

It was a dark and stormy night. The window to the apartment living room was left wide open to let in the air, which had been cooled to a pleasant degree. It was mid-August, and with the temperature over Gotham breaking new heat-records that year, even just a single night below 20°C felt like a huge blessing. The sound of raindrops hitting the metal railing on the fire escape, the ambient noise composed of feet and tires splashing on the asphalt below, and the distant sound of sirens filled the small two-room apartment, as well as those of an active microwave oven and a blender from the kitchen.

Selina Kyle was curled up on the couch in the living room, illuminated only by the flickering glow of a 15-year-old television set. She sat quietly listening to the late-night cable broadcast, while nursing a number of bound cuts and bruises all over her body. The TV was tuned to a news broadcast, where the anchor, one Victoria Vale, was summing up the events of a particularly busy news week. Selina knew Viki personally, and could tell that though she was putting on a brave face for the cameras, she, like her, was shaken to her core.

“Thank you for joining us again tonight, Gotham. I’m Viki Vale and you’re watching This Week in Gotham. The months long protests in the streets of Gotham have all but come to an end no doubt as a reaction to the events that took place earlier in the week. On Monday the dead body of the wanted criminal Jack Napier, more commonly known by the name: Joker, was found strung to the clock atop the Gotham City Police Department building. As usual, we warn our viewers that the associated images, as everything involved with this madman, are disturbing.”

The image cut away from Viki’s face and displayed a shot of the central GCDP building, no doubt filmed from a rooftop on the opposing side of the street. After a brief panning shot, the camera zoomed in on the lit up, round analog clock on the face of the old gothic architecture just above the entrance. There he was, the former clown prince of crime, strung to the clock with his arms at 10 and 2, and his legs at 5 and 7. Blood was still pouring from the open wounds on his face, staining his trademark green and purple suit. The largest of the bloodstains was from a stab-wound on his chest. The shot ended with close-up of the weapon still burrowed in him, the sight of which was all but too familiar to the citizens of Gotham: a metal throwing-star in the shape of a bat.

“Screw video games, this is the content making our kids turn violent.” The voice came from the open door to the kitchen. Selina turned her head toward the source only slightly, as her neck was still sore. Harleen had poked her head out to get a glimpse of her former abusive partner. “Still, good riddance.” And she vanished again to go finish what she had started.

Viki Vale’s narration continued.

“This execution is all but confirmed to be the work of the Gotham City billionaire Bruce Wayne, who has been identified as the infamous vigilante: The Batman. The Joker’s death is believed to have been an act of vengeance for the murder of one Jason Tod, Mr. Wayne’s adopted son. Tod, who is also believed to have aided Wayne in his crusade as Robin, was found dead in an abandoned Gotham warehouse close to the amusement mile last Thursday. Police confirmed that video footage depicting Joker beating Tod to death with a crowbar was sent to Wayne via email, though thank god, our studio has not managed to get ahold of it.”

Selina couldn’t help but let out a somber smile. Viki was going of script, and she could tell that she was on the verge of having a breakdown. She couldn’t help but wonder how many takes they had to record to get 30 minutes of useable footage out of her.

“Jason Tod’s body was recovered by Mr. Wayne, and a private funeral was held over the weekend. In response to the Joker’s death Police commissioner Jim Gordon made the following statement to our reporters.”

The footage cut away once again this time to a scene in front of the GCPD building, where commissioner Gordon was stood before a bouquet of microphones. Behind him a ladder was propped up against one of the pillars in front of the entrance, and several men were busy picking up a stretcher with a sheet covering the Joker’s corpse.

“I urge the press not to jump to any conclusions just yet.” A clearly troubled looking Gordon said. “At this point all we know for certain is that the Joker was murdered using a weapon identical to those used by Batman. Please keep in mind that the Batman has been framed for crimes he had nothing to do with several times in the past. I think all the good he has done for our city in the fight against crime earns him the benefit of the doubt until we have had time to more thoroughly look over the evidence.”

The footage cut back to Viki Vale.

“While at the time commissioner Gordon’s statement sounded reasonable, further developments would reveal that, unlike in the past, these events were exactly as they seemed. On Wednesday, two days following the Joker’s death, an anonymous source posted security camera footage from Wayne Manor to multiple video sharing websites, in which the notorious criminal mastermind, Bane, broke in to Wayne manor and confronted Mr. Wayne himself. Once again, please be warned that the images are disturbing.”

The footage cut this time to a sight Selina was well familiar with: The interior of Wayne manor. From the corner of the hall the footage showed that the wooden doors were lying on the ground broken off of their hinges, and right in the entrance way stood Bane, his muscles pulsating from the latest fresh dose of Venom. He was shouting, though the footage was silent. Several seconds later Bruce entered the footage, holding a gun in his right hand. The two seemed to exchange angry words, following which Bane rushed him, and though Bruce managed to fire several shots, the massive brawler seemed to simply shrug them off. What followed was several jumps between the various security cameras to get a better view of the fight between them. Like a bulldozer, Bane left a trail of splintered wood, crushed furniture and crumbling brick as he chased Bruce through several rooms of the manor. Try as he might, Bruce could not manage to get a good angle to use his gun. Bane was simply too close to him.

“Holy shit!” Harley returned from the kitchen holding two cups of instant noodles and two banana-milkshakes. She put down the milkshakes on the coffee table, then sat down on the couch beside Selina handing her one of the noodles. “Sorry, Kitty-cat. I know it’s garbage but it’s the only thing warm I have right now.”

“It’s perfect.” Selina reached out a single hand and took the noodles from Harley.

