

Draco664

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The Edge of a Blade

Prologue

Gotham.

A great actor once said of a fictional settlement, 'You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy'.

He'd obviously never been to Gotham City.

Several million men and women made Gotham their home. The wealthy, the poor, the meek, the powerful.

Some good, some evil. Many selfish, few generous.

The wide spectrum of humanity drew people to it, like a black hole. And just like a black hole, many who brave the streets are never heard from again.

Some who arrive though, are strong enough to survive whatever even Gotham and its inhabitants can throw at them.

The super tanker *Menindez* silently coasted towards its designated berth. The two powerful tug boats that had attached themselves to the hull of the tanker skilfully guided the great ship safely to what would be its home for the next several weeks as its cargo was unloaded.

Captain Dino Giotti watched the lights of Gotham City gradually get closer nervously from the bridge. This in itself was odd, since he had been working on tankers since he was fourteen, and had been the *Menindez*'s captain for the last thirteen years. He had docked without incident at Gotham countless times before, so many that the last few times he had yawned constantly just to keep awake.

This time was different.

"Everything is in order?" asked a soft voice behind him in oddly-accented Italian. The sharp point digging into his kidneys indicated that responding in the negative would not be a bright move.

Captain Giotti nodded gently, his throat too dry to respond verbally.

"Good," came the voice again, and the tiny point of pressure on his lower back disappeared. *"You will remain alive because your corpse would cause unwanted attention. I do not like attention. We shall not meet again."*

The Captain's nod was more emphatic this time.

There was no response.

Dino turned around slowly, only to discover that he was completely alone.

He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly in a quivering sigh.

Ropes thicker than a person moored the huge ship to the dock. Against seemingly gentle movement, the pier creaked and groaned as the ropes pulled and slackened rhythmically.

As the local customs agents boarded the ship, a figure dressed completely in black gracefully climbed head-first down the underside of the rear most tether. Hanging from the underside, it moved quickly and efficiently, arm over arm, clinging to the rope like a sloth, but moving like a lemur.

Gary Jones yawned, and turned the key in the ignition of his taxi. Gently, he touched the accelerator with his big toe, nudging the car forward, to take the place of the taxi that had just left the rank.

Gary was just about to turn off the ignition, when a slender man dressed head to toe in soft, stylish black opened the door and wordlessly entered the cab. The newcomer tossed in a soft duffle bag onto the back seat opposite him.

"Where to?" Gary asked, looking into the rear view mirror. The man had short cropped red hair, and cold green eyes.

Wordlessly, the newcomer passed a slip of paper and a note through the fare tray. Gary frowned and glanced down to see an address in uptown Gotham written in an old English school hand. It sat on top of the welcome sight of a crisp one hundred dollar bill.

"A C note? Man, I can't change that! I just started my shift."

"It's yours, if you get me to my destination in half an hour." came the soft response.

"Yes sir!" Gary said enthusiastically, and gunned the engine.

The late evening traffic was not too heavy, and Gary made good time down the main streets of Gotham. Gradually, the look of the streets improved, as the docks were left behind. Gary checked the rear view mirror again, noting that his passenger had not moved at all since settling back into his seat at the beginning of the journey.

Try as he might, (and Gary had indeed tried) he was unable to draw the man into conversation, his passenger simply stared out the window, ignoring him. With a mental shrug, Gary concentrated on his driving, silently wondering what he would spend the money he'd get for this fare on.

Suddenly, his passenger snapped his head around, looking straight out the other side of the cab at a block of apartments they were passing.

"Stop here!"

Gary blinked. "What?"

"Here! Stop here!" snapped the man.

Gary quickly pulled over, narrowly avoiding running down a cyclist. "Man, we're still a dozen blocks from your address," he complained, returning a rude gesture to the indignant cyclist.

For a few long moments, the red haired man leaned over the seats and gazed out the opposite window, looking the non-descript building up and down. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision, and opened the door.

"Um, look man, you want to go here or not?" Gary asked, waving the piece of paper with the written address. "I can't get you there in half an hour if we gawk here for too much longer."

"Yes," replied his passenger. "But I have business here first." He exited gracefully from the taxi, and took hold of the bag's handle.

"Look, I can't hang around all night," Gary replied, hoping against hope that he wouldn't have to give the Benjamin back.

Slowly, the red haired man lowered his head to look through the open door at him. With a easy twist of his arm, the black bag was tossed over one shoulder. "I'll give you another hundred if you wait for me," he said in the same soft, well enunciated tones.

"Deal."

Gary sat in the cab, the engine off, casually tapping his thumbs on the steering wheel in time with the music he listened to on the radio. For two hundred dollars, he'd wait a while for sure.

This was turning out to be a pretty good night. A hundred and seventy buck tip for a thirty dollar fare. Nights like this didn't come along often at all. He reached out and changed the channel as the news came on. After scanning the stations, he found an old Elvis song.

Gary started nodding his head to the music. For a few minutes, he sat there in perfect contentment.

The radio died.

Frowning, he cursed softly and thumped the dashboard above the recalcitrant radio.

Gary's heart skipped a beat as the engine roared to life unexpectedly, lurching the car forward. It was only the fact that the hand brake was engaged that saved him from smashing into the car parked in front. The wipers thrummed to life and scrapped across the dusty windscreen, the horn sounded and the headlights flashed on.

Gary cursed inventively as he fought to bring the car under control. In the back of his mind, he noted an odd taste forming in his mouth. The air felt... heavy. And tasted of tin.

Cars parked all around the street were flaring to life, alarms flashing, horns blasting.

Just as Gary was entered a full blown panic, every pane of glass in the apartment building behind him shattered at once.

Almost every window pane was empty, with the exception of only a handful of jagged edges remaining here and there, lonely testament to the obvious power of the recent explosion. Hundreds of people were gathered at the front of the building within minutes, judiciously avoiding the sharp slivers of glass that covered the pavement. Gary stood at the back of the crowd, looking at the pockmarked face of the building in awe.

He almost jumped out of his skin as someone tapped him on the shoulder. He spun around to stare straight into the eyes of his generous passenger. "Oh. Yeah. Your ride. Man, that was incredible. Were you in there when that happened?"

The man ignored him. "Come. I am late."

Gary blinked and followed after his fare, but looked back over his shoulder at the devastated building. "Yeah. Incredible," he muttered.

The taxi pulled away from the scene just as the first of the GCPD arrived.

Commissioner Gordon picked his way through the shattered glass on the pavement outside the devastated building. He sighed to himself and

wrapped his long overcoat around him against the unseasonably chill wind. He cast his eye over both the damage and the crowd, wondering not for the first time how this one was going to be written up.

Despite over three hundred people on the street surveying the damage, not one of them would say that they saw anything. Or heard anything. Or was anywhere near the building when the bomb went off, thank you very much.

"That's Gotham for ya. A couple of hundred people around and no one saw a God damn thing." came an unwelcome observation.

"Thank you for your observation, Sergeant. Has any trace of the bomb been found?"

"Not so far, Commish. Bomb squad can't even tell where the thing was set off."

"They don't know where the epicentre was?"

Sergeant Bullock shrugged, his ever present cigar moving from one side of his mouth to the other. "They haven't found it so far."

James Gordon looked up at the building face. "No warning. No one claiming responsibility. No bomb fragments. All the usual suspects confined to Arkham. Damn it, I'm supposed to be having dinner with my daughter tonight. Why does this sort of thing always happen the night I have something planned?"

"Maybe God's trying to tell you somethin'?" Jim could hear the smile on Harvey's face.

"Just go and liase with the Bomb Squad, Sergeant." he said, still looking up.

Gary rolled the cab to a stop in front of the apartment block at the address his passenger supplied. The building was brand new, one of the first to have been erected after Gotham's status as a No Man's Land had been rescinded.

The man in the back seat nodded to Gary, and passed another crisp hundred to him. "Thank you. May I have the address back?"

Gary nodded quickly. "Sure thing," he said, reaching over his shoulder to pass the thin card back through. It was snatched from his so quickly that it left a small but painful paper cut on his index finger.

Despite Gary's mumbled curse, the red-haired man exited the taxi wordlessly, and quickly entered the lobby of the building. Gary frowned after him, sucking on his wounded finger, but the idea of having two hundred dollars in his wallet after just one fare brightened his mood considerably.

Jim Gordon exited the fire escape on the roof of the building, completing his brief examination of each floor. Clutching his chest and breathing heavily, he moved over to the building's leading edge. "Damned elevator's not working." he said out loud.

"Nothing electronic that was within the building at the time of the explosion is working correctly."

Jim turned to face the source of the voice with no surprise apparent on his face. "When did you get here?"

Batman stepped out from the shadows. "Before the Bomb Squad. It doesn't make much sense, Jim. There is no epicentre, no fragments, there's not even traces of an accelerant. The entire front of the building just exploded out at the same time."

"What else?"

Batman looked down at the street, twelve stories below. "Phenomena inconsistent with an EMP, though similar effects," he said softly, as though talking to himself.

"What does that leave?"

"I have a few theories."

Jim looked down too. The yellow tape holding back the crowd formed an odd dividing line below. "I don't suppose you'd care to share them with me?"

Silence greeted him.

"Batman?" Jim asked, looking around at the roof, now quite obviously lacking a two-metre tall man dressed as a bat.

"Damn, he did it to me again."

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Chapter 1

Alfred gently placed the tray down on the workbench in front of the massive, three-metre plasma screen and poured the steaming tea deftly through the delicate strainer. He then picked up a pair of silver tongs and gently placed a thin sliver of lemon on top of the piping hot, sweet tea. Taking the saucer, he elegantly placed it in front of his employer.

Bruce Wayne didn't appear to notice, engrossed as he was in his research. He was fully dressed as Batman, with the exception of his cowl, which was hanging from the nape of his neck.

"Tea, Master Bruce?"

"Thank you, Alfred," Bruce said absently, not glancing in his butler's direction.

Alfred stood silently for several minutes as Bruce made no attempt to drink the tea, his attention totally focused on the screen in front.

"I suppose I could wait a few more moments, then put some crushed ice in it, if you prefer iced tea, sir."

A small smile graced Bruce's lips. "You are using my mother's favourite china set, the one with the blue chrysanthemum pattern she was given as an anniversary gift by her parents," he said, without taking his eyes from the screen.

"I don't believe you took your eyes off your work, sir."

Bruce continued to look at the screen. "The base of those cups are smooth, making the sound they make on a saucer distinct," he said absently.

Alfred raised his eyebrows. "If you noticed that detail, then you should also know that you have not had anything to drink for several hours. Dehydration does cause a loss of concentration, sir."

Bruce chuckled softly. "I suppose I need to take a break. This makes no sense."

Alfred nodded, and glanced at the screen. "What makes no sense, sir?"

Bruce sipped the tea, holding the delicate bone china cup gently with the tips of his fingers. "An hour ago, something, probably some sort of explosion, shattered the windows of an apartment complex downtown. There are no conventional signs of a bomb; no mechanism was found, no fragments, no accelerant, not even a definitive blast radius. Not only was every pane of glass in the windows shattered, all glass objects within the building were broken too."

He waved at the pictures displayed on the screen. "At first it appeared that there had been an EMP too, since nothing electronic in the building worked correctly. But looking deeper, it doesn't appear to have been the case."

"What leads you to that conclusion?"

"The affected area is too small to start with. But there were other odd events too, even the emergency fire hoses in the building had unravelled and turned themselves on. On the street, every car with an alarm fitted began sounding seconds before the windows shattered. The physics behind an EMP does not suggest that it is possible to engage electronics before shutting them down."

"What of the scrambler you used when that ghastly creature was hunting you?"

"That is both short range and directed, Alfred." Bruce ran a finger over his upper lip. "No, this is something different."

Alfred peered at the map of the affected area currently on one of the screens. "Did the blast come from inside the building, Master Bruce?"

Bruce nodded absently. "There are only two indications that the source of the explosion may have been external. The fact that all the windows shattered simultaneously and the fact that there was no structural damage. Everything else I've examined points to something internal."

"I understand that glass can be broken by sudden changes in temperature, or loud noises at certain frequencies."

"True. Though I've considered and discarded both theories. Even taking into account the fact that Dr. Freeze's technology is still available on the black market for the right price, there is no indication that extreme cold was applied to the outside of the building. Or extreme heat, for that matter. Your second theory is far more probable; except that the glass from the windows and from other shattered items inside the building all have different resonance frequencies. Getting them all to shatter simultaneously using acoustics would be impossible." Bruce sighed deeply. "Besides, no one reported hearing a high pitched noise before it happened. No, this is something different. It may be a combination of factors, but nothing on its own stands out. There weren't even any reported injuries."

"A most puzzling set of circumstances, sir. It would appear that you will need your faculties unburdened by fatigue. Please give me a moment and I shall bring you something significantly stronger than tea."

"Thank you, Alfred."

"You're wrong about one thing," observed a new voice.

Both Bruce and Alfred turned to face one of the screens. An attractive, red-haired woman with a faint, humourless smile stared back at them.

"Oracle. What did you hear?"

"All of it. You'd better drink up, before Alfred mothers you some more."

Bruce's expression darkened. "I meant, what did you hear about injuries?"

Oracle shrugged. "Well, not exactly an injury. Sergeant Bullock found a murder victim during a door to door."

"He's sure it's murder?" Bruce asked, rising to his feet and pulling his cowl over his head, settling it over his eyes.

"There's not much doubt, when the victim's head is found ten feet from the body."

"I'm on my way," said Batman, as moved quickly towards his favoured vehicle.

Alfred sighed as the thunderous sound of a V12 engine filled the massive cave. "He didn't even finish his tea."

Jim Gordon watched as Batman knelt down, carefully avoiding the debris that littered the room. The headless corpse lay in the centre of the room, arms splayed out wide, in a position that would be called *face down*, if the victim's head was still attached. A sword hilt was clenched in the right fist, the blade sheared off only a dozen centimetres from the guard.

Batman gently touched the fabric of the victim's shirt, then ran his fingertips down one arm.

"Uh, sir? Should he be doing that?"

Gordon turned to face the unfamiliar speaker. "Harrison, right? Just graduated?" he asked, vaguely recalling the faintly worried face. He'd signed on a batch of new officers a few days ago. Given Gotham's dangerous streets, police recruits were almost rarer than crimeless nights.

"Yes, sir!"

"Are you questioning my orders?" Jim asked in an irritated voice.

"Nosir! Notatallsir!" Harrison blurted, his cheeks paling quickly.

Gordon sighed, mentally berating himself for his tone. "The GCPD is under-staffed, under-financed, and under-resourced. In those circumstances, you take full advantage of every asset you have." Gordon turned back to watch his cowed friend. "And be damned thankful for it."

Batman rose to his feet, holding the sword hilt which had been clasped in the victim's fist. He drew a tiny object from his belt, which after a few deft twists, unfolded into a jeweller's magnifying glass. With slow, methodical precision, every millimetre of what remained of the weapon's heavily notched blade was examined in minute detail.

"Where is the rest of the blade?"

Jim cleared his throat. "We're not sure. It hasn't been found."

Batman nodded, and pulled out a pair of tweezers and a pair of tiny plastic envelopes from his belt. With the precision of a watchmaker, he plucked minute slivers of metal from the deep gouges in the shattered blade, and sealed his prizes in the plastic pockets. He returned the tools to a compartment in his belt and then stood and surveyed the scene. "He put up quite a fight, Jim."

Jim frowned and looked around the room too. This part of the apartment was almost totally destroyed. Furniture had been reduced to kindling, plaster walls had man-sized depressions. There was not a single part of the room clear of chaos. Jim had seen many a similar scene before, probably thousands over the years, though up until now it had always indicated that Batman had *already been* present.

"The neighbours didn't hear an argument, just breaking furniture and a couple of metallic clashes," he offered.

Batman raised the remains of the victim's sword. "There wouldn't have been too many of those. The blade has been sheered off by something both strong and sharp."

"Another sword?"

Batman tilted his head slightly to one side. "If so, it's one I've never seen before."

"What do you mean?"

Batman held out the remains of the victim's sword. "Jim, this is a katana, and not one of the mass-produced replicas either. The kanji characters here indicate it was made by a swordsmith called Ichimondo. This is a blade designed to do the shearing itself. If there is a sword out there that can cut through one of these..."

"What else would it cut through?"

Batman was silent for a long time. "The question would be, what *wouldn't* it cut through."

It was a particularly cautious figure who silently entered the dark, unlit apartment. Dressed head to foot in black, the slim figure entered the unlit flat through the window, staying in the deep shadows cast by the little street light entering through the dusty panes.

Like a lethal breath of wind, the figure faded in and out of the rooms, until he was certain he was alone.

"Well, Marcus, where have you got to?" he asked the empty home. The figure went back to the window he had entered by, and pulled in a black duffle bag. He then calmly moved over to the main entrance, and turned on the lights. The sudden illumination revealed a single envelope on the table.

The green-eyed man placed the bag on the table, and then opened the envelope, which contained a single folded sheet of paper. The leading face contained a quick, hand-written note.

Damien,

I cannot wait any longer, I have to go.

Here is the information you wanted. Do not ask for any more. I am no longer a Watcher.

M.

Damien smiled in a humourless way. "The snake escapes again. Don't worry, Marcus, I'll catch you."

Damien sat down and unfolded the sheet. It contained a list of names and addresses. He ran one finger down the list, stopping at the address of a recently devastated building. A slow smile spread over his features.

"Well, well, well. Surprisingly, it would appear that your information *is* valid, Marcus. It would have been irritating to have to chase you down so soon after arriving," he said to himself, before drawing a pair of objects from the black bag.

The broken blade of a katana, and a blood-smeared sword.

Damien set to work cleaning his sword.

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Chapter 2

Tim Drake casually tossed up a fluffy white object high into the air and caught it in his mouth as it fell. He sat slouched down in his chair with his feet up on the massive bank of computing equipment, legs crossed at the ankles. In front of him, the crays compiled the latest changes he had made to an experimental program. Seemingly lost in thought, he chewed and swallowed, before extracting another snack.

"You'll choke."

Tim looked up at Oracle's features on the screen. "Nah, it's just popcorn."

Oracle gave him a smirk. "Does Bruce know you're down there."

Tim tossed up another kernel, and deftly caught it in his teeth. "Mmm-humm," he mumbled as he chewed. "He's got me working on something pretty big."

"Well, I've got something he might find a little more important."

Tim raised his eyebrows. "Good luck. He's got me running all sorts of theoretical models on some heavy-duty physics. From what I understand, he's trying to determine if there was a way to reverse entropy over a small area."

Surprise registered in Oracle's eyes. "He doesn't believe in starting small, does he?"

Tim shook his head. "Nope. Anyway, he's all in a fuss about that explosion uptown last night. He's got all sorts of evidence that breaks a heap of the laws of physics. Like the unravelling fire hose, the cars out the front starting; he seems to think that something caused the potential energy in the area to reverse or something without anything to force the change. Like I said, he's trying to work out how to reverse entropy."

"Well, I've got a lead for him."

"Uh huh," Tim replied, tossing up another piece of popcorn.

Oracle's eyes focused on something to her right and she tapped a few keys off screen. "After the Clench, I cracked the coroner's office computers and made an addition. Whenever an autopsy returns an odd result, it raises some flags here." She focused on Tim. "One popped up on the radar about an ten minutes ago."

"And?"

"Jones, Gary, 27, cab driver. Found dead in his cab by an off duty police officer."

"What was so odd that it flagged him for your attention?"

Oracle grimaced. "Symptoms indicate he was poisoned. His nervous system simply crashed around him. Toxicology reports say there were some odd things in his bloodstream, but nothing matched in their database. He had an empty stomach, since he'd woken up about an hour before his death, and apart from a small cut on his finger, there were no puncture wounds."

"Odd, but I doubt it will catch Bruce's attention."

"How about the fact that his cab's GPS puts it at your odd scene *before* the explosion, and has it leaving the scene just afterwards, but before the police arrived?"

Tim swung his feet off the desk and turned around in his chair. "Bruce!"

The graveyard shift at the Gotham morgue was generally rather exciting. At least, compared to other big cities around the country. At many times in recent history, the door barely stopped swinging as bodies were wheeled in and out at all hours of the day.

At times when the various nutters Gotham seemed to attract were at large, the intake of corpses sharply increased, often with little calling cards. It didn't take a genius to tell that the Joker was on the loose when bodies started piling up in here with gruesome grins, or that the Scarecrow was free and plying his deadly trade when expressions of terror were common on the dead.

Even so, the orderly on duty tonight didn't notice the almost inaudible sounds of someone taking a pair of bodies from his care. Neither would he notice the empty drawers and missing personal affects.

In five hours time, he wouldn't notice their return either.

Tim examined the clothes of the headless corpse while Batman inspected the body itself, doing his own post-mortem.

