

Gotham in the afternoon was a fetching sight. The skyscrapers stretched to meet the clear blue sky, and the people were out in droves, everybody moving at their own pace on the crowded sidewalks and storefronts. It was a picturesque summer day, the kind that buoyed spirits.

For Bruce, the idea of relaxing his guard seemed almost preposterous. But he wasn't prowling as the Batman, fighting till the dawn; for now, he was just Bruce Wayne, meeting his date for lunch. He tugged at his shirt collar in the window's reflection, in a bit of a sweat—just the heat, he would swear by.

Alfred caught his gaze in the rearview mirror. His faithful butler had elected to drive despite Bruce's insistence on a taxi, though he was grateful. "We'll be there in five minutes. I hope you're prepared, Master Bruce?"

"I had the suit measured and fitted twice now. I think any more preparation might be overkill," Bruce said. Perfectionism was a vice of his, even for a venture that was *supposed* to be a fun time.

"I meant prepared for Julie, Master Bruce. Try smiling when you see her."

"I know that," he scoffed.

After a few turns, the limo rolled to a stop, and he stepped out, adjusting his navy blue coat before the silver gates of Argus Motion Picture Studio. The security guard in the booth tipped his hat and let him in.

"You're expected," he said. With the press of a button, the gates slowly swiveled open. Bruce smiled and gave the man a cordial wave.

On the concrete lot, he saw Julie standing under a spotlight, dark auburn hair tousled by the breeze, wearing a loose vest over a pink shirt. She was in conversation with an older

gentleman, bespectacled, with a shock of gray in his brown hair. *One of the studio heads?* he guessed, walking a bit faster. He wanted to project confidence, not arrogance.

When Julie caught sight of him, she waved him over and met him halfway. She wrapped her arm around his elbow, and he could see she was a little flushed, either from the spotlight or the excitement.

"Bruce! This is the director I've been telling you about. Morris Bentley, remember?"

"I do." Bruce gave him a firm handshake. He leaned a bit closer to Julie, looking fondly at her. "Julie's told me a lot. She's very excited about working for you, I know that."

Bentley shook his head and smiled. "Believe me, Julie's one of the few bright spots of this whole mess!"

"Mess?" Bruce arched an eyebrow, looking between Julie and Bentley. Both of them looked a bit reticent to explain, dodging his gaze.

Bentley cleared his throat, speaking in a hushed tone. "Well, it's a bit delicate—"

Just then, another man stormed into the spotlight, lean with a hard jaw and five o'clock shadow. "Serves you right for stealing this picture from me!" he shouted.

"Ned! You've got your nerve. You fired yourself by disappearing for days on end! Get off this lot before I call security!" Bentley snapped.

If the situation escalated to violence, Bruce was ready to handle it. He took a step forward, one hand still on Julie's shoulder.

Ned scowled. Perhaps deciding he didn't want any trouble, he headed off for the gates. "I'm going...for now."

As soon as he stormed off, a fellow in a pinstripe dress shirt walked up, His fair complexion and platinum-blond hair shone under the spotlight, a face made for the big screen.

"Was that Norton? He's not coming back, is he?" he asked, sounding only mildly concerned over the outburst.

The director waved his hand dismissively. "Forget about him. Oh, Ken, this is Julie's friend, Bruce Wayne," he said. "Bruce, meet Kenneth Todd."

"A pleasure," Bruce said, with another handshake. He squinted at Ken and Ken squinted back, like they both vaguely recognized the other from TV.

"He's our rising talent—set to play *The Terror!*!" Bentley explained, wrapping his arm around Kenneth. The actor shrugged, clearly not too pleased with the glitzy introduction.

Then, the director ushered in another figure under the spotlight, one that Bruce hadn't noticed before. "And this is Basil Karlo, star of the original *Dread Castle*—the picture we're remaking!"

Bruce's eyes widened with recognition. Basil Karlo was a legend of early color film, the face of gothic horror. His high cheekbones and razor-thin mustache gave him a perpetually austere look. His brown hair was slicked back, just beginning to gray with age.

Bruce was briefly starstruck. Thankfully, Karlo got to talking.

