



THE MAN BEHIND THE BAT, THE WOMAN WITHIN THE CAT
THE LIFE BETWEEN THE PANELS, THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MASKS

#4

Cat \equiv Sales

Catfight



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES

CATFIGHT

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CATFIGHT

“Careful,” the shadow in the doorway thought to himself, “This is an unprecedented opportunity, but taking advantage of it is a dangerous and delicate undertaking. If you don’t time this just exactly right, if you waste the element of surprise, the target will have time to react, and the precise nature of that reaction is impossible to predict.”

Batman was a master strategist, schooled in the art of move and counter move. Bruce Wayne was a CEO, exploiting opportunities and anticipating contingencies were part of the job. Both skill sets were required for this exceptional set of circumstances:

Selina Kyle lay on her stomach reading a magazine, back to the door, damp hair and torso wrapped in a bath towel. The intruder didn’t make a sound. And the sixth sense that usually warned her when the Dark Knight was near hadn’t so much as quivered when she felt her body spinning over as the towel was pulled from under her like a conjurer’s trick. Before she could gasp, he was on top of her, playfully pinning her naked body against the bed and smothering the would-be scream with a passionate kiss.

“Sneaky Bat,” Selina laughed to herself. Then she corrected the thought, “No, not Bat. Bruce.” It was four weeks since he’d made that startling revelation, and she hadn’t entirely recalibrated her thinking to accommodate the new information. The “guy inside Batman,” as she’d come to think of him, had a name. His name was Bruce. And there was a lot more to him than the brooding Bat’s dayface. Bruce could be charming, playful, sneaky, adorable, urbane, and even sexy in ways Batman could not.

He *could* be, but not right now. The hands pawing her legs and neck were ungloved, the face was unmasked, but this raw lustmonster was all Batman. They’d denied themselves for too long. And he was making up for every time he’d stared into those green eyes on some freezing rooftop, wanting her, wanting to take her in his arms and hold her, but couldn’t because he was the Batman and she was a thief.

Bruce was perfectly aware he was acting like a kid with a new toy, brushing against her or slipping a hand round her waist on the slightest pretext, patting her ass or kissing her cheek almost as punctuation. He couldn’t help it. She fit into his arms so well; she fit into his *life* so well....

His shoulders stiffened a little at the thought. It reminded him that he hadn’t come to grope Selina, but to talk to Catwoman.

“We have a problem, Bruce,” Lucius Fox had said. The Wayne Enterprises Chief Operating Officer was not an alarmist. He didn’t overreact to simple, everyday setbacks. “LexCorp’s declared war,” he had said. “We can’t stick our heads in the sand

and pretend it's not happening. Now I've commissioned this report from Foster and Forsythe to upgrade security, and I need a decision: Do we act on their recommendations or not?"

Bruce massaged his temples.

Lex Luthor could not serve as President and remain CEO of the multinational corporation that bore his name. So he'd hired—to the disbelief of the financial world—Talia Al Ghul to run it in his stead. *The Daily Planet* questioned Luthor's sanity in appointing an unknown and unqualified amateur to run his company. *The Wall Street Journal* called her a Poison Pill chosen to make the firm undesirable for a takeover in his absence. And Nightwing joked that Displaced Daughters of Demons course at the Learning Annex must've really paid off. Only Bruce saw the subtlety of Luthor's strategy: Talia was in no way qualified to run a legitimate corporation, but she was supremely experienced at hovering around the top of a vast criminal empire, ignoring the moral quandaries posed by the guy in charge scheming to take over the world.

Since the election, LexCorp had opened offices in Gotham City, taking over the old Knickerbocker Tower directly across the street from the Wayne Enterprises Corporate Headquarters. There were rumors that an entire floor of LexCorp-Gotham was devoted to nothing but observing the comings and goings from the Wayne Building.

Lucius hired these consultants to beef up their security against corporate espionage, and of course Bruce considered their recommendations with Batman's professional acumen. There was nothing really *wrong* with the recommendations. But Foster and Forsythe were looking at the problem with a policeman's mentality only: how to stop the bad guys getting in—in all the ways they imagined bad guys would try to get in. They could only protect against attacks they could *anticipate*, and they had precious little imagination in that regard. Whereas he... he was acquainted—and getting better acquainted each day!—with someone used to looking at these matters from the other side. To Selina, no security setup was a deterrent or even an obstacle; it was a puzzle. She'd certainly find the weaknesses in this proposal, and he could close the gaps before even building the new system. And he'd get to see her mind work—that alone would be a treat. Better still would be the look on her face when he told her...

"You want to hire me?"

"Yes."

"To break into Wayne Enterprises?"

"To figure out how to break into Wayne Enterprises, yes. Look, I already hired these guys—"

"Foster and Forsythe. They're good."

"Everyone says they're the best. And yet you *routinely* get past security they've set up. So I want you to figure out how you'd get past this."

He tossed her their proposal. She started to look it over, then stopped and looked up at him.

"And you don't have any qualms about hiring your girlfriend?"

"About hiring my..." Bruce broke off chuckling. She couldn't be saying this...

She was.

"You can laugh all you want but romance in the workplace is a seriously bad idea."

Bruce stared for a long, long minute, trying to fathom just what goes on inside a woman's mind that doesn't happen in a man's. This was Selina—this was *Catwoman*—Catwoman that routinely pressed her breasts into his chest and her pelvis into his crotch while they fought, who whispered things about heat and animals in the night that brought a blush to his cheeks even now....

She held the deadpan for almost a full minute until the grin, the *"I can't believe you fell for that, you're so cute when you're stupid"* grin, stole over her features.

If he'd been worried taking off the masks would defuse the strange adversarial charge of their relationship, he needn't have. She could still sucker him in anytime she wanted.

As a devotee of Shakespeare and Milton, Alfred Pennyworth would certainly have dismissed the words "Be careful what you wish for" as a pedestrian cliché best suited to the inside of a fortune cookie. But however uninspired he found the wording, events of the past few days made him a staunch believer in the idea it expressed.

His inspired Jeevesian manipulation of Batman's love life had borne greater fruit than he could have hoped for. Bruce could not have been as dead to human feeling as everyone had feared, for he had offered surprisingly little resistance to the vacation suggestion. And he'd apparently let himself go most satisfactorily once he actually found himself on holiday. For he had returned, quite as gruff and non-communicative as before, but with the addition of this startling new companion in his life.

For that much Alfred would give daily thanks. The lady herself was certainly beautiful, and seemed bright, confident, witty, and cultured besides. Certainly he'd expected nothing less of any woman able to capture Master Bruce's attention. And her good humor seemed to balance Bruce's tendency to suck everything in his vicinity into a black hole of brooding despair. For this too, Alfred would be eternally grateful.

"But the fact is," Alfred confided to the heavens, represented at the moment by the stalactites of the Batcave trophy room, "that since the master hired Miss Selina to work on this project, I have two of them to look after instead of one."

On accepting the job, Selina had handed back the Foster and Forsythe report. She refused any information about Wayne Enterprises or LexCorp but what she could find for herself, as if she was truly working from the outside. All she needed, she said, was a computer terminal and quiet. This she promptly amended to: a computer terminal, quiet, *and for Bruce to please refrain from blowing in her ear in that very distracting manner.*

She'd spent four days hunched over a laptop in Bruce's study, shooing away all interruptions, refusing sandwiches, letting the occasional cup of tea Alfred brought grow cold—and generally doing such a thorough recreation of Batman on a paper chase that Alfred nearly called her "sir."

It was at the end of Day Four when Alfred entered the study to collect the untouched lunchtray and stone cold cup of tea, that he found Selina staring, not at the computer screen but out the window, with a cold, hollow glare.

"Where is he, Alfred? Where is he right now?"

Alfred didn't know Selina had a "Catwoman voice" the same way Master Bruce assumed a deep growl when thinking as Batman, and the revelation gave him a chill.