While the neck of the shirt was stained with blood, not a great deal more was.

"Was he wearing anything else over the top of his shirt?" Tim asked.

"No." Batman replied absently.

Tim made a face. "If someone cut off your head, the blood spray would cover everything, wouldn't it?"

"Only if you were standing upright. The blood pressure would force most of the spray away from the body otherwise."

Tim blinked. "I suppose that makes sense. What about this guy?"

Batman looked up, his cowl'd face intent on his task. "From the spray patterns on the walls, he was kneeling as he was decapitated by a single blow."

Tim swallowed. "It would have to have been a sharp blade. Beheadings in Europe during the middle ages sometimes took a couple of strikes with the axe, and that was when everything was done correctly."

Batman nodded. "You can see how sharp the blade was by the cuts in the material on the sleeves. He managed to evade a few attacks after his sword was shattered."

Tim quickly arranged the material under the microscope so that one of the few bloody cuts was in focus. At high magnification, the clean and precise cut in the fabric was fairly obvious, if a little obscured by the blood. As sharp and straight as a razor, if not sharper.

Batman's voice became a little muffled as he again closely examined the corpse. "Now examine the stab wound on the front."

Tim fumbled with the shirt to lay it down flat. The obvious gash in the front was crusted with dried blood.

"What am I looking for?"

"A connection," Batman replied. "Come here."

Tim nodded, and moved quickly over to the examination table. The headless body made his stomach quiver slightly, but he swallowed and looked at what Batman was indicating.

"One thing I noticed at the scene was that the wounds under the cuts in the fabric appeared to be old. Look. See that one, just below the elbow on the forearm? The cut on his shirt was wet with his blood when I examined the body, but the cut beneath was almost completely healed." Batman pointed to a point on the body's other arm. "There was a bloodied cut in the material at that point too. The blood belonged to the victim, but there is no wound at all. Not even a scar."

Tim frowned. "Surely he wasn't just wearing a previously bloodstained shirt. One he was wounded in earlier?"

Batman shook his head. "The blood on the shirt after the murder was both fresh and warm. Now, consider the manner of death. At any other time, stabbing a man through the heart would be fatal. Decapitating him afterwards would be considered overkill, if not deliberate mutilation of the corpse. But I've examined the wound to the heart. Even though it was received just seconds before the final blow, it had started to heal." Batman shook his head slightly.

"This is the most fascinating cadaver I've ever seen," he continued. "Look, the kidneys are perfect. Perfect colour, perfect texture, right down to the cellular level. It is as though he never came in contact with any toxin in his life. The lungs are flawless, even though both his hair and home reek of pipe smoke. His liver is as unblemished as a newborn's, even though there were empty alcohol bottles strewn everywhere in his room."

Tim blinked. "So, he smoked and drank, but was perfectly healthy?"

Batman shook his head. "No, he smoked and drank *heavily*, and was beyond healthy. No, at the moment, only there are only two theories that make sense. Either this man's body healed itself orders of magnitude faster than usual or the body was perfectly reproduced cell by cell and planted at the scene.

Tim nodded tentatively. "OK. Which do you think is more likely?"

"I need more data before I make that decision. Normal human teeth do not heal themselves in the usual way, but this man's teeth were perfect. There were no cavities, fillings or blemishes. So if the first theory was valid, not only did he heal faster, his entire body healed."

Batman pulled off a latex glove and ran his hand over his chin. "On the other hand, the technology for creating a perfect body cell by cell may be able to create the same effects as were found at the scene."

Tim looked towards the refrigeration unit where the cab driver's body lay. "Um, we only have an hour or so before we need to return them. We should get started on the other one."

Tim watched Batman's examinations with open curiosity. The lining of the cab driver's extracted stomach proved to be of intense interest to his mentor; Batman had been almost hypnotised by the foul smelling organ.

"Um, since he hadn't had anything to eat, he couldn't have ingested the poison."

"You can poison a glass of water, Robin, and if the victim had only taken a sip there would be no trace of food in the stomach."

Tim grimaced. "Ugh, I didn't think of that."

Batman straightened, pushed back his cowl and shook his head. "You are right though, there is no trace of the poison in his stomach at all. Besides, the poison used is not one taken orally. It needs to be applied to the bloodstream."

"You know what poison was used?"

Bruce nodded. "I learned about it during my first trip to South America. It is an exceedingly rare poison, but it is only used by a handful of tribes to kill small prey, and as such it is not particularly potent. I didn't believe it could have killed someone."

"So it was given through the cut on his finger?"

Bruce nodded, his attention firmly on his powerful memory. "I've swabbed the wound, so we can run some more tests on it later. Right now, we need to find out what he was doing at the scene of the explosion. We need to know who he was transporting."

Tim nodded. "I'm on it."

As Batman ran the bodies back to the morgue, Tim sat at the cave's computers and worked his magic. He made a couple of calls to Oracle for some technical advice and one to Batgirl for help of a different kind, but by the time Batman returned, he had a few answers, which only led to more questions.

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Chapter 3

"The GPS indicated that the driver picked up a passenger at the docks, outside pier 34. At that time of night, there isn't a big demand for cabs, so it was fairly easy to pick out the passenger on the CCTVs around the docks and work out where he came from.

"Look here. See the slim man in black? He enters the cab... there. Going back to another camera, it shows him coming from the docks. I ran the facial recog software Oracle provided, and there's a ninety-odd percent chance that he didn't enter the docks from the city today. So that leaves arrival by ship.

"Three cargo ships arrived in Gotham harbour within six hours of the time the man got into the cab, the tanker *Aurora*, the *Alysis II* and the super-tanker *Menindez*. The *Aurora* docked at pier 12, and there are two other taxi ranks closer to her than the one where our driver waited. The other two ships docked close enough to pier 34 that I ran a check on them both.

"First, crew logs. The *Alysis II* has a crew of twelve, all accounted for. The *Menindez* has a crew of four, also all accounted for. A dead end.

"Second, departure port. The *Alysis II* came from London, with no stops on the way. The *Menindez* stopped at several ports along the eastern South American coast. If our target used a poison from down there, odds are that he'd have to have either been there recently or had someone collect it for him.

"Third, I checked the cargo and manifest details. It all checked out for both, though the *Menindez* is still under quarantine. It turns out that Customs and NIS were tipped off to an illegal on board.

"So in all probability, our mystery man arrived on the *Menindez* and jumped ship before NIS were in place. The timing is a little tight, but it would be possible for someone skilled in evasion to escape the ship as it was being docked and make his way to the taxi rank without running or attracting attention."

Tim took a deep breath and looked over at Batman, who was staring at the screen with interest. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes before continuing. "I dug a little deeper on the history of *Menindez*. The crew is unchanged for the last seven voyages, including three which follow the last route. I managed to crack the shipping company's computers, and downloaded all the documents on the cargos, owners, even the supply lists." Tim grinned at his mentor. "Believe it or not, it was those lists that convinced me that our man was aboard that ship. About a quarter more food and water was consumed on this voyage than the last."

Batman gave Tim a small smile and a nod. His way of saying 'Good job, Tim'.

Tim returned the smile, wishing not for the first time that his mentor could actually say the words. "That's not all. I followed him in the cab too. Here."

Another screen flickered to life, and showed the progress of the ill-fated taxi through Gotham's streets. It made a bee-line through the centre of the city, before stopping outside an apartment building.

"The deceleration was quite violent. I'd guess the driver wasn't expecting to stop here. He stopped almost a block away from the building that blew up. Maybe ten minutes later, electronics in the area go all screwy. Including the GPS on the taxi," Tim finished with a wince.

Batman frowned slightly. "No readings were recorded?"

"They were, but they're unusable. Over the course of thirty seconds, the taxi was put in the middle of the Atlantic, in Australia, twice in Siberia, forty miles off the coast of Hawaii and once in Antarctica. And that was when the unit wasn't spitting out error codes like crazy."

Batman rubbed his exposed chin thoughtfully, his short whiskers making it sound like rubbing sandpaper. "Did you get readings afterwards?"

Tim nodded. "Yes, but they were consistently off by thirteen degrees of longitude and twenty-seven degrees of latitude. The unit needs to be recalibrated. But I could work backwards to find out where the taxi went, and found security footage along the route to confirm."

"Good. And?"

"Our man got out at this apartment building a few blocks away. At least, that's what I'm assuming; there aren't any CCTV streams I could crack into to confirm it. At any rate, the taxi stopped there for a couple of minutes, and then drove to a nearby rank where it stayed until the driver was found dead an hour later."

Batman nodded slowly. "So he arrived on the *Menindez*, jumped ship, caught a cab and drove towards the second location. He stopped on the way, suddenly it seems, at the exact place and time where some sort of device sabotaged all the electrical equipment in the area, and then returned to the cab and resumed his journey. Meanwhile, a man with healing capabilities that are unheard of is decapitated. I'd say we have a suspect for his murder."

Tim raised an eyebrow. "So you do think it was murder now?"

Batman shrugged. "The police are treating it as a homicide. I have a feeling that if we find the who, we'll discover the how. Opposite to my usual method of solving crimes, but in this case, it may be the only way that will work.

Tim stood. "Right. I'm off home. Cass is staking out the building, setting up some surveillance kit. I got a reasonable side view of the suspect, and a

good shot of his clothes, if you want to give the police a description."

Batman shook his head. "Not just yet. Let's see what we can discover on our own."

Benjamin 'Fitz' Fitzroy stepped further back into the shadows of the covered alleyway. Like all creatures who come into a dangerous situation, muggers had evolved in Gotham. Those who practised their trade in an area where their actions were exposed to the heavens soon became too injured to continue their work.

Those who attacked from covered hiding spaces had a far greater life expectancy.

After a few moments, Fitz again stuck his head out of the shadows to track his quarry. The slim figure had not made much progress along the street, he appeared to be examining his surroundings in great detail. He even appeared to be making notes.

Fitz again drew back and checked his gun was loaded.

Damien steadily examined his surroundings, moving casually along the sidewalk. He stopped frequently, making notes in a worn notepad.

Since setting up a temporary base of operations in the apartment vacated by the hapless Marcus, Damien had been studying and documenting the building's surrounds. He had noted every building, fire escape and alleyway within a three block radius of his base.

Hiding a smirk, he wondered just how long he could keep the man he spotted in the alley ahead waiting.

Apparently not too long. The scruffily dressed young man didn't have the patience to wait.

"Hey buddy? Got a quarter?" he asked, coming out of the protective camouflage of the alleyway.

Damien turned to face the speaker. "No change," he said softly.

The thug whipped out a pistol. "Then gimme wha'cha got!"

A slow smile spread over Damien's face. He dropped his notepad and pen, then raised his hands slowly to shoulder height. With agonising slowness, he reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a money clip with a thick brace of folded hundred dollar notes. "This?"

The mugger's eyes widened. "Hand it over!" he almost gasped, holding out his free hand.

Damien nodded, and with a flick of his wrist, sent the wad of money in a high arc towards the mugger.

Fitz's eyes left his mark, greedily following the money as it arced towards him. He didn't notice the fist connecting with the point of his jaw.

His finger squeezed the trigger in reflex, but it was far too late. As his eyes rolled back into his head, the last thing he heard was the report of his shot. He didn't feel either of the two heavy blows that struck him after the first; the fist rupturing his spleen and then foot shattering his skull.

It was the late Benjamin Fitzroy whose corpse came to a crumpled halt in the dingy alleyway.

Damien reached out and caught his money clip as it fell towards the concrete. As the surge of adrenaline faded, a numb sensation in his left arm drew his attention. Looking down, he noticed the small, but rapidly expanding, blood stain on the sleeve of his coat over his left forearm.

He quickly rolled back the material, noting absently that the bullet had passed straight through his arm, between the ulna and the radius. Momentarily, blue tendrils of arcing light flashed over the wound, closing it. Seconds later, more light sealed the skin, then washed away the slight scar left behind.

Damien opened and closed the fingers on his left hand, feeling the newly healed muscles in his arm stretch and flex. He always felt a little stiff after his Quickening healed him, and over the centuries it had quickly become habit to stretch any healed wounds as soon as possible.

He debated searching the body of his mugger for anything interesting or valuable, but shrugged and moved on. No doubt the authorities in this rat-infested city would find the remains sooner rather than later.

Damien walked over to his discarded notebook and picked it and the pen up. He resumed his task of cataloguing the area.

Once he was done, all that left was an examination of the surrounding rooftops.

Batgirl deftly screwed a tiny camera to its stand, already set up and disguised within the crevices of a large stone gargoyle. She set the adjusted line of sight, and checked the image on a palm-sized plasma screen. The tiny camera's lens twisted and turned on itself briefly, sharpening the image automatically.

All this was done while the teenager was hanging upside down from a single mono-filament cable, twisting and turning slightly in the soft breeze.

Batgirl nodded in satisfaction at a difficult job done well. Nearly all the entrances and exits to the building Robin indicated were covered. She just

had to set the last camera into place and check its battery and transmitter. Robin would have pictures of all this building's residents within a day or so. She sent a double click over her own radio, informing Oracle of the completion of the current task. A soft blue LED lit up, telling Batgirl that her disabled mentor now had control of the camera.

She then silently climbed up and over the roof's edge, as another figure arrived, just as silently.

Damien and Batgirl spotted each other and froze at the same instant.

The costumed teen waited to see what the new arrival would do. It was not illegal to be on the top of a building, but she could not allow this man to interfere with her work.

Damien drifted his gaze over the equipment out on display. The cameras, the transmitters, the sophisticated electronics. He kept his expression neutral, despite the horror he felt. It had been less than two days since his arrival, and already one of the masked vigilantes this city spawned was staking out the building he was staying in.

Damien had expected that he would eventually attract the attention of the legendary Batman. In fact, he had been counting on it. But not yet! This was too soon.

The unique blade he kept hidden beneath his long coat gleamed in the neon lights of the surrounding skyscrapers.

Batgirl stood still as the red haired man looked over the equipment she was setting up. When dressed in the Mantle of the Bat, most bystanders left her alone. More than once this same situation had played itself out with the intruder apologising profusely while making a hasty exit.

From this man's subtle body language, she knew this encounter would not likely end without violence.

He drew a sword from under his coat and assumed a ready stance which screamed to anyone who could read someone like Cassandra, that this was a very dangerous man.

Both figures blurred and struck. Both figures narrowly evaded the other's strike.

Both learned a great deal more about the other from that single opening gambit.

Batgirl struck out at the man's jaw, knowing that he had the skill to evade. As expected he rocked back just enough that her fist passed harmlessly past his lips, close enough that he could have puckered his lips and kissed her hand.

She flashed her feet into a different stance, and aimed a strike at the man's newly exposed ribs.

Her hand sped through a tight arc, only to be deflected when the man smashed the sword's pommel down on her fist. The man had managed to bring down his guard on her hand as he twisted and spun. The blade of the sword streaked down in an improvised and inelegant attack, slashing at Batgirl's leg. Though slightly off balance, she kicked out at her attacker's abdomen, more to get her leg out of danger than in any real effort to attack.

The man, accepted the weakened blow, folding his body over her leg, capturing her foot. Batgirl leapt with her free leg, and twisted in midair, swinging her free foot around at head height in a kick that would knock most men unconscious.

Damien grabbed the girl's foot as it struck his abdomen, and bent over it, ensuring she could not draw it back. As expected, she leapt and twisted, leaning against him to throw a powerful kick at his head.

Damien lifted her captured leg, disrupting the kick and allowing him to stab down with his sword as her body succumbed to gravity.

Somehow, she managed to contort herself so that the blade only scraped along her upper arm. In her current position, an experienced fighter could strike out with a free foot at his knee. If she connected correctly, he would be at a severe disadvantage until his body could heal itself.

Damien let go and took a half step back, allowing his young opponent to regain her footing.

Again, the pair examined each other, evaluating and calculating.

Batgirl swallowed. She knew she was facing a very dangerous opponent. In the few seconds they had fought, he had used three distinct styles of fighting, and it would be suicide to assume that he was not a master of many more.

There was one major difference. Young, but inexperienced warriors used strength and power to amplify their attacks. Older, but extraordinarily experienced warriors used guile and cunning, usually more than making up for their lack of strength.

This man was in his physical prime, but was using the same stealth and precise techniques as a ninety-year-old master. Experience, cunning and guile combined with youth and power.

She felt a trickle of blood down her arm. That sword was *sharp* !

Damien swallowed. The myths and legends that came from this place told of men and women dressed as bats who were impossible to defeat in battle. Like most unconfirmed tales, Damien refused to take them at face value, and only formed his own opinion once he had direct experience.

For the first time in his long life, he was beginning to think that reality may be beyond the myths.

This little mortal girl was reading him better than any immortal opponent ever had, anticipating his moves and attacks as he made them. His only successful strike so far had been a spur of the moment thing. It had been a long time since he had relied on such a desperate attack just to score first blood.

This girl, no, this *warrior* was good. Damien shifted his grip on his sword. Perhaps a slightly different technique was required here.

Over the next several minutes, Batgirl struck out again and again, each attack being turned easily. The red haired man had changed his methodology, preferring to concentrate simply on defence, only occasionally responding with a riposte.

It wasn't the first time that someone fighting Batgirl had swapped from offensive to defensive after the first few exchanges, but this man had something on his mind. Some plan he would bring to bear when she could least defend against it. The fact that she could not read what he intended was more than a little disturbing.

He leapt over a sweep kick, and ducked a knife hand strike to his temple. As she expected, he flicked out with his blade at her neck, which she casually evaded.

Batgirl took a half step back and thought deeply. Half the attacks she had made had been pulled because of the sword the man wielded so expertly. She had tried over a dozen methods of disarming an opponent, yet had been foiled each and every time.

Absently, she noted that her cloak was hanging a little oddly. She ran her fingers quickly over the seam, noting that the edge of the sword had cleanly sliced through the material.

With a quick rip, she tore the cape from her costume, and hefted it in her hand.

Damien watched as she ripped off the cape, realising what she intended as she struck.

With blindingly quick hands, the masked vigilante impaled the material on his sword, and with a twisting flick, wrapped the remains of her cape tightly around the blade.

Normally, that would not have been a problem. Damien had fought three opponents in recent years who had used that exact tactic. Simply jerking the sword towards him shredded whatever was holding it. His new sword was easily sharp enough to cut through any normal material.

He was not fighting an average opponent, nor was the cape made of normal material.

As Damien tried to pull the sword towards him in an effort to cut through the cape, Batgirl ducked, spun and lashed out with both her feet, one connecting with Damien's wrist and the other with his fingers.

The involuntary loosening of his grip gave Batgirl all the opportunity she needed to tug the weapon from his grasp. Sword and cape flew over the edge of the building, falling four stories to the concrete alleyway below.

If she had expected to have an easier time, she was sorely mistaken. The red haired man almost threw himself at her, hurling four or five attacks a second at her from different angles. Batgirl was forced on the defensive, but after a few seconds of struggling to find her centre, she found herself within her comfort zone. His strikes were precise and powerful, but it was tiring to keep this level of offensive attacks up. He would tire, and she would finish the fight.

Damien struck again and again, at her legs, her head, her ribs, her abdomen. His understanding of his opponent grew, and he knew how to defeat her.

He allowed her to settle into a comfortable routine of defense, before setting up a pattern of attacks which left an opening small enough to be considered unexploitable by most, but well within this woman's capabilities to use.

She took it the first time, shattering his left collarbone with a hammer-strike through the flaw in his defenses. Gasping with shock at the sudden pain, Damien drew back and switched to defense as his opponent assumed the role of attacker.

Now, it was up to his Quickening to give him the advantage.

Batgirl's eyes widened beneath her mask as her fist struck home. Instantly, the man stopped his assault and drew back, gauging the severity of the wound.

She attacked with renewed ferocity, determined to end this contest as soon as possible. With her attacker's left side now disabled, she could focus on different methods of attack, without expending as much concentration on defense. After all, the man's injury would take several weeks to heal properly.

He stepped back slowly, grudgingly giving ground, now using his legs for both defense and attack. He cradled his injured arm close to his stomach,

making it an enticing target. Twice Batgirl landed a solid kick on the man's arm, sending a disconcerting level of pain through his injured shoulder. He blinked, and his arm dropped away from his torso. Batgirl leapt at the opportunity, lashing out with her right foot. Through the thick sole of her boot she felt some of the man's ribs snap. Not waiting for another opportunity, she then drove her own left fist at the man's injured shoulder again. The shock of seeing the man's left arm flash forward as though uninjured to snatch her wrist in an aikido grip only lasted one tenth of a second. That was enough time, however, for him to drive his right fist into the side of her head, just behind her ear.

It was one of the most satisfying blows Damien had ever landed.

