



Detective Comics #2

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Published: 2005

Categorie(s): Fiction, Fan Fiction

Tag(s): "Vicki Vale" "Hugo Strange" Comics DC2 Batman

Detective Comics

Issue 2: "*Lustmord: An Uncommon Fondness for Blood.*"

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The Wayne Foundation Christmas Masquerade Ball was in full swing. For the occasion, Alfred had hired a team of caterers, but the Gentleman's Gentleman was everywhere in evidence, making sure that everyone's drink was filled, the decorations were properly lit, and that the band was playing suitably-themed holiday tunes. In fact, he was the perfect host— *Somebody needed to be*, he thought grumpily, checking his watch again, and searching the ballroom for his employer.

"Alfred!" A distinguished man with graying sideburns and glasses, dressed as Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Present, approached the butler. "Merry Christmas." He enthusiastically shook Alfred's hand.

"And to you, Mr. Fox." Alfred smiled warmly. "I hope you're enjoying the festivities...?"

Lucius Fox sipped his egg nog and nodded. "Very much so, old friend. It's always nice to come up to the manor for a visit. Seeing as Bruce hardly shows himself in the boardroom these days."

"Master Bruce *has* had a tumultuous few months." Alfred reminded his employer's business manager.

"Of course, of course." Lucius commiserated, solemnly. "Such a tragedy, what happened to Julie. They were so happy together...! And with his ward Grayson leaving for college so soon after, this time of year must be rough for him."

Alfred did not offer an opinion on that last comment.

“Still, I had hope Bruce would make an appearance at his own party...” Lucius pressed. “Life must go on, and he can’t grieve forever.”

“I have been assured that Master Bruce will be joining us tonight.” Alfred told him. “He’s just seeing to some last minute details...”

Far below the prettily dressed couples swirling to Pachelbel and Handel, beneath the ancient estate warmed by the cheerily roaring fireplaces where the elite of Gotham society had gathered to celebrate the holidays, in the chill, dark cave, Bruce Wayne wore a costume that struck fear into the hearts of the stoutest evil-doers, as he again examined the prosecution’s case against Montagu John Druitt.

Something just wasn’t sitting right with him... Yes, the Ripper murders had stopped with Druitt in custody, and the police had built a very solid circumstantial case against the sad, deranged little man— but the World’s Greatest Detective couldn’t help but feel it was all a bit too neat: all the parts neatly arranged for him to piece together...

And Montagu John Druitt seemed the perfect patsy.

He scanned the police files, going over the evidence again: blood transfer that matched the last victim, personal affects of two of the girls found in his room at Arkham, and a sobbing confession with surprisingly scant details...

No, what he was looking for wasn’t here.

His mind kept going back to the message scrawled in blood on the wall in Crime Alley...

Lustmord.

Not a message so much as an announcement.

He could not shake the feeling that Hugo Strange was involved in this

somehow, despite how obvious (and thus unlikely) that appeared. It was as if the professor was playing a game, taunting him with a sly wink, almost daring Batman to call him out...!

Bruce stiffened at his monitor screen. Was that it? Had he been snared by some homicidal gambit of a new archfiend?

His fingers flew over the keyboard. He would have to dig deeper than he had first suspected. *Lustmord*. Strange was the modern authority on the concept, but not its originator... A thorough search of a wide variety of internet databases resulted only in tantalizingly scant information: the term had been coined in the 19th century by the German traveler and mystic Friedrich Wilhelm von Junzt, in his controversial and much-banned occult opus, *Unaussprechlichen Kulturen*, or *Nameless Cults*, but this was the only information he could find. It seemed to him that the title was familiar. Perhaps he had seen the book in his father's collection...?

"Master Bruce?" Came Alfred's familiar, disapproving voice.

Not turning, Bruce waved his faithful servant away.

"I'm going to have to cancel my appearance at the Christmas Ball, old friend. Please give my guests—."

"I think there is one guest in particular you may want to see."

"Tell Lucius I'll see him at the office on Monday."

"Not Mr. Fox, sir." Sniffed Alfred. "A Professor Hugo Strange."

Strange was chatting up a pretty young debutante dressed as the Sugar Plum Fairy, fawning ludicrously over her delicate little alabaster wrist like a European sybarite, when the master of the house glided up to them.

"Bruce!" The girl giggled, retrieving her hand from Strange and placing it comfortably on Bruce's shoulder; but Bruce had eyes only for the good doctor. Strange was dressed in a sharply pressed tuxedo, and wore a

long-snouted Venetian *commedia dell'arte* mask, but the distinctive beard was unmistakable. He returned Bruce's icy blue stare with a barely perceptible amused twitch of the lips.

"Ah, *Buon Natale, Signore Wayne.*" Strange greeted him with an exuberant flourish of his coat tails.

"Vesper, would you excuse us, please? I'd like a private word with the *dottore.*"

With a pretty little pout, the girl flounced away.

"To what do I owe this unexpected visitation, Professor?" Bruce had hastily donned the Nutcracker outfit that Alfred had laid out for him, and looked suitably imposing in Victorian military regalia. "This is a charity ball, not a society function, and I don't remember inviting you."

"I came in place of Dr. Arkham, who was too busy to attend. He sends his regards." Strange explained, unruffled. "Though, I was hoping to have a private word with you, as a matter of fact."

"About what?"

"I've been thinking about our last encounter at Arkham. And I would like to continue our conversation." He said in such a way as to make Bruce think of his last visit there as Batman.

Bruce fixed him with a cold stare, which Strange merely returned innocently.

"Alright. I have a private study across the hall."

When Bruce had closed the door behind them, shutting off the lively sounds of the party, Strange immediately went to the well-stocked liquor cabinet and proceeded to help himself to a brandy.

"I must say," The professor began. "You intrigue me Mr. Wayne. The richest man in Gotham, one of the wealthiest men in the world, actually,

and you keep such a ridiculously low profile." He passed a glass to Bruce and the two men sat in arm chairs across from one another, Strange sipping his brandy appreciatively, Bruce not touching his at all.

