



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

#17

Cat = Sales

Something Borrowed



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
SOMETHING BORROWED

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SOMETHING BORROWED

With great stealth, the lithe, cat-shaped silhouette lowered itself from its position several feet above the target. She calculated the angle of descent that would enable her to snatch the coveted object and hit the ground at the optimal angle for a quick getaway. The figure leapt, seized her prey and ran, hearing as she went how the theft disturbed a dozen surrounding objects, noises that drew instant attention to her crime.

“NUTMEG!” Selina yelled, as the blur of fur sped between her legs and through the doorway to the bedroom. “She likes envelopes,” she explained in an embarrassed voice to some visiting twofoot.

“Success!” the smug feline announced, reaching her war room under the bed. She deposited her prize, an envelope of unusually thick paper with shiny foil lining, amidst other trophies that included a plastic milk ring, three paper balls, a pantyhose egg, a strip of blue fabric, and a cotton sock.

“Big deal,” her companion, Whiskers remarked, unimpressed.

“But it’s crinkly,” Nutmeg insisted, pawing the new acquisition to illustrate the point, “and shiny.”

“Woof,” answered Whiskers, in the ultimate expression of feline disdain.

“Fine. Be that way. More toys for me,” replied Nutmeg, not caring. “Why don’t you sit on your balcony and watch birds then?”

“Twofoot with boots,” Whiskers grumbled. “Bat-Bruce. Brushed the planter in front of my flowerpot, leaves aren’t right now.”

“What’s your thing with that planter?” Nutmeg asked.

Whiskers rubbed his head into the mass of buttersoft purple leather kept under the bed, scenting it, then answered, “When the leaves are just so, they hide me. I am the stalking jungle cat of death.”

“Woof,” Nutmeg answered. It was really the only thing to say.

Whiskers slunk out from the war room and saw the visiting twofoot sitting against the fat pillow, ruining the indentation it took days to create.

Whiskers walked up to the intruder and tried to explain as nicely as possible:

“This is my home. That is my chair. That is my pillow. I had it arranged the way I like it. Please put it back the way it was.”

“What’s your name, Little Guy?” Dick asked, interpreting the cat’s hostile stare as friendly curiosity.

“That’s Whiskers,” Selina explained.

“The Whiskers that has it in for Bruce?”

“Note to self: if you don’t want everybody to know something, don’t tell Barbara.”

“Eh, yes,” Dick affirmed with a smile, “Somebody should have warned you about that before now. Babs is sort of Radio Free Bat.” Then the smile vanished and,

covering an awkward silence, Dick took Whiskers onto his lap. The cat promptly wedged itself between Dick's thigh and the disputed pillow.

“HEY HEY HEY HEY HEY! New twofoot pillow-squasher, PUT ME DOWN! Just 'cause you have thumbs doesn't mean... Oh. Lap. That's okay then. I can get to my pillow now. Watch the ears though. You can stroke between the shoulder blades if you want. No, here. Put the hand *here*. Alright, you'll do.”^{oo}

“He likes you,” Selina observed, “He doesn't usually take to new people.”

Dick said nothing so Selina continued, just to cover the silence.

“I have a theory that cats already know everyone they want to know.”

Again, Dick said nothing, but continued stroking the cat.

“Richard, not to be inhospitable, but you did come over to talk about something, right?”

Dick sighed.

“I mean, you didn't ask when I would be home alone—very pointedly stressing the *alone* part—just to come and meet Whiskers?”

“Yeah right, I need to ask something... delicate. I want to ask you—or Catwoman, rather—to do something for me. Something slightly... illegal.”

Twofoot Selina-Cat, she who wielded the power of the can opener, arched her eyebrows, which sometimes meant good things to come, open closets and excitement, and sometimes not.

The words were seldom of interest: “stealing” “don't say stealing, consider it borrowing, consider it your ‘Something Borrowed’ for the wedding” “borrowed you give back. we're not giving it back” “unilateral property transfer then” “it's still theft, it's breaking and entering, it's still illegal” “and you still want me to do it” “...Yeah...I do. I really, really do.”

The words were of no interest at all. The tone is what mattered. And the tone said this would be a time of open closets and excitements.

“Well, if that doesn't beat all,” Selina said, closing the door behind Dick then returning to the living room. “I know what you're thinking,” she said as Whiskers looked up from his place on the pillow, “Hypocrisy, thy name is crimefighter.”

Whiskers was, in fact, thinking about a trip to the end table to drink from the flower vase.

“But his heart is in the right place.” Selina went on, as Whiskers decided moving to the end table could mean losing the pillow again.

An hour later, the doorbell rang and Selina ushered a different visitor onto Whiskers's favorite chair.

“Calloo-Callay, I'm screwed I say.”

"Jervis, this will go a lot faster if you give it up and talk prose," Selina announced firmly.

She was prepared to let bygones be bygones. The hatting episode with Mad Hatter at the mythology museum was a good four months ago, and that was the usual statute of limitations for incidents with Hatter, Scarecrow, and Penguin-caliber rogues. But forgiving him was one thing, putting up with gobbledygook was another.

"C'mon, Jervis, plain and direct, what's the deal?"

"It doesn't matter," Jervis moped, "I'm in the soup. Aunt Maud's coming to town."

And this is the plain and direct version, Selina thought. Aloud, she said, "And 'Aunt Maud' would be your little codephrase for...?"

"For my Aunt Maud," Jervis answered testily. "She's coming to Gotham for, like, a month. She wants to stay with me. She thinks I'm an editor at Harpers and Row. Selina, what am I going to do?"

Whiskers looked out from under the settee and eyed the newcomer with distaste. This one didn't just rumple the cushions, he talked with his hands. Twofoots were so undignified.

^{oo}That's not the one from before,^{oo} Nutmeg remarked, joining Whiskers under the settee.

^{oo}No. That one smelled like damp, cavern, and cut grass. This one smells like porchscreen and cheap aftershave.^{oo}

^{oo}Excitable too. Moves around a lot.^{oo}

^{oo}Squeaky voice too.^{oo}

"I don't think I can help you, Jervis."

"Eddie thought you might cut me a break, since I was so nice and helped him out with the y'know ♪-yadada-da-dada yada ladada-♪"

"For money. You helped him for money, Jervis. And when it didn't work, you cut him loose to—"

"Hey, I did what he asked. It's not my fault it didn't work out."

"Okay, okay, look, it's not that I'm not *WILLING* to help you, I just don't see that there's anything I can do."

"You could let me live here," he blurted out.

"Ex-cuse me?"

"Let me live here. Let me borrow your flat and say it's mine. And my Aunt Maud can stay here too, and she'll think I live like a normal person. She can't see me at the hideout, I've got white rabbits and giant playing cards and queen of hearts and—"

"Jervis, this is really getting into 'more than kittycat need to know' territory, okay."

"Can't my aunt and I stay here for a month. Pleeese?"

"Jervis, I live here."

"But you've got Bruce Wayne in your pocket, right; he's got a big place."

"JERVIS!"

“Oh, we can’t mention him either? I know we can’t say Batman, but I figured Wayne was all ordinary so that’d be okay—HEY, Wayne is *ordinary*! You two could come over while my Auntie is here, let her see I have legitimate friends.”