“Don’t you mean... puuuurfect?” Harley rolled the r’s with a broad smile and an eyebrow wiggle.

“I’m not really in the mood, Harley. Sorry.” Selina said, and began to eat her microwave meal.

Harley sighed understandingly, and the two both turned their attention back to the TV. The footage had progressed to the conclusion of their fight. Bruce had gotten the upper hand by shoving a fire-poker into Bane’s lower back. The giant man collapsed onto the floor, following which Bruce stood

over his body, stretched out the hand holding the gun, and emptied the remaining clip into Bane's head at point blank range. The tape cut back to Viki.

"So..." Said Harley slowly. "You knew?"

"I did." Selina replied. "I've known for about a year now, and I suspected long before."

"How come you never told us?"

"Because..." Selina said, barely containing her emotions. "I trusted him."

The narration resumed.

"Following the release of this footage, the GCPD made public a statement received from Bruce Wayne's former ward, Richard Grayson, resident of Bludhaven, known locally as the crime-fighter Nightwing."

The footage cut to a scanned in version of a written letter with Dick Grayson's signature at the bottom. Viki Vale began to read the contents out loud:

"I am writing this statement in response to recent news of the Joker's death and the surfacing of the footage of Bruce Wayne's murder of Bane – Mr. Grayson writes. – I consulted with my contacts surrounding Mr. Wayne, as I too first believed he was being framed for actions he did not, would not ever commit, as it has happened before. However, my inquiries have led me to understand that Bruce, the Batman, is in fact directly responsible for both acts. What's more, I am also led to believe that since the Joker's murder Bruce has committed several other murders of violent criminals in the days that followed.

"In light of all this, I find myself compelled to issue this warning to the people of Gotham. Almost a decade ago I joined him in his fight against crime as the first Robin, before I left to pursue my own crusade in Bludhaven, and left him with a new protégé, Jason Tod. Bruce spent the majority of his youth training in combat techniques, gathering specialized weaponry and strengthening his efforts with resources he embezzled from his father's company. I joined him at the time because we shared similar traumatic experiences, and the economic state of the city created criminals at such a rate that the desperation was huge. I also genuinely believed him when he told me that his intentions were pure, and I still do. However, it is now clearer to me than ever, that the death of his adopted son at the hands of the Joker has sent him over the edge. I approached him after news of Jason's death to make sure he was alright, and though I could tell that he was withholding things from me, this behavior was usual for him, and I expected him to process the tragedy internally as he normally does. I was clearly wrong.

"Bruce is a master strategist and a deadly fighter. Even while he remained true to his non-lethal principles, he took down some of the most dangerous people in Gotham, including Ras al'Ghul and Victor Frieze, and now both the Joker and Bane. He is extremely dangerous, and must be handled with the utmost caution. He is a terrible danger to anyone, including those closest to him. I am willing to cooperate with the authorities in any way I can to help bring him in.

"My message to the people of Gotham is this: Do your best to stay off the streets at night. Do not try to approach Bruce under any circumstances, and if you are unfortunate enough to see him, don't stop to snap pics or record videos, don't do anything stupid, just leave and get away from there as fast as possible.

“And here is my message to Bruce: Please, this has gone far enough. You started to wear that mask to protect the people you love. Your actions now are undoing all of that. If not for your own sake, then for the sake of everyone who cares about you, please put an end to this, and just come in peacefully. It’s not too late.

Signed: Richard Grayson”

“Looks like the bat-family is turning on the old man, huh?” Commented Harley.

Viki Vale took a deep breath before continuing.

“Mr. Grayson is currently in police custody at GCPD. Commissioner Gordon confirmed that Nightwing surrendered voluntarily and is fully willing to aid the GCPD’s efforts to bring Bruce Wayne to justice.”

The footage once again cut away. In a more official setting this time, Jim Gordon was speaking to a crowd of reporters from behind a podium.

“As of today, the GCPD has issued a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Bruce Wayne, also known as the Batman. It is our hope to apprehend Mr. Wayne alive and unharmed, however, due to his reputation we are considering him armed and dangerous, and lethal force may be needed if he chooses to resist. We urge the public not to try and act on their own, as there is no telling what Mr. Wayne’s mental state is currently like, and how he might act if confronted. We are asking that any information regarding his whereabouts be brought to us to aid our efforts in bringing him in. That will be all, thank you!”

“That was commissioner Gordon’s address just this afternoon.” Said Viki, and the footage cut back to her. “The police have already conducted raids on both Wayne manor and Bruce Wayne’s downtown penthouse. Police confirmed that a hideout was discovered in a large cave system beneath Wayne manor, though all equipment and supplies had already been removed from the scene prior to their arrival. There is no sign of Mr. Wayne’s household staff, or his butler Mr. Alfred Pennyworth. They are assumed either accomplices or kidnapped. The police have also ordered an investigation of Wayne Enterprises to determine if there was any involvement in Mr. Wayne’s activities on the company’s part. Wayne Enterprises CEO Lucius Fox stated that the company is deeply embarrassed by the actions of their majority shareholder, and will cooperate with the authorities to the full extent of the law.”

The camera now centered on Viki for the final words of the evening.

“To close out this evening let me just say this: I’m sure many of you can tell, but I am truly shaken. Both Batman and Mr. Wayne’s father, Thomas Wayne were true heroes to the city of Gotham. Bruce Wayne has betrayed all of our trust, and it is okay to feel whatever you are feeling right now, be it sorrow, shock or anger. Alas, this sight is nothing new to us Gothamites. We witnessed heroes fall before, as we did with Harvey Dent. We endured hardship as we did during the depression. If anything, I believe this is a good reminder to us all to put our faith in our own strength, and our strength as a society, rather than elevate individuals to hero status. Stay strong. Stay safe. This has been Viki Vale with This Week in Gotham.”