Nevertheless, he answered with the same butler's detachment he would assume with Master Bruce:

"Downstairs, Miss," he said, meaning the cave. "He returned a few minutes ago."

Selina stormed out in the direction of the grandfather clock. Alfred glanced at the laptop screen and saw a scanned memo on LexCorp letterhead with a brief handwritten postscript:

Beloved, why must we still be at odds since I've abandoned my father? This opposition is as needless as it is futile.

Hollywood likes Buddy Pictures. Two men whose backgrounds and personalities are entirely incompatible are brought together through a roadtrip, a prison break, or an invasion of intergalactic cockroaches—and at the end of two hours they’re the best of friends. In real life, the Buddy Picture phenomenon seldom occurs. But it is true that there is something on the Y-chromosome that enables men who are at odds on any number of subjects to put their differences aside and achieve an eerie camaraderie when one of them is getting some and the other wants to hear about it.

Bruce and Dick’s relationship may have been strained at times, but no rift could have prevented Dick’s coming to hear, firsthand and in person, about the extraordinary aftermath of “The Jeeves Conspiracy” in which he’d played a small but significant role.

“So she’s living here now?” he asked, incredulous.

“No, she’s not exactly, well, she’s stayed over a few nights. But y’know she’s working late on this security thing, and it’s a drive back to her place in the city, and I do have these 25 spare bedrooms, so...”

“But you’re sleeping with her?”

“Dick!”

“C’mon Bruce, you can’t hold out on me on this. I’ve been following this thing from the beginning, well, almost the beginning. You remember that time you had her pinned and sent me off to ‘find some evidence’ in an EMPTY PARKING LOT! You OWE ME, MAN! Tell me what’s happening.”

“Dick, no.”

Bruce was shaking his head, laughing in an odd, embarrassed way his former partner had never seen. He was truly happy, and that was good to see. Dick smiled at the man he finally, when all was said and done, considered a father.

Then the smile dissolved, and he abandoned the locker-room tone.

“Bruce, seriously, I’m glad for you. Really. But... this is *Catwoman* we’re talking about. And you *told* her. You’re really that sure... about... everything?”

“Dick, this is *Selina* we’re talking about, okay. There’s a difference.”

“BASTARD!” On cue, she was in the cave in full Catwoman mode, so intent on venting her rage that she didn’t even register Dick’s presence. “ARROGANT, DUPLICITOUS, HYPOCRITICAL, PRICK-FOR-BRAINS, BASTARD!”

Dick’s eyes met Bruce’s and, for a split-second, the quasi-telepathy they’d once shared as partners returned. Bruce could hear Dick’s thought: “*Lovely girl. I’m just gonna sneak away and ‘find some evidence’ now*” as distinctly as if he’d said it out loud.

“SHE KNOWS!” Selina continued without pausing for breath. “You didn’t tell me that she knows. I have wasted FOUR DAYS going about this BULLSHIT JOB you hired me for without telling me that SHE FUCKING KNOWS! I’ve spent *four days* looking at this like it’s Wayne Enterprises vs LexCorp, but NO, this is some sicko tango between you and your little demonspawn chippie!”

“You knew from the beginning that Talia was CEO of LexCorp.”

“Yes, *Beloved*, what I didn’t know was that *she* knew the CEO of Wayne Enterprises was Batman! Or do you expect me to believe she tosses that nauseating expression at everybody in pants thinking every man will swallow whatever bullshit lies follow as gullibly as YOU DO!”

Dick backed quietly towards the showers. Bruce had assumed an icy tone that would freeze molten lava; and Selina, an irony that made it quite clear she wasn't going to be intimidated by a little bit of frost in the vocal chords. In seconds, this exchange between Bruce and Selina had escalated beyond anything he'd ever seen between their costumed personalities.

"...as if you wouldn't have mentioned it if it was anyone other than your Third World thing-on-the-side who was pulling the strings!"

"What possible difference does it make if it's Talia or Luthor or... *Michael Eisner* heading LexCorp? Security is security!"

"ARGGHHH! Hey, Batboy, how many corporate headquarters have you broken into, hm? IT MATTERS, OKAY! Look... Look, where do nice, prep-school, trust fund, playboy executive types keep files they don't want other people to know about? Encrypted disk in a safe in the private office, right? Or maybe, if they're half-way computer literate, an E-Nig partition on a laptop...."

Bruce blinked. Somehow in the course of two sentences it was over. Between the two "looks," she was Selina again, explaining her position with something resembling articulate calm. His own heart was still pounding in his chest. He'd snapped into Bat-mode at the first sound of that voice cursing him out. He needed time to compose himself before he could listen to... What was she saying?... What the hell was an E-Nig partition?

"Batman, on the other hand, keeps his private files in a Cray network in a hole in the ground linked to the JLA satellite and a space station on the fucking moon."

"Okay. Okay I see your point." If she could be reasonable, he could. Really he could.

...

No he couldn't.

"I see your point, but I *DON'T* believe for **ONE SECOND** that that's what this is about! Are you **REALLY** pissed because I didn't tell you, or are you pissed because *she* knew before *you* did?"

"....."

"....."

"I don't know," she said finally. "Both, I guess... This was a really shitty thing to do, Bruce. You shouldn't have... dropped me in this chess game with her without telling me what was really going on."

"I know. I wasn't thinking of it as you against Talia, I was... I'm sorry. It... *'it seemed like a good idea at the time.'*"

She smiled, reluctantly, at the quote.

"Well," Bruce did his best imitation of a mischievous schoolboy, "We just had our first Batcave fight."

She said nothing. If he thought he was getting makeup sex after this nth degree screwup...

"Shall we try it again? Wayne & Kyle vs LexCorp, no secrets."

"Okay. But let me make one thing painfully clear. Somebody that knows is going to go about ferreting out your secrets much differently than somebody who doesn't. This just became a job nobody else on the planet is qualified to do like I can, and that, Mr. Wayne, means I am raising my fee."

True to her word, Selina went about the problem of breaking Wayne Enterprises security much differently. For starters, she moved from Bruce's study into the Batcave. There she often chatted with Alfred, learning a surprising amount about Bruce's work habits in the manor and in the cave. One afternoon, she charmed Tim into helping her with the computer: Batman's purchasing habits for the Batmobile and other equipment were a genuine concern to her. If he used the same vendors as Wayne Enterprises or diverted money from company accounts to pay for them, he exposed the firm in ways Talia would be uniquely able to recognize and exploit. Tim walked her through the procedures, and she noted a sequence to get into the core of the system.

Then she waited. On the 20th she placed a call:

"Harvey, how're you doing, Pal."

...: *Selina, long time no meow. What do you want? ...*

"I can't call my old friend just to talk?"

...: *You could, but you never do. What do you want? ...*

"I need a favor."

...: *A good favor or a bad favor? ...*

(That was a hell of a question)

"That's a matter of perspective."

...: *C'mon love, We need an answer. ...*

Selina shook her head sadly. He had to flip his coin.

"A good favor."

(Was it?)

...: *And the winner is... Unscarred. What do you need, pet? ...*

"I want you to make a few appearances tomorrow. Nothing newsworthy, you understand, just so people see you're in town—the dogtrack, that plaza in front of the federal building, the train station."

...: *That's three, We'll need one more. ...*

(It had to be divisible by two. Poor Harvey.)

"The fourth one is your choice. And Harvey, this is important. No crimes, you hear me. No violence. No jaywalking. Just be seen."

The next night, the Bat-Signal shone over the city. Two-Face was in town, and it escaped no one's attention that he'd been spotted on the 21st, undoubtedly casing his targets for a crime spree on the 22nd. Batman and his operatives were staked out at a number of potential targets in the vicinity of each appearance.

It was time.