"I don't crave the spotlight. Or notoriety." He answered flatly.

"Or you have something to hide, something you don't wish to call attention to..."

Strange smiled benignly, but his eyes, seen through his *dottore* mask were arresting and intense.

"What do you mean by that, Strange?" Bruce challenged.

"I have a confession to make." There was a barely contained jubilant quality in the professor's voice now. "As I student of the human psyche, I am fascinated by Gotham. Nowhere in the world is there such a collection of clinical disorders, psychotic aberrations, not to mention mental delusions...! But particularly, I have been fascinated from afar by the creature who calls himself the Batman."

Bruce stiffened, but his face remained composed.

Strange went on.

"You see, I have made a rather in-depth study of the man, compiling what I think is a fairly accurate profile."

"I thought we were going to talk about the *lustmord* killings." Bruce said coldly.

"Oh, we are, we are." Strange insisted and went on. "Batman is a societal and cultural anomaly of the highest order, and as such must have been birthed from a significant trauma, such as witnessing his parents murdered in front of him at a young age. He has taken on the persona of a grim and macabre figure, which suits his crusade on the element that deprived him of a normal, well-adjusted life— and at the same time sets him apart from the mass of humanity. I would conjecture that he is a man of independent means, else how else could he afford the specialized tools of his trade, or the luxury to practice said trade."

There was something about his voice, a kind of cadence that when coupled with the glare of his beady eyes, commanded a listener's enraptured attention.

"I won't bore you with any more of my clinical observations, or my years of detective work and research into Gotham history, except to say that such a man as the Batman would be fueled by the twin motivators of grief and rage. Perhaps enough to drive him to a psychotic break and to murder."

"That's absurd." Bruce spat, setting his untouched snifter of brandy down with a splash. "Are you trying to pin the *lustmord* killings on Batman?"

"Even the noblest intentions can be warped by latent emotional scarring." The professor leaned forward, never allowing his eyes to release Bruce's. "Your parents were murdered in front of you when you were a child, weren't they, Bruce? Left you all alone in an ugly world that offered no solace unless you took it yourself."

"I had Alfred..."

"A servant? No, you put on a brave front, and when the lights were all off, and the bedroom door closed, you cried for your lost mother, reached for your slain father... And your dreams were haunted by the face of the man that brutally snuffed out their lives. You look for that monster's face in every passing stranger, every night you go out... And every night you don't find him, he murders them anew!"

"What? No! The hell..." Stammering, Bruce struggled to look away from the mesmerizing stare of the professor, to turn away from the droning voice, aware deep down that he was being manipulated. A vision of his mother flashed violently in his mind's eye, of the expression on her face as the bullet entered her chest... the splash of blood from her mouth...

"I understand that you've suffered another, more recent tragedy." Strange's voice was soft now, almost compassionate. "Julie Madison, your fiancée. She was murdered, too. By the madman known as the Joker, before the Batman was finally able to put him away again."

This blow told. Bruce visibly flinched. He had driven Julie out of his thoughts, could not afford to think about what might have been... But now the image of her arose again, and he felt his breath catch, a familiar ache shuddering through him.

“It was quite the dramatic scene, I understand.” The professor’s voice nursed the knot of grief swelling in Bruce’s breast. “I spoke to the self-proclaimed Clown Prince of Crime at Arkham. He had made a promise to kill Batman’s junior sidekicks, Robin and Batgirl, and apparently the Batman had ordered them to lay low until he could bring the Joker to justice once more. But they disobeyed. And they fell right into the fiend’s trap! He boasted that he brutalized Batgirl, and beat Robin to within an inch of his life. And while Batman was busy rescuing his young protégés, the Joker went on a shooting spree in downtown Gotham, that left twenty people dead—including your dear fiancée, Mr. Wayne! More lives lost, more dear ones never to return!”

I told them to leave him to me! I couldn’t protect them, and stop the Joker at the same time! I couldn’t save everyone...!

Anyone...

Bruce had to physically swallow to keep the confession inside. He ground his teeth together, but could not control the moistening of his eyes.

Julie. Dick. Barbara. A new list of names to add to the growing litany...

“Robin and Batgirl haven’t been seen in Gotham since.” Strange mused. “I’m sure you can empathize, Mr. Wayne. After all, your own ward left town right around the same time, no?” He clucked his tongue. “Grief and rage. That’s when I believe the Batman snapped. At last the nature of his dual persona manifested itself in a profound psychotic break from reality. He found release only in the savage expression of his pathos, perhaps in revenge on his mother for deserting him at such a tender age? He may not even be aware of it! He could be blocking out the events, creating a new personality to protect his increasingly fragile psyche... How many nights has he returned to his hidden lair and wondered: *where did this blood on my hands come from?*”

Visions of crime scenes, forever burned into his memory, rose up and assailed him. Like pages in a flip-book, they flashed before him, all different, but all the same in that death laughed back at him. He screwed his eyes shut to block them out, to push them away, and covered his ears to the half lies and almost truths Strange hurled at him—.

A ragged gasp escaped him, and he shot from his chair. He staggered away from his tormentor, still seeing the afterimage of those piercing eyes, hearing the echo of that persuasive voice.

“You’re wrong, Strange...!” He heaved through a laboring chest. “I’m not who you think I am!” But he wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince more: Strange or himself.

Surely, these things could not be true...? He was no murderer...

“No, of course not.” Strange cooed, gently setting his glass down and rising to face Bruce. “Bruce Wayne is not Batman, and Batman is no killer... But can you tell me who is doing these things? Can I talk to him? Perhaps I can ease the voices, make them go away for awhile...?”

He reached out a tentative hand, but Bruce dashed it away with a snarl.

“Get out!” He rasped, not looking the doctor in the eye, trying to drown out the sound of his voice. “Leave now, Strange, or so help me...!”

The professor calmly walked past him and out of the room, and Bruce did not see his self-satisfied smirk.

Bruce tore open the collar of his Nutcracker costume, breathing in air as if he’d been deprived of it.