The music played. The screen faded to black. The commercials started to play. Selina was still there curled up on couch now clutching an empty paper cup. Harley looked over to her thinking of what kind of joke she could make to lighten the mood. The sight of her friend staring speechlessly at the screen made her reconsider. Instead she just put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “You okay, Kitty-cat?”

Selina trembled slightly. "Thank you for letting me stay here." She said.

"It's no problem." Harley replied. "You can stay here as long as you need. I can get you some keys if you like."

"I don't plan on going out for a long while." Selina said.

Harley nodded silently. She understood perfectly.

"You uh... Haven't even touched your milkshake."

Selina did not respond.

"If you don't want it, do you mind if I...?" Harley tried to gauge her friend for a reaction, but found none. "Never mind. We'll just leave it there for when you get your appetite back."

The silence persisted for a while longer as a rebroadcast of an earlier show played. Several talking heads were discussing the new developments. Harley reached for the remote and turned off the TV. The room fell both dark and silent, lit only by the dim glow of the microwave light through the open kitchen door left on because Harley forgot to close it when she was finished making the noodles.

"Selina." She said, turning serious. "Please tell me what happened."

Selina curled up even harder, as if trying to keep the world out.

"I know those scars." Harley said nodding in the direction of the cuts and scrapes all over her arms and legs. "I had those at least twice while I was with Mr. J."

Selina reluctantly looked down at her wounds, and started to run her hands over the bandages.

"You went through a window, right?" Harley would not relent. "You show up here at my place with those scars, and don't want to go back to your place. Now you're all curled up in a 'ball of shock' and are too scared to speak to me. I've never seen you before like this, Selina, please talk to me."

Selina managed to glance at Harley for a fraction of a second before averting her gaze again.

"He came to you, didn't he?" Harley said. "It's no secret that you and the bat were boning. Never were you happier than when you would tell us about how you and him had another 'adventure' together. It almost sounded like you were--"

"DON'T...!" Selina shouted, then immediately lowered her voice. "Don't say it..." she said, her voice trailing off.

"He showed up at your apartment, didn't he?" Harley said.

The tears began to form, but all Selina could muster was a nod.

"What did he want? Was he hoping you would hide him?"

"He..." Selina forced herself to speak. The words were fighting against her. "Wanted my help."

"And you turned him away?"

"...yes." Selina sobbed.

"What happened, Selina? You know you can trust me, right?"

Amidst now pouring tears and heaving lungs, Selina gathered her strength and tried to open up.

“He... accused me of betraying him. Like everyone else, he said. Called me a petty thief, a liar and a criminal. I... I told him...”

“You told him what?” Harley prodded.

“I told him at least I’m not a murderer.” Selina went silent for a good few seconds, now fully looking Harley in the eyes. “Then he snapped.” She wiped the tears away, only for new ones to emerge just as fast. “He began shouting and flailing. I tried to get ahold of him, but he struck me. Sent me flying across the room. I fought him before, he was never like this. He was out for blood.” Selina now began sobbing uncontrollably. “He wanted me dead, Harley! He had his hands around my throat. I could feel the life leaving me. It was all I could do to break his hold and jump out the window before he finished me for good. He was going to kill me! His eyes...”

“Okay, okay.” Harley came in and wrapped her arms around Selina laying her head on her shoulder. “That’s enough, Kitty-cat. It’s over. He’s gone now. He will not find you here.”

“Thank you, Harley.” Selina said as she hung on to Harley’s arm. “Thank you.”

“Don’t sweat it. You cry as much as you need to. I’m right here.” Then Harley took her free hand and picked up one of the glasses from the coffee table. “And so is this milkshake. Drink up. I mean it.”

At long last Selina let loose a small smile and took the milkshake from Harley.

“You know...” Harley said. “I hate giving that fucker credit, but Joker said this would happen. All the time he would talk about how the Bat was only a hair’s width away from insanity.”

“He finally got what he wanted.” Selina said, the tears finally beginning to subside.

“Tell me about it. It pisses me off to no end knowing that the bastard died getting what he wanted. You just know his death-gurgles were full of satisfied laughter as he finally broke the bat.”

“Fuck Joker.”

“Hell yeah, fuck Joker!” Harley squeezed Selina with the arm she still had wrapped around her. “And fuck Batman too. Just like you always said: no such thing as an ethical billionaire.”

Selina sighed.

“Come on, Kitty-cat! Nobody puts down Selina Kyle like this, am I right? He doesn’t deserve you! He never did.”

“No, I guess not.” Selina relented.

“There he was, using his money to trophy hunt petty criminals in Gotham while you were struggling not to starve. With the money he earns in 2 hours he could have fed half the starving children in this city for years.”

Selina’s look of sorrow was fading and, in its place, anger was starting to grow.

“With less than 5% of his net worth he could eradicate poverty in the city all together!”

“Yeah!” Selina said.

"You know what I think? I think Bruce Wayne was always an ignorant piece of garbage, who only cared about fulfilling his own need for revenge for his dead parents."

"Yeah!"

"He doesn't know what it's like to really suffer, does he? He's just a rich white boy living out his need for superiority and control by beating up on the same criminals created by the system he directly profits off of."

"Wow!" Selina exclaimed. "What a fucking asshole!"

"I know, right? Fuck him!" Harley chanted.

"Fuck him!" Selina joined.

