

by Chris Dee

There's nothing like a good midnight prowling.

There is no state of angst, confusion or exasperation that cannot be eased by slipping on the catsuit, slinking out to the rooftops, and letting Gotham night work its magic.

Tonight, I didn't have a lot of angst or confusion, I was just... out of sorts somehow.

They were putting up the tree in Gotham Plaza and I went to watch. It takes them a week; they only work after dark. One of the secret shows only the night people get to see: First night, they reroute the traffic and close off streets to get the thing in place, then the scaffolding goes up around it, and then they decorate it. This was the last night of the decorating. The formal tree lighting would be tomorrow. Bruce was invited to sit on the platform. He was planning to cancel at the last minute and make Lucius Fox go in his place.

I still don't understand how this is good for Batman. So Bruce Wayne is undependable and rude, that means he can't be Batman? Batman is plenty rude. I know him as well as anybody and I adore him, but even I've got to admit that the popping in and out without a word is downright obnoxious. Especially in the old days, popping out when things were just starting to heat up. And as for dependable, well, it's a given that anything that gets between him and his mission gets tossed by the wayside, no matter what he may have promised or what's at stake.

Anyway, I had prowled down to midtown to watch them decorate the tree. I was feeling "Christmassy" this year. Maybe that's what had me off-kilter.

I'd been shopping that afternoon. It was nothing major, some bowls of holiday potpourri, apple & cinnamon for the morning room, sage & citrus for the drawing rooms, a few candles, some petit fours, chocolates, and kringle... Some ornaments...

I looked down into the plaza, past the tree into Dean & DeLuca—I had stopped in there earlier as well. I ordered a snowflake cake, caviar, and some imported panforte.

It was an impulse, just like prowling, you have to go with your impulses and not worry too much where they come from. I had passed their window display and it all seemed so festive. I don't know what the manor's routine is at Christmastime, but I had an urge to make some little contribution. And I always trust my urges when it comes to window displays in this part of town. It used to be emeralds at Tiffany's or Cartier, but today it was potpourri and petit fours.

This was a strange prowling.

You know it's funny, one of the first things Bruce and I nailed down when we began, first date, practically the first conversation we had as a man and woman instead of bat and cat: we're never going to be normal. Our lives aren't normal and we will never fit into what "normal" people consider a "normal" life.

Prowling is like that. Normal people could never understand what it's like, that pull out into the city, out into the night, being called out there by something, to become a part of it. Some of it is routine; I have my territory just like he has his patrol routes. But it isn't like some pitiful security guard making his rounds through the museum at 10, 12, 2, and 4. Prowling keeps you open to impulse and instinct. I don't know where the whims come from; I don't know where any of it comes from when I put on the catsuit. It's just a sense: this is the place to go, now. Tonight, that place was midtown to see them work on the Christmas tree.

And just like anything you do regularly, there are good nights and bad nights; there are normal nights and... strange ones.

Tonight was a strange prowling.

I don't know why I felt Christmassy or why I came down to see the tree.

I drifted over towards the Wayne Building next and broke into the penthouse just to keep my hand in. Alfred is right, the place could use some work. The art is first rate, more modern than the pieces at the manor. It's a shame, really, to keep pieces like this hidden away where nobody ever sees them. The decorating style, on the other hand, could best be described as early "I'm rich" with occasional touches of "I'm horny" and an understated influence of "I'm better than you." I'm sure this was fine for the playboy bachelor days but it certainly couldn't be described as homey.

I suddenly felt very uncomfortable and got the hell out of there. That is an important rule on any prowling—if the inner warning bells go off, SCAT! Don't think about why, don't stop to close the safe, just get the hell out NOW.

I soon found myself back uptown.

I always loved uptown Gotham. Of the twin neighborhoods flanking Robinson Park, the upper west side is flashier: more movie stars, rock stars, new money. They show off more, which kept me in catnip without even trying.

The opera house is there, and I stopped on the roof. That was where it happened—that first date—when we admitted our lives would never be normal.

The upper east-siders across the park showed off too, but they were a lot more subtle. The art collections alone, *reowrl*... and the jewels. They were social people, snobs in fact. That's why I chose to live there, despite the slightly stuffier atmosphere than there would have been on the west side. Snobs are better than the yellow pages for a thief on my level. Besides which, rock star neighbors might be good for a laugh now and then, but Yoko's party guests coming and going at four in the morning would be more likely to notice Catwoman's comings and goings at four in the morning...

I had an urge to see my old place and took the shortest route through Robinson Park.

And the strange prowling got just a little stranger.

I passed the clearing where Poison Ivy, smarting from an image setback, unleashed a nightmare of berserkers and black magic on Gotham. She had been so traumatized by the whole thing, she checked herself into Arkham. I was remembering that whole mess when I felt this tug, a light little pull around my right ankle. It felt exactly like Whiskers trying to cajole my feet to move towards the kitchen. But this was no cat; it was a plant, one of Ivy's pet vines, being more polite than usual.

I wasn't about to go along, no matter how polite the invitation. But the summons itself, a plant moving on its own that way, was an unwelcome piece of news: Ivy was free.

I continued on to the roof of my old apartment, then looked back down into the park, piecing it together: Once upon a time I helped Batman gaslight Joker. Like Ivy, he had checked himself in to Arkham—which meant he could then check himself back out whenever he wanted. When he did, the Arkham administration didn't notify anybody the way they would when they released a regular Bat-nabbed criminal. The same thing

must have happened with Ivy. They let her go; they didn't tell anybody. Bruce didn't know, and now I'd have to tell him. Fun.

I thought about checking around for the Batmobile, but I wasn't in the mood. It could wait until morning.

A limousine was pulling up below and Binky Sherborn got out, swathed in sables. Nick, the doorman, hurried out with an umbrella and he held the door until she disappeared inside. I had the weirdest sense of déjà vu. This was my old building, and Binky Sherborn—9th Floor, a small publishing fortune, but the real bucks came from her four marriages—had been my neighbor. Binky was a trip. I could go down to Raoul's cart for a cappuccino, run into her in the elevator and walk away with three or four prime Catwoman targets by the time we reached her floor: *A new Galanos dress? Oh, of course, for the Wayne benefit next week! I simply must remember to get the rubies out of the safe deposit box, mustn't I. I guess I'll just keep them out since the Winthrop's party is only a few days later. Did you hear the Ravels are finally splitting? She's hiding assets, doesn't want him to know she owns a Cézanne...*

One of Binky's more amusing snobberies was that she counted her visits to certain places: She could tell you exactly how many events she had attended at Wayne Manor, how many times she dined at the Finn's, how often she had seen Prince Charles play polo, and she could tell you exactly how many times she had been inside the Bristol Country Club.

I had a chuckle over that as I continued my prowl through the neighborhood, but then driving home, as I passed the turnoff onto Country Club Drive, I realized that I too know *exactly* how many times I've been there: Nine. Of course, I know for a slightly different reason. Binky keeps track because the Bristol Country Club is the most exclusive enclave in the northeast and you have to be a direct descendent of God to become a member. For her, every time she walks through those doors, it's a triumph. For me, I remember because every time I go into that place, it's a disaster.

Visits 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 were all failed robberies; never once could I manage to get away with the goods. I turned the Jag off the main road and snarled at the unmarked division between the public road and Wayne property. I could never get away with the goods, and now we know why, don't we. Pay no attention to the bland Mr. Wayne yawning in the corner, he's just consoling himself after a bad putt on the 12th green...

Visit #3 to the Bristol Country Club was your garden variety bad date: Some Wall Street type, bragged about his portfolio (a lot), made a ridiculous performance of selecting the wine, and then, as if Harvey's pal Fate wanted a laugh at my expense, he ordered Chateau de Poulignac. Nothing like sitting through the dinner from hell staring at the name of your first boyfriend on the wine bottle above a pretty pencil sketch of his house.

Visit #7 was my introduction to "The Fop", and what a shock to the system that turned out to be. I wasn't even used to our being together yet. I hadn't adjusted to the idea of Batman having a name and a face, and he takes me out to dinner and springs a new personality on me.

Visit #8 was even worse. Visit #8 made me nostalgic for the good old days of Visit #2, when I damn near broke my ankle leaping off the terrace after a fucking batarang clipped my boot heel on the way down. Visit #8 was the night I discovered that a

lifetime escaping Batman on rooftops in no way prepares you to escape Gladys Ashton-Larraby in the powder room. She had finally put it together that Selina Kyle, the new brunette with Bruce Wayne, was the Selina Kyle from Cat-Tales, aka Catwoman the jewel thief. It's quite a coup in her circles to have your trinkets taken by someone who burgled the Vanderbilts, Gotham Museum, and Windsor Castle, and she wanted to know why her jewel box hadn't been accorded the honor. She followed me to the ladies' room and kept me there for 20 minutes, auditioning her jewels. That's the only word for it: the illustrious Ashton family name, the illustrious Ashton family fortune, this was famous jewelry bought by a famous fortune—and for the big finish, she had canary diamonds! She must have repeated that six times, like she was worried maybe I wouldn't get it: canaries are *birds*, and *cats* eat birds, so what a perfect item for Catwoman to steal. Finally, I got away, and when I returned to the table, the Dark Knight Dilettante had, of course, figured out what I was going through. The world's greatest detective thought it was funny as hell. He claimed it was the Fop, that too-cheery laugh, but I knew better.

Visit #9 would make me nostalgic for Visit #8. It was a garden party, right after Dick and Barbara's wedding, and the whole "Mrs. Wayne" mix-up was still going strong. I would have rather been... *anywhere*. Karaoke night at the Iceberg, a Lazarus Pit, a story meeting at the Gotham Post, anywhere at all but that damn manicured lawn wearing a flowered hat. But Bruce had to go, just in case it turned out to be a Poison Ivy target. So I had to go—just in case *HE* turned out to be the Poison Ivy target. Ivy never showed, and it might have been a less painful afternoon if she had. I could have clawed something green and leafy instead of sitting there, my very presence providing the cue for everybody who was at the wedding to show off that fact by telling anybody who wasn't about that delightful Mrs. Wayne story.

Nine times I've gone to the Bristol and nine times it's been a fiasco.

That's not a thought you want lingering at the conclusion of a strange prowling, so instead of going up to bed, I headed for the cave.

I almost always beat Batman home, so I figured I had some time. I made myself comfortable at Workstation 2 and started playing with a little idea I'd had at the penthouse. I thought it would be fun to fix it up for him, as a surprise, then lure him up there for a bit of after hours fun. I wouldn't do anything as elaborate as redecorating (like Alfred had been hinting), but a few little touches here and there to make the place more livable, what was the harm in that? The penthouse was more like an extra catlair than anything else: You didn't live there, but on those occasions when you did use it, you wanted it to feel like *you*, not like you were hiding out at the Gotham Hilton.

So... a few little touches, like I'd already picked up for the manor, and then I would send him a message at Wayne Enterprises, something anonymous and cryptic, make him think something was up, maybe he was a target. He'd stay after hours to investigate, a little cat and mouse through the building, finally leading him upstairs to the new penthouse.

It would be fun. He needs more fun.

I surfed a few websites for some decorating ideas, but figured I could do better in person. I decided to go back into town tomorrow — when the Batmobile roared into the cave.

“Honey, I’m home,” I purred when he saw me.

“You’re still up?” the great detective noted.

“They were right about you, your powers of observation are something special,” I teased.

He took off the cowl, like he couldn’t banter in full costume, and then delivered the stunning rejoinder: “Woof.”

I smiled, glad that he was home, and he sat down at his workstation and started on the logs.

“Ivy’s back,” I mentioned casually.

“I know,” he said without slowing his typing, “The northwest corner of the park is thickening, new growths, about two days old. So I checked the Arkham records, and sure enough, they released her Monday.”

“Hell,” I grumbled under my breath. “Just when I thought we could settle in for a nice, quiet Christmas.”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

I sighed. Why go into it.

“I said I saw them putting up the tree in Gotham Plaza,” I fibbed.

“Do you think it will be a target?”

“No. I had moved on from thoughts of Queen Chlorophyll to—never mind. I just had a weird night, that’s all.”

He grunted like he wasn’t really listening and kept on typing.