"Mr. Bentley has kindly asked me to act as a technical and makeup consultant."

Julie cut in. "Why don't I show you around, Bruce? We have time."

He was happy to take her up on the offer. Julie and Bentley gave him the express tour of the studio, showing off the makeup rooms, the elaborate sets, and half-finished props not yet ready to see the light of day. Bruce was in the middle of admiring a convincing mold of a body when the sounds of shouting caught his attention.

On the outskirts of a painted backdrop, he saw a man and a woman up in each other's faces, locked in argument.

"I said we're through, Fred! I may have loved you once, but..."

"You've never loved anyone but yourself!"

By now, Bentley and Julie were eavesdropping too. Bentley grimaced. "Oh no...that's our starlet, Lorna Dane, and her boyfriend, Fred Walker—arguing again, of course..."

Bruce wouldn't have guessed they were a couple at first glance. Lorna was all glamor, curly black hair and lots of makeup on her face. By comparison, Fred was what one might call homely, thick glasses and greasy blonde hair.

"You think you're too good for me, don't you?" Fred snapped, fists clenched.

Lorna scoffed. "*Think?* Fred, I know I'm too good for you."

After that, Fred turned red. His next few words were softer spoken, but Bruce picked up every word.

"One day, someone's going to shut you up, once and for all. And I hope I'm there to see it."

With that, Fred left. Lorna's reaction was nonplussed, hands on her hips; maybe it was just an empty threat.

Bruce exchanged a look with Julie, and she shrugged wearily. "Showbiz," she said.

Right by the prop exhibit, a stocky man in a maroon suit approached the director with a mean look in his eye. "Bentley, we gotta talk," he said, his voice deep and husky.

Another familiar face. Bruce narrowed his eyes at the man. *But not from film...*

Bentley smiled tightly, and waved at Bruce and Julie. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Wayne! Drop by the set sometime. Excuse me..."

* * *

After two strange arguments back to back, Julie suggested getting away for a minute. There was a cafe on the studio; the two of them got drinks there.

Julie slumped over the table, giving Bruce an apologetic look. "Sorry. It's not always this hectic. Today's just odd, that's all."

"It's no trouble. I've seen worse," he said, and he meant it.

"Did you recognize that man with the director? I saw you giving him the side-eye."

Bruce scratched at his collar. He didn't want to appear too in-the-know for a Gotham socialite. "That was Roxy Brenner. He's a gangster—wants a piece of the motion picture business," he said, then quickly added, "so I've heard."

"Ghastly," Julie gasped.

"Do you believe it?" Bruce asked.

"Well..." Her shoulders slumped. "It's not out of the question."

"Oh?" Bruce leaned closer. "Go on. The mess the director mentioned earlier—how bad?"

"It's just a bunch of funny coincidences, that's all. At least I hope that's the case." Julie took a long swig of her coffee. "A prop knife got switched with a real one the other day. Before that, one of the lights fell down onstage. Could've killed somebody! I don't wanna cry foul play just yet, but..."

He could see she was worried. He laid his hand atop hers, even though his own suspicions were growing. "I'm sure that's all it is. Coincidences," he said.

Julie brightened a bit. "I feel like I've given you the wrong impression of my work. Do you wanna come back tomorrow, during shooting? You could see the actors do their thing."

Bruce smiled. "I'd love to."

* * *

As promised, Bruce showed up to the studio the next day, though it meant canceling a meeting. Walking on set, he marveled at the stage, replete with medieval touches. The flaming torches, grimy brick walls, and iron armaments immersed him in the scene. *Morris Bentley spares no expense*, Bruce thought.

Julie was in costume as an extra, playing the role of a handmaid in white. Although she was only a bit part compared to Kenneth Todd and Lorna Dane, Bruce couldn't help but think she shined the brightest in costume.

The cameras started rolling. The actors took their positions while Bruce watched from afar, standing off in the corner.

Lorna Dane reclined on her plush bed, playing the part of the decadent Countess. "Fetch me a glass of wine, would you, servant? My thirst is never quenched,"

"Yes, my lady. Right away, my lady." Julie curtseyed, and hurried off camera. That was her only line, but she did it well. Bruce relaxed.