The costumed girl crumpled quickly to the rooftop, rolling to a stop a few feet away. Damien took a deep breath, grunting at the pain in his side. Her kick had been more powerful than anticipated. Any stronger, and he may not have had the ability to end the fight so easily.

Another gasp caused him to turn around in a crouch.

Another damned masked vigilante crouched on the edge of the roof, her purple robes almost black in the dim light.

Damien had no intention of facing another of Batman's posse of warriors; especially if the newcomer was anywhere near as good as the one he had just defeated. He had no first hand knowledge of how this one fought, and he was unarmed and, temporarily, injured.

Damien turned and began to run to the opposite edge of the building. The edge where his unconscious opponent had sent his sword. Despite the pain in his side, he took a deep breath, and leapt.

The Edge of a Blade

Chapter 4

The air whistled past Damien's ears as he fell. From his scouting, he knew the layout of this side of the building reasonably well, enough that he knew he could survive a fall from this height without going through the inconvenience of dying.

He grasped at the fire escape on this level, allowing the shock of grabbing the metal ladder to slow his fall. He allowed the ladder to slip from his grasp, and fell another few metres. Again, he reached out to the life saving railing, only to mis-time his maneuver. Damien let loose an involuntary grunt as his left shoulder was dislocated.

In an uncontrolled fall, he landed on the edge of a pile of trash, soft enough that he didn't suffer a mortal injury on landing, but he did shatter one ankle.

Ignoring the pain, Damien rose to his good leg, looking around desperately. He spotted his sword, still wrapped in the black material of Batgirl's cloak. He picked it up, unwrapping the blade. The flawless blade gleamed proudly in the dim light of the alleyway.

Reinforcements would be here soon, Damien had no doubt. Even injured, he was still an incredibly dangerous man, but if the young girl he just fought was any indication, he would need all of his skills to prevail.

Damien tossed the cloak over his head, obscuring his features. While it would fool no one, it may give him a few moments of peace if the surveillance equipment was only monitored by machines. Hopping, he left the alleyway and made his way into the apartment building.

"I suppose it is a good thing that I haven't unpacked yet," he mumbled to himself.

"Is she going to be alright?"

Alfred was tempted to sigh, but his training allowed him to keep his demeanor steady. "Master Timothy, I have not yet finished my preliminary diagnosis. Doing so will require my full attention, so I would politely ask that you keep both still and quiet for a short time."

Tim resumed biting his fingernails. "I mean, I sent her there. She didn't have to go, but I asked her, so-"

"Indeed. Perhaps you now have some measure of what the master feels when you or Master Dick do something foolhardy. Please hand me that scalpal."

"What?" Tim almost shrieked. "What do you need a scalpal for? You're not going to operate are you?"

"Of course not, Master Timothy. I merely need to remove her hood without inflicting more damage to the wound. Now do make yourself useful and pass me the scalpal."

"Ah, right," Tim said, and snatched the scalpal from the tray and offered it to Alfred, who glanced down at the proffered implement.

"Handle first is traditional in this context, unless you are intending to threaten me."

Tim blushed. "Sorry, Alfred." He reversed the tool and held it out. Alfred accepted it with genteel calm.

"That is quite alright. Now, if you would assist, I would be most grateful."

Tim nodded and followed Alfred's instructions, assisting in the removal of the skin-tight mask. Alfred gently sliced through the tough material, allowing Tim to peel back the thick material. An ugly bruise covered in sticky, partly-congealed blood appeared.

"Oh my god!"

Alfred allowed a small sigh to escape. "Calm yourself, or I shall sedate you. Are you capable of operating machinery in your present state of mind?"

"Um, sure."

"Then initialise the X-ray machine. I need to be sure there are no bone fragments loose before I begin a more thorough examination."

Tim nodded and ran over to the oft-used machine. Alfred took the blessedly quiet opportunity to test Batgirl's reactions.

The cave filled with the deep, throbbing hum of the Batmobile. The enormous car descended the ramp into the cave at high speed before coming to a screeching halt. As Batman emerged, the circular pad the car parked on slowly spun through a half circle, pointing the car back the way it arrived.

Batman stalked over to Alfred and glanced down at Cassandra. "Diagnosis?"

"From a severe blow to the head? At best, concussion. At worst, a slight skull fracture. Her vitals are strong, so she does not appear to be in any immediate danger. Her pupils react correctly to light and are equal in size, there is no bleeding or other discharge from the eyes, ears or nose. Her reflexes are sluggish, but present and correct. Until she regains consciousness, I have very little in the way of testing her motor skills or visual disturbances. I have just requested Master Timothy initialise the X-ray machine, to be sure. I'm afraid that she will be bed-ridden for at least a few

days, more probably a few weeks." Alfred frowned, and inhaled deeply through his nose. "Do I detect smoke on you? Have you been in a burning building?"

Batman nodded. "Our man got away. He lit a fire in the apartment building Tim had Batgirl stake out; I assume it was in his own. Either he hadn't unpacked or the fire was extremely thorough, because there was nothing there to indicate his destination once the fire was extinguished."

"Nothing, sir? You've inferred a great deal of detail from simple smudges before."

Batman pulled back his cowl and became Bruce Wayne. His voice lost its deep, threatening tone. "Nothing, Alfred. From what I can gather, he had only just arrived, and had little in the way of luggage."

"Have you learned anything else about this man at all?"

Bruce nodded. "Probable meta-human, with incredible healing capabilities. From Spoiler's description of the fight, he and Batgirl appeared almost evenly matched. He took a blow to the shoulder which sent him reeling, and Spoiler claims she heard bones breaking. But then used that arm to capture Batgirl's wrist in an aikido hold and end the fight. Apparently, he took one look in Spoiler's direction, and leapt from the building."

Alfred frowned, looking down at Cassandra. "If I may, sir, no disrespect intended to the Spoiler, but why would a man capable of dispatching someone of Mistress Cassandra's skill have anything to fear from-"

Bruce held up a hand. "If you ran into one masked vigilante who fought like Batgirl, and only just prevailed, would you remain to fight another?"

"Point taken," Alfred acknowledged. "What is your plan of attack?"

Bruce rubbed his eyes. "It's morning, so Tim needs to go home, and I need to appear at a press release in two hours. Will you need Leslie's assistance with Batgirl?"

Alfred shrugged. "Perhaps. I shall know more once I have taken some images of her skull. I cannot make anything any worse, and I shall call her immediately should I find my skills not up to the task. You, however, will rest for at least an hour before leaving, do I make myself clear?"

Bruce smiled ruefully. "Crystal."

Damien rubbed the back of his neck, watching the Batman leave. The massive car tore through the streets of Gotham, leaving an array of bewildered and wary residents behind.

From this distance, there was no way to tell for sure just who he was, but the Batman was an exceedingly dangerous individual. Through a set of powerful binoculars, Damien had studied the man, the way he moved, the way he examined his environment, the way he distorted the people around him.

Yes, that was it. When the masked figure arrived, both police and fireman alike stepped aside for him. But it was not fear that these people displayed. No, it was respect. The head policeman, Damien didn't know his name or exact rank, allowed him full and instant access to the destroyed room, something any other policeman in any other city would do only once in a career. The other seasoned members of the police force all gave the Batman a great amount of leeway.

The firemen acted similarly, but subtly different. While primarily known around the world as a somewhat mythical crimefighter, he was also this city's protector. The firemen gave him the respect due one of their own. The police saw him as someone who could cross a line they could not.

Damien had no doubt that each and every one of the fire fighters in the city had witnessed the Batman rescue people from burning buildings and other dangerous situations. He also had no doubt that every policeman and woman in the city had cases blown away by the unconstitutional beatings criminals received at his hands.

Odd that it was the police chief who was closest to him.

Damien glanced down at his notepad again, reading the shorthand he had taken over the last hour. The Batman obviously outweighed him by forty kilograms or more, was stronger by far and had access to a variety of highly advanced weapons and devices. He moved like a stalking panther and was as patient as a corpse.

The attention to detail shown made Damien slightly nervous that he had left some clue behind.

He couldn't have the Batman come after him so soon. Not until he had taken more Quickening, and become more powerful. Only then would he challenge the Batman. If the man behind the mask was an immortal, and it was beginning to appear as though he was, Damien shuddered with anticipation to think of how much power he would absorb.

Yes, the Batman was in all probability immortal. No mortal man could attain all the skills he was rumoured to have in less than forty years. But Damien wasn't going to assume he was immortal until he could stand next to him and feel his Quickening.

Damien nodded to himself, and busied himself in finding a new base of operations.

Bruce rubbed his eyes. He had only managed to rest for an hour that morning before heading out to have his photo taken repeatedly. The press still hounded him with questions about his escape from custody and where he had hidden himself while on the run.

He was glad Nightwing had taken it upon himself to dress in the Mantle of the Bat a few times while Bruce had been in prison. With Batman sightings made while Bruce Wayne was in prison awaiting trial for murder, it deflected a great deal of unwanted attention. More and more people knew of his secret, and it would only take one who accepted just one of the multi-million dollar bountys placed by various criminal gangs to rat him out.

This much press attention was a severe inconvenience when Bruce Wayne was out and about the town, but it did provide a plausible explanation as to why he had become somewhat of a recluse in recent days.

The main screen faded into life, Oracle's face appearing. "Bruce?"

"Yes, Oracle?"

She set her lips. "How's Cass?"

Bruce sighed. "She is out of danger, but she'll be bed-ridden for several days at least. I convinced Alfred to ask Leslie to take a look, and she concurred."

Oracle let out a sigh of relief. "Good old Alf. Oh, I have some information on the vic with no head."

Bruce nodded. "Go on."

"I know nothing about him."

Bruce blinked. "Sorry?"

"Fake ID, fake passport, fake everything. It was good, and would have fooled a great many people, but nothing about the man was real."

"Perhaps including the body," Bruce murmured under his breath. Out loud he said, "Perhaps he was running from something. After the city was reopened, millions of people stormed back to claim what had been theirs beforehand. Others came too, to claim things that other's didn't."

Oracle nodded. "That's what I thought to start with, but the neighbours remembered him from years ago. As a matter of fact, according to one resident, he was one of the original inhabitants of that particular building block, though her testimony has been called into question."

Bruce frowned in thought. "How long had he been living there?"

"Almost sixty years, according to some of his neighbours. One was an old woman who moved in as a teenager. She remembered him from when she first moved in. Apparently he helped her veteran father carry their bags up the stairs, since he had lost a leg to a mine."

"That can't be right. What else does she remember?"

"Just that he became a recluse. That building escaped the quake with little damage, unlike most in the city, so many people stayed in their homes during NML. Why can't it be right?"

"Because I'd put his age somewhere in his early thirties."

Oracle smiled. "Bruce, that building was erected in the late forties. Almost sixty years ago. And that's why the old lady's testimony was considered worthless. She identified the face as looking exactly like the man who helped her father."

Bruce nodded absently, his mind whirling. A new theory formed. "Oracle, do a search in as many other police databases you can. Look for unsolved murder by decapitation. Check out the victims, their history, their identity. Any discrepancies at all."

Oracle frowned. "You want me to go after the victims? What are you looking for?"

Bruce slowly shook his head. "If you can heal injuries extremely fast, why not the effects of aging?"

The woman known to her associates as Elle McGinty hurriedly tossed her suitcase into her waiting car before running back into her home for more of her possessions. Her mentor had often told her that she should be ready to move away from a home in an instant, but her upbringing had instilled a great sense of sentimentality. Items she had had for over a century were difficult for her to just leave behind.

She had just returned from a business trip out of state to discover that a fellow Gothamite had died tragically a few days before, his head severed. The police had no suspects, no witnesses, and no motive.

That told her all she needed to know.

The car horn sounded. "Come on, Honey!" her husband Malcolm hollered.

Elle rolled her eyes and was about to shout something scathing back when she stumbled, allowing the bottom of the cardboard box she was carrying to give way. As heavy momentos crashed onto her toes, she shouted, "Merde!"

She took a deep breath, waiting for her husband to race in to help her. As much as she despised his weakness, his need to be controlled, he was a kind-hearted man.

She frowned after a few moments. Normally, he would be at her side in seconds after an outburst like that.

"Sweetheart? Malcolm?" she called out.

The silence that followed chilled her stomach, before she was overwhelmed by the expected yet unwelcome nausea she had experience only a handful of times in her long life.

"Lady Chantelle de Bernard?"

Elle stiffened and forced down the unpleasant sensation of being in the presence of an evil immortal. She turned to face her executioner and swallowed. "Oui."

"Your husband will not be joining us. You will be joining him shortly."

Elle forced the painful knowledge that she was again a widow out of her mind and began backing away. She looked the man up and down, wondering how someone so slight could exude such a corrupt, stinking menace. The odd-looking sword held loosely in his hand indicated the ease at which he found himself in these unfamiliar surroundings. But it was not held so nonchalantly that he would be taken by surprise.

Taking another by surprise was the only way Elle had ever won a battle with another immortal. She didn't even carry a sword. Her innocence and charm had been her most powerful weapons. She had only taken two heads in her two hundred years.

"Please, you don't need my power. I don't have much," she begged, her hauntingly beautiful features contorted with shame at having to debase herself so.

"I can tell. Your Quickening burns so dully, compared to others. Need it I do, however, as there can be only one."

"Please, no," she almost whispered, as her back reached the wall. She raised her eyes, shimmering with tears, to look directly into his own cold, green orbs. "Who- who are you?"

A slow smile spread over his features. "I am Damien, bastard son of Henry, who overthrew his brother Robert to become Duke of Normandy. I was born in the year eleven hundred and seven, and it shall be I who will win the prize."

Elle fell to her knees, abasing herself in front of this man. "Please, no. I want to live," she whimpered, tears of fear and humiliation running down her face.

The red haired man snorted with disgust. "Your father would be so ashamed of you at this moment, he would kill you himself."

Mention of her father sparked something deep within. Elle swallowed, and stood up straight, though her quivering legs gave her little support. In a voice that sounded less defiant that she wished, she said, "No, I shall not beg. And do not dirty the memory of my father by speaking of him."

Damien's smile grew evil. "Ah, but surely one can speak of one's... acquaintances?"

Elle gasped. "You knew my father?"

"The guillotine was such an elegant method of exterminating you cowardly aristocrats. The job of executioner to spineless noblemen was one I found... most satisfying. It was I who released the blade that severed your father's head. He died somewhat bravely, more bravely than many of his useless peers. I saw his family struck down and killed the following night, only to discover later that the remains of second eldest daughter apparently disappeared. Odd, wouldn't you say?"

Elle started moving along the wall to the right, dry heaving at the unpleasant memories. "I remember. I remember that night. I was stabbed by a filthy farmer, for merely being the daughter of a great man."

Damien snarled. "You were born into wealth and privilege, and you did nothing but live off the toil of those farmers. You are a parasite, and parasites need to be exterminated."

Elle looked around wildly. "But you are the son of a Duke!"

"Unacknowledged *bastard* son. I was afforded no wealth, no rank. I was assassinated by my Uncle's henchmen, merely to hurt my father." Damien snorted. "I was there, hidden in the roof of the building when my father received the news of my death. He laughed. He could not believe that my Uncle's retainers believed that I meant anything to him. My death was a waste. I then swore to whatever power that had saved my life that I would not waste my remaining years."

Elle reached the kitchen door, and slowly backed out of the room. The sharp blade never ceased pointing directly at her heart. "If I scream, you'll be caught. We are in a good neighbourhood."

"You truly believe that? Do you have any idea how many heads I've taken? And how many times I've been caught?"

Elle clutched her stomach, wincing. It was true, this man had killed many of their kind. He was almost incandescent with Quickening. Steeling herself, she leapt as quickly as she could and snatched a carving knife from a rack on the wall, then whirled around and stabbed out, hoping against hope to strike before Damien did.

And fell over from the lack of resistance. Damien stood smirking in the doorway, not having moved a centimetre. "You do not have a sword?"

Elle shook her head frantically.

"Well then, now that our banter is done, shall we conclude our meeting?"

Damien almost blurred, slicing the knife blade off at the joint with the handle, then burying his sword into her abdomen. He drew the blade out, allowing Elle to clutch helplessly at the wound. He watched as she slid to the side, lying on the floor, gasping softly. He crouched down in her field of vision, an expression of disappointment on his face.

"You shall not die just yet, Lady Chantelle. No, a person such as yourself needs to be punished before descending into the pits of hell. You need time for... retrospection." He leaned forward, filling her diminishing vision with his features. "You will beg for death many times before I grant it. It has been many centuries since I had the pleasure of torturing a victim who would not die."

Elle opened her mouth and whispered, "I shall be remembered fondly."

Damien chuckled. "No. You shall be remembered with pity."

The Edge of a Blade

Chapter 5

Commissioner Gordon trudged through the devastated house, clear plastic bags tied over his shoes to prevent contamination of the scene. An eerie feeling of déjà vu settled uncomfortably in his stomach as he mentally checked off the facts of this seemingly horrific case. Here, again, electronic devices refused to work correctly, and several people had reported that their cars had started by themselves just before the explosion. Another explosion with no epicentre. Admittedly, one of much smaller intensity.

At first glance, the murder scene did indeed appear demonically horrific. Blood caked the walls of the room and was even spattered on the ceiling in an impressively grotesque amount. But it covered the floor of the small room to a point where there was no single tile without a thick layer of drying blood. At a simply ridiculous depth. Even a rudimentary understanding of mathematics would enable anyone to calculate that the amount of blood in the room exceeded that held within a human body by about an order of magnitude.

Harrison had taken one look and retched, sending his breakfast a fairly impressive distance. In an effort to prevent further contamination of the crime scene, Jim had sent the rookie out to the police line to ensure no one got through.

Jim shook his head, an odd feeling settling in his bones. It certainly wasn't the first time in his long career that a crime scene had been staged, but whoever had assembled this one either hadn't known the first thing about creating a realistic scene, or assumed that the GCPD were so inept that they wouldn't spot an obvious fake.

Several dozen blood samples from various parts of the room were sent away for examination and testing. Most likely, it was a blood substitute, or animal blood. There wasn't much chance that it was the all the victim's, and in that case, she would have had to have been an active participant. Perhaps a plan she hatched with someone else to fake her own murder. Her blood would have had to have been taken several times, perhaps even hundreds of times, to create such a mess.

Jim pushed his thick-rimmed glasses up onto his forehead and gently rubbed his eyes. He felt a headache coming on.

Once more, he settled his glasses on his nose and scanned the room. It was, minus the blood and corpse, a pretty normal room. Tiled floor, dining table along one wall, two wooden chairs tucked neatly under the table.

The naked body of Elle McGinty was tied up with blood-soaked rope in an elaborate way on the large coffee table, allowing her attacker to sexually assault her easily. Her head was lying behind her, face down in a pool of what was supposed to be her own blood. Three simple stools were positioned at arms length away, one between her legs, the others to either side of the body, a tray on each.

Several bloodstained knives, pliers and other grizzly tools were arrayed neatly on the tray to the victim's left, like a surgeon's scalpels. Like the rest of the room, they were covered with blood and gore, looking for all the world like they had just been used. Gazing at the set of implements gave Jim a cold shiver at the potential pain they could have caused, and his only relief came from the fact that they had obviously not been used. Well, used on Mrs McGinty, at least.

Elle's body was unmarked and remarkably healthy, with the exception of course of the fact that her head had been removed. Unlike the other decapitation earlier in the week, her head had been severed with a carving knife. It would have been both painful and terrifying, having her head slowly cut from her body.

The metal tray to the body's right was even more gruesome than the blood encrusted tools. Four oddly shaped lumps of gristle lay on it, lumps which stumped the homicide squad. Hopefully, the coroner would know what they were. Jim shook his head once more, wondering what they meant; wondering if Gotham had attracted yet another homicidal maniac that Batman would soon do battle with, before being locked away safely in Arkham.

"Jim."

With a wry smile, Jim turned around to see Batman crouching on the table in one corner of the room, his cloak twisted tightly and hung over his shoulder like a scarf to prevent it trailing in the fluid on the floor. He frowned slightly, but looked up to see the skylight to the room, which happened to be directly above the table, was now open.

Jim smiled to himself in a humourless way. It wasn't often he worked out how Batman arrived and departed without a trace. "Batman. Interesting murder scene, don't you agree?"

Batman swallowed and scanned the room. When he saw the strange fleshy lumps, he froze, simply staring at them.

"What is it?" Jim followed his friend's gaze. "You know what they are?"

Slowly, Batman nodded. "They are larynxes. They've been cut from someone's throat."

"Well, they're not our vic's. She's unharmed, except for the decapitation. I hate these staged crime scenes," Jim said. But Batman's body language, normally so difficult to read, almost screamed differently. "What? What is it?"

"The scene. It wasn't staged."