“Jervis,” Selina sputtered, then took a deep breath, trying to achieve the kind of okay-dealing-with-crazies-now calm she’d seen Batman assume on these occasions. “Jervis, I am not going to lend you my apartment, nor will Bruce and I be visiting you socially while your Aunt Maud is here or pretending you are an editor at Harper and Row.”

∞∞She’s laying down the law now.∞∞

∞∞Looks like.∞∞

∞∞That’s the no-climbing-the-drapes tone.∞∞

∞∞I was thinking no-rubber-mice-in-the-bathtub.∞∞

“Alright,” Jervis sighed dejectedly, “If you won’t let me live here, and you won’t visit, then at least come to the Iceberg sometime. Penguin’s gonna let me act like I run the place.”

“Fiction editor by day, nightclub owner by night?”

“No, I’ll have left the editing job two years ago, and now I’m doing this.”

“Mm,” Selina nodded, playing along, “Better pay?”

“Downsized.”

“Ah.”

∞∞At last he’s gone.∞∞

∞∞Thank Bast.∞∞

∞∞I’ll be on my planter.∞∞

∞∞I’ll be playing with my envelope ball.∞∞

∞∞ANOTHER ONE?∞∞ Nutmeg glared at Selina in disgust. How many twofoots were going to be allowed to come trudging through their territory today?

This one might turn out okay, though...

Nutmeg moistened her nose as she detected, under a surface odor of pipe tobacco, an undeniable whiff of honey-garlic chicken. She hopped up to the end table next to the visitor and confirmed, YES, the new twofoot visitor was a slob! The heavenly aroma was coming from two distinct globs on his shirt. All hail twofoots that drip honey-garlic chicken on their clothing! Nutmeg nestled up to the newcomer and tentatively licked the stained fabric.

“Miss Kyle... eh, Selina,” Gordon began hesitantly after the social pleasantries subsided. “I know we’ve had our differences, but the thing is, the differences are why

I'm here. I – I mean, Catwoman – I need to hire Catwoman for something, and – I've never done anything like this before. How do I start?"

"Start what exactly?" Selina asked uncomfortably.

"I've never commissioned a criminal undertaking before. How do I begin it exactly?" Selina sat back heavily in her chair.

"Is there a full moon or something, 'cause I'm getting the damnedest offers today. You want to pay me to commit a crime?"

"Yes."

"Well, Commissioner, I'm not in that business anymore, but if I was—"

"It's ex-commissioner, and that's really how this all comes about."

"...but *IF I WAS*, this would be what's called entrapment."

"Miss Kyle, Selina, please, I assure you this proposition is not a law enforcement exercise."

"What is it then?" Selina demanded impatiently.

"A wedding present."

She stared, stunned, and Gordon continued.

"I need you to acquire something for me, something I have no legal right to. And I want to acquire this thing, to get it away from the people who have it now, as a gesture and a security measure to protect Barbara."

"Go on," Selina encouraged softly, just a hint of her Catwoman voice creeping in.

"You know what happened to her, with the Joker, why she's in the wheelchair?"

"Of course."

"You know there were pictures."

"Yes."

"Not police photographs, sick ones, taken by that fiend. You know what they... show."

"Not the details, but I can imagine the general content, yes."

"Well, they were used at the trial, evidence. They're public record, technically. But, I was commissioner then. I had power, I had the ability to... I saw to it that the pictures *got lost*, misfiled actually. A couple digits transposed in the evidence locker. Mistake if anyone noticed. No one did. I did it to protect Barbara, you understand. I didn't want some newspaper or magazine to..."

"I understand, Jim. It's okay. I'm not a 'Rules girl.' "

Gordon half-laughed ironically, then went on.

"Damn near forgot who I was talking to. Okay, I bent the rules, and I hid the photos. I got away with it. No harm done. The case is closed, will never be appealed, and no one is the wiser, right?"

"Except?"

"Except what?" Gordon asked in alarm.

"If there wasn't an 'except' you wouldn't be here," Selina pointed out.

"Ah, I see. Okay then, yeah, *EXCEPT* now I'm retired. And it's all political. Anybody snoops, they can make a big thing out of it 'cause of my impropriety, former commissioner's abuse of power and all that rot—but it's not me that'll hurt for it. It'll be Barbara 'cause all the uproar will dwell more than a little on what it was I covered up."

"Yeah, I can see that. Sensational stuff. And of course with the wedding, Bruce Wayne's son, big news story, somebody might actually go looking."

"You think so?" Gordon stared in horror, as if this had never occurred to him.

Selina nodded. She didn't mention that Dick himself had brought up this gruesome possibility at their earlier meeting.

"Okay," Selina agreed, an air of dismissal in her tone. "I'll look into it."

"What'll it, I mean, the cost? In addition to my pension, I have an IRA and the house is paid off."

Selina waved him off, embarrassed for the first time in this extraordinary conversation.

"Forget it. On the house—if I decide to do it, which I was going to say I hadn't decided yet, but I just did."

Gordon blinked. Was that a yes?

Nutmeg entered the war room still savoring the lingering flavor of honey-garlic sauce. She batted a milk ring lazily, then settled against the folds of purple leather. She was just drifting off as the leatherbed was swept out from under her like a magic trick.

^{oo}REOWRL!^{oo} she objected.

The bedskirt rose and twofoot Selina-cat's face appeared.

"Don't you get clawmarks in this, I need to use it tonight."

^{oo}rowrl,^{oo} Nutmeg sulked.

"Don't push me. I'll vacuum under there if I have to."

It took fifteen minutes to get to my first stop, which, it turned out, was a few minutes less than it would take to get over the heady thrill of being in costume again, prowling for criminal purposes.

The panel before me was part of the PHOENIX 9000, one of the best, if not *the* best, security systems on the market. This panel took up to a 10-digit digital PIN that could take four hours to crack—and then only if you had the right equipment.

Fortunately, it wasn't going to take me anything like four hours, because I was damn sure I could guess the owner's PIN: 22222 222 22

There was a low hum and the indicator went from red to yellow to green. The system was deactivated.

I let myself in and, since Harvey wasn't around, I made myself at home: fixed a cup of tea and stretched out on his sofa with a box of Goldfish crackers.

For some reason, on getting home a half-hour later, Harvey acted like this was a big deal: What was I doing here, how did I get in, etc. etc.... I mean, really, you would have thought he was channeling Batman.

"Harvey for godssake, it's Gotham City, and you're in the murder and mayhem business. Even with a Phoenix 9000, you must've had people let themselves in before!" I insisted, a little put out that he was being such a prude.

He just looked at me, then said, "You know, Selina, exactly TWO other people have been able to 'let themselves in,' as you put it: Poison Ivy. And Batman. Neither one of them, we assure you, sat on the couch and ate Goldfish."

"What Batman did, I can guess," I said with a laugh. "But Ivy? I don't ever want to hear about that."

He smirked and that ended the preshow. I got down to business.

"I need a favor."

"A good favor or a bad favor?"

"Bad one."

Harvey raised an eyebrow, then the Two-Face voice cut in:

"This mean love's young dream with Bruce Wayne is over and done with?"

