



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

#9

Cat \equiv Sales

Satori



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES

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SATORI

Gotham Times, October 12th

LIFESTYLES *Hermoine's Society Chit-Chat*

Tongues are wagging that the new brunette on Bruce Wayne's arm is none other than Is-She-or-Isn't-She Cat-Tales star Selina Kyle. Naughty-Naughty Bruce, you've been hiding this one. The couple was spotted enjoying a late-night supper at D'Annunzio's and are expected to cut the ribbon at the gala opening of the new Gotham Mythology Museum underwritten by the Wayne Foundation....

Harvey Dent read the blurb twice more. He couldn't quite believe it was still going on. It was four months since Selina mentioned a pair of cat pins were a gift from Bruce Wayne. Four months! In the years when they were friends, Bruce never stuck with a relationship for four weeks, let alone four months.

Pussycat's stringing him along good and proper, the Two-Face side of his personality sneered.

Not her style, the Harvey side defended his friend. Selina can steal for herself anything Bruce could buy her. If she's seeing him, must be 'cause she wants to.

No accounting for taste.

Two-Face was bitter. He wasn't capable of affectionate or romantic feelings, but it hadn't escaped his attention that Catwoman operated on both sides of the law and could play both sides against the middle. Duality. It would have made her a very suitable object for his attention, except that Harvey seemed to think of her as some kind of kid sister. He wouldn't let the thought form clearly enough to even propose a flip of the coin.

Harvey, the canker of goodness that blocked his every idea and impulse. The goody-goody was now defending his other friend:

Bruce isn't so bad.

Wayne's a wuss. Should be fun when he screws up and the fur starts to fly.

Harvey considered this.

It was a valid point. Selina was a lot to handle as a friend, let alone (god forbid) as a girlfriend. And Bruce was used to bimbos that would put up with anything from a billionaire playboy...

He had a thought.

NO!

It was a good thought.

NO FUCKING WAY!

Bruce was a friend of his, after all, and so was Selina. It'd be nice if they made each other happy.

HARVEY, I SAID NO. ARE YOU LISTENING YOU INSUFFERABLE DO-GOODER SACK OF SH-

-flip-

Good side up.

Harvey smiled and Two-Face smashed the table into the wall.

Though he was dressed casually as Bruce Wayne, it was really Batman who sat at the workstation in the core of the Batcave, typing his final comments into the file on Ra's Al Ghul's unprecedented visit to Gotham City. His great enemy had left his seat of power and come onto the Batman's own turf, without a plan, without a hope, totally befuddled by his infatuation with Black Canary.

Analysis: Possibly Ra's status as my ultimate adversary derives more from his ambitions than his abilities.

With that, he saved and sealed the file, then punched in a code to pull up a list of criminals currently at large.

"Sir," Alfred began impassively. (How long had he been standing there, Bruce wondered, waiting for him to reach a stopping point?) "There is a party of gentlemen wishing to see you upstairs."

"Thank you, Alfred."

"I had them wait in the study."

"Thank you, Alfred."

"I believe, sir, you should not keep them waiting long."

Bruce turned with some annoyance, and Alfred continued.

"A Mr. Tetch, A Mr. Nigma and a Mr. Dent, sir."

Bruce looked back at the monitor:

...: At Large :...

Mad Hatter

Riddler

Two-Face

He looked back at Alfred, who offered no further comment.

Bruce Wayne entered the study without, for once, feeling the need to perform the role of Bruce Wayne in any way. He was perplexed as to why this committee of rogues should pay a call on him, and saw no reason to conceal it.

Harvey Dent, apparently elected spokesman of the group, smiled and shook his hand as if it had been days, rather than years, since they'd last spoken as friends.

"Hey Bruce, good to see you. This is Jervis and Eddie."

As they sat, Bruce acknowledged the introduction with a quasi-smile that showed he was no less perplexed than before.

"We, uh, saw this bit in the paper about you seeing Selina Kyle. Been going on for a while now, hasn't it."

Oh. My. God. Bruce thought, freezing his features as rigidly as if he was wearing the cowl. Then realizing that was perhaps an unwise face to present in this company, he

relaxed it into the softer but equally uncommunicative expression he put on at business meetings.

Harvey continued. "We've all known Selina for quite some time and, well, since you and I are such old friends, we thought we'd come by and just, you know, fill you in on some things you should know."

"Harvey, I already know she's Catwoman."

"Oh, that, yeah, we figured she'd told you that, she sort of told the whole city... No, ah, we wanted to make sure you understood what all that means."

"Never mention that book," Nigma began.

"That unauthorized biography a few years ago, F. Miller, said she started out a hooker," Jervis Tetch explained.

"Right," Harvey completed the thought, "Don't make even a passing reference to that, even in fun. No matter how trivial the remark, or how obvious you think it is that you're joking or that everybody knows it's a pack of lies. Don't ever mention it."

"I learned that one the hard way," said Jervis, wincing at the memory.

"No pussy jokes," Harvey went on to the next item on the list.

"If she ever uses a phrase like 'Do that again and I'll set you on fire'—not an idle threat."

The trio chuckled among themselves at some private joke.

"Scarecrow learned that the hard way," Jervis explained.

"2nd of the month through the 6th is, ah, nature's special time. If you're going to cross her—which I wouldn't suggest under any circumstances—don't do it then unless you've got your affairs in order and your insurance paid up."