Jim blinked. "What? There's too much blood here to have come from one person. And if those things are voiceboxes, then we have four other victims to look for. You couldn't get the amount of blood in the room from ten people, let alone one, so at least part of the scene is staged."

Batman shook his head. "Do your tests. If I'm right, all the blood will be hers. And you won't find any anticoagulant mixed in with the blood, which will show it wasn't extracted earlier and used to stage the scene. DNA tests will link all of those voiceboxes to her."

Jim looked around again. "Don't be ridiculous. How can that be possible? You only have one voicebox! And anyway, there isn't a scratch on her. What is going on?"

Batman stared straight into his friend's eyes. "Something terrible, Jim. Something that will get worse unless I can stop it."

Batman crouched silently on the roof of the late McGinty couple and stared down at the gathering crowd, thinking hard.

The husband, Malcolm McGinty, had been discovered in the driver's seat of the family car first, the trunk full, the fuel tank empty. He'd obviously been waiting in the car for his wife, the engine running, ready to leave. His neck had been broken; his head had been twisted around almost a full one hundred and eighty degrees. The initial police report suggested that he knew his attacker, since there was no sign of a struggle.

Batman knew differently. The person he was hunting was a dangerous, silent and resourceful hunter, not to mention evil. He easily had the skill to surprise someone like Malcolm McGinty, whose employment records showed that he was an accountant. The entire scene in the house below indicated the murderer was also a meticulous planner. Though he tortured Elle McGinty over the course of a couple of days, by allowing his victim to heal completely before finally killing her, he created a scene full of contradictions. Contradictions that would completely derail any conventional investigation.

The torture he inflicted upon the victim would have been horrific. The fact that he cut out her voicebox meant that he had no wish to have her screams disturb the neighbours. Batman shook his head. Professional torturers in the past walked a fine line between inflicting pain upon the focus of their efforts, while keeping their poor unfortunate victims alive. This man had no such difficulty, and had obviously tortured her mercilessly for at least two days.

Throughout history, mankind has sought to delay death. If someone had discovered a method of ensuring immortality, it would have been hailed as a blessing. At the hands of someone skilled in inflicting pain however, such immortality would then be a curse.

Batman took a deep breath, stood and stretched. Such an evil man would need to be stopped. Whatever the cost.

Batman climbed into the Batmobile and gunned the engine. With a roar, the powerful car sped down the previously quiet neighbourhood roads, away from the McGinty residence. With a free hand, Batman pressed an autodial button on the dashboard, causing Oracle's features to appear on a small plasma screen a few seconds later.

"Yes, boss?"

"Oracle, I need you to do some of your magic."

She gave him a wry grin. "Yes, I know. You never call just to ask about my health."

Batman ignored her. He extracted his digital camera's memory card and slotted it into the receptacle on the car's dashboard. "Download the contents of the card. I took pictures of the pages of the victim's planner and address book. I need you to check each of the people listed to see if they have the sort of false identities you found on the other victim."

Oracle nodded, and busied herself off screen for a few seconds. "I'm on it. You're looking for more of these fast healing meta-humans?"

Batman nodded. "And we need to find them fast. Our murderer either has another method of identifying them quickly, or already knows who they are. We need to play catch up."

"It will take time, but I'll give you an update in an hour. Download complete. Oracle out."

The screen went blank as she cut the connection. Batman withdrew the memory card and replaced it in his utility belt.

The car swept down the quiet roads, faster than many would consider safe.

Damien smiled to himself as he finished listening to the conversation between the Batman and this 'Jim', the police chief. The radio transmitter he had hidden under the body of the late Lady Chantelle would not be discovered until the coroner moved the corpse, giving Damien a great deal of information on how the investigation was progressing. His efforts at misdirection had succeeded in both alienating the police from the Batman, making them believe he was fallible, and proved that the masked vigilante knew about the existence of immortals. He even told the Police Chief what the results of the tests would be, but didn't give an explanation to his reasoning. It was clear that even if he wasn't an immortal himself, the Batman knew enough about them to recognise them.

So either he was a watcher, or an immortal.

From his vantage point at an open window on the eighteenth floor of a building three miles away, Damien again looked through the powerful telescope trained on the McGinty house. The hunched figure of the Batman stared out over the ever-larger crowd; from the legends Damien had heard of the Dark Knight, he was probably committing each face to memory.

The evil immortal's hands tingled at the thought of subsuming all those skills. But he needed to be prepared. Having seen the Batman in action, and

having fought one of his protégés, Damien knew she needed more power. There were seven more immortals living in Gotham on the list Marcus left him. Usually, after killing two the others would either seek him out or flee once they heard the news. By ensuring the police would not release details of the Lady Chantelle's murder, he gained a little more time to hunt down the others. If he was lucky, he would be able to take at least four more heads before the rest fled the city.

Damien again extracted the piece of paper from a pocket and ran his eye down the list of names, now with two crossed off. Of the remainder, one of them may have been Lady Chantelle's teacher or friend. Such a pathetic immortal as her would have needed significant protection to have survived this long.

He smiled at the memory of the last fifty hours. The Lady Chantelle had suffered under his hand for what must have seemed to her as an eternity. Time and time again he had ripped out her throat to keep her from screaming as he performed his bloody craft. He had raped her eight times himself, not counting the numerous invasions of her body he performed with his tools. It had been a delightful experience, destroying the body of such a deserving victim, only to have it heal itself in time to begin again.

Damien began disassembling the telescope and started to clean both himself and the room of any sign of his involvement in the murder. It was time to move.

Oracle contacted Batman fifty-seven minutes later, just as Batman finished his patrol and was making his way back to the Batcave.

"There were ninety-four names in the couple's records. Eighteen were emergency or medical contacts, which I set to low priority. Thirteen were dead of natural causes. Twenty-two duplicates, either a work address or that person moved. Which left me forty-one to search on.

"Twenty-eight were simple to identify, they were either from out of town or had records which survived NML. Another nine took some searching, but there were some records. I haven't ruled any of them out yet. One more was the original victim you examined."

Oracle took a deep breath. "Oddly, only three were from out of town, one is in Manhattan, the other two are outside the country."

Batman nodded. "What intel do you have on them so far?"

"Just names and addresses on the OS records. I'm still waiting on the international databases to cooperate. One is in Paris, the other in a place called Watford, England."

"What of the contact in New York?"

Oracle turned her attention away from the camera and glanced at one of her many screens. "Russell Nash, an antiques dealer on Hudson Street. And no, it isn't a false ID, all his records are legit. Re-issued passport, driver's licence, bank accounts, all of them are genuine. The birth certificates for his generation are not stored electronically, so I got a friend to check it out at the archives. It's there."

"Keep me posted."

"Will do, boss. Oh, one last thing."

"Yes?"

"Nash is on his way to Gotham. One way first-class ticket was purchased on his card a few minutes ago. He'll be here in three days."

Batman frowned. "There are flights between JFK and Gotham every couple of hours. Why would he wait a few days before coming. He'll miss the wake."

Oracle shook her head. "He's not coming by air. He's booked on a train."

Batman digested this piece of information. After a couple of seconds, he spoke again. "Did your contact check for death certificates?"

"No. Why would she?"

Batman ignored the question. "Are you sure about his identity?"

"Absolutely," Oracle replied, a little testily. "Why do you ask? You've never second-guessed me before."

"Because this Nash is another fast-healing meta-human."

Oracle blinked. "How did you figure that out?"

Batman cleared his throat. "Why travel by train rather than plane?"

Oracle clicked her teeth together in thought. "Cheaper?"

"With a shop on Hudson Street? Buying a first-class ticket? No."

"Scared of flying?"

"He has a passport."

"You don't need to fly to leave the country," Oracle pointed out.

Batman nodded. "True, but it has been re-issued. The old one must have been filled. Stamped in other countries."

Oracle grunted, but bit her lower lip, thinking hard. "He has something to hide?"

Batman nodded. "Something you can't take on a plane these days."

"A gun?"

"No. Something that is difficult to acquire. Well, difficult to acquire one of usable quality."

Oracle's eyes widened in realisation. "A sword."

"Bingo."

Tim put down his cup of tea and looked up as the Batmobile roared into the cave, blinking to get his dry eyes working properly again. In the days since Batgirl had been injured, he had hardly slept, and had eaten very little. Guilt still plagued him, and he had spent a great deal of time sitting next to Cassandra's bed as the teen recovered from her injury.

He had a few things to tell his mentor though. With all the bustle of Batman chasing down leads on this new maniac, Tim had temporarily hung up the Robin costume, and had done what investigation he could on the evidence they had accumulated in the Batcave.

Batman exited the massive car, rubbing his whiskered chin deep in thought. Casually, he pushed back the cowl and absently sat down at one of the terminals. Tim cleared his throat.

Bruce looked over to the teen. "What?" he almost snapped.

Tim swallowed. "I've found out why the poison was enough to be fatal to the cab driver."

That caught Bruce's attention. "Go on."

Tim turned back to his own terminal and punched a few keys, bringing up the spectral analysis of the poison on the screen. "This shows the contents of the poison sample you gave me. It pretty much matches what was in his body, but I ran a test on the swab we took of the cut on his finger anyway." Tim tapped a few more keys. A second graph appeared, overlaying the first. There were a couple of differences. "See here, and here. At first I thought it was a variant of the poison you had. But I recognised what the differences were."

Again, Tim brought up a new graph.

"Caffeine," he said simply.

"Caffeine?" Bruce frowned.

"Yep. After I noticed that, I did an experiment. I took a tiny amount of the poison and looked at it under a microscope." Tim cleared the screen and showed Bruce a Petri dish. He placed the dish under the microscope and displayed the highly magnified image on the massive plasma screen. "See these enzymes? Watch what happens when you add caffeine."

Tim poured a small glass of water. With an eyedropper, he took a drop of tea from his cup and dropped it in the water, stirring it around. Again, filling the eyedropper with a small portion of the now highly-diluted tea, he allowed a single drop to fall into the Petri dish with the poison.

The enzymes on the screen went berserk.

"There was an empty Starbucks cup on the floor of the cab when it was found. If he had drunk the coffee, traces would have been in his saliva. If he then sucked on the cut, a small amount of caffeine would have mixed with the poison that way. Changing its characteristics."

Bruce nodded. "Making it fatal." He nodded at the young man, pleased with his investigations.

Tim almost blushed with the rare acknowledgment of his work. "I have something else too."

Bruce looked intrigued. "Yes?"

Tim got up and walked over to another workstation, one with different equipment. He picked up a test tube with two tiny slivers of metal. "You got these from the first victim's sword, right?"

"That's right."

Tim nodded. "I ran a set of tests on the metal fragments. I've never seen anything like it. Titanium, crystal-lattices, Teflon; it is just incredible. If a sword was made out of this the way I think it was, it would cut through just about anything man-made. Imagine a sword made without thought to cost, using state-of-the-art materials, in the methods of the great sword-smiths of the Orient. An almost infinitely sharp sword, light, inflexible, unbreakable."

Bruce sighed. "I thought that would be the case."

Tim winced. "I spoke to Cass earlier today. She wants to get out of bed and back out there."

Bruce smiled slightly. "I can imagine. I suspect Alfred will be able to confine her."

Time nodded, a similar smile on his face. "He already did. He said he'd never feed her again if she left before he was satisfied with her progress."

"A dire threat."

Tim's grin disappeared. "Anyway, she said that the guy's sword was as sharp as anything she'd ever encountered. It could have cut her arm to the bone."

Bruce shook his head. "It could have cut her arm off completely. She was lucky to escape."

Tim swallowed and looked up to his friend. "Bruce, who is this guy?"

Bruce shook his head slowly. "I don't know." He looked over at the bed-ridden Cassandra, who was sleeping. "But I will find out," he said with certainty.

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The Edge of a Blade

Chapter 6

Bruce let out an explosion of breath and sat back comfortably as he completed his sixth set of fifty reps. Perspiration glistened on his bare torso, rising gently as steam in the cool air of the Batcave. The hundred and twenty pound barbell clicked and held in the holding position high above his head. He stood and stretched, feeling his hard muscles lengthen and relax.

"Boss?"

Bruce looked up at Oracle's features on the massive screen. "Yes, Oracle?"

"I hate the way you're always right."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "What was I right about this time?"

Oracle pursed her lips together. "I had my friend in Manhattan check out the Death Certificate archive, just like you suggested. She found one for Russell Nash, dated the same day he was born. That's the reason all his papers were not forged, he got them all in a legal name."

Bruce nodded. "So this Nash died at birth, but appears in an address book decades later."

"He arrived in Gotham today."

Bruce lowered himself to the floor and began doing one-armed press-ups. "I know. I've got Tim watching him."

A beeping off screen caught Oracle's attention. Her eyes widened suddenly, as she tapped on her keyboard. "I've located your man."

"Nash?"

"No, the suspect."

Bruce immediately stood, snatched a towel and quickly rubbed himself down. "How?"

"I had Steph set up remote surveillance on Elle McGinty's wake and at the cathedral, to see if the perp attended. He didn't, but I haven't had time to organise her to take the cameras down. I got an alarm to say that our man entered the cathedral not more than two minutes ago."

Bruce threw on his clothes, quickly donning the mantle of the bat. "Do you have a visual inside?"

"Naturally. I'll patch it to the car now."

"Excellent," Bruce said, before slipping his cowl over his face.

"I'll be there in five minutes," said Batman.

Damien sat in one of the pews towards the rear of the nave otherwise empty cathedral. The enormous church had been rebuilt only in the last year after being totally destroyed by the recent earthquake, using many of the original building materials. The same marble sheathed the altar at the far end of the church, and the majority of the stone pillars supporting the high ceiling had been recovered, repaired and reused.

The building had nothing special in terms of originality of design. No travel guide or art book suggested anything of interest could be found within. The artwork that went into many of the stain-glass windows was similar to other Christian temples around the world. If any building could be considered 'average' amongst its peers, this was one.

Except in one instance. Damien closed his eyes and allowed his Quickening to infuse his awareness. The building had not been rebuilt exactly on the original site; not an uncommon occurrence after a devastating earthquake. A small portion of it was not on the original allocated land. That small part wasn't on holy ground. A slow smile spread over the Immortal's face. The local Cardinal had not yet done the rededication of the cathedral. Until then, a thin strip of the Northern Transept was fair game for him to take a head.

Damien opened his eyes and glanced down at his watch. It had only been six or seven minutes since he arrived, and now he simply waited. The remaining seven Immortals living in Gotham had not left their usual abodes, since the news that the two murders had been decapitations had not yet been disseminated. They were, however, inconveniently surrounded. They all lived in built up areas, making isolating them to battle a logistical nightmare.

However, many Immortals regularly spent time on holy ground. They came to pray for the souls of long dead friends and family, to escape the game, or even to meet with other Immortals in a setting where both were guaranteed to walk away.

Without warning, the familiar sensation of another Immortal nearby washed over him. Damien's smile grew evil. Would it be the Batman? Or would it be one of the other Immortals who walked the streets of Gotham? He closed his eyes and concentrated. The Immortal approaching was powerful, very powerful; his Quickening was bright indeed.

Damien stood and turned to face the large double doors at the front of the cathedral. One of the massive handles turned, and the door slowly creaked open.

Damien's attention was caught by something else. The low light entering the cathedral through the circular stain glass window above the doors darkened suddenly, foreshadowing an enormous shatter as the window burst apart. Damien jumped slightly, something he hadn't done in almost five hundred years.

An enormous black figure appeared, arms outstretched, framing the shattered window for an instant, long enough for primitive terror to flood Damien's body. The frightening visage fell with the broken glass, landing in a graceful crouch, about five metres in front of him. Slowly, exuding menace, the Batman rose, six-and-a-half feet of pure intimidation, his cape flared, the silhouette sending primal fear coursing along Damien's nerves.

Damien forced himself to focus, and he banished his terror. No stranger to evoking fear and panic in others, the old Immortal understood and silently acknowledged that he was a mere apprentice of the art, and that he was in the presence of a master. His heart still beating over one hundred beats a minute, Damien stepped out into the aisle of the cathedral.

The hulking Batman stood silently for a long moment, before striding forward with obvious intent. Damien had seen it before. While sparing was allowed, no Immortal would fight on holy ground, but intimidation was fair game. On younger Immortals, it was an easy way to break them, to make it easier to take their heads at a later date.

The Batman's fist smashed into Damien's face like a battering ram, sending the smaller man tumbling over a pair of wooden pews, his broken-nosed expression one of complete surprise.

Connor Macleod slowly walked towards the massive cathedral. Wearing his trademark sneakers, his feet made no noise at all on the sidewalk. The Highlander was slightly uneasy. He had sensed that he was being watch, had sensed it since he arrived at Gotham Central. No matter how he searched the surrounding crowds, he could not identify the unknown watcher.

He sighed. The Lady Chantelle's wake had been held the previous day, and he was sorry to have missed it. Chantelle had been a terrified girl the first time he found her, just days after Thomas Cavanaugh had gone to the guillotine in the Highlander's place. Connor sighed; it had been many years since he had thought of the sacrifice Thomas had made for him. The Highlander had been aggrieved at the time, struggling with an almost debilitating case of survivor's guilt; alive while his friend, who had become tired of his immortal life, was dead. Chantelle's education had allowed him to forget about the pain for a while.

She had risen from the dead the day after her family had been slaughtered, a rusty knife still plunged deep in her heart. He had found her like that, panicking, staring down at the hilt of the knife which had begun to quiver with each beat of her heart.

Like most of the Immortals Connor had trained, she denied her powers for a long time. Even after accepting the reality of her new station, she remained a pacifist at heart, and refused to learn how to fight, even for defence. It had been with a heavy heart, several months later, that Connor had let her go her own way, armed only with knowledge of the game and its rules.

She had entered his life only twice since then. The first time was sixty years later, just after she had taken her first head. The young Immortal who challenged her was overcome by her beauty, and had been easily tricked by her offer to share her bed. As he dozed in the afterglow, she took his own sword and severed his slumbering head. Guilt at her actions had sent her back to Connor for support.

The last time they had met was merely coincidence. Both of them had been in France at the time, only twenty-odd years ago. Chantelle and Rachel had developed an almost instant mutual dislike for each other, and it was more for Connor's ears than any real desire to part company so soon after meeting that they again travelled in different directions.

Connor smiled ruefully to himself. Rachel's reaction at the news of Chantelle's death had been a sort of huffy, 'good-she-deserved-it' kind of thing. But he had spied his adopted daughter in the back room, dabbing at her eyes less than fifteen minutes after that declaration.

Connor almost gasped in surprise, and shook his head to bring him out of his reverie. He felt it. The Quickening pulsing through another nearby Immortal. The harsh edge to it shouted louder than words that that nearby Immortal had an evil heart.

Those who played the game quickly learned to control any outward sign of their discomfort. Immortals like Connor who, even before he took his first head, had a far greater share of Quickening than many others, could cause intense pain in other, less powerful Immortals. Evil beings intensified the pain somewhat, making it sharper, but Connor had found that peaceful thoughts and emotions on his behalf eased that pain in others.

He glanced around, quickly discerning that the Immortal was inside the cathedral. As was his habit, Connor gently ran his hand over the outside of his overcoat, tracing the outline of the hilt of his katana. If a challenge were issued tonight, he would be prepared.

Connor quietly climbed the few steps leading up to the mighty doors, and gently turned the handle of one. The enormous wooden doors swung inward, just as a blur of motion above him finished with an explosion of coloured glass.

Batman leaned out from the top of the building opposite the cathedral. The small park between the two buildings made leaping to the cathedral difficult, but not impossible.

He timed his grappling line perfectly, allowing his body to swing out and snap at the end of the arc. The acrobatic action sent him through a beautiful parabolic curve, ending at the stained glass window above the main entrance.

This particular window had been donated by a subsidiary of the Wayne Foundation when the Cathedral was undergoing its reconstruction. The glass used was under tension. If broken, the panes would shatter like a car's windscreen, forming harmless little pellets rather than lethal shards.

One other property of the window was there, was that if the centre pane was broken out in its entirety, certain other panes would burst as well, leaving the outline of the bat symbol.

One way of leaving a lasting impression with those who saw it later.

Batman hit the window hard, breaking through it easily. He immediately threw his arms wide, allowing his cape and air resistance to slow him enough that he wouldn't be injured on landing.

Glass pellets fell and danced around him like excited puppies as he landed in a crouch in front of the red haired man, whose expression of terror indicated Batman's method of arrival had its desired effect. Slowly, Batman rose from a crouch, drawing himself up to his full height, towering almost a foot over his target.

The man's expression lost its terror, as he overcame the primal images Batman sought to induce. He stepped out into the aisle, a small smirk on his features.

Having lost the advantage of fear over his opponent, Batman strode forward to instil a far more memorable fear. The man simply stood there, as though daring the Dark Knight to attack. Like an invisible gauntlet, challenging the courage of the Dark Knight.

