



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

#29

Cat Sales

Highland Games



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
HIGHLAND GAMES

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HIGHLAND GAMES

HARLEY'S DAY

The day began at 9:43 when the alarm clock blasted Puddin's favorite sound bite off the walls of the HA-HAcienda:

:: This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It's expired and gone to meet its maker. This is a late parrot. It's a stiff. Bereft of life, it rests in peace. If you hadn't nailed it to the perch, it would be pushing up the daisies. It's rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. This is an ex-parrot. ::

"Leggo my Eggo, HAHAHAHAAAAAAA!" Joker cried, swiping at Harley's wrists with a carving knife. After that, he chased her around the kitchen table, down the stairs and into a taffypull deathtrap that would one day pound Batman into batgoo.

"And your little dog, too!" he warned, plunging the knife into a bucket of silly putty he kept on hand for emergencies. Then he blew a kiss and returned upstairs.

By the time Harley got back to the kitchen, he had eaten her Pop-Tart and left, so she took the hyenas, Damien and Slobberpuss, out for a run. Puddin' liked to call them Bud and Lou, but anybody could see that Damien was a Damien and Slobberpuss was a Slobberpuss. For their part, the hyenas didn't care what their names were. Harley fed them, so they answered her voice. Joker kicked them, so they ran behind Harley when he called.

After walking the hyenas, Harley went shopping:

Crazy Glue (Mistah J. said not to EVER run out of Crazy Glue).

Fruit Loops, HoHos, DingDongs, and Spackle.

9 sacks of White Castle Burgers (Mistah J. said NEVER go Krystal;

Krystal cleans the grill!).

Ben & Jerry's: 6 pints of "Half Baked" for Mistah J,

and 1 pint Cherry Garcia Frozen Yogurt for her.

When Harley got back, she was surprised to find Puddin' was home already... And he was hysterical.

"I CAN'T SEE! I CAN'T SEE!!!!" he cried, "And I can't play the piano! I can't sing *Georgia on My Mind!* Where shall I go?! What shall I do?!!!"

"Sick 'em, Slobberpuss!" Harley called to the hyenas, thus concluding the consultation with her esteemed colleague. Why had she called Hugo Strange for a second opinion? He wasn't just a quack; he was a slimy quack, far more interested in her underwear than in tending to the patient. Her poor Puddin' was blind! And all that mannequin freak could think to talk about was underwear.

Speaking of which, she'd have to remember to warn Catty: since that picture of Batman and Catwoman appeared in the Gotham Post, it seemed that Hugo—who everybody knew had a pretty whacked Batman fixation—was dressing up his mannequin in purple.

Normally Harley wouldn't care about something like that, but it wouldn't be a bad time to make a little gesture where Catty was concerned. There was a story going around the Iceberg that Selina might be moving. If she was, that meant a primo apartment was about to become vacant and...

"Har-ley!" Joker called, "I'm going out. I'll need Bud and Lou for guide dogs."

"Ah, Puddin', I don't think it works like that. Guide dogs gotta be trained special."

"Nonsense! Just put dark glasses on them and give 'em a white cane."

"Put glasses on the dogs?"

"A little Crazy Glue and a little patience," Joker instructed.

"Whatever you say, Puddin'."

"Less patience and more glue!" Joker had ordered.

Well it worked. Kind of. Except now Harley was glued to the kitchen table. It wouldn't be so bad, she told herself. She could read—if someone brought a magazine to the table, at least she could turn the pages with her free hand. And she could eat. She could just reach the refrigerator if she pulled the table a few inches to the right. Of course, she would have to use the bathroom eventually, and that was going to be tricky...

::Twitterbringngng::

At that moment, the phone rang, and Harley added another item to the list of things she couldn't do glued to the table.

::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

She couldn't reach the phone.

::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

:: -click- HAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAA! Boy, did you get the wrong number! Leave your name and number at the sound of the shriek... No, please! Don't! Ahhhrghhhhhh!::

:: -beep- I hate that damn message, Harl. Pick up, will ya, it's Pam... Harley? Harley, are you there? ... Damn. Well, call me as soon as you get this. There's this Highland Festival in the paper; they must be stopped. They're tossing trees, did you ever hear anything so barbaric! Caber tossing, they call it. Only men could come up with something this perverse. We have to do something... Oh, and I don't know if you heard, but word at the 'Berg is Catty is moving. You know what that means? Her apartment. A Classic-6 on the Park, rent controlled. What's that expression: "Meow." Call me. ::

JOKER'S DAY

Joker's day began at 9:43 when the alarm clock blasted his favorite sound bite off the walls of the HA-HAcienda:

:: This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It's expired and gone to meet its maker. This is a late parrot. It's a stiff. Bereft of life, it rests in peace. If you hadn't nailed it to the perch, it would be pushing up the daisies. It's rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. This is an ex-parrot. ::

Ah, the Dead Parrot sketch. A Monty Python classic. One day, Joker would have to find that John Cleese and have him stuffed.

In Key West, they had something called Dead Parrot Wings at that delightful Cheeseburger in Paradise restaurant. But Joker never got around to trying them before that silly waitress made him take her hostage and those Jimmy Buffet Stormtroopers had him thrown into a dungeon and chained to a wall... It was good to get away from Gotham. But he'd missed all the news... well, all except for that story about Nightwing and Poison Ivy, HAHAHAHAAHAHAHAHA! It was such fun watching Harvey froth at the mouth that way. But there had to be other news he'd missed. He'd have to stop by the Iceberg and catch up.

For breakfast, Joker treated Harley to a spirited game of Leggo my Eggo, then set off on his day's mission: How to lure the Monty Python crew to Gotham City so he could meet John Cleese and have him stuffed? He seemed to remember that you could get entertainers to make appearances if you offered them money. There were some sorts of theatres and theatrical agents midtown near that... what was it called? The theatre district, that was it... so he headed there. Entering Gotham Times Square... Joker blinked. He felt a powerful sting in his eyes and they watered painfully.

There was—a billboard, three stories high. Gotham Post, it said in large black letters. And underneath was—it was—it was BATS! And he was—he was—WHAT WAS HE DOING TO BRUCIE'S GIRL!!!!

Before Joker could even process the horror before him, the same image, slightly smaller, was coming at him on the side of a bus! He dove out of the way into a newsstand plastered with dozens of the same picture, the horror, the bat—NOOOOOOO!

It all blurred, fuzzier, darker, fuzzier, until everything before him was totally black.

"Hysterical blindness," Dr. Strange declared, "Do you concur, Dr. Quinn?"

"Oh Puddin'," was Dr. Quinn's diagnosis, "and I just bought a new teddy!"

"Oh really?" Dr. Strange asked with interest.

"Sick 'em Slobberpuss!" Harley called to the hyenas, thus concluding the consultation with her esteemed colleague.

Harley the heartless didn't understand. Joker had to get to Brucie at once. He had to console his bestest buddy in his time of need. For that, he needed dark glasses, a white cane, and guide dogs!

At once!

To the manor, you huskies! To the manor, I say! HAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAA!

GORDON'S DAY

The adjustment from overworked Police Commissioner to retired gentleman of leisure was still not an easy one for James Gordon. The worst adjustment was being awake at six in the morning with no earthly way to get back to sleep and no earthly reason to get up. When he was working, he would never go to the office this early, preferring a late afternoon routine that allowed him to overlap some of the standard 9-to-5 workday, but also some of the nightshift when Batman was active. For that phase of Jim Gordon's life, six am was the middle of the night. But now, now this damn retirement schedule caused some shift in his metabolism. His body would fall asleep in front of the television at ten o'clock, and it seemed to think six am was the start of a new day.

Gordon grumbled his way to the kitchen and started coffee. Decaf, his doctor ordered. It was unnatural. Not that he needed the pick-me-up of caffeine. He was just grumbling how he was wide-awake. But it was the principle of the thing! Decaffeinated coffee: It was utterly against God's plan.

Two cups later, after he'd dressed, he examined the papers laid out on his desk. The Highland Games. Genealogy was the one activity he'd found to fill his time since retirement that brought him true satisfaction. His early research found the link to Clan Gordon easily enough, and he learned there was a network of family associations here in America, clustered around major cities like Gotham. The Gordon Clan in America was delighted to discover a descendent of such prominence as the former Police Commissioner of Gotham City. They promptly made him an officer.

The distinction brought some organizational duties, nothing that was beyond him after running an operation the size of the GCPD. The greatest responsibility was helping organize the Highland Games with the other clans. The games were a kind of heritage festival with traditional foods, music, folk dancing, pipe bands, a parade of tartans, crafts, demonstrations, and, of course, traditional Scottish sports: the sheaf toss, iron toss, hammer throw and the famous caber toss.

"A caber toss, that's like a tree trunk, isn't it? You want me to throw trees for distance? You got the wrong guy, Papa Jim, you want to be talking to Superman."

"Dick, ordinary men have been competing in this sport for generations. And it's not a tree exactly. It's more like a pole."

"A pole. How big?"

"18 feet long," Gordon admitted, "about 130 pounds."

Dick glared a glare learned from Batman, when he failed to complete a Zogger round in the allotted time, and from Alfred, when he fibbed about finishing his schoolwork. It had the desired effect. Gordon squirmed, then coughed.

"Er, they do cut them from tree trunks, I believe."

Dick grunted like his mentor.

"Why me?"

Gordon pulled out all the stops: It was the least Dick could do, having taken his little Barbara away. Dick had an obligation to give back to the family that gave him so much. And Gordon was so very proud to at last have "a son" to enter into these games that brought such joy to his people for so many generations. "Today, Richard Grayson, you are a Gordon!" And with that, he slapped a tartan down across his son-in-law's knees.

"A kilt!" Dick sputtered, unbelieving, "I have to wear a kilt???"

"Of course, sweetie," his wife chimed in, "all the athletes at those games wear kilts. It's been too long since the world has seen those knees, Wonderboy!"

Gordon showed himself out to sounds of "Barbara stop... the shorts were from my old circus costume... stop it... I mean it, that tickles.... sigh, where do I sign up?"

He smiled to himself. Only one more item on his To Do list for the festival, and that would get him out of the stinking city for an hour. From Barbara's apartment, there were several routes out to Wayne Manor, so Gordon chose the more scenic, across the Lee Street Bridge. It was a mistake. To get to Lee, he had to go through Gotham Plaza, and there was an enormous traffic snarl from some accident up ahead. By the time Gordon got to the orange cones and flares, there was only a shaken news vendor, the shattered remnants of his newsstand, and the front bumper of a crosstown bus lying on the sidewalk.