Batman would have to admit to a new respect dawning for the niche Catwoman had carved for herself in the Rogues Gallery. These were vicious, violent men. They each had more than a hundred pounds on her, they were not adverse to killing as she was. And yet she was not only accepted as an equal among them, she had established (and evidently enforced) ground rules for her acquaintance and friendship that they ignored at their peril. They accepted this, though god knows they wouldn't tolerate this treatment from any man, because she was... well, she was Catwoman. She'd somehow leveraged the supposed weakness of her gender into a very palpable advantage.

Edward Nigma was the only one to notice a wistful look flicker in Bruce's eyes, but he misread it as fear. This was, after all, a candy-ass rich boy and here they were giving him a list of DOs & DON'ts to avoid catastrophic injuries with his new girlfriend. He offered a word of comfort.

"Anyway, she's a darling girl, a real sweetie. And next time you go out, you bring her to the Iceberg, that's Penguin's club downtown. I know it's not the sort of place a lot of respectable folks feel safe, but you're with Selina, you're part of the family now. Stop by the Iceberg, you won't have any trouble."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Dent, Nigma and Tetch were all thinking of the last time Catwoman was seen at the Iceberg and with whom. It introduced a delicate subject, one they had discussed in the car, but hadn't reached a consensus about mentioning to Bruce.

Bruce was silent for a different reason. His mind froze up utterly on the phrase "you're part of the family now."

The silence went on as the trio of rogues looked at each other.

It went on too long to ignore.

They had to explain now what it was about. To simply stop talking for four solid minutes and never say why was worse than speaking the dreaded name...

"There is one more thing," Harvey began, looking to the others for last-minute inspiration. "About—"

"Don't ever ask about—"

"Don't ask what the deal is with her and—"

"-Batman," the three said in unison.

It's doubtful if even an actor of Bruce's skill would have been able to greet these words with the look of guileless confusion he now wore. But his brain was still firing on only one cylinder. He only heard the speculation (and meticulous deconstruction) of Batman's are-they-or-aren't-they relationship with Catwoman through a stunned haze of "You're part of the family now."

"She just plays with his head."

"I don't think so, Jervis, you've never seen it up close and personal. It's weird, they bicker like married people."

"You're part of the family now."

"He just wants to save her."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?"

"You're part of the family now."

"I'm not saying he doesn't want some, I'm saying he's not getting any."

"If you had an excuse to fight with her, you saying you wouldn't cop a feel or two?"

"With those claws—I'm a bleeder, man!"

"You're part of the family now."

THIS is what comes of lightening up, Batman's inner voice berated him. You smiled at her once. And THIS is what comes. Pretty soon you're slipping notes into picnic baskets, stopping by for coffee, talking to your reflection, cooking, and gaslighting the Joker instead of pummeling him—and THIS IS WHERE IT LEADS: Mad Hatter, Riddler and Two-Face sitting in your house, debating your chances of getting to second base.

The image of Ra's Al Ghul humiliating himself on a morning talk show came unbidden into Bruce's mind. This is what love could do to a formidable man's image. His own comments—dismissing Ra's as his ultimate adversary—because of his performance in the throes of a romantic infatuation.

"You're part of the family now... part of the family now... part of the family now..."

"If I go patrol with Robin and come back in, say, two hours, is there any chance of my seeing something other than the back of your head then?"

...

"Babs?"

...

"Barbara Louise"

"I'm sorry, 'Wing, Did you say something?" Oracle's eyes never left the computer screen and she continued to type through their conversation.

"I just wondered if I left and went on patrol, if you'd even notice before I blipped on your little tracking setup."

"Mhm. Setup. Should've seen that was a trap going in."

Dick paused and tried again.

"Helped a girl scout troupe change a tire, and they gave me a box of cookies."

"Cookies? On the counter next to the 'fridge. And bring me a glass of milk."

"So then I threw Poison Ivy down on the bed and made passionate love to her right in front of the flytrap."

"WHAT!"

"Oh hi, Barbara, hope I'm not interrupting. I just thought I'd drop in and say hi before going on patrol."

Barbara sighed.

"I'm sorry, Dick. This is time-critical. Do you mind coming back later."

"Whacha doin' anyway." He looked over her shoulder at the cluster of monitors. She had four chat windows open on one screen, a bulletin board on another and several websites on a third.

"Cloudmakers."

For a second Dick thought she was answering his nonsense-speak about girl scouts and flytraps with a bit of her own, but then he saw the bulletin board, the chatrooms and one of the websites were all labeled Cloudmakers.

"It's a game, or it was, a promotion for the movie AI. Dozens of websites, hundreds of puzzles, that led you bit by bit through this very elaborate murder mystery set in the world of the movie."

"You're using roughly half a million dollars in computer equipment to play an Internet game."

"I'm not, you basketcase, the Cloudmakers are—or they were. See, this game and the puzzles were incredibly complex: There were clues hidden in chemical formulas, dead languages, the html code on the websites—live events in different cities going on at the same time. No one person could begin to solve it alone. This group, they formed a collective—called Cloudmakers—named for the boat of the guy who's murdered in the story. That was the point of the game: 'distributed biological processing,' a group of people working together, linked up like this over the internet, could outperform any artificial intelligence."

"Interesting, in an insanely geeky beam-me-up-Scotty way, but what's it got to do with you."