He was not unaware of what Strange had tried to do. The doctor was no fool; he had cobbled together enough facts to make reasonable deductions, not unfounded in certain schools of psychological theory, but there was no way he was right...

Was there?

The last few months had been hell... The campaign that the Gotham underworld had waged against him, which the press had dubbed Knightfall, had taken such a toll that he had been prepared to hang up the cape and cowl, settle down at last with his long-time fiancée and childhood sweetheart Julie Madison, and try to live a normal life. He had fought the good fight for six years, bled for it, and made his city a little safer for it—but then the Joker had changed all that.

Barbara. Dick. Julie.

This is what happened when the Batman made way for Bruce Wayne...

He had gone out every night since Julie's funeral, become again the stripped-down dark angel of vengeance of Gotham. Yes, some nights blended into others, some details became hazy... One street thug looked very much like another, one crime like the one before it...

And he was relentless. Barely sleeping. After all, what waited for him at home? He haunted the shadows and streets, allowing his instinct to take over. Some nights *had* become a blur...

No.

He could never be capable of the madness Strange had tried to impose upon him, no matter the pressures that caused him to throw himself into the night. There was nothing buried so deep in his subconscious that could so pervert who he was!

A rap on the door brought the real world back into focus. He ignored it, but it opened anyway, and Alfred poked his head in.

"Master Bruce. I'm afraid we have another uninvited guest. Detective Gordon of the GCPD is here to see you. He says he wants to ask you a few questions."

"I don't have time for this, Gordon." Bruce prowled the small study, straining to get out of his ridiculous costume, and into a different, less

gaily colored get-up.

"I'll only take up a moment of your time, Mr. Wayne." Gordon was flipping through a small spiral notebook. "And if we can't do this here, we can always do it downtown..."

That stopped Bruce in his tracks.

"What is this about?"

Gordon fixed him with a careful stare.

"There's been another Ripper murder. Tonight. And not very far from here."

Only the clenching of his jaw revealed that Bruce had heard the words.

"The news hasn't gotten out yet. The mayor doesn't want to cause a panic on Christmas Eve. But when the papers find out the wrong man is behind bars..."

"What does this have to do with me, detective?" Bruce asked with some exasperation, falling back into the well-practiced persona of apathetic dilettante.

Gordon wordlessly handed over a plastic bag with a crumpled scrap of torn paper inside, which Bruce took, and seemed to give a cursory glance, but his eyes devoured every detail hungrily.

It was a receipt from a local florist shop for a delivery order, and the address was all too familiar to him.

"We found it at the scene. Do you recognize it?"

Bruce handed the evidence back to Gordon.

"No." He shrugged. "I didn't place this order, if that's what you're asking. Is this some kind of sick joke?"

Gordon stuffed it back into the pocket of his rain coat and grunted

noncommittally.

“Just one more thing, Mr. Wayne: it’s common knowledge that prior to your recent engagement you were one of Gotham’s most eligible bachelors, and were linked to a number of young ladies, the reporter Vicki Vale among them.”

“Yes.” Bruce admitted tightly, his blood freezing. *Was Vicki—?*

“Ms. Vale isn’t the victim.” Gordon noted the look on Bruce’s face. “It’s just that she didn’t report to work today, and nobody’s heard from her in a while. We’re concerned because of a series of letters she received from the Ripper. I was wondering if—?”

“My relationship with Ms. Vale ended badly.” Bruce admitted, wanting more than ever now to get Gordon out of there so the Bat could hit the street. “We haven’t spoken in almost a year.”

Gordon nodded as if this were significant, then, passing his card to Bruce, wished him a Merry Christmas, and showed himself out.

In moments, Bruce was in the cave and fitting the cowl snugly over his face!

The snow fell lazily out of the night sky, swirling and gathering in soft fluffy drifts as it piled against the wrought-iron gates of Arkham Asylum. Inside the echoing halls, it was a quiet Christmas Eve, and it seemed that even the inmates had decided to observe the holiday with at least a small bit of silent lucidity.

A dark figure ghosted down the halls, out of the range of the feeble night-time lights, past the rows of cells where wild eyes watched him without a word. If the Bat haunted the halls of Arkham on Christmas Eve, nothing good could come of it...!

It was child’s play to pick the lock of the office at the end of the hall; Professor Strange’s office. The beam of his high-intensity light flickered over the rows of books. He had gone out to investigate the Ripper’s latest crime scene, when he’d remembered where he had seen the title of the

book he'd been looking for: the last time he was in this very room. Now his slim light beam settled on a thick leather tome: *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*.

Nameless Cults.

He pulled it down from the shelf and cracked it open, poring over its contents rapidly.

Lustmord... von Junzt wrote... I encountered a disturbing phenomenon while traveling in the far north. It seems to have sprung from the harsh conditions of the bleak, joyless landscape of the Arctic regions, in the small villages and towns where wolves ran on two legs as well as four, in a land that is dark for half the year, and the splash of blood on snow is a welcomed spot of color. I can only describe it as a disease, an uncommon fondness for blood and murder. I have actually noted the transmission of this psychic virus from person to person. The town constabulary was hanging a killer, and he cursed them as he dangled, but his eyes seemed locked on one little boy in the crowd gathered around the gallows. That night, this hitherto perfectly normal lad took the family ax from the wood shed and hacked to pieces his parents and siblings. He, too, his age notwithstanding, was put to death the next day, laughing and unrepentant as if possessed by devils. But not before staring longingly at me as they tied the rope around his neck. I have since been consumed with the compulsion to do such horrible things...! I want to creep from the inn and find the little girl who served me dinner and split her from belly to throat with my shaving razor. I want to warm my chilled fingers in her gullet, and watch her blood stain the virgin snow a brilliant crimson. I don't know if I can help myself... everything itches, blurs... I must satisfy this infernal craving, or infect another with this curse lest I realize my deepest fears...

A psychic virus? Was such a thing possible? Was this how the Whitechapel murders of 1888 were duplicated so precisely a century later in Gotham? In a very real sense, Jack the Ripper had returned, his sickness transmitted from carrier to carrier from 19th century London to 21st century Gotham.