Then, the curtains in the countess's room rustled. The sound team simulated the roar of a thunderclap with a trash can.

The Countess jerked around, a hand on her chest. "Who goes there?"

Then came the Terror, a hunchback with an executioner's hood over his face and a scraggly beard. Perched on the sill, he brandished a silver sword, teeth bared.

"Back! Back, I said!" The Countess retreated, as the intruder slowly closed in on her.

The Terror lunged, snarling like an animal.

"Eeeeeeeek!"

"Cut!"

Bruce blinked. Bentley stepped in front of the cameras. Both the Countess and the Terror stopped in their tracks, seeming agitated.

"That was good, Lorna, but could you give us a little more fear next time around?"

"Whatever you say, Morrie," Lorna snarked.

Just like that, the actors rewound, assuming their original positions. Julie rushed to be there, looking like she might die of a heart attack in the glow of the spotlight.

Bruce suppressed a yawn. Retakes were just the monotony of filmmaking, of course. He followed Julie with his eyes, and then—

Everything went dark. Bruce startled to alertness, a reflex of the Batman. A shriek—a true, bloodcurdling shriek—echoed through the studio.

He could hear actors and technicians alike fumbling around. Bentley called out, "Not now, Lorna! Wait until we get—"

The lights came back on with the flick of a switch. The Countess was lying on the carpeted floor, a pool of blood around her.

Bruce's pulse quickened. *It's real.*

Without thinking, he drew near to the scene of the crime. Indeed, he knew it was a crime—no question in his mind. Somebody wanted the lights out; somebody wanted Lorna dead.

Bentley put his hand on Lorna's neck, and recoiled in horror. "Oh my God! She's dead..."

"I'm—I'll call the police! Everyone stay here," Julie stammered. She seemed on the verge of panic, but holding it together.

And then, something caught Bruce's eye. He couldn't help but look at Lorna's hand.

* * *

The next morning, Bruce stood on the porch of his manor with a police officer, answering questions. It was all very dry and routine, with Bruce able to offer frustratingly little detail aside from the spats he witnessed at the studio.

Scribbling something down in his memo pad, the cop bid Bruce a good day and left. For a long time after that, Bruce leaned on the railing overlooking his front lawn, staring long into the cloudy skies. He had a hunch, but could he act on it? Maybe. Maybe not yet.

"Master Bruce," Alfred announced his presence as he walked outside, carrying a cup of herbal gray tea. "Troubled?"

"Yes. But I'm thinking," Bruce answered. "I saw something under Lorna Dane's fingernails. It was this thick grime—putty? Like *clay*..."

"Clay," Alfred repeated, no doubt suppressing a sarcastic response. "And that means...?"

"Not sure yet. But I know it had to be someone in that studio. *Who*?"

"Between the cast and crew, you're casting a wide net, Master Bruce."

"Less than you'd think," Bruce said. "I've narrowed it down to four. Kenneth Todd, the lead actor—he was only a couple feet from Lorna when the lights went out. It would've been easy. But no motive. No animosity. Nothing."

"Fred Walker, the ex-boyfriend. He threatened Lorna in front of everybody. One problem; I didn't see him anywhere on the set when she died. Maybe he paid someone off to have her killed? I can't rule him out yet."

"I could say similar things for Ned Norton. He had a grudge with the director, Morris Bentley; Lorna's death could've been a message. Beyond that, I'm not sure."

"And last, Roxy Brenner. He's got men at his beck and call, ready to kill; I know he had the means to kill Lorna. I also know he had some kind of racket going with Bentley. I'm almost convinced it's him. He's well connected, so the police won't touch him."

"You're going to put on the cowl," Alfred said, hardly a question.

"It'll be discreet," Bruce replied. He was glad to have a confidant in his butler.

* * *

When night fell, Bruce returned to the Argus Studios as the Batman. He climbed the high fence to gain access, dodging the flashlight beams of the patrolling security guards. On the blacktop, he stalked closer and closer to the set of *Dread Castle*. He kept about a hundred feet away, watching the perimeter from a distance with a spyglass. His breath was even, heartbeat slow.