Selina went down to the deserted Batcave and sat herself down in Batman's chair. She opened the core system as Tim had done... and found exactly what she expected... there was an additional password sequence on Batman's workstation that not even Alfred or Tim knew of. It took only minutes of trial and error to break the three-tiered password sequence:

Thomas – Martha – Justice.

Damn.

Breaking into the most impossible holy of holies should make any thief giddy with triumph. Selina felt ill. It was so easy. But it had to be done. Bruce was easy to read once you understood him. If she was to protect him from that poisonous witch bent on inserting herself into his life, she couldn't be squeamish about using that understanding as ruthlessly as her adversary would.

Just what was in these most private files wasn't really important; it only mattered that she'd found a way in. There was no need to look around.

...Except...

She told herself it wasn't that cats are curious creatures. It was just that, well, he was Batman. It was just possible this was a dummy desktop set up to fool intruders. She'd glance through one or two files, just to make sure... She typed in c-a-t when the helpful operating system threw up a pulldown menu of recently accessed files that began with those letters –

Catvid-museum

Catvid2-pier

The nauseous feeling that hung over her since breaking into the system evaporated into a warm glowing laughter as she saw these were the video surveillance records of her committing various robberies. Video records that had been saved and viewed many times. Of course, the ever-vigilant crimefighter could have been watching them over and over again to study her technique. But looking at the filenames after those first two...

Catvid-newcostume

Catvid-legs

Catvid-wow

Catvid-favorite

...Selina somehow didn't think that was the most likely explanation.

A month later Bruce Wayne threw a barbecue for a number of friends and colleagues, including many Wayne Enterprises employees. Lucius and two other senior executives stayed afterwards for a very unofficial meeting.

"I want to thank you all for coming tonight," Bruce began. "I realize this is a little unorthodox, but I imagine you've heard the rumors that LexCorp has been spying on the Wayne building. The rumors are true, and I want to assure you that we are aware, and we're taking steps to counter it. Over the next 30 minutes, Ms. Kyle is going to brief you on those steps." He looked over at her with pride as he continued. "I suggest you listen up, because none of what's said here will ever appear in a memo or a report or an e-mail. Ms. Kyle, the floor is yours."

"Thanks, Bruce. Gentlemen, we're looking at a two-part defense: the first part counters their ability to track comings and goings from the Wayne building."

Lucius spoke up. "Foster and Forsythe suggested sneaking important contacts into the building through hidden entrances, perhaps underground."

"Well that's fine if you're in a James Bond movie, but there's a much simpler way. You're going to have hundreds of businessmen and hundreds of other people coming in and out of the building every day—the ground level is going to become a shopping arcade—and the 34th floor will be home to the next hot upscale restaurant."

Lucius's eyes bulged. It was a brilliant notion. Observers wouldn't be able to tell who was entering the building on Wayne Enterprises business and who was just going to lunch.

"But what about the departments that are housed in those areas now?" he asked suddenly.

Selina beamed. "Glad you asked; that's part two. Three divisions will be moved from the midtown headquarters to a new 'high security' research and development campus across the river. It doesn't matter which ones; it's misdirection. With any luck, the observers will think it's to get them away from the prying eyes at LexCorp, that those divisions are especially important. In reality, it's just to free up space in the Wayne building. And to set a little trap."

"A trap?" Bruce asked. She hadn't mentioned this part before.

"The divisions across the river will still have to stay in contact with the main offices. Just like your branches in other cities, they'll be connected by a company intranet, and when—" Selina bit her tongue in order to reframe her thought "*the conniving bitch*" into less accurate but more businesslike language: "*the Lexcorp execs realize those divisions have been deliberately moved out of the observation zone, their first order of attack will be to hack into your intranet and intercept those communications.*"

Bruce interjected, "Our intranet can't be hacked. I set it up myself." His eyes danced with a private joke that said 'and you know how good I am with computer safeguards.'

She passed him a Post-It note with six words: Catvid-museum, Catvid2-pier, Catvid-newcostume, Catvid-legs, Catvid-wow, Catvid-favorite

Bruce blanched, and Selina finished addressing the meeting.

"They're going to hack your intranet. And we're going to let them. From that point on, we can feed them whatever misinformation we want them to have."

Neither Batman, greatest detective of the 21st Century, nor anyone else in the past four or five thousand years has had the capacity for observation of self and nature exhibited by the Ancient Greeks. The Greeks didn't just see, they grabbed onto the things they saw and chiseled them into the cornerstones of Western Civilization.

Here were a people that saw a specific ratio in nature. They noticed it occurring over and over again, replicating itself in strangely beautiful ways. They called it the Golden Mean, and once they identified it, they pulled and tore at it until they extracted the founding principles of mathematics, music, architecture and physics. Not content with that, their greater thinkers worked the Golden Mean into a philosophy of beauty, thought, and the meaning of life. Meanwhile across town, other thinkers were mapping out the foundations of democracy, rhetoric, teaching, and theatre.

Theatre, of course, came in two varieties: Comedy and Tragedy

The core of most Greek Tragedy is the principle of hubris: the Pride of the Great. When a mortal man, whether king, general or poet, achieves a certain level of success, he is apt to get a mite full of himself. Inevitably, this honks off the gods. And the gods promptly knock him down to size. What contemporary man often fails to realize is that the mythological gods are just a metaphor. Man is a self-righting creature. He doesn't need a real Zeus or Apollo to keep him in line, the Proud will find ways to destroy themselves.

You'd think someone who actually knew Euripides and Aeschylus, who could have attended the first readings of the Iliad or the opening night of Oedipus Rex, would realize the essential truth of the Greek's observation that Pride goeth before a fall. But Ra's al Ghul had the special kind of arrogance that could fully appreciate the principle of hubris, could recognize it as a useful failing in his enemies, but blithely assume such human folly did not apply to him.

Talia had inherited all of her father's hubris. She believed that Luthor appointed her head of LexCorp for her strategic brilliance. Her mind could not conceive of any other possibility. Just as she couldn't conceive that she'd stepped into a trap in the matter of Wayne Enterprises surveillance, that the information her agents downloaded daily from the WE intranet was exactly what Bruce wanted her to have. It wasn't merely that she *didn't* consider the possibility, she *couldn't*. It was no more possible that her beloved could deceive her than it was that he could love another woman.

It was vexing that he allowed the cat to advise him. Talia was sure moving the divisions had been Selina's idea. Probably too, the restaurant and shopping arcade that flooded her observers' records of the comings and goings at the Wayne Building with so many prominent names and faces that it was useless as an espionage tool. But Selina, so Talia believed, was too full of herself and her cleverness to recognize how well Talia knew her beloved's mind. When the divisions were moved, she'd simply hacked the computer system they'd use to communicate with the main office.

She longed to confront the miserable thief and rub her nose in it: how, because of Selina's own strategy, Talia could now eavesdrop on this important part of Bruce's life. She longed to taunt her beloved with her rival's failure, and impress upon him how she could read him in ways Selina never would. She wanted to go to him with some tale of her father's schemes and make him believe in her again, to demonstrate once and for

all that she could control Batman against his very reason as no other woman every would. But that wouldn't do. To benefit from her victory, she had to keep it a secret.

It was most vexing.

Batman was staked out on a rooftop near the waterfront, waiting for an expected drug shipment. It was a bad time to be an underworld stooge in Gotham City. The Bat had visited no fewer than four seedy bars tonight, and the informants had become desperate (not to mention bruised) trying to figure out what the hell he wanted. He seemed more intent on beating information out of them than in actually hearing the information. As the bottom feeders witnessed one stoolie after another spill their guts and get tossed out the window anyway, they became more complete and creative in the information they supplied. The panicked recital of every criminal enterprise, real or rumored, on the lower east side had given Batman an assortment of leads to follow up. He'd chosen this one: drug-dealing scum were just perfect for his mood. No conflicted impulses there, no murky ambiguities—just pure unadulterated evil. And their jaws would make a very satisfying crack when they hit the concrete.