Had Strange been infected? And if this was the case, who's to say he hadn't found a way to infect poor Vadim Koslovsky, as well, and manipulate him into doing his bidding?

Batman remembered how Strange's eyes stared at him with such fervent intensity only an hour before— had he himself been infected?

In his upstairs office, Dr. Jeremiah Arkham was working late. It didn't matter that it was Christmas Eve; he didn't have a real family left. All he had was his children in the rooms with the padded walls below...

He was bent over a patient's file, when he heard a scratching at his window. Going over to investigate, he saw nothing but the full moon and the gently falling snow. He was about to return to his desk when he heard the sound again. He went back to the window and opened it— Suddenly, a dark-gloved hand shot in, seized him by his shirt, and dragged him over the ledge!

Batman dangled him over the grotesque he was perched upon, the doctor's feet kicking furiously over empty air and a hundred foot drop to the courtyard flagstones below.

"Listen to me closely, Arkham, because I'm only going to ask this once." Growled the Dark Knight. "What the hell is a psychic virus?"

Arkham gibbered incoherently for a moment, but after a vigorous shaking was persuaded to collect his thoughts in a more organized fashion.

"They've never been clinically proven!" He shrieked. "But some investigations suggest that certain intense sensations and compulsions can be transmitted by susceptible carriers, usually through the means of an intuitive form of hypnosis!"

Batman loomed over him.

"That's absurd. Germs carry infection. How would a psychic virus take hold?"

"Nobody knows for sure!" The doctor cast a quick glance downwards and swallowed heavily. "But some individuals have been known to influence others by the force of their will alone... Rasputin, Hitler, David Koresh. It's a very similar phenomenon to crowd mentality. A famous

study in the 19th century by Charles Mackay showed that—.”

“Alright, enough. One last question.” Batman pulled the terrified doctor in close, his breath steaming on Arkham’s face. “When Hugo Strange first came here, was he assigned to Montagu John Druitt, or did he seek him out?”

“Neither.” The doctor stammered. “Druitt was already in the professor’s care. He was transferred in. Along with Strange’s other patients.”

Under his cowl, Batman’s eyebrow arced.

“His other patients...?”

“Yes! He brought in four other men. James Maybrick, George Chapman—.”

“Michael Ostrog and Frances Tumblety!” Batman finished, aghast. Like Druitt, the names would all be aliases, but they fit Strange’s modus operandi exactly.

“Why, yes.” Arkham admitted, panicked and perplexed at the same time. “How did you know...?”

“Montagu John Druitt, James Maybrick, George Chapman, Michael Ostrog and Frances Tumblety.” The Batman ground out between his teeth. “The names of the five men suspected in the Jack the Ripper killings of 1888. If you check their cells tonight, doctor, I’m sure you’ll find they’ve been given a holiday furlough.”

In a surge of strength and anger, Batman hurled Arkham back through the window of his office, cursing under his breath. He held out his arms and stepped off into empty space, allowing himself to glide to the ground.

Hugo Strange was playing a lethal game with him, and not one but five Jack the Rippers were loose on the streets of Gotham this Christmas Eve!

Crown Hill Cemetery.

The simple and the ornate grave markers both were covered in a thick white mantle, creating a deceptively serene tableau. It was almost beautiful. A cloud scudded across a moon that was nearly full, lighting the winter scene below. This close to midnight the cemetery was all but empty, mourners and caretakers alike long home and nestled in their beds.

All but empty, but not completely empty...

The woman's soft moaning cries were the only sound to be heard. Vicki Vale was tied to a gravestone in the shape of a large cross, her arms apart, and her feet together as if she had been crucified. Her clothes were in torn tatters, and she shivered in the cold, tears staining her high cheeks. Urns of fresh flowers were set at her feet, delivered to this gravesite earlier in the day.

Snow crunched beneath booted heels, as the man materialized out of the winter fog. At the site of his bowler hat and medical case, Vicki Vale would have screamed if the constriction on her chest wasn't so painful.

An elegant hand with a ruffled sleeve placed a small placard near the delivered flowers, then Hugo Strange looked up at his captive.

"I want to thank you again, Ms. Vale, for participating in my endgame. Tonight is the culmination of years of study and scheming, and all the pieces are finally in place. I have laid the trail very carefully... The detective should soon be here!"

All that escaped Vicki Vale was a whimper, then a slight widening of her eyes, as they focused on a point over her captor's shoulder. Strange turned in time to catch a split-second glimpse of the cowled figure before the fist smashed into his face!

Batman pounced on Hugo Strange, kicking away his medical bag and snatching him up by the lapels of his greatcoat.

"It's over, Strange." He yanked Strange's face close to his, the professor's glasses cracked and sitting on an angle on his nose. "I know who you are and what you've done. They're preparing you a room of your own at Arkham now!"

The professor cackled feebly, trying in vain to pry the Batman's hands off his coat. He fixed the Dark Knight with an imploring look.

"Nonsense, Bruce! We both know the truth, don't we?" He gasped for breath. "We both know how that dark seed was planted all those years ago in Crime Alley, and how it blossomed into dark fruition when they planted your beloved in the ground!"

Batman shoved Strange roughly against the grave marker, scattering pots and urns of fresh flowers.

"It won't work." He snarled. "I know what you are trying to do, and I won't let you drive me mad! I know who I am and what I am capable of!"

But as he said this, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, the small card that Strange had placed with the flowers moments before. It read: *For my beloved parents, who deserved a worthier son and legacy...*

He released Strange and looked up in stunned surprise. Though Vicki's weakly struggling form was covering most of the monument, it was obvious to him now where he was. So consumed with finding Strange, he hadn't noticed that he this wasn't Julie's grave at all, though it was nearby. The names on the carved marble read *Thomas and Martha Wayne!*

"How dare you!" Batman flashed whirling on Strange. The professor had managed to back a safe distance away, and wielded a razor now in his right hand.

"Finish it, Bruce!" Strange implored, and as he spoke, from out of the fog and snow around them, four figures stepped into sight, all dressed just as Strange in bowler hat and coattails; Maybrick, Chapman, Ostrog and Tumblety, all dressed like Jack the Ripper.