I’d had enough. I try to be reasonable; I try to remember he is a dedicated crimefighter, an important CEO, and the only thing that keeps the Justice League from putting aluminum foil in the microwave. But there comes a point when I need him to be mine. And this was one of those times. I’d had a strange day and a strange prowl, and I needed him to be mine.

So I did what any cat would do: I crawled into his lap and positioned myself between him and his computer screen. He went on typing, although he obviously couldn’t see the screen, so I was forced to escalate the maneuver, purring in his ear.

“Kitten, the log,” was as far as he got before I started kissing around his jaw.

“Selina, please,” came next. I knew the tone, the rooftop tone, right before he’d push me away with a gruff “that’s enough.” It meant I was getting to him.

“You really want me to go?” I purred, running a claw over the bat emblem.

His eyes burned.

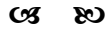
“I’ll be up in a minute,” he said at last.

I shook my head no.

“Now,” I insisted.

I felt him lifting me up, and tried not to look too smug in my victory. Then I heard the beep of the shutdown behind me. Somehow he had finished his entry, saved his file, and shut down the log.

“Jacmph—” I started to say, but it’s hard to call someone a jackass with their tongue in your mouth.



It was a beautiful day to be a plant. The air was crisp, but not cold. The sunlight glistened off the lake in Robinson Park and warmed the soil still thick with yesterday’s rain. Sunlight, air, and water, what more could any plant want?

What more *could* any plant want?

Well. A little company would be nice for starters.

Poison Ivy liked to think she was more than just Queen to all this wondrous vegetation; she liked to think she was their mother. And what mother is not content if her children are happy? The air was sweet with honeygrass and strawflowers. Wasn’t that perfect bliss? Her flowers were happy, her trees, bushes, grass, all her subjects, all her children, perfumed the air with their contentment.

So why should she sit here restless and unfulfilled?

So Harvey Dent took it into his head to reform. So what? Whatever Two-Face might have been to her once—and he was never more than a pleasant distraction—it was long over. She didn’t need him. He was only a man. And a man—any man—she could have back any time she wanted. One whiff of her lure, a thousand times sweeter than the fruity scents now tickling the air, and he would crawl back on his knees, he would bow at her feet and think himself blessed if she commanded him to be her footstool.

But why should she even bother; he wasn’t worth enslaving. He was just a man, and she could have any of them. They were perfectly interchangeable. It was ridiculous to pretend Harvey Dent was anything special. What could he do for her that any of them couldn’t do? Indeed, Ivy thought bitterly, what could he do for her that any of them couldn’t do *twice as well*.

Maybe she *was* just a little bothered by the stories that reached her at Arkham: they said that Harvey Dent “was back” but not in the way they usually meant. They didn’t mean that he was captured and rotting away in Cell #2. They meant that Harvey was “back” and Two-Face was “gone” in the sense that he somehow got his face healed and turned his back on all things roguish... It was an upsetting report. But it was the gossip of lunatics. Ivy would have to be crazy to take the raving of lunatics at face value.

Of course, she could go to the Iceberg, always a more reliable source of information than Arkham. But the last time she had gone there, bored and restless after an Arkham release, it set off that absurd Roxy Rocket, provoking that ludicrous catfight, culminating in that outrageous video. If there was one thing Poison Ivy could not abide, it was commingling with the absurd, ludicrous or outrageous.

It had taken her... *considerable effort* to regain her dignity and position after those horrific events. She had resorted to... *conversing* with Dr. Bartholomew as if she really were a stressed out mental patient needing therapy. She did not find it an uplifting experience. But in humoring that little man in his deluded ideas of being a doctor in a position to counsel her, she had reclaimed her plantlike serenity at last. And now that she was free, she had only to learn the truth about what happened to Harvey and life could return to normal.

But she would be happier if she could find out the truth without going back to the Iceberg. The sight of Sly alone...

Harley! Harley was always good company, and usually a good source of information when she wasn't confused beyond reason by the mad cackling and constant abuse of that sick clown. Harley was the perfect companion. It always took her a few days to adjust, to realize she was away from Joker, but as soon as she did and recognized Ivy was in charge, they always had the most wonderful time together.

The tricky part was hooking up. Ivy had no idea which Hacienda Harley might be using. Trial and error threw her into Joker's path more often than not, which always gave her an upset stomach.

So. How to find Harley?



The Bentley made the turn Selina's Jaguar had bypassed the night before. It turned onto Country Club Boulevard, and Selina clutched her handbag a little tighter, knowing they would soon arrive at the front gate of the Bristol Country Club—where her every visit was a worse disaster than the last.

Her eyes flickered as she snuck a peek at Bruce.

"Yes?" he graveled, to show he'd noticed.

"Nothing," she smiled. "You're sexy like that."

"Like what?"

She didn't answer out loud, but she thought it: Bat-mode. She wasn't happy about their going to the country club, but the reason they were going thrilled her. It was a case, it was crimefighting, and Bruce was completely in Bat-mode. No mask, no gloves, no cape, but it was Batman sitting there all the same. Delicious.

It had been a long time since they had worked together. It was delicious. Even if he only brought her tonight as camouflage, and even if she was dreading what the cat-hating gremlin of the Bristol Country Club might have in store for her this time, it was pure catnip being with him so entirely in Bat-mode.

"You're clear on the plan?" Bruce asked suddenly. "We can't talk openly from the moment the valet opens the car door, so this is the last chance to—"

"I'm clear on the plan."

"You're sure?"

"We're having drinks and dinner, Bruce. It's not the Normandy invasion."

"I just want to make sure—"

"It's eating and drinking. Tell me you're not about to coach me on eating and drinking. Tell me before the valet opens that door that you do not have a martini protocol."

"Are you through?"

"Meow."

"Good. Then tell me the plan."

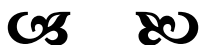
Selina sighed, trying to fathom why she found Bat-mode sexy. Then she recited the mission of the evening as the Bentley pulled into the circular drive in front of the club.

"The City Council just granted permission for an environmental artist called Kristov to build an installation in Robinson Park. He's putting up pathways of curtained gates

which, although temporary, might stir up Ivy into expressing her displeasure in an epoch-making manner. You want to find out more from Richard Flay, insider on all things artsy in Gotham, but you want it to look like a casual meeting. So—whereas the Fop would have once made a spectacle of himself, hanging out at the bar all night pretending he’s an idiot, repeating the imbecilities of some bimbo that thought he was a socialist because he said he liked the Marx Brothers—you now have me, to sit with, talk with, have a cocktail and eat a civilized dinner.”

She had timed it perfectly, so the car came to a stop and the valet opened the door on her final words, making it impossible for Bruce to respond without breaking his own rule.

His lip merely twitched as he got out of the car. He looked at her for a moment before they went in, his eyes a gleam and distant, as if completing some private calculations. When he moved again, placing his hand to the small of her back to guide her towards the door, he was no longer Bruce-in-Batmode, but a subconscious echo of the Fop.



You know, every now and then, in their hopelessly deluded way, the Gotham Post nails one.

Look at Poison Ivy. Some of those lunatic Post writers have the idea that she is literally poisonous: that she can't control it and any close contact, like a kiss, would release toxins into the other person's system and kill them.

Well, it doesn't work that way. Like her pheromones, her immunity to poisons, and her resistance to alcohol, Ivy can control her weird biochemistry most of the time—except when she gets very emotional, which is a story for another day. When she *does* get vicious, emitting toxins into some poor schnook that gets too close, the damage is usually a rash and an earache. It's not fatal.

I can't imagine how the Post got this idea about poison kisses—maybe somebody had a bad divorce—but if you dismiss the nonsense and look at the metaphor, it's really not far off: Whenever something occurs that might make you feel sorry for her—it does happen, unlikely though it may seem—Pammy will do something to set you straight.

She asked me to lunch. Lunch with Leaf-Bitch—not my preferred way to spend a Friday afternoon, but I agreed. I told myself I went because it would head off another night at the Bristol. We had only gone so Bruce could pump Richard Flay for information on a likely Poison Ivy target. If I could get the same information direct from the horsetail's mouth, we wouldn't have to go back.

But as I drove into town, I couldn't help wondering if that was the real reason.

I wondered as I parked the Jag in the garage under my old apartment, I wondered as I waved to Nick, my old doorman, and I wondered as I winked at Raoul's coffee cart and crossed the street into the park.

I guess what I really wanted was some taste of my old life. If Ivy hadn't rung up, it would have been the catsuit and the Iceberg, and then a more predatory prowl than I had been indulging in. No more flitting around the Christmas tree and breaking into the Wayne penthouse. I figured, even after this lunch, I would still stop in the museum after hours, maybe Spinoza's, too, or Cartier, and Sotheby's. Meow. But all that would have to wait for nightfall and the lunch invitation was right now.

What could it hurt; it was just lunch after all. And Pammy might be just the right touch of rogue life to remind me how much I *don't* miss of those days.

There are a couple lakes inside Robinson Park, there's the big one where you can go rowing and a cute little one where you can sail model boats. They rent them; it's very popular on Sunday mornings in the springtime. This time of year, it's too cold, only the hardcore hobbyists that build their own boats turn out. The rental booth is closed up and so is the restaurant next to it.

Pammy doesn't care about little things like "Closed 'til April 1" and no human staff. She had invited me to the Sailing Pond Restaurant, so I knocked despite that sign on the door. I knew going in it would be one of those Disney-gone-wrong scenes with the plantlife waiting on us like it was Upstairs Downstairs meets The Jungle Book—and I wondered again why I was going along with it.

The night at the Bristol wasn't that bad, not compared to catastrophes past anyway. Maybe it was... just bad *enough*, somehow.

A big mass of flowery vines opened the door, just like a maitre'd, and led the way to a table. I sat and waited, and after a minute, some kind of helleborous rosebush brought me a martini.

I thanked it.

It's one of those moments that makes you stop and take stock.

I had just thanked a plant for bringing me a cocktail. That's not something you can forget, much as you might want to. I had given Bruce some nasty looks for dipping into the Fop-act at the country club. He knows I hate it. He told me the Fop was dead and he was just going to be Bruce Wayne from now on, but there are these weird little throwbacks. He says it's habit. He says he's used to acting a certain way, particularly when Batman is fact-finding like we were last night. He says he does it without even thinking.

Pffffffft.

I have a hard time believing Batman does anything "without thinking"—but then I just said "thank you" to a plant. That's going to make it a bit harder to doubt the Bat-Fop.

I sipped my drink as I waited for Ivy to make her entrance.

When she did—well—remember when I said there are times you could feel sorry for her if she didn't go all leaf bitch?

The last time I had seen Ivy socially, she'd come slouching into the morning room at Wayne Manor like she was applying for a loan. She came in now like some bad actress playing a socialite.

"Catty, darling!" was her entrance line. She stood there a moment, sort of posing in the doorway, arms outstretched. I don't know what I was *supposed* to think of it, but the image that came to mind was that the bad actress playing a socialite was in a musical and she was about to burst into song, the plant-waiters forming a kickline around her and god only knew what the martini-serving rosebush might do.

I banished the ridiculous image of The Upstairs Downstairs Jungle Book morphing into *Hello Dolly* meets *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*—it's a mental discipline you develop after a few nights at the Iceberg. I smiled and said hi. Pammy came up to the table, subjected me to a stage kiss, and sat. The prospect of another night at the Bristol Country Club suddenly didn't seem so bad.

"So," she began with a strangely coy smile, "how is Bruce?"

"Fine," I answered flatly. It never once crossed my mind that there could be a catfight situation in the making and, if so, we were meeting next to a large, cold body of *water*. After that Kazaa disaster, Pammy couldn't possibly have it in her head to...

"I was thinking we should double sometime, you and Bruce and me and Harvey," she said sweetly—and this is where the feeling sorry for her comes in. "You and he are such friends, after all, and—well, a double date would mean so much to him. His theme and all—and we really can't double anymore when the only other couple in our circle is Harley and Joker."

"Yeah, I heard about that," I mentioned casually, hoping to change the subject from Harvey's *theme*. "You four went camping? Pammy, how did you ever let him talk you into something like that? You and Joker in a forest with long pointy forks and fire."

Instead of the expected railing against Joker, she sighed. "He could talk me into things, Catty," she said wistfully.

It was *creepy*. Poison Ivy wistful over a man, it was Batman-smiling creepy.