For some bizarre reason, he had assumed his conflicted feelings about Catwoman were behind him once they'd become a couple. How naïve was that! Sure she'd devised this brilliant system of defense for his company, and even made some equally wily suggestions to improve the Batcave's security, but damnit, she'd violated his private sanctum.

...

No, that wasn't it.

...

She'd betrayed his trust.

...

No...

No! *SHE* hadn't trusted *HIM*. That was what stung. In the past, every time they'd declared a truce and tried to work together, she'd complain, sooner or later, that he didn't trust her. But this time, she'd made it very clear that the only reason she was letting Bruce Wayne know anything at all about her plan was because it was his company and it couldn't be helped. She stated, to his face and in the most unambiguous language, that Batman could not be trusted with information that was to be kept from Talia.

"Wonderful, you and Dick should get together. You can belittle me in stereo."

"Dick is a very bright kid. And you—"

"Can be intensely stupid when it comes to letting bad girls into my life."

It was a vicious and hurtful thing to say, and he regretted it immediately. But the damage was done. He steeled himself for the equally vicious shot she'd take in return. She wasted no time.

"Let's get something straight: What I am, I am by virtue of my talent and personality and the choices they've led me to make. If you think I'm threatened by comparisons to some little twinkie that has *nothing* that wasn't given to her by some big strong man, then you have absolutely no idea who you've been fighting with all these years.

“And speaking of that... Y’know, my opinion of old man Ra’s has always been that he’s a bush league schmuck that gives sociopathic megalomaniacs a bad name. And the only reason anybody on, say, my or the Joker’s level even knows his name is because *you* go to pieces every time he’s mentioned. If you didn’t take everybody to DefCon-4 just because an al Ghul comes to town, he’d be just another bad guy with a bad haircut.”

It stung. It was a speech she’d obviously been saving for the right occasion, because it was far too eloquent to have been composed on the spot. There was no denying Catwoman was as deadly with words as she was with her whip. Much as it killed him to admit it, it wasn’t the violation that was pissing him off; it was the bodyblow to his pride. Selina had beaten him in a fair fight on his home turf. She’d outmaneuvered Talia without breaking a sweat, simply because she didn’t have the exaggerated opinion he did of the Demon-crowd’s abilities.

“Sulking? That’s not like you.”

He didn’t turn.

“I really don’t want to talk to you right now,” he said flatly.

As if he’d said the precise opposite, Catwoman came closer and curled up beside him.

“Lucius is so happy he sent two dozen roses along with my check. A Miss Cleghorn in public relations is so giddy with the reviews the restaurant’s been getting, she’s got cover stories on deck in like seven magazines. And my spies tell me the guys in finance sing songs about me.”

“Is this your idea of not talking?”

“I just figured I’d get a ‘thank you.’ I don’t think that’s so much to ask.”

“This conversation has outlasted my interest in it. Go away.”

“Come to think of it, I’ve NEVER gotten a thank you. I helped you stop a plague, I kicked Prometheus’s ass when he’d taken out the entire JLA, I let you use me as bait to catch the Joker, and I have never gotten so much as a—”

“You didn’t *let* me use you as bait. I had to trick you into it.”

Catwoman bit her lip. That was not how she liked to remember it, but it was a fair description of the event.

“And when you met Prometheus you were at the WatchTower to steal the Storm-Opals. I’m the only one that knew that.”

She shrugged.

“And,” Batman moved in closer, feeling much better now that he’d refreshed his ego with a recitation of *his* victories over *her*, “I did get you a little thank you for this latest thing. But I’ve decided not to tell you what it is or where it’s hidden. When you figure it out, you let me know.”

Dick had changed out of his Nightwing costume, double-checked that the cave was finally secure, and entered Bruce’s study from the hidden panel behind the grandfather clock at the same instant Tim came in from the dining room. They looked at each other for a brief second... and both burst out laughing. After a few minutes, they collected

themselves, glanced at each other, then began again. Dick gasped, wiping a tear from his eye, and fought to avoid any eye-contact with Tim that might set him off again. As a mantra to focus his thoughts and get control of himself, he recited a particular passage memorized in his theatre history class:

"The Farce is a classic and enduring form of humor, relying as it does on the comedic ramifications of a lie or deception. Comedy of errors is often introduced with multiple characters appearing in the same costume or one character appearing in many guises, attempting to be two or more people at once. It is always presented in a grand house where corridors of identical doors escalate the confusion as characters come and go at an increasingly frenetic pace..."

Tim gaped unbelievably, and soon both were laughing again as Dick sputtered the footnote: "Bruce has had this coming for a long, long time."

One Hour earlier...

The party was in full swing. Once a year, Wayne Manor hosted a fundraising gala to benefit the Foundation. Because Fate is the only cosmic force with a tragic sense of humor, some costumed villain usually made an appearance and Bruce was forced to vanish from his own party so that Batman could foil the crime.

Tonight's event was no exception. Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn had descended with the apparent intention of doing as much property damage as possible while robbing the house and guests, and spritzing the wealthier men with Ivy's hypnotic pheromones for future subplots best left to the imagination.

Considering the gala's history, it was a depressingly predictable turn of events—with the unfortunate wrinkle that this time, when Bruce ducked into the study to get to the passageway behind the clock, he discovered Vernoica Vreeland making out with that tall sportscaster from Cable Sports.

Bruce backed out of the room and went round to use Alfred's elevator in the butler's pantry, only to find the caterers embroiled in a battle of their own (about the temperature of the crab puffs) that was not to be set aside just because some psychotic plant-women were taking hostages in the dining room.

Though it was risky, Bruce decided his only choice at this point was to go upstairs and climb down the drainpipe outside Dick's old room. Ridiculous as he knew he would feel, the great Dark Knight reduced to shimmying down a drainpipe, he was sure Dick had used this as an unofficial exit for years without ever being caught.

Reaching the bedrooms, he spotted a figure already hanging halfway out one of the windows. It was Catwoman. Selina kept her costume in her room, not in the cave, and she'd obviously snuck up here to change as soon as Ivy and Harley made their appearance. Assuming she'd had the same idea of using the drainpipe to get out of the house, Bruce joined her at the window just as she pulled herself back inside abruptly, clamping a hand over her mouth and pointing down.

The Joker and two henchmen were at the base of the window, hiding in the bushes and looking through the French doors at Harley and Ivy's antics inside. Joker was in a quite a state. For a man with bleached skin he looked positively purple. He kept gesturing excitedly to the henchmen, pointing out some new outrage going on inside.

Amusing as the Joker's jealous rage might be under other circumstances, there were people in danger downstairs and Batman had to save them. Bruce motioned to Selina to go round to the landing and wait for his signal. Then he went out the window and, instead of climbing down, he went up, across the roof, and finally used a tree on the far side of the house to work his way to ground level and the cave.

He shook off his dinner jacket and shirt and began fumbling with the cowl when a pair of slim, cool arms wrapped round his waist. "It's been so long, my Beloved."

This was a nightmare.

Talia was no more than two sentences into her usual story about her father—angered by her betrayal, yadda yadda yadda, sending agents to kill her, yadda yadda, and begging his protection—when a click at the top of the stairs warned that someone had opened the passage behind the grandfather clock.

Good News: Veronica and SportsNight had left the study.

Bad News: If that was Selina coming down the stairs, there's no way this would end good.

He unceremoniously flung Talia into the costume vault, slammed the door shut, and leaned (casually) against the hinge with every ounce of his weight. The foot on the stair was not Selina's, however, but Alfred's.

"Sir, the situation upstairs is becoming critical. The Joker has arrived and, quite apart from the criminal proceedings, the exchanges between he and the harlequin woman have become embarrassingly personal."

"I'm on my way, Alfred, just... hang on as best you can."

Alfred turned with a shrug... just as Tim arrived from the outside entrance Bruce himself had used. Bruce saw to his horror that he was expecting to open the costume vault.