All consumed with *lustmord*.

Batman's eye's flickered to the ring of foes closing in around him, but Strange went on in his wheedling tone.

"Surrender to your innermost desires, and be the person you were meant to be! Allow the *lustmord* to sharpen your focus, to satisfy that crimson craving within you! Take the blade, Bruce, and go to Vicki! Allow her to be an offering to the fiend struggling to be born in your soul! Only her blood can set it free, and release you from its grip!"

Reversing the blade, he held it out to Batman

As if from a distance, Batman watched himself accept the razor, his mind numb with a scarlet haze. He barely registered Strange's triumphant grin as he turned back to his parent's grave, and the helpless girl bound to it, the knife glinting in his gloved hand.

His will was not his own. The professor had implanted a hypnotic compulsion within his mind, so long walled off, but weakened now by the events of the last months. He saw Vicki's eyes widen in terror the closer he got to her, but he could do little about it. Around him, the Rippers closed in, watching him in silent approval.

He focused on her bare midriff where her shirt was torn, narrowing in on her quivering navel cavity... He longed to drag the cruel edge of the razor across that alabaster stomach, to see the thin red trail open up, to feel the warm gush of blood on his bare hands...

"My god, Bruce, is that really you...?" Vicki breathed in a barely perceptible whimper. "Please... Please don't..."

Batman raised the blade, and looked up at her, looked into her panic-stricken eyes.

"Bruce... Bruce..."

"Bruce!" His mother called again. "Come downstairs and see what Santa

brought you!"

He rushed down the carpeted steps, still in his pajamas, grinning at his parents waiting by the dazzlingly bright Christmas tree. He paused only long enough for a quick hug before he tore into his elegantly wrapped presents. His young heart had been so filled with love and light and family. He wished that Christmas morning that things would always be that way...

But the next Christmas morning was different. There was still the tree, still the presents— but only Alfred waited for him at the foot of the stairs this time. And his young heart hurt so bad that he wished no other person in the world could feel so cold and empty...

He had based his life on that, on the promise to the two people laying peacefully in the ground beneath his feet; he would dedicate himself to that mission, to do all he could to spare the next child from spending a Christmas alone and bereft...

And somewhere, he believed, Thomas and Martha Wayne looked upon their son with pride, and they were smiling...

Facing Vicki Vale, bound and struggling weakly on the cross of his parent's monument, Batman held aloft the razor in his hand and looked her straight in the eye...

And winked.

His mind clear, the knife flashed downwards, slashing through her bonds in a blur of motion. She fell, weeping, into his waiting arms, but the Batman did not linger. The Rippers were upon him in seconds, but he leapt off the monument in a tight whirl, his weighted cape flaring out and scattering his attackers.

Batman landed in a fighting crouch, still holding the wilting Vicki Vale in one arm, while in his free hand appeared a trio of batarangs. He hurled them, pinning James Maybrick to the side of a mausoleum, then he ducked a slashing blow from George Chapman, gracefully kicking out with his foot at the same time, breaking his assailant's kneecap and

sending him moaning to the ground. Michael Ostrog had not hesitated, and was upon the Dark Knight in an instant, stabbing down with his weapon. But Batman was not unprepared. Still one handed, he caught Ostrog's wrist, twisted it brutally, and reversed the blow, smashing Ostrog in the face with the butt of his own knife, felling him. Using the killer's unconscious body as a club, Batman swung him by his wrist into Frances Tumblety who was rushing in from behind. Tumblety went down under Ostrog's weight, his leg broken underneath him.

Hugo Strange watched in horror as the Batman made short work of his minions then turned on him. Safe for the moment, the Dark Knight left Vicki Vale and slowly, menacingly, advanced on Strange.

"I— I know who you are, Wayne! I'll tell the whole world!" Strange backed away, stumbling slightly, blanching from the grim set of the Dark Knight's jaw.

"I don't care. I'm taking you in tonight, professor. You're going to pay for the evil you've done."

Strange lobster-crawled away, scrambled to his feet, then took off at a head long run. Batman surged in pursuit. A quick glance over his shoulder showed the villain the billowing cape of the Dark Knight spreading out behind him.

In his headlong race to escape, Strange did not see the freshly dug grave, lying empty before him.

But Batman did.

"Strange, stop!" He called, reaching for his cord of batline, but to no avail.

Hugo Strange pitched headfirst into the hole, with a strangled screech that was cut suddenly short.

Reaching the grave, the dark Knight peered down into it; the body of Hugo Strange was splayed at impossible angles at the bottom of an eleven foot drop, his neck hideously twisted.

It was then that the police sirens became audible, and in the distance, he could make out the red and blue glare of their approaching squad cars. It was about time. He had called for them before he even reached the cemetery...

When he turned around, Vicki Vale was there. She stared at him in wonder, her eyes searching his. For a moment, as the sirens got closer, neither said a word, both unsure of what to say... It was only when they began to hear the voices of officers that Vicki at last sighed.

"Go! Your secret is safe with me— for now!" She groaned, against every reporter's instinct she had. "But we're going to talk about this soon!"

With a quick, tight nod, Batman turned in a snap of leather and melted into the night, just as Lt. Detective James Gordon, flanked by two armed cops, rushed onto the scene.

"Merry Christmas, boys." Vale waved weakly. "Your presents are all neatly wrapped over there, courtesy of the Batman!"

Christmas morning...

Alfred found him in a chair by the Christmas tree, a cup of coffee at his side as he read the morning edition of the Gazette.

"Ms. Vale wasted no time writing that story." He told his oldest friend and confidante, folding the paper and putting it aside. "At least she stuck to her word, though. No mention of Bruce Wayne anywhere. But it seems that Hugo Strange survived his fall last night. He was rushed to Gotham General, where he's in a coma and probably suffering from massive brain damage. Seems he's also completely paralyzed from the neck down."

"Ghastly man, but a fate no one deserves." Alfred repressed a shiver. "At least our little secret appears to be safe."