"The game's ended. And these people—these amazingly creative, number-crunching, puzzle-solving, hackers—are still linked up, have all their communication lines in place, their bulletin boards and websites. Their brains all charged up and no more puzzles to solve." Barbara's eyes glowed with inspiration as she said "I want to put them to work for me."

Dick's mouth fell open: It was a fantastically clever idea.

"And that's why I've gotta move now—get them onboard before they find something else to do or break up their little network."

Dick couldn't help it. He reached down and kissed her full on the mouth. He had the most fiendishly brilliant girl on planet earth and wanted every one in the universe

to know it. But that had to wait because she had no time for him now and had already turned back to her monitors and there was the back of that brilliant, brilliant, wonderful, inspired head.

"Oh, before I go. Where's Bruce patrolling tonight?"

He was going to show off. He was to find Bruce and make it clear that Selina wasn't the only significant other with two brain cells to rub together.

It was a darker bat that entered the cave than had been seen there in many months.

I am the night... Bruce thought as he opened the costume vault.

I owe nothing to anyone or anything but their memory... he took off his belt.

I am the right hand of justice... He pulled off his sweater.

I am vengeance... he put on the chest plate.

I am the mission... he reached for the cowl.

I am... ..in desperate need of a personality transplant... in his mind's ear, Catwoman's voice sounded from the stage of the Hijinx Playhouse nearly a year before.

Bruce looked down at the cowl in his hand as he said "And that's exactly what's you gave me, isn't it, Kitten."

"And is it so terrible," he imagined her asking, "having a personality?"

"That's not the point."

"Let's make it the point," the imaginary Selina insisted. "Is it so terrible being a real person when you're not wearing that mask."

Bruce sat the mask on the table and looked at it—reminded of a painting at Gotham Museum—Aristotle contemplating the Bust of Homer, one great mind deconstructing another.

Bruce was reacting emotionally to the scene in the study with the rogues. Changing into Batman meant putting emotion on hold and thinking it through rationally.

Emotions are a natural part of being human.

It's only a fool who pretends he doesn't have them. And only a fool who pretends they don't matter.

I am not a fool.

Excessive Emotion, on the other hand, is counterproductive.

Let emotions take over completely, mistakes follow.

Make an opponent angry, make them afraid, make them need to prove something, and the battle is won.

Emotions are a tool. Theirs and mine too.

I use the anger and the guilt and the pain and the fear.

I channel them through the mind and soul of Bruce Wayne and they come out the other side as Batman.

That was the answer! He needed his emotions to do what he did.

Bruce was so focused on this sudden insight, he didn't notice there was a part of him thinking of both Bruce Wayne and Batman simultaneously as "I."

I need my emotions to do what I do and that means I don't get to squander them in a tantrum before leaving the house.

I do not get to indulge in being Psychobat.

We're going to do this calmly and rationally, let the feelings have their say, let intellect respond, then make the choice.

Like a hypnotist regressing a subject, he allowed his subconscious to introduce, little by little, his emotional reaction to the scene in the study.

They don't fear me, I've become a joke.

Do you really think the things they said about Batman and Catwoman are something new? That talk's been going on for years. It has nothing to do with loosening up. Next.

They don't fear me.

But they do. It's whistling in the cemetery. They make light of what they fear. That's how impotent little trolls express terror and dread. Next?

They

This isn't about them. It's about me. I'm not about to give Riddler, Mad Hatter and Two-Face a vote on how I live my life.

But the changes...

...haven't harmed Gotham. In the past months, I've brought down Two-Face, Joker, and Ra's in record time, with less damage to life and property than usual. I haven't lost the edge.

But Psychobat...

No. Batman.

I don't understand.

Bat-Man.

I don't understand.

You DO understand.

You're too smart to be Psychobat for a sustained period. Too centered to be buffeted by things you're not aware of.

I still want to unleash holy hell on them.

That's fine. So consciously and deliberately, with malice aforethought even, unleash holy hell on Two-Face, Mad Hatter and Riddler.

They're going down tonight.

They're going down tonight.

Riddler first—extra kick in the ribs for "part of the family now."

Fair enough. But that's as far as it goes. Anything else?

It still hurts.

Yes.

Outside the Stonybrook Warehouse, Nightwing caught up with Batman -or rather with the ragged, singed, bruised and bloodied mass of Ouch formerly known as Batman. His cowl was missing an ear, there were scorch marks on the chest plate, he limped, and the costume was torn and oozing blood in a way that could only mean the flesh beneath was torn and oozing blood.

No one but the former Robin could have beheld this sight and realized: this was a happy man.

He had unleashed holy hell, first against Riddler, then against Two-Face, and he had won.

Nightwing greeted his former partner in a way that would have been unthinkable six months before.

"Big-B! You started without me. Looks like I missed all the action."

"Tough."

Whoa, thought Dick, it's been a while since Bruce was monosyllabic.

"Looks like you'll have to completely replace the costume."

"Yes."

"Okeydokey... I was over at Oracle's just now and she's got this great idea to—"

"Anybody watching over your city while you're chasing Barbara's skirts?"

Dick reacted as though to a physical slap. What the hell? He started to reply that he didn't answer to Batman, that Bruce wouldn't let him be his own man, etc. etc. ...when one of those sudden flashes of insight that strike between the eyes, struck between the eyes. He remembered, a few days earlier, Bruce and Selina playfully reenacting the exchanges they'd had a hundred times as Batman and Catwoman—and he realized, just like them, he had been a hamster on a wheel. He wasn't going to have this same fight again. He wasn't going to wail about Bruce being a dictatorial bully. He wasn't going to storm off yet again because Bruce wouldn't let him be his own man.