"No," I answered. I would have preferred to deal with Harvey alone, but there's nothing for it when Two-Face decides to get involved. You have to roll with it like it's perfectly natural. "This is by way of being a favor for a friend," I explained casually.

"A criminal favor," one of them observed.

"Yes. So will you help me or not?"

They flipped their coin, then appeared to have a disagreement whether the result meant yes or no. 'Favor for a friend' being construed as a good thing, 'criminal favor' being bad.

"Look boys, I hate to interrupt, but this sounds like a crock to me. Bottom line is: one of you wants to help me and the other doesn't. If you'll just tell me which of you it is that's being a fathead, maybe we can cut a deal."

It was Two-Face who spoke up: "You want to make deals, precious, you deal with us. If it was Pretty Boy Harv that needed convincing, you could just whip him into line with that braided leather sextoy you got hanging from your belt."

If this was the way it had to be, it's the way it had to be. I would have preferred to play nice, talk like civilized people - but some things you can't let pass. I uncoiled the 'sextoy' enticingly and purred.

"Now Two-Face, that's not how I hear it at all. Word has it, your bedgames with Ivy, you *like* it rough 'n' ready."

It was enough. Two-Face may consider himself the baddest thing on two legs, but a few non-ambiguous words from a comely lady in leather and he loses it. Well, maybe he didn't 'lose it' exactly, but he hesitated long enough for me to swing the whiphandle across his throat and plant a heel in his gut. I was sorry, pulling him by the hair, that Harvey had to pay for Two-Face's mouth. Not sorry enough to stop slamming his head into the kitchen table, but sorry enough to fix him an icepack when it was over.

"Sof fwat ifsit sfat you fwant?" Harvey managed from under the ice and swelling.

"What can you tell me about police evidence lockers?" I asked.

Harvey Dent staggered into the Iceberg Lounge looking like he'd been in a battle.

Sly, the only bartender who had stayed at the Iceberg for more than three weeks or three brawls, decided not to notice this until Mr. Dent gave some sign that he wished it to be noticed.

"Evening, Mr. Dent."

Two-Face growled, "Two double malts on the rocks. And make them doubles."

"Happy hour, Mr. Dent. If you order two, I serve you four. If you just want two, only order one," Sly advised, wisely.

"If you know what we want, Wise Ass, why don't you just serve us."

"Now, Mr. Dent, you know Mr. Cobblepot'd shoot me if I sold less than you ordered without sayso."

Two-Face sneered, but Harvey smiled: "Just 'one' then - Double shot of double malt, please."

Sly produced two drinks on cue.

"That's what the doctor ordered," Harvey held up the glass, touched a finger to the ice, then applied it to the inch of bruise on his forehead that extended to the unscarred side of his face.

Sly decided this was enough of a go ahead, so he spoke:

"You look like a man that broke one of the cat-lady's rules."

"Technically," Harvey said wearily. "But that's not why we require your services, oh barkeep extraordinaire."

"Why's that then, Mr. Dent?"

"Ask your new boss."

"New boss? - Oh, you mean Mr. Tetch. Yes, we've all been briefed about that. Pretend Mr. Tetch runs the place. A little unusual," Sly mused philosophically, "but not half as strange as some of the things I've seen in this club, Mr. Dent, nor you either, I expect. And it's exciting for someone like me to be a part of it for once."

Harvey liked Sly, his easy manner never put out by the most outrageous Rogue behavior. But there were times the guy was just too perky for Two-Face. The latter glowered. Sly met his gaze evenly, and Two-Face seemed to reconsider, like a charging dog that was challenged. In reward, Sly topped off his glass.

"So how does Mr. Tetch posing as manager of the Iceberg relate to—"

"You ever see *The Birdcage*," Harvey explained, "gay couple playing it straight for a conservative politician and his wife?"

"Robin Williams, Nathan Lane, Miramax 1996," Sly answered like he was reading a resume.

"Guess you know it. You know the part where all the campy drag queens from the nightclub are redoing the apartment?"

"Where they get a moosehead and a crucifix - Playboys in the bathroom - that's what they read.' I love that scene!" Sly enthused. "It's funny."

"We used to think so too." Harvey replied. "No more. We just lived it."

"Plants are chic," Poison Ivy insisted, "You can't have too many plants."

"You can if you want to look normal, Pammy! This is like Wild Kingdom," Harvey moaned.

If Jervis Tetch wanted to look normal, upstanding, and respectable for his aunt's visit, Harvey thought he was the obvious choice to advise him redecorating this flat. He had been a successful lawyer and politician, he knew how to play that game. What Pamela Isley and Roxy Rocket were doing here was beyond him.

"Maybe we did overdo the green," Jervis wondered, standing before two walls almost completely covered by potted trees, ivy-covered trellises, and hanging planters."

"It was Riddler that overdid the green," Roxy countered. "Without the plants those walls just look GREEN; this way it looks planned, like it's part of the decor."

"If the decor is Wild Kingdom, yes," Harvey repeated, and Ivy kicked him in the shin.

"Why Riddler's place anyway?" Roxy asked abruptly, "Why not either borrow someplace normal or redo your own hideout."

"This is a better location," Jervis ticked off his list of reasons, "It's near the club, it doesn't need nearly so much work as mine - just the green, the futon and the question marks really."

"Oh, save that one above the mantle," Roxy put in, "One big question mark in the room - it looks like art!"

Harvey, Ivy, and Jervis all stared.

"Or not," Roxy squeaked.

"Let's face it, the only hideout, lair, or apartment that wouldn't need any work at all is Selina's, and she wouldn't cooperate."

"You could have hatted her," Ivy observed coldly, "that'd bring her around."

Jervis winced and unconsciously moved his hand to his right side. The memory - and the scars - from the payback when he'd 'hatted' Catwoman were still far too vivid.

Harvey empathized and touched a finger to his own fresh cat scratches.

"The futon's got to go," Roxy declared, again changing the subject at an opportune moment.

"Throw some pillows on it," Jervis suggested.

Harvey realized what this scene reminded him of, and quoted *The Birdcage*: "Don't add, just subtract."

"What?"

"Don't bring in pillows, get rid of the futon."

"Then were'll we sit?" Jervis asked peevishly.

"Surprise!" Penguin called from the doorway, "I brought you a *-quack-* house cooling present."

He handed over a coffee table book: THE WONDER OF IGLOOS

Jervis looked at it, then up at Harvey who repeated, "Don't add. Just subtract."

"So, Mr. Tetch is not just pretending to run the club, he's pretending to live at Mr. Nigma's?" Sly asked in awe at the end of the story.

"That is the second tier of his deception, yes" Harvey answered, gesturing for his glass to be filled.

"What does Mr. Nigma say about this?"

"He's up the river, not saying anything at the moment," Two-Face answered, gesturing for the other glass to be filled.

"Only one to be complaining is Roxy," Harvey continued.

"Miss Rocket?" Sly's tone changed slightly. It wasn't the first time Harvey had noticed such a change. Roxy was the one rogue that caused Sly to lose his unflappable cool.

"She's posing as Jervis's girlfriend," Two-Face informed him maliciously.