"The 27th Laird of Glencairn is officiating these Highland Games and you want Wayne Manor to put him up?" Bruce asked with a markedly batlike undertone.

Gordon nodded. The hint of disapproval was unexpected. He was used to asking whatever he needed, from either Bruce or Batman, and getting it without hesitation.

When he'd finally escaped the midtown traffic headaches, he'd found the trip out to Wayne Manor refreshing. Alfred brought tea and Gordon felt his worries were over. What he was sure was a mere formality, asking Bruce Wayne for a favor, made a pleasant excuse for a chat.

"Let me check something," Bruce growled quietly, then he called out "Oh Darling, would you step in here for a minute?"

Selina Kyle appeared a moment later. From the speed of her appearance, Gordon deduced that she had been in the next room. From her appearance itself: dressed in street clothes but with a leather whip tied around her waist like a belt, he concluded that she was in a "Catwoman" frame of mind.

"Selina, you wouldn't happen to be acquainted with one Galen MacDonald, 27th Laird of Glencairn, would you?"

"Never heard of him."

"Then Jim, Wayne Manor will be happy to play host for your guest Laird MacDonald."

They went on to discuss the games. Gordon thought he heard a derisive sniff from Selina when he announced Dick was competing.

After Selina excused herself, Gordon could not contain his curiosity.

"What's with the whip?" he asked.

"Well," Bruce seemed strangely embarrassed, "we've sort of... discussed the possibility of her moving in. And, eh, let's just say an activity has begun that is no less dear to the people of Gotham than caber tossing is to the Scots..."

"Jockeying for a better apartment," Gordon guessed.

"Precisely."

BRUCE'S DAY

Bruce's sleeping brow furrowed. His tongue felt his lower lip, searching for a lock pick... He was chained, hanging upside down, like Nightwing... A fuzzy sound slowly came into focus. Music. Vivaldi. E-major. His eyes flickered under closed lids and more information flooded in: The Four Seasons—Spring—first movement...

The dream faded—no chains—bed sheets of crisp Irish linen. He lay there, still drowsy, not comprehending, while some rebel corner of his subconscious filled in more detail: Spring Concerto, Vivaldi's Four Seasons—Boston Symphony Orchestra recording from the late 80s—Seiji Ozawa, conducting—Joseph Silverstein on violin...

His eyes popped open, and he wondered why his first conscious thought of the day was Batman's: "...playing on a Bang & Olufsen stereo across the hall and two, no, three rooms away."

He poured water from the bedside decanter and looked at the rumpled sheets that surrounded him. No Selina. And no breakfast tray. She and Alfred were both letting him sleep, getting back on a normal schedule after the prolonged hunt for Nightwing.

The Vivaldi gave way to an electronic pulse and a throbbing guitar... The Who—Teenage Wasteland... Was Dick home? By the time Bruce shaved and showered, the pulsing rock had segued back to Vivaldi. Bruce followed the sound to the guest suite across from his own bedroom. This suite of three rooms, originally a bedroom, boudoir and sitting room, had been emptied of furniture and only the farthest room was now occupied. Peering through the open doorways, Bruce saw the carpet had been removed and a tatami mat lay on the hardwood floor. He moved cautiously through the first two rooms to better see into the third: Selina was working out on an exercise machine. Before her stood a multilevel cat perch. On the top shelf, at eye height, sat a portable DVD player. Behind it on the wall hung the sleek stereo from whose speakers Vivaldi segued again, this time into... another throbbing guitar—Janis Joplin.

A twitch tugged Bruce's lip as he watched: Selina. Beads of sweat glistened on her face. More glazed her arms and chest as she moved. She was breathing hard. Little grunting cries escaped her lips with each exhale. After the strain of Hell Month, it was difficult not to think, at last, of a release.

"Good morning," he said, unaware until he spoke how the lustful thought brought his voice down an octave into the batgrowl.

"Morning, Handsome. Alfred know you're up?"

She never broke stride. Predictably. Common criminals might start at his sudden appearances. So did civilians. So did most cops. Even Gordon did it. Even Clark did on occasion. And Kyle could have a seizure. But Selina? He could count on one hand

the times she'd reacted with anything but this easy acknowledgement—"Hi, Handsome, nice night for a stroll." (20 stories above street level in the diamond district)—like she'd sensed him there all along.

His thoughts were interrupted by a respectful cough from the doorway. "Excuse me, Miss Selina—oh, good morning, sir; so good to see you up and about. Miss Selina, this object is beeping again." Alfred held out her cell phone on a little silver tray.

Performing one of Catwoman's more elegant fire escape-to-rooftop maneuvers, Selina reached out with one hand, taking the phone from Alfred, while the other hand arched forward to a bottle of water on the cat perch. The maneuver, while a triumph of feline grace, also afforded Bruce a glimpse at the Caller ID: *JervisHat*.

Bruce's jaw set; his muscles tightened. *HATTER! What could Mad Hatter possibly want with...*

"Catwoman's House of Pain," Selina purred into the phone.

What was she doing?

"...Mhm..." she went on, "How'd you hear that? ...No comment... That's a big IF, Jervis... and that'd be a Big NO..."

"Excuse me, sir," Alfred interrupted at the worst possible time. "Master Bruce, as you know, I strive to keep your calendar clear of, shall we say, *distractions* during the month of January..." Bruce strained to follow Selina's conversation while appearing to listen to Alfred's. "...This year, due to the unfortunate circumstances with Master Dick, I did not think it appropriate..." but ultimately he had to give in and give the butler his full attention, "...to begin scheduling appointments at the conclusion of Hel- on February 1st as usual. I wondered, sir, if you are now ready to resume your regular schedule?"

Bruce paused to reflect on how much Alfred really did for him, and how seldom he stopped to recognize that fact. By the time he'd dressed and reached the dining room, Alfred had prepared a schedule. Next to Bruce's place at the table lay a single sheet of paper from a looseleaf dayrunner. Beneath the printed date was a handwritten list of appointments.

11:00 a.m. Lucius Fox WE/F

concurrent: Fitting with Goldman Sr, Goldman and Sons tailors

out: Sterling Vintage Autos, by appt only, to view classic Aston Martin (James Bond car), newly restored

3:00 p.m. James Gordon

Bruce couldn't suppress a chuckle. Alfred's attention to detail was phenomenal. The purpose of the eleven o'clock entry was to see Lucius. Bruce would be resuming regular visits to the Wayne offices next week, and this meeting would get him caught up on Wayne Enterprises and Foundation business. Should Bruce require them, Alfred had supplied both a distraction and an escape hatch. A tailor chalking fabric and sticking pins during the meeting gave Bruce a plausible reason to be distracted without seeming genuinely stupid. Then this appointment to view a restored Aston Martin gave him a reason to end the meeting on short notice.

"Bloody hell!" Selina stormed in from the hallway, holding her cell phone from the antenna like a dead rat. "Nine voicemails at home, NINE—Jervis, Eddie, Barbara, Pam,

Josiah Arkham, Randolph Larraby, Derek Drake, *Gunshy Barton*—I don't even know who that is!"

Bruce started to tell her, then thought the better of it. There was a look in her eye that it wasn't worth messing with unless there was a half million dollars worth of someone else's jewels to recover.

"Thank you, Lucius. It was good of you to come out to the house for our meeting—and to put up with all that nonsense with the tailor. I'd ask you to stay to lunch, but I must be rushing off myself. I've an appointment at Sterling Autos downtown—a wonderful little Aston Martin, just restored. That was James Bond's car, you know."

Instead of the terse disapproval Lucius usually exhibited when a Fop excuse was uttered, he smiled agreeably and adjusted his glasses. "Not at all, Bruce. I understand completely. We've all been there; not enough hours in the day." He paused, and nudged his glasses again. "And of course with, eh, the changes and all."

"Changes?"

"Selina's, eh... going to move in, I heard."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Leslie Thompkins told me."

"Leslie? How did... never mind."

"Anyway, I was just wondering, has Selina promised her apartment to anyone?"

Bruce watched from a distance as Selina sat at the desk, scribbling on a notepad. He knew what she was doing. She'd measured her furniture, she'd measured the little rooms she'd taken over, and she was working out what to bring with her if she moved in completely.

If she moved in completely.

Bruce was too good a detective not to realize the truth about that exercise room.

The days and nights searching for Nightwing were difficult. They were long and strained and brutal, physically and emotionally. She had seen a part of him he never wanted her to know about. She had to deal with it on her own. She was isolated in his world and on an insane schedule. So she created a little space of her own, a corner for herself to cope.

It was a far cry from really moving in. She'd brought nothing personal. No clothes or furniture or—most telling of all—no cats. This space, she made to help her cope. Her cats were her center. And yet, all she'd brought of Whiskers or Nutmeg was that perch where she sat her water bottle while she worked out.

It was a far cry from really moving in, from making the manor her home. This was, at best, one of her trial runs. Casing a target, mapping out the guards' routine, the location of alarms and security cameras, before she'd set foot on the premises—before she'd commit to anything he could nail her for.

And now something had gone wrong; she'd missed something... and he was the one that had to tell her.

"Add Lucius Fox to the list of hopefuls, Kitten."

She acknowledged the statement with an angry hiss.

"I'm running out of ways to say 'Bite me.'"

"He, eh, *did* mention how he heard about it. Leslie Thompkins. She found out from Dr. Bartholomew. Bartholomew seems to be the crossover point from the Iceberg/Arkham set to 'upstanding citizens.'"

Two orbs of wickedly angry green glared up at him. He knew that phrase would get her. She had no idea how sexy she was when she seethed.

"And did your deductive prowess *also* work out how the Iceberg crowd found out?"

His lip twitched. There were times, when a villain taunted him like this, that it was a positive pleasure to rub a their face in the simple thing they'd overlooked. This was one of those times.

"Oh yes. From Nick. You know, your doorman: holds the door, offers to help get the exercise machine to your car, feeds your cats the many days in a row you don't go home because you spend the night here."

"I know who Nick is," she spat, "how does any of that get to the Iceberg? I take a tatami mat out to my car, Nick offers to help. I say I can manage, thanks anyway. Even if he works out from that that I might be moving..." she trailed off as realization dawned.