"Tim, I ah, need you to go back upstairs—as yourself, don't change into Robin. I can take care of Ivy... and Harley... and Joker. I need you to, ah, get the caterer out of the butler's pantry."

Tim just blinked as Bruce physically spun him round and propelled him back out the door. The Caterer? Unless there was a new pastry chef criminal he hadn't heard of, this was the worst insult ever. Hell even if it WAS a pastry chef criminal he was being sent after, it still wasn't exactly a compliment.

Of course, the moment Bruce turned back, Talia was letting herself out of the vault prattling "How quick your mind is, Beloved."

A lesser man would have gagged.

Bruce was not a lesser man.

He somehow managed to stifle the words "obsessive stalker from hell" and corralled the clinging female long enough to finish changing into Batman. Returning to the party was another matter. If he left her alone in the cave and Catwoman found her here...

He didn't finish the thought. He'd undoubtedly see what would happen in such a scene the next time Scarecrow nailed him with that fear toxin that made you hallucinate your worst nightmares.

He'd have to get Talia out through the mansion without Selina seeing... and if in the process he could somehow stop Harley, Ivy, and Joker from killing his guests, so much the better.

He dragged Talia roughly by the wrist back towards the clock passageway, but checking the monitor he saw that the study was occupied again: Ivy and Catwoman were both there—with Harley Quinn—conducting what appeared to be an intervention.

“But Red, you don’t understand, he said he *LOVES ME*.”

“Harley, for pity sake, he just tried to KILL YOU—AGAIN!”

“Every relationship has its ups and downs.”

“Damn it Quinn,” Catwoman broke in, “you used to be a psychiatrist. You ever hear the AA definition of insanity: It’s doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. How many times are you going to go back ‘cause that psychotic loon says he loves you, only to have him try and kill you all over again.”

The subtext was inescapable.

But Batman had no time to ponder the ironies of Selina speaking these words while he had Talia blowing on his neck talking about her need for his protection from her father... Just how many times *had* Talia betrayed him while all the while proclaiming her love? For that matter, how many times had Catwoman fought along side him—rescued him even—while they were ostensibly still enemies? When the chips were down, the one woman could be counted on to stand by him as surely as the other would betray him.

It was a long discussion for another day. Tonight he needed to extract himself from this Rube Goldberg Machine that was becoming his life. The study wouldn’t be free for some time. He tried Alfred’s elevator next. On reaching the butler’s pantry, he saw Tim had indeed dispatched the caterers, but the room was now occupied with Nightwing pummeling the Joker. That was at least manageable. He waited until Joker’s back was to the elevator door, quickly opened it, and smashed a crock pot into the madman’s temple. Laughing boy would be out at least until the police arrived.

“Leave him,” Batman ordered as Nightwing started to tie him up, “I’ll take care of that; you take care of *this*.” He pulled Talia from the elevator. Whatever Nightwing was thinking, he knew better than to speak it.

He tried marching Talia out the back way, but outside the kitchen door Tim was involved in some kind of heated exchange with two crazed Frenchmen.

That left the front door—but he could hear the sirens of two squadcars pulling into the main drive.

The French doors in the Dining Room!

He peeked in and saw Catwoman, having given up on the intervention, was helping soothe the guests still hysterical from the original Harley and Ivy mess.

He pushed Talia behind the draperies and, catching Catwoman’s eye, mouthed the words “Cops are on the way.”

Desperate not to be involved in the official aftermath of this event, she dashed into a handy closet to change back to Selina’s evening dress. As the closet door closed behind her, Nightwing escorted Talia out the French doors, just as Bruce emerged from the study—tuxedo cuffs smudged with bat guano from the cave—and Officers Montoya and Bullock walked through the front door.

Meanwhile, inside Bruce's head...

Batman had always considered Catwoman "the sane one" among his enemies. She was a thief; she stole for profit. She didn't try to copyright fish, wipe out humanity so the plants could rule, or kill off all her henchmen just because it's Thursday. He had always *thought* she was sane, until she started sleeping over and he heard her talking to her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She claimed it was very therapeutic and he should try it sometime. That it would "loosen him up" and make him "more human."

Bruce Wayne stood at his shaving mirror, stared at it for a minute, then another minute, then another.

This was just too ridiculous. He shaved and brushed his teeth in silence, as always.

Next day as Batman, returning from patrol, he glanced at the rearview mirror for a split-second longer than necessary after cutting the Batmobile engine. What would anybody have to say to their reflection? It made no sense. It must be a girl thing. Or maybe a cat thing. He found himself saying that a lot lately. Despite the playboy persona, Selina was his first true girlfriend: the only woman he'd really let into his life, *all* of his life, in an intimate way. Without any similar relationship for comparison, he was becoming increasingly unsure just what in her behavior was typical girlfriend banter and what was uniquely... *feline*.

Next day in his study that question still bothered him. He hated the idea of talking to someone about it. He hated displaying any uncertainty that could be seen as weakness. Besides, who would he ask?

Alfred was a bachelor.

Dick ?

Christ, he had given Dick such a wonderful role model, hadn't he: feckless playboy/monosyllabic avenger with a thing for bad girls. No wonder the poor kid had such a problem closing the deal with Barbara.

Clark ?

Clark had very limited (admirable but limited) Smallville notions about the relations between men and women.... Besides which, there was no power on earth that would make him repeat Selina's words about loosening up and making him more human. They were the same things Clark himself had said on a number of occasions, and Bruce was too smart not to realize: when CATWOMAN and SUPERMAN triangulate on the same aspect of your personality, you can be pretty damn sure it's really there.

Bruce glanced up from his desk and saw the answer: the person he really needed to talk to, the man he could absolutely trust with the deepest fears in his soul, a man who had enjoyed a happy, loving marriage for 20-plus years... was his father.

The portrait of his parents that hung over the fireplace looked down benevolently—but it was the wrong image. He wanted—insane as it sounded—he wanted to talk to his father alone, outside the presence of his mother. He took an old photo in a silver frame off a side table and set it directly in front of him on the desk. He addressed it more or less the same way he'd heard Selina talking to the mirror:

"I need some advice, Dad. I've got girl trouble."

In his mind's eye, he could see his father reacting as Alfred would: mock concern unable to hide a pleased smile. And in his mind's ear, he could imagine the response:

"Well it's about time, Bruce. Your mother and I were starting to worry that those... 'bimbos' I think you call them, were going to sour you on the benefits of a real, loving relationship with a woman. And incidentally, son, 'bimbo' is *not* a proper way to refer to any young woman. Not everyone has had the advantages you've been given, and certainly not everyone is gifted with the intelligence you have, but you still treat them with respect."

"Yes, sir."

"Alright then. We've been meaning to speak to you about that for a while now. Your mother'd kill me if she thought I had this talk with you and didn't say something."

"She would?"

"Of course she would, where do you think you got that tendency to obsess over injustice night and day until it's corrected? That's your mother. Also your temper. The detective skills, those are mine. Medical diagnosis is mostly about watching and listening and drawing conclusions. Don't tell me you didn't know that..."

"I remember, Dad. You told me that before he became a writer, Arthur Conan Doyle had studied medicine, and that Sherlock Holmes's methods were based on those of his professors in med school."

"Good lad. I didn't know you were paying attention that day. I guess you couldn't be hearing me say any of this if you didn't already know."

"I guess. Look Dad, here's the thing: Selina, she's got a temper too. We seem to set each other off. I don't know, maybe it's force of habit, we were fighting a long time."

"Son. It's passion. It's a good thing, trust me on this. Raising their voices, it means they care. If you can upset her that much, it's a sign that she's wild about you."

"So you think it's not just a cat-thing?"

"A cat-thing?"

"Dad, Selina is *Catwoman*; I'm *Batman*. We were *enemies* for a lot of years. If I had a nickel for every time I said I'd take her down, and she tried to flay me with that whip while I tried to get the cuffs on her..."