"Pammy," I said carefully, calculating the distance to the door (7 paces) and the possible delays from wisteria-waiters running blocker (9 seconds tops). "I got the idea that you and Harvey weren't together anymore."

"Yes, quite," she declared, drawing herself up proudly. "Not that I couldn't get him back, of course, with a whiff or two of my particular charms, but you know, Catty, that was the thing about Harvey. I never had to resort to those methods with him. It was almost as if..."

She trailed off and I probably should have left it at that. But I really did feel for her. I could see now *why* she'd asked me to lunch, and there was no way to get into it without *getting into it*.

"It was almost as if," I continued her half-spoken thought, "he liked you just as you were. Pamela, did you ask me to lunch and ask about Bruce so I would recip and talk about Harvey—and you could find out what's happened to him?"

"Not at all," she said grandly, "I asked you to lunch because I get tired eating alone and I can't seem to locate Harley."

"Ah."

"I called Jarvis first, of course, he always seems to know everything about everybody. But he is—indisposed. It seems he tried to —ooh— such incompetence, it really gets on my nerves."

I chuckled. It was so perfectly Pamela: Mad Hatter had, for reasons surpassing understanding, hatted Killer Croc. Croc will usually go along with whatever you need for a couple Boston Chickens, but for some reason, Jarvis used one of his mind-control chips instead. Inevitably, the moment came when the hat had to come off, and Jarvis is expected to be back on solid food by Hell Month... Only Ivy could look at a train wreck like that and see only the inconvenience to her personally.

It was just the dose of pure mainline Pammy that I needed to get past feeling bad and tell her the truth about Harvey.

"Alright then," I began, waving over the rosebush. "Have this guy bring you a nice pitcher of cosmopolitans. I'll fill you in on what you've missed."



Bruce often seemed preoccupied at meetings with Lucius Fox. He felt it struck just the right note: it opened the door for all sorts of senseless comments without ever proving conclusively that Bruce Wayne was stupid. "*He was only half-listening that day. Remember that meeting when he was so distracted? Why, that could happen to anybody.*"

And so Bruce stared out the window while Lucius droned on about the new year projections for the latest divisions acquired from LexCorp. His mind did wander... back to the Bristol the night before.

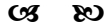
The Bristol Country Club, like so much of the neighborhood, was built on land that had once been a part of "Wayne Manor" in the days when the term designated a land grant instead of a house. Before it became a manorship in a British colony called Gotham, the land was part of a Dutch settlement, the patroonship of Schuylerwyck in

the colony of Nieuw Nederland. The last American descendent of the Van Schuylers was one Richard Flay, who could be found most evenings sipping a brandy in the club's main lounge.

Many of the Flays and Van Schuylers patronized the arts, but Richard Flay was the only one who wanted to be an artist himself. For a homosexual of his generation and lineage, it was as "out" as he could ever hope to be.

It wasn't meant to be. He lacked the talent and he had the aesthetic sensibility to see where his work was lacking. He had no interest in being a mediocrity that real artists would tolerate for his connections but would secretly despise. So he put down his brush and changed his focus: He became an art historian, then a tenured professor; Dick even had him for a few classes at Hudson U. Flay sat on boards, he consulted at museums, he became a prodigious fundraiser, and he amassed one of the finest personal collections in the United States. He became *the* man to know in Gotham art circles—and therefore, the man for Bruce Wayne to know. Over the years, Richard Flay had quietly provided all kinds of insider details on whatever art-happenings Bruce asked about.

Bruce had no reason to expect last night's fact-finding mission to be any different. When would he ever learn? Anything that included Selina would be different. Selina was Catwoman: that meant Cat + (Impossible) woman.



"Pammy," I asked cautiously after I finished, "Are you okay?" She had this dull-but-appalled look, like Robin the first time he saw the bullwhip.

"Harvey has his face back," she breathed, "magically restored by that horrible man from the Highland Games, who turns out to be a friend of yours and such a good friend that you gave him that magnificent apartment overlooking my park. Harvey—your other dear, *dear* friend—is therefore going back to a 'normal' life, which I suppose means living with all of us was *abnormal*, and now that he is free of it, he won't have anything more to do with any of us—except for you, evidently, Selina. Because, I suppose, you're so normal and ordinary, what with the cats and the purple and the meowing and that sorry fixation on Batman!"

Zero to animosity in 2.4 seconds. That's why we love her.

I was about to cut her off right there and explain that even though I didn't have my claws on at this second, I still could and would do her plenty of damage, up to and including another record-breaking appearance on Kazaa—when she remembered she was a goddess and made an effort to present herself as such.

"That was very rude of me, Catty, I apologize," she resumed with renewed dignity, "It is certainly understandable why your good friend Harvey would stay with you, that is what friends do, after all. Just as Harley has stayed with me." On the last word, her face seized into a frozen grin, and for a split-second, I thought Joker got her with some kind of time-delay SmileX dart. "Just look, Catty, the way Harley came running back to me the moment she split up with that wretched clown." She gestured to the room at large—a deserted restaurant where we sat alone, except for the plants. "I don't suppose you know where she is?" Ivy asked meekly, back in abashed loan-applicant mode.

"No, I don't," I told her frankly.

I was getting sick of the damn mood swings. I was sick of wanting to scratch her eyes out one second and feeling bad for her the next. And I was sick of cocktails mixed by a rosebush.

"Hey Pam," I said impulsively, "What would you say to giving 'normal' a try for one afternoon. Let's go shoe shopping, see what those civilian women get so worked up about."



Bruce sat in his office staring blankly at the brilliant cityscape outside the window. He noted dimly that Lucius had finished with the LexCorp acquisitions and was moving on to WayneTech projections. That meant charts. So he turned from the window and directed his still-distant gaze to the PowerPoint slideshow.

The felinity began as soon as he and Selina had settled in at the Bristol. Richard Flay wasn't there yet, so they sat in the main lounge in easy view of his regular chair. To pass the time inconspicuously, they ordered drinks...

PsychoBat had watched Selina's performance with stern disapproval. Raising his ire was the point after all; what other purpose could it serve?

Like most institutions of its kind, the Bristol had certain rules it enforced no matter who you were, just to make a point of its social preeminence: Whites on the tennis court, collared shirts on the golf course, no denim in the club house, ladies could not wear slacks in the dining room after five, no special orders from the bar. It didn't matter if you were the president of the nominating committee or the President of the United States, those were the rules and *that meant you*; no matter how rich you were, no matter who your daddy was, the house rules of the Bristol Country Club were the law of the land.

The Bristol served only an onion garnish with a vodka martini; Selina preferred pickled ginger. She sat there with her legs crossed as Stan came over to take their order. As she spoke, the top calf tightened subtly and rubbed ever so gently against the bottom knee. Bruce watched in horror as she looked Stan in the eye and delivered the naughty grin—just as if she wanted to waltz out of Cartier's vault with some diamond-sapphire trinket. And instead of pulling himself together and coldly informing her of the rule, Stan went to pieces saying they had some candied ginger in the kitchen that she might like even more.

"What do you think you're doing?" Bruce graveled softly when the waiter had left them alone.

"What did it look like to you?" she asked playfully.

"Do you have to flout every rule, decree, and statute on the books just to show you can?"

"Meow."

"Of course, your answer to everything."

"Some questions answer themselves, Bruce. The answer to that one is *meow*. Besides I'm not flouting anything; I ordered a drink. If I'm going to survive another night in this genteel, gilded, manicured bastion of bad luck for kitty cat, I'd like a martini."

"Your special martini, when you know they don't take special orders."

"Stan didn't mind. Why do you have a problem with it?"

“Of course Stan didn’t mind when—you’re impossible—you’ve always got some rationalization for—of course Stan didn’t mind when you’re doing the leg-thing and the naughty grin and—Yes, that’s the grin, right there.”

“I think you need a vacation.”

“Because I object to you using your feminine wiles to—”

“I smiled at the waiter. What is your problem?”

“To get what you want, you smiled and did the leg thing.”

“Ah, I get it,” Selina smiled, crossing her legs the other way and repeated the rubbing maneuver, “I’m sorry, Handsome, I never did ‘the leg thing’ in Cartier’s vault because I was never sitting down.”

Bruce held his fingers to the bridge of his nose as if summoning infinite patience, then announced he was going for a walk on the verandah. When he returned, Richard Flay had arrived and was in his usual place before the large fireplace. Selina was seated next to him.



There is a way of looking at this where it’s all my fault, but no feline would let that statement stand without pointing out that it is just as valid to say it’s Jimmy Choo’s fault. He’s the one that opened a boutique on Fifth and 51st, after all, and he’s the one who decided it was the year of the hunter green alligator pump.

Taking Poison Ivy shoe shopping may not have been the best idea I’ve ever had in my life, but I didn’t think it was “hatting Killer Croc” bad. I figured anything that got her out of that empty restaurant and into the world where the people were would be an improvement.

The only thing I hadn’t figured on was that one of those people out in the world be Harley Quinn herself—and also that Jimmy Choo would come out with these high-heel fuck-me pumps in “the deepest, most divinely decadent shade of—ooooh, just look at them, Catty—green.”

So we went inside to try them on—and naturally *Gaia’s Chosen* can’t just *ask* the salesman to bring her the green shoe in a 7½ *because it’s his job!*—No. She has to enslave the guy, just because he’s a man—like it doesn’t occur to her that maybe the guy slinging shoes at Jimmy Choo doesn’t swing that way.

So I’m standing there while the *second* most-confused person in Gotham politely ignores the cloud of lemon pledge now enveloping the store and asks the *most*-confused Gothamite how wide her foot is. Pammy is so befuddled by the prospect of a non-drone waiting on her of his own free will, she won’t tell the poor ass if it’s A, B or C. He won’t leave, she keeps telling him to bring the shoe, he keeps asking her size—and I looked out the window.

And there was Harley—in the window of the bookstore across the street. She was seated at a miniature desk with a stack of books next to her, like she was part of the window display. And she was waving like mad.



Bruce turned his attention from the Power Point slides to the printed handouts: new programs to be funded from enhanced revenues resulting from LexCorp acquisitions...

He had no intention of pursuing any of these, preferring the extra monies be directed into the Wayne Foundation... but he had to at least pretend to listen. His mind drifted back to the country club...

The segue into the Fop had been automatic once he saw Selina chatting with Richard Flay. It was his instinctive camouflage when Batman's mind was racing as it raced then, cataloging observations and evaluating each possibility suggested by the new data. His mind raced in just that way when he saw Catwoman (for at that moment, she *was* Catwoman to him, reformed or not. Her behavior with Stan made it impossible for him to think of her any other way) Catwoman sitting with the most famous art collector in Gotham.

She had robbed Flay's collection twice, Bruce remembered: once successfully and once not. He had prevented her getting away with a Rembrandt etching, but after that night, she had never tried again. He never found out why... He briefly considered asking her. The way things were now, she would probably tell him. It would be one less unanswered question about her, but probably useless in understanding criminal psychology generally. Nothing about Catwoman was typical.

Like now. She had noticed his return, he could tell. Something about her posture or expression as she talked to Flay—he wasn't even sure what it was, maybe it was their unspoken connection, but *somehow* he could tell—she was sitting there chatting with Richard Flay before, but now, a split second later, she was *performing* sitting and chatting with Flay, performing for his benefit.

"Richard!" Bruce exclaimed with a full bore blast of foppish cheer, "Good to see you, old man, it's been ages! What've you been up to?"

Selina shot him a glare—her usual response to the Fop—so Bruce clumsily spilled his drink on her, making the angry stare more plausible. He expected her to excuse herself, make for the powder room and repair her skirt. Instead, she shot him the most pointed rooftop grin—without in any way diluting the hostility of her stare.

"Mr. Flay was just admiring my cat pins," she said sweetly.

Bruce's mind raced ahead, tracing out the implications: Richard Flay had long been Batman's unwitting art expert. He provided information on any number of exhibits, auctions and happenings that might be of interest to Batman's enemies and he did it—so Bruce imagined—without being aware what they were really talking about. That was the chief advantage of the Fop persona. Fop-Wayne was known to be a bit flighty, so he could ask seemingly unrelated questions on any number of topics in a given conversation: They might be talking about some new investment fund and Bruce would ask about a gallery opening. He'd tie it in later with a flippant comment about investing in the gallery, but the questions came out of nowhere and the informants were left with no solid sense of what they had talked about.