"Selina, you live on the park, Upper East Side. It's an upscale neighborhood. You don't think the likes of Penguin and Ivy and Scarecrow would ignore those buildings filled with millionaires just because..."

"Jervis hatted my doorman?" she asked flatly.

Bruce nodded.

Selina massaged her temples.

"Ok. Nick figures out I'm moving. Nick tells Jervis. Jervis—"

"—tells many, many people."

"That does it," Selina got up, left the room, and returned a moment later whip in hand. She tied it around her waist like a belt as she decreed: "Next person to ask for my apartment gets flayed."

When the doorbell rang mere minutes after Jim Gordon left, Bruce assumed his visitor had forgotten something. He answered the door himself, and—

"BRUCIE!"

—gagged. Before Batman's reflexes could toss his assailant into the hedges, Bruce found himself —GAG— being hugged.

"Brucie, it's terrible. I came as soon as I heard!"

Forcing down the bile, Bruce managed to extract himself from Joker's clutches and neatly entangle the clown in his hyena leash.

"Umph—Ouch. Brucie, help me up, would ya. Boy, these floors are hard."

With a madman like Joker, it was always risky making assumptions. But the clown was directing his statements to a hat stand, holding out his hand for it to help him up. It was always risky making assumptions with Joker, but it looked to Batman like his nemesis couldn't see.

"Master Bruce, I heard the doorbell and... oh my word," Alfred gasped.

“John Cleese!” Joker howled, hearing an English accent, “HAHAHAHAAAAAA! Now that’s what I call a dead parrot—Where’d he go?”

Unable to stand the spectacle of Joker crawling around on all fours in the Wayne Manor entranceway, chasing after his butler and muttering Monty Python quotes, Bruce pulled the Joker to his feet and shoved him into the closest sitting room.

“What’s this about, Joker?” he asked in a voice not entirely free of batmenace.

“Ooohhh Brucie,” Joker wailed, remembering the reason for his visit, “I came as soon as I heard—I came as soon as I saw—and what I saw—THAT FIEND!—the horror—the purple—and then it all went black. We’re going to blow up that billboard, Brucie, you and me. As soon as I find it again. To put a picture like that up there for all the world to see. A man like you, upstanding citizen, some faceless manbeast takes your woman and then they rub your nose in it! What a world, Bruce! What a world. There’s no *decency* anymore. Well, never you mind, Brucie; we’re going to fix it all. We’re going to set the world right! We’re going to blow up that billboard—and that bus with the bitchin’ right hook. Never turn your back on a bus, Bruce. They kick. They kick hard.”

While this fevered rant raged on, Bruce performed several tests that assured him Joker wasn’t faking. He was truly blind. Bruce took out a pen and pantomimed jamming it into his own temple. No reaction from the Joker. He waved his hand in front of Joker’s face, then switched it over to an obscene gesture. Still no reaction. Then, the ultimate test: He threw a punch toward Joker’s nose. Not even a flinch.

As to what Joker was saying? Batman had more experience with the mad clown than anyone in the world. He’d even performed the unpleasant exercise of trying to “get inside Joker’s head” on a number of occasions. Understanding how an enemy thinks is vital to predicting their actions. But Batman would have to admit, even with all that expertise, this gibberish made no sense.

“Anyway, we’re going to blow up the billboard, and blow up the bus, and then we’re going to kill the Bat. Yes indeed, he’s gone too far this time. You let me handle that part, lad, you don’t have the touch. And then you’re going to get her back. That little lady wants a very serious talking to. No wait, FIRST you get her back, THEN we kill the bat. He must live to see it, Bruce. He must live to see you win her back!”

Of course, while he had logged more hours of Joker-combat than anybody, there were others, Batman would have to admit, with more experience dealing with the clown ‘informally.’ And one of those others was on the premises now.

“Selina,” he called, “Kitten, would you come in here for a minute?”

“Still,” Joker said thoughtfully, “even if we don’t kill Batman yet, somebody has to die. You can’t just go plastering the city with disgusting pictures of some other guy liplocking Bruce Wayne’s girl. Not on my watch. No, no, no. Somebody has to pay.”

“You bellowed?” Selina said from the doorway then she inhaled sharply as she took in the scene. Bruce pointed to Joker then signed “We have company.”

She rolled her eyes, but put on a cheery voice.

“Hi Jack! What’s up?”

“We’re going on a killing spree at the Gotham Post!” he announced.

“Cool!”

SELINA'S DAY

The day began at seven. He was moaning. The five o'clock nightmare. The 5 am nightmare at 7—his sleep schedule was still off-kilter. With practiced skill, Selina lifted the sleeping hand clenched into a fist and eased it open like the pressure-catch on a Mattson safe. Touching her fingertips to the soft flesh of the palm, she rubbed light circles and whispered "Easy love, you're all right. It's only a dream. You're safe, Bruce. The alley was years ago. You're safe at home."

There was no way to tell if the whispered assurances did any good, but she liked to think so. It had to help if some part of him knew he wasn't alone.

It was late enough to get up. With Catwoman's stealth, she eased from the bed without waking him, changed into a leotard, and slipped into the hall.

"Good morning, Miss Selina," Alfred greeted her as soon as she'd closed the bedroom door, "I trust you slept well."

"Very well, thank you Alfred."

"May I bring you some juice or coffee?"

"Nothing, thank you," she said, crossing the hall. This much had become routine in the last week of the Nightwing search. Frequently, she was up when Bruce was not, and vice versa. Rather than bring a breakfast tray, Alfred set up fruit and danish in the dining room for them to eat in their own time. And yet, he also managed to appear, somehow, soon after she got up, whenever she got up, offering juice and coffee. He offered, she refused, and that was that. Except today, he followed her into the suite and coughed.

"Excuse me, Miss Selina, if I may say, you've become something more than simply a frequent guest at the manor. If there is some particular refreshment you would prefer..."

Selina Kyle was not easily embarrassed. She was a woman who could wrap her body in tight leather and banter hardened crimefighters into stunned silence. Yet somehow, this simple question brought color to her cheeks.

Part of it was Alfred himself. There was something about his manner at times like this; it reminded her of Bruce. In fact, no, it reminded her of *Batman*, Batman at his most rigid and insistent. "If there is some particular refreshment you would prefer..." It might have been worded as a request from a kindly family servant, but it was no such thing. She was just put on notice that she was now part of the household and expected to... to do what exactly? ...to contribute to his routine in some way, she supposed.

"...If you are not disposed to partake of a large breakfast before you exercise, Miss, I could bring you a protein shake or even a chilled bottle of water."

Catwoman had a sixth sense that tingled when the Dark Knight was near. Quite different is the sense all women have when their body is being ogled. When a woman looks like Selina Kyle, that sense becomes highly refined from regular use. It was this

sense that sounded now. Not the Dark Knight tingle at all. Someone was looking at her ass. Somehow, she didn't think that someone was Alfred.

"Good morning," said a deep voice.

Catwoman's Rule #12 demanded she answer with a cheery "Morning, Handsome. Alfred know you're up?" but at the same time she twisted her grip on the handlebars, forcing a little more tension on each stroke.

She wasn't pissed—not exactly—but still.

Fact is, even though their relationship was unusual in many respects, in one or two ways they were still *a man* and *a woman*. And no matter what the history, a woman doesn't necessarily want the man she's sleeping with to see her in sweaty, grunting, hair-frizzed workout mode.

Plus...

That guttural growl of his was unmistakable. In a vault, it might mean "Drop it, Catwoman. This ends now!" but anywhere else, it meant "Here, kitty-kitty." She was working out! She was sweating! She was HOT! She had a body temperature of 412 degrees and he wanted to come piling on another 98.6!

Men!

:: You have nine new messages ::

-beep- 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe; the Cheshire Cat is moving sayeth the Jabberwock, moving to mimsy borogoves, and that does leave her rent controlled penthouse up for grabs now doesn't it, Catty? Call me!

-beep- Riddle me this, Lina! Who has the best apartment in Gotham City? Who is her dearest friend? Who gave her a hand up when she first put on a mask, hm? Who never once forgets her birthday? Who got her those exquisite antique tarot cards in that beautiful carved puzzle box?

-beep- Selina, my dear. Pamela. We had such fun the other night at the Iceberg, I wondered if we could get together again. We don't see enough of each other, Selina—why with my living *in* the park, and your apartment being *right there*—RIGHT ON THE PARK—with that big glorious terrace looking out over all the trees—we *have* to get together more often, Selina. Call me! We'll do lunch.

"Bloody hell," Selina whispered.

-beep- Miss Selina Kyle, yes? You don't know me; my name is Dr. Josiah Arkham. Harvey Dent is one of my patients and he happened to mention...

Bruce's meeting with Lucius gave Selina a perfect opportunity to catch up on her e-mail. It, like everything else, had taken a backseat to the search for Nightwing.

She took her laptop up to the suite of rooms on the second floor. There was a phonejack along the east wall; her desk would go over there. She sat on the floor and started to plug in the laptop, then stopped. Her nose twitched. It felt... funny.

Rather than continue, she went across to Bruce's room. The clothes she'd ordered in Paris had arrived. All the boxes stacked in the little dressing room off the closet. She hadn't touched them. It was time. She opened the first, a Chanel suit, and tried it on. Then the Balmain gown. They too felt... funny. She didn't buy them. She didn't steal

them. She didn't buy them with money she stole. *He* bought them. Wearing clothes bought with Bruce Wayne's money, it wasn't what the couturiers called "a snug fourreau fit."

Of course, the shopping spree *was* a gift. Gifts were allowed. The cat pins were a gift. But the cat pins did not entail her going into Chanel and Balmain and having saleswomen fawn over her because her purchases would be billed to Wayne-comma-Bruce, Gotham City, USA.

She put the clothes away, retrieved her laptop and took it downstairs. She set it up in Bruce's study, like she always had in the past. She'd just started downloading e-mails when Alfred popped in. He was serving tea in the North Drawing Room for Master Bruce and a guest and thought she might enjoy a cup. He left the cup—mixed with a splash of milk no sugar, just how she liked it—and an orange scone—her favorite—next to her elbow.

Unable to ignore it, she sipped with a deliberately absent air while she looked over the e-mails. 40 new messages. She scrolled, looking for any subject lines of interest. There were 3:

From: Dick Grayson <D.Grayson@oraclesecure.bludhaven.net>

Re: Did I hear that right?