Bruce nodded, sipping his coffee.

They were both quiet for a moment, lost in contemplation. It was Bruce who finally broke the silence, letting out a sigh as if resolving himself to a course of action.

He got to his feet, and said to Alfred: "I know this is short notice, old friend, but is there anyway you could manage to throw together a Christmas dinner tonight?"

Alfred shot to his feet as well, intrigued and suddenly hopeful.

"Of course, Master Bruce! Should I expect any guests...?" He called after him as Bruce went into the other room for the phone.

He listened in amazement at the call.

"Hi. It's me." Bruce's voice was resolute, if a little abashed. "I know it's been a while but... Well, Merry Christmas. I was hoping you could come up to the house for dinner tonight, that is if you don't have any plans."

Alfred could hardly believe his ears as he eavesdropped around the corner.

"Oh, good. I'll send the car. We'll see you in a couple of hours then, Dick."

A smile spreading across his face, Alfred crept away, wondering where in Gotham he was going to find a ham or turkey on Christmas morning!

If you enjoyed this story, you can find more tales of your favorite DC heroes at DC2 Universe.

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From the same author on Feedbooks

The Adventures of Superman #0 (2005)

The Adventures of Superman: Lost Sons of Krypton, Prelude:
Strange Visitors!

A strange visitor from another planet comes to Metropolis--- and Superman is all that stands in his way! It's a battle royale in the skies and streets of the City of Tomorrow as a mistake from Jor-El's past comes back to haunt his son. And intrepid reporter Lois Lane is onto the story of her career, but can the Man of Steel save her when she goes too far?

The Adventures of Superman #1 (2005)

The Adventures of Superman: Lost Sons of Krypton, Pt. 1: A War of Brothers!

Zod, the Destroyer of Krypton, has come to Earth, and with his Tigris and Hound, the bastard son of Jor-El, at his side, can even Superman stand against him? Meanwhile, Lois plays a deadly game to get to the bottom of the sinister machinations of Lex Luthor!

The Adventures of Superman #2 (2005)

The Adventures of Superman: Kingdom of Zod.

Superman leads a desperate assault on the Antarctic Kingdom of Zod. But even with the aid of an unexpected ally, can the Man of Steel overthrow the might of the Destroyer and his Doomsday Bomb?

Wonder Woman #0 (2005)

Wonder Woman: A Game of Gods and Men, Prelude.

Meet the Amazing Amazon as she hosts a summit of world leaders at Themyscira House--- but danger stalks the hallowed halls as a familiar foe lurks, thirsty for the blood of her enemy Wonder Woman! Meanwhile, on Paradise Island, former USAAF Colonel Steve Trevor becomes embroiled in the deadly affairs of gods and men--- and learns that sometimes they are one and the same!

Detective Comics #0 (2005)

Detective Comics: Lustmord, Prelude.

A wicked new serial killer with a bloody history stalks the night-time streets of Gotham, and no one is safe! Reeling from personal crises, the Dark Knight must confront hidden dangers from his own past and new enemies laying in wait for him... From Crime Alley to Arkham Asylum, Batman is tested by a diabolical mastermind!

Detective Comics #1 (2005)

Detective Comics: Lustmord: Shadows and Fog.

The mystery of the Gotham Ripper deepens as his murderous rampage continues. Batman haunts the streets and shadows, determined to bring the lunatic to justice, but in Arkham Asylum, plots are laid for the Dark Knight's demise!

The Immortal Legend of Hawkman #0 (2005)

The Immortal Legend of Hawkman: Under Ancient Stars.

In the days of the pharaohs, in the land of the pyramids, is born a hero for all time! Defying the will of men and gods, Prince Khufu and his beloved Chay-Ara embark upon a destiny filled with triumph and tragedy, sacrifice and murder. With the wizard Nabu and the champion of Shazam who will one day be known as Black Adam at their side, they must use the power of the otherworldly Thanagarian Nth Metal and the gifts of the hawk-god Horus to defeat the villainous immortal tyrant known as Vandal Savage! Born in the fires of war, undying passion and treacherous betrayal, this is a definitive retelling of the ancient origin of the hero who will be known as--- Hawkman!

The Immortal Legend of Hawkman #2 (2005)

The Immortal Legend of Hawkman: Wings of Destiny, Part 2.

The two part origin arc of the Golden Age Hawkman concludes as Carter Hall takes up the mantle of the immortal hero and races against time to save Shiera Saunders from the clutches of the villainous Dr. Anton Hastor! But first he must survive the attack of the undead Sons of Anubis, and defeat the man who is destined to slay him!

The Immortal Legend of Hawkman #1 (2005)

The Immortal Legend of Hawkman: Wings of Destiny, Part 1.

"Wings of Destiny, Pt. 1" First in a two part origin arc! It is 1938, and the world hovers on the brink of war... Troubled by dreams of past lives, museum curator and archaeologist Carter Hall receives a mysterious package from a lost colleague that sends him across the globe to Egypt, where he will be reunited with an immortal love and encounter an enemy that stalks him through the ages! A hero discovers his destiny as the Golden Age Hawkman is born!

Wonder Woman #1 (2005)

Wonder Woman: The Swords of the Amazons!

As Wonder Woman hunts the Cheetah, Doom's Doorway opens and Themyscira is besieged by the horrors of the underworld! Diana must contend with a deadly and secret mastermind determined to destroy her and all she holds dear!

Teen Titans #0 (2005)

Teen Titans: Friends and Heroes.

Reeling from recent harrowing events in Gotham, Dick Grayson struggles with the decision to hang up his cape and mask forever as he goes off to college in New York City. Joined by Roy Harper and Wally West, the trio have a fateful meeting with the girls who will forever change their lives! Guest starring Wonder Woman!

Wonder Woman #2 (2005)

Wonder Woman: The Rage of Angels.

As the Minotaur leads the Sons of Uranus against the walls of Themyscira and Wonder Woman does battle with Typhon, the Father of Monsters, a more devastating threat comes to Olympus... Nothing will be the same after this issue!