"Fuck who?"

"Fuck Bruce Wayne!"

"What's that?"

"Fuck Bruce Wayne! Fuck Batman!"

The two cheered as Selina got fired up again. Harley raised her hand in the air for a high five, and Selina slapped it with all her strength. After a few more exhilarated sighs, she calmed back down.

"Thanks, Harley. I needed that."

"Any time, Kitty-cat. Any time."

"You know, the police will never catch him." Selina put her empty cup back on the table.

"He won't be able to hide for much longer though, right? I mean they raided the bat cave and no doubt froze all his assets."

"It doesn't matter. He still has his gear and his car. Even without those he is still deadly. He probably has a place to hide that only he knows about. Hell, he probably has several, knowing how paranoid he is."

"Take it you don't want to just let the cops handle him?"

"They don't stand a chance. Not even with Nightwing helping them."

"I don't want to be the one to rain on your party, but I don't think we do either. Not if he's really gone off his rocker."

"Someone has to do something. How am I supposed to keep going on robbing rich assholes knowing he is still out there? He may even be hunting for me for all I know."

"You're right, Kitty-cat. We can't just let this go. Without Mr. J's escapades to keep him distracted even I'm an easier target for him now. He's gotta be dealt with."

"Damn fucking straight."

"Are we..." Harley hesitated. "Are you out to kill him?" She asked.

"Killing him is not the end goal." She said. "But it's too tempting to leave off the table."

“Well, you’re in luck.” Harley leapt up off the couch and grabbed her phone. “With Bane out of the picture there is only one person in all of Gotham who has what it takes to take on the Bat. And it just so happens I have her on speed-dial.”

2

Even during the day, the drive to the Gotham City suburbs was an uncomfortable one. Nearly the only people out on the streets were police officers in riot gear. Since the middle of the last month the city had been all but untraversable due to the massive crowds protesting police brutality. Now there was barely a single obstacle in the way of Harley’s van as she drove with Selina in the passenger seat.

“This is unnerving.” Selina said. “Just imagine how silent everything will be when the sun goes down.”

“Don’t blame ‘em.” Said Harley with her eyes still on the road. “He could literally show up any time now. No more need to hide in the dark. Everyone knows who he is, and he has nothing to lose.”

“He has plenty to lose.” Selina sighed, running her palm across the bandages on her arm. “He just no longer cares.”

Harley peeked over at Selina for a split second between glances at the road and the rear-view mirror. She was gazing out the right-side window at the empty streets.

“We’ll get him, Kitty.” She said reassuringly. “He’ll pay for what he did.”

“Harley...” Selina turned back toward her and awkwardly rubbed the back of her neck. “Last night I... That breakdown I had. It has been a very long time since I allowed a man to get close to me. I was convinced that Bruce was... you know... better. It was more the betrayal that hurt than anything else.”

“I understand. You don’t have to explain.”

“All the same, if you could promise me that...”

“Don’t you worry for a second. Nobody will ever find out from me that Selina Kyle got all sobby and crashed at a friend’s house over a man.”

“They better not. I would hate to have to kill you.”

“That being said...” Harley grinned her usual wide mischievous grin. “I will absolutely rub it in your face for the rest of your life.”

“You little bitch!”

“You little pussy!”

Chuckles and smiles were indicators to both of them that the abuse being flung back and forth was good natured. Selina knew she could trust Harley’s intent, and that if she made a promise, she really meant it. Still, Harley was an impulsive creature by nature, and her unpredictability did make it hard for Selina to fully relax.

“So...” Selina reinitiated the conversation. “You have Ivy on speed dial?”

"I know, I know..." Harley responded. "What kind of fucking boomer am I to still be using the phone function when I could just use an app? I'm conscious about my communication channels, okay? If you knew how much shit telecommunication companies really have on us, you'd be setting up private untraceable phone lines too."

"Right, because I was totally referring to the method of contact rather than the fact itself. Are you too...?"

"Yeah." Harley said, with the 'no duh' expression on her face. "We're fucking."

"Just fucking... or is it more than that?"

"Oh, it's more." Harley sighed. "It's soooooo much more. But the fucking part is what seems to interest most people. I mean, I get it. Ivy's superpower is basically bondage and seduction. Not to mention an intellect and scientific creativity that would make anyone just melt in her presence. Oh, the things she can do with that gorgeous mind of hers..."

"Eyes on the road Harley!"

"Shit! Sorry." Harley yanked the wheel of the van to the left as she almost struck a light post with the van drifting slightly to the right.

"Anyway, Ivy has not been seen in Gotham for the better part of 3 months." Selina continued.

"Oh, I know... It's been so fucking long."

"What's she been doing all this time?"

"Recovering from death." Harley said with the most natural tone in her voice.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh yeah. She died. She's buried in the old abandoned botanical gardens."

"Uuuuh..."

Selina was now remembering the news story from the start of the summer. Massive plant growths had risen and caused damage to the Boil Pharmaceutical factory, effectively rendering it useless. A concerted GCPD effort was made to contain the situation. Though everyone knew Poison Ivy must have been the cause, there was no mention of her being detained in the news.

"She was killed by the cops." Harley began to explain. "You know that increase in drug overdoses in Gotham last year? Ivy found out from a... khm, conversation with one of Boil Pharma's executives that the culprit was their prescription medication they had been pushing through clinics all over. The company was paying doctors to prescribe it, while the government allowed it to happen. To make matters worse, manufacturing of the drug also created a toxic byproduct, which of course they were not disposing of properly, so my love did what she does best: She tore down their whole fucking operation."

"But something happened?"