You would think that someplace like the police evidence locker for all of metro-Gotham would be a fortress, wouldn't you? Turns out their "security" is set up by bureaucrats. It's all about paper, documenting the chains of who handled what: this officer turned in this item on this date, tagged to that incident report, that lawyer signed it out on that date. The priority is maintaining the legal integrity of the stuff, not the physical security. I mean, it's not totally unprotected, but compared to museums, galleries, jewelry stores, bank vaults, government installations - in short, the kinds of places *I* break into - this was a walk in the park.

In under an hour, I was inside and doped out the layout. There was a cage on each floor that led to the records for a block of precincts. The 29th, which is where Barbara's casefile would have been "misfiled" according to Gordon, was on the 3rd floor. There was one guard that patrolled the 1st through 10th floor stairwells and elevator—slowly. He was, to put it mildly, not difficult to avoid. There was one clerk in the cage. That took a moment's thought... Traditional gas pellets, while effective, would be remembered. When he woke up, he'd know he was gassed. A couple drops of chloral hydrate in his coffee would do the job too, but the hangover's a dead giveaway. So I opted instead for a 100mg dose of a common over-the-counter antihistamine. It was risky, as I couldn't be sure he was completely out. So instead of taking his keyring, I figured I'd just pick the locks beyond the cage.

Maud Wodehouse sat at the best table at the Iceberg Lounge, alternately singeing the rogues of Gotham with glares of haughty disapproval and crinkling her nose as if to avoid some unpleasant smell.

The rogues looked at Aunt Maud, then at each other. Formidable didn't begin to describe her; the woman was a cross between the Queen of Hearts and Batman. Hell, you'd think after growing up with a gorgon like that, Batman would be a breeze!

"JER-VIS," the Wagnerian voice intoned, "This novelty glass in which that slippery bartender poured my drink is an abomination. Please instruct him to serve me with ordinary glassware in future."

"Yes, Aunt Maud," Jervis groveled.

He was mortified letting the other rogues witness his humiliation, but there was always the chance one of them would snap and kill her.

"Very interesting," Hugo Strange observed from a corner table. "This is perhaps why Herr Tetch is so scared of The Batman - she reminds him of his childhood terror: Aunt Gladys."

"Aunt Maud," Scarecrow corrected.

"Aunt Gladys," Hugo repeated, lost in recollection of his own family burdens, "could make grown men to climb trees and pull them up after them."

"You guys are pansies," Poison Ivy observed. "A strong woman should be celebrated. It's nothing to be intimidated by."

"You go over there and say that," Scarecrow challenged her.

"No way."

"I can't think why Alice is so late," Jervis was saying with a twitchy expression. "She's usually so prompt."

"Alice?" Scarecrow asked, in a hushed whisper, "I thought Roxy was posing as the girlfriend."

"Fiancée," Ivy sneered in disgust, "it's more respectable."

"Fiancée then," Scarecrow countered. "I thought it was Roxy."

"It *IS* Roxy, you straw-brained nitwit! He's calling her Alice. Says Roxy's not a normal name."

"Oh, like *JERVIS* is?"

Minor setback.

All the locks behind the cage were Medico, and Medico locks...Well, let's just say they *can* be picked if you know what you're doing, but it takes a while. Easier by far to cut or blast through them, except this needed to be an invisible job. They weren't supposed to know anything had been tampered with. So I went back to the dozing clerk, held my breath, and eased the keys from his belt. He didn't stir—some guys just can't hold their NoSneeze Nighttime.

I made my way to the appropriate room, the right filing cabinet, and the right drawer. At last. Found the file... and it was sealed. Thank you, Commissioner SuperCop, for not giving me a hint about that little surprise. *Now* I had to somehow get the pictures out without breaking the seal!

More lost time.

“Explain to me again, Jervis, why so many of the patrons here dress in such an odd and conspicuous fashion.”

“It’s, ah, well, a kind of custom here. It’s called Viva la Difference night, the, ah, third Thursday of the month, all the regulars dress in wild outfits. The more respectable they are, the wilder the getup, you see.”

“How very peculiar.”

“It’s like Mardi Gras!”

Damn, I’m good.

Plain ordinary exact-o-knife dipped in liquid paper... slid ever so gently up the seam opposite the seal... so I could open the file without the seal ever being broken. Got the pics, and re-glued it with more liquid paper. Was it absolutely undetectable? No. But you’d have to be looking for something amiss. And it wasn’t like this case would ever be appealed or retried.

I opened the file and a thin plastic sheet, like a transparency for an overhead projector, except opaque and gray, fell to the floor. I picked it up and noticed a faint chemical smell.

I returned it to the file and paged through the police report. I could see why Dick and Gordon would go so far as to break the law, commissioning a crime, to get control of the pictures that accompanied this report, the words were graphic enough... Poor Barbara. She’d hate that I thought that, and I’ll never let her know if I can help it. Still. Poor Barbara. She opened the door, that’s all she did: Makes her dad cocoa, sets down the tray, doorbell, “It’ll be Colleen from across the street. Yoga class tonight” – and BANG! – psycho-clown out of a nightmare blows a hole in her spine.

Then he took off her clothes and took pictures—bleeding, naked—quite a variety of poses, judging by the testimony. He blew them up into slides and plastered a funhouse wall with them. He wanted to prove a point, he said, he wanted to drive Jim Gordon mad. Didn’t work. He considers it one of his failures.

Some failure. Barbara’s still paralyzed.

I was skimming. I didn’t want to be reading any of this. I just wanted to find the part where it said how many photos, slides, negatives, and whatever there were to track down.

I found the photos—they were blank, all the same solid gray as the plastic sheet. I looked for the negatives, and found they were in the same condition. The slides were in an envelope with another tiny strip of plastic. They too were solid, opaque gray.

I pasted the folder back together at the seam, returned it to the filing cabinet, relocked the cabinet, relocked the room, returned to the cage and replaced the clerk’s keys... all the while waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I was nervous. I don’t like surprises like that in a job, any job, but my first in months, I especially didn’t like it. In the heart of police territory, I especially didn’t like it.

I took an extra minute to evade Captain Efficiency patrolling the stairwell. I was being too cautious, which in itself was dangerous.

I made my way to the roof—and with the shock of the cold night air, the explanation hit me. It was so obvious and so right I almost laughed.

The chemical smell.

I should've thought of it before I wasted six hours on a fool's errand.

Well, if I wasted my time, it was worse for poor Harvey. Beat him to a paste for nothing.

I did laugh then.

I really should have expected it.

"JER-VIS!" Aunt Maud bellowed for the ninth time since arriving in the lounge.

"Is it my imagination, or does she hit the same notes as Joker calling for Harley?" Penguin asked, waddling up to the table from the direction of the imperious Maud. "She wants to meet you," he told Poison Ivy.

"Me? Why?"

"-quack-, 'Cause it's Viva la Difference Night," Penguin answered.

"Don't ask me why," Scarecrow offered a longer explanation, "but it seems in the World According to Jervis, the wilder the outfit you wear on Viva la Difference Night, the more respectable you are. She took one look at me and decided I was a corporate vice president, at least. Now she wants to meet you, because she decided you must be practically a duchess if you come here dressed like a whore."