Hey Selina, I know I had a bump on the head, and I know these are good painkillers Dr. Leslie has me on, but I could have sworn I heard you and Babs whispering something about you moving in with B.

You know how happy I am about you two. I really am, Selina. He's a new man. SO anyway, I was thinking—you remember that time back in the day—museum—you played dirty. You know the time I mean. I was young and inexperienced and you took advantage of a young boy with a crush. And you had a whip!

They do say a guy never gets over his first crush. Sigh.

So ah, who gets your apartment??? :)

"Oh Darling," a deep voice called from the next room, "would you step in here for a minute?"

After listening to as much as she could stomach of Jim Gordon's talk of the Highland Games, Selina returned to her laptop.

From: G. Mariposa <Mariposa@GothamAnimalRescue.org>

Re: "Free to good home"

Ms. Kyle:

Several years ago, your preserve, The Catitat was good enough to take in four of the leopards we rescued from a cage hunt in Texas. I write today because we are trying to place no fewer than 20 tigers and cubs from a failing zoo in the Kurac which is simply unable to provide adequate space and care for these beautiful creatures. I know small, private preserves such as yours must budget carefully...

She closed the e-mail without reading further. Twenty cats? The Catitat wasn't large enough to take more animals. The only reason she could take the leopards last time was because Jason Blood hired her to filch the Scrolls of Delataire from the Museo

d'Magiques. That bought an additional ninety acres and the services of an extra groundskeeper.

And the time Mariposa brought her a cougar the FEDs had seized guarding a drug lord's garage in Miami, Blood showed up again. That time, he wanted a jeweled sword from a private collector refusing to sell. Somehow, whenever she needed money for the Catitat, Jason Blood came into her life.

The hairs on the back of Selina's neck quivered and chilled as she scrolled down the inbox, knowing what she would see.

"Speak of the devil," she whispered, hovering her cursor over the words:

From: Jason Blood <defluo_animus@dis.net>

Re: What's New Pussycat

Eerie. The man was eerie. She had liked Jason from their first meeting. Despite the fact that he introduced himself as "a demonologist," something told her not to dismiss him as a kook. His voice was quiet, cultured, polite even—but there was an edge of steel beneath it. His glare spoke volumes. This, she had known as if an unseen spirit whispered the words in her ear, was a dangerous man. She hadn't flinched at the revelation. She liked her men on the dark and dangerous side.

"Kitten, would you come in here for a minute?"

Selina laughed out loud. Dark men with precious timing. She strode across the hall, in a good mood for the first time today. "Kitten" he had called for, and Kitten decided it was time to play.

"You bellowed?" she asked with mock-scorn a split second before registering the scene... Joker? Here? Fuck.

~~We have company.~~ Bruce signed.

No kidding. Fuck.

She plastered on her humoring-Joker smile and braced for the atrocity *de jour*. "Hi Jack! What's up?"

"We're going on a killing spree at the Gotham Post!"

"Cool!" she blurted, ignoring the deathglare from Bruce.

~~Behave,~~ he warned like the killjoy he was.

~~By the way,~~ he added, ~~laughing boy is blind.~~

"Got any snacks?" Joker asked, chewing on an ashtray. Then his head snapped up. He looked in Selina's direction like he'd just processed her arrival.

"YOU!" he roared, pointing with the ashtray, "Faithless hussy! You've got a nerve to show your whiskers around here!" Leading with the ashtray, he charged the space next to her and ran into the wall. "That'll teach her," he muttered, staggering back to the chair.

"Let's try that again," Selina purred, nonplussed. "Hi Joker, what's shaking?"

He ignored her pointedly.

"So anyway, Bruce, stop me if you've heard this one. There's this guy, right, he's seeing this girl. And this girl is *drop dead*—not like 'Harley bring the shotgun' drop dead—but drop dead gorgeous. And this guy and this girl, they're doing well, seen in all the right places, known by all the best people. HAHAHAHAAAA. And then, alas, one fateful day, the chicken crosses the road and gets mowed down by a number seven bus. And on the side of that bus is a picture of Batman with his hand up your girlfriend's tights, my friend. Moral of the story? The chicken looked both ways!

Don't talk to me about justice. DEAD CHICKENS IN THE STREET! Is that any way to run a city? Dead. Chicken. Roll it in flour, little salt and pepper, fry it up. Good eatin'. That's what I'm saying. Eeeecchht... can't... breathe."

Bruce did nothing to intervene when the whip snaked around Joker's throat, nor when Selina took a chunk of his hair and slammed his head into the coffee table.

"Do I have your attention, Jack?" she asked sweetly.

"Eeeecchht."

"Good. You are alluding to a picture, I believe?"

"Eeeecchht."

"Recently seen in print?"

"Eeeecchht."

"Now above that picture, there were words."

"Eeeecchht."

"Those words said what?"

"Eeeecchht."

"Right. Gotham Post. And who was it last year at this time said you were dead?"

"Eeeecchht."

"Gotham Post again, hmm. And who was it that said Harley was frenching Slam Bradley at Lot 61?"

"Eeeecchht."

"Yes indeed, Gotham Post again. Seeing a pattern here? And, oh yes, who are the journalistic giants that announced Azrael is dead and reincarnated as a sacred gourd in Yoruba?"

"Selina, I hate to break in," the Fop interrupted, "but these examples could go on forever, and his air supply won't."

"Eeeecchht."

"Oh that's okay, we're almost done, aren't we, Jack?"

"Eeeecchht."

"I thought so. So who do we know better than to believe when they come up with this ridiculous shit?"

"Eeeecchht."

"That's all I wanted to hear. Glad we straightened that out. Because of course, if we didn't, you could go breaking one of my rules about you-know-who, and then, Joker, my pet, I might get angry."

"Eeeecchht."

CHAPTER 2: MEET JASON BLOOD

In the fourteen hundred years since Merlin made him immortal, Jason Blood had gradually ceased to be an Englishman. He was, he told himself, a citizen of the World.

He *had* sworn allegiance to his King, to Arthur, the ultimate and the only English King in his mind. But even a knight's oath could only bind for so long. When he swore that oath, he swore as a mortal man. He pledged a mortal lifetime, and that promise he more than made good. He could not know the demands of service would entail making him an immortal in order to cage a demon.

*You thought, oh keeper mine,
These Highland Games would cheer?
Transplanted Scots are asinine.
And look, a souvenir.*

A rhyming demon, no less.
Something amusing, Etrigan?

He thought the question, knowing the demonic laughter would be his only answer. Etrigan, the Demon with whom he shared existence. His curse.

What the agent of Hell found so amusing, Jason knew he would find out soon enough.

Fourteen hundred forty three years ago, Jason Blood had ceased to be an Englishman. But today's excursion made him feel otherwise. He felt nostalgic. The music of pipe bands droned in the distance—not one band, not one song, but several bands playing at once. It was a long, long time since Jason Blood heard such a sound.

He strolled past booths selling steak and kidney pie, Cornish pasties, Scotch eggs and haggis. It was a long time since he had smelled those aromas.

Jason lived chiefly in Gotham, Seattle, Buenos Aires, Rome, Tokyo and St. Bart's. When he got back to England at all, it seemed he was either shuttling between Heathrow Airport and Gatwick, or else immersed in some business that permitted no more indulgence than a hurried sandwich from a London TGI Friday's. He never made it into the country to discover signs such as this:

Cream Teas
Shortbread
Scones w/ Devonshire Cream
Crumpets like Mum used to make
India or China Tea
\$5

For a hardened warrior made cynical through centuries battling evil while bonded to a demon, Jason Blood felt more buoyant and hopeful than he had in years.

“Red, I’m confused.”

“What else is new?” came the snide reply.

Harley sighed and continued walking up the hill towards the fairgrounds. She was used to being shut out of the master plan. She knew Poison Ivy was here, and she knew Poison Ivy was pissed. But specifics were not forthcoming.

The first scheme Ivy *had* shared with Harley: She would begin by enslaving the Grand Marshal of this hideous event. The games were to be opened, they had learned, by one Laird Galen MacDonald of Glencairn, come to Gotham especially to wave at a parade of bagpipes and declare these Highland Games officially open, [Huzzah!]. Ivy thought it would be most fitting if, instead of declaring the games officially open (Huzzah!), he publicly condemned them for promoting the cruel slaughter of plant life, and then did penance by signing all his twenty-seven generations of wealth over to the Wilderness Warriors.

It was, she thought, a good plan. Then they learned that Galen MacDonald was staying at Wayne Manor, the honored guest of Bruce Wayne.

The plan, suddenly, looked less viable.

Catty.

It was not a good time to piss off Catty. Not if she was about to vacate that beautiful rent-controlled penthouse with that enormous terrace overlooking all the trees of Robinson and Gotham Central Parks. Pamela enjoyed living in the park proper, certainly. It was her natural element. But as much as she liked to believe herself a humanoid plant, there were times she wanted to bed down on 300-count Egyptian cotton, not topsoil and mulch. With Catty’s place, she could give up the greenhouse and have a delicious indoor retreat of her own that hung suspended like a floating cloud over her beloved oaks. *And*—if she had indoor digs, she would not only be able to provide for her orchids and other hothouse vegetation, she would have a place for Harley. She simply must get Harley out of that madman’s Ha-Hacienda.

So enslaving Galen MacDonald was dropped to Plan B.

“There can be only one.”

Jason Blood looked at the bumper sticker in disgust as more demonic laughter rung in his ears. His delight with the quaint homey aspects of the Highland Games faltered when he found the merchandise booths. Clan tartans and emblems were to be expected, and in this day and age that meant mugs and mousepads as much kilts and tams. Books on history and folklore were to be expected as well—and as with the food, the scope was broader than Scotland alone. Blood, always a history buff, eagerly perused volumes on the histories of Ireland, England, and Wales. Unfortunately, interspersed with the legitimate histories, Blood began finding curious volumes of “Druid Poetry,” “Celtic Tales,” and “Lost Wisdom of the Goddess”.

Then came the final horror: movie merchandise. This was not some Renaissance Faire or theme park, and Blood had come confident that there would be no children playing dress up in improbable armor, swinging styrofoam broadswords like softball bats and calling themselves knights! He hadn’t realized movies like *Braveheart* provided an “in” for the sale of novelty swords and shields. And he especially hadn’t

figured on this final horror: a movie called *The Highlander*, an immortal warrior—who just happened to be Scottish.

I am Duncan McCloud of the Clan McCloud.