Fifteen minutes passed in uneventful silence. At 10:03 PM, he caught sight of his mark. He moved across the street to get a better look, crouching in the trimmed hedges outside the building.

"Roxy! *Roxy!*"

Morris Bentley's voice was shrill, to the point of hysteria. The director shadowed Roxy Brenner's footsteps outside the building. Bentley seized the mob boss by the wrist, finally prompting Brenner to turn around.

"Tell me—*did you kill Lorna?*"

Brenner paused for a second, and then jerked free of Bentley's grasp.

"Shoulda accepted my offer. I'm still waiting on my cut."

The director fell short of words, shoulders slumped, slack jawed. Roxy Brenner left him there, his heavy footfalls echoing across the deserted studio. So self-assured. So fearless.

Brenner was headed for the west end of Argus Studios, towards one of the parking lots. He had come alone. His black Ferrari, waxed to a shine, sat isolated. It was a long walk away. Brenner stopped, feeling inside his breast pocket for a lighter and his pants pocket for a pack of cigs.

Before he could step under a street lamp, Bruce snuck up behind him and got him in a stranglehold, covering his mouth.

Brenner reached for his pockets, but Bruce was quicker. He snatched the greasy revolver from the coat before Brenner even knew what hit him. He emptied the ammunition on the ground and let the gun drop.

"*Not a word,*" the Batman growled. "Nod if you understand."

The mob boss gave a stiff nod. Bruce dragged him away, only to pin him against the brick wall at the edge of Argus Studio.

"Who the f—"

Bruce grabbed him by the lapels. "What's your involvement in Lorna Dane's death?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about." Brenner swallowed, breathing heavily. "Get me my goddamn lawyer."

He decked Brenner in the jaw, bloodying his lip and bruising his nose. Brenner almost dropped like a sack of bricks, but Bruce kept him upright.

"I'm not the law. And you will answer to me."

On the verge of unconsciousness, the mob boss heaved. "I-I didn't do anythin'. I swear it wasn't me. I just needed to give Bentley a scare, make him think I had something to do wit' it."

"If not you..." Bruce got in his face, so close he could see the sweat dripping down his brow. "Then *who?*"

"I dunno! I don't know..."

Bruce relinquished his hold on Brenner, causing him to fall flat on the woodchips below.

"Don't ever come back here."

Another dead end, Bruce thought, pacing across the parking lot. *And I fear it won't end with Lorna...*

* * *

The next few days were sporadic. Bruce kept in touch with Julie during the week, presenting a calm, affable exterior while he tried to crack the mystery of the Argus Studios murder by night. Whenever he had a spare moment between the charity balls and luncheons and long phone calls, he took to his study to meditate on Lorna Dane's death. Dressed in a wrinkled button-up shirt and slacks, Bruce sat at a clear glass table, faced with photos of potential suspects. The hearth at the far end of the study crackled. He had already cast Roxy Brenner and Ned Norton's photos into the fire, ruling them out as suspects. As if his attention wasn't split enough, he had a television playing the news behind him, just so he could keep an ear out for any updates on the case.

Alfred's arrival was heralded by a gentle turning of the doorknob as he hovered at the entrance. "Your six o'clock was canceled. That's the last of your obligations today," he called out. "Might I come down, sir?"

Bruce frowned, but beckoned his butler anyway. He was stuck—maybe a second opinion would do him some good. "Go ahead."

Alfred took a look around, pausing to look at Bruce's diorama of the investigation. "Ah yes—Brenner folded, didn't he?" Alfred said. "Wait. Norton as well, Master Bruce? How do you figure that?"

Nothing about Lorna yet, he thought, turning down the TV volume.

"Norton has an alibi—it couldn't have been him," he explained. "That just leaves Kenneth Todd and Fred Walker. Todd's PR team is scrambling. He's getting all the media attention, and he looks like a mess in interviews."

"He would have had the easiest time of it," Alfred suggested. "Not to indict him prematurely, of course..."