"Yeah. GCPD were ready for her that time. They had apparently created a special task force just to deal with her." Harley was seemingly starting to cry, but the wide smile on her face made it look like tears of joy. "Can you believe it? My baby, a special task force all of her own. I'm so proud. Joker had a dedicated investigative team, but with Pammy they brought out the fucking heavy artillery. We're talking gas-masks and napalm here."

“Harley...” Selina was starting to get a bad feeling. “Is Ivy... did GCPD really manage to kill her?”

“Yep. But the plant was permanently taken out of commission. The irony is that the cops actually caused more damage than Ivy did. Ha! What losers.” Harley slammed on the breaks. “Speaking of...”

A police car parked in the middle of the road brought the drive to halt. Several police officers were standing beside it, their fingers unprofessionally wrapped around the triggers of their assault rifles. An officer in full riot gear walked up to the passenger seat window and knocked on the glass. Not sure what to do, Selina hit the button to roll down the window.

“Is there a problem, sir?” She asked in as calm a tone as she could manage.

“Ma’am, I’m going to need you to step out of the vehicle.”

“What for? What’s wrong?”

“Please do as your told, miss.” The officer said. “Don’t make this any harder than it needs to be.”

“Not without an explanation. What the hell is going on? It’s the middle of the day. We’re not violating curfew. You can’t just...”

“Ma’am.” The officer raised his sidearm and pointed it right at Selina through the window. “If you are not willing to cooperate, I’m going to have to use force.”

With the gun staring her right in the face, she realized there was nothing she could do right then but do as he said. With one hand in the air she opened the car door and carefully stepped out. She was waiting for her moment to disarm the bastard, but no sooner than she was out of the van, the officer had already grabbed her by the arm and pushed her up against the side of the vehicle.

“What the fuck!” Selina shouted. “We didn’t even do anything!”

“Ma’am, do not resist! I won’t warn you again.”

“Hey, bozos!”

Selina heard Harley’s voice from the other side of the van, then an explosion. With a quick glance to the side she could see that the police car blocking their path had exploded. Through the window she could also see Harley Quinn with a rocket launcher on her shoulder. Selina also saw that her attacker had lost focus. With a backwards kick she knocked the firearm out of his hands, and proceeded to pin him to the ground with her boot on his throat.

Harley strutted up to the two of them, with the bazooka casually resting on her shoulder. “I know she’s black...” Harley said to the cop on the ground. “But I’m the one who’s crazy.” The rear of her weapon came crashing down on his head. The mask cracked, and the cop went limp.

3.

It was late afternoon by the time the two reached the botanical gardens. Even from the moment Harleen parked the van and Selina got a look at the building from the outside, it was clear as could be that this place had not seen use in ages. Many of the glass windows were muddy, cracked, broken or missing, with the plant life having since grown wild. Trees and vines poked out of the walls and rooftops while the grass and shrubbery grew tall and rebellious, and most of the structure was

covered in a thick layer of moss. The constructs of man designed to tame and subdue nature taken back by nature herself. A fitting place for Dr. Pamela Isley to reside in.

Selina was still in the dark on a few things. Harley told her that Ivy was killed when the GCPD literally doused several acres in napalm to stop her destroying the Boil Pharma factory complex. Though GCPD never confirmed her death, never even mentioned her by name for that matter, Poison Ivy's visible absence from the public eye for the past few months was a bad sign. Seldom would a week go by without news of a sabotaged pipeline or destroyed coal plant somewhere on the continent before. But the wrath of mother nature had been noticeably silent of late.

"Harley?" Selina asked as she followed her friend up the stairs to the main entrance. "Why are we here?"

"To get help against the bat, silly!" Harley giggled.

Selina was getting flashbacks to times when Harley was still under the Joker's influence. So fanatical was her love for him, that she would block out any input from her friends about the clown's bad side. There were several occasions where she would turn violent and lash out, leaving terrible injuries and property damage, if someone were to besmirch her "puddin'" or his non-existent love for her. Breaking her away from him was practically a herculean feat. The only reason it did not destroy her already fragile state of mind was because of the support she received from her friends: Selina's friendship, and Ivy's love. Selina found herself wondering now: If Ivy really was killed in the Boil Pharma incident, Harley could easily be in the same state of denial she was in while dating Joker.

"I thought you said Ivy was dead." Selina gently mentioned.

"Details, details!"

"Harley... What is going on?" Selina reflexively felt her body brace itself for the worse.

"What do you...?" Harley turned around as she reached the top of the stairs in front of the main gate. When she locked eyes with Selina, she went quiet for a second or two, leaving a few moments of tension. Then she let out a wide smile and said laughingly:

"Oh! I see. Ha! Your worried that Ivy's death sent me into a state of delusion brought about by denial of the facts. That's what your tensing up, right? Worried that I will follow the pattern of delusional psych patients and start violently lashing out at outside stimuli that challenges my delusionary world-view."

Selina furled her brow in confusion.

"Don't worry Kitty-cat, you're good. I'm not gonna bust out the bazooka on your pretty little, leather covered butt." Harley said as she continued on her path to the entrance. "Look at me, old scatter-brain! Hahaha! Still can't fully shake the self-centered habit of assuming everyone knows what I already do. My bad, baby, sorry. Ivy was killed, but she's better now. Well, kinda. She's just resting."

Though Harley was clearly trying to calm her, Selina was not yet relieved. Past experience was still reminding her that just because Harley was aware of the psychological phenomenon, that was no guarantee that she could also detect it happening within herself.

"What do you mean 'resting'?" Selina asked, still quizzical and suspicious.