Naturally, Selina's tastes being what they were, quite a number of those artworks discussed over the years were potential Catwoman targets—including, Bruce now remembered, a pair of Cartier cat pins fashioned for the Duchess of Windsor. It was Richard Flay who brought that auction to his attention, and when neither Catwoman nor Two-Face made a move for them, Bruce bought the pins himself.

Damnit.

Flay probably had no idea what he said to Bruce Wayne nine times out of ten, but actually seeing the cat pins on Selina's lovely bosom... Damnit. It would have triggered a memory "Oh yes, I remember those, for the Duchess of Windsor. Why I mentioned those to Bruce way back when. Never realized he bought them."

Damn it.

So that's why she was pissed.

Selina knew he'd bought those pins at cat-bait, he told her so. It's not like either of them could have known he might one day be in a position to give them to her as... Damnit.

He could imagine now how it played out—She knew they were there to pump Flay for information on an art happening. So as soon as she realized he had told Bruce about the cat pins: *Aha, he's the art expert and Batman uses him for insider info—and he has been for a long time—like back then—against me.*

Damn it.

He looked at her with a quietly pained expression. *What do you want from me, Kitten. I'm a crimefighter. You're a thief... How many times did I say it? You're a thief... were a thief... Our history is what it is. Absurd to be pissed about it now.*

This was nonsense. This was crimefighting and Selina wasn't here as his date; she was here as his partner, she was in Robin territory now and had no business making this *personal*.

As he always had, he shoved the personal aside and focused on the mission. They were gathering intelligence and... and... as *she* always had, she somehow shoved the crimefighting aside and forced his focus back on the personal whether he liked it or not.

"Yes, I remember that place in SoHo," she was saying (and Bruce was sure she did, she hit it enough times), "Gallery Blu. It was owned by a Russian or Hungarian, I think. They had the wildest openings and, just between us three, they had *really* crappy security. It's like they wanted to get robbed."

"They did," Flay told her with a grin. "They were a front. They laundered money for Odessa or someone. They could lose thousands and thousands in inventory and still turn quite a profit on paper."

"Meow," Selina gleamed on hearing this news. "I always figured it was an insurance scam, but there has to be a limit to that. I mean, at some point, any insurance company is going to cut you off, right?" She winked happily at Bruce and chattered on. He sat there and quietly seethed.

"...Well, considering the death stares I'm getting from the head of the table," Lucius remarked dryly, "I suppose we really should wrap this up. We have gone a little overtime, and there is nothing left that won't wait until next week or fit into a memo. Good weekend, everybody."

"Thank you, Lucius; that was very interesting," Bruce lied. He felt a pang, hurrying the Chief Operating Officer out of his office that way. When he only pretended to be distracted but actually listened to every word Lucius said, he felt freer to dismiss the man like a paid flunky. But now... when his mind really was wandering throughout their whole meeting, it seemed rude.

He wouldn't dwell on it, though. The damnable holidays would bring a hundred opportunities for some little gesture. Bruce swiveled his chair slowly back to face the city once again, but he was no longer looking at it. He had taken out his cel phone and hit a preprogrammed number.

"Kitten, secure the line."

...: *Call me back*, ... she spat at him, and hung up.



I tapped Pam on the shoulder. "I found Harley," I said simply, and pointed.

She tore herself away from her frustrating tête-à-tête with the non-enslaved salesman and turned. It was the damnedest thing, in about five seconds, the lemon smell was completely blotted out by orange. Pammy went charging across the street, and rather than follow her, I looked at scarves. When those two get together... I just didn't want to get into it. I asked if the alligator fuck-me pumps came in black.

They did, they fit. And that's when the whole day went to hell.

I had just taken out my credit card when my phone rang, and at the same moment, Pammy came storming back into the store, dragging some poor woman by the wrist. She held a book and a protest sign in the other hand and she knocked some shoes off their display as she waved them around.

"Just LOOK at this, Catty! Look at this, this OBSCENITY! TREES DIED FOR THIS!"

I juggled for my cel phone and heard ...: *Kitten, secure the line* ...

"Call me back," I spat into the phone "And Pammy? Little discretion, please?" We had agreed to keep a low profile, which isn't that easy for Ivy to do with that distinctive "alabaster" skin of hers. I was prepared to look the other way when she let loose with the pheromones, because it meant at least she was going along, in her way, with the shoe shopping. But calling me "Catty" and screeching about the trees—right in front of some woman she'd evidently kidnapped, that was time to draw the line.

"She wrote a book, Catty. Harley wrote a book! She wrote a— a— I can't say it. She wrote a *ROMANCE NOVEL* about her and Joker! She *murdered trees* to *publicly air her disgusting fantasies* with that—"

She let go of the woman's wrist and doubled over, retching. It was hard to criticize. I have the same reaction sometimes.

Now, instead of leaving once her wrist was free, kidnapped woman started reaching for Pam's other hand, demanding her sign back. The salesman handed me a pen and the credit slip and my phone rang yet again.

"AND YOU!" Ivy wheeled on kidnapped woman. "You're no better. Catty, look at this, LOOK AT THIS SIGN! That is a wooden handle. Gaia knows that book *should* be protested but these people—You're getting those shoes? I saw them first."

"That book promotes the psychotic lifestyle," kidnapped woman broke in before I could explain that I was getting the pumps in black, "In selling it, that store promotes sick, anti-social behavior..."

...: *Kitten, can you talk now?* ... I heard in one ear, while Pam railed in the other, "Anti-Joker, damn straight, but HEY, it's not like ANYBODY who EVER put on a costume is a deranged nutjob, Lady!"

...: *Is that Ivy?* ... I heard on the left and “We’ll be having a trunk sale on the new spring line next week if any of you ladies would like an invitation,” on the right.

This was followed by

“Paper is Murder!” “...that publisher has a responsibility to the community...” and ...: *From the woman who almost brought about the end of existence because she was shunned by her bifurcated lover...* ...

I started to wonder if the cat-hating Bristol Country Club gremlin might have followed me home last night.

“Oh, you don’t think TREES are a part of the community, you’d only all ASPHYXIMATE without them!”

“Hey, Red! You ran off so fast, I didn’t get a chance ta—OH! Hiya, Catty, why didn’t you come over and say Hi?”

...: *You’re obviously busy,* ... the phonevoice graveled in a new octave, ...: *I’ll want to hear all about it later* ...

I signed the slip, took my shoes, and walked out of the store without acknowledging any of them.



Bruce looked out at the Gotham skyline with the same dangerous glower he’d given Selina in the car driving home from the Bristol. He had left the office, taken the executive elevator down to the 40th floor, switched to an elevator that serviced the lower floors and pressed the LL for Lower Lobby. He had crossed to his private elevator and slipped his keycard into the access panel. It was a convoluted way to reach the penthouse on the 78th floor from the executive offices right below on the 77th. But the private elevator could access the satellite Batcave beneath the Wayne Tower as well as the penthouse on top, and Bruce naturally felt it was worth the inconvenience to keep it completely isolated. Any additional access points, no matter how private in theory, constituted an unnecessary risk.

The whole thing had taken long enough that Selina should have had ample time to free herself up by the time he called her back. But from the sounds of it, she was having some kind of party with Poison Ivy, Harley Quinn and someone from the Westchester PTA.

There was getting to be far too much he didn’t know, too much that *she* knew and he didn’t—and he wasn’t about to let some ridiculous feline logic about the cat pins prevent his finding out.

The elevator pinged discreetly and Bruce heard the alluring clip-clip of a high heeled pump on the marble floor of the foyer. In four more clips, she would be here, and then, at last, he would get some answers.

Clip-clip... Clip-clip... and then...

“Hello, Bruce,” a low, beguiling voice teased from the doorway, “we have some unfinished business, don’t we?”



This whole thing was out of control. I had let everything spiral out of control. Lunch with Poison Ivy is no way to get your head together. And shoe shopping! What was I thinking? What the hell was I thinking?

That's other women; that's not me. I needed to get my head back in the game. I needed to prow! And I *wasn't* going home first, not to his house.

I didn't even call. That might get Alfred bent out of shape if he thought I was coming home for dinner... Good. Sooner or later, even Alfred has to realize that a cat will never walk on a leash. No matter how generous you are with the cream and catnip, a cat needs to be free. I had to prow! I had to feel like me again, I had to stamp out those urges to go flitting around Gotham Plaza looking at the goddamn Christmas tree—"Oh look, that's where I bought bonbons"—*what the hell is the matter with me?!* That's not a prow!, is it? I had to get my head back in the game.

I stopped at an old lair I still had on West 79th. He never found it, not that I know of anyway. I was pretty sure I had an old costume there. Only problem was I had to dig through a Hellmouth closet, circa 1998, to find it. That brought up a few memories I didn't need. Like when Blake made his debut as Catman and decided to make me "his bride." Only time in my life I actually tried to hack up a furball.

Anyway.

The old costume was tight—Alfred's cooking, no doubt—but I managed. I headed out as soon as it was dark. I went straight for my old apartment. That's where I used to begin a prow! and that's where I would begin tonight.



The klutzy reordering of the pillows on the settee was one of those unconscious holdovers from the fop act, but it did permit Bruce to steal a glance at his watch as he sat down.

His guest certainly wanted to talk.

A lot.

And he didn't want to offend her by obvious clock-watching.



The first thing I noticed was that the hawks were back. Back in the day, this pair of red tail hawks made a nest on the top of my old building. People noticed. They started bringing binoculars and telescopes into Robinson Park to watch them. That stirred up my neighbors more than a little. Binky Sherborn was especially upset. She had spent the entire proceeds of divorce #3 for that apartment with a view of Robinson Park, and now she had to keep her curtains closed because the hoi polloi were pointing telescopes at her living room. So the building board invented a problem: they claimed the nest could cause the façade to crumble and threaten pedestrians below. The nest was removed, the public protested, and right about the time I moved into the manor, a hotel down the block volunteered to host the hawks' nest on their roof. End of story—except I guess the hawks didn't take to the new roost and came back to the site they had picked out for themselves.

You had to admire that. It showed surprising sense for birds.

Now I had a choice: 3 blocks uptown to the museums or 2 blocks downtown to Cartier... Cartier is usually my favorite spot to think. But right now, they would have their Christmas decorations up: the whole building wrapped up in a big red ribbon, just like it was that first night with Batman...

I wondered if he noticed that I never came home this afternoon. It didn't matter; he could wonder or else he could go all great detective and work out a theory—like he knows me inside and out. Arrogant jackass. Anyway, it didn't matter.

But I didn't feel like Cartier would be a good choice for me tonight. So I headed to museum row—the Egyptian wing of the Gotham Museum of Art was always a favorite, and the Guggenheim is right there too. I opted for the Guggenheim, because the Egyptian room was one of my first encounters with Batman too, even before Cartier, and this wasn't supposed to be about him. So I went to the Guggenheim instead... which turned out to be a mistake.



"Oh yes," Bruce drawled, "the new yacht. I know it's smaller than most people expected. But very luxurious in its way and so comfortable. Can I get you a drink?"

Say yes, Bruce silently prayed. Getting up from the settee, going to the bar, preparing a cocktail... It would, if nothing else, change the subject away from the yacht. The yacht he named for Selina, La Gatta Mobile. That was awkward.

But his guest asked what he had been doing with his money, and there was no way the Fop could not boast about his new boat.

He did his best to look like a man born and bred to mix her a cocktail and willed her to please accept the offer of a drink.



It really *wasn't* about Batman after all. It was about that other museum, the one *not* on the row, the MOMA.

The whole time breaking into the Guggenheim, I was fine. I felt alive again. Finagling their new perimeter sensors was a kick. Disabling heat alarms, meow. Negotiating the electric eyes, purr.

And then I saw the Kandinski.

And it all came crashing down.

The Guggenheim's collection is a lot more modern than the GMA, and the sight of that great spattered canvas, five feet high, seven feet wide, it screamed *MODERN ART!* It screamed at me to wake up and realize why I was really there, why I was doing all this: Richard Flay and his goddamn country club chitchat.