Teen Titans #1 (2005)

Teen Titans: Serpent's Tooth, Part 1 (of 2).

As the team comes together, Wally West is seduced by a mysterious girl with a dangerous secret. The Titans must infiltrate the church of a fanatical ancient cult to rescue one of their own, but a fierce enemy awaits them: Enter Brother Blood!

Teen Titans #2 (2005)

Teen Titans: Serpent's Tooth, Part 2 (of 2).

The Titans have fallen to Mother Mayhem and a dark messiah is on the brink of awakening! Only Dick Grayson and his new ally, the mysterious and dangerous girl known as Raven, stand in the way of the resurrection of the dreaded... Brother Blood!

New Outsiders #0 (2005)

New Outsiders: What Happens in Vegas...

PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS A MATURE READERS TITLE.

A gritty and realistic look at vice, corruption and superheroing in Sin City! Meet the New Outsiders---Green Arrow, Black Canary, Huntress, Batgirl, Zatanna, and a driven District Attorney named Adrian Chase, the Vigilante!--- an unorthodox team of heroes banded together to stand against a sinister conspiracy and depraved foes!

New Outsiders #1 (2005)

New Outsiders: House Rules: Luck be a Lady.

PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS A MATURE READERS TITLE.

Things heat up in Vegas as the Vigilante and Huntress face off against each other, and Green Arrow and Black Canary enlist the aid of young college prodigy Barbara Gordon to break into L'Inferno and rescue an old friend from the clutches of the criminal organization, the House, and its cruel mistress, Roulette--- and only Zatanna stands in their way!

New Outsiders #2 (2005)

New Outsiders: House Rules: The Most Dangerous Game.

PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS A MATURE READERS TITLE.

With Black Lightning's life at stake and Green Arrow and Black Canary in the clutches of the House, Batgirl looks for some unlikely allies as she plays a dangerous game with Roulette in the conclusion of the New Outsiders origin arc!

JSA: Legends of the Golden Age #0 (2005)

Justice Society of America: Legends of the Golden Age: The Society, Prelude.

In the dark days before WWII, A Secret Society of Super Villains unleash a masterplan to seize the world in its iron grip of tyranny! But, in the gathering shadows of war, there is a glimmer of hope! The emerging mystery men of America--- Hawkman! the Flash!

Hourman! the Atom! Starman! Dr. Fate! the Sandman! and the Amazing Amazon, Wonder Woman!--- rise up in a Justice Society to oppose the evil oppressors! But can even they withstand--- the Spear of Destiny!?!

All-Star Comics #1 (2006)

All-Star Comics: Captain Marvel, Part 1 (of 2).

At last! The history of the World's Mightiest Mortal in the DC2 is finally revealed! The ancient wizard Shazam recalls the career of his champion, even as foes from the past regroup to threaten the world once more. But will there be a Captain Marvel to stand against them?

Action Comics #7 (2006)

Action Comics: Hostile Takeover.

What is Genesis Corporation? Clark and Lois want to know--- and so does Lex Luthor! The Countdown to the Crisis heats up as some major players are revealed and a three-way brawl erupts in the skies over Metropolis!

Action Comics #8 (2006)

Action Comics: For All Mankind...

Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative, Part 9!

Darkseid has assembled nearly all of the components to complete the Anti-Life Equation. Now, Wonder Woman leads a daring mission to the very gates of Darkseid's palace to rescue the Man of Steel and bring hope to the war-torn planet Earth! Don't dare miss this pivotal chapter, as one man shows just what it means to be a hero! You won't believe the shocking ending!

Action Comics #9 (2006)

Action Comics: Return to Smallville, Part 1 (of 4).

In the wake of the crisis, the greatest tragedy of his life brings Clark Kent home to Smallville. But can you go home again? A new era in the life of the Man of Steel begins here! New dangers await, an old romance is rekindled--- and you won't believe the shocking ending!

Action Comics #11 (2006)

Action Comics: Return to Smallville, Part 3 (of 4).

The mystery villain stands revealed and the truth about Connor finally comes out! Superman stands alone against friend and foe alike and the surprises keeps coming in this penultimate chapter of the new adventures of the Man of Steel!

Action Comics #10 (2006)

Action Comics: Return to Smallville, Part 2 (of 4).

Reeling from Lana Lang's recent revelation, Clark is forced to re-evaluate his future--- unaware that a secret enemy is lurking and waiting to destroy him! Meanwhile, Lois Lane shows up in Smallville on the trail of the biggest story of her career: the secret identity of Superman!

All-Star Comics #2 (2006)

All-Star Comics: Captain Marvel, Part 2 (of 2).

Billy Batson has no time to adjust to his new role as Captain Marvel as the Monster Society of Evil unleashes their attack upon Fawcett City! And not even the wizard Shazam is safe when the villains storm the Rock of Eternity and a new, deadly fiend is born!

Wonder Woman #8 (2006)

Wonder Woman: Hell Hath No Fury...

All-Star Comics #5 (2006)

All-Star Comics: Martian Manhunter.

Snatched across time and space by the machine of Dr. Erdel, J'onn J'onzz is the Last Son of Mars, a dead planet wasted by a telepathic plague created by his own brother. On Earth, he is the Martian Manhunter, a crusader for justice in the years after the JSA retired and before the advent of Superman. Now, hoping to at last find his place on his adopted homeworld, he is John Jones, Private Investigator--- but his quiet retirement is at an end when a beautiful dame walks into his office with legs to kill for and a fiery disposition...

Rogues Gallery #1 (2006)

Rogues Gallery: Catwoman: Hot Tin Roof.

A wave of cat burglaries sweeps through Gotham's elite society! But as the Crown Jewels of Bahdnesia come to the city, can the

beautiful socialite Selina Kyle resist the lure? Sparks fly when Batman comes face to face for the first time with the deadly feline fatale, Catwoman!

DC2 Special #1: An Arkham Christmas Carol (2006)

DC2 Special: An Arkham Christmas Carol.

Wonder Woman #4 (2006)

Wonder Woman: The Eye of the Storm.

