the pearls with her. A high window provided a ready egress. “Good night, Mr. Wayne,” she said teasingly, before flipping backward out the window. Bruce heard her touch down lightly in the gardens outside.

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