"Of course, the MOMA is reopening soon. You and Bruce will be at the gala, I'm sure. Art event of the decade, right?" Right before Bruce came over, right after Flay admired my cat pins... "You'll be at the gala, I'm sure." Maybe the cat pins triggered it, reminded him: Catwoman was sitting right there. Catwoman who was something of a player in the art world—that other art world, the underground, black market.

You can't trust just anybody that says they've got a Picasso to sell, taken from the Hermitage in '89, so keep it under wraps. There are particular thieves and fences who can handle important works without invalidating the provenance. If the Picasso just

goes missing and then shows up in the collection of a Richard Flay a decade later, it will never be fully accepted as the original. It could be a forgery. It could be anything. But if it was known to be taken by Catwoman, fenced through Beverly Stendal in Argentina or Igor Fabricant in Brussels, it's the same in the underground art world as if it had legitimately changed hands through a dealer.

"You'll be at the reopening gala, I'm sure," Flay had said.

I had made big plans for that opening. And I had forgotten it completely.

The Museum of Modern Art was built in 1929. It had long outgrown its space. Right about the time I mounted *Cat-Tales*, they announced they were closing their doors for an unprecedented renovation and expansion. They would move the whole collection out to Queens while they fixed up their midtown building. I remember going to watch as they loaded the trucks. Batman saw me. It was one of those strange encounters.

After *Cat-Tales*, after I closed the stage show and went back to prowling, it started getting weird. The first night, the first confrontation of bat and cat in the Egyptian room, he smiled at me. We got back into the chase and scratch soon enough but it was... different. Nothing about him, about us, was predictable anymore. He had smiled at me—that's what that twitch was, there was no pretending otherwise. It was a smile.

Batman.

Smiled.

At me.

Cartier was next. Then a penthouse in SoHo. Then Gallery Blu. Each time, he would start off just a little sterner, a little gruffer... and each time he let it go a little sooner. He just... let it slip somehow, the hard, rigid crimefighter would... blink.

And then he found me on top of the MOMA. I was on the roof across from the loading dock, laying on my stomach propped up on my elbows, watching them cart their whole damn collection out to Queens.

All of a sudden, I knew he was there. I felt that tingle. I didn't say anything. Then I heard the rustle of his cape in the wind. I pretended not to hear. Then a long pointy shadow stretched to the edge of the rooftop. I pretended not to see.

"Don't try it," he graveled, deep-throated, ominous, sexy beyond belief.

"I wondered which one of us would break the ice," I purred quietly.

He stepped beside me and squatted, and looked down to the workers below loading the trucks. He obviously wasn't going to abandon an action-ready position, but it seemed like he was relaxing in his way.

He didn't say anything more at first. I couldn't believe it. Each time we'd met since that night, he had eased up just a little quicker, but this was *too* soon, *too* easy. It wasn't right; it was... a little scary. So I did... what I do. I baited him.

"Don't try?" I teased playfully, "I should ignore this? What fun would that be?"

"This isn't fun," he pronounced, "Nothing about this is entertaining or exciting."

"Want some licorice?"

"What?"

I pulled a small packet of candy out from the pouch where I stash my lock picks.

"What do you expect me to say when you had been standing back there watching my ass and now you tell me it's not fun or exciting?" I looked up at him and offered

the package of licorice. "I figure they're going to be at this all night, so I brought a snack."

He grunted—which meant no. I knew that from the 500 other offers he'd grunted no to over the years. So I took a piece, put the packet away, and returned my attention to the alley.

"That big crate's got to be a Monet," I pointed out. "Water lilies."

He grunted again—which either meant he didn't think it was a Monet or else that particular grunt was subjective.

"You sure you don't want any licorice?" I repeated, just to nail it down about the grunt.

"Do you like Monet?" he asked.

This may sound strange, but I could feel a pulse in my lower lip.

He asked if I liked Monet? Batman asked. Batman did. Batman "That's far enough, Catwoman/The easy way or the hard way/There are laws against breaking and entering" *asked if I like Monet*. It was on the tip of my tongue to say "No, I like what I could do with the \$3 million the Monet will fetch in Amsterdam." I opened my mouth to say that, but... I felt this pulse in my lower lip.

That's not supposed to happen. It's a very odd sensation.

Batman asked if I liked Monet and... Well, I felt like I should say something, so I told him the truth.

"No. Too much color and light."

There was another grunt—one that sounded more like *agreement*. This was getting really confusing. Could a grunt mean *yes*, too? I wondered if I should come right out and ask—but sitting on a rooftop casually asking Batman about his taste in French art, that didn't seem like something I could do. So I looked down into the alley and said the first thing that came into my head.

"Now the Van Gogh, that's more my style. That's meow."

He said nothing, but my peripheral vision caught...

"A twitch? A sly, quick, barely perceptible twitch of that oh so sexy corner of that stern, rigid lip... because I said I like the Van Gogh? Do *you... like... the Van Gogh, Batman?* Did I pick your favorite? Or maybe it's not the painting at all, hm? Maybe what you really liked was... *the meow?*"

Who was this woman talking? I had teased him for years, but it had never come out anything like this.

I had rolled onto my side and was looking up at him. There was no more lip-twitch, but there was no more grunting, either. And there was no staring or glaring or glowering. Instead, it seemed like he was... studying me.

"Good night, Selina," he said at last, standing up. The old voice. The old manner. But not quite the old finality, not like when he'd say "Enough" and push me away.

"I could give you something better to do with that twitchy lip," I mentioned, returning my attention to the alley, certain I had regained my old purr.

"Stay away from that Van Gogh."

"Bite me," I hissed.

I figured he'd be gone already, but he wasn't. He was still standing there, looking down at me. I didn't even know it until he spoke again.

"You know we can't," he murmured—it was a strange voice, one I had never heard before. A voice I know intimately now. It was Bruce. I got up and stood in front of him. It felt—so different. "Selina, we can't," he said softly, "This work... what I do... It's my life. I couldn't—wouldn't... You can't think I would compromise it for one night."

Our eyes met. "Who said anything about one night, Stud?"

"You did," he said. "'A wild night of passion, no names and no strings'—I believe the whip was also mentioned."

He was quoting Cat-Tales. He was *quoting* my stage show, something I threw together because I was sick of those tabloids making me out to be an unstable gun-toting whore!

"That was a *joke*," I blurted. "It was banter, it was a stage show, it was..."

I trailed off. At the time, I didn't know why. By the time I got home, I'd put it together. *That* was a joke; *that* was banter... it meant that this, what we were doing now, was something else. I couldn't begin to say what. So instead I said:

"When they reopen down there, it's going to be a banquet." My voice was off. I knew I didn't sound like Catwoman anymore, but I kept going. "They'll have a huge party. The *crème de la crème* will be decked out in all their best jewels—and all the new security will be suspect. A brand new system, impossible to tell if that's a glitch or... meow... me going for the Van Gogh."

Grunt.

Christ.

It was three days later he sent me that note to meet him at the opera house.



Bruce set the cocktail on the sleek coffee table next to his guest.

"It's lucky," he told her foppishly, "that the bar is still stocked from Richard's bachelor party. I don't live here, you see. This penthouse, it's useful to stay in for a few nights now and then, when my schedule is tight with in-town appointments: the week of the stockholders' meeting or if there's a trade show where WayneTech is rolling out some new software. But it's never been a home away from home."

"Mmm... lucky," she responded, sipping her drink.

"Tim was under age, so he imposed on one of the other groomsmen to buy the liquor for the party," Bruce babbled. "They went a little overboard. Always happens first time I give someone my credit card."



That was then and this is now.

Once I'd faced up to what was really ruffling my fur, I left the Guggenheim and went straight to the MOMA roof.

This was it. This was where it happened. Something said or not said that night made the decision for him; something that night moved him to send that note. They closed up the museum, they trucked the stuff out to Queens, and now they were ready to reopen.

I stood there a long time trying to deal with it.

I stood there a long time thinking about that Van Gogh.

I had made plans for that Van Gogh. I was going to steal Batman's favorite painting from under their very noses... During the gala, a cat scratch would appear across the attribution plate, just to remind him... And later that night...

Now none of it would happen. Because the masks are off, and I live in his house, and his butler sneaks Nutmeg treats. I'd be there, all right, just like I said. Oh yes, Catwoman would be at the reopening gala. I would be there as his date.



This would be tricky.

Bruce had already written off the night as far as Batman patrolling. It was already dark, it had been dark for hours. He wasn't sure how long, and he couldn't risk another peek at his watch. His guest had already noticed something in his expression while she was talking. He thought the "listening face" seemed attentive; the WayneTech executives always took it as such. But they were employees, he supposed, where his guest was not.

In any case, she thought he wasn't listening—which, of course, he was. More than she knew. He was hanging on her every word, but now he made sure she could see that.

So there was really no way he could risk another glance at his watch.



I wasn't going to steal the Van Gogh the night of the reopening gala. My heart was racing as I stared that reality in the face. My life had changed that much. *I* had changed that much. It wasn't going to happen, not the Van Gogh, and not any of the jewels on the party guests, and not any of the other treasures.

And

I wasn't dead.

The universe didn't explode.

I hadn't lost all respect for myself and my life.

I was with Bruce now, and things had changed as a result of that ...and it didn't kill me, and the world didn't end, and I didn't hate myself for letting

Him

change me.

Wow.

It took about ten minutes for my heart to slow down to the point where I could travel. Rooftop whip-swings, you want to be focused. It took about ten minutes, but as soon as I felt it was safe, I took off. I knew where I was going, I just wasn't sure what I'd do when I got there. I'd work that out on the way.

A lot of modern art looks alike. I couldn't take the Van Gogh; it was too conspicuous, one of the most famous paintings in the world. But the rest... Bruce had a lovely collection at the penthouse. It would be no great feat to swap one for a piece at the museum of about the same size.

I absolutely giggled at the thought—which isn't that easy to do mid-swing and I had a bouncy landing on a noisy fire escape as a result. I was giddy at the thought of it—

what would he do? Would he even notice on his own or would I have to point it out? Would he get the joke? Would he even remember the significance of...

The thought went unfinished, because as soon as I reached the Wayne Tower, I had that feeling that you never, ever ignore if you're a Gotham night person, no matter what you're doing, no matter where you are, no matter who you're with or think you're with.

The best way I know to describe it is that split-second between taking a swig of milk and realizing it's sour. There's this tightening somewhere between your throat and your solar plexus and it pulls in both directions, and your skin feels like you're standing next to something highly electrified, and all you know is that something is wrong—very wrong—and you better figure out what before it crashes down on your skull.

That's how I felt landing on the Wayne Tower roof, and that's how it felt moving to the window. Something was wrong, very wrong. I did figure out what it was before it cracked my skull open. It was impossible to miss. Looking into the penthouse, the penthouse Alfred said needed redecorating... It had been "redecorated"—it was covered in ferns, grapevine, pansies and primroses.



Enough is enough.

I've been more than patient with all of Ivy's little quirks, her pretensions, neuroses, psychoses, and ego. Especially her ego.

Patience is not a quality cats have in abundance either, unless there's a mouse involved and even then there's a fucking limit.

I've put up with the alabaster skin and natural redhead routine, in the spirit of humoring and handling her. I overlooked past indiscretions with both Batman and Bruce, because it was all ancient history. I've put up with her dissing Harvey. And Eddie. And Bruce too, for that matter. And everyone else so inconsiderate as to be born into this world with a penis. I even held my tongue the 246 times she proclaimed herself irresistible when what she *really* is is a pheromone dispenser.

"No man can resist me," she says—like it's a mark of her personal charm, beauty, and sex appeal. She drugs them! It'd be like Sly claiming credit because anybody guzzling a fifth of scotch gets drunk!

Well, enough is enough *is enough is enough*.

That was the thought that kept cycling in my head for the fifteen minutes it took to enter the Wayne penthouse after I saw those ferns through the window.

It wouldn't normally take me fifteen minutes, not when I know the target so well. But normally Bruce's penthouse doesn't look like the goddamn Jungle Cruise, so I took precautions going in.

I took the kind of precautions I would take going into hostile territory.

Which wasn't pleasant.

The penthouse isn't the manor, it isn't his home, but it is his. I didn't like approaching it like enemy territory. It made me sick, in fact. I kept repeating in my head *enough is enough...* I had this sick tightness in my gut... *is enough...* If I got inside and it smelled like furniture polish... *is enough...* I didn't know what I would wind up doing... *is enough...* but I was sure claws and the words "AIIIEEEE, CATTY, MY FACE!" would be involved.