"WHAT!" Poison Ivy screamed, while Scarecrow and Strange held her back.

"C'm off it, Pammy, it's not like the 'foliage' leaves a lot to the imagination," Harvey pointed out.

Ivy spun around and slapped him. He turned back from the slap with Two-Face's lecherous grin.

"Ooh, Baby," he growled, and slapped her back.

Jervis ran over in a panic.

"What are you doing! No slapping, no slapping!" He looked back at his aunt in alarm, "Thank god, she didn't see it. Oh, where is Roxy? This is not going well."

"Jervis, something I don't understand," Scarecrow began, "If your aunt's such a problem, why not just pop one of those mind control chips on her head and shut her off."

Jervis sighed.

"She is my mother's sister, Jonathan. Does a man 'hat' the mater's own sister? And if he does, what happens when she goes home without any memory of it, and my mother asks 'How was your trip and did Jervis take good care of you?'"

"Mammasboy," coughed Two-Face.

"JER-VIS!" Aunt Maud bellowed for the tenth time since arriving in the lounge.

I love the windows they put on those old mansion houses, I really do: foothold - foothold, and *a shelf* if you have some heavy safecracking gear you need to set down while you work on the alarm system. This particular system was the best commercially available before the little adjustments that make it all but impenetrable... but no system is foolproof, not even his. There was a flaw, a very tiny one. If you

weren't the world's very best thief with exhaustive knowledge of the technology AND had a set of razor-sharp catclaws, you could never, *never* get passed it.

I opened the window silently and entered. Padded quietly over to the bed and watched him sleep for a moment before lowering my head and meowing softly.

His eyes opened instantly, bright and clear and blue.

"Hey," he murmured softly, reaching to pull me to him, "There's a Catwoman in my bed. Y'know, I actually have a dream that starts just like this.."

I purred.

"Tell me."

He reached up around my waist -and then his hand went flat against my back and the other felt my arm. He sat up abruptly.

"Your costume's cold. How long have you been prowling tonight?"

In one move, I laughed, smiled and kissed him. Busted in under ten seconds! You gotta love him.

"You really are the best, you know that," I meowed, settling back on his bed, enjoying the situation tremendously.

"Selina, what have you done?"

"You tell me," I challenged him. *My Dark Knight Detective*, I thought, *You tell me. Let me watch your mind work.*

He looked into my eyes for a long moment. I used to wonder if he could read my mind when he did that.

"Police evidence locker. Barbara's file."

I guess he can.

"And all for nothing," I confirmed it, as if he needed me to. "You got there first."

"Well..." he looked embarrassed, "it's not like I removed anything."

You gotta love him.

No, he didn't steal the photos, he just added something that reacted chemically with the paper and negatives. I wanted to kiss him and tell him what a sweetie he is under all that avenging badass of Justice - but I just couldn't. Not when he was Bruce. When he was Batman in a righteous spate, yes, but not like this, all warm and blushy. I let him off the hook with a change of subject.

"Since you're awake, what would you say to a little excursion? There's quite a show on at the Iceberg tonight."

"Aunt Maud," Jervis intoned proudly, "This is my fiancée, Alice Rocket." And he pronounced it ro-KAY.

The older woman eyed Roxy as though through a monocle.

"Sit down with me, young woman," she commanded. Roxy did so. "And tell me about yourself. How old are you?"

"I'm not going to answer that," Roxy objected.

"Then how did you meet my nephew?"

"26," Roxy answered.

Aunt Maud glared.

Jervis stepped in. In his panic, he blurted the truth: "We met through work."

"You did not work at this club, surely?" Aunt Maud sniffed. "This is only a barely acceptable situation for a man," she paused to glare mercilessly at Jervis before continuing, "Let alone...."

"Oh no, my old job," Jervis adjusted the story, "We met at my old job, when I was an editor. Roxy is, ah, a librarian."

Roxy's eyes bulged slightly.

"Indeed," Aunt Maud nodded approvingly, "a most respectable profession. What it lacks in social cache, it makes up for in refinement. I like a well read girl. Tell me, Miss Roquet, which is your favorite Bronte sister?"

Roxy swallowed. Behind her, the Rogues within earshot began whispering: "Roxy hasn't read a book since high school," "She goes into Barnes and Noble for calendars and coffee," "\$50 she makes up a name," "\$100 she says 'the quiet one,'" "'with the bangs.'"

"What are those ill-bred people whispering about in that rude fashion?" Aunt Maud wondered audibly, and the most notorious representatives of the Gotham underworld hung their heads like truant schoolboys.

"Actually," Roxy tried to extricate herself from the most objectionable lie so far, "that was just when we met. I haven't worked in a library for years."

Now it was Jervis's turn to swallow...

"And what do you do now?" Maud was asking.

Why oh why did he get Roxy for this? He knew educated women. Harley Quinn was a psychiatrist (speaking of which, where was Harley these days?) Poison Ivy was a botanist. But Roxy, Roxy was a lovely girl and not stupid, but not book smart, not the kind you bring home to meet Mother. Before turning to crime she had been...

"...in the movies," Roxy was saying.

"Yes. She used to be a stunt woman," Jervis cut in, glaring at Roxy, "but that was just temporary."

"A TEMPORARY stunt job?" Roxy glared back.

"In a very important art film," Jervis went on, "...and actually now she's... she... she works at—"

At this moment Selina Kyle entered the dining room with Bruce—

"Wayne!—Wayne Foundation—She works at the Wayne Foundation!"

Dearest, Dearest Barbara,

I'm so very pleased to be able to offer this bracelet as your 'Something Borrowed.' It was my 'Something New' when Clark and I got married, a gift from Papa Kent. I would have brought it to the shower next week, except I'm not yet sure I'll be able to attend. A story developing in Pango Pango might keep me away. But you know I'll be there in spirit.

Lois

"It's beautiful," Dinah remarked, handing back the note and picking up the bracelet of tiny seed pearls.

"Yes," Barbara agreed, "I admired it at her wedding, and she remembered, isn't that sweet."

"Reporters," Dinah grumbled, "may log everything that's said to them, but that doesn't mean they're sweet, caring or in any way sensitive to their fellow human beings."

Barbara raised an eyebrow, and Dinah stood down.

"Okay, that was my thing."

"Still sore about the Ra's al Ghul stories?" Barbara guessed.

"One does not forget being labeled a living demon's love slave," Dinah declared adamantly.

"But that wasn't the Daily Planet's doing and it certainly wasn't Lois Lane's."

"No, but come on Barbara, what kind of friend is this: I'll be at your shower if I'm not busy breaking some story in Pango Pango?"

Barbara laughed.

"Dinah, don't be a featherhead. Pango Pango is Diana."

Dinah blinked, so Barbara explained.

"Lois's spies in the JLA have not yet told her if Diana is coming to the shower. If she is, big story in Pango Pango keeps Lois away. If she's not, 'oh look, I'm free after all.'"

"Are you telling me Lois and Diana avoid each other?"

Barbara nodded.

"One Superman-Wonder Woman rumor too many, in my opinion."

"But Lois can't think there's anything in that! I mean, Boyscout: Truth, Justice, and cheating on his wife? No way."