Batman never allowed such a challenge to go unanswered.

Damien felt his nose break. The world stopped tilting as he landed on top of the wooden pews, but a flash of intense pain from his thigh quickly focused his attention. His sword, hidden under his jacket, has slashed a deep wound in his leg.

With agility beyond what most would consider possible, the evil Immortal grabbed the hilt of his sword and rolled across the back of the pews. He fell down in the gap between two of the rows of seats, quickly gaining his footing while being protected from the Batman.

Putting his entire weight on one leg, he stood slowly, an expression of indignation on his features. "What are you doing? We are on holy ground!" he spat.

The Batman remained silent, he tilted his head to one side, and kicked out hard. His foot connected with the pew nearest him, which, like a series of holy dominoes, rammed the nearest pew into Damien's legs. With a howl, the Immortal grabbed the back of the pew behind him and vaulted over it, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

Three heavy blunt objects slammed into him, one on the side of his head, two thumping into his ribs. Damien gasped at the new assaults, but managed to leap and roll into the aisle, finally free of the constricting pews. From the corner of his eye, he noted that the objects were weighted throwing stars, shaped into the same Bat-symbol as was displayed on his attacker's broad chest.

Try as though his opponents might, the Batman rarely gave up an advantage once he had a stranglehold over an opponent. The Dark Knight closed on Damien, landing blow after blow. Damien's defences managed to keep about two out of three strikes at bay, and he rolled with the rest, but disoriented and injured as he was, he simply could not find his centre.

Throughout the beating, he managed to maintain a hold on his sword. Damien accepted two heavy blows, both of which broke a pair of ribs, to give him the opportunity to raise it into a defensive position. The Batman tried to disarm him, but letting go of a sword is the second-last thing any Immortal would do.

With the blade in position, Damien managed to keep the heavier strikes at bay, allowing his Quickening to begin its work. Damien slowly conceded ground, moving towards the Northern Transept of the building.

While the Batman may be able to shrug off the detrimental effects of attacking on holy ground, Damien had no ability to follow suit. The thought that he may be able to absorb this unique ability sent his heart racing even faster with anticipation.

Connor watched with fascination as the hulking figure of the mythical Batman tore into Damien with a vengeance. The evil Immortal tried everything he could think of to dispel his disadvantages, but Gotham's Dark Knight was as good a warrior as Connor had ever seen. He refused to let up and allow his opponent to develop a comprehensive defence.

The fact that Damien had shouted aloud the fact that they were on holy ground told the Highlander that he believed that the Batman was an Immortal. A wry grin spread over the old Highlander's face. His own presence was confusing the evil Immortal quite extensively.

The Batman tossed heavy, bat-shaped objects at Damien, each on finding its mark. Throughout the beating, Damien managed to keep a grip on his odd sword. He twisted and swayed, desperately evading Batman's attacks, with little success. All he managed was to deflect potentially crippling strikes, rolling with them to turn them into merely exceedingly painful blows.

Somehow, Damien managed to bring his sword up between himself and the Batman. Once there, he was able to keep the Batman at bay long enough to maintain some sort of balance between them.

Not that being unarmed seemed to bother the Dark Knight. It was obvious from someone of Connor's ability that the Batman was a Master of dozens of styles of fighting, and an expert in dozens more. Karate knife hand blows followed savate kicks, ju-jitsu strikes and judo throws. Injured and disoriented as he was, Damien was on the verge of defeat. By a mortal, no less.

But fate often plays an odd hand.

Batman grabbed the red haired murderer and threw him over his shoulder. With his almost inhuman desire to maintain his hold on the sword, his options to recover from such a throw were limited, should he wish to keep from cutting off a limb off himself.

The slender man chose an oddly effective variation of a roll Batman was familiar with, safely putting almost two metres between the combatants. Batman easily covered the ground in time to strike before the man was ready, but an unwelcome visitor intruded.

The Cardinal of Gotham rose from the entrance to the newly dug crypts below the building, his frail legs carrying him more quickly than they had in fifty years. "Stop! Stop this at once!" he commanded, putting himself between the pair. "Batman, I shall not allow you to desecrate this holy place with your violence. Leave this man be."

Batman growled deep in his throat as his opponent grounded himself and prepared for battle. Without the element of surprise or fear, he was sure they were quite evenly matched. "Step aside, Your Eminence. This does not concern you." He tried to move around the churchman.

The stick thin octogenarian refused to back down, insisting on positioning himself between the combatants. Not budging an inch under the intimidating stare, the Cardinal held up a finger under Batman's nose, the digit quivering with righteous rage. "Your methods are not only unlawful, but also immoral. Unless you have come here to confess your sins and repent, you are not welcome. Begone!"

The red haired man took a deep breath, and smirked at Batman. The Dark Knight watched with impotent interest as the flattened nose straightened and healed. "Your Eminence, this man is a murderer. Step aside."

That announcement made little impact. "All who come to repent are welcome, no matter what their sins. While in this building, they are under my protection. You shall not harm this man."

Batman refused to look down at the holy man. All his attention was on his suspect, whose body was healing itself at an incredible rate. With a snide expression, the red haired man glanced around the church. The superior expression slid from his face in a most satisfying manner when he laid eyes on the other occupant.

"Macleod?" he exclaimed, blinking in shock. He glanced from Batman to the man at the back of the Cathedral, an expression of unwelcome realisation appearing on his face.

Batman reacted a tenth of a second too late. The unique sword arced around and rested against the Cardinal's neck, causing the furious churchman to cease his pious lecturing and freeze. In a low, sibilant voice, the murderer said, "He's right, your Eminence. This does not concern you. However, since you have unwittingly chosen to involve yourself in our little dispute, I'm afraid you'll have to assist me."

Batman stood straight and still, allowing his cloak to cover the preparations his hands were making. "Let him go."

"I think not." Again his eyes tracked over to the other person in the building. "Now that it has become apparent that you are not one of us, it is time for me to take my leave."

Batman watched as the murderer's cold green eyes half closed, and his breathing rate increased. Almost as if he were willing his heart rate to build, the man began panting, his shoulders rolling.

With a shout, he drew back the sword, and drove it into the cardinal's lower back, before pushing the mortally wounded man towards Batman. With a burst of movement, the man ran towards the door, faster than any Olympic sprinter. The newcomer drew a sword as the murderer approached, but only a single clash of blades was exchanged before the murderer escaped out of the building.

Batman glanced up, and noted with relief Robin's silhouette in the devastated window above the doors. "Robin! Get down here, give the Cardinal first aid and get help. I'm going after him."

Robin nodded quickly. "That's-," he started, pointing towards the other occupant, who was also leaving the building to chase after the escapee.

"Nash! I know!" snapped Batman in an irritated tone as he sprinted towards the door, the soles of his boots crunching on the glass beads. Robin was here and the newcomer had a sword; it didn't take a great deal of deductive reasoning to know who the other man was.

Connor sprinted after Damien, watching as he vanished quickly into the twisted group of alleyways to the west of the Cathedral. As soon as he entered the heavily shadowed back streets, Connor drew his katana out of his jacket again.

His Immortal senses told him that Damien was nearby. Connor brought his sword up to eye level, held horizontally, a defence that allowed him to fend off nearly every surprise attack to his neck, and allow him to use the polished blade as a mirror to see behind him.

It was at that point that Connor noticed the centimetre-deep gouge in the blade. He focused on the edge of his katana, wondering just what sort of weapon Damien had managed to procure. A flicker in the image on the blade alerted Connor to the imminent danger, and the Highlander spun and almost gently caught the descending blade on his own.

"Nice to see you again, Macleod."

"Nice to see you too," replied Connor, before he pushed Damien's sword around in a wide circle and flicked it away.

Damien easily prevented the disarm attempt. "You try that move every time we meet. Haven't you learned anything in the last hundred and fifty

years?"

Connor ducked the next strike and moved towards the centre of the alley. His eyes widened as he noticed that Damien had sliced through the corner of a dumpster. Thinking quickly, Connor changed his tactics, and his stance.

Damien's next attacks were parried easily, Connor using his katana like a rapier. Instead of his usual hard blocking, he gently turned the attacks aside, the edges of both swords sparking as they danced and slid along each other. The Highlander smiled tightly, his time in the late seventeen hundreds spent with a rapier instead of his katana was turning out to be worthwhile, in spite of Kastagir's predictions. Without the edges crashing together, he prevented his sword from being cut in two.

With the footwork associated with this style of fencing coming back to him, Connor began pressing his own attacks, searching for weaknesses in Damien's defences.

"Interesting, Macleod. It would appear that you have learned a thing or two."

"I learned what you did to Chantelle."

Damien snorted, and launched a series of strikes at Connor's head. "She deserved everything. She deserved the pain. She was weak; she lived off the toil of others."

Connor snarled. "She lived on her own toil for two hundred years."

Damien snarled back. "Her sins cannot be washed away." He waved his sword back and forth in front of Connor's face. "It's time for you and I to find out who is stronger."

Connor took the initiative in the fight, flicking the point of his katana at Damien's wrists and elbows, trying to disable the man. Damien easily defended against the attacks, slicing through Connor's own coat sleeve in return.

"You have been a persistent enemy in the past Macleod. Time for that to end."

Again, Damien sent a series of high attacks at Connor's head and neck. The Highlander brought his katana up, and parried each stroke as it descended.

But Damien had been pushing him towards the slick puddle in the middle of the alley. As soon as Connor's rear foot landed on the slippery surface, Damien arced his blade around at the Highlander's side, forcing him to use his back leg for support in defence.

Connor's rubber soled sneakers failed to keep its grip, and he fell to the ground. Damien swatted the ancient katana from his grasp, knocking it out of his hand and sending it clattering down the alleyway.

Damien stopped his attack, and simply held the point of his sword under Connor's chin. "So it ends as it should. Goodbye, Macleod. There can be-

Damien's body was flung to the right, flying briefly through the air before landing solidly on the alleyway floor. The Batman rose from a crouch, having planted both feet in Damien's back. "Forget about me?" the Dark Knight asked.

Damien rolled to his feet quickly, in time to meet the Batman's attacks. This time, the pair met on equal ground, both expecting and anticipating the attacks of the other.

Once more, the Batman tried disarming the evil Immortal, but failing. Where Damien tried to stab or slice at the Batman, the masked man's agility and warrior's sense allowed him to easily evade.

Connor slowly stood, scrabbling around for his sword. The Batman had given him at least a few extra minutes of life. He needed to make the most of them. His gloved hands grasped the hilt of the ancient katana, and once more the powerful sword was joined with its powerful master.

Damien saw Connor stand, and ground his teeth together. Either of these opponents on their own, he was confident of dispatching. But together, he had no hope. This time, he could not use his Quickening to defeat his opponent, the Batman was proving far too informed to fall for his tricks.

But Damien never willingly fought in an area where he was not prepared. Before he entered the Cathedral, he had set up a few items in the alleyways surrounding the building to give him an advantage in any fight.

He allowed Batman to drive him back along the alley, to where he set up one of his traps. Once the pair were below a specific fire escape of the many in the alleyway, Damien swung his blade out wide and neatly cut through a dark thread.

A small glass globe fell from two stories above, no longer suspended. As it crashed onto the ground a couple of seconds later, the chemicals within combined. A blinding flash filled the dingy alley, blinding two of the three combatants.

Damien, who had been ready for the flash, took the initiative, slicing out at the Batman. Somehow, the powerful mortal evaded his strike, but lost three of the spikes on his left gauntlet. As he fell back, he grasped the edge of his cape, swinging it out and around between them in a figure-eight pattern.

Damien slashed his blade through the material, only to discover there were metal threads through it, preventing a clean cut through. The lead-

lined hem swung out and around the point where the sword struck, wrapping itself around the blade.

Not willing to allow the same trick to disarm him twice in one week, Damien planted one foot firmly on the ground, spun, and planted his other foot as hard as he could into Batman's chest. Powered by Damien's Quickening-enhanced muscles, the kick blew the Batman backwards. He landed awkwardly on his back on the lip of a dumpster, his body armour absorbing enough of the impact to prevent his spine from snapping.

Instinct took over, and Damien ducked and rolled to the side. A notched katana blade flashed through at what had been neck height, then drew back for another go.

With a growl, Damien rose to his feet again, facing the Highlander. The Batman had not been incapacitated, and Macleod was proficient enough to prove almost impossible to overcome quickly. Hissing with frustration, Damien again searched the surrounds with his Quickening for another creature to harness.

He mentally found a fox rummaging through garbage nearby. For the second time that night, Damien allowed himself to feel another animal's emotions, their heartbeat, their life force.

The fox bolted.

Damien bolted, his speed enhanced by the animal's spirit.

The whiskered man turned to leave, sliding his katana back under his long overcoat. Batman stood on wobbly legs, reached out and grabbed his shoulder. "You're not going anywhere."

The man slowly turned to face him, his eyes as intense as any Batman had ever seen. "Let go. Now."

"I just saved your life, and you saved mine. We are even, but I will not allow a murderer to roam free in my city. What do you know about him?"

He shrugged, sliding Batman's hand from his shoulder. "Nothing."

"Liar," Batman growled, and reached out again. The man swivelled, and grabbed Batman's wrist in a tight hold.

With a single twist, Batman escaped the hold and swung out his leg to trip the man. With reflexes Batman found himself envious of, the man casually leapt over the attack and assumed a fighting stance.

The pair faced each other for several minutes in unmoving silence. The other man broke the silence.

"So, are we going to stand here all night, or are you going to let me go?"

Batman didn't move. "He called you Macleod."

He shrugged. "He was wrong, my name is Nash."

Batman nodded. "Russell Nash, of 1182 Hudson Street, New York. You're an antiques dealer."

Not even a flicker of surprise registered on Nash's face, but from the tiny pulses Batman could see in the veins in Nash's neck, his heart rate had increased. "You know a lot about me."

Batman shook his head. "No, I know a lot about who you are trying to be. Nash died at birth, you just assumed his identity."

Nash slowly relaxed, standing up straight. Batman followed suit. "Are you a Watcher?"

Batman shook his head. "Watcher? Is that some sort of group?"

Nash frowned, obviously thinking deeply. "Just what do you know, Mr. Bat."

Batman relaxed his guard. "Your name is Macleod, you were born in Scotland, but have spent the majority of your life abroad. You trained with someone experienced with using a katana, though you originally used a different weapon. You heal quickly from any injury, save decapitation. You, and others like you, live as long as you keep your head attached." Batman ran a hand over his chin.

Macleod tilted his head to one side. "You know a lot. How?"

"I'm called 'Detective' by certain people."

The Highlander's eyes narrowed. "You didn't answer."

"Your name was easy, and it helped identify where your odd accent comes from. You've changed the way you speak enough that I'd guess you've spent many decades at least outside of your native land. Your fighting style told me about your teacher and your weapon skills." Batman took a deep breath. "Your turn. What do you know about him?"

Macleod looked Batman up and down. "Do you drink?"

A long pause. "No."

Pity. Do you mind watching me drink?"

The bar was a dive, still to be renovated after the earthquake, it was little more than a propped up roof over an old diner. The barman, who went by the name 'Grunter', and who had been on the receiving end of Batman's fists twice before, put down the glass he was polishing and grabbed the wooden baseball bat from under the bar as the Dark Knight entered. "Get out!" he said, the trembling in his voice betraying his fear.

"Put it down, or I'll shove it down your throat, Gunther," Batman promised absently, not pausing as he swept past. "Just make sure we aren't disturbed."

Grunter blinked at the use of his real name, trembling at the realisation that he had shouted at the Batman. The thick ring through his nose was quivering in time with Grunter's shaking, as he watched the hulking vigilante's retreating back. The Batman's companion glided to the bar. Looking into this man's eyes, Grunter decided that he'd prefer trying to stare down the Dark Knight. "Brandy. The oldest you've got." Several grubby bills landed on the counter.

With a cough, Grunter swept his arm over the bar and the cash disappeared. In their place, he deposited an unopened bottle. The man held Grunter's gaze for a few moments, then picked up the offering, wiped the dust from the label, and nodded. "This will do." He picked up the forgotten glass and followed the Batman to the back of the bar, where they sat in the rearmost shadowy booth. Grunter swallowed past the lump in his now dry throat, debating briefly with himself. Self-preservation won over greed, and moved over to the entrance to flip the sign on the door to closed. He sure as hell didn't want it getting out that the Batman drank here.

Connor poured himself a glass and savoured the bouquet. With a sigh, he sipped the liquid, grimacing at the taste. "You tend to get a taste for the better vintages when you live a long time."

Batman nodded slowly. "What vintage do you prefer?"

Connor gave an odd little laugh. "Seventeen Eighty-three."

"A good year?"

Connor nodded, his eyes closed in memory. "Seventeen Eighty-three was a very good year."

Batman leaned forward, seeming to fill the entire booth. "Who are you?"

Connor looked up, his eyes betraying no fear. "I am Connor Macleod of the Clan Macleod. I was born in 1518 in the village of Glenfinnan on the shores of Loch Shiel. And I am Immortal."

Batman was silent for a few moments, but recognised that this man stressed the word *immortal*. He wasn't using it as an adjective, but as a noun. "What is an Immortal?"

Connor shrugged, a little amused. "One of us? We are, were, born human. We died before our time. Personally, I was killed in my first clan battle, Macleods verses the Frasers. A black knight sought me out on the field and drove his sword through my side. He then tried to take my head, but my kinsmen tackled him to the ground, saving me." Connor sighed. "All I remember after that was his saying, 'Another time, Macleod!'"

Connor's eyes were staring at the past. "When I rose from the dead the next day, they banished me from my village. Many wanted to burn me, including my woman, but a man named Angus convinced them to spare me. Another Immortal sought me out, years later, to teach me."

"Teach you what? How to be an Immortal?"

Connor poured himself another glass. "No, I am an Immortal. Nothing can change that. He taught me the rules of the Game, how to fight, and how to harness the Quickening."

Batman stayed silent, waiting for more details. Connor looked up from his glass into the masked man's eyes, impressed that he wasn't interrupting. He was leaving it up to Connor in which order to explain the unfamiliar terms.

"The Quickening is what makes us an Immortal. We all have some of it, but it isn't shared equally. I was blessed, or cursed, depending on your point of view, with a larger share than most. When we take the head of another Immortal, we absorb their power, skills, and their Quickening. Some ancient Immortals have incredible power."

Batman held up a hand. "When you cut off a head? You've killed before?"

Connor chuckled, a breathy sort of laugh. "A few hundred times, I'd guess. What? You gonna arrest me? You might find it hard to make a four hundred year old murder charge stick."

Again, Batman was silent for a while. "How do you recognise one another?"

Connor shrugged. "We just know," he said, not willing to explain more than that.

"A sixth sense?"

"Something like that."

"You mentioned a game."

Connor nodded. "The Game. All the Immortals play the Game." He looked down at his glass, now half empty. He gave a little snort. "There can be only one."

Batman drew in a sharp breath after a second's thought. "You're fighting to the last? Until there is only one of you left?"

Connor smiled, and drained his glass. "You are quicker than most. I can see why some people call you Detective."

"A game generally has a prize for the winner. What is the prize for this one?"

"Power. Lots of power. Other than that, I don't know. None of us do. We battle, we take heads, we hide throughout history. There are some of us who seek out and teach the newly awakened Immortals. There are some of us who seek them out to kill them." Connor poured himself his third glass. "Damien is different. He seeks out all Immortals, no matter how young or old. And kills them."

"Damien being our man? He killed Elle McGinty and the other John Doe?"

Connor nodded. "Damien is old, almost twice my age. I don't know what name he goes by now. I've met, and fought, him three times before tonight. The first time, I only just escaped with my head. The second and third times, we were separated with no clear winner." Connor slowly withdrew his katana, and placed it on the table. He examined the sword in detail, and winced at the massive nick in the blade. "That's going to take some working to fix."

Batman glanced down at the blade, then up again. "How did you know Elle McGinty?"

"Her real name was Lady Chantelle de Bernard. She was the daughter of a nobleman who was executed during the French revolution. She and the rest of her family were murdered in the days that followed. I found her, and became her teacher." Connor chuckled darkly. "My daughter hated her with a passion."

Batman frowned. "Daughter? You have a daughter?"

Connor nodded. "Yes. Why?"

Batman leaned back in the seat. "I examined the body of Damien's first victim. He was infertile."

Connor leaned forward, seemingly interested. "Oh? You know this, how?"

"The very same power that keeps you young, this *Quickening*, heals your body. But I found it heals you down to the DNA level."

"So?"

"So, sperm is only half a DNA recipe. Your Quickening breaks it in a vain attempt to make it whole. I'd have thought infertility would be a universal trait amongst you Immortals."