I got inside.

It didn't stink of lemon.

It smelled of olive and fig and ivy and cedar and honey and mimosa and fern. But it didn't reek of lemon pledge. That was something. It didn't completely rule out the possibility that Ivy had overstepped, but it didn't prove absolutely that she had.

Well no, the place was overgrown with grapevines and primroses, so she *had* absolutely overstepped. It was just a question of how far.

I felt that catlike tug around my ankle just like that night in the park. I looked down, and sure enough, it was my viney little friend from that prowl, or a viney little sprout just like it. And just like that night, it had wrapped around my lower leg and was nudging me forward.

I kicked it off, cursing myself for not thinking this through before coming inside. It would have been a good idea to gather a bit more intel before barging in this way. I should have at least checked to see if Bruce was inside ...or if Batman was... or for that matter if Ivy herself was here. But now that one of her damn weeds had seen me, it

was too late. If she was on the premises, she'd know in a matter of seconds that I'd come calling.

"Tattling little creep," I told the ankle-vine, giving it another kick for good measure.

There was nothing for it now. Any cat will tell you: if surprise is no longer an option, the only way to go is to march right in like you own the place. So I made straight for the living room. Only one plant got in my way, I think it was the maitre'd from the restaurant. I brandished the claws, explained where mulch came from, and it stepped aside.

The jungle scents were stronger as I neared the living room—where I found Queen Green making herself entirely too much at home, draped over the chaise longue and pouring herself a cocktail—from a shaker that was a thank you gift from Barbara after I wore yellow ruffles at her wedding!

But there was still no lemon in the air. And even more important, no orange.

There was also no Bruce.

So I squelched the impulse to pick her up by that it's-not-alabaster-it's-green neck, slam those henna-rinse locks into the nearest wall and explain with bat-brevity: *Not yours.*

Instead, I made a show of looking around at the flora. When I finally spoke, I kept my voice soft and firm.

"If this is payback for the Jimmy Choos," I told her, "then you have either overrated the fuck-me pumps or else you have *very seriously* underrated my attachment to Bruce."

She was ready to respond, but I cut her off at the inhale.

"Nono," I warned, "No. You don't try to argue this one, Pamela. There is no explanation; there is no rationalization. There is just you and the blood in your veins—and there is the question whether it's going to remain in there, happily carrying oxygen to all your vital organs, or if it's going to be rerouted in the next five minutes onto this terminally dreary carpet."

"Really, Catty," she drawled, going all dignified goddess. "How you do go on. No harm came to your precious Bruce. I'll give him back once I've had my fun."

"*Precious Bruce*" would have struck a nerve at the Iceberg over Cosmopolitans. But we were so far past that at this point, I just shot my hand out and grabbed the nearest piece of green. I gestured, as if giving her the finger except with the index, and then used that claw to make a long, slow incision down the plant's leafy gullet.

Goddess dignity was forgotten. She gave the expected shriek (her babies, her babies, her dear leafy babies) and lunged at me. I sidestepped and tripped her, quickly and casually, then plopped the sap-oozing plant carcass on her it's-not-natural-redhead.

"Do I look like Roxy Rocket to you?" I asked firmly.

She looked daggers up at me. She doesn't shy away from eye contact. Goddesses don't. Neither do cats.

"You murdered this plant!" she declared. The volume was down from the initial shriek, but she more than made up for it with venom.

She hadn't bothered to get up yet, so I half-bent over her.

“Nope, you did. You brought it with you when you trespassed into my territory. You don’t want the rest of these weeds to go the same way, get them the fuck out of—Get them out. Now.”

There was a distant hum—the elevator was coming up—and Ivy had this funny smirk. I figured that meant it was Bruce, coming back from whatever task she’d sent him on. She had him and thought he’d defend her. Or maybe she figured she could hurt me just by displaying her control over him. Neither was a pleasant thought.

But I gave her too much credit. When she spoke, it was clear that her smirk had nothing to do with the sound of the elevator.

“Get the plants the fuck out of? Get them out of *what*, Selina? Out of ‘*your house*’, perhaps?”

Bruce spends the better part of Hell Month making a fist; he’s not aware of it, he just does it reflexively. I had just done the same thing. I only realized when the claw tips punctured the glove.

“Has the wildcat been tamed?”

The elevator pinged and I recognized the footstep on the marble foyer. It was certainly Bruce about to come through the doorway. So rather than give Pammy the thrashing she was begging for, I posed, hands on hip, and waited. In three more footsteps he’d reach the doorway and I’d have to face an attack from an Ivy drone... with Bruce’s face—and Batman’s right hook.

Step. Step. Step.

And there he was.

“Let me guess,” I announced, although I doubted he was in any condition to appreciate a snappy line. “This isn’t how it looks.”

I was still braced for an attack—but in the second it took to speak the words, I saw my joke had hit on the literal truth: it *wasn’t* how it looked. He wasn’t under Ivy’s spell.

I know Bruce. I know Batman even better. The split second he walked in the door, he saw something very different from what he expected. The very second it registered:

–*Catwoman!*–

that 17-jewel brain went to work.

–*Ivy on the floor*–

I SAW it in his eyes.

–*prostrate over a dead plant*–

I saw his mind rolodexing through the possibilities: what did it mean? what had happened? what might happen next? what would he do in response?

None of those answers mattered. The questions meant he was in there. He was okay. She didn’t have her hooks in him.

The relief I felt, starting between the shoulder blades and oozing through my body in all directions, was... was a lot more disturbing than relief is supposed to be. Ivy’s last (unanswered) taunt was still ringing in my ears. “*Has the wildcat been tamed?*”

It was 14 minutes before I could extricate myself from the situation. As soon as I saw Bruce was okay, I knew I should go. Batman was on the job and he had the situation in hand. But I couldn’t just wink, blow a kiss, and waltz out the door. The play had to

play out. It took 14 minutes. It took 14 of the longest goddamn minutes of my life. It took 14 tree-minutes, that's 140 years to you and me.

Bruce had volunteered, from the sounds of it, to go out and get her a love token, some little bauble to prove his devotion. My guess, which I'd confirm later, was that he wanted an excuse to leave in order to secure the satellite cave.

Now Gotham is the city that never sleeps, but the "love tokens" available at four in the morning are still fairly limited. There's kink, of course, if you're into leather and handcuffs, which Pammy is not. There are t-shirts or novelty mugs from an all-night diner, maybe a Hong Kong Rolex from a guy on a corner (although I doubt even those guys bother at this hour), a variety of pills and powders, and the contents of the 7-11. Factor in that this is a gift for Poison Ivy, which means no cut flowers and no perfume (eeked out from the petals of the poor, poor flora, her babies, her babies, look how Calvin Klein distilled the essence of her poor murdered babies)...

So he got her a Whitman Sampler.

And that's when she went thermal. Gaia's Chosen, Goddess of Green—once she blinked away the shock—went absolutely, flat out, "So this is what it's going to look like when we completely lose the ozone layer, fry the atmosphere, and all of nature becomes a big global microwave."

He brought her a Whitman Sampler. I got diamond cat pins. She mentioned that several times: I got cat pins from Cartier, just for being me, no pheromones required. And she got a box of chocolate creams.

~*There's been a lot of that,*~ Bruce signaled me silently. He'd never used the sign language that way before. It's something we evolved during all those Wayne parties, just to stay sane amidst all the Wigglesworths and Ashton-Larrabys. But in front of *them*, we're more careful. And with me in costume and him not... I guess he figured these were special circumstances.

~*She has a thing about you,*~ he added.

~*It's not my penthouse she greened,*~ I shot back, although that haunting echo of Ivy's "Get the plants out of what, Selina? Out of 'your house', perhaps?" sounded again in a dim corner of my brain—*"Has the wildcat been tamed?"*—a corner of my brain that must have more important things it could be doing, like remembering the date of the Norman conquest or something.

~*You're why she came here,*~ Bruce insisted. ~*But she doesn't know that.*~

We had to suspend our sign-chatter at that point, because Ivy was now directing her complaints at random—to me, to Bruce, and to the ferns—so there was no telling which way she might turn at any given second.

"Maybe you should leave us alone," I said crisply, because, as I said before, cats are not known for their patience, even when mice are involved.

"You mean me?" Ivy asked grandly.

"No, I meant Bruce." I said calmly, turning to face him. "Please."

The look on his face really is priceless when I throw him a curve—even pretending to be pheromoned, there's no mistaking that defiant/confused glower.

I smiled and raised a playful eyebrow, which is how I always answer that glower.

Fact is, a curveball is the only way to deal with either of them sometimes. And this time it was Ivy who needed the jolt. She certainly hadn't forgotten how we'd started

our conversation this evening—but she was burning to know why I had asked Bruce to leave and not her. She looked at him, poured on the goddess grandeur, and ordered him to go. Then she looked back at me, glowing with triumph.

It seemed Bruce was right: it was about me somehow. She had struck at him because of me. But why? That whole performance, lording it over me that she could control him—why? What was the point of this—other than proving she could be a royal bitch, which was certainly no state secret.

Bruce left, and we just stared at each other for a minute.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out the way you wanted with Harvey,” I told her finally. “I know it meant a lot to you that he liked you without the Lemon Pledge treatment. But Pamela, there’s more to being a couple than how *he* made *you* feel. He’s got his face back; he’s got a piece of his life back. Pammy, if you care about him at all, you’ve got to be happy for him. And if you don’t, if he was nothing more than a way to feel good about yourself, then go back to the goddamn plants, you’re not ready for people.”

“Catty, I—”

“No. Save it,” I cut her off. “I can’t listen to any more of it tonight, Pammy. I’m done. I’m not a rosebush; I get no benefit from fertilizer. I’m going home, I’m taking a bath, and I’m going to bed. In the morning, if I do not find Bruce and this penthouse in the precise condition they were in when we went shoe shopping, then Ivan will be making the acquaintance of the Jimmy Choo heels in a manner he will not enjoy. UnderstoodGood, see Iknewyoucouldbereasonable. GoodnightPamela.”

And I was out the window before she could get a word in.

I checked the time—14 minutes. It had taken me almost as long to get back out as it had to get in in the first place. And I’m still not sure which was the more difficult.



After I’d left the penthouse, I took the long way around the building, giving Bruce every chance to see me through the north windows.

I did go home. I did have a bath. I did not go to bed.

I sat on the bed, waiting for Bruce, running two memories in parallel in my mind, like watching two TVs side by side showing different programs: That night on the roof of the MOMA three years ago, and that moment in the penthouse tonight.

I wasn’t going to steal the Van Gogh when the MOMA reopened... and then... “*Has the wildcat been tamed?*”

I wasn’t going to steal the Van Gogh because I’m with Bruce now, and Bruce is Batman, and it’s not possible for us to... to be like we were and still be what we are. “*Has the wildcat been tamed?*” she asked. She didn’t mean it as a question, she meant it as a shot, she meant it to hurt but... it was a fair question.

Not only was I not going to steal the Van Gogh, I was literally sitting on *Batman’s bed* trying to work out how I felt about it.

I thought I was fine with it but... that penthouse all greened over. (NOT YOURS, Pammy!)

I didn’t mean the penthouse, of course. I meant Bruce.

Not.

Yours.

How he would love this. Me holding up those two words as the great inviolable absolute: Not yours. Doesn't belong to you. Wrong to take.

Self-righteous jackass.

Anyway.

I had these two memories cycling in my head. The top of the MOMA—the Van Gogh that Catwoman would never take now because I've changed that much.

And the penthouse.

"Get the plants out of what, Selina?" "Stay away from that Van Gogh." "Out of 'your house' perhaps?"

The penthouse that didn't belong to Pammy...

"Who said anything about one night, Stud."

...the penthouse I thought of as mine...

"Do you like Monet?"

...because Bruce is mine.

"Get the plants out of what, Selina?" "Stay away from that Van Gogh."

Batman is mine.

"Has the wildcat been tamed?"

NOT YOURS, Ivy. Not. Fucking. Yours.

"Are you crying?"

I jumped. That last one was not from the memory TVs. Bruce was home.

"Kitten, what's wrong? You're not upset about that nonsense at the penthouse, are you?"