"Of course not. But look, Lois is in the rumor mill business. It's not like she can pretend she doesn't hear that nonsense, and she gets tired of it. Says Diana doesn't do anything to discourage it - *which is true enough.*"

"Staying 'above it all,'" Dinah hazarded.

"I suppose," Barbara answered. "Worked okay for you."

"What did? Head down and wait for it all to pass? Yeah, technically it's over, I guess. The papers went on to write about something else - but a lot of people still think that I was in love with that slimy, creepy, icky, evil..."

"Cadaver?" Barbara prompted.

"YES!" Dinah cheered, "*Cadaver*. Perfect term. Thank you."

"You'll have to thank Catwoman for that one. It's what the rogues call him."

"Catwoman," Dinah repeated. "Now *THAT* was a solution: Get yourself on stage, sell tickets, and tell it like it really is."

"Maybe a TV show," Barbara giggled, "It'd have to be cable-access, I guess, but it's not like there's any shortage of material. When they got done smearing Catwoman,

they did you and Ra's, then Joker was supposed to be dead. There's even a story now that Bruce Wayne is supposed to have killed somebody, there's no end to it."

Dinah beamed a smile of almost sexual excitement: "Let's do it, Barbara, you and me. You've got the equipment here to make up some holodeck character—"

"Holographic."

"Whatever, to appear as the host. Let's do it!"

"You can't be serious!"

"Why not? Barbara, why not? I'm so sick of this bullshit. And I'm sick of these mindless lemmings thinking whatever those scandal sheets tell them to... about all of us!"

Barbara just smiled, not unkindly. Then Dinah smiled too.

"Okay, was a silly idea. Done now."

"Good. So tell me who's coming to my shower."

One thing Selina Kyle knew, her friends and enemies would have to agree, was how to enter a room with distinction.

She did so now, surveying the table at which Jervis Tetch, Roxy Rocket and an unknown large woman sat...

"A foundation," the large woman cooed, "That is most respectable."

...the many clusters of Rogues watching the show...

"The nerve of the guy," Hugo Strange muttered, eyeing Bruce contemptuously.

"Oh give that a rest," Penguin retorted. "Look at her, my Roxy, pretending to be with Jervis Tetch."

"Your Roxy, oh please, she hasn't spoken to you since the Christmas party, has she?"

"Hasn't even looked at me," Penguin admitted.

...and Harvey Dent at the bar...

Normally either Harvey or Eddie would be her first stop in a room full of rogues. They were her preferred informants for whatever was going on beneath the surface... Except Eddie was still in Arkham. And Harvey was nursing his wounds after their last meeting.

She sighed, glanced at Bruce, and then, as if by mutual consent, they went up to greet Jervis and Roxy.

"You're not in costume!" were Jervis's first words, uttered far too loudly considering the whole club was straining to hear every syllable uttered at that table.

Selina didn't react at first, and Jervis, in a near panic at the waves of disapproval he felt coming from Aunt Maud, turned to her companion and said: "Or you either, Bruce!"

There was a gaffaw from Hugo Strange, but the room was otherwise silent.

"It's Viva la Difference Night, did you forget?" Jervis prompted.

"...Is... it... Viva la Difference Night already?" Selina managed slowly, "Where does the time go?"

Meanwhile, while everyone watched Selina, Bruce took a heavy plate from the table and tossed it like a Batarang into Hugo Strange's head.

"Aunt Maud, despite the nondescript clothing, I know you won't mind being introduced to Bruce Wayne, of the Wayne Foundation."

Bruce shook Maud's hand, but eyed Jervis warily. That was an unusual introduction.

"And this is Selina Kyle, she's in... acquisitions."

There was a gaffaw from Roxy this time, and Selina very sweetly batted her on the head with her tiny hardcase handbag.

"Hand slipped," Selina cooed sweetly, "Sorry, Roxy."

"Roxy?" Aunt Maud raised her eyebrow.

"Oh, that's a nickname she picked up... in college... rocks! Alice studied *geology* before she went into library science... so they called her Rock-sy and Selina still calls her that because... they were sorority sisters."

The rogue audience almost applauded this magnificent whopper, so impressed were they with the effort Jervis was putting into each syllable. As lies went, it was an impressive tour de force.

"See, the thing is," Dinah mugwumped, yet again, about a name Barbara suggested for the guest list, "I'm not sure I can contact all these people."

"C'mon, Dinah, we can use our imaginations here," Barbara urged, "JLA distribution channels."

"I can't actually get in there, Barbara."

Barbara stared in horror.

"Why?"

"Birds of Prey! Takes up *too much of my time* and now I'm *no longer a full-member* of the League, so according to Diana, Queen Bee of the Watchtower, my access has to be approved case-by-case now."

Barbara rolled her eyes.

Then a solution presented itself.

Oracle was, herself, a full member of the JLA, but it wouldn't do to use the database for her own bridal shower. But there was another member of the bridal party on the JLA membership rolls..."

"Selina can get the list," Barbara declared happily.

"CATWOMAN! Catwoman can use the JLA DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS and I HAVE TO GET APPROVAL CASE BY CASE!" Dinah fumed. "SHE HELPED OUT TWICE!"

"Yeah," Barbara hedged, "but...well, you know...Batman.... Nobody was sure what the situation was there and... I guess everybody figured they weren't going to be the one to take her name off the computer..."

"Wonderful."

"You know what I think," Barbara chirped, "I think you should co-host the shower with Selina. And once we have everybody together, we make a point of how nice it is to be able to get together like this, more socially, and we need to do it more often, so let's keep the rolls open for invitations. Have more events like this. Gosh, somebody shouldn't have to get married for us all to get together. From what Selina says, the rogues do it all the time. Wouldn't it be nice if we could do stuff like that..."

"WHORE???" Ivy bellowed.

"SORORITY SISTERS???" Selina yelled.

"LIBRARIAN???" Roxy screamed.

"Mamma's Boy," Two-Face taunted.

"Getting into a slap-fight in front of Auntie Maud," Jervis complained.

"Somebody threw a plate at my head," Hugo Strange slurred.

The moment Aunt Maud retired to the ladies room, pandemonium had broken out at the Iceberg Lounge as everybody jostled for airtime to voice their grievance before she returned.

Only Sly and Bruce Wayne remained totally calm.

"We don't actually hire stunt people at the Wayne Foundation," Bruce told the bartender, quietly.

"We don't actually have a Viva la Difference Night," Sly confided in the billionaire.

"JER-VIS!" Aunt Maud bellowed, officially ending Open Share Time by dragging Gina, the washroom attendant, into the dining room by the ear. "I have learned things," Maud announced, red with indignation, "I have learned *monstrous* things from this young woman about the goings on in this club and the kind of people these are with whom you surround yourself!"

Jervis Tetch gulped, looked around like a startled deer, and then stammered, "But Auntie, whatever do you mean?"

"Mammasboy," Two-Face coughed; "Excuse us," Harvey apologized.

"That man," Maud pointed accusingly at the Penguin, "has betrayed your trust. Not only does he claim to own this establishment—"

"OSWALD!" Jervis turned on the Penguin with a what-can-I-do shrug as he wailed, "AFTER ALL I'VE DONE FOR YOU!"