So sure, so proud, and so well-endowed,

was Etrigan's comment, in between bouts of more mocking laughter.

Jason sniffed and left that booth, only to be assaulted by the sight of a soccer mom in the robes of an Acadian alchemist, hocking Enya CDs, scented candles, and "witch oil."

He stomped off in disgust. Why did the children, the ignorants and the dimwits always manage to—

"Jason? Jason Blood? You are back in Gotham City!"

"Miriam?"

Jason looked quizzically at the vendor that called to him, a small woman with half-moon glasses and a mass of graying hair that always escaped its neat, prim bun. It was Miriam Nash, proprietor of *The Curiosity Shop*, one of the finest covert magic shops in America. Jason sidestepped the soccer mom alchemist and went to the booth called *Crystals of Avalon*.

"Miriam, what is this? You run the best magic shop east of New Orleans. What on earth are you doing peddling crystals to New Age kooks?"

"It's nice to see you too, Jason, after so long. You're looking well. In answer to your question, I am a businesswoman. I can hardly stay in business selling you \$1.29 of bobble root twice a year."

Poison Ivy's second master plan was ambitious, to say the least. She could speak to plants of all varieties, she could command the smaller kinds to move about and do her bidding. With care, she could even train large, specially bred specimens like the flytraps to follow her commands. But you didn't just walk up to a tree and order it into battle. Even she could not approach a forest of 200-year-old elms and tell them to charge. Getting trees to move at all took a special kind of persuasion, and getting them to actually attack might just stretch her influence past the breaking point.

To make matters worse, when she tried telling Harley her concerns, her devoted sidekick *LAUGHED*. Poison Ivy did not like laughter under any circumstances, but Jokeresque laughter was the worst, and Jokeresque laughter aimed at her was intolerable.

"Something funny?" she pronounced with a raised eyebrow.

"Just the idea itself, Red, the fighting trees. Like in that *Lord of the Rings* movie, *The Two Towers*."

Poison Ivy had not seen *The Two Towers*, simply based on the title. Two-anything was always bad news for her.

And now it turned out this odious motion picture with two in the title had scenes like Harley was describing of warrior trees avenging the destruction of a forest. It was too much. She couldn't possibly associate herself with such a plan now.

The enslavement of Galen MacDonald was relegated to Alternate Plan C.

Tree Rampage—Plan B.

And Plan A? Still, she had no Plan A.

Dick Grayson stood on the playing field, resplendent in his Bludhaven PD sweatshirt and Clan Gordon kilt. He held a pitchfork and looked down at the burlap bundle for the sheaf toss. He poked it, then looked up at the pole. It was a warm-up period, getting the feel of the field, allowing family to shoot video, local papers to snap photos. Instinctively, Dick slipped into stand-up mode.

"I can see how this sport got started," he told the other athletes, "Two lads, one lass, a bottle o' scotch and a bale o' hay: 'I bet I can throw this higher than he can.'"

There was a round of rewarding laughter and then—a wolf whistle. Dick turned in dread, already knowing what he would see: Roy.

"Before you say something inappropriate," Dick warned, wagging a finger at his fellow Titan's nose, "I would point out that there are sixteen strong men on this field who are *on this field* because they're the kind of men who throw trees for fun. And they are all wearing kilts. Now, what did you come here to say to me?"

"Just came to wish you luck, man," Roy smiled, offering his hand.

Dick raised an eyebrow. That was... odd.

A fine diversion, these games, you thought.

Indeed, your hunch was true.

You're not alone, despise-ed sot.

From others here shall fun ensue.

What Ho, a Knight, but not like thee,

And a sorceress facsimile,

That feline whom you so admire

And best of all, delish, hellfire!

Jason tuned out the demon's taunts as best he could. Whatever had Etrigan worked up, he would learn soon enough.

"Jason Blood, the man, the myth, the legend."

Jason turned with a smile that, for once, expressed pleasure rather than malice. That greeting was unmistakable, as was the rich purring voice that produced it.

"Selina Kyle, what a surprise. Does this mean you've considered my offer and are so eager to accept, you couldn't wait until dark for Catwoman to come see me about it?"

"Afraid not," she laughed it off as if he were teasing. "I had no idea you'd be here. A friend of a friend is competing in the games. This is just a coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidence," Jason said sincerely.

"Well... tough," she answered.

That was her way. In the adventures they'd shared, Jason had never seen Catwoman lose that easy manner, and their adventures had included supernatural episodes that would shake most mortals' equilibrium. Of course, she'd never learned about Etrigan, thank God. As far as she knew, he was just an expert on the occult with enough money to hire her from time to time. If they continued long enough, she would eventually notice, as Miriam had, that he didn't age. Then she would either accept it, as Miriam did, or start finding reasons to avoid him, like Nicole, and Pierre, and Victor, and a hundred others.

"Come and watch the games with us," Selina was saying. She pointed to risers beside the playing field. Jason winced. Much as he liked the lady, he was a loner, and

the family atmosphere of this festival was starting to grate. The prospect of sitting with a merry band of her “friends of friends” was not appealing.

“Perhaps later,” he said with the crisp bow of another era, and walked off.

*A lady’s man, methinks,
would have chased the little minx.
Shut up, Etrigan.*

Stephanie Brown’s mother was Scottish and proud of it. Her father, Cluemaster, was a trivia hound. Result: Stephanie had more information at her disposal about Highland sports than even Barbara could scrounge from the internet.

“So the caber isn’t really thrown,” she told the little cluster of spectators at the grandstand, “it’s more like it’s flipped over, and it’s not for distance, it’s for accuracy. You want to come as close to landing in a twelve o’clock position as you can.”

Dick approached from a circle of athletes.

“Steph—Coach, half a minute,” he said, pulling her aside to the awe of the spectators. “You didn’t brief me on that one.” He pointed to a small circle of men holding a large boxweight by a metal ring, swinging it between their legs, and then over their head.

“Oh, that’s the iron throw,” she said.

“The. Iron. Throw.” He repeated each word distinctly.

“Dick, it’s just like the sheaf toss: they set the highbar, everybody makes their throw, whoever clears it goes on to the next round, then they raise the bar higher...”

“It’s a freaking block of iron!”

“It’s the same principle as the sheaf!”

“It’s a block of iron! How much does that thing weigh?”

“56 pounds.”

“56 pounds. And I’m supposed to swing that monster between my legs—I wouldn’t do that in the tights, but like this! Hoping for what, enough momentum so when I throw it over my head, it doesn’t kerplunk right back down into my skull like Harvey Dent’s boot!”

“Dick, what do you want me to say? It’s the iron throw, that’s how it goes.”

“Okay. Steph, I’m going back in there because I haven’t figured a way out of this yet, but I want you to go back up there and deliver a message to Bruce when you see him. Tell him, what I said about Zogger that first night, I take it back. I take it all back.”

*So Madness has a girl.
How quaint, how sweet.
About to drop her custard swirl,
Upon your clumsy feet.*

“Oops, hey, look where you’re going, Buddy. Look at that, you got my lunch all over your shoes! Now I gotta go back and get another one, and I’ve already lost sight

of Red, and we're gonna miss the start of the—Hey, look at your hair! Wicked dye streak. That's so completely fresh—"

"Silence," Jason said firmly, staring down into Harley Quinn's eyes. "Your friend who told you to use nailpolish remover to unstick yourself from the kitchen table..." He turned, gazing slowly and methodically across the crowd, "...you will find by traveling down that path. When you reach the demonstrations with the sheep dog, you have gone too far. Turn around, and in the yellow tent on your left, you will find your friend 'Red.'"

"I will?" Harley asked in wonder.

"But it would be better if you did not. You will wind up back in Arkham by nightfall no matter what. If you go there now, voluntarily, to be with your Mr. J, you will suffer considerably less injury."

"Freaking now," Harley squeaked. "Going away," she said, backing away slowly. "Bye, bye now," she waved, "See you later, scary freaky person."

"That's my studmuffin!" Barbara called from the Wayne-Gordon enclave beside the grandstand. "Does my champion have the best knees going or what?"

Selina looked sideways at Stephanie, Stephanie looked sideways at Cassie, Cassie looked sideways at Galen McDonald—climbing the stairs to the grandstand, his body language and weight distribution informing her he had a flask with at least 12 oz of liquid fastened beneath his kilt. Cassie looked back at Stephanie who looked back at Selina who looked back at Barbara.

"You're all jealous," Barbara winked, then she pulled Selina aside to talk quietly. "Where did all the men go, anyway? I mean, I know Dick and Dad are both getting ready to march in the opening ceremonies."

"Tim is with Cecily in the bleachers," Selina answered. "Officially, he thought it would be better if there were no outsiders around so we could, you know, *speak freely*."

"And unofficially?"

"They're avoiding Stephanie."

"Ouch, that's a little petty, isn't it?"

Selina raised an eyebrow, then explained, "Well, that depends on your point of view. It seems Steph was doing the 'ethnic pride' thing earlier, brought them some of her national dishes, like she was extending the olive branch."

"Uh oh, I see where this is going. She fed them haggis before telling them what it was, didn't she?"

"Haggis, oatmeal cakes, and something called cullen skink."

Barbara cackled. "I wish I'd thought of that with Helena," she said, "Olive branch, come to family dinner. Eat up on sheep innards and cream of fish!"

"Jason Blood. Back in Gotham City."

It was neither a question nor a challenge, nor even a greeting. It was a simple statement of fact.

Batman could not rightly disapprove Jason Blood's presence in Gotham. He owed both the man and the demon from occasions past. And it had to be said that, as magic-

users and meta-beings went, Blood was more serious about his quest and responsible with his powers than most. But it also had to be said that Jason didn't give a damn about having Batman's approval for operating in Gotham City, which Bruce found annoying.

Blood was of another world and another system. He saw the rise of the superheroes; he knew the first of the Mystery Men. He would never hold them in awe the way modern men and women did. Nevertheless, Gotham *was* Batman's city. You would think a relic of feudal times would understand that better than the run-of-the-mill JLAers, but alas.

"Hello, Bruce. You're looking well."

"Jason, I thought we agreed long ago to leave the glad-handing pleasantries to the others."

"I wasn't being polite; I am quite sincere. You look... *well*. Since we last met, you have found balance."

"Reading my aura?" Bruce asked sarcastically.