It wasn't like Bruce was completely wrong. He was in Gotham instead of Bludhaven. He was in Gotham yet again, because of Barbara. And Barbara was busy—doing her job. He had a job too. He should go home and do it.

"You're right," he said frankly, "And I have to be getting back."

Batman didn't react visibly to the unprecedented maturity of this response, but he noted it. In a year that saw Batman smile, Bruce Wayne cook, and Ra's Al Ghul appear on morning talk shows with his dog, what was one more miracle?

"Well. Okay then," Batman grunted.

"Can I borrow the Cessna?"

"No."

"Aw, c'mon, Dad, I'll fill the tank and wash it before I bring it back."

Batman watched from the roof of Selina Kyle's apartment as a sleek plane rose on the horizon near Wayne Manor, followed the river south, then veered east towards Bludhaven. If Dick was finally growing beyond the adolescent notion that manhood means you don't answer to anyone, he deserved the gesture.

He glanced down at Selina's terrace. Speaking of gestures... it was a long time since Catwoman had faced him in dark and dangerous mode... a very long time. It might be interesting to see how she'd react if...

"My god, you look like hell!"

Batman spun around, unused to be the one who's snuck up on. Catwoman surveyed him from head to toe, taking in the bloodied lip, the burn marks, the tears in the arms and legs of his costume.

He attempted to turn on the intense, brooding Psychobat.

She cocked her head quizzically then pronounced: "And you're missing an ear."

She walked up to examine the peak of the cowl that was severed off.

He looked down at her, pouring on more brooding intensity.

She purred in his ear.

Then he remembered, this is why Psychobat never worked with her. All of a sudden, the silence isn't a dangerous silence. It's an I don't know what to say cause there's a Catwoman purring in my ear silence, and that's just not intimidating. Needing to say something, anything, he did what he'd always done: murmured the first thing that came into his head. "What time do I pick you up for the ribbon cutting tomorrow night?"

This won't be like the protocols. I won't permit it. This time, I'll do it right. Bottle of wine, a little jazz on the CD, rub her neck, get everything just right, nice and relaxed. Then...

"Selina, you've changed my life, do you know that? Sometimes I'm actually happy now. Not every dream I remember is a nightmare. Not every waking moment is consumed by the mission. You did that... Can I ask you something, Kitten?"

No. Call her Kitten it's as good as wearing the cape.

Can I ask you ... Darling?

I'll never get that out without resorting to the playboy.

Can I ask you something ... Selina

There. Good. Perfect. Then she says:

"You can ask, I don't guarantee I'll answer..."

"Are you still stealing?"

And then she scratches my eyes out.

Damn.

"Can I ask you..." "Don't guarantee I'll answer..."

"Catwoman still prowls at night, right?"

"Sure, of course. You know that, Bruce, don't be silly."

"Well yes, I was just wondering what you did on those prowls now that you're not stealing anymore."

"What makes you think I'm not stealing any more, you presumptuous jackass!"

No.

Wine/Jazz/neckrub. "You changed my life" "Can I ask a question..." "Maybe."

"Promise you won't get mad."

"Why would I get mad?"

"You're going to think it's Batman asking for one reason and it's really me asking for another reason entirely."

And then she'll throw a drink in my face.

Shit.

It's going to be the protocols all over again.

I've never understood what it is about the Wayne Foundation that's a crime-magnet. I didn't get it before finding out about Bruce's night job, and I don't get it now. This is to be a ribbon-cutting for a *folklore museum*: no ancient artifacts, no Rembrandts, no priceless relics. Just dioramas and tableaus of mythology and literature, what would be the point of hitting an event like this? Yet Bruce stored his costume in a hidden compartment in the Daimler and suggested (rather emphatically) that I do the same. I asked if he was expecting trouble, and he looked at me very strangely and said he hoped so. First time in forever I didn't have a clue what he meant.

We made our entrance and did the social thing for about half an hour before the actual ceremony. Waiters circulated through the lobby with champagne and hors d'oeuvres. They were dressed, for reasons surpassing understanding, as Mercury. Bare-chested (in Gotham, in October, in an atrium lobby), abbreviated white shorts, wings on their shoes, gold helmets with more wings on the sides above the ears.

I whispered to Bruce that it looks like an FTD commercial by Fellini.

No reaction, not even a twitch-smile.

We mingled a little: Lucius Fox and his wife, Jack Drake and Tim's stepmother, a few others... I repeated my Fellini joke—they all laughed—and this time Bruce gave a weird half-smile, like he didn't really get it. That's when the penny dropped. He needed to be "Bruce the idiot" tonight. The opening remarks he had prepared for the ribbon-cutting were quite *astorishingly brilliant*, and he wanted to make sure everyone would assume the rich pinhead hired someone to write his speech for him.

Why he thought that was necessary is another question entirely.

I know Batman better than most people, certainly better than anyone at that party. I certainly have as high an opinion of his intellect as the next person. If he's not the smartest man alive, he's in the top three. But that hardly means -and I'm speaking as Catwoman now- that hardly means I'd suspect Bruce Wayne, or any other random thirty-something Gothamite, is Batman because he makes a few savvy comments about the significance of outcast in Greek mythology. It's ridiculous!