Bruce shook his head. "Yes, but why? A bout of psychosis? Got too in-character? I already know Brenner didn't have the stones to order Lorna's execution, so he and Todd can't be collaborators."

When he heard the words 'Argus Pictures' coming from the stereo, he tuned back into the TV, looking over his shoulder. *"...We're back at the scene of actress Lorna Dane's grisly murder, with no conclusive answers. Morris Bentley's remake of Dread Castle was said to be fraught with trouble behind the scenes, and it appears to have reached a fever pitch with this tragedy. While Gotham PD hasn't issued any official statement on the investigation, inside sources tell us that the mob may have had a hand in Dane's murder. Morris Bentley's longtime connection to alleged*

gangster Roxy Brenner has come under scrutiny, with some inquiring as to the exact nature of their business dealings. More at 7:00, with another statement from Kenneth Todd. This is WGBS, signing off."

Bruce frowned: nothing new.

"I'm going to investigate Fred Walker next. It's a long shot, but he's the next most likely."

"Master Bruce...I know it's pointless to ask but isn't this the sort of thing better left to the police? You can always let the investigation run its course, wait to see justice done."

Bruce stood up, swallowing a lump. "I can't. Julie hasn't walked off set."

Admitting it aloud, he felt a trickle of cold sweat collating at his brow. "I need to go," he said.

"I understand, sir," Alfred said, head bowed. "Don't take any undue risks—for your sake."

* * *

Getting Fred Walker's address was trivial; just a matter of looking his name up in the phonebooks to get his apartment building and room number, then making some innocuous calls to confirm it was really him.

He waited well past nightfall to make a move. Dark fog rolled through the streets, obfuscating the Batman as he stalked up to the building. Fred Walker's apartment was situated in one of Gotham's opulent neighborhoods, not far from the studio. A spiked fence barred the way to the entrance, but Bruce sidled his way up without a sound, then vaulted over. Once inside, he tread lightly over the porcelain-tiled floors, peeking into the hall from the lobby: no one in sight.

Rather than the elevator, Bruce made his ascent up the stairwell, not wanting to risk an encounter with another tenant. He only stopped once, hearing the arrhythmic footsteps of stumbling drunks coming from above. He listened, and clung to the wall. Thankfully, they were bound for another floor, a door opening and closing above.

His anticipation rose as he made it to Walker's hallway. *He's the one*, Bruce thought, *he has to be*.

Carefully, quietly, he set about picking the lock with a set of worn tools from his belt. It was hard to make out the entry point in the dark, but he knew he succeeded when the knob gave a slight *click*.

Bruce pulled the door shut behind him. *First, look for evidence...then, interrogate Walker.*

He shined a flashlight across the room. The apartment was spacious and tidy. Expensive artwork hung above the shag couch, across from a stereo setup that spanned an entire wall. Unopened wine bottles lined the kitchen counter, but the dining table was gathering dust. It was all for show.

Bruce stalked around for several minutes, searching with increasing restlessness for anything incriminating. He looked beneath cushions, under rugs, and inside cabinets, but it was a hopeless effort. *Not even a photo of Lorna*, thought Bruce.

Desperate, Bruce stalked up to the bedroom door, opened just an inch. He couldn't hear any sound coming from inside. *Maybe he's out right now. Unless he's a light sleeper...*

From the narrow glimpse he could get, there was nobody atop the bed.

He opened the door, creaking loudly on its hinge. The blanket was tossed over, and the mattress bore a heavy imprint. It had been recently used.

Bruce's eyes shot to the floor, noticing a dark trail seeping toward the closet. Heart pumping, he shoved the sliding door aside and gaped in horror at what lay inside.

Fred Walker sat slumped against the wall, bleeding profusely from the chest. When the flashlight's beam hit his face, he gurgled blood with a wet cough.

Bruce grabbed him by the shoulders, trying to keep him conscious. "Stay with me—who did this?"

Walker's eyes widened. His voice came out as a rattle. "...Still here...!"

