



Batman: Inferno

By Alex Irvine

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With more than thirty fires raging out of control across the city, Gotham is indeed a hell on earth. But torching the population is small potatoes for the arsonist extraordinaire known as Enfer. The pyromaniac's mad masterpiece is Arkham Asylum, blazing like a Roman candle and engineered to provide the perfect escape for Arkham's most infamous inmate, the Joker. But the dire situation goes from bad to beyond monstrous when the archvillain's path to freedom leads directly to the Dark Knight's cave.

The Joker believes in striking while the iron is hot . . . and now it's never been hotter. After all, the diabolical villain has devised the ultimate joke: launch the mother of all crime waves, masquerading as the Caped Crusader himself! With Gotham erupting in flames and its #1 crime fighter fast becoming its #1 enemy, the burning question is: Who's going to get the last laugh?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Alex Irvine has written more than thirty books, both his own original fiction (*Buyout*, *The Narrows*, *Mystery Hill*, *A Scattering of Jades*) and licensed work for Marvel, Hasbro, Warner Brothers, Fox, Blizzard, Legendary, and other international entertainment companies. He has also written comics (*Daredevil Noir*, *Iron Man: Rapture*, *Hellstorm*, *Son of Satan: Equinox*), games, and animation. The three games he's currently writing -- *Marvel Avengers Alliance*, *Marvel War of Heroes*, and *Marvel PuzzleQuest* -- together have totaled more than 75 million players. Before leaving to write full time, he spent six years as an English professor at the University of Maine. A native of Ypsilanti, Michigan, he lives in South Portland, Maine, with his wife and three children...and two dogs, a bird, a snake and a fish. You can find him on Twitter or Facebook.

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July 26, 9:09 am

Bruce Wayne has never figured himself for a power-tool enthusiast, but the fact is hard to deny. He blames Lucius Fox, which is a dodge, like blaming Tsunetomo for his love of physical discipline as expressed through the martial arts. It has always been there, latent. Waiting for the shriek of the lathe and the brutal seduction of the pneumatic drill. Today it's the jackhammer, pulverizing a bulge in the cave wall.

Smoothing, leveling, squaring. He will bring order and regularity to the cave the way he brought order and regularity to his fear: through planning, diligence, and the necessary application of force. Where millennia of water had meandered and eroded and precipitated, leaving an organic and irregular labyrinth, a few weeks of work will yield a haven, a completed base of operations from which a man with the right kind of courage and dedication could save his city from those who would corrupt it and do it harm.

He wants as much of the cave to remain natural as is possible. Once he cleared and squared enough space for a laboratory, workshop, training area, and garage, that was enough; now he's in the finishing stages. Too much work, too much hammering and blasting and drilling, might displace the bats that were the reason for his coming here. As they were the collective reason for so much else. Bruce has already redone the cave's wiring twice to accommodate the additions he's made since deciding to create this hideaway two years ago, and if he goes ahead and adds all the facilities he has in mind, he'll have to do it again. Right now the computer workstation is in a level spot surrounded by stalagmites, the metalworking area nestles in an alcove that still stinks of guano, and he can't do any materials testing because he needs a climate-controlled room. Good thing I'm a billionaire playboy, he thinks. If I had a real job, I'd never have time to get all this done.

As soon as the jackhammer's echo dies away into the depths of the cave, Alfred is there. "Why don't you take a break, Master Bruce?"

"Alfred, you know I can't," Bruce says. "I need to get this squared off before the reception tonight."

"If I may be so bold," Alfred says mildly, "the cave will be exactly where you left it."

"Yes, it will. And tomorrow it will be a portfolio review, or a charity appearance, or a stockholders' meeting that will get in the way, and this will be just a cave until I come down here when I don't want to and get this

done. Or are you suggesting I should put the job out to bid?"

The idea of a gang of Gotham's finest hard hats banging around under the foundations of Wayne Manor brings a smile even to Alfred's studiously impassive face. "Surely not," he says. "But you must realize when you have brought your crew to the last of its strength." Alfred snaps a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabs at his forehead and the corners of his eyes. "If you'll excuse me, Master Bruce, I believe I will enjoy a break for both of us."

"Be my guest," Bruce says.

Alfred sits in the swivel chair in front of the bank of monitors near the elevator and leans it all the way back, resting a hand over his eyes. Bruce starts to go back to work, but out of all the thoughts about Tsunetomo and grand schemes for the cave, the morning's "Bull's-Eye" column creeps into the front of his mind and won't leave.

He leans the jackhammer against the cave wall. "You read the paper this morning, Alfred?"

"I'm quite sure you know the answer to that question, Master Bruce."

"So what do you think? Should I start to license Bat-gear? Or maybe I should get a Bat-wife first, and have some Bat-kids so I can sell pictures of them in the maternity ward to the gossip rags. Sound like a good idea to you?"

"It seems to me," says Alfred, "that the very fact of your marriage would keep the gossip rags in rapture for years. Whether your betrothed was a bat or not."

Bruce laughs. "True. Wonder if it's time for another Bruce-Wayne-jilts-socialite scandal. Think that would goose the stock price a little?"

"I highly doubt that shareholder value is dependent on your amorous escapades," Alfred says.

"Still, if there's any chance I could do the company some good . . ."

Alfred gives him a sidelong look. "I shall consult the social register," he says. "Surely there is a lass remaining who has not yet been victimized by your charms."

"That's the spirit," Bruce says. "When you find her, invite her to whatever the thing is tonight."

"The thing, as you so casually put it, is a charity event for Wayne Enterprises' cystic fibrosis foundation."

Bruce starts clearing rubble into a bin. It doesn't match training on a glacier with Tibetan warrior-monks, but it's hard physical work and he falls into the rhythm of it, feeling muscle and ligature flex and lengthen, hearing the air in his lungs and the steady backbeat of his heart. There is music in the body, if you know to listen for it—a more metaphysical thought than Bruce Wayne usually allows himself to indulge in, but when you've decided to devote your life to breaking your body and your mind against the tide of evil and corruption that constantly threatens Gotham City, there is something centering about plain mundane labor. Especially when you can do it in a cave that's constantly fifty-seven degrees instead of the ninety-plus summer heat baking the city.

He has just topped the bin off and lifted the handles to wheel it back to a depression in the back of the main cave when Alfred calls, "Master Bruce. I believe you'll be interested in this."

"What's that, Alfred?" Bruce thought Alfred was asleep. He should have known better.

"If I'm not mistaken, a situation has arisen that requires the . . . informal . . . services you have of late provided our fair city. May I suggest you have a look yourself?"

Butler-speak, Bruce thinks. Much too late to cure Alfred of it, but he has a passing impulse to endow a charity for the education of butlers in idiomatic regular English. "Be right there."

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