"I would do nothing so crude. I know that you have found balance just as you know that vendor shortchanged the man in blue: from a dozen minute details your detective eyes perceive without even realizing. You process them unconsciously. And only if I draw the vendor to your attention and ask 'How do you know he shortchanged the man in blue,' will you even begin to realize what you know and why you know it."

"Look Harley, that man talking to Bruce Wayne, he must be MacDonald."

"Heh, heh. Him? Oh Red, I don't like this plan. He's creepy."

"Don't worry, Harl. You won't have to have anything to do with him. I don't want to cross swords with Catty, so your job is to get Wayne away from him. Once he's out of the way, Catty couldn't possibly object to my having a little talk with Laird MacDonald."

CHAPTER 3: GAMES BEGIN

Etrigan was quiet. That was never a good sign.

Outwardly, Jason continued to talk to Bruce. Inwardly, his mind scanned the fairgrounds. Something... no someone was here that... ULGH!

"Something wrong?" Bruce asked, noting a sour expression.

"I taste... flame retardant?" Jason said quizzically.

Bruce laughed—which Jason found almost as troubling as Etrigan's silence. Jason had often thought how Batman was a blessed exception to the usual flippant wisecracking superhero. Strictly speaking, this was Bruce Wayne standing here laughing, and not Batman. But in Blood's experience, Bruce Wayne, when not masquerading as a moron, was simply Batman without the cape. And he was laughing—or chuckling, certainly.

"Come on," he said. "My son, Dick, is competing in the games. You can watch from the Wayne enclave, right over there beside the grandstand," he pointed, "Go on ahead, I'll be there shortly."

Jason looked towards the enclave, with the faint alkaline sour of flame retardant puckering his lips.

Bruce made his way through the crowd, the laughter tamed into a twitchsmile. Flame retardant. He hadn't been able to stifle a chuckle at the chain of thoughts: he recalled Green Arrow firing a fire extinguisher arrow into Etrigan's mouth... "I will never ever mock your trick arrows again," Batman had told him... Roy must be here... Dick in a kilt. How could the Titans resist that?

At last, he reached his destination, a sign his peripheral vision had detected on the walk in to the festival. It was a brisk day and a dozen booths were selling coffee and tea, but only this one had hot cocoa. Selina had such a weakness for chocolate.

Selina.

Bruce turned, thinking for a minute he heard manic laughter buried in that drone of distant bagpipes.

Never in all the years he'd known her had he seen anything like what she did to Joker. He thought he'd witnessed every variation of Catwoman's fighting styles, from playful to vengeful. But to use a blind man's Adam's apple as a fulcrum to smash his head into a marble-top coffeetable, that was in a category by itself. If he had surprised her with his violence during the search for Nightwing (and he had no doubt that he had), that surprise must surely be weighed against her utterly clobbering Joker with such total abandon.

JOKER! Who would just as soon rip her left lung out through her right ear. Joker, who was too insane to ever be convinced of anything no matter how hard you hit him or how often. Joker who—she freely admitted—she never tried to enforce her 'rules' with because a) he seldom held on to a thought for more than a week anyway, b) he

wouldn't consider her whips and claws a deterrent and c) he would only take the stating of rules as a blueprint to pushing her buttons and a challenge he must accept.

Yet there she was, an hour after the incident, in the Batcave using his forceps to pluck green hairs out of her watchband.

"That was Catwoman's idea of 'Humor 'em and Handle 'em?'" he had asked in Batman's most disapproving gravel.

"Special case, he pissed me off."

"Of course he pissed you off. He's Joker, that's his M.O. Selina, every time I've run in to him as Bruce Wayne, it takes me hours of Zogger to work through it afterward. I can't stand sitting there not being able to pound that grin off his face because I'm stuck being—"

"Brucie!"

Bruce winced as an unexpected bearhug spattered cocoa on his shirt. Not again. Not twice in one week.

"Good to see ya, Brucie," the too-chipper blonde greeted him, "Why, I haven't seen you since Christmas. Remember—my little appearance at the benefit to get a present for my Puddin'?" Then to remind him, she started singing: ♪ LOVE FOR SALE, KookyKookyCrazy LOVE FOR SALE ...If you want the thrill of love, I've been through the mill of love... LOVE FOR SALE! ♪

:: And now, throwing the hammer for Clan Gordon, winner of the sheaf-toss, newcomer...RICHARD GRAYSON! ::

Jason watched the young man grasp the iron sphere by the bamboo shaft, twist, spin for momentum, and release at the perfect moment for optimum distance. As a warrior, Blood could appreciate the triumph of technique. He recalled a young squire on a training field much like this, discovering that by mastering precise timing, he could outperform larger and stronger knights.

In the same way, young Grayson was outperforming athletes who had trained for years in these games, simply by applying superior physical skills honed in his life as Nightwing. It was, Jason would admit, an impressive display. Still, he was happy to be watching from a quiet spot, alone and away from the "Wayne enclave."

Alone you may be, except for me,

But not for long, for look, a She.

Jason looked up. A woman was indeed standing before him.

A sorceress of the Poison Tree,

Etrigan laughed heartily.

With a PhD in Botany.

The air was heavy with sweet leafy scents.

"Do not speak," Poison Ivy instructed, "for moments such as this, there are no words."

Stench of moss and hair of fire

Is meant to spark a man's desire?

This passes for a witch today?

Not for we, who knew Morgan Le Fey!

Jason allowed himself a distant smile at this. Poison Ivy, assuming her enthralled subject's smile was for her, decided he had basked long enough in the deep jungle mists.

"Now that you feel the wonder of the Green, now that you long for your very being to enter into the Green and become one with the beauty of Nature, you will surely realize how wrong it is for wretched human animals to harm a living plant. You will want to put a stop to this barbarous ritual at once, and do penance for all the harm you have done."

There was silence as Ivy waited for the inevitable declaration of slavish devotion.

Then Jason Blood spoke:

"Just because I look at you when you speak, you shouldn't assume that means I'm listening to or care about what you say. That's just something I do to be polite."

Poison Ivy stared, unbelieving. She concentrated on pumping more intense pheromones from her body and tried again, "None initiated into the enchanted mysteries of the Green can resist the beauty of Nature's chosen vessel. I am the Green, irresistible to all that--"

"How quaint," Blood cut her off, "You're also blocking my view of the field." Then, when it became apparent she wasn't moving, he tried: "Your companion has met with an unfortunate accident. You should go to the first aid tent by the entrance if you wish to see her before she is taken away."

Tim figured he had just enough time to get a bag of kettle corn and a couple sodas before the next event. It was waiting in line for the corn that he noticed a curious booth. The sign read "Crystals of Avalon." Beneath it, an older woman, shortish, with half-moon glasses, polished a small tabletop gargoyle. It was a miniature of a gargoyle he knew, atop the Grupnel Towers. Robin had named him "Jowls."

Tim couldn't resist going over for a closer look.

"He's a cute little guy, isn't he?"

Miriam Nash looked up.

"\$12.95," she said sweetly, concealing her thought that Maxilas Do Blostiban, Guardian of the Fifth Circle, was neither cute nor a he. For the customer was always right.

"Nah, that's okay," Tim said, patting the gargoyle on the head, "Dorm room. Small desk. Not much extra space."

"What about this one?" Miriam said, holding out a smaller version, "This is cut so it can sit on top of a computer screen."

"I'll take it."

As Miriam began wrapping his purchase, Tim glanced at the other items displayed on her counter. Miriam was quick to notice. "Anything else, young man? A mystic crystal, perhaps? For your own protection, if you believe, or a charming piece of jewelry for your lady if you do not."

"How did you know I had a girl?"

"You're holding two Cokes."

"Ah."

"So I know you don't need a love potion," she joked.

"No, but if you've got anything to shoo away my ex, that'd be a help."

"So young to be so victimized," Miriam teased, not unkindly. "And what has your scorned lady done to you?"

"Fed me haggis and told me it was meatloaf."

Miriam chuckled.

"You may consider yourself lucky, young man. Some lessons are best learned early, when the price is a plate of haggis and nothing more dire." She thought over the parade of jilted wives, lovers and girlfriends who came to her shop requesting, and occasionally receiving, ingredients for vengeance spells. She tossed the protection crystal into Tim's bag, just because. "In my opinion," she remarked, handing him his purchase, "you got off cheap."

"ow, ow, Ow, Ow, **OW!**" Harley cried.

"I don't think I've ever seen this many separate bruises on one leg, Miss," the first aid volunteer remarked. "How did you ever do it?"

"She's a klutz," a harsh voice declared as the smell of pungent lemon filled the tent.

"It's not my fault, Red. I was tryin' to keep him away and distracted, but he was walkin', so I had to get in front of him and walk backwards, and I guess I kinda... tripped?"

"Tripped?! Harley, you're one big bruise! What did you trip into?"

"Bagpipes."

"Surprise," Bruce said, handing Selina a steaming cup of hot chocolate, "you won't believe what I went through to get that."

From anyone else, it would have been a pleasantry. But Selina heard a curious edge in his voice.

"I missed fun," she noted with a twinkle in her eye.

"Considering your bizarre ideas of fun, possibly."

Then he switched to their sign language:

~~Harley Quinn.~~ ~At first, I was worried.~~ ~I thought, maybe payback for what you did to Joker.~~ ~I tried to get back here to you.~~ ~But it was like she was blocking me.~~ ~Made it easy to steer her into harm's way.~~

Selina chuckled. Unable to sign back while holding the hot chocolate, she settled for asking aloud, "Any permanent scars?"

"No," answered an unexpected voice, "But there is a worse injury still in store for her by nightfall."

"Jason! You came after all!" Selina cried.

"Y-yes... and no. Actually, Selina, I did not realize you..." he looked to Bruce, then back to her, "...were together."

"But you know Harley Quinn's scars aren't permanent. Jason, you need to get that second sight tweaked."

Bruce cleared his throat. "I didn't realize you two knew each other."

"You know what you need tweaked," she teased.

"Bruce, if I might speak to you privately," Blood said. Cassie was still at the grandstand, so Selina wandered over to join her. When she was gone, Jason resumed, "You know, of course, that she's Cat—"

"Of course," Bruce answered soberly.

"How interesting."

"And yes. She knows. About me."

"I wasn't about to ask that."

"Jason, I may not have known you and Selina were acquainted, but I did know the vendor shortchanged the man in blue. I know you were burning to ask. Now you don't have to. I also know this isn't what you came here to talk about."

Jason took a deep breath, deciding whether to share his knowledge or keep silent.