Bruce turned around just in time to see a glint of metal coming towards him. His body moved on instinct, and suddenly he was grabbing the forearm of his assailant, barely stopping a long dagger from plunging into his clavicle. He shuddered as he struggled, the knife's tip hovering precariously over his skin. The man in front of him was clad in a dark Inverness cape and wide-brimmed hat. His face was deformed, baggy gray-brown skin drooping over his eyelids and mouth. It was hideous, but too exaggerated to be real—just another part of the disguise.

An assassin! Bruce thought, his rational mind coming back to him bit by bit. *Somebody got to Walker first. But why?*

He drove his boot into the killer's chest, knocking him against the bed frame. There was no doubt in his mind that this was the man who killed Lorna Dane; he'd been too blind to consider another party.

The hideous assassin picked himself up and darted for the bedroom door. Bruce tried to grab him by his coat, but Bruce grasped at empty air, having lost sight of him in the dark. He tried to give chase, but the door wouldn't give way—something was blocking him in. Then, he heard the sound of spilling liquid, and picked up on a very particular smell. Bruce's pulse skyrocketed. *Gasoline!*

A wave of heat surged through the apartment. *He's trying to destroy the evidence—and any witnesses!* Bruce realized.

Knowing he had precious little time before suffocation, Bruce took a couple steps back, and ran at the door with his shoulder braced. He knocked down the reinforced wood like a battering ram, emerging into an inferno. The ceiling sprinklers ran, but proved ineffective against the raging fire.

Bruce scowled. *He's getting away!*

There was no way out but through. Covering his face with his cape, he dashed straight for the room door, shunting the base fear of flame out of mind.

He hit the hallway wall hard, rolling against the floor to smother the fire catching on his clothes. By the time he recovered, the masked man was gunning it down the stairwell, just out of sight. The trail was going dangerously cold; if he acted now, he might catch up to the killer before any of the tenants came out of their rooms.

But if there was still a chance, however slim, that Walker was alive...

Bruce smashed open the glass case to a fire extinguisher. Teeth bared, he marched into the same inferno he'd fought like hell to escape, and smothered the fires under inches of white foam. He couldn't contain it all, but he just needed to extract one man. *One* man...

Black smoke clouded the bedroom, and Walker hadn't moved an inch from where he sat—unconscious or worse. Coughing, Bruce dragged the man by the shoulder out into the charred remains of the living room. The speakers across from the couch had been reduced to a slab of molten metal, the white walls burnt black.

Desperate not to lose him, Bruce tapped Walker on the cheek, trying his damndest to keep him tethered to the mortal coil. He was still bleeding profusely from the gaping wound in his chest, the corners of his lips black with soot.

"An ambulance is on its way," Bruce said, though he couldn't know for sure. "Stay with me!"

"I saw him do it," Walker blurted out, in a fit of delirium. "Saw him...kill Lorna..."

Those were Walker's last words, as he passed seamlessly from stagnant life to still death. Bruce sighed, knowing that he could have prevented all of this.

He was gone before any of Walker's neighbors arrived.

* * *

In the span of an hour, Bruce booked it to Argus Motion Picture Studio. He had hoped to have the killer apprehended before filming started again, but that proved to be only a pipe dream. Perhaps in desperation, or not wanting Lorna's death to be for nothing, Bentley insisted on shooting the rest of the movie come hell or high water.

Doesn't he know he's going to get somebody murdered? Bruce thought, body tense as he clung to the brick wall of the building where *Dread Castle* was being filmed. There was no doubt in his mind that the clay-faced killer was going to strike again, before the sun rose.

And Julie was going to be more than just an extra tonight... Instead, she'd claimed a starring role from one of the actors who walked off after the Lorna Dane incident. Standing right in the line of fire, for what? A chance to advance her career?

Before he let the anger and stress cloud his mind, the Batman set about scaling the building, accessing the rafters via the door on the roof. From here, he had a bird's eye view of the entire set.

The elaborate studio took up most of the floor space, of course. Water sloshed violently inside the fabricated moat, small puddles tracking to even disparate parts of the room. Separated by a divider, Bruce saw a break room, where the cast and crew had left their brown-bagged dinners for the late night shoot; it looked like nobody could work up an appetite, though, because the room was deserted. Bentley's office was situated behind a door with a plexiglass window, but the director himself was out on set, giving frantic instructions.