"-he has had an indiscreet liaison with your fiancée."

"YOU TROLLOP!" Jervis wheeled on Roxy.

"Yeah," Dinah agreed with Barbara. "It's a shame we don't all get together more."

"Nonono," Selina was saying, holding up a hand to silence the rogues gathered around the Iceberg bar, "I got in and out of a police evidence locker tonight, I can get through this without help from any of you."

She gestured to Sly, who filled the shot glass sitting before her.

"Jervis Tetch," she began, "who is not the Mad Hatter, used to be an editor at Harper and Row and now runs a nightclub called the Iceberg, which is not a criminal hangout. He's engaged to Roxy, who is called Alice, Rocket, pronounced Roquet, who is not a criminal, but used to be a librarian and now works at the Wayne Foundation, which is very respectable, even though Bruce isn't wearing a costume because he forgot it's Viva la Difference Night." She downed the shot, there was a collective cheer, and money changed hands.

"I don't get it," Killer Croc said. There was a collective groan and more money changed hands.

"Next," Selina called out, admitting defeat. And Scarecrow took her place trying to explain the tangle to Croc.

Meanwhile across the room, sweat poured from Jervis's brow as he spun story after story trying to explain the latest revelations to Aunt Maud. Finally he joined the rogues at the bar.

"Selina," he whimpered, "come to the flat for a bit with Wayne. This place is too dangerous, but if I have to take her home - the only thing she likes there is this painting of a question mark. She thinks it's art. I can't BS about art. Please help me!"

Selina looked at him coldly.

Jervis looked to Bruce, who didn't look any warmer.

"C'mon, guys, I just had to break up with Roxy and fire Oswald. I'm desperate. HELP ME!"

"C'mon, Selina," Harvey urged, "one good favor deserves another. Or rather, one bad favor deserves a good one."

Bruce raised a disapproving eyebrow. "I'll want to hear about that later," he signaled in their secret sign language.

"You're bluffing," Selina countered.

He had the same look he had watching Ra's Al Ghul on The View. He was having a ball but wouldn't admit it. Which meant (God help us miserable sinners, Selina thought) they were going to the flat.

"This would be... a... meditation on uncertainty, I would say. Taking a familiar, commonplace image like the question mark and forcing us to... grapple with the complex... philosophical... abstract... ideas it represents."

I took a deep breath. The evidence locker was nothing compared to this. Breaking into Fort Knox would be nothing compared to this. Explaining true modern art to non-art lovers who say "my three year old could do that" is no simple feat, but trying to pass off a piece of Riddler kitsch as fine art, that requires some heavyduty footwork.

Outthinking Batman was easy compared to this—Speaking of which, was I getting any help at all from Mr. Twitch-smile? No, I was not.

It was *RIDDLER'S HIDEOUT* they fixed up! Nobody at the 'berg had mentioned that! We walked in and there were two walls covered in plants, just barely obscuring the signature lime green wallpaper. A third wall was a bookcase full of Harvey Dent's old law books, and the fourth was covered in posters from Roxy's old movies. There was a book on igloos sitting on the coffee table and a giant oil painting of a question mark over the mantle. Tell me who wouldn't laugh at that?

But did the guy with a trophy room full of this shit so much as blink? No reaction whatsoever. Thanks, Dark Knight. I owe you one.

Two. I owe him *two*, because Jervis decided to play host, offering us drinks and coffee - when he didn't have the slightest idea where anything was kept. So Bruce offered to "help" him. Any excuse to go snooping around, opening all Eddie's drawers and cupboards, no doubt. Wonderful, Batman finally got his inside peek into a rogue's private life other than mine - except it left me alone with Aunt Maud and the punctuation still-life.

The two of them, Bruce and Jervis, somehow managed to make coffee and returned with a tray just as I was running out of unanswered questions the painting invited us to reflect upon. Like: What is the sound of one hand clapping? Why am I here? and What's taking so long with that damn coffee?

With the arrival of the coffee, I was officially out of material - and apparently, so was everybody else. We sipped in awkward silence just long enough that it was almost a relief when the doorbell rang.

Almost.

There was the awkward matter of who it could possibly be and what they could possibly want.

The question mark painting was looking a mite more profound than I thought, especially when Maud asked Jervis if he was going to answer the door or not.

He did, muttering an obscenity cut short by the sight of Harvey escorting a sobbing Roxy Rocket.

"Jervis, forgive me, forgive me!" she cried, throwing herself at his feet.

"Hugo Strange has an Aunt Gladys," Harvey explained quietly to me and Bruce, "He is very sympathetic to Jervis's situation. He went to work on Roxy right after you left. 'Sticking by our own in time of need' and all that rot."

"Jervis, forgive me, please. It will never happen again, I'll be good from now on," Roxy went on, sobbing.

"Isn't she taking this a little far," I asked, somewhat nauseated.

"She's on a mission," Harvey agreed, "Hugo pushed her buttons pretty good."

"Please Jervis, please..."

"You know Roxy has a bit of an inferiority complex," Harvey continued, "not been among us very long, and being able to help an old guard criminal like Mad Hatter, I think Hugo put it in terms of 'earning her wings,'" Harvey concluded. "-or earning her horns," Two-Face corrected.

Then disaster struck. There was a jiggling sound from the door, it opened, and Edward Nigma walked in. He looked around the room, and you could read the thoughts clearly on his face: *Selina. What are you doing here? And Jervis. Harvey. Bruce Wayne. Large woman -Who are you? ...and WHAT HAPPENED TO MY WALLS?*

It wasn't necessary to read that last part on his face, because he said it out loud.

And I have to hand it to Jervis, who I would have written off as a flyweight a few hours earlier, but now recognized as the most creative and courageous improvisational liar of my acquaintance.

"This is my decorator," he declared without a moment's hesitation, "Edward Nigma, he goes by Enigma."

Eddie just blinked.

"My stuff," he stammered.

"Mr. Nigma, this is my Aunt Maud."

"My stuff," Eddie repeated. "That wall - and that one - and that one."

"You know how temperamental they are when they've put so much of themselves into a design. Eddie, not all the stuff worked out, so I'm sure you can get a *FULL REFUND, OK?*"

Hearing the magic word "refund," Eddie nodded.

If Jervis is half this impressive in the field, without the added indignity of a bawling Roxy Rocket clinging to his pant leg, I have no idea how Batman can deal with him—

“Jervis, please forgive me,” the dialogue from below resumed.

And that’s when it got weird.

“Alice, do stop that,” Jervis muttered, “I forgive you, just go over there and be quiet.”

“Roxy, what are you doing here?” Eddie asked, looking down.

Roxy rose from her knees, an actress whose scene was completed, and - in an inspired touch - she gave Jervis a light kiss on the cheek.

Now Eddie, it should be remembered, is particularly sensitive about mind control issues right now. He saw Roxy: on her knees, answering to “Alice,” and being submissive to Jervis. He jumped to the not-*entirely*-fantastic conclusion that she’d been hatted. So far, so good.

He jumped to the conclusion that she’d been hatted for some romantic rather than criminal purpose. Well, considering: Hatter, Kiss, “Alice” ...Again, I say: So far, so good. Not completely through the looking glass, as logic jumps go.