As I wandered through the exhibits, I was forced to realize that what Bruce does isn't new. Zorro, The Scarlet Pimpernel, Claudius, even Hamlet ... literature is full of heroes playing the fool to mask their abilities. I just didn't see why he had to take it so far. It was embarrassing being with a guy you'd have to be...

There was a faint rustling in the exhibit behind me. When I turned to look, I felt a funny tingling in my temple that shot down the back of my neck. "Come with me," the tingle said... and then everything went white until...

"Selina!" Robin was shaking me. I was outdoors—on some side street—near the park?

"Selina, look at me..." He was holding some kind of headband with the same wings the waiters had at the party.

"...you okay?" I nodded—which turned out to be a mistake—was so lightheaded I nearly passed out. I heard Robin saying "I've got her, she's alright," and through radio static "Good."

Bruce? No wait—this was Robin so the radio voice was Batman, not Bruce. I figured I better not open my mouth 'til my head cleared.

Robin got me home, sat me down with a cup of soup like I was an invalid, and finally filled in the details. The broad brush strokes I could guess: Mad Hatter, obviously. Seems he took offense at Alice in Wonderland not being included in the museum, so he staged a little armed robbery. The waiters were all under his control, thanks to the winged headgear. When he saw me, being Hatter, he thought "Cheshire Cat." While the waitstaff held everyone at bay with submachine guns, Hatter used me to gather the jewelry and valuables from the guests.

"Must've been hell on Bruce," I said.

Tim nodded, then he chuckled and I wondered how much I could scratch him up without my claws.

"Sorry," he apologized with this obnoxious twinkle in his eye. "It's just that... if you'd told me a year ago that Catwoman's next crime would a) not be your idea and b) your very first thought afterwards would be how *he* reacted to seeing you commit it... Well, I would have said Arkham is lovely this time of year and tell Joker I said hello."

I could see he meant it in a nice way, and I tried to hold on to that—but I was so pissed off I could barely speak. I feigned a headache, a not unreasonable claim considering, and asked him to leave. Closing the door behind him, I tried to get a handle on what was making me so angry.

I hate introspection. Hate it. Bad things happen when I do it. And quite apart from that, it means going into places inside yourself that just aren't meant to see daylight—ulgh, I *hate* it. 'Nuff said. I'd rather face a hail of gunfire or pits of molten lava rather than— stop.

Just stop it.

It was less than two hours ago that I'd had Mad Hatter running around my head. This wasn't the time to think rationally. I was blowing things out of proportion, that's all.

How did this happen? I wondered. I let him kiss me once and before I knew where I was, we were taking vacations together, he had me revamping Wayne Enterprises security, playing little Catwoman in the manor sex games. I had to get my head back in the game. This was just nuts.

Is it? For some reason the annoying devil's advocate voice in my head sounded exactly like Batman.

Yes, I answered. It really was *nuts*. I had the freakin' Boy Wonder taking me home after a Mad Hatter incident—bringing me chicken soup for chrissakes! If that wasn't nuts...

Tim is very considerate. He wanted to make sure you were okay, overly rational head voice pointed out.

Yes, I can see that. I answered. *Tim's a doll. That's not really the point.*

If it's not, maybe it should be. You've got some good people caring about you. By what bizarre twist of feline logic do you make that a bad thing?

It's not exactly; it's just that—

And surprise, they care about you, you care about them. Natural law—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

But Tim was right. My first thought was for Bruce, isn't that a little...

Don't look now, Kitten, but you're being introspective, and it's not painful.

Yeah, why is that?

You're happier with who you are now. So it doesn't hurt to look inside.

That's a creepy thought.

Why?

It just is.

I need to get back in the game.

I need to get Catwoman back in the game.

I need to steal something and fast.

Why?

I don't know.

I didn't know.

There was a knock at the door. I was both surprised and not to see it was Bruce.

Of course he'd be coming over as soon as he finished with Hatter, that was to be expected. It was a little surprising he changed back to Bruce first. It was quite astonishing that he knocked. In either identity, he doesn't knock much.

He hugged me first thing stepping through the door—hugged me tight—and I could feel how hard this was for him... he caressed my cheek, chin, looked into my eyes...

"Last time I saw you, you weren't in there," he whispered.

It was unnerving. I could almost convince myself I half-remembered him handing me his wallet, watch, and then grabbing my wrist—touching a pressure point or something—that same hoarse whisper—"Get out of here, go home—first chance you get, go home."

I kissed the hand at my cheek—and tasted blood. His knuckles were bloodied and badly bruised...

"I can just guess how that happened," I smiled.

"He'll live."

"Good, my turn next."

"Oh, before I forget. Here, I got these back from the recovered loot. There's still plenty of evidence left for the trial."

He held out the cat pins—diamond and onyx, set in platinum, emerald eyes—but a lot more than diamonds and platinum if you know what I mean. I hadn't realized they were missing. I swallowed hard. So this was what it's like to be stolen from. Not exactly pleasant. Not at all pleasant. I felt the urge to claw Jervis Tetch's throat out.

"You left me a piece of him that can still feel pain, right," I growled as I took the pins back.

Twitch-smile.

"Yes, Kitten. We discussed that, actually, between punches. How you don't kill—but before you're finished, he'll probably wish you did."

I smiled at that. Quite apart from our history and heat, it's nice having a fella who understands me so well.

An hour later, it was like none of it ever happened. I was purring happily while Bruce massaged my feet, saying the sweetest things about my changing his life.