And lastly, the makeup room. It was a narrow corridor with a row of vanity mirrors on either side, five stylists to an actor as they rushed to get everyone ready to shoot. Kenneth Todd looked especially pale, and it wasn't just the bright lights on his face either.

There he saw Julie, dressed in pink finery with flowing, translucent veils. Her costume was identical to Lorna's dress as the Countess, and her character would follow a similar role, another victim of the Terror. Bruce vowed not to let Julie meet the same fate, even with the terrible sense of déjà vu creeping up his back. Right now, she was standing stiffly with her arms out, as a tailor took a needle and thread to her sleeves.

The Batman walked along the rafters, his footsteps light and airy. There was no doubt in his mind that the killer was inside the building, but where?

Last time, he didn't strike until the cameras started rolling, he thought. But he had the element of surprise then, and he has to be agitated after I caught him at Walker's apartment. Will he be so patient this time?

It was possible that the killer would let it be tonight, just to catch Bruce out. If so, this was going to be a long shoot. Sweat collated at his brow, watching Julie from the shadows. *Stay safe for me, dear. Don't make any bold moves if you can help it...*

Despite his mounting distress, Bruce kept his cool. He tried to picture himself in the assassin's position; where would he be? What was he planning?

Rather than keep watch on the brightly lit areas, the Batman turned his gaze toward the obscure, black corners of the set. He walked along the rafters, trying to see the studio from every angle. The makeup hall was directly in front and below him now. Clenching the rail tight, he spied for any sign of movements on the outskirts of the corridor, where no light touched the cold stone floor.

Minutes passed, and he glimpsed nothing of note. Only members of the scrambling film crew, dressed in sweat-drenched t-shirts and scuffed jeans, wheeling expensive cameras and lights back and forth. The stress of the night was beginning to wear on him, his eyelids heavy, body sore. Even so, Bruce remained vigilant.

He blinked, and his eyes widened. A whitish sheen pierced the darkness, just a wall behind Julie. He recognized that peculiar gleam—the polished dagger that extinguished Fred Walker's life, and nearly Bruce's own. No sooner after Bruce identified it, a silhouette emerged from the shadows, looping around to the makeup hall. The assassin was on the move!

Bruce panicked, thinking he would have had more time to react. He vaulted over the railing, cape flowing with his rapid descent. The shock of the fall traveled upward through his body, starting at the knees as a brittle vibration.

He ignored the immediate pain and forced himself to run at full speed. The assassin was only a few paces from Julie, knife raised. The people around her froze in place, unable to react.

Knowing he wouldn't make it in time, Bruce reached for a batarang at his belt and threw it in a straight arc. The metal projectile flew fast through the air before hitting the assassin's wrist dead on. The knife clattered to the ground, the silver blade catching the light brilliantly.

A ghastly cry of pain came from behind the clay mask: the first human noise Bruce heard from the assassin. He hesitated momentarily, his wrist sagging as if sprained or broken. It was all the opportunity Bruce needed to tackle him, right as the assassin retrieved his knife. The two of them flew over a table, rolling on the ground in messy combat. Bruce quickly got the upper hand, knees pressed on the assassin's chest as he rained blows on his clay face. Just when Bruce thought he'd knocked his opponent unconscious, he took a swipe with his knife, missing Bruce's throat by mere inches.

Bruce pulled away, only to realize his back was to the makeshift moat on the set of *Dread Castle*.

The masked man drew closer, exchanging the knife between hands with artful elegance. The blade twirled, never so much as grazing his fingers, more reminiscent of stage fighting than real expertise. Then, the assassin lunged. His escape cut off, Bruce had no recourse but to plunge into the water with him.

The water was deathly cold. It locked up his joints, like a kind of living rigor mortis, before his will to survive got him thrashing. The assassin had one hand on his throat, the other hand poised to stab.

Strangely, Bruce was less concerned about his own mortal terror than confirming his hunch. He stared widely at the clay mask, finally glimpsing the frenzied white eyes beneath.