"Of course not." It wasn't a lie. It wasn't Ivy or the penthouse, it was... something. "What happened with the silly leaf-bitch anyway?" I asked lightly, changing the subject.

"Nothing. She's still free," he sighed, frustrated. "She simply *would not* do anything that Batman could go back and arrest her for. I tried leading her to it eight or ten times. I mentioned the yacht, reminded her about the bachelor party, I did everything but wave a credit card under her nose, she wouldn't take the bait. She just kept *whining* about Harvey and Harley and Joker and—life."

"That's our Pammy," I mentioned softly.

"Well, unfortunately, there's no law against self-pity. And a simple trespassing charge without any felony extortion wouldn't hold her long enough to justify the drive out to Arkham. Now are you ready to tell me what's wrong?"

"Actually, when I asked what had happened at the penthouse, I meant before I got there, not after I left. You were... ready for her, I assume."

"It wasn't hard to predict. Ivy has abandonment issues and control issues, and she can't cope with rejection. Harvey's gone, Harley's gone—something like this was bound to happen. I've been dosing myself with the anti-tox since they released her from Arkham."

"How did you know you'd be the target?"

"I didn't know, but it was a possibility. Harvey and I were... cohorts, back when she first went after him. And my personal wealth is a lot greater than his—"

"You mean you're the road not taken? 'If I'd zigged instead of zagged back then, would I be sitting here now with my heart broken?'"

I don't know why I said it that way, why I said "I," why I used the present tense.

"There is a *second* reason," Bruce said gently.

I smiled sadly.

"As if the ghost of Two-Face is still with us," I joked. It wasn't funny, and neither of us pretended it was. "So what's reason number two?"

"You are. Selina, you and Harvey are friends. Striking at me scores off both of you with one stroke. But even more than that, there's the catfight factor."

"That's insane. After the humiliation with Roxy, she'd have to know—"

"That you'd cream her, of course she does. Selina, that's what she was after: dulling the emotional pain with a physical one. It's a maneuver I know pretty well... Just like I know the one you're pulling, Kitten. Hiding the obvious fact that you're hurting in this (not very convincing, coming from you) preoccupation with the job."

I do hate it when he does that.

"Jackass," I said quietly.

"Pffft," he answered.

Nobody said anything for a minute. Then...

"Selina, tell me what's wrong?"

"Did you know the MOMA is getting ready to reopen?" I asked him.

"Of course, Flay wants me on the committee to... Ah. The Van Gogh." He was chuckling like it was cute, and he'd run a hand around my waist that was now playing up my back.

"Don't touch me," I spat. I had meant to push him away, but somehow I wound up turning in to his shoulder, and, well, not crying exactly, but there was one breath that came out something like a sob. "This is why you're not supposed to tame a wild animal, Bruce." I said it into his sweater, but I'm pretty sure he could hear. "They can't ever go back to what they were and if it's the only way they know how to be—"

He pulled at the back of my neck until I looked up at him. He'd done that density shift, he was all bat-intensity now, which I didn't find nearly as sexy as usual.

"Selina, nobody has tamed you. Nobody will ever tame you. You're an impossible woman, it's part of your charm. Now where's this coming from?"

"You don't think... the penthouse... and Ivy... you don't think that was a little... Pammy thinks the wildcat's been..."

"*Pammy* is having a meltdown because of a man she once stabbed with pottery shards after he killed her pet flytrap, and that's not even the most psychotic stunt she's ever pulled. And a wildcat will claw you into ground chuck if you go poking around her lair, and god help you if you try to help yourself to the wildebeest she bagged and stuffed in the crotch of a tree. So I think you're safe as far as what went on at the penthouse."

He stopped, because I was... staring at him... openmouthed.

"Yes, I'm the wildebeest in that analogy, that stays between us," he growled.

"Cause it's pretty hard to strike fear in the hearts of men when everybody's picturing you hanging halfway out of a tree on the Serengeti with a disgruntled look on your face," I pointed out.

“See. Impossible woman.”

“Meow.”



It was almost dawn when Ivy left the Wayne penthouse. By the time she reached Robinson Park, it was full light. The man with the coffee cart was setting up for the day.

"STOP!" Ivy screeched. It was the last straw. Harvey abandoned her. Harley abandoned her. And now this fiend. "Pouring scalding water over the ground up babies of those dear Arabica trees, have you no heart! You wretched, wretched monster!"

Raoul looked at her suspiciously.

"Lady, I got espresso, cappuccino, café au lait. You want some decaf new age herb tea, try the Greenmarket on the corner."

"I do not want HERBAL TEA!" she screamed. Harvey. Harley. Wayne gave her cheap drugstore chocolates. "Don't you realize, you heartless fiend, that those coffee beans are somebody's children! A coffee tree takes six years to grow strong enough to produce a single bean—only to have cruel planters strip them away to feed a brutal world's desire for a morning pick-me-up!"

She was prepared to bolster her remarks with however much chemical persuasion it took to make him see her point—when she saw a tall man with a white streak through his red hair come out of the apartment building across the way. He was headed straight for the coffee cart, and as he came closer, Ivy was horrified to see—as if there could be any doubt with that hair—it was the man from the Highland Games. The one Selina called Jason Blood.

"Monstrous man," Ivy hissed under her breath.

"Ah, I see it all now," Raoul said wisely, nodding as if it all suddenly made sense. "Here I thought you were one of the crazy peppermint tea women."

Ivy turned on Raoul testily, forgetting for a second that Jason Blood was crossing the street and would reach them in a matter of seconds.

"What exactly is so crazy about herbal tea," she demanded, "it is no less barbaric than what you were doing to those poor coffee grounds."

"You've had a lover's spat," Raoul offered kindly, pointing to Jason. "It's okay, happens all the time. Your friend used to make the morning coffee, I bet, that's why you rail about it so."

"Good morning, Raoul," Jason stepped onto the curb and greeted the vendor cordially. "A large café au lait, please." He gave a vague bob in Ivy's direction, what would have been a quarter bow in a more civilized age, to politely acknowledge the existence of one with whom one was not on polite terms.

"Good morning, Mr. Blood, one café au lait," Raoul announced cheerily.

In the minutes it took Raoul to finish grinding the beans, fill the steam chamber, and begin heating the water, nobody spoke. Ivy felt sure she had achieved the poised, cool dignity befitting a goddess of the green, and Jason wasn't about to chitchat when he had nothing to say.

It was the coffee machine that finally broke the silence, emitting a high, pressurized squeal. Ivy tensed—the noise punctuated the strained lack of conversation, and it announced that time was running out. In another minute, this Raoul would pour Jason

Blood's coffee, hand him the cup, and Blood would walk away. If Ivy was going to say or do anything, it had to be now.

"So you're the loathsome worm that took Harvey away from me," she hissed hatefully.

Raoul's eyes flicked up at Jason and then became engrossed polishing the cappuccino spout.

"I am not aware that I 'took' Harvey from anyone," Jason answered smoothly. "I am rather surprised you couldn't hold on to any man you wanted. Something about the irresistible jungle green, wasn't it?"

Ivy turned to slap him, then eyed the vendor. "Give me a latte whatever it was," she ordered, taking the cup he was handing Jason, and flung the hot contents into Jason's face.

"Jesus, lady," Raoul exclaimed, "Mr. Blood, I'm so sorry. Crazy in the park, I didn't know."

"Quite alright, Raoul," Jason said calmly. "No harm done."

"Oh, of course," Ivy railed, "No harm done, quite alright, what could be wrong! Rude, freakish, do-gooders roaming around healing anybody's face that's cut in two, no good, faithless two-timing skunk he was anyway, taking up with that, that *Rocket*..."

She continued as she turned her back on Jason and Raoul and disappeared into the park, muttering as the foliage thickened around her, closing off the path before either man could follow her.

"...Cheap Hollywood riffraff. And tell-all books, killing trees to air those revolting fantasies about a man that *doesn't even care about her*, doesn't even see that, too stupid to realize he only keeps her around as a convenience. And Wayne. What kind of tribute is a Whitman Sampler, anyway. What kind of devoted slave can't do better than..."

Jason allowed a thin, cruel smile to crease his lips for a moment, then he turned to Raoul and resumed his everyday manner.

"Another café au lait, if you please, Raoul. Since I never got to drink the first."



I had the weirdest dream last night—after I finally got to sleep. An old dream. Batman on a rooftop. There was a time I wouldn't even let myself remember those. Mirror-Bitch was pretty smug back then.

I'd wake up feeling wrapped in this warm tingly contentment, and I'd stagger into the bathroom—and there she'd be, sporting a rosy glow. I'd grumble because Batman and I were never going to happen and I was too smart to waste my time wanting something that could never be. And those eyes in the mirror just—*glinted*, somehow, vaguely triumphant, like she'd won some game I didn't even know we were playing.

Well it's different now. I woke up remembering the dream just fine, thank you very much. The rooftop was the MOMA and he was in the old costume with the slate emblem on a black oval. And even though I never remembered those old dreams, I knew this was one because he didn't have scars on his arms or chest, and he kissed down my neck, but he didn't pull my hair or rub my abs...

And of course, when I woke up, it was different too. A faint smell of leather, musk, and damp rock, a muscular arm (with the scar) nestled around me, chest (with the scratches) rising and falling, warm under my fingers. In a strange way, it was a lot less cozy than waking alone wrapped in that haze of tingly contentment. At least it was last night. I staggered into the bathroom, like in the old days—but now Mirror-Bitch wouldn't look me in the eye.

I guess technically that means I wouldn't look her in the eye, either, but there's no doubt who was avoiding whom. The rosy glow was there, just like before, but I knew there wouldn't be any gleam of triumph in her eye.

Bruce said I couldn't be tamed, but I couldn't be so sure. I was the one inside here, inside my head. I was the one that had... *settled*... into the manor and... into his world. Into his life. I really enjoyed getting that potpourri for the morning room, I really was thinking about redecorating the penthouse... If this wasn't "tamed", it certainly felt... domesticated.

It was early, but I didn't go back to bed. I went to my suite and worked out. I thought about old times, old rooftops. I thought about Pammy too. Annoying as she could be, she was once a force to be reckoned with. Now she barely seemed able to summon the qualities that made her Poison Ivy, let alone sustain them—all because of a man. Pammy didn't even *like* men very much, and with Harvey she had started out to—

I stopped mid-stride and the treadmill whooshed the floor out from under me. I banged my cheek on the handlebar going down and I didn't even care. I had this great big grin on my face—that frankly made the cheek *hurt* and I didn't care one bit. Because I'd found the answer! Whew!

She was projecting! Ivy was projecting. *She's* the one who had let herself be sucked in, ever so subtly seduced into a relationship with a man she wouldn't even admit to liking at first—a man she started out going after *professionally*, when they were on opposite sides, in order to... Because Harvey Dent was the D.A. back then, but then she got involved with Two-Face too—and somehow found herself after however many twists and turns and rounds of denial, thoroughly stuck on him and... *She's* the one who had gotten so tangled up in that rat's nest of conflicting emotions that she wouldn't even cash in when she had Bruce Wayne in her snare and...

This all sounded better in my head.

It really did. The initial spark was a good one.

I moved in with the man I love and I bought a few things for the house because it was Christmas time and I was feeling good. It's not a big deal.

Pammy, on the other hand, was in a downward spiral of spectacular proportions. In the heat of it, she lashed out and said I was the one broken and tamed and caged.

Pammy is a mess.

And I am a cat.

And cats always land on their feet.

And that's that.

I was feeling much better—despite the fact that my cheek really hurt. I could feel it starting to swell, so I went back to the bedroom. I knew Bruce kept a jar of salve that would head off any visible bruising. Unfortunately, my less-than-catlike rummaging

around woke Bruce, and he insisted on helping. So I sat on the edge of the bed while he applied salve to my cheekbone...

"I was thinking," I started to say.

"Don't talk," he warned.

"I washinking," I began again, moving only the one side of my mouth, "About Poishunvy."

"I was, too. This sorry state she's in, we better find a way to snap her out of it. Otherwise, it's going to be when I rigged Harvey's coin: peace for a week and he came back ten times worse. Right now, Ivy's barely functional enough to commit a crime, but sooner or later she'll hit rock bottom, she'll look at herself in the mirror and—"

"—Undfipou."

Bruce stared, let go of my cheek, and grunted.