"I mean just that: resting. The cops killed her, now she has to take a few months breather to get back to her former strength. I helped her you know. Found her in the factory wreckage and brought her back here and put her in the earth."

"You..." Selina was repressing a look of horror. "You buried her here?"

"Yep! Now where the hell is that... Ah, here we are!"

The front door was fully overgrown and appeared to be untraversable, but after looking around for bit, Harley managed to find a few loose vines covering up a hole in the brick wall. When pushed to the side, the opening was just wide enough to allow an average sized person entrance.

"Right this way!" Harley led on. As she vanished into the opening, Selina was still trying to figure out how to break the news to Harley that Ivy was not going to greet them. After all that happened with Bruce, the last thing she wanted was to have to fight another person she trusts. Though Harley wouldn't have meant to hurt her, Ivy's love and affection was one of the most important things in her recovery after breaking up with the Joker, and there was no telling how she would react when confronted with the news that Ivy was gone.

Selina followed her through the hole in the wall. The inside of the gardens was just as wild and overgrown as the outside. Barely any of the stone tiles were still visible, all was covered with moss and grass which admittedly seemed to be old and withering. Several trees had busted through the glass dome over their heads, all around the damage to the walls left by nature reclaiming its domain invited a cool draft throughout the hall. The grass and bushes rustled in the moving air, but other than that there was only silence.

"Hey Red!" Harley called out. "I'm home!"

Selina scanned the empty hall. Nothing. No response.

"C'mon Baby! Don't leave me hanging! I brought Catwoman with me too!"

"Harley..." Selina walked up and put a hand on her shoulder. "I don't think Ivy is here."

"What do you mean?" Harley turned to Selina with a look of confusion. "I literally just talked to her on the phone this morning. She knew we were coming."

"Yeah, about that..." Selina was searching for words, consistently getting distracted by Harley's large, light-blue, innocent doe eyes. "I'm not sure how to put this..."

Selina was interrupted by the sound of a rumble. One of the large trees in the center of the hall started to raise its roots, revealing underneath them a set of stairs leading down, in remarkably good condition compared to the rest of the place. All around the downward leading pathway the vines overgrowing the walls and railing turned from a dark, brown color to a vibrant green and sprouted beautiful blooming bright red roses. The pale, dying grass and shrubbery also began to brighten in complexion, as though the life was flowing back into them before their very eyes. A magnificent, intoxicating scent was being carried by the draft, preceding the sight of a figure walking up the steps.

"Hello, my beauties." The sultry, deep alto voice carried through the air like the tune of a harp. Selina watched Ivy ascend the rest of the steps. It had been a long time since she last saw her, she had forgotten the impression Ivy makes. The plants sprung to life in her presence, the effects of her pheromones were potent even when not in close proximity. Selina could not help but let her lungs fill with them. She could feel her heart beginning to race. The hand she left on Harley's shoulder took a firmer grip as she bit her lower lip.

“Red!” Harley dashed straight for her. “Damn I missed you! Give me a whiff of that hot love powder.” She leapt into Ivy’s embrace, who stumbled ever so slightly at the impact, but threw her arms around her all the same. In her arms Harley took a deep breath, trying to pull in as much of Ivy’s sweet pheromones as she could. Then pulled back from the hug, put her hand on Ivy’s cheeks and gave her long a kiss on the lips. Selina felt her blood rushing.

Following the kiss, and moment or two of a lover’s gaze, Ivy looked over Harley’s shoulder to Selina. Eyelids hung low over the green iris of her eyes, the long, luscious lashes waving at her flirtatiously.

“Don’t let the oxytocin get to you, Selina.” Ivy walked over to her slowly. Selina was still paralyzed. She could not take her eyes away. Her curves waved in a hypnotic fashion as she walked, her long red locks with thin green, leafy vines woven between them got picked up by the draft, her bright red lips approached her face. Closer. Closer. Before Selina even knew what was happening Ivy took her face in her hands and planted a soft peck on her lips. “I’m happy to see you again, Selina.”

Ivy’s hands travelled down from Selina’s face to her shoulders and her upper arm. As they did, the seductive smile vanished from Ivy’s face and was replaced by a look of worry. Her eyes turned to Selina’s arms as she felt around her upper arm for a bit, then rolled back her sleeves to reveal the bandages covering her entire arm.

“Oh, my goddess!” Ivy exclaimed. “Harley told me something bad had happened, but I... My poor dear! What happened to you?”

Selina was finally getting used to being in the presence of Ivy’s arousing aura again, and was starting to get control of herself back. The first thing she noticed was that Ivy’s gorgeous, attractive exterior was not as she had seen it the past few seconds. Under the leaves and vines that formed her tight dress Selina started to notice large, rough, red and brown spots on her skin. They were all over her. She also had several scars and bullet wounds in visible places, some seemingly having gone straight through her chest and other lethal areas.

“I...” Though she was regaining control of her faculties, Selina was still very much distracted. “I went through a window.”

“Come with me! Let me help you. Tell me what’s going on. Tell me everything.”

Ivy took Selina by the hand and led her towards the steps, then down below. Selina now noticed another thing that was not apparent to her while under Ivy’s spell. She was limping. Badly.

4.

The laboratory under the gardens was far less... Ivy then the rest of the lair. Once they were underground and the tree sealed the path behind them, the corridors ceased to be walled with vines and growth, but tiles and glass. The space was not large, and had its fair share of plant life, but still felt more like a regular human apartment with furniture and a small laboratory setup. A few doors led to other areas Selina has yet to see.