Show me who you are.

The knife came down, lagged by the weight of the waves. The Batman intercepted it with a kick. This time he felt something give, fragile bones crunching at the elbow; the assassin was an older man, just as Bruce suspected.

He reached out and clawed at the clay prosthetic. *Show me who you are! Show me your face, Karlo!*

Like a savage animal, Bruce dragged his nails down the assassin's cheek, revealing ghoulish, thin cheekbones beneath the mud. The assassin cried out. Water rushed into his open mouth, and he stalled in the water, on the verge of drowning.

In seconds, Bruce surfaced, dragging the clay-faced killer with him.

The old man hacked violently on the floor, eyes bloodshot from the strain. Bruce looked down, frowning.

* * *

The Batman was gone before the spotlights reached him. He subdued the assassin with stunt wires, stringing him beneath the rafters with his weapon lying nearby. In a stroke of good fortune, Basil Karlo, the faded star turned makeup consultant, confessed to everything in a fit of delirium.

The cameras were rolling while he raved. He got his moment in the spotlight again—perhaps not as he envisioned.

"Dread Castle was my greatest moment as an actor, and those bastards cast me out! This whole production—everyone involved—can burn in Hell!"

It was the spectacle of WGBS's 9:00 AM spot. In his morning robes, Bruce watched from the comfort of his living room, eased into a velvet chair with a steaming cup of coffee in hand.

A reporter stood out in front of the silver gates of the studio, her face cast in the reds and blues of swirling police lights. "*Basil Karlo is currently awaiting trial and being held at Gotham State Penitentiary. Tune in at 11:00 for another interview with Kenneth Todd, speaking about his harrowing time on the set of Dread Castle.*"

Standing beside the TV, Alfred exchanged quizzical glances between the news broadcast and Bruce.

"Sir."

"Yes, Alfred?"

"You said you knew Basil Karlo was the killer, but how? He wasn't even a suspect, last we discussed."

Bruce took a long swig of coffee. Though he kept a stone face, something like pride was beginning to buoy in his chest. "It was a late hunch. The murder of Lorna Dane would've been the perfect crime if it weren't for Fred Walker. He saw Karlo do it."

"In that case, why didn't he go to the police?" Alfred asked, baffled: it was a fair question.

"Blackmail," Bruce posited. "Walker was spiteful, and Karlo had money. It got him killed. When I saw the clay mask up close and remembered that claylike substance under Lorna's fingernails, I started thinking it had to be someone with access to prosthetics—someone on the makeup crew."

"Which brings us back to Argus Studios..."

"Right," Bruce said, a little more animated. The caffeine was settling in his system. "And

that got me thinking. Fred Walker was unplanned. But Lorna Dane was premeditated. Why Lorna first? A better question—why kill the Countess first?"

"She was the first to die in the script," Alfred speculated aloud. He cupped his chin in his hand, before his eyes widened with a realization. "Which would have made Julie—"

"The next to die. Karlo wanted everyone involved with that production to pay dearly, revenge for recasting him. He wasn't just out for revenge; he wanted to send a message."

Alfred shook his head and scoffed. "Theatrics... Where are you headed, Master Bruce?"

Bruce had set down his coffee already, walking with purpose. "Just a minute, Alfred."

Feeling a chill in the manor, Bruce retreated to the Batcave. His descent was accompanied by the disturbed chitter of the bats clinging to the ceiling, before they resumed their diurnal slumber. He made his way down to the metal table where he'd hastily cast off the cowl and suit in his exhaustion. And beside it lay Karlo's mask, transfixed in a forever scream.

He took the mask delicately in his hands. At the far end of the cavern, a glass case stood atop a pedestal, a mannequin's head inside. He stretched the mask over the mannequin's face, a stoic countenance unlike Karlo's mad visage. Only then did he set the glass case back on, where it would remain protected from the elements and anything else that might spoil it.

The mask stared into him. He stared back. Was it wrong to hold onto such macabre keepsakes?

He didn't bother to dwell on it. Bruce left the cave in silence, the bats stirring quietly above.