Connor leaned back and poured himself another glass. "Well, well, well. You didn't know that, you Spanish peacock," he said in a low, amused voice.

"Who?"

Connor shook his head and looked up, a smile on his face. "You are right, my daughter is adopted, I found her orphaned in Holland during the War. And I always called my first Immortal teacher a Spanish peacock, even though he was Egyptian."

"So you are all unable to have children."

"Yes. Something that devastated my wife."

Batman nodded his condolences. "What is the significance of holy ground?"

Connor sighed and tossed back the latest glass of brandy. "We don't fight on holy ground. We are safe from one another only when on consecrated land. Damien obviously thought you were one of us. Well, before he spotted me at the back of the church."

Batman tilted his head to one side. "He 'sensed' you, but thought it was me?"

Connor shrugged. "Maybe."

Batman watched as Connor poured the last of the brandy. "When you kill another Immortal, what happens?"

Connor raised an eyebrow. "You mean, what happens when we absorb the Quickening of another Immortal? It's violent, and painful. Depending on the power of the Immortal, a large area can be devastated."

Batman nodded, and described the scenes of the two murders. Connor's eyes closed as he heard about the second scene.

"That sounds like a Quickening. Chantelle wasn't a powerful woman, but the first..."

"Do you know him?"

Connor shook his head. "No. I'm only here to find Chantelle's killer."

"What do you intend to do to him when you catch him?"

Connor raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Take his head, of course."

The Edge of a Blade

Chapter 7

Bruce smashed his fist down on the specially reinforced workbench in the Batcave, sending a resounding thump echoing around the enormous cavern.

"A difficulty, Master Bruce?"

"An impossibility, Alfred," Bruce snapped back.

The butler's demeanour didn't change in the slightest. "You have quite often remarked in the past at how very little is actually impossible."

Bruce's shoulders slumped. "Not physically, Alfred. I swore an oath to my parents that I would fight crime when I saw it. But I also swore never to kill. And I will never kill. But—"

"I see."

"Do you?" Bruce asked.

"Indeed," Alfred replied. "Normally, incarceration is sufficient to prevent those who are a danger to the public wreaking their havoc. Time will eventually take away everyone's strength. Men such as the Joker will eventually die natural deaths, and cease to be a burden on society." Alfred placed a tray with a hot meal in front of his employer. "An Immortal criminal, on the other hand, will not succumb to time's grasp. Putting such a person in prison merely transfers the danger of his presence from one generation to the next."

Bruce nodded slowly. "Yes, but now, I'm put in a position where I need to work with a man who has no qualms in killing. If I don't stop this Damien, then he will try. If I fail, one of them will die."

Alfred set out the silver cutlery on each side of the steaming plates. "Perhaps. You've stood back and let others kill before. Just recently in Babylon Towers, you allowed Commissioner Gordon to shoot and kill a man crazed with the Clench."

"Standing by and allowing Jim to put a dying man out of his misery is a far cry from assisting a man intent on murdering my suspect," Bruce snapped back.

Alfred raised an eyebrow. "With all due respect, the only difference is that the man was already dying. The Clench victim would have shot both of you given the chance."

"That man was crazed, he was out of his mind."

"Again, with all due respect, one could make the argument that believing that cutting off other person's heads gives you their powers also puts one out of his mind."

Bruce rubbed his eyes, then massaged his temples. With a sigh, he dropped into his chair, and softly chuckled. "Remind me never to argue with you."

Alfred gave him a small smile. "One would already have thought that you would have learned not to by now," Alfred said serenely, pushing the full tray in front of Bruce. "Now, eat. You need to keep your strength up."

"I also need to keep an eye on Mr. Macleod for the next few days. I can't afford to have him evade me."

Alfred frowned briefly, but then smiled. "Leave that to me." He pressed a button on the massive panel in front of the primary screen, and seconds later Oracle appeared. "Yes, Alfred?"

"Would you be so kind as to supply me with Mr. Macleod's- I'm sorry, Mr. Nash's business details?"

The elegant, early-twentieth century phone tingled gently. Rachel Ellenstein daintily picked up the receiver. "Nash Antiques."

A pleasant, English accented voice spoke. "Good morning. May I speak with Mr. Russell Nash?"

"I'm afraid Mr. Nash is away on business at the moment. May I help you?"

"What is your name, dear lady?"

"Rachel. Rachel Ellenstein."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ellenstein, yes you may indeed be able to assist me. My name is Alfred Pennyworth. How do you do?"

Rachel smiled at the elegant manners the caller exhibited. "Miss Ellenstein, and I am quite well, Mr. Pennyworth, thank you," she replied, her own English accent unconsciously becoming more refined.

"I do apologise, Miss Ellenstein. Ah, it is exquisite to speak to someone who has obviously been educated at a civilised establishment. As much as I would dearly love to spend all day conversing with someone of your breeding, I am afraid, however, that time forces me to rather crudely bring

myself to the point of this call. My employer, a Mister Wayne of Gotham City, recently uncovered a great many artefacts and family heirlooms. Items he wishes to have catalogued and appraised."

Rachel shifted the receiver to her other ear and picked up a pen. "To what period do these artefacts belong, Mr. Pennyworth?"

The man sounded amused. "Master Bruce was rather hoping Mr. Nash would be able to tell him. Perhaps I should divulge a little more information. You are aware that Gotham City recently suffered a rather powerful earthquake?"

Rachel sighed. "Yes. The way the city was treated afterwards was simply barbaric. No civilised society would dream of treating their own in such a fashion." She blinked as she made the connection. "Mister *Bruce* Wayne? Of the Wayne Foundation?"

"Indeed. Fortunately for Master Bruce, his family estate is located outside of Gotham City proper, and was not considered part of No Man's Land. The mansion itself was destroyed in the initial disturbance, and it was only afterwards, when rebuilding began, that it became apparent that numerous treasure troves of items had been hoarded by members of the Wayne family in various attics. Many were, of course, damaged beyond repair, but a great number were salvageable."

"And Mr. Wayne was hoping that Mr. Nash could help in the identification of these pieces," Rachel finished.

"Precisely, Miss Ellenstein. Master Bruce always prefers to use the best, and Mr. Nash comes most highly recommended. For him to have retained someone of your obvious breeding speaks greater than words of his character."

Rachel flushed with the praise. "Mr. Pennyworth, I'm quite sure you could talk the birds down from the trees."

"I'm horrified to think that you believe my words were anything but sincere praise, my dear lady."

Rachel couldn't help but smile. "Sir, I shall take them as such. And by good fortune, Mr. Nash's business has taken him to Gotham City."

"How remarkably fortunate."

"Although I have no way of contacting Mr. Nash directly, he does call me regularly. If you would care to leave your contact details, I shall get him to speak with you directly."

"Thank you again, my dear. Please let Mr. Nash know that a suite at Wayne Manor will be waiting for him, should he accept my employer's invitation."

Rachel's eyebrows shot up. "I believe Mr. Nash is staying in one of the prominent hotels in Gotham City, Mr. Pennyworth. There is no need to prepare accommodations for him."

"Miss Ellenstein, perhaps I haven't been clear as to the magnitude of the contract. There are several thousand pieces Master Bruce would have catalogued. Requiring someone of Mr. Nash's credentials to commute for several days is simply not something a true gentleman would tolerate."

Rachel's smile widened. "Mr. Pennyworth, I'm sure Mr. Nash will be delighted to assist you. I shall ensure he contacts you momentarily."

"My dear lady, it has been an absolute pleasure to speak with you. Should you wish to join Mr. Nash in Gotham City, it would make me delighted, proud and honoured to make your acquaintance."

Bruce watched as Alfred hung up the phone. With the aplomb of someone who knows the difference between duty and need, he turned to face his employer. "I have organised for Mr. Nash to spend a great deal of time at Wayne Manor for the next few weeks. It should be elementary to follow his movements from there."

Bruce looked from Alfred to Oracle and back again. "*That* would never have occurred to me."

"Me either," added Oracle. "Alfred, you realise that it is incredibly bad manners to lie to someone?"

Alfred's expression turned almost haughty. "Naturally. However, I was not lying. It is easier to convince someone if your praise is genuine. I would indeed enjoy meeting such a well bred young lady."

Bruce glanced up at Oracle. "Would you do me a favour?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"I need you to search for a needle in a massive haystack."

"Sounds boring."

Bruce nodded. "I'm not sure if it can be done. I need you to try and find out information on a group that call themselves 'Watchers'. They have something to do with these Immortals, and probably have some sort of mark or tattoo on the inside of their left wrist."

Oracle blinked; Alfred raised his eyebrows. "That's pretty specific. I reviewed the recording you made of your conversation with Macleod. Nothing like that came up."

Bruce shook his head absently. "No, when we faced off in the alley he asked me if I was a 'Watcher', and glanced down at my wrist. Given their name, I'm hoping that they will have more information than I was given. Macleod was hiding something."

Damien silently slithered into his new home, recently occupied by a college professor who recently began a sabbatical. In the darkness he hunted, searching the house for signs of recent activity. Finding none, he relaxed, but still drew his blade. The body of the professor was stored safely in the deep freezer, ready to be used as needed to cover for Damien's death when he torched the place.

Suppressing a shout, Damien began his daily callisthenics, slowly building up the intensity of his exercises until he was fighting an imaginary foe with every joule of energy. For several long minutes the evil Immortal went through his kata, his sword slicing through the air like the Grim Reaper's scythe.

Bit by bit, Damien allowed himself to slow. His movements became more relaxed, more fluid, lacking the intensity and passion of the previous minutes. Eventually, half an hour after he began, he stopped completely, his breathing deep and even. Stripping off his clothes, he walked into the bathroom and ran a shower.

Standing under the freezing cold water stream, Damien pondered the night's events. Macleod's appearance was interesting, and a fortunate bonus. He had no idea it the Lady Chantelle's instructor had been the Highlander. It almost made up for the fact that he had been completely wrong about the Batman. Gently, the Immortal rested his forehead against the tiled wall, allowing the cold water to run from the nape of his neck down his back.

Without the prospect of attaining the powers of the legendary Batman, there seemed little point in remaining in such a dangerous city. The Batman's followers had managed to track him from his arrival point within hours, and his previous two hideouts had been discovered faster than Damien would have believed possible.

He was still well ahead of those hunting him, however. And besides, hunting an Immortal and surviving the encounter were skills few mortals had.

No, the prize to be taken in Gotham was gone; the only Quickening left to take that was worth the risk of staying was Macleod's. The damned Scot had been an annoyance for nearly four hundred years. It was time to get rid of him.

Connor opened the door to his tiny motel room and entered quietly, gently closing the door behind him and engaging the many locks, bolts and chains. While he certainly had the funds to stay at the most expensive hotel in the city, those establishments frowned upon registrations to people who would prefer to remain anonymous. The places that took cash with an alias were not in the better parts of town. He opened his overcoat and tossed his sword down onto the bed.

He turned the lights on and quickly examined his room, noting that no one had entered in the time he had been gone. He sniffed lightly and grimaced; not even the cleaning lady had been. Connor sat down on the lumpy bed and kicked off his sneakers without bothering to undo the laces. He looked down at his feet and noted that his socks had developed holes at the toes. Again. Hardly anything lasted more than a few years these days, something keenly noticed by someone nearly five hundred years old.

He picked up his katana from the bed beside him and carefully examined the deep chink in the ancient blade with a sigh. This wasn't something a series of graded whetstones could fix. The damage was severe enough that he'd have to remove the hilt from the blade and use his blacksmithing skills to repair it. Unfortunately, forges were difficult to come by in Gotham City, especially ones that generated the amount of heat Connor required. The run-down motel he was staying in anonymously was exceedingly unlikely to have such a facility.

The Highlander shook his head. It was a crime. The blade was two and a half thousand years old, and had withstood every test thrown at it in that time. Only the Kurgan had defeated its wielder, and even then the sword had drawn a price. The Russian warrior still couldn't speak properly. Connor lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, letting himself drift back in history, remembering the past.

The icy spray of the Atlantic ocean half froze in Captain Carruthers' beard, as he fought to outrun the naval vessels chasing him. His gunrunning activities had finally caught up with him.

Adrian Montague rose unsteadily to his feet again on Boston Common, after unknowingly being run through by Monsieur Basset's rapier. Even though Basset's wife looked like a bloated warthog, Basset himself should be around here somewhere. He pushed his enormous powdered wig out of his eyes, blinking in the sudden light. "Basset? Is that you?"

A warrior of the Frazer clan was pushed backwards towards the Macleod priest, Father Rainey. The holy man drew a small, but serviceable knife and swiftly cut the man's throat, before forming the sign of the cross, praying for the newly departed soul.

The wooden ship exploded, destroying the life of Connor's old seadog friend, Captain Carmichael. The Immortal Khordas once again celebrated the birthday of his wife, by wreaking fiery vengeance. Duncan would eventually hunt down and kill the insane Immortal, but not before more of Connor's friends had been killed by the self-proclaimed god of fire.

A petrified young noblewoman stared down at the crude dagger plunged into her chest. The sight of the partially dried and sticky blood that surrounded the wound pushed her into outright panic, the dagger's hilt trembling in time with her rapidly beating heart. The Highlander gently comforted the newly awoken Immortal, again taking on a student who would die before her time because of his failure as a teacher.

A few hours later, the phone next to the grubby bed rang, startling his eyes open, forcing him back to the present. Connor debated ignoring it, not in the mood for chit chat, but reached out and picked it up. "Hmm?"

"Um, out of state call for Mister, er, Adrian Montague."

Connor frowned at the use of an alias he had discarded centuries ago. "Put it through," he said softly, grasping the hilt of his sword in reflex.

A click followed, and there was silence for a few seconds. Another click, and a familiar voice came through. "Hello, Father."

Connor relaxed. "Rachel? I asked you not to call me while I was in Gotham."

"I know, but I've just had a conversation with the most remarkable man."

Connor chuckled in his soft, breathy style. "You're old enough not to need my permission to date," he told his daughter. She had graduated from Yale in 1957.

Her voice became stern. "He has a commission for you."

Connor blinked in surprise, but listened as his adopted daughter laid out the invitation.

Alfred set out the step-ladder, and carefully climbed to the top, allowing him access to the high mantle below the family portrait of Thomas and Martha Wayne. Gently, he ran a duster along the portrait frame's base, and then began dusting the china vases on the mantle.

A deep gong reverberated throughout the mansion, causing Alfred to pause his dusting. With a sigh, he carefully stepped down the stepladder and placed the ostrich-feather duster on one of the ladder's steps. He removed his apron and draped it over another step, then turned and made his way quickly to the front doors.

He opened the right-most of the double doors, revealing a slim man wearing an overcoat and a large suitcase next to him. He was exactly as Master Bruce had described. A taxi cab with its engine running sat on the gravel driveway. "Mr. Russell Nash, I presume?"

Connor smiled. "Yes, that's right. Please forgive me for turning up unannounced."

"Goodness, no, there is nothing to forgive. Please, do come in. I shall fetch your luggage momentarily." Alfred waved to the cab driver, indicating that all was well. The cab drove off, spraying white gravel off the perfectly raked driveway.

"Thank you," Connor replied, moving past Alfred and into the main reception hall.

Alfred picked up the suitcase, noting that it had obviously been in use for quite some time. "This way, please sir. I shall take you to your room."

"Thank you," Connor said again, following the butler. As the pair made their way to the guest wing, Connor admired the newly rebuilt mansion, seamlessly combining the original elegant styling with state of the art materials, insulation and security.

Alfred took him to the prepared suite, placing the suitcase inside the door. "Your suite, sir. The ensuite is through there," he said, gesturing through an open door to a bathroom three times the size of his recently vacated hotel room. "The sitting room and parlour are through there, opposite," Alfred continued, gesturing to each room. "The sitting room opens onto a balcony which faces west, and I can assure you the sunsets are breathtaking."

Connor nodded. "I'm sure they are."

Alfred gave a small bow. "Unless there is anything else you require of me, I shall leave you to become accustomed to your rooms. Should you require my services, simply give the bellpull there a tug, and I shall be along momentarily. Dinner is served at seven, I shall send along someone to escort you to the dining room. Will that be all?"

Connor blinked at the calm efficiency of the man. "I thought I was to begin cataloguing his pieces?"

"That can wait until tomorrow, Mr. Nash. Master Bruce prefers to meet personally with those he commissions before work commences. The pieces have been waiting for so long, another day would not cause undue alarm."

Connor smiled at the dry humour. "Very well. Thank you, I shall see him at dinner."

Alfred nodded. "Dinner at the Manor is usually a casual affair, please do not feel the need to dress up." He gave another slight bow, and left the room.

Connor looked around, studying the subtle opulence displayed in the room. The trimmings were made to look old, but were obviously brand new. Probably based on the original furnishings, he mused.

The sitting room was as large as it was comfortable. Dozens of shelves lined the walls opposite the balcony, filled with tomes and texts of all descriptions. Connor smiled, and selected one he hadn't read. This would be a most enjoyable commission.

It was a disgruntled Timothy who put on a suit and a fake smile, and led Connor down to the dining room. The teen indicated the place set for 'Mr. Nash', and left to give Alfred a hand.

Connor glanced around the room, dominated by the massive mahogany table stretching for at least fifteen metres. While not as impressive as some of the royal tables Connor had seen in the past, it was eye-catching none the less. The two places set were opposite each other, but across the relatively slim table width at one end, rather than one at each end.

Bruce stood next to the fire, leaning on the high marble mantelpiece, a small glass of sherry in one hand. He turned to face Connor. "Mr. Nash, so good of you to accept my invitation. Bruce Wayne," he introduced himself, holding out his hand.

Connor took it and gave it a firm shake. "Russell Nash. Please, call me Russ. And I'm delighted to be here."

Bruce nodded. "Thanks Russ. And please, call me Bruce." He took a couple of steps towards a sideboard. "Sherry?"

Connor nodded, accepting a tiny glass from Bruce. "Thank you. You live in a very impressive home."

Bruce looked around the room as if he'd never seen it before. "Yes, I suppose I do. I was almost crushed when my father's mansion was destroyed in the earthquake. I made it a point to build it again, better than before."

Connor tilted his head to one side. "Your father's mansion?"

Bruce gave Connor a sad smile. "I wasn't even a teenager when my parent's were murdered. Even though it has been decades since their deaths, I still referred to the old mansion as my father's," he said, his voice trailing off.

Connor nodded, and took a sip of his drink, realising that Bruce needed a few moments to compose himself.

Alfred appeared in the entranceway to the dining room, carrying a massive silver platter with two steaming bowls of soup. "Dinner is served."

Throughout the rest of the meal, the pair chatted away over inconsequential things. Sporting results, literary preferences and artwork featured in their conversation. Connor found himself opening up to the charismatic billionaire, who appeared as down to earth and honourable as his cousin Duncan. As Alfred removed the desert plates and placed a platter of fruit and nuts in their place, Bruce leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"I'll never get tired of that man's cooking."

Connor sighed in contentment too. "I agree, you are fortunate to have someone so skilled who is so devoted to you."

"Russ, I'm glad to have invited you here. I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you to your own devices soon, I have a function for the Wayne Foundation that I need to attend."

Connor waved his hand dismissively. "Go, Bruce, go. I've discovered a number of books in the sitting room off my suite that have caught my attention. If I discover many more, I may take a little longer than is strictly necessary to catalogue your pieces," he said with a smile."

Bruce chuckled appreciatively. "Russ, you are more than welcome to stay as long as you like. If you still haven't read all that tickle your fancy by the time you are done, by all means let Alfred know and I'm sure he'll organise for you to borrow any books you like."

Before the sun was completely over the horizon, Connor was up and about, ready to begin his work. Alfred had come to fetch him, dressed impeccably in a suit and tie at six in the morning, something that bemused the Immortal. Connor was led to an enormous hall where thousands of items were carefully packed into boxes.

Connor gently lifted the hessian covering from the first box, and looked down at the varied collection of items below. A few he picked up and discarded as being worthless, many he put aside for further study. A couple, he examined closely, and reverently placed into a separate container.

For the next few hours, Alfred watched him closely, remaining on hand should he be needed. It was obvious that the Immortal knew what he was doing. Each of the valuable pieces Alfred had taken from the mansion and seeded amongst the dross had been selected quickly and separated from the rest.

Connor picked the next item up, and frowned. Alfred glanced at the twisted piece of rusted metal, wondering why it engendered such interest. Finally, the Immortal spoke. "This is part of an old stirrup. The saddle it was attached to would be over a hundred years old. What is this doing in with these items?" he asked Alfred.

Alfred reached out and took the rusty, oddly shaped piece of metal. "Ah, that, and a few other pieces, were recovered from the remains of the old stables. I believe this pile over here contains most of what was discovered there after the earthquake."