Bruce stopped as his imagination caught up with the words he was speaking, and he envisioned his conservative, middle-aged father's reaction to this evocative imagery.

"It's not as kinky as it sounds," Bruce lied.

Wayne Sr. didn't seem to have a response, so Bruce went on talking.

"We were just... on opposite sides for a long time... and we fell for each other anyway. And... I guess maybe she feels that's part of what I like and if she doesn't go off at me regularly, I'll lose interest."

He stopped.

My god, that made sense!

He hadn't really seen the logic of it until he heard the words coming out of his mouth. Selina had seemed so totally on top of things at every turn, he hadn't fully appreciated that she was, after all, human. Subject to all the same insecurities as everybody else.

"Just like you come on like gangbusters in the JLA," his father put in, "overcompensating to mask your humanity in the face of so many meta-humans."

"Dad, I'm such an idiot. Every real blow-up we've had has been about Talia. She said—God, I'm an idiot—I said I'm really stupid *about letting bad girls into my life*. Then she said... she said 'If you think I'm threatened by that little—' I forget now, but she

had it all prepared. She'd been *waiting* for me to make the comparison. Of course she's threatened. Christ, if even the smallest part of her thought it was just about 'bad girls'—how could she not be insecure? Let's face it, morally speaking, Talia makes Catwoman look like Marsha Brady.... I've been a real schmuck, Dad. And I need to make it right."

Wayne Sr. smiled. "There are advantages to being a rich man, Bruce. Not as many as people think, but a few. You owe her a thank you, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You told her you got her something, but you haven't yet, have you?"

Bruce looked ashamed.

"I had to say something to break the ice. So I made it into a challenge. She likes that. And I figured that'd give me time to come up with something... *appropriate*."

"Get her a really spectacular piece of jewelry."

Bruce gave a nobody-understands-my-problems look of mock self-pity.

"It's *Catwoman* that has a thing for jewelry, Dad, I've got to make it up to *Selina*."

"Don't be impertinent, Bruce; I'm an older and wiser man and I'm giving you good advice. They all like jewelry."

Meanwhile inside Selina's Head...

The inevitable aftermath of a wild night of drinking is the hangover. The inevitable aftermath of "the season" of society parties is the letdown when it's over and everyone leaves town for the summer. And the little-known result of being a costumed vigilante is the hollowing lull after a period of excitement concludes. Oh it's great that the baddies are all behind bars for a while and innocent people aren't in danger. But there's no denying that a restlessness sets in when you're used to living in an adrenaline-fog 24/7 and suddenly find yourself at your desk catching up on e-mail. It's tedious. Even heroes without guilt issues wind up feeling bad that they're disappointed by the lack of crime and catastrophe.

Selina didn't know this. As often as Catwoman had worked with the good guys, she didn't consider it her vocation. She'd always picked her battles. She'd always made her own fun. She'd known Desire, Rage, Exultation, Indignation, Disgust, Frustration, and Desperation. But Boredom? That was a new one.

The whole episode with LexCorp and Wayne Enterprises security made an invigorating challenge, but it stirred up complex emotions. Selina just hated dealing with her emotions. Getting into costume and kicking some butt the night Harley, Ivy and the Joker invaded the Foundation Gala made a wonderful release. Then morning came—and afternoon. The letdown was palpable. It was one of those days that looked like rain, but didn't.

Ulgh. Summer humidity was a killer.

She attempted a physical workout, the favored therapy of the mask and spandex crowd that shrug off gunfire, ninjas, and supernatural beasties but avoid introspection like the kiss of death. Intense physical exertion was a great way to force all those complicated doubts and conflicts out of one's mind. It was about reducing yourself to

that primal core of your monkey brain where everything was instinctive and simple... when it worked. But it was so miserably humid, Selina found she couldn't perspire properly. Actually she could perspire just fine, but the sweat wouldn't evaporate in the moisture-heavy air.

Ulgh-squared.

There is no sublime fight-or-flight simplicity in feeling like a sticky mass of cotton candy wadded-up in a smelly sweatsock.

"What a vision you are, Thief," said a hard voice made harder with sarcasm, "I can see why my beloved amuses himself with you until we can be together."

“What a vision you are, Thief. I can see why my beloved amuses himself with you until we can be together.”

I turned, making a mental note to stop spending so much time at Bruce’s and beef up my own security a little. There she was: Talia Al Ghul, looking impossibly arrogant, composed—and cool. Immaculate linen suit, not a hair out of place, and smelling—unless I’m mistaken—of amber incense and Chanel Number 5.

I had so hoped she’d want to avoid a face-off as much as I did. I so hoped she’d be passive-aggressive like her old man and try to pass it off as being a mastermind: *Send an assassin to kill me, Cupcake, or frame me for some cat-crime. But no, you’ve gotta let yourself into my bathroom on the hottest bloody day of the year when I just had a work out and I’m sweaty and my hair is frizzing...*

“Did you hear me, Thief?”

I made no attempt to make conversation. This seemed to piss her off in a very gratifying way. She was there to throw a tantrum. If I hurled barbs back at her, it would have only inflated her importance. Deny her her moment of drama, and...

“CAT!!!”

She slapped me! The miserable little... How old was this demonspawn brat? She wound up again and I grabbed the incoming wrist... then the other... not letting go and not pushing back but redirecting the momentum of her strikes to the side.

Now I’ve been on the other side of that particular move, and I know it’s maddeningly frustrating. The more you put into it, the less able you are to make contact. A part of me truly did empathize with the impotent rage behind the ear-splitting scream she let loose—the rest of me remembered that when Batman grabbed *my* wrists that way, I kept my dignity.

I closed my eyes (and ears) and summoned thoughts of Yo Yo Ma, Bill Conti, and Bobby McFerrin. ...*This too shall pass, and when it does, I’ll get my shower—then a martini, an evening of quiet jazz, and a foot massage...* I opened my eyes.

The tantrum seemed to have exhausted itself and I tried to throw the wrists up and backward hoping she’d follow. It didn’t quite work, but she half-fell/half-sat on the clothes hamper next to the sink.

I noted, with a satisfaction I’m not proud of, that her clothes were now wrinkled and her hair was mussed. It evened the playing field a little.

“This concludes the physical portion of our confrontation,” I thought hopefully—but she had a little more inarticulate cussing to get through before we could get down to business. After the fourth repetition of “lousy bitch” I allowed myself a smirk.

“You dare laugh at me, Thief. Tell me what you find so amusing.”

“You know what I was thinking, Princess? I’m thinking that you’re not very good at this. I guess growing up in your father’s court where nobody’d raise their eyes to an Al Ghul, let alone disagree with you, or god forbid deny you something you wanted—well, let’s just say your creativity with the language of insult leaves a lot to be desired....”

I paused for a split-second, then just to make the point I add:

“As, I expect, your imagination is lacking in a number of other arts.”

I was ready for her to come at me again—but it took her too long to work out what I was saying. By the time she got it, she’d look stupid as well as spoiled if she reacted.

"You may insult me all you like, she-witch," She said finally, "but you can never come between my beloved and me. We are destined for each other. He is chosen above all men to continue the line of my father's glory."

"You're just starring in your own little Euripides play over there, aren't you?"

"You mock matters of great importance..."

"I'll give you one thing, Precious: As pompous as Bruce can be when he's on a roll, you make him look like Nathan Lane in drag."

"...but what are you, Thief, that you flatter yourself that you're dear to him? He is a man, he found you pleasing, so what. Now that he's had you, what can you possibly offer him..."

OK, Now I was getting pissed. I was determined not to let this become one of those hissing-scratching-hairpulling sideshows where overdressed women with big hair knock each other into swimming pools and soggy shoulder pads float up to the surface. That was NOT going to happen—but damnit this posturing little twit needed taken down a peg!

I glanced up and saw she was still at it:

"...You're nothing special. You're just some passing amusement, a conquest for the great crimefighter..."