Ivy was busy treating Selina’s wounds with some kind of aloe extract. She tried at first to insist she was fine, put up the tough girl act, but defenses had a way of melting in Ivy’s presence. Even though the pheromones were not affecting her as potently as when she first inhaled them, Selina was still getting goosebumps from the feeling of Ivy’s soft fingers on her skin.

"I always knew Wayne was trouble." Ivy said as she tended to Selina's wounds. "Even just as Bruce Wayne. But if he's also Batman..." Harley and Selina had recounted the events that led them to Ivy's doorstep, from the death of the Joker all the way to the present moment. "And don't even get me started on the cops. Bastards."

"I'm really grateful for your help." Selina said. "But if I'm being honest, you don't look so hot yourself right now. What happened to you? Harley told me you died."

"She was not wrong." Ivy finished with the last of the cuts and was reapplying the bandages. "I was clinically dead for 20 hours."

"But... I don't understand. You can just... get better after dying?"

"Can't kill my girl!" Harley exclaimed proudly. She was swinging on some vines in one corner of the room.

"I've been dead before." Ivy explained. "As long as my babies are around to help, I can usually find refuge in fertile soil where I can regenerate. Various fungi living underground consume nutrients in the soil and create a byproduct my body can absorb. It's a type of symbiosis. Lots of pines feed a similar way. I can heal wounds with this method, and I've even come back to life after hours of absolutely no brain activity. Though I'll be honest, I was very worried I would not make it back this time."

Ivy got up having finished the last of the bandaging, sealed the container with the aloe extract and stored it in a cupboard in the lab. The limp in her steps was ever more noticeable now. It made Selina feel unusually sad.

"It's been 3 months since what happened at Boil Pharma." Selina said getting up off the table she was sitting on. "Those are burn marks, right? You're still recovering from that attack?"

"Yes." Ivy had her back turned and was leaning on the lab counter. Selina could not see her face, but her voice sounded somber. "That was a truly terrifying day."

"It was all over the news." Selina said. "But nobody actually mentioned what happened to you. Until just now I assumed you had died. Permanently, I mean."

"I came close." Ivy turned around, leaned against the counter and crossed her arms, quickly brushing away a lock of hair that floated gently in front of her face. "I had been planning that attack for months. Finding a time when I could safely destroy the factory was a chore. Boil was working his employees for ridiculous hours. Humanitarian, my ass... What I didn't know was that the police were also planning a reception for when I made my return to Gotham. They equipped their officers with rebreathers and a layer of skin-tight mesh underly too keep my toxins from affecting them. Their guns were loaded with some form of high-powered incendiary ammunition, and they were all issued light-weight flamethrowers with some extremely potent variant of napalm. They had choppers dropping bombs with the stuff as well. They rained fire on me. It was..."

Ivy was starting to cry. Seeing her girlfriend in distress, Harley jumped off of her vine swing and rushed embrace her. Selina just sat awkwardly for a few moments. After spending some time in Harley's arms Ivy managed to wipe away the tears and continue.

"It was terrifying. They burned all the life out of several acres of land around the factory. All around me there were concrete walls collapsing, fires roaring, gunshots, sirens and helicopter rotors. And yet everything was silent as the grave. My skin was on fire, the incendiary bullets scorched my

insides, everything around me was being reduced to ash and cinders, and I couldn't hear any of my babies. Not tree nor shrub, not flower nor fungus, not a single strand of grass. It was all dead silent. I was sure it was the end. That I would join them among the silent soil and never return."

Her eyes locked with Harley's and her somber face brightened again, and the whole room seemed to brighten with it. "The next thing I know I'm in pain and in dark, lying on my back covered with earth. I pushed away the soil and climbed out of the ground to find this lovely face lying beside my grave, fast asleep with streaks of pink and blue makeup along her cheeks." She ran her hand over Harley's face. Harley grabbed it with her own and began gently rubbing her cheek against it. "This most colorful of all the flowers braved the forces guarding the crime scene the next morning, hunted for my body and carried me back here. The poor dear spent the next four days by my side, not knowing for sure if I would ever recover."

"It's no less than you've done for me in the past." Harley said. "You know I would have waited much longer too."

"My heart breaks at the thought." Ivy planted another kiss on her girlfriend's lips, then the two rested their foreheads on each other's and enjoyed a few seconds of silent embrace. Selina smiled at the sight, then let chose to look away for a bit to let the two have their moment without interruption.

Ivy gave one last smile to Harley before changing the subject. "I've been trying to heal the wounds of that day since. I'm getting better, but it's progressing much slower this time. I spend most of my days sleeping in a pod of one of my plants, letting the healing effects of the various aloe excretions be absorbed into my skin and muscles. Whatever the GCPD used in that napalm formula of theirs left more of a mark than anything before. I wondered how they could get their hands on an incendiary recipe I had never even heard of before. Now that I know Bruce Wayne is Batman, I think it's more than obvious that the weapons division of WayneTech must have supplied them with it."

"Wait... Wayne Enterprises has a weapons division?" Selina asked.

"Oh, absolutely. Did you think all those billions came just from energy production and aerospace R&D?"

"Well, I knew they had one, but I thought Thomas Wayne shut it down 50 years ago."

"They shut down the weapons division, but they never stopped developing the products." Ivy said. "The WayneTech board of directors was never going to drop such a lucrative industry because their CEO was on an idealistic pilgrimage. They shut down the department to please Wayne only to keep weapons development continuing on silently under other departments. And before you ask, yes, I promise you Bruce Wayne knew about it. How else would he have gotten the armor he wears, the special ops survival gear he uses, and that ludicrous tank he drives around the city?"