The true enemy is at last revealed, and the gods of Olympus discover there is a traitor among them! Meanwhile, the war on Paradise Island comes to a turning point as mysterious new arrivals appear--- but are they friends or foes? And in the end, Diana must set out upon a new quest to save everything she holds dear...

Wonder Woman #5 (2006)

Wonder Woman: The Quest for the Syrinx.

Nemesis is awake, and destined to bring about the end of the cosmos! Only the Syrinx, the Pipes of Pan, can stave off the inevitable fate of the universe, and now Diana, Hippolytus and Steve Trevor set off on a quest to the isle of the witch to find the legendary artifact. But will Circle prove Wonder Woman's most implacable foe yet?

As the traitor to Olympus makes his next move, the gods brace themselves for the final assault of the Furies!

Wonder Woman #3 (2006)

Wonder Woman: Horns of Doom.

Both Olympus and Paradise Island are reeling from the cataclysmic events of last issue, and the true enemy is at last revealed! Be here when Wonder Woman and the Minotaur face off at last under the walls of Themyscira!

Wonder Woman #6 (2006)

Wonder Woman: The Isle of the Witch.

The Quest for the Syrinx continues! As Wonder Woman confronts her old enemy, the witch Circe, the plots and machinations of all the players start to become known: friends are not who they seem and the true plans of the Olympian traitor are revealed as the

Game of Gods and Mortals hurtles towards it's epic conclusion next issue!

Wonder Woman #7 (2006)

Wonder Woman: Down the Widening Gyre.

Wonder Woman must journey into the Underworld to retrieve the Mask of Hecate for Circe, as time is running out! Even the Gods of Olympus prepare to meet their end as Nemesis, She Whom None Can Escape finally rises to work her terrible will, and the final moves of the Game of Gods and Mortals are played out! The Olympian traitor is revealed--- and his masterplan at last is clear!--- in this penultimate chapter of the epic storyline that began in Issue 0!

Wonder Woman #9 (2006)

Wonder Woman: Armageddon Aria.

The war is over and Wonder Woman is faced with a host of new problems: what to do about the war-like Lost Amazons, who will rule Paradise Island--- and who wants her to get... married?!? And Godfrey's Glorious Crusades reaches fever pitch as a deadly new foe is unleashed upon Diana--- and leads directly into next month's crisis!

Wonder Woman #10 (2006)

Wonder Woman: Darkseid Is.

Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative, Part 13!

At long last, the Anti-Life Equation is within the grasp of the Lord of Apokolips! The world's greatest heroes come together for the first time--- to destroy each other! Don't miss the epic battle as Wonder Woman stands alone against a world turned against her!

JSA: Legends of the Golden Age #1 (2006)

JSA: Legends of the Golden Age: Attack of the Giant Nazi Robots!

It's mayhem at the 1939 Worlds Fair in New York, as Baron Blitzkrieg attacks the greatest gathering of scientific minds in the world, and the Secret Society of Super Villains continue their quest for the Three Holy Artifacts!

This is it! The birth of the JSA!

Teen Titans #10 (2006)

Teen Titans: Forever and Never, Amen!
Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative, Part 7!
The city of Metropolis teeters on the edge of an uneasy peace as the truce between Lex Luthor and Darkseid begins to break down. Who are the Forever People and what happens when they turn the city of refugees against the Titans? Bedlam ensues!

Justice League #0 (2006)
Justice League: Justice Falls.
Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative, concludes!
This is it! The final battle between Earth and Apokolips as the World's Greatest Heroes take the fight to Darkseid! Don't dare miss this issue--- one year in the making!--- and the senses-shattering conclusion to this epic storyline!

Justice League #1 (2006)
Justice League: A League of His Own, Part 1.
It's finally here! The World's Greatest Heroes have come together as one! But not everyone is happy about that... It's the grand opening of the Hall of Justice, and all of Metropolis has turned out to honor their saviors. But hatred and jealousy lurk in the heart of one man as he schemes to destroy the newly-formed League! And this time, the League has met its match!

Justice League #2 (2006)
Justice League: A League of His Own, Conclusion.
The most powerful members of the Justice League have fallen to Amazo. Now, only Batman stands against the villainous Professor Ivo and his killer android, with all the powers of the World's Greatest Heroes at his disposal...

World's Finest #1: Batman (2007)
Join us on Earth-X for the re-imagined Batman and his new adventures.

World's Finest #1: Superman (2007)
Join us on Earth-X for the re-imagined Superman and his new adventures.

World's Finest #1: Wonder Woman (2007)

Join us on Earth-X for the re-imagined Wonder Woman and her new adventures.

All-Star Comics Annual #1 (2007)

All-Star Comics Annual: Justice Society of America: The Time of Their Lives.

All-Star Comics #10 (2007)

All-Star Comics: Hawkman: Sins of the Father, Part 1 (of 4)

All-Star Comics #11 (2007)

All-Star Comics: Hawkman: Sins of the Father, Part 2 (of 4)

All-Star Comics #12 (2007)

All-Star Comics: Hawkman: Sins of the Father, Part 3 (of 4).

All-Star Comics #13 (2007)

All-Star Comics: Hawkman: Sins of the Father, Part 4 (of 4).

The Flash #23 (2008)

The Flash: Flash of Infinite Worlds!

When Barry Allen agreed to help his good friend Ray Palmer with an experiment, he never thought he'd find himself in another reality! The Cosmic Treadmill takes the Scarlet Speedster to a parallel Earth, and just may give him a glimpse at his own tragic destiny! Can even the Flash fight the future? Find out in this first ever DC2/DC3 crossover issue as we enter the Multiverse!

Adventure Comics #11 (2010)

Adventure Comics: Stranger New Visitor.

The long-awaited return of the DC2's original Superman book, by its original creative team! Springing from the pages of last month's "Action and Adventure" Annuals, the new era for the Man of Steel continues here, as Lois investigates the sinister Evil Factory, a strange figure in a familiar costume arrives and a threat from beyond the stars strikes in the heart of Metropolis... A huge storyline for the Man of Tomorrow begins here!



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