"Can I ask you something, Selina?"

"Sure."

"Does Catwoman still steal?"

"No. Not any more... Move up to the ankles, would you, Love?"

Selina and Barbara arrived at Wayne Manor hours before they were expected for dinner. Since Selina decided officially that Catwoman had stopped stealing, Barbara extended a few invitations: lunch, lectures, shopping, movie-dates. She didn't think they would ever be friends exactly, but she empathized. She'd had to completely reinvent herself and her role in the super-community, and do so alone—no confidantes, no role-models, no precedents. It was harder than it had to be. If Selina was facing the same thing... So she called and proposed that first lunch. She was amazed to learn that Selina didn't feel she was reinventing anything.

"What, you think Catwoman is just about theft? Or liking cats? Or mooning over Batman? You haven't been paying attention. *I am Catwoman, Barbara. Me. Whatever I choose to do with my life, that's what Catwoman is. Hell, girl, making our own choices—and not defining ourselves by somebody else's idea of what we should be—that's what being modern liberated women is about.*" She paused to take a strawberry garnish from Barbara's aperitif as she admonished, "You should have had this in class."

Barbara was speechless. Fortunately Russ, their waiter, was not.

"Welcome to Café Satori, ladies. May I recommend the swordfish."

While Barbara tried to process the full implication of her companion's comments, Selina asked about the name of the restaurant.

"Satori is a Japanese word for a moment of intense revelation," Russ began, reciting from the plaque in the entrance, then he deviated abruptly from the formal explanation. "It's a kick in the head—a burst of insight that changes everything, or causes you to look at everything differently."

"And that relates to the swordfish, how?" Selina teased.

"It's served over Risotto Florentine," Russ answered bravely.

"Sold. What do you think, Barbara, up for having your life turned around by swordfish, Italian rice and spinach?"

Barbara gave an absent nod, then as the waiter left, she picked up where she'd left off: the subject of Selina's career change.

"But Steph and Cassie thought you'd be worried that you'd be weakened by this, that you're so much stronger on your own."

Selina smiled patiently.

"They're very young, aren't they. 'Me' as the source and center of all things, that's how infants think. Well, they'll grow up—one hopes. Come on, Barbara, you know better than this. How old are you?"

While she ducked that and the next six probing questions, Barbara realized the addition of another mature woman in the bat-family would not be at all amiss.

Stephanie and Cassie were indeed 'very young,' that much was evident by the ease with which Selina mocked their presumptuous analysis of her career change. "Growing weak," began the eerie parody of Superman struck by kryptonite, "Men in vicinity... can't... raise... hand... in... algebra... class."

Barbara smiled, making a mental note not to honk off the wit behind Cat-Tales.

Yes, Steph and Cassie *were* young. Huntress was not (and never would be) 'Bat-Family' if Barbara had anything to say about it. And Dinah... Well, Dinah wasn't exactly Bat-Family either. She was a free agent. Besides they'd long ago made a tacit

agreement to keep their banter light: Playing *Men of the JLA: Boxers or Briefs*—yes; meaningful discussion of the role of women in the super-community—no.

Then again, a year ago Barbara never would have pegged Selina as one to give serious thought to such matters. But then, being smeared by the Gotham Post and having to create an off-Broadway show to set the record straight is probably apt to raise one's consciousness. Barbara was astonished, sitting in the refined and rarified atmosphere of Cafe Satori, to hear Selina openly allude to a topic that Bruce said was strictly *verboten*.

"Like that Miller book that said I'm a whore."

"Ex-cuse me?"

"F. Miller. *Catwoman: An Unauthorized Biography*. Don't tell me you never heard of it; it was on the best-seller list for six of the longest weeks of my life. Wish I'd had the Cat-Tales idea back then, damnit."

"But, but, Bruce said if we mentioned that for any reason you'd, like, go supernova or something."

Selina gave an odd, amused look.

"Really? Did he now. Interesting... Well anyway, *you* didn't bring it up; *I* did. And my point is this: I've been called a whore, orphan daughter of a drunken father, an abused wife, even an abused secretary once—always the product of male-oppression, you notice that? *They* have to have made Catwoman. Only way they can deal with the concept of a truly free woman—isn't it a hoot?"

"You know what I'm *really* the product of? Selina Kyle. The whole package is MY creation, not theirs. My choice. I choose to steal, I choose not to steal. I choose to help the JLA... I choose Bruce. A truly free woman, and THEY CAN'T STAND IT—scares the living SHIT out of 'em. Why do you think they keep putting out all these demeaning stories? I'm a whore, I'm stupid, I'm weak-willed, I'm common, I'm in jail, I'm crazy. All 'cause they're scared out of their minds that a woman like me could exist naturally. Scarecrow's got it right. Fear, it's a real bitch."

An hour after Selina and Barbara arrived at the manor after their lunch date, Dick arrived from Bludhaven. It had taken six weeks to hammer out the new arrangement in which he'd come into Gotham one night a week for a 'family dinner' with Bruce, Barbara, & Selina and then patrol with Tim (determined as he was that this Robin would never feel cut loose as Jason Todd had been). And after that one night, the next six days belonged to Bludhaven, unequivocally, without any guilt, hassles or thoughts of divided loyalties.

