

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



#73

Cat = Sales

The Engagement Party



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
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THE ENGAGEMENT PARTY

"And the nightmare begins," Bruce muttered, taking the stairs from the Batcave three at a time. He half-expected Alfred to be waiting with his tux on a hanger and a sarcastic remark cued up when the clock passage opened: "*Miss Selina will be moved I'm sure, sir. Allowing yourself a full nine-second cushion reveals the obvious importance you've placed on the occasion.*"

It didn't happen. The study was empty, as was the hall outside. It was only when he'd made the skidding turn into the Great Hall like he used to as a boy that he saw Selina waiting between the stairs and the foyer, in her evening dress, purse in hand and that blasé tilt of the head when Batman "surprised her" at a vault where he was clearly expected.

"Cutting it close," she said dryly as he ran past.

"Murder! Body gone, Alfred car," he called, taking those stairs three at a time as well.

"The disappeared body wasn't going to be back on its slab by morning," Selina argued to nobody once he had gone. "And if it was, we'd have a whole new case. Alfred's already bringing the car around. You didn't imagine Alfred Used-to-Your-Battitude-and-Prepared-for-Anything Pennyworth was sitting around waiting for your suggestions on how to minimize the damage when Psychobat priorities upended the one event meant to buy us the wiggle room to get through the fondant and bridal lace nightmare with identities intact."

"Ready," Bruce said, trotting down the stairs with a self-satisfied grin. "Did you say something?"

"Not a word," Selina lied. "But at the risk of channeling you on the way to a Demon sting, 'Are you clear on the plan?'"

"Selina, there have been three murders in six days and now a body is—"

"And that's a tragedy. But those victims are still going to be dead tomorrow, and this is an engagement party. *Our* engagement, as in not something I can show up to without you or cover if you disappear once we get there. We need this, Bruce. The blue blood triangle is lined up: Ashton-Larraby, Bantree and Flay. If we nail this tonight, if we *spike it*, then it's *done*. The social cover we need to exclude undesirables from the guest list, to duck out of the rehearsal dinner if we need to, to explain why the bridal bouquet can talk or the best man keeps disappearing into the bar with a 5th dimensional leprechaun. Bruce, you *know* what those people are like, they can ignore *anything*. If they want to. If it's embarrassing to someone they don't want embarrassed, that steely resolve to carry on and pour the champagne, we need that. And you just happen to be Bruce Wayne, so we can get it as long as you don't trip the 'Oh dear, like his playboy bachelor days' tsk-tsk. They will do it for *you*, they'll do it

for us, we just have to give them the Mr. and Mrs. Wayne they want. Tonight, just this once.”

“This means a lot to you, doesn’t it,” Bruce said.

“It does,” she said softly. “I want to be your wife, and I’d been thinking of the wedding as just a lot of nonsense to get through in order to get there. But now that it’s really happening, yeah, I realize I do want it. It’s more than an empty ritual ‘for them;’ it’s an affirmation. We belong together, and I belong in *this* part of your life too. We deserve this, Bruce, we’ve *earned* it, it’s our right and I want to claim it. We beat the odds, we beat everything. We deserve *each other* and we deserve a very proud and very public *victory lap*... And I don’t want some presumptuous, self-important *thing* crawling in from our other lives, lighting the Bat-signal and—”

There was a half-knock and the front door opened abruptly. Alfred was there, holding a small package wrapped in green paper.

“No,” Selina said.

“Beg your pardon, sir, miss. This object was lying on the front steps as I drove up.”

“No,” Selina repeated, pointing at it like a dog’s puddle on the carpet.

“We’ll read it in the car,” Bruce said hurriedly.

“You can’t, you have to test it, you have to x-ray...” Selina started to say.

“We can safely assume it’s from Nigma,” Bruce said, flashing the trademark green wrapping at her while putting a hand at the small of her back to steer her towards the door. “And the one thing you have convinced me of in the course of our relationship is that he’s not going to blow us up. Like you said, we can’t be late. Alfred, the car’s idling out front, right?”

It would take the Bentley twenty-six minutes to reach the Butterfield, and Bruce wouldn’t be wasting one of them. He opened the package to reveal layers of what looked like gauzy cheesecloth wrapped around a sheet of stiff, yellowed paper, roughly textured as if it were covered in masking tape. An Egyptian scene was depicted on one side, with writing in dark reddish ink on the other.

“He’s gone the extra mile,” Bruce said, rubbing the pads of his fingers over the surface. “It’s papyrus. Modern but clearly authentic, handmade.”

“Showing off too,” Selina said, noting the writing on the back. “When did he start leaving riddles in Greek?”

“Just now,” Bruce admitted. “You didn’t tell him how you were feeling, did you? About the wedding, about the party?”

“Of course not, that’s personal. I mean, he’s a friend but that’s *really* personal. I only told you, why?”

“Because I don’t have a Rosetta Stone in my pocket, and this was left for us to find as we were leaving. I’m supposed to be turning us around and going back to the cave right now.”

“You don’t read Greek?” Selina asked.

“I read a little, but these squiggles, with Nigma’s wordplay and obscure references, not to mention the etymology angle, no way. It was left to ruin our evening.”

"That's crazy," Selina shook her head. "He was helpful when we announced the engagement. He made hashtags to push specific rogues to take the news in a certain way. He was on our side."

"And then Ivy nearly killed him. (Delta... epsilon) Maybe he blames us. (That's an epsilon isn't it? It doesn't look anything like his usual e.) Maybe he wants payback."

"Blames *me*, you mean."

"Selina."

"It's an epsilon. Delta, epsilon, sigma, omicron, (and I basically shut him in a room with a rampaging mutant tree monster and then electrocuted it) Um, a u with an umlaut? I have no idea what that