"Another of the costumed children is here. Poison Ivy, I believe. Red hair, odd complexion, not the enchantress she thinks she is."

Bruce glared a dangerous glare.

"Where is she?" he growled, shifted instantly in Bat-mode.

Jason seemed to think, then said: "I don't know. She was at First Aid with that unfortunate creature that loves the madman... But now, I can't quite..."

I'll hunt her, Jason,

If you'll set me free.

I'll find you the vixen

Of the Poison Tree.

"Jason?"

"It's nothing, bit of a headache. Etrigan took an instant dislike to this woman. He is fire and malice. Green, growing things are not something he particularly enjoys."

Druids are to blame!

Cult of trees, and rites of wood!

We should have set the world aflame,

Before your kind brought down the neighborhood.

Once Earth belonged to Demonkind.

No stench of Man did land pollute.

'Til wretched trees made air refined,

And then could life like you take root.

So, no, "green growing things"

Are not to Demon's taste.

I'll gladly spew ten thousand stings

To see the curse-ed blooms laid waste.

And if no bloom or tree be seen

To feel my wrathful breath,

The druid witch who worships green

Can taste of fiery death.

Poison Ivy was mad with burning rage. Hollywood claptrap or not, she would unleash an army of trees upon these games and that horror of a man behind them. He spurned her! Impossible! No man could resist her. How could that... that... that... AAARRRRGGGHHH!

"Excuse me, dear, I don't wish to intrude, but you are clutching that bayleaf rather... emphatically. Herbs are living things, you know. And even if you don't care about that, well, this is a business, after all. If you bend it, you bought it."

"You tell ME plants are living things! You say I DON'T CARE about that!" Poison Ivy intended to build her outrage into a crescendo'd "HOW DARE YOU!" but only managed to sputter when she realized she was choking the life out of the bayleaf.

Miriam simply watched this with a terse, tight-lipped expression and picked up several plants from the herb display. At first, Ivy thought they were valuable specimens the woman was moving away from her grasp, but then she returned holding a small glass vial.

"Here. Sacred Glen for attuning to natural elements, Dragon's Blood Resin and Flax Seed for converting negative energy into increased power and will for invocations, and chamomile because you need to calm yourself down. Together with the bayleaf you destroyed, that's \$47.95."

CHAPTER 4: THE TREES AND THE BIG YELLOW UGLY

The covered VIP Grandstand was divided into two parts, with thick black curtains sectioning off the back half as a kind of private club, shielded from view of the festival crowd. Selina sat in this backroom and politely declined Galen MacDonald's third offer of a Cardhu single malt Scotch. She nodded while MacDonald enthused about its added kick over the milder lowland whiskies. And all the while, she thought about Bruce.

He'd disappeared without a word. And while she certainly preferred that to some absurd lie he'd concoct for the bimbos, she couldn't help but feel excluded from the fun. He'd nabbed Harley Quinn earlier, a chance encounter, he said. And now he was off somewhere as Batman *again*, and she was stuck hearing how Scotch whiskies made at Speyside distilleries were maltier than those from other regions.

"Just smell that wonderful aroma, Lassie, sweet and malty, like a loaf of bread. Heartier grains in Speyside, where the lowlands are more grassy."

Deciding that Catwoman never waited for an engraved invitation before, she excused herself, planning to track down the fun wherever it was occurring and claw out a piece of it for herself. She had just swept back the black curtain shielding the grandstand backroom from onlookers, when her way was blocked by a tall imposing figure.

"Just the kitty I was looking for," Jason Blood smiled. He placed a hand on the small of her back and steered her away from the grandstand. As they left the Wayne enclave, anonymous in the crowd of spectators surrounding the field, Jason began talking about the offer he alluded to in his e-mail: "Some sketches have turned up in a rare bookstore in old Cairo, 'For Display Only. Not for sale. Don't bother asking.' 19th Century sketches of the archaeological digs. Those sketches include ten previously unknown hieroglyphs. The mystic pictures of ancient Egypt, every one has a special meaning and a special power. And here are ten of them we never knew existed. I have to have them. How much catnip will Kitty require?"

Jason's manner did not usually make Selina feel "catty." He stated forcefully whatever it was he wanted, not to be a bully, but simply because he assumed it would be done. Given their past history, it wasn't an unreasonable assumption. Nevertheless, Selina—and indeed, Catwoman—was somewhat annoyed. Cats were never a foregone conclusion.

...of course...

It would mean money to enlarge the Catitat and make room for those tigers. And it was in Egypt. Not in Gotham City. Not breaking U.S. law.

Not that any of that would matter to him.

Not that his disapproval was the last word on the subject, but it was a consideration. Things had gotten unexpectedly tense on Cartier's rooftop that night...

"I'm sorry, Jason," Selina started to say, "Fact is, my situation has changed and—"

She got no further when something hard and heavy swatted her to the ground.

Screaming mobs are a greater danger to themselves than whatever they're running from, so Batman and Robin's first challenge was to prevent the large crowd of spectators from becoming a mindless stampede.

Figuring out how to stop the rampaging trees the crowd was running from, that was another matter. Punching an oak tree, Batman surmised, would be like punching Superman—plenty of damage to your hand, zero damage to what your hand was hitting.

"Plan?" Robin asked.

"Take the east and south sides leading away from the field," Batman ordered. "Fire tungsten lines to make a traffic lane. Flares there, there, there and there." He pointed, and Robin nodded.

"And the trees?"

"I'll get back to you."

"Oh great."

*No bargains, My Cage,
You'll not deny my rage.
'Tis time to set dark brother free.
You ask me to cease
Once this danger I decrease?
I say, "Hell no, I gotta be me!"*

*I'll stop when I've tasted of sweet human flesh,
When I've chomped on crisp succulent bone.
I'll stop when...
Then you don't get out, Etrigan.
...that kitty looks fresh.
Not her or any of them. You agree to stop with the trees or no deal.
Fine. I'll roast oak trees alone.*

Jason carried Selina, knocked unconscious by one of the marching oaks, to the comparative safety of the grandstand. Then he ducked into the backroom, hidden from sight, and paused. Etrigan was a demon of Hell, the son of Belial, Lord of Lies, and Raan va Daath, Pitwitch; he was evil and an agent of chaos, but he *did* honor a bargain. If the demon agreed to only go after the trees in exchange for being released, Jason would take him at his word. There could be a loophole; Etrigan was crafty. But with the trees attacking the fairgrounds, there simply wasn't time to analyze the terms of the bargain. Jason took a deep breath and recited the necessary spell:

*Change, change the form of man.
Free the prince forever damned.
Free the might from fleshy mire.
Boil the blood in heart of fire.
Gone, gone the form of man,*

and rise the demon Etrigan.

With the authority of a former policeman, Dick managed to take charge on the playing field and get all the athletes to safety. That done, he saw no way to change into Nightwing or join up with Batman and Robin. It was far too risky. He was too conspicuous in Bludhaven PD sweats and a blue, black and yellow kilt. His disappearance would be noticed.

While frustrated, he was also silently, secretly, relieved. There was no question who would be behind a rampage of trees. Between the tabloids and the Two-Face incident, the last thing he needed was a Nightwing-Poison Ivy confrontation in broad daylight in front of several hundred spectators, half of whom had camcorders.

From her vantage point at the northwest corner of the playing field, Poison Ivy surveyed the devastation with a smile of queenly approval. The scent of mandarin oranges was strong in the air. Just as her pheromones took on a smell of Lemon Pledge when Ivy was angry, the fragrance of mandarin indicated she was especially pleased. The games were at an end. And she had most certainly made her point.

The mandarin smell pitchshifted back to lemon; she had not yet located that horror of a Scotsman Galen MacDonald... but that would come. Her subjects (she did not have the gumption to call these massive oak trees “her babies” as she did most plants) had done well. That curious woman’s potion had certainly given her powers an added oomph—at least as far as persuading the ancient oaks to do her bidding...

A new thought struck her, and again the northwest corner of the field began smelling like an orange grove. The potion *had* increased her control over plants. Perhaps it heightened her other powers as well. She would still see that hateful Galen MacDonald torn limb from limb by her army of trees. But it would be so much better if he were humbled first, kneeling before her to pledge his undying devotion.

She must find him.

Eyeing the VIP grandstand, she smiled a far less queenly smile. She resembled, she imagined, one of those jungle cats that Selina admired, a jaguar or a leopardess, eyeing the hapless fawn that would be its next meal.

Etrigan was pleased. The trees were burning, and that was good. But best of all was the screaming. The Poison Witch had a most unexpected and delightful scream when she saw him pick up her planties like kindling and hurl them into the flames.

It was music to his sadistic ears. For a human, she had quite a vocal range. Not since the Inquisition had he heard such sounds. Not since the righteous villagers of Monmarth burned Prudence Cavendish for joining with a wood sprite. Maybe it was flora in the larynx that did it. It warmed his infernal heart to know such wailing cries had not left the Earth completely.

:: Batman, our situation hasn't improved. ::
:: The trees are contained. ::
:: They've stopped moving, yes, but they're on FIRE. They've ignited half the playing field!
And the big yellow ugly looks a bigger problem than the trees. ::
:: Calm down, Robin. The people are the priority. ::
:: Getting the last of the spectators cleared away from the southeast corner now. ::
:: Check. Same here at the north end. ::
:: Batman? That yellow thing ::
:: The demon Etrigan. That... may not be a problem. He's on our side... for now. ::
:: He seems pretty happy with that fire he started. He's not going to let us put that out. ::
:: I know. ::
:: So what do we do? ::
:: I'll get back to you. ::
:: Great. ::

Miriam Nash had vacated her little stall on the fairgrounds before the crowds started running. She had sensed the lines of magick shift from their normal patterns, and that there was a connection between this shift and her own magicks... the tincture she had prepared for that hysterical woman? The shifting had a focus. It was centered on the fairgrounds; it was pointed at the games themselves, so Miriam relocated to the comparative safety of the parking lot. From there, she heard the first screams, and almost at the same moment, she was struck by a whole new disturbance of the astral plane.

Another magick, this one very different from her own, had been released in response to the first. She knew Jason was a practitioner, and another time she might have paused to wonder if the new power might be him. But for one sensitive to the mystic realms, the emergence of this new force was like a hurricane tearing through her psyche, and it took Miriam several minutes to recover. By the time she had adjusted to the new supernatural environment, billows of dark smoke were rising from the playing field.

Not knowing what was burning, but aware her own magick had played some role in this situation, Miriam felt obligated to balance the scales. She shut her eyes, envisioning the three runes of Kaliki, focusing all her will on the skies above the playing field, and murmured a chant of supplication...

The clouds over the playing field turned darker than the smoke.

Miriam continued to chant...

A thunderclap was heard in the distance.

And Miriam continued to chant...

The first thick droplets fell onto her lips, and still Miriam continued to chant.

Reaching the grandstand, Batman's head throbbed as that final surge of adrenaline subsided. He shook his head, willing his body not to relax yet. There was still Poison Ivy to be apprehended...

His body wasn't listening. After the trees, the mob, the fire, the storm, and staring down a demon from hell, his body had simply determined that the worst of the job was done.

He'd drawn a line, stood face to face with a demon, never shifting his gaze while hot, fetid breath stinking of sulfur washed over his skin. "Enough, Etrigan. You've done what you came for."

*"Yea, curse-ed trees I vowed to burn,
And burn-ed trees there be.
But for more hellish screams I yearn,
While yet I remain free."*

Etrigan might be evil, but he was not an irrational being. He would work with the heroes when it suited him, he would fight the enemies of good when it suited him. And he would back down from a bad situation *when it suited him*. The trick, Batman knew, was manipulating the situation so it "suited" Etrigan to depart.

Batman's face remained hard and expressionless, his voice cold and dead. "The trees are ash. The rains doused your fire. It's over. Time to go back."

*"When Jason, the foolish, this peril appraised,
I swore only trees would I set ablaze.
What my gullible keeper failed to espy?
There are other ways for you mortals to die."*

Batman didn't flinch, didn't react, he merely regarded the demon coldly.

"No," he said finally, taking a pellet from his utility belt, "You won't be doing any of that."

Etrigan sniffed the air, but said nothing. Batman's manner changed, becoming more conversational as he held up a small tube the size of a cigarette.

"You know who is here, Etrigan. You know what happened last time. All that fire inside you, and no way to set it free." Batman put the pellet inside the tube. "If you think the fire extinguisher arrow was unpleasant, consider that it's been a year since Green Arrow gave me the idea. And I am considerably more... *imaginative*... than Green Arrow."

Etrigan snarled, and Batman resumed the hard, dead expression.

"You've done what you came for," he repeated, "Time to go back."

Etrigan seemed to think about it a moment, then departed with a laugh. At the time, Batman stood firm and immobile, not allowing any visible reaction to escape him. Now, reliving the moment in the privacy of the deserted Wayne enclave, he permitted himself a sigh. It was one thing to bluff a lunatic like the Joker, or even a once-mortal man with an artificially prolonged lifespan that called himself Demon's Head. But to bluff an actual Demon of Hell with nothing more than a blowgun and an Extra Strength Tylenol capsule, that, his body decided, was quite enough for one day.

But Poison Ivy was still to be captured, his mind argued!

No, the rest of him didn't care: Harley Quinn. Trees. Mob. Fire. Demon. Done now.

Resolving to go on despite the growing fatigue, Batman continued into the grandstand—only to encounter Selina coming through the door to the backroom.

"Don't go in there," she said simply.

"Poison Ivy," he explained, brushing past her.

"Oh, the Ivy situation is under control," she purred, that curious touch of Catwoman's sarcasm in her tone. That made him stop for a second, hand on the curtain leading to the backroom. "Just don't go in there," she repeated.

Ignoring her, Batman double-checked his noseplugs and continued through the curtain into the backroom. Taking in the scene, he checked the noseplugs yet again, just to make sure what he saw could not be a hallucination.

"You'll like this one best of all, Lassie, the Highland Scotch whiskies have the sweetest floral notes of any in the world. It's in the water. From the snow on the mountaintops, it flows downhill as it melts, running through miles of heather until it hits the streams. Here, try this Dalwhinnie; you'll see what I mean."

Sitting on Galen MacDonald's lap, Poison Ivy produced a sound that, coming from another woman, might be called a giggle. Then she took the glass he offered, smiled, and sipped.

Batman backed silently from the room. He could feel Selina's eyes on the back of his head and he turned to face her.

"Told you," was all she said.

Much as he hoped his scowl projected a stern demand for instant and complete explanation, he could feel the dumbstruck 'What the hell happened?' face leaking through the mask.

"It started with Pam storming into the grandstand looking for MacDonald, and before I could stop him, he stepped right up and introduced himself—which seemed to throw her for some reason. She thought he was 'taller, younger, and ruder'... whatever that means. Then she saw her trees going up in flames and had one of those screaming fits. MacDonald offered 'a wee dram' to calm her down and that's when, frankly, it all got a little weird for me."

Harley Quinn, Batman thought, *Trees. Mob. Fire. Demon... And now, Feline logic.*

"That's when it got weird?" he growled as once he might have questioned her half-hearted excuses for being in Christie's vault with a sack full of Catherine the Great's emeralds.

"Yes," she answered distinctly, "*THAT'S* when it got weird. He started telling her about some 'Angels' share moss,' this stuff that grows on the ceilings in the distilleries and nowhere else in the world, feeds off the evaporating fumes of distilling whiskey, the 'angels' share.' Well, you know Pammy: it's plant trivia, they bonded."

Batman massaged the bridge of his nose, a pointless gesture he couldn't feel through the cowl, but sometimes an outward show of frustration lessened the internal.

"Well," he grunted, "I suppose it will make it easier to take her in. I wouldn't have thought that physiology of hers would respond to alcohol."

"Only if she chooses. She was *really* upset about those trees."

The drive out to Arkham was uneventful. Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn together were usually a handful. But in Ivy's present state, she thought the story of Harley tripping over bagpipes was the funniest thing she ever heard. She was too busy laughing to be any trouble. And Harley was too abashed by the sight of her friend cackling and snorting like she'd had a noseful of SmileX.

During the drive back to the cave, Batman reflected on the day's haul. Two dangerous criminals were off the street for a while. Jason Blood was back in Gotham. The games were a shambles, but there were no serious injuries. Galen MacDonald did not appear to have any pheromone exposure at all, but Batman insisted the hospital run a toxscreen anyway. It would keep him out of the manor until his departure in the morning.

Reasoning that the others should all be home by now, he punched into one of the Batcave relays, accessing the camera feeds from the manor. He saw that Dick, Barbara, Cassie and Selina had all returned from the games—and that Jason Blood was with them. He saw too that Jason was sitting next to Selina.

Postponing the log entry for this incident, Bruce changed quickly and joined them all in the drawing room. He moved behind Selina's chair and touched her shoulder lightly, all the while making eye contact with Jason. It was a proprietary gesture, which Selina would resent, and Bruce knew he would have to pay for it later, but for now she simply murmured "Hello, darling."

Jason watched this exchange with faint amusement, then resumed talking to Dick.

"Indeed, it was one of the more impressive demonstrations I've seen for one of your years who never actually trained for that type of sport. And I'm sure your two Titan compatriots will agree."

"Two?" Dick blurted in surprise, "I only saw Roy."

"Yes, I'm sure. You only *saw* Roy."

"Uh oh," Barbara put in. "I smell decoy."

"Him and the rather quick-footed one..." Jason finished.

"Wally," Dick hissed.

"...with the digital camera."

"No."

"He'll have shown all the others by now, of course."

"Barbara," Dick turned on his wife, "where is my all-seeing Oracle in all this? Aren't you supposed to be one step ahead of anybody with a digital camera and an addressbook full of Titan e-mails?"

While Barbara and Dick spat, Selina spoke up in an attempt to divert attention, "Alfred, what's your take on all this? I was surprised you didn't come with us to the games."

"If I had realized the food and demonstrations that were offered, Miss, I might have attended, but I was told only about the games themselves. I have often thought those Scottish sports result from having too much time on their hands in the Highlands. Throwing a weight into the air, it is undignified. Not British."

"I'm sure that's the whole point as far as the Scots are concerned," Jason offered as an in-joke.

Alfred gave a half-nod in acknowledgement, and replenished the plate of biscuits between Jason and Cassie. He always approved of the girl's appetite.

Jason, noticing that Bruce was occupied with Selina and Dick with Barbara, took his opportunity to speak quietly with the enigmatic young Batgirl.

"It is quite wrong of you, my dear, to blame yourself for not being more aggressive on the field today. An able fighter you may be, but there are monsters no amount of

the bagpipes. The man who brought him in, by now he's getting a little jumpy, 'cause he knows he's losing the bet. He's pulling at his collar, sweating a little..."

"Excuse me, Mr. Joker," the night nurse interrupted in that polite humoring-the-lunatic voice they all used, "but I do have to be distributing the evening meds now. The other patient will be in great discomfort if those painkillers wear off."

"See what you get, Harley," Joker called across the room, "gallivanting around with that Hothouse Harlot. How many bruises?"

"Depends, on if you count this one on my shin as three little ones or one big one."

"Reminder, Harl! I can't SEE THEM!" Joker sang out angrily.

"I'm sorry, Puddin'," Harley mumbled as the new injection dulled the throbbing pain. "But I got troubles of my own."

Dangerous muttering was heard on Joker's side of the room and the night nurse decided to make himself scarce. Joker squinted hard until he convinced himself he saw a patch of yellow (that'd be Harley hair)... over a patch of pink (Harley skin)... over a patch of white (hospital gown). He got up from the bed and moved towards it.

"So, little miss, you got problems, do you? How'd you get so banged up anyway? Batman?"

"Bagpipes," Harley whimpered.

Joker's eyes popped open wide as the image of Harley snapped into sharp focus.

"**BAGPIPES! BAGPIPES!!! YOU DARE MOCK MY OCTOPUS JOKE! YOU DARE!!! MY A-LIST MATERIAL. THE OCTOPUS JOKE—YOU'VE ALWAYS HAD IT IN FOR THAT JOKE, YOU HA-HA-HARLOT!!! THIS IS A CALCULATED AND DELIBERATE INSULT! MY OCTOPUS JOKE!!! THAT DOES IT, QUINN, WE'RE THROUGH, I TELL YOU! 'T' like in 'Take the faithless bitch by the ankles and swing her head into the wall,' 'H' like in 'Hold on to her hair and pull it up and down, 'Roo' like the cute little Winnie-the-Pooh character you want to toss in a food processor and make furry thing puree. We. Are. Through!**"