...

You know, you can say what you want about Joker being a homicidal maniac, but in his insanity he sometimes sees things much clearer than rational people. He told me once that if I ever found myself in one of those standoffs with Ra's al Ghul, when you put on a brave show trading insults but he's got the upper hand and you both know it, that I should look him right in the eye and do what no one, not even "the Detective" had ever done—laugh right in his face.

What was true of the father was doubly true of the daughter: self-importance can't abide silliness. And so I just let go and laughed at this last bitter diatribe. She tried to look superior, like the inability to control this wild mirth was a sad mark of my inferiority. That I actually *did* find funny and that made it all the easier to keep the laughter going.

Finally, I made a great effort to control my breathing enough to sputter out, just a few words at a time: "I guess... I must have... achieved some kind of status... in Bruce's life unless... unless... you break into the bathroom... .. of every woman he dates... and give that same speech!"

I composed myself and concluded, "Let me tell you something. I think it's really sweet that you're so protective of and committed to a relationship that doesn't exist. It says a lot about you. And it's almost hard to choke back the tears while I say ...YOU'RE INSANE! Get out of my bathroom, you crazed nutcase from hell. Lady, you are about five different kinds of crazy, plus -you talk like Theodoric of York!"

Cats are amazing creatures really. They have this wonderful ability to try and jump to the mantle from the end table, miss, spill a vase of water onto the sofa and knock a Faberge egg into the wastebasket as they claw at air on the way down, fall ungracefully

on their furry rumps, and then blithely lick a paw like that's exactly the way they meant it to play out.

So I've decided (despite my continued opinion that women with a conflict involving a man should avoid water whenever they meet) ...I've decided that I actually *meant* to keep harping on Talia's pretentious ranting until she got mad enough to come at me again and knock me into the shower, meant to pull her in with me (by the lapels, mind you, not by the hair!) and throw her back against the knob bringing a stream of ice cold water down on both of us. After all, I was in my own apartment and she had to get herself home through midtown Gotham at rushhour in a soaked white suit.

I snickered as I wondered if she walked, tried to hail a cab, or (giggle) took the subway!

I'd emptied the martini shaker twice. Hard as I tried to make light of the incident with Talia, the aftertaste was standing up to vodka surprising well.

I told myself that she's a spoiled child that can't accept not getting her way. Then I thought that Bruce too is a child in some ways. Perhaps they had that in common.

I told myself she's a humorless, obsessive, borderline psychotic with a skewed and limited view of the world. They had that in common as well.

I told myself he chose me to help fight her off when she attacked his company. And then I remembered how little he minds being attacked under certain circumstances.

I told myself vodka is fattening, and if I made another shaker of martinis I would be too hungover to work it off tomorrow.

I filled the shaker anyway.

I wanted to be numb. I wanted to block it all out of my head.

Well.

There was the catsuit. I never tried to drown my troubles in a bottle before; I just put on the mask and let the way of the cat handle everything.

Cats are independent. Cats are loners. Cats might let you stroke their fur and give them catnip, but they ultimately *don't care* if you also have a dog or a parakeet or a girlfriend that you maybe like better or—ARRRRGGGGHHHHHHHHH!

I threw the martini shaker at the nearest breakable object, and felt like nothing so much as a childish, spoiled undisciplined daughter of a demon that needed a good spanking.

Cats aren't like this. Cats aren't jealous. Cats aren't possessive. Cats are independent. Cats are loners. Cats are... oh hell, who was I kidding.

Whiskers and Nutmeg were peeking out from under the sofa. They sniff my shoes every time I return to the apartment. They crawl into any book or newspaper I try to read instead of paying attention to them. And right now, they cared that their flatmate was too busy throwing things to sit down and make the lap they wanted to be curled up in.

It was time to let the cat out.

Nightwing slid his arm under Barbara's back as she nuzzled his throat while a distant news report droned on about some important race that was being run.

"Oh Dick" *-snick snick-*

"Oh Dick, you shouldn't be shy with me. So what if he got here first. You're almost as good as he is, really."

"Almost ... as ... good ... as who?"

"Why, Azrael of course." *-snick snick-*

-snick snick- -snick snick-

Dick's eyes popped open. That was *NOT* the alarm clock. *-snick snick-* Nor the telephone. *-snick snick-* He looked bleerily in the direction of the sound: *-snick snick-* Window—Claws—Gloves—Mask—Catwoman?

He went to the window and opened it.

"Since when do you knock?" He wasn't awake, and it came out sounding more hostile than he'd intended.

Dick tied the belt of his robe with a sharp jerk. Now that he was awake his inner-Alfred reminded him that we do not leave ladies standing on our fire escape at four in the morning in the drizzling wet.

"Would you like to come in and, I don't know, have some coffee?" he offered.

She looked like he'd hit her. What the hell?

Then he saw it: Catty looked awful. Besides the wet, she seemed tired and hurt and bewildered... The light dawned: *Way to go, Bruce.*

"Look I'm sorry, come on in. I'm not awake yet."

She did come in but didn't speak, didn't apologize for waking him... Plenty upset, and not saying a word... God, she and Bruce were perfect for each other.

He sat her down and waited patiently. It came out slowly about her encounter with Talia. From the sounds of it, she gave as good as she got, but it obviously bothered her.

He would tell her his pet analogy, Dick decided. About Bruce and Talia. The analogy meant a lot to Dick. It was funny. It was right. And there were very few people he could share it with, most of whom, like Alfred and Superman, were too straight-laced to see the humor. Selina was not straight-laced. She knew Bruce better than almost anybody; she had no love for Talia. She was sure to see the funny.

"Talia is Lucy," he explained. "Bruce is Charlie Brown. Every time she comes around she swears she'll hold that football in place, and every time he falls for it and believes she'd left Ra's and is ready to start a new life ...WHOOSH...Oh Good Grief!"

Selina looked at him like a kitten that'd been stuck on a fire escape in the rain until four in the morning. She did not see the funny.

Okay, so much for lightening the mood, Dick thought.

"You have any pet analogies about me, kiddo?" she asked softly.

Oh.

Man this was awkward.

He had, in fact, what Tim described as a "killer ten minute standup routine" on the subject of Batman and Catwoman.

Dick was always something of a wiseass. It was the circus kid in him. You grow up touring from town to town with a troupe of performers, you get accustomed to a certain level of banter, and you develop a pretty sharp wit of your own to keep up. It

was a shock when Dick went to live at Wayne Manor to discover that everybody didn't sing at parties! Some people couldn't sing *at all*—some couldn't even tell jokes!

When Bruce and Dick had their falling out, his humor became a defense mechanism, and unintentionally he'd wound up the comedic commentator of the Bat-Family, saying serious things in a funny way because it was just too painful to hit them head on.

There was no point in telling Selina any of this. He thought she was good for Bruce. Why mention that his most frequent observation during his years as Robin was that they should "just do it already and defuse the bomb."

"How about this," he said gently, "I'll just shut up and you take your time and tell me whatever it is you want to talk about."

She opened her hand and held out a pin: a leopard—platinum set with diamonds, its spots picked out in ovals of highly polished onyx, two tiny emerald eyes. He recognized it—it was somewhat famous, made for the Duchess of Windsor.

"I found it in his private safe. It's my thank you for the security thing. There was a card."

Dick smiled. "That's so cute. He locked it in a safe! I didn't think Bruce had it in him."

Selina gave him a look that said *I'm going to start over, 'cause that's how completely you've missed the point*. "Yes, it's a cat and it's beautiful and he locked it in a safe for me to find... Don't you get it? It's for *Catwoman*. The son of a bitch... I just... I thought we were past that. I thought... I thought he liked *ME*. Now it turns out I'm nothing special, I'm just ... the first bad girl that happened to run across his path. A conquest."

Dick shook his head in wonder.