"And flip out," I repeated. "You came close with the Whitman Sampler, if it's any consolation. If that's not rock bottom, I don't know what it's going to take." I laughed, "You couldn't have at least gone for the Russell Stovers?"

His lip twitched.

"After eight grudge matches with a six foot flytrap, a greenhouse full of suffocating spores, twice encased in a slimy vegetable pod, seven times tied up with creeper vines with a grip like alloyed steel, *no, I wasn't* going to spring for the Russell Stovers."

I tugged at him as I laid back on the bed.

"I could never understand that," I purred, wrapping around him like one of those creeper vines, "Holding you down is the best part. Staffing it out to henchmen and creeper vines?..."



Ivy could no more hide from Jason Blood than she could prevent his following her. The wilds of Robinson Park were no camouflage from one who could sense her aura, a frittery green aspect moving towards the northwest corner of the park. The area was unnaturally thick with foliage, foliage subtly different from the other greenery planted by humans. The thick wall of thorny shrubs was meant to prove a barrier, but Jason's magick could part it with a thought.

He found her in the very rear of her lair, back half-turned to another wall of thorny green, her arms crossed before her—a defensive position. Hostile but defensive.

Jason approached her like an invited guest and sat down next to her, offering one of two large paper cups.

"Raoul seemed to think you favored peppermint tea for some reason," he said flatly.

"That man is a limited, presumptuous, and wholly stupid creature who—"

"You really are quite magnificent in a way," Jason observed, sipping his coffee. "I don't think I've ever met such a wholly selfish and self-absorbed creature in all of my travels, and that includes an impressive string of candidates."

Ivy glared—offended and yet confused.

"That doesn't sound like a compliment," she noted.

Jason shrugged. To his mind, it was neither compliment nor insult, it was a statement of fact.

“So your friend Harley finally split away from the Joker, just like you’d always dreamed, and instead of coming straight to you, and the two of you embarking on wondrous adventures, she’s set out on her own, living her own life, pursuing her own interests and—”

“She isn’t pursuing anything at all,” Ivy snapped bitterly. “She’s just *killing time*, rotting away in those stupid, nauseating fantasies of hers that that loathsome clown is in love with her and they’re going to—”

“She is hopelessly obsessed and always will be. It is her fate.”

“You seem to know a great deal about everybody, don’t you, Mr. Blood.”

Jason nodded formally. It was true, his magickal sensitivities could give him an extraordinary amount of information about the past, present and future of anyone he encountered, if he only opened himself up to the knowing. But he needed no supernatural knowledge to understand the likes of Poison Ivy or Harley Quinn.

“So to your mind, Harley and Harvey both abandoned you and you struck out in response... at Selina? That is most curious. Why her, I wonder? Can a ‘goddess’ envy what an ordinary mortal woman has? It would appear so, if the man she loves—Oh, do go away,” Jason ordered casually in an aside to the vines that had eased into position to wrap around his throat.

Ivy was horrified to see her most loyal plants bow obsequiously to Jason and back away. And Jason was quick to note it.

“It wouldn’t occur to you, sublimely selfish creature that you are, that Selina would find it just as distasteful to see Bruce respond to you...” Jason’s cruelest smile returned. “Oh, but no, of course you realized; that was the point, was it not?”

Ivy bared her teeth. Her pheromones and her plant minions were useless against this terrible man. She had no choice, it seemed, but to sit and listen while he could say whatever he wanted. Such monstrous lies, too. Who did he think he was to treat her this way? Who did he think he was to have such callous disregard for her feelings? How could anybody be so oblivious to another person’s pain that—And what in the name of Gaia’s blossoms was he smiling about!

“It is a start,” Jason pronounced with satisfaction, staring at her as if he could read her thoughts. “Really very surprising growth from you... Pamela, is it? I would not have expected it. Not at all.”

He stood to leave.

“How dare you,” she declared, more offended by this presumptuous condescension than anything that had happened yet.

“Yes, quite,” Jason answered with a formal bow and turned, slowly, his hands behind his back, like—well—a man strolling through the park.



I was in a bit of a state when I hit the rooftops.

Bruce had, predictably, gone all batty on the Ivy issue. He hates it when any of them slip out of the nice, neat crime/chase/pummel routine and act like people. He likes the status quo—at least where non-feline adversaries are concerned.

We'd discussed several ways to bait her. Some of Bruce's ideas were pretty wild, including mounting a class action suit on behalf of all the men she'd enslaved over the years, the idea being to humiliate her into striking back and teaching them a lesson. How's that for a clueless guy idea. I mean, seriously—if pulling ahead of Harley Quinn in the Messed Up Over a Gotham Man sweepstakes doesn't jolt those last active braincells into pumping something other than chlorophyll, I really don't see that a summons from the law firm of Jacobs, Abercrombie and Slade would have any effect.

In the end, we decided it was, quite simply, a job for Batman. Batman can be infuriating. I had a time explaining that to him, just how maddeningly annoying he can be. I finally convinced him all he really had to do was go to her and be himself—if Batman pushed her, she'd push back, period. I was sure of it.

So he'd gone into Robinson Park to initiate Operation Bat-Prick.

But I couldn't stay at home waiting. Not tonight, after all that "taming" stuff. I had to be out and about. But considering the way the last few prowls turned out, I wasn't keen about making the rounds on my usual rooftops.

So I went to see Harvey. I knew he was still puttering around that old theatre that had served as his last Two-Face lair. He hadn't worked out what to do with himself yet, so he invented these little projects. The last one I heard he was hooking up some kind of satellite dish into the projection booth so he could watch digital programming on the big screen.

I was just approaching the theatre when I saw he was leaving. I was a little disappointed, it looked like I was stuck with a solitary prowler whether I liked it or not... when I got the idea of following him. I'd been doing this, on and off, since I'd changed the way I prowled. I could follow Robin, Nightwing, Huntress, and Spoiler without their ever knowing and Batgirl... Shit. Stephanie. Aw, hell... Anyway Batgirl was harder. She's seen me four times. She's so cute. She doesn't understand what I'm doing and she won't ask. I'd tell her if she'd ask... I think Black Canary spied me once. And Bruce caught me the only time I tried following him.

I figured Harvey, while in no way challenging, would make a nice change of pace.

I thought that right up until his cab slowed at the northwest corner of Robinson Park. Was he out of his mind? He was getting out of the taxi, paying the driver, and walking straight into the Crazy Chrysanthemum Playhouse. Tonight's feature: Fatal Attraction.

I followed him inside, of course. It took me longer to reach Ivy's actual lair, I needed to be more circumspect with all her damn weeds everywhere. By the time I reached a point where I could see what was happening, I was afraid Harvey might be sucking seedpods.

Instead, it seemed like they were just talking. The voices were low and sort of—not hostile. I started to get the idea that I was snooping into something intimate and personal, that was none of my business, and that maybe I should take my feline curiosity out of the vicinity and go back to stalking Van Goghs.

Now it may seem like I was slow to reach that conclusion, but I wasn't the very bottom of the bell curve. Because just at that moment, a gloved hand clamped over my mouth and I felt myself pulled around and backwards—to see Batman with a finger to

his lips. He removed the other hand from my mouth and wordlessly handed me an earpiece.

There are times he really has no shame. No shame whatsoever.

I put the tiny silver half bat to my ear and heard exactly what I expected—Harvey and Ivy, the same voices we could hear only as muffled murmurs from the lair entrance, only amplified and distinct.

“This is none of our business,” I insisted in a hissing whisper.

“Quiet,” he growled.

No shame whatsoever.

...: The irony, ...: Harvey was saying, ...: is that Two-Face would have loved this. ...:

...: Loved what? ...: Pammy replied. And she sounded... like I’ve never heard her before. Normal. ...: Loved that you’ve moved on so beautifully, living your life happily without a care in the world, while your ex has become this pathetic basket case—...:

...: Yes. He would have really enjoyed that. The sadistic brute. ...:

...: I would have slapped that smarmy smirk off his face, ...: Ivy growled. ...:You know the one. ...:

...: He would have slapped you right back, Petal. Twice. ...:

...: Don’t call me that. ...:

...: Ivy, then. ...:

...: It’d kill you to call me Pam? ...:

...: I’ll call you anything you want, Pamela. But you were never “Pam” with me, and we both know it. ...:

...: In the beginning. ...:

...: In the beginning, when you introduced yourself as Pamela Isley, you were more Poison Ivy than you would ever be. You tried to kill me, Petal, that’s all that first relationship ever was. You think I magically forgot that little detail when we started up again after the acid? *Darth got off on it, Ivy!* He liked making you scream for it and then turning to me and replaying the memory of that little bistro in SoHo where it took you four tries to order the Mixed Herb Cous Cous because you kept tripping over your tongue and then broke into that phony first-date giggle like you were some shy, sweet, ordinary girl. ...:

I turned to Bruce—Batman, rather—and handed back the earpiece.

“That’s it,” I told him, “There’s a line, that crossed it, I’m outta here.”

“I’m staying,” he growled.

“Imagine my surprise,” I growled back.

I went back to the penthouse.

I fixed myself a martini. Same shaker Ivy had used the night before. It was a thank you gift from Barbara, for being an attendant at her wedding. I wore yellow ruffles...

I’ve broken into people’s homes, gone through their safes, private papers, their bedrooms, jewelry boxes—nothing ever felt that—*invasive*—as those minutes eavesdropping at Ivy’s lair.

At least that’s what I told myself. The crisp tang of the vodka said otherwise. I’d drunk quite a few martinis that night, after the catfight with Talia. She had said something, that I was a conquest. He just wanted the persona, the forbidden bad girl.

It hit a nerve. It was only the bitter rantings of a jealous, psychotic shrew, but it hit a nerve.

I heard the ping of the elevator, and that familiar footstep in the foyer.

"Honey, I'm home," I called when he saw me, just as I had that night in the cave. We were both in costume then, like we were now, but it felt so different there in the penthouse. His eye glanced at the shaker, then the glass, then at me. I assumed he was guessing how many I'd had.

"I tried Cartier's first," he said, "then the MOMA."

"Yeah, I thought about the MOMA," I told him, shaking the last drops from the shaker into my glass. "But I came here instead. I felt like I needed a shower."

"It wasn't that personal," he insisted, picking up the empty shaker and walking it back to the bar. "I've listened in on—and on occasion burst in on—much worse. Every crimefighter has."

He had taken off his gloves and started washing up the shaker and the glasses from the night before.

"What was Harvey doing, going to see her like that anyway?" I asked, raising my voice to be heard over the running water.

"From what I heard before you arrived, it sounded like Jason Blood ran into her and gave Harvey the heads-up that she was... in trouble, emotionally. Harvey's a nice guy. And the way he left it with her as Two-Face was obviously part of the problem. I suppose he went to see her to make it right. Give her some closure."

"And did he? How did they leave it?"

"It's over. It seemed like a fairly civilized ending, considering."

"Meaning what, you didn't have to step in and take half the sketch to the emergency room and the other out to Arkham?"

"She tried to seduce him—the old fashioned way—he said no. They said goodbye. And that was that."

I winced. It sounded so... bloodless.

Bruce surprised me then. He'd finished the wash up at the bar and come back to the living room. He sat down beside me and stretched out his arm behind me on the sofa. It was the strangest thing. He almost never "relaxes" that way in costume, even in the cave.

"I have to go back out," he said softly. "I missed both patrols last night and the early one tonight. I'll be late getting back. You shouldn't wait up."

I had this overwhelming urge to try and seduce him "the old fashioned way", to try and make him stay, although I knew I wouldn't be any more successful than Pammy had been.

It was like he read my thoughts, because he had put the glove back on the one hand and touched my cheek with his bare fingers before putting on the other.

"Selina," he said gently, "They never became *Harvey* and *Pam*. Goodnight, Kitten. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Bruce," I whispered.

"Oh, and Selina," he called over his shoulder as he headed for the window, "let me be clear about something. As much as I did enjoy last year's dubiously acquired

Houdini journal, I will not be pleased if that Van Gogh turns up under the Christmas tree with a purple ribbon around it.”

I laughed.

“Hey, that hadn’t even occurred to me,” I teased, “What a good idea!”

He shot a line and was gone—I didn’t hear it, but I just know he said it as soon as he was out of earshot.

“Impossible woman.”



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