It occurred to none of them that it took over a month of signals, stares, glares and mishaps to work out the details of this new arrangement—which any normal circle of people would have settled in minutes by simply talking to each other. Nevertheless, it was progress, of a sort, and Bruce was so proud he didn't even grunt (audibly) when Dick parked his Mazda too close to the Daimler.

30 minutes after Dick's arrival, Bruce returned from Wayne Enterprises. Both men were as confused as Alfred had been by Selina and Barbara's giddy behavior. They seemed to be talking in code and laughing at some private joke. When Selina rose to

powder her nose, Barbara followed, leaving Bruce, Dick, and Alfred looking from one to the other. It was Dick who finally spoke the collective thought.

"Man, that was weird."

Bruce nodded. Alfred raised a discreet eyebrow.

"So what does it mean?" Dick asked.

"You're asking me?"

"You're the detective."

"That means I speak Womanese? No. You're the generation where your girl tells you what the hell's going on."

"If I may," Alfred interjected while clearing the table, "Ask them."

When the women returned, after an awkward minute during which Dick gave the old "after you" signal (four times) which Bruce pretended (four times) not to see, Barbara, who'd been sending similar (and similarly ignored) signals to Selina, finally spoke.

"The most exciting thing happened at lunch today."

Both women burst out laughing. Then Selina picked up the story.

"We met the sexiest man in Gotham City."

More laughter between the women. More bewildered stares between the men, who each thought they held that title in their respective lady's view.

"Ur," Dick began, just as Bruce said "Ehrm."

A round of indulgent smiles, then Selina said, "Sorry boys, you're second and third."

"A *distant* second and third," Barbara added viciously.

A long silence, until Bruce, or rather Batman, growled, "Well?"

"Woody Allen!" the women chimed in unison.

"The movie director?" Dick demanded, "Short, neurotic, middle-aged, balding, nasal, glasses, nerdy, hypochondriac?"

The auteur film-maker was the quintessential Gothamite, and his string of films about a short, brilliant, funny, Jewish, hyper-intellectual hypochondriacal Gothamite celebrated the City and its landmarks—as well as celebrating being a short, brilliant, Jewish, funny, hyper-intellectual, hypochondriacal Gothamite. Why women found him sexy was a mystery, but they did. Selina and Barbara were no exceptions.

With girlish excitement, they jointly told the story: how he had recognized Selina from *Cat-Tales*, introduced himself and offered Catwoman a cameo in his next picture. Of course he'd mentioned Batman and company in passing in his earlier movies—he even included a shot of the Bat-Signal shining over the night sky as an icon of the city—but that's all he could ever do because the hero wasn't exactly accessible for guest appearances. But now that Selina had outted herself, he couldn't resist. Could she possibly, possibly, please ask Batman if he would consider...

Selina and Barbara again burst into peals of laughter, and this time Dick joined in.

Later that night, the story of Woody Allen's attempt to secure a Batman cameo in his next movie would be told again. On the roof of the Engineering Building at Hudson University, Dick Grayson's alma mater and the Scarecrow's favorite target, Nightwing

told Robin as they kept watch over the still campus. Robin did not find the story funny. It was unthinkable that Batman would consider appearing in a movie; that went without saying. But Robin still wished aloud that he would do it: “It would put an end to that Urban Legend crap once and for all, wouldn’t it?”

He referred to the theory of one particularly strange newspaper, **The Post Herald**, that Batman was a myth created by the Police Department. The Joker was real, the Riddler, Clayface, Two-Face, Poison Ivy and Scarecrow. All the costumed criminals were known to be real—but the costumed hero who caught them—that was urban legend. The signal, the car, the supposed capture of all those Rogues—it was all an invention of the city to bamboozle the public at large—and maybe bring in some tourist dollars.

A few equally strange academics took up this idea, not as conspiracy theory, but on the simple principle that anything the great unwashed masses believe in must be wrong. If Batman was something the ignorant rabble knew to be true, then they, the toffee-nosed elite, knew better.

“Robin, you’re talking about, like two dozen people, nationwide. You can’t think Bruce gives a shit? Do you think anybody gives a shit?”

Robin gave a melodramatic sigh.

“I do, okay. Because one of those two-dozen people is my headmaster. Do you have any idea how many times in the last month I’ve been treated to snippets from that grand master treatise: *Fugue Mythos of the Post-Millennium Metroscape: The Batman as Totemist Jessel of a Modern Myth?*”

“The WHAT of the WHAT in the Wha?”

Tim repeated the title slowly and distinctly. His headmaster’s treatise, printed first as an academic paper and then as an article in that loathsome newspaper, was an endless source of grief. Oscar Offred, or “Double-Zero” as his students referred to him, often reminded the young scholars of Brentwood Academy that the prep school was a feed into the country’s top universities. He never added that he hoped it would open the same doors for him as it did its graduates. He hated teaching high school, even at an upper crust institution like Brentwood. He yearned for the prestige of a full professorship, tenure, and teaching assistants.

The paper, he was sure, was the key.

Nightwing rolled his eyes but before he could respond, his OraCom link beeped.

“Wing, Robin—Batman’s down. North Campus on the Mall—sounds like fear toxin”

By morning the worst was over. Bruce awoke from the nightmare delirium to a haggard-looking Selina stroking his hair.

The first time someone is exposed to the Scarecrow’s toxin, they invariably hallucinate their greatest fear. While monumentally unpleasant, the experience can be cathartic, and after repeated exposures, exactly what an individual might hallucinate becomes more random.