Connor ran his eye over the indicated box, pausing as he spotted something of interest. With widened eyes, he withdrew some rust-covered blacksmithing tools. "Where are these from?"

Alfred frowned slightly. "The same building, sir," he replied, again wondering why the old tools were of such interest.

"These stables, did they have a forge?"

Alfred nodded after a moment of thought. "Yes, I understand so. Master Bruce's great-grandfather was an avid horseman, and did his own shoeing, I am given to believe."

Connor smiled. "Might I examine that forge, Mr. Pennyworth? I was taught the rudiments of blacksmithing when I was young."

Alfred nodded. "I shall be delighted to escort you there."

Connor nodded in response. "Thank you. No rush, I imagine I'll be spending some time here."

The next night, Connor informed Alfred that he would like to wander around the extensive manor grounds, and made his way indirectly to the old stables. With a wistful smile, he began preparations to use the old facilities. The old stables had survived the earthquake surprisingly intact. The forge itself escaped the quake unscathed.

Though the last coal delivery had been over a century before, there was still a half-full store of bone-dry briquettes left over from the last time the forge had been used. It took Connor a couple of hours to prepare the forge and file the rust away from the tools he needed to use, but finally, the familiar cherry-red glow of heated steel lit up the inside of the stables.

Connor selected a hammer and placed his glowing katana blade on the anvil, holding it with a pair of tongs. With steady, rhythmic strikes, he set about repairing the damaged sword.

Batman watched in fascination at a master smith at work. The Immortal had obviously been trained not only in traditional blacksmithing, but also on the then-secret method of forging the blade of a samurai sword. He worked quickly, and skilfully, without a break.

Finally, after a few hours, Macleod quenched the repaired, glowing blade in a horse trough filled with stagnant water. He wiped a forearm across his brow and rolled his shoulders, obviously stretching. Batman decided to make his presence known.

"Impressive. When did you learn smithing?"

The only reaction Connor gave to the surprise he felt was the subtle quickening of his breath. "Mister Bat. Most people would ask where I learned to smith. How did you find me?"

"I told you some people call me Detective."

"You didn't answer."

Batman regarded him thoughtfully. "There are only eight serviceable forges in the entire city where you could repair your sword. Only three allow the privacy to do so unnoticed and uninterrupted. I placed bugs at each."

"You're good." he turned back and withdrew the blade from the slimy water. "My first father-in-law taught me smithing; in 1537," he said, carefully wiping the blade.

Batman watched him attach the hilt back to the blade. "Why quench it in stagnant water?"

"Low oxygen content. Makes it less prone to rusting."

Batman watched in silence as Connor reattached the blade to the cleverly embossed hilt. Carefully, he checked the balance, hefting and swinging the sword through a few routines. The blade cut through the air as though brand new.

"Will the blade be able to stand up to Damien's sword?" Batman asked.

Connor shook his head. "Probably not. If it could put such a flaw in it after just one strike..."

"I examined traces of it from the first victim's sword. Unless made by the same methods using the same materials, I don't think there is a sword made on this planet that would stand up to it."

Connor grunted. "Then I don't suppose you have a sword that was made on a different planet?"

A long, slow smile gradually appeared on Batman's face.

The Edge of a Blade

Chapter 8

In the cool, dim environment of the Batcave, Tim sparred gently with Cassandra. The pairs' playful fighting was slowly rebuilding Cass' stamina and agility, though she was still far from her best. Tim found he rather enjoyed spending time with the oddly childish young lady, at least for the present, while he could keep up with her.

The pair twisted and flowed over the tatami sparing mats, their battle more like a dance than a sparring match. Gently, slowly, Tim built up the tempo, pushing Cass' fitness to keep pace with the rest of her recovery.

A genteel cough interrupted their fun. They turned to see Bruce, dressed in slacks and a woollen turtle-neck jumper observing their fun.

"Sorry to stop your workout, but MacLeod has just left. Tim, off you go."

Tim sighed, and slipped his mask over his eyes. While having Russell Nash in Wayne Manor made it easy to keep an eye on the powerful immortal, the fact that he seemed to lead a very boring life was getting Tim down. Bruce had insisted on him following the antiques dealer on his nocturnal outings, which had given the teen a wonderful tour of the city's churches and temples.

"But all he does is sit in a church for hours!"

A small frown flittered across Bruce's face, and Tim swallowed. "All right, I'm going, I'm going," he said.

Cass giggled at the sudden reversal. Tim threw her a dark look. Bruce just gave her a wink behind Tim's back.

Cass continued her workout after Robin left. She had been chafing to get back to work, and in her opinion, both Alfred and Bruce had been overly cautious regarding her recovery.

Making up her mind, Cass stopped attacking the poor dummy and made her way over to the safe where her 'Bat-clothes' were kept. Opening the door, she extracted and struggled into the tight-fitting costume, frowning slightly on the realisation that she had put on a couple of pounds while confined to bed. Not that she was too surprised at that; Alfred had insisted on feeding her four or five times a day. It was hard enough to convince the man that she was full from eating the meal in front of her, let alone explaining that she wasn't hungry.

Bruce sat in front of the giant computer screen, already dressed in his own protective gear, except for the cowl which hung down at the back of his neck. Cass had noticed that when he wasn't wearing the mask, Bruce's voice and demeanour were far more friendly and open. Once the dark mask was drawn over his eyes however, he became Batman, his voice becoming deeper, and his personality becoming ruthless.

A sudden incoming signal startled Cass out of her thoughts, and she looked up to see Robin's face on screen. The odd perspective caused by the position of the tiny camera in Robin's watch.

"Batman!" Robin hissed quietly. "MacLeod is moving! The target met him in a church on the south side of town, and they're heading out somewhere!"

Bruce nodded and rose quickly. "I'll be there in five minutes. Keep an eye on them. Out."

The cowl was pulled over and put in place. Batman turned, pausing when he saw Cass dressed to go. Pursing his lips in thought, he finally said, "Ok, buy you're on rescue detail. Get any civilians clear."

Despite the sudden sensation of disappointment in her gut, Cass nodded. Even with such a boring task, it would be good to get back into action. She quickly ran towards the Batmobile, and leapt into the cabin. Two seconds later, she turned to see where Batman was.

He wasn't anywhere in sight. Scrambling out of the sleek car, she trotted over to where he had been standing. A flash of movement caught her eye, pulling her attention downwards.

Cass watched with interest as Batman quickly descended deep into the vast, shrouded depths of the Batcave. After an instant of indecision, she made up her mind, and crept along behind, scaling down the craggy walls as silently as a fly. Batman dropped to the bottom level, just above the groundwater circulating at the bottom of the crevice.

She watched in fascination as he opened a massive vault door on the floor, one she hadn't noticed before. Not that her ignorance was a surprise, Cass had never descended so far into the cave. She had no idea that there was anything of interest this far down. The massive vault looked like it wouldn't be out of place protecting the entire contents of Fort Knox. Batman entered the vertical passageway, and closed the door behind him. A series of muffled hydraulic groans and compressed air hisses indicated that a second vault door underneath the first was being opened.

What could be down there? Cass wondered to herself. The security on the Batcave was beyond extensive, bordering on paranoid, yet this lower section was even more heavily fortified, not to mention secret.

Again, the muffled mechanical noises caught her attention, signalling Batman's return. Hastily, she ascended the walkways, climbing back up to the main level. A minute later, Batman appeared, carrying a cloth-wrapped item, a little over four feet long.

"Don't ever follow me down there again," he said sternly.

Cass blushed. Despite her caution, she'd been seen. As chagrined as she was, she knew she shouldn't be surprised. This was Batman, after all.

"What's down there?" she asked, intensely curious.

"Nothing that concerns you, or anyone else for that matter. It is for my eyes alone."

Throughout the frenzied, high-speed drive, Robin updated them twice on MacLeod's movements, directing the pair to a warehouse near the docks. The pair entered one of the massive warehouses, the thin walls and many broken windows allowing Robin a good line of sight to his targets. The Boy Wonder found a vantage point on a nearby building and wrapped his cloak around his body, keeping out the early evening chill.

There was nothing left for him to do but keep an eye on things. He could easily make out the heat signature of the two men when he used the infrared lenses in his mask.

Robin tightened his grasp of his cape, and shivered slightly as the two men below began fighting.

Connor feinted left and stabbed right, only to have Damien follow with morale-sapping ease. Restricted as the Highlander was, fighting in a fencing style which couldn't make use of his katana's curved blade and wicked edge, he knew he was at a significant disadvantage.

Connor caught Damien's descending blade cleanly, and steered it away to the side, opening him up for a counter attack. The evil Immortal knew what was coming however, before Connor even launched his attack. Damien danced aside and resumed his defensive posture with a smugly superior grin.

Again, Damien took the advantage, making Connor react to his moves. His sword arced around and down, over and over, and it was only the Highlander's exceptional skill that kept his own sword from being sliced in two.

Rather than the usual loud ring of steel clashing on steel, the noises the blades made when connecting were softer; more genteel. But there was nothing gentle about the motivations behind the two warriors. Both knew that one of them had to die this night. Both knew that it would likely be the Highlander.

Connor mistimed a parry, and Damien's blade gashed open the Scot's left shoulder. Suppressing a yell, Connor kicked some dust from the floor towards Damien's eyes, before running towards one of the many ladders. With adrenaline masking the pain in his shoulder, Connor hauled himself up onto one of the massive shelves in the warehouse, rolling away from the ladder quickly.

Damien followed casually, deliberately showing that he was in no hurry. Once on the thin platform, he changed his stance. The restrictions on the pair's footwork would work to Connor's favour, something Damien had no intention of allowing.

"So, where is your guardian angel? The big, bad Batman?"

Connor's eyes twitched with annoyance. "Hunting, no doubt."

Damien nodded with a smirk, lazily launching a couple of high attacks, aimed to gain him nothing more than a moment to test his balance on the platform. "Too bad he's not hunting around here."

Batman drew the Batmobile to a skidding halt behind a neighbouring warehouse, and leapt quickly from the car, sliding the covered object into a pocket sewn into the lining of his cape. Without hesitation, he quickly scaled the building and took up a position overlooking the warehouse from where the clash of swords could be heard. Scanning the building where the two Immortals were fighting, he mentally noted the positions of several traps.

As Batgirl reached his side, he threw a batarang across the gulf between the two massive buildings, and swung across with casual skill and ease. The masked teen watched him go, remembering the orders he had given before they had left the Batcave.

With a sigh, Batgirl crouched down on the edge of the roof, and waited.

She was the first to note the arrival of a new car.

Batman climbed in through a broken window near the roof completely silently, only to watch in horror at the scene below. The duellists performed their deadly dance on the shelving in the middle of the building, knocking dust into the air as the structure shook.

Damien battered MacLeod back using a series of high strikes, pushing the Scot right up to a stack of crates. With an expert move that even had Batman blinking with surprise, Damien disarmed him, spun, and drove the stolen katana point-first through the Highlander's chest. MacLeod slumped, his strength obviously leaving him, but the katana had been driven straight through and into the crates behind, pinning the Highlander to them like an Immortal butterfly.

Damien grinned with satisfaction as he stepped back to admire his work. Blood was rapidly staining the Highlander's chest. MacLeod weakly gripped the katana's intricately carved hilt and feebly tried to tug it out, blood bubbling from his mouth with each dying grunt.

Damien nodded to himself. "And so it ends. Goodbye MacLeod. There can be only one." With that he drew back his sword for one final strike.

As he began the swing, a tiny dark flicker in his peripheral vision gave him an instant of warning before a metal object skipped off the side of his head, a second slamming hard into his side, audibly cracking a rib. The evil Immortal stumbled, leaving himself exposed for one hundred and thirty kilograms of enraged Kevlar-covered Bat to crash into him.

The slender man was hurled off the platform like a leaf under a blower, tumbling haphazardly to the concrete floor below.

Making a split-second decision, Batman left his target and stepped in front of MacLeod. He looked over the dying man critically, then gripped the katana hilt with a determined expression. The ancient blade drew free from its human sheath with an ugly, steely hiss.

Renee Montoya had simply been driving home from the cinema when she saw the Batmobile thunder past. She was three days into a well-deserved fortnight vacation, and the last thing she wanted to do was get into a situation where she had to risk her life.

But very few people had seen the Batman in action. It was a chance few ever got even once.

The decision to follow had led her here, and she crept up to the filthy warehouse window just in time to see the Batman pull a sword from the chest of a stricken man.

Renee gasped, clapping her hand to her mouth. Had he just...?

No, he had just pulled the sword *out*. But if that was the case, then he had interfered with a crime scene.

Renee glanced around hurriedly. With one final glance through the dirty window, she ran up the fire escape steps leading into the manager's office on the second floor of the building. Before she was halfway up the stairs, she had already called for backup on her mobile.

Batman grimaced as MacLeod collapsed bonelessly, without his own blade supporting him. The Scot almost fell from the platform to the floor beneath, something Batman could not allow to happen. Batman stabbed the katana down, pinning the Highlander's overcoat to the wooden shelves, securing the Immortal to the spot. Batman nodded to himself, quite satisfied. When MacLeod awoke, he would easily be able to free himself, but it would keep his body up here and safe, away from the vengeful Damien.

Batman turned and slotted his infrared lenses in place, instantly discerning Damien's heat signature. Without any more wasted time, he ran and leapt into the air, coming to land in a crouch directly behind the evil Immortal.

Without the benefit of heat-sensing optics, Damien had no hope of making out Batman's dark clothes in the dim light of the warehouse. As Batman landed, the red-head twisted and swung his sword in a wide arc at chest height behind him. Batman, whose pointed ears were just centimetres beneath the blade's path, calmly waited for the right instant, surging forward and striking with surgical precision his father would have been proud to display.

The deadly sword clattered on the floor five metres away, and the pair began to fight in earnest.

Renee shouldered the fire escape door open and stumbled into the floor manager's office. Ignoring the room, she raced over to the office door, and wrenched it open. She drew her Glock and took two deep breaths, before stepping out onto the walkway overlooking the warehouse floor, her gun held out and ready in front of her.

The man who had been stabbed was lying on the central shelves, the sword pinning him in place. But what caught her eye was the fight. On the floor beneath both her and the dead man, Batman was calmly, almost sedately, kicking the shit out of some poor bugger.

Anger flooded him. Rage pulsed through his veins. Every move was fuelled by his ire.

Batman used them all like old friends. He had lost himself in his negative emotions in the past, but he had learned to use them productively rather than let them use him.

Once more, Damien was both injured and stunned. This time, he was disarmed, fighting with only what skills he had at unarmed combat.

Not that they were in any way inadequate. The slender man had countered the majority of Batman's attacks, and his unnatural healing ability gave him an unsurpassed advantage, but he was battling arguably the best martial artist in the world.

On his part, Batman let himself go. No more did he have to rein in his instincts to kill. He didn't have to select only non-lethal attacks. After Bane had broken his back, the Lady Shiva had insisted that until he had killed, his training with her was not complete. At the time, he had to use a dangerous deception to convince her he was a killer.

Now, there were no inhibitions. No restrictions. It was almost with relief that Batman threw off his self-imposed limitations and attacked to kill. Damien's jaw shattered under his fist for the second time in a minute. In his heightened awareness, the few counter-attacks Damien made were almost offensively easy to evade.

The man's instinctive defenses were fully intact however. Fighting constantly against experienced opponents for eight hundred years ingrained your reflexes and honed your skills to a razor edge. Without thinking, Damien was able to keep the majority of Batman's attacks at bay.

It was a battle of attrition though. For every bone Damien healed, Batman broke two. Eventually, Batman snapped Damien's left ulna with a savage knifehand, leaving a tiny gap in the Immortal's defenses.

It was with almost savage joy that Batman launched a leopard blow, the very same strike that he fooled the Lady Shiva with.

It mimics the bite of a leopard. The bridge of the nose is driven into the brain. The front of the skull is shattered by each of the five fingers, sending sharp slivers of bone slicing through the frontal lobes. Death is instantaneous.

Damien's temporary corpse fell to the cold concrete floor. Batman fought the urge to tilt his head back and scream with primal victory.

Renee froze as the Batman destroyed his opponent's face. The body collapsed backwards away from the Dark Knight, obviously lifeless.

She swallowed, drew a deep breath and shouted, "FREEZE!"

Oh my God, she thought to herself. I'm going to try and arrest the Batman!

"FREEZE!"

Batman snapped his gaze up, finally noticing Officer Montoya's presence. Ice trickled down his spine. "Don't Move!" he thundered.

The policewoman blinked, not used to having her commands repeated back at her. "You're under arrest. Don't move!" she shouted.

Batman clenched his teeth together and shook his head. "Officer Montoya, you are standing on a trap!"

She stiffened, slowly lowering her gaze. For the first time, she saw the recent modifications to the walkway, her dark eyes widening with fright. Her head snapped back up again, and she looked back at Batman imploringly, completely missing the irony of the fact that she desperately wanted his help, yet still had her sidearm trained on his heart.

With a growl of annoyance, Batman quickly studied the scene, mentally noting points of cover, danger and certain death. Drawing a pair of batarangs from his belt, he leapt back up to the central shelving where he had left MacLeod pinned. With a running leap, he tossed both into the distance, each setting off a tripwire during their flight, fired his grappling hook up, and swung out and around, gaining momentum.

On the end of a batrope, Batman swung around and snatched Renee from her perch just before the landing she had been standing on collapsed down into the dusty depths. Detonations from explosives set in various places rocked the building. The pair swung down and up, finishing on the walkway around the edge of the warehouse, just below the ceiling.

"You killed h-" Montoya started, before Batman covered her with his cape and forced her against a vertical, heavy steel support.

More explosions filled the air above them, and the entire corrugated iron roof gently slid off its supporting structure. Lethal sheets sheered down the outer sides of the warehouse, and would have severely inconvenienced anyone looking in the windows or climbing up the outer wall.

Officer Montoya peeked out from under the heavy cape, looking up at where the ceiling had been. She coughed, and tightened her grip on her pistol. "You're under arrest," she said, sounding almost as nervous as she felt.

"For what?"

She blinked. "You killed that man!"

"That one?" Batman asked lightly, gesturing down towards the floor beneath.

The policewoman glanced down, half expecting a trick, only to nearly drop her gun with surprise. The victim of Batman's assault was slowly rising to his feet, manually straightening his broken limbs. *Had she imagined it? Had Batman's strike not killed him?* She gave a gasp of shock when she noticed that MacLeod was also up and about.

"But... But he had a sword through him!"

Batman nodded his head. "I know. They can't die. But I have to stop him. Stay here."

Renee nodded fervidly, tightly clutching the steel support that used to hold up the roof. Despite the fact that she was uncomfortable with heights, she didn't want to soar through the air with him again.

Connor slowly stood, sliding his overcoat up the katana's blade, then gripped the hilt and wrenched it from the wood. He looked down at his clothes. They were drenched in his blood.

Ignoring the explosions that were going off all around and above him, Connor jumped down from the central shelving. His sneakers made very little noise as he landed. Once again in the deep shadows of the building, even with light from the city's neon jungle pouring in from above, Connor took a deep breath and sighed, leaning back on the shelving. After being stabbed through the chest, as the world faded around him, Connor had thought he was dead. It was only in the last flicker of consciousness that he saw the Batman attack Damien. Once more, the Batman had saved his life. It was becoming a habit.

Connor mechanically checked his sword, nodding with satisfaction that there were no nicks and scrapes. His fencing style had prevented a great deal of damage from being inflicted. With a soft grunt, Connor pushed away from the shelving and back out into the warehouse proper, hunting a red headed Immortal.

Not that it was difficult to find him. Damien and the Batman had squared off again, only this time, Damien had dried blood all over his face and arms. Connor grinned to himself. The Batman had obviously treated him to a world of discomfort.

With more light, his sword in hand, and ready for his opponent, Damien's defenses were a match for the Batman's attacks. Oddly, Damien was using a similar style to Connor, attacking with jabs and feints. There was no hint of the majestic sweeping strikes that he had used against MacLeod.

The Batman must have done something to force a change on his opponent. The answer came shortly.

Damien tried a more formal cutting attack, which the Batman easily caught by clapping his hands together on the blade. Connor nearly applauded the incredible act of reflex and timing.

But Damien twisted and kicked out at the Batman, now unable to use his hands to defend. The Dark Knight accepted the blow to his ribs, falling back and exhaling to cushion the hit.

Something twanged in the darkness, and a taut steel cable flashed out at neck height. Once more, Connor was amazed at the sheer speed of the Batman's reflexes, since the big man had ducked under the lethal trap before Connor had even realised where the noise had come from.

But with something rigid in the lining of his cape, it got caught instead, pulling him roughly away from Damien. The Batman crashed into another set of shelving, knocking some heavy crates down from above, one landing hard on his shoulder.