"You're unbelievable. The both of you are absolutely fucking unbelievable. From Bruce, of all people, this is a monumental gesture of affection and acceptance and all you can... unbelievable..."

He turned and walked into the next room muttering aloud: "Do you, Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle promise to forsake all others and reserve your warped, angst-ridden, dysfunctional nincompoopery *for each other*, thereby saving at least two innocent people and providing untold hours of fascinated diversion to the rest of us who might otherwise think *WE* have screwed up relationships!"

He returned and flung an auction catalog into her lap with a cover photo of the cat she held in her palm, and one other exactly like it.

"It's one of a pair, Selina! I remember because when it came up for sale we were keeping an eye on the auction house, and I had a bet with Batgirl whether you or Two-Face would make a try for them!"

She looked up, confused.

"Don't you get it? If he had one locked in a safe for Catwoman, he probably has the other in a giftbox to give Selina. My guess is he'll give it to you at dinner as soon as he sees you found its mate. Try to act surprised."

Epilogue:

OK, I've been an idiot.

Talia is a bitter psychopathic witch, I know that. I've said it to Bruce; I've said it to her; I've said it to Whiskers and Nutmeg, my bathroom mirror and my luffa sponge.

And still I let her get under my skin with her insane delusional rantings.

I apologize for nothing I ever did as Catwoman—except for that one night.

After the witch showed up in my bathroom, I gave in to the little formless fears.

I let her make me doubt.

I put on the suit and went to Wayne Manor as Catwoman, that's who he wanted after all. The bad girl. A conquest. Catwoman. Not me, not the real me that lives somewhere between Selina and the Cat. So I broke into Wayne Manor and I opened his private safe because I could. I don't know what I was thinking, and I certainly don't know what I expected to find... but I didn't expect a greeting card.

Yet there it was: One lavender envelope addressed to "Kitten," one perfect dried rose, one exquisite cat pin covered in diamonds and onyx with two emerald eyes.

My Thank You. I'd forgotten completely.

I opened the card, half-expecting something sappy and out of character, but instead found the words:

Took you long enough.

I was beginning to think you'd lost your touch

-B

Wiseass.

We had a dinner date two days later, so of course I wore the pin. Alfred noticed the minute he opened the door and commented as he took my wrap on the lucky coincidence of its having green eyes. Oddly enough that detail hadn't sunk in, and I blushed a little. That was embarrassing; I haven't blushed since I was 15. But Alfred looked so pleased that he could make a woman blush at his age, I guess it's okay.

I met Bruce in the garden, gave him a special kiss in thanks for the pin and... it's the damndest thing, I don't know if it was Bruce or Batman kissing back. At first it was so easy to tell them apart, but lately.... Maybe I am losing my touch.

Dinner was slightly awkward at first. Intimate table for two in a perfect honeysuckle-scented garden, with candlelight glistening off the crystal and an invisible butler whisking plates and filling wineglasses... terribly romantic. And the regular world's version of romance is not something either of us has ever done well. At least it's something I've never done well. I had thought he was none too good at it either, except tonight he was doing it perfectly. He was so smooth and charming and at home with all these movieset seduction props. This wasn't my Bruce; this wasn't 'the guy inside Batman' and it sure-shit wasn't Batman...

Then I got it: THIS was the playboy routine he gives the bimbos.

I would love to say I played along and took up my role in the scene he'd set up, then realized playing a part on a date—even with him, even for fun—wasn't my style and brought the episode to an end with some magnificent bit of wise & sexy bravado. I would love to say that, and I'm sure that's just what would have happened... if only I could have held back the smile. But the second I realized I was seeing "Wayne, Bruce

Wayne," the startling-endearing-pitiful-adorable-sillifudiness of it all produced this ridiculous grin.

"What?" asked the Dark Knight Dilettante.

All I could do was rearrange the smile and gesture in his general direction, the Caped Catch-of-the-County Crusader.

He got up from the table and walked off a few paces, standing with his back to me. I followed and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Do you know why I love you?" I asked, trying to make my voice tender, but sounding amused instead. "Because you suck at the candlelight and violins as much as I do. And I think it's the most adorable thing in the world that you 'ran home to mamma' putting on that ridiculous playboy character just to give me a romantic evening."

I put a hand on his chin and turned his head to face me, intending to give his cheek a light kiss. I expected the seeking, vulnerable eyes from that first night in the vault. What I saw instead was the steel intensity of Batman. They were so interconnected. This was my Bruce.

He walked me back to the table and we finished dinner, but now he acknowledged Alfred's presence and playfully chided him for setting up the romantic staging.

"He says having a house like this to entertain in is a privilege and I don't do it justice."

"Well, maybe if you did it more often, you wouldn't suck at it so very, very badly," I teased.

"Before tonight, I haven't had any complaints," he answered in a parody of the playboy lothario.

I smiled.

"Before tonight you've been playing to bimbos."

For the first time since my encounter with the demonspawn, I was feeling myself again. Cat and Woman teasing my favorite bat.... Enjoying the way he eyed my figure when he thought I wasn't looking. Except he wasn't eying my figure; he was focused a few inches higher.

"That's not quite right, is it?"

"What isn't?"

"The pin, it should be higher and more to the side."

I looked down—the pin was positioned perfectly—and what do men, particularly men who dress as bats, know about ladies' couture?

"Move it up, please."

I started to suspect where this was going, did as he asked, then gave a perplexed half-smile like I was humoring a deranged dressmaker.

"Better," he grunted, reaching into his jacket. He pulled out a small red leather box and slid it across the table. "Now there's room for this."

If it weren't for years spent curling my arm through alarm system lightbeams, my hand may have trembled as I opened the box. Dick's advice to "act surprised" was unnecessary. Even knowing there was a second pin made for the Duchess of Windsor, even seeing that Bruce had set up this elaborate (if somewhat hokey) romantic dinner, even seeing the box as he slid it across the table, it didn't seem real. But there it was.

Bruce was saying something about buying these years ago—diamond leopards with green eyes—telling himself they'd make excellent bait for Catwoman one day and never dreaming...

The words didn't matter; the gift spoke for itself. Two pins: one for Catwoman, one for Selina.

Oh Bruce... ...I've been such an idiot.

OK, I've been an idiot.

I knew when I got involved with Selina Kyle there was going to be a certain amount of... strangeness from the Catwoman part of her life.

I knew she must have contacts and, yes, friendships with some of my enemies. I can't claim to be surprised that any relationships existed. So what's my problem, that these particular ones are so off-the-scale bizarre? They're not. Harvey Dent was once my friend. Edward Nigma is harder to figure out. He wouldn't be my choice for a drinking buddy, but considering the alternatives... From the sounds of their conversation, he's more of a regular guy outside of Riddler-mode than the other psychos.

Besides, it's not like he was involving her in anything criminal. They were just talking. They were talking like friends do.

It's an opportunity, really. Even Matches Malone would never see the star-players interact that way. This could be a watershed in my war on crime. My enemies let their guard down in the presence of my girlfriend in ways that could expose any number of secrets and weaknesses...

She called him Eddie. Not Riddler, not Nigma, Not even Edward. Eddie.

They seem to have little nicknames for everybody. Azrael was "The Choirboy"; Huntress was "Bony Ass." Ra's al Ghul was "The Cadaver." It was like listening to the cast of Seinfeld.

It's part of who she is. It's part of what I ...love. Selina is wonderful, but she's not the whole package.... Could anyone but Catwoman have looked into Batman's eyes that way without blanching for even a second? She hurt my feelings last night, and I shut down and I glared at her... and she just... looked up at me with those impossibly green eyes that see so much and so little... and everything was fine.

Well, I don't get to pick her friends.

Eddie. Harvey. Fine. I can deal. I don't like it, but I can deal. Who else? Penguin? Croc? If Joker so much as has her phone number I swear to god I'll break him into...

Listen to yourself.

...I've been such an idiot.