The first time Batman was exposed, he saw Crime Alley. The second time, he saw Crime Alley. The third time: Dick shot by the Joker. Innocents slaughtered while he

was powerless to help. Jason's tombstone. Ever since then the nightmare world was less ... predictable.

The evening's earlier conversations had planted a seed in his mind: "It was awful," he murmured. "We were in a movie... Batman and Robin. There were these silly rubber suits... with nipples... and the city ... my city was this dayglow Vegas acid trip... one-liners about my car... Oh, it was awful." His head slammed back against the pillow in disgust.

Selina patted his hand and soothed, "It's okay, Dorothy, you're back in Kansas now."

Bruce looked at her with wide eyes.

"And you were blonde and shallow, and Alfred let you into the Batcave without telling me."

Despite the hundred times Tim Drake sat in Mr. Offred's office conjuring up images of Joker lowering the headmaster, inch by inch, into a vat of piranha, of Poison Ivy's flytraps tearing him limb from limb, and Laurence Olivier as the Nazi dentist in Marathon Man drilling his teeth without Novocain, Robin didn't hesitate to pull the terrified schoolmaster off the ledge of Hudson U's Human Resource Tower.

It was ironic really: the paper debunking Batman had done its work. Offred had obtained a coveted interview at Hudson U on the very day the Scarecrow attacked the campus. Fleeing what he thought was his worst nightmare—a lynch mob of Brentwood Academy students with spider-legs driving him towards the open mouth of a giant lizard with the head of his ex-wife's alimony attorney—Offred fled to the ledge only to encounter his true nightmare: undeniable proof that Batman (or at least Robin) was real! For the young vigilante not only swung in from nowhere to save him from certain death, he deposited him safely on the ground, directly in front of the clicking cameras of the Gotham Times, Hudson Observer, and WHUB, the campus television station.

A short distance away, Barbara clicked her tongue in mock-sympathy as the camera zoomed in for a close-up and the caption appeared: O. Offred, author of *Batman as Myth*, saved by Robin.

Dick hung up the telephone.

"Selina says he's awake and he's fine—but apparently rubber, neon, nipples, and Las Vegas are on the 'do not mention' list for a while, whatever that means."

Barbara muted the television and turned to Dick pensively.

"It's happened to you too, hasn't it, the fear gas?"

"Yeah, long time ago. Why?"

"It creeps me out," she answered with a shudder. "The idea that... you take a breath and all of a sudden your worst fear is there in front of you."

"It's not always, you know, it varies, what you see. First time, yeah but—" he broke off at the horror of the memory, then continued. "But anyway, it's funny, the last time it happened, I flashed back to... it wasn't funny at the time mind you, but I flashed back to the day I got my driver's license. Bruce asked to see it, and I handed it to him—and he didn't give it back. He just walked off. I followed him—down to the

cave (surprise, surprise). And he very nicely informs me that the DMV's standards are very different from his, and he'd be keeping that little piece of paper until I had completed the Bat-driving curriculum."

Barbara laughed happily at the story and the welcome change of subject—but that night, as Oracle logged on and began monitoring, she wasn't able to concentrate. Her mind kept returning to that nightmare thought: *What would it be like? You take a breath, and you're suddenly living your worst...*

Involuntarily her hand moved to the armrest of the wheelchair.

What if you're already sitting in your worst nightmare?

Bruce got to wake up. Dick got to wake up. But when she woke up tomorrow the chair would still be there—and the next day and the next. It was a bitter thought. As was the realization that most of her thoughts about Bruce and the others were bitter now.

She was more than this, wasn't she? More than bitterness and hardness and self-pity.

There were worse fates, after all. She'd seen it in the hospital, she'd seen it in her support group. The paralysis could go up to her neck, like the Felpin boy. She might not be able to use her hands. Mrs. Tobas had had a stroke; she might not be able to speak.

It was a devastating thought. As she continued her online duties, Barbara felt numb as she realized: there were hallucinations she could imagine worse than her reality.

When she logged off, however, she rallied. As she got ready for bed, she grew angrier and angrier, as if it was something more tangible than her imagination threatening her with those fates.

"If it was my hands," she thought, "you can operate a computer by voice. And if I couldn't talk, they have those things that read eye movements. I will not be stopped no matter what—Scarecrow, Joker, any of 'em. Never. They won't get the satisfaction. NOT EVER."

Satisfied, mistaking her single-minded hatred for resolve, Barbara put out the light and went to sleep, dreaming happily of an Uber-Oracle, a Cyber-age Valkrye who found a digital workaround for any obstacle the grinning jackal might inflict on her.

She awoke in a cold sweat.

It wasn't fear of the Joker or Scarecrow or paralysis that was clutching her insides with a clammy nausea. It was Selina's words: "Catwoman is whatever I decide to do with my life." So what was Oracle? What it... was it JUST her response to what the Joker did to her? Was her whole life JUST about that? Because that wasn't being a hero—that wasn't even being a person.

That was the nightmare.

Oh god.

That *was* the nightmare. Not losing the use of her legs. Not losing it all.

Going from birth to death with this one event driving it all—no conscious choices, just reacting. That wasn't being human, it was being an animal.

Barbara let out a long breath. She saw the sunrise beginning to bleed through cracks of the Venetian blind.

"And I didn't even have to inhale fear toxin to lose a whole night's sleep to this," she thought bitterly.

You've got to be a person before you can be a hero.
Words to live by. It was worth a lost night's sleep.