Damien drew back for a final strike to the pinned man when Connor barrelled into him, sending the Immortal pair tumbling. Both rolled quickly to their feet and lashed out at the other. Once more, the pair fought.

Connor caught the invincible blade on his katana, trying to cushion the blow so that it didn't damage his sword. With an evil grin, Damien hooked the tip of his sword under the curved edge of the katana, and twisted the ancient sword out of the Highlander's grip. It clattered away a few metres to Connor's right.

Connor responded with one of the first tricks he had ever been taught, snatching a handful of his opponent's clothes, pulling him forward and flattening Damien's nose with his forehead. The red head staggered backwards with tears filling his eyes.

Thank you, Angus, Connor thought to himself, thinking of the gentle giant who forced the Glenfinnin villagers to let him go after he had first awoken as an Immortal. A shout from his left caught his attention.

"MacLeod! Catch!" the Batman shouted, throwing a bundle towards him. Batman kept a grip on one corner of the cloth covering the object, causing it to unravel in the air. When the cloth ran out, a slivery sabre with a mirror finish rolled through the air between the two men.

Connor caught it by the guard, fumbling slightly. The sword was slightly heavier than his katana, with a much wider blade. The bell guard covered his entire hand, and the edge gleamed.

In the second it took the Highlander to grip the sword correctly, Damien was upon him, delivering an overhand blow that would have cut through anything. Instinctively, Connor raised the blade, and both edges crashed together like the crack of doom.

One sword's blade was severely damaged. It wasn't Connor's.

The look of surprise on both combatant's faces was almost identical, but their second expressions couldn't be more different. Damien looked as though he had been fatally wounded, while Connor's wicked grin betrayed his delight at the reversal of Damien's main advantage.

"Heh, heh, heh," Connor laughed in his trademark breathy way. "Time for a little head hunting."

With a guttural roar, Damien slashed at Connor again, only to have his attack easily blocked. Once more, not a single scratch marred the surface of Connor's new weapon.

The pair squared off, and began to battle in earnest.

Without the roof, the warehouse was lit far more effectively from the city lights. Batman spared a handful of seconds to watch the two ancient warriors battle beneath him before trying again to shift the forgotten crates that had his cape trapped.

An unwelcome noise intruded on his task, and Batman almost groaned with irritation. How many more times would a distraction occur?

A police helicopter arrived and hovered over the denuded building, kicking up dust and debris from below. A connection formed in his mind, one that didn't bear thinking about.

"No!" Batman screamed, desperately waving his arms over his head. Beneath him, the two figures slashed at each other with animalistic fervour. "Send the helicopter away!" he shouted towards Renee.

"What?" shouted Officer Montoya, holding her hand cupped behind her ear, her hair and clothes waving around in the violent downdraft of air as she clutched at the exposed steel structure of the building.

Grinding his teeth in frustration, Batman looked down into the now-exposed building. With the roof gone, and dusty bales strewn around on the floor, the wind from the helicopter's rotors was whipping up the extensive deposits of dust from below. Visibility was reduced enough that he was forced simply to following the two silhouettes as they continued their frenzied, lethal dance. From this distance, without the ability to make out individual details, Batman couldn't be absolutely sure which was which.

Ignoring the pain in his shoulder, he signalled the pilot of the helicopter using semaphore, though without a bright object in each hand, the attempt was unsuccessful. With a tug, Batman tore part of his cape away, freeing himself from Damien's trap. He turned away from the battle and scrambled up the wall, reaching the lip of the building in seconds.

In a crouch, he scuttled along the building's edge, his exceptional reflexes allowing him to keep his balance even when under assault by artificial high winds. Closing in on Officer Montoya, he again shouted, "Order the helicopter away! It's in danger!"

Renee frowned, still clutching the support beam. "What? Why?"

"Just do it!" Batman all but shrieked, only to stop and turn when he a noise he had been hearing for several minutes simply stopped.

The clash of metal on metal.

Batman snapped his head around and looked straight down into the dust-filled atmosphere. Only one figure remained upright. As Batman desperately examined the blurred figure for details which would identify him, the figure dropped his sword and held his hands out to his sides, as though impaled on a crucifix.

The air suddenly felt heavy. Blue tendrils of Quickening began arcing off the exposed metallic skeleton of the building. Renee gasped and shook as the column she was holding onto grumbled and groaned at the unexpected sensation of potential energy.

Mentally screaming a curse, the Dark Knight whipped his gas-powered grappling hook from his utility belt and fired it, directly at the hovering helicopter. Misjudging the air turbulence slightly, the hook passed beneath the body of the helicopter instead of through the open side doors, but did pass over the metal runners beneath the fuselage.

With a jerk, Batman reversed the mechanism, reeling the hook back so that it latched onto the 'legs' of the vehicle and pulled him up. As the air filled with bursts and bolts of tightly knitted blue lightning, Batman reached the helicopter.

The pilot was swearing loudly, struggling to maintain control of the now useless electronic circuitry. Even this far from the battle, Quickening visibly surged through the interior of the cockpit, shorting out panels and blowing up components.

Ignoring the terrified shouts from the passengers as the craft lurched to the side, Batman heaved himself into the body of the helicopter and lashed out with his last batarang, using the sharp edges to slice through the safety lines securing the two crewmen and one pilot to the hull of the doomed vessel. Somehow managing to keep his footing in the jumble of flaying limbs and rapidly changing centre of gravity, Batman passed his left arm through the shoulder straps of the struggling crewmen's halters, and got a firm grip on the clothes of the pilot. He deliberately waited for three quarters of a second as the helicopter dropped and twisted, then threw himself out the side door.

Renee screamed in agony as the surging trails of blue lightning seared the skin on her hands. As the latest tendril vanished, she slumped, looking desperately around for a way off this ruined building. The Batman had disappeared up to the helicopter for some unknown reason. She glanced up at the craft, hoping to get a glimpse of him, perhaps to let him know she needed help. Again.

To her horror, the blasted blue lightning was sparking and exploding off the police helicopter. As she watched, the craft twisted and swayed, obviously out of control. It tilted and *dropped*, heading towards the street below in a lethal sideways dive.

A figure leapt through the side door, though with the helicopter nearly ninety degrees on its side, it was probably closer to being the *ceiling* door.

The amorphous figure rolled gracefully to the top of its parabolic arc, before a line shot from it, anchoring above Renee's head. As the figure swung closer, she recognised the Batman, holding onto three figures, all rigid with fright.

Despite the fact that the shortening line meant that the quartet wouldn't be swinging to the end of the line directly into the ground, they did accelerate quickly into a window beneath Renee. Her fear of the blue lightning gone in her terror for her workmates, she followed the flight path and shrieked with grief as the four crashed through a large glass pane and into the wooden shelving beneath her feet. Containers exploded around them, and her terror turned to tearful relief as she recognised what they had landed in. Gotham's forgotten stockpiles of loosely packed wool bales.

A deep, masculine shout of agony snatched her attention, and the blurred figure in the middle of the destroyed warehouse raised his arms from horizontal to high above his head, and the lightning from all around shot towards him in a rush. In one instant, the figure lit up, and appeared to be fried by the energy coursing into him.

The structure, already weakened by the unnatural phenomenon, crumbled beneath her. All along the wall, the shelves collapsed, sending bags and bales flying. Weevil infested flour bags burst, sending grey powder into the air, further lowering visibility.

Breath was blasted from Renee's lungs as something slammed into her from behind. Strong, slender arms encircled her waist and easily lifted her from her precarious perch. Renee and her rescuer fell in a controlled manner towards the soft wool below, the howl of pain from the blurred figure in the centre of the lightning storm echoing through her ears.

She had hardly landed in the soft wool when a hand like a vice clamped down on her ankle, jerking her into a different direction. "Down!" the Batman shouted, burying both her and her rescuer deep in the wool, before the world went white and filled with almost solid noise.

The explosion ripped through the warehouse, forcing the building's structure out and up. Renee felt herself screaming, but couldn't hear her voice over the noise. Then darkness gathered in her vision, and she descended gratefully into cool blackness.

Jim Gordon drove the squad car towards the glowing building far too quickly for Sergeant Bullock's nerves. The car almost lifted onto two side wheels as it raced in and out of the heavy traffic.

"You know, Commish, better late than never," the fat policeman said, gripping the dashboard with one meaty hand and his seat with the other.

Jim ignored him, desperate to cover the relatively small distance between HQ and the docks in as little time as possible.

The pair arrived ahead of even the second police helicopter sent to the scene, Gordon all but standing on the brakes as the car skidded towards the levelled building.

Sergeant Bullock gingerly exited the car far more sedately than his boss, who was out and running across the debris covered street like a man a third of his age. Bullock focused on where the Commissioner was running, only to start running in that direction himself.

Batman emerged from the flames, his cape nothing but a ragged scrap of material covering his shoulders, carrying Officer Montoya with one arm as though she was an overgrown toddler. Behind him with his other arm, he dragged two other members of the GCPD out of the flaming building. The young woman who often joined him on his nocturnal hunts helped another policeman out of the building, one who was conscious, but had to lean on the slender young woman to walk.

"Are... they...?" Jim asked, pointing at the helicopter and panting heavily.

Batman nodded wearily. "I got the crew out of the helicopter before it crashed, and covered them and Montoya here before the explosion. They're all present and accounted for, but will need medical attention. They'll all live."

Jim slumped in on himself, managing to hold himself up by putting his hands on his knees, relief dissolving his adrenaline-fuelled strength. "Thank you, old friend," he said sincerely. "And thank you too, young lady."

Batman and Batgirl nodded, the former gently lowering Renee to the ground.

"What happened?" the Commissioner panted. "Bomb?"

Batman shook his head. "No, flour dust in the air hit with a lightning equivalent caused the main explosion. The roof was removed earlier by controlled detonations. I have to go back in there, Jim."

That brought the Commissioner up short. "What?" he blurted, as Sergeant Bullock attended to the wounded officers. The building was in flames, the fire beginning to really take hold.

"There's a headless corpse in there, Jim. I need to find out if it's our head-taking murderer."

"What? You know who killed those people?"

Batman nodded. "It's a story I'll share another time. I have to go."

The Edge of a Blade

Chapter 9

Connor staggered towards the mansion, still dizzy after being at ground zero during the explosion. Even though his Quickening had healed him completely, he'd be dazed for a little while yet.

It had taken holding up a pair of hundred dollar bills for a cab to stop for him. Not surprising really, since he was covered in soot, blood, flour and dust. Not to mention the fact he was essentially bald after most of his hair had been singed away.

Funny thing about eyebrows, you look really odd without them.

Connor stopped a few metres from the door, wondering what his next step should be. Certainly, he couldn't just walk in dressed as he was, even though he had been given full run of the house. Wayne's butler was incredibly efficient, and would probably notice the creaking of the front door immediately.

No, he'd have to go around the mansion, and enter his room through the open window. Then he'd change, pack, and leave the same way, hopefully not getting any blood or dirt anywhere in the room.

Having made his mind up, Connor cautiously crept around the perimeter of the impressive building. The three swords under his arm clinked slightly, even wrapped in the hessian sack he had purloined from the warehouse. It posed a dilemma for the Immortal. The Batman had obviously only loaned the sword to him for the battle, and Connor dearly wanted to give it back before he left. But with no forwarding address, he'd have to assume that the Batman would track him down in his Manhattan home.

Reaching the ground beneath his guest suite, Connor studied the building face, noting very few handholds he could use to scale the building. Shrugging to himself, (he had studied with Houdini after all) he began scaling the wall, falling only once. He broke his leg in that fall, but that little inconvenience healed quickly.

Finally, panting softly, Connor hauled himself over the stone balcony. A hint of steam in the air puzzled him for a second before the light in his room was suddenly turned on.

"Ah, Mr. Nash. I have drawn a bath for you. It shall be ready momentarily."

Connor stopped his hand from drawing his katana. "Um, Sorry, Mr. Pennyworth. I will be leaving tonight."

The butler scoffed at the notion. "Dear me, no, sir. I think not! Strip! Those clothes will need to be thoroughly cleaned and dried before I can begin to repair them."

Connor blinked. "What?"

The butler waved the question away. "Later. Now, get out of those clothes. Place that bundle you have on the desk, if you would prefer that I didn't see the contents. Now, do hurry up, the bath will remain hot for only so long."

Connor frowned, trying to maintain some sort of equilibrium in the suddenly surreal situation. He looked down at his clothes. Burnt, ripped, torn, not to mention filthy with blood, soot and flour. In the dozen or so times in the past four hundred years he met people looking similar to this, they had generally either run away screaming or tried to kill him. Drawing him a bath had not hitherto been a response.

"Um, are you sure? I can leave..."

"Oh, for goodness sake, no! Master Bruce would be most put out with me if his guest were in circumstances that necessitated leaving. No, I simply will not tolerate it. We can discuss this afterwards. Strip!"

With a cough, Connor placed the bundle of swords on the desk, then slowly stripped off. The butler, whose back was turned for decency, collected the ruined clothes and gave them a quick perusal. "I'm afraid your overcoat is fit only for dusters, sir. I'm afraid that there is just not enough left to repair."

"Um, fine?" said Connor, still trying to ground himself.

"The rest, however, should be salvageable. Your bath is ready, sir. Just step into your ensuite. You'll find a robe hanging behind the door waiting for you.

"Um, thank you."

"Do you require your back scrubbed?"

"Um, no! No, definitely not."

"Very well, I shall leave you to soak. Oh, you may find it preferable to bathe in the Japanese method. There is a shower unit available, should you wish to rinse down before entering the bath."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure. Now, go and relax, I shall return in an hour."

The water was luke warm by the time Connor finally hauled himself out of the massive tub. With a wry smile, the Highlander decided that this was the best, post-Quickening recovery he had ever had. The bath itself was carefully shaped to allow a person to relax and lie back in comfort, with no chance of them slipping down and under the water.

Not that it would have been anything more than an inconvenience to the Immortal. But he did hate getting the water out of his sinuses after drowning.

Connor stretched, and towelled down his hair. The thick, fluffy robe hanging on the back of the door fit him perfectly, hanging down to his ankles. It had spent the previous hour hanging on a warming rack, and Connor instantly decided to buy one for himself on his return to New York.

Connor opened the adjoining door to his suite, only to jump slightly as the door to the rest of the mansion opened almost simultaneously. Wayne's butler stepped in, carrying a folded set of clothes, washed, dried, repaired and ironed.

"You are most efficient, Mr. Pennyworth."

"Practice, Mr. Nash, practice. Now, I assume you have some questions for me."

Connor nodded as the butler placed the clothes on the foot of the bed. He had indeed wondered at the lack of reaction the man had shown on his arrival. Such a man noticed everything, and surely would have noticed the tips of the blades hanging out from the hessian covering. "Do you know about me?"

Slowly, the butler's eyes met Connor's own. "I assume you are referring to your, somewhat *extended* lifespan?"

Connor swallowed. "Yes. How?"

"Master Bruce is not the only person to have retained my services, sir."

Connor raised an eyebrow at the non-answer. "Who? Which Immortal did you serve?"

The butler gave a sad smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. Nash. But I will not divulge any personal information regarding my employers, past or present. Rest assured, however, that the same courtesy applies to your good self. Nothing that is said in this room shall be reported to a single soul."

Connor nodded, satisfied with the answer, even though it didn't address his question. "Thank you. I guess this isn't the first time you've cleaned blood from clothes then."

The butler's lips twitched, but his expression remained carefully neutral. "That would be a fair assumption, sir."

Connor sat down on the bed. "What do you know about the Batman?"

The butler's head tilted to one side. "Before I answer, might I enquire as to the sudden change in topic?"

Connor shrugged. "He saved me tonight. I came to the city to find the Immortal who murdered a student of mine." He looked up at the sudden surprise in the butler's expression. Connor held up a hand and waved it in a placating manner. "The Immortal I hunted is gone, so you have no need to worry for your or your employer's safety. But for someone who, until a few days ago, knew nothing about Immortals, the Batman has been able to find us easily. I've hidden from the world for nearly five hundred years, it is more than a little disturbing at how easily he keeps finding me."

The butler turned, and pulled out a wooden chair from under the desk, and genteelly sat, his knees creaking slightly. "The Batman has been a part of Gotham City for over a decade, Mr. Nash. While I cannot say that I know as much about him as anyone else in the city, there are certain facts that newcomers are, shall we say, surprised to learn."

"Like what?"

The butler smiled. "Like the fact that the police have a signal which they used to summon him when necessary. As I understand it, while the Police Department refuse to make any statement regarding the Batman to the press, it is common knowledge that there is some sort of understanding between them."

Connor frowned. "That doesn't answer why he was able to track both myself and Damien down."

The butler rose from the chair. "Master Bruce often entertains Gotham's high-profile individuals here at the Manor. The Batman has often been the hot topic of discussion, given his activities. From what I gather, he is both a detective, and a man-hunter. You shouldn't feel disheartened that such a man discovered you, and divined your *talent*. If even half the rumours are true, he would have found you sooner or later, no matter what precautions you took."

Connor nodded. "Perhaps. Thank you again, Mr. Pennyworth."

The butler gave a small bow. "Do you require anything else? A hot meal?"

Connor shook his head. "No thank you. I think I shall just retire."

"As you wish."

The butler gave the room a quick look, nodded with satisfaction that everything was as it should be, and left. The door had been closed only a few

seconds when Connor nearly leapt out of his skin.

"You took off quickly."

The Immortal leapt to his feet and whirled around to see a faint outline of someone dressed head to toe in black standing on the stone banister outside, almost invisible against the dark sky. He clutched at his heart, and suppressed a hiccup. "Mother of God, what the hell are you doing?"

The Batman lightly stepped down from the banister and onto the balcony floor. "What? I can't exactly frighten you to death now, can I?"

Connor slumped back down onto the bed, ignoring the slight barb. "I suppose you're after the sword."

"Good guess. I'm glad it worked. I just wish you could have avoided killing him."

Connor gently drew out the otherworldly blade. "That was never going to happen. One of us would have died, if not here, then in a few years when we met again. This way, he won't kill again. Where did you get this? I've never seen anything like it."

The Batman held out his hand, and accepted the sword. "You wouldn't believe me."

Connor gave a breathy laugh. "Try me."

For a long moment, the Batman studied the Immortal. Finally, he said, "Many years ago, Gotham was first visited by an alien race of hunters. It killed boxing champions, crime lords, government officials. Finally, we battled, and I defeated it. Its kin arrived and pulled me off it. It took this sword and committed suicide. It was given to me as a trophy."

Connor swallowed. "You said, 'first visited'."

The Batman nodded solemnly. "Twice more they have returned. The last time, instead of them dying, I humiliated them and sent them back. With any luck, they won't come back again."

Connor nodded, reached down, and picked up the remains of Damien's sword. "Here. Perhaps you can work out what to do with this."

The Dark Knight accepted the dead Immortal's sword with a nod. "Thank you. What are your plans now?"

Connor shrugged. "I have all of Damien's memories and skills now. It will take me quite some time to come to terms with them. I still have a day or so of work to do here for Mr. Wayne, then I'm going back home. After Gotham, New York is going to seem like a holiday."

Rachel looked up at the elegant tingle, signalling a new customer entering the store. Her face split into a large, joyful smile, and she almost jumped to her feet. She flew into her father's arms. "Oh, I wasn't expecting you for hours!"

Connor's smile was nearly as large as his adopted daughter's. "Sweet Rachel. It is good to be back. And I have a surprise for you."

He stepped aside, revealing Alfred, who gave a small bow. "Good morning, Madam. I do hope that you remember me. Alfred Pennyworth, at your service."

"Why Mister Pennyworth, welcome. This is a pleasant surprise."

Connor ushered him in. "Bruce has a meeting in New York, and offered to bring me home in his private jet. While he is busy, Alfred here asked to be introduced. He was most insistent."

Rachel blushed. "Oh, that is so sweet of you."

Again, Alfred gave a small bow. "A pleasure, my dear. Mr. Nash here did say that you rarely got away from the store. Master Bruce will be tied up for most of the rest of the day. Perhaps I could treat you to a late breakfast?"

Rachel gave Connor a quick glance, which he returned with a nod. "Mister Pennyworth, I'd be delighted."

"Alfred, please my dear."

"Only if you call me Rachel."

Connor watched the pair go, a smile on his face. It was good to see his daughter enjoying life. She had spent far too long looking after him.

He flipped the sign on the front door to closed, and shrugged out of his new overcoat. Alfred had been good enough to sew a scabbard into the material, even going so far as to line the addition with some sort of cloth that not even the razor sharp katana would cut.

Connor ascended the stairs leading to his private quarters, where he poured himself a drink. He sat down on the leather couch and relaxed. He didn't really need to open the store until Rachel got back. He was just going to relax and filter through the memories he had just obtained.

After all, he had all the time in the world.