But! Then Eddie wheeled on *me*!

“And you just stand here and look at this like it’s nothing?”

He turned to Bruce!

“I can’t believe you approve of this.”

Maud assumed he was talking about the desecration of his decorating scheme, and she agreed that the plants were way too much but at least they obscured that hideous wallpaper, and the only object of real beauty in the room was that painting of a question mark.

Eddie wavered for a second.

“That’s true,” he brightened, “so few people really appreciate the cache of an unanswered question.”

For a second, I thought that was the end of it. Eddie wandered into a corner, then turned back, bewildered.

“Where’s my futon?”

Roxy gestured for him to join her on a window seat and, before long, he was searching her helmet and goggles for the mind control chip he was certain was there. I know because I heard her whisper “Stop pulling my hair” and Eddie answered “It’s for your own good.”

“She’s letting the decorator take liberties now,” Maud observed.

And where was Bruce during all of this? Standing there. Like it was a video of Ra’s Al Ghul on national television covered in papier-mâché with a yapping dog on his lap...

The phone rang. Things had gone so far at that point we all just looked at each other, everyone too stunned, panicked or overwhelmed to move to answer it.

It rang again, again, then there was a click.

“Riddle me this,” Eddie’s disembodied voice intoned, “What do you get when you cross a hive-dwelling insect with a yellow marshmallow Easter treat: BEEP.”

Jervis looked around frantically, but couldn’t find the phone.

::Hiya Eddie,:: a second voice cut in, ::It’s your HA-HA-HAR-LEY! ::

Now Eddie too joined the wild search for the phone.

:: Didja get my postcard? Paris was so fun, but they talk funny and you can't understand a word they say! Anyway, I just wanted to say, I heard you had trouble with Puddin' over the video we made... ::

Jervis and Eddie collided with each other before a small cabinet. Bruce casually opened the cabinet, picked up the receiver and spoke in his foppiest drawl:

"Hello... Yes... Yes... France. Aha. Yes. Puddin. Mhm. Mhm... Okay, I'll tell them. Goodbye::

He hung up, looked at Eddie, at Jervis, and then at me. When he spoke, it was a magnificent deadpan.

"She went to Paris and the Riviera with a French count. She's back now. Don't tell Puddin."

EPILOGUE

“Yawn. What’s that noise?”

“Laughter. She’s home.”

“Finally. Alone? Or with Bat-Bruce?”

“No Bat-Bruce. Another one. Twofoot with two shoes.”

“They all have two shoes.”

“This one has two different shoes.”

“Oh, this I’ve got to see.”

“Oh god” Selina was laughing, “if I was still doing Cat-Tales, that would’ve been good for a third act.”

“You could never capture ‘Aunt Maud,’” Harvey countered, mimicking her in a nasal falsetto, “Eddie? Video? Ha- Ha- Harley?”

“And what did Eddie say? ‘You see, the beauty of the unanswered question, so few people truly appreciate it.’”

“Look at that: two different shoes, two different socks. This guy’s a calico.”

“Something’s awfully funny.”

Harvey wiped a tear from his eye.

“And what was that nonsense she spouted back! ‘A meditation on uncertainty, taking a familiar image like the question mark, forcing us to grapple with the abstract ideas it represents...’”

“That, she got from me, actually,” Selina giggled.

“You came up with that crock of shit!” Harvey was delighted, “Man, we would have loved to see that.”

“I’m just glad now that Eddie didn’t hear me say it, considering how he took it from Maud: ‘It takes an extraordinary woman to understand the full meaning of the question mark.’ Jesus!”

“Yeah, that was scary. He really teared up; I think he’s in love.”

“Poor Jervis,” Selina cackled, and Harvey nodded and echoed, “Poor Jervis.”

When the laughter subsided, there was a strained silence. Then Selina spoke.

“Anyway, thanks for the lift. Bruce remembered an...”

“...an early meeting, I remember those. C’mon, Lina, I’m not stupid. He’d just been thrown out of Ed Nigma’s hideout in the company of Catwoman, Two-Face, Mad Hatter and Roxy Rocket, leaving god knows what going on between Riddler and ‘Aunt Maud.’ If he wanted to go home after that, it’s not necessary to invent a morning meeting excuse.”

“It was still nice of you.”

Harvey said nothing and the strained silence returned. Selina spoke tentatively:

“You didn’t flip for it, I noticed.”

Harvey bristled, then admitted: "No. We figured... we owed you... after...."

She smiled gently.

"We're okay then?"

She was heartbroken when, instead of answering the question at once, the coin came out.

°°TOY! SHINY! GIMME!°°

"ARGH! What the Fa-HEY! DAMNIT! That cat took our coin! That cat's a thief!"

Selina cackled merrily on the sofa.

"Well, duh, what do you expect? Harvey, sit down. You're not going to catch her."

"SHE TOOK OUR COIN! THAT FUCKING FURBALL TOOK OUR COIN!"

"Sit down, I'll get it later. I know where she'll hide it. But first," Selina stood, "you've got to deal with *me*, without the coin. Harvey. Look at me. Are we okay?"

Harvey looked in the direction Nutmeg had disappeared to with his coin, then back at Selina. "I dunno," he mumbled, then weakly croaked "We guess?"

Selina sighed sadly. Not much of an answer, but it would have to do.

°°You still sulking?°°

°°She took the round shiny away.°°

°°Never mind. Twofoot-calico is gone, and look what I got. Nip-nip.°°

°°From Bat-Bruce?°°

°°Y-EP°°

°°In boots?°°

°°Yep.°°

°°And you're not whining about your terrace and your planter and your flower pot?°°

°°Nip-nip.°°

°°You are so easy.°°

"Viva la difference night," Batman remarked, entering from the terrace with a twitch-smile, and gesturing with his cape.

"Thought you were so clever, didn't you, 'helping' with the coffee like that," Selina answered with a real smile. This was their first chance to talk freely since before the Iceberg.

"I was sorry to miss your treatise on the question mark."

Selina sighed, she was laughed out from the reminiscence with Harvey.

"I thought Roxy's was the most nauseating performance," she said instead of making another joke. "One more 'forgive me please forgive me,' I thought she'd start singing a country western song."

"C'mon, Kitten, what was she supposed to say, that she was swept off her feet by Penguin's charms? Or maybe the truth: that she got drunk on jello shots?"

“My God, it *is* a country western song.”

He sat back on her sofa, as he used to when the relationship first started to change and he began stopping in after patrol. Then he removed his cowl, as he never would in those early days, and laid it on Whiskers’s pillow.

“I’m afraid there is no option that doesn’t lead back to: she has all the good judgment of a stuntwoman bimbo that turned to crime for cheap thrills.”

“A-hem,” Selina picked the cowl off the pillow and handed it back to him, “She was not the only one to get sloshed at that party.”

“Will you never stop bringing that up?” he asked, pulling her into his lap.

“Make me,” she purred her answer.

∞Yawn. Are they still at it? I want to go to bed.∞

∞Nothing stopping you.∞

∞Look at that! Look what they’re doing! I’ll never get those indentations out of the pillow.∞