"The son of a bitch..." Selina scowled.

"I always hated Bruce Wayne." Ivy shook her head. "Though I was always under the impression that he was just indifferent to all the harm his company is causing to the planet. To be honest I always blamed Fox. And while I was likely right; he was the reason and Wayne really doesn't know the full extent of the damage society and nature continue to endure as a result of the actions of Wayne Enterprises, now that I know he's Batman..." Selina could see Ivy's hands form fists. "He really should have known better."

"He never had the chance." Selina said. "In the end he was still just a rich child taking revenge on the world."

"While I was under the impression Bruce Wayne and Batman were separate entities, I saw it differently." Ivy said. "Bruce was a playboy, living merrily in ignorance off the profits he makes at the expense of the employees his company uses up like cattle. Meanwhile Batman was a pathetic vigilante fighting street level crime while blind to the larger picture; the sick system that manufactures desperation and hatred as though they came off an assembly line. But if the two are the same... Well, Bruce Wayne had no excuse for his ignorance, nor Batman for his blindness. It truly makes me sick just to think about it."

"I know how you feel." Selina said.

"Oh dear!" Ivy saw Selina grow somber at the thought and rushed to give her a hug. Selina hugged her back, fighting against the fresh whiff of pheromones she had just inhaled. Ivy's warmth felt so calming and comforting, she found that she could have stayed in that embrace indefinitely. Alas, it lasted only a few seconds.

"This must be even worse for you." Ivy looked Selina in the eyes, her gaze radiating a deep concern. "You lost so much more. The trust you are so reluctant to hand out you gave to him, and he betrayed it. I wish there was a cure I could give you for that wound as well."

*I can think of one.* Selina said to herself without thinking, then almost immediately felt panic. For the moment after the thought crossed her mind, she was actually not sure if she has said it out loud or not. When nobody reacted, she calmed back down again, and tried to shake Ivy's pheromones out of her system.

"Don't... Don't sweat it." Selina said. "I appreciate the thought. But anyway, Harley said you are our only hope now."

"I did." said Harley. "Bane and Joker are both dead. They are the only ones who ever really caught B-man off guard in the past. Those with the mind and skill to match him - Frieze, Ra's, Crane - are all either locked up dead. There is only one person in all of Gotham who has the power and the mind to take out the Bat, and that's you."

"Not in this state I'm not." A clump of large leaves formed a seat behind Ivy as she sat down and crossed her legs, clearly in pain as she moved. "I've managed to remove all the shrapnel embedded within me and I can walk well enough, the plants also still listen to me and do as I ask them. But the pain is still present, the burns on my skin still sting like a bitch and I'm not moving well at all. And it took me 3 months just to get to this state. I could be recovering for up to the better part of a year before I'm at acceptable strength again, and even that is just speculation. Not to mention that if the cops still have their new flame-weapon against me, I promise you Batman has it too."

Selina and Harley looked at each other as Ivy moved her hand across the mark of a bullet wound on her opposite upper arm.

"I can't fight him. I can't risk it. I..." Ivy was beginning to get teary again. "You don't understand just how... how terrifying those last few moments were. I'm never far away from my babies. They are always with me, and I am always with them. There is no way for me to describe my relationship with them in terms of human relationships. In the midst of all that fire... I was alone. Everything around me burning to death, myself included, and in those moments I thought were going to be my last... I was well and truly alone. Nothing in the void but a deep black emptiness, and the knowledge that I had failed my babies... I can't... I can't go through that again... I can't."

As the tears began to pour from Ivy's eyes and her arms began to shake, Selina could feel her sadness as though it was her own. The whole room began to grow sad. She was overcome with a desire to comfort her. It was more than the need to console a friend. It was deeply internal. Ivy was in terrible sorrow and distress and she *had* to make her feel better. She *had* to share in her burden. Selina was fighting tears of her own, only to see Harley break down beside her, and rush into her girlfriend's arms crying out loud. This was the point where Selina could no longer contain herself. She let the sadness take over, cried for all she was worth, and joined Harley in embracing this goddess of nature.

Ivy got ahold of herself once she noticed what her pheromones were doing to the two women, whipped away the tears and gently caressed them both.

"I'm so sorry." Ivy said. "I didn't mean to make you... Please, don't be sad for me. It's over now. I'm fine."

Though even with the encouragement it took all the willpower Selina could muster to pull away from Ivy's soft, warm body. Somehow in the end she did manage it. Harley took much longer, though she more than likely just didn't want to let go.

"It's..." Selina tried to catch her breath. "It's fine. Really."

"I can't face Batman." Ivy said. "I can't face anyone in this state. But you are still right: This can't be allowed to continue. Nobody else can take down the Bat if he is not holding back anymore. Not the police, and certainly not that useless band of his former sidekicks. They would all be too soft on him."

"What about the Justice League?" Selina asked, herself already knowing the answer.

"Oh, please." Ivy responded. "There is no way Batman hasn't been preparing methods to take out his fellow 'superheroes' ever since he met them. Those fools never kept their guards up around him to begin with, he no doubt knows all their secrets and weaknesses. His friends are the ones who stand the smallest chance."

"So, it really is up to us, isn't it?" Harley asked looking at Selina.

"I guess so." Selina replied.

"And I'm not abandoning you in this." Ivy said to the two women still kneeling at her side. "Of that you can be certain. For now, we will be safe here. My babies will protect us from sight. Rest and recuperate, my beauties. Once we are ready, we will take down the Batman. We'll make sure he never harms anyone ever again. Never forget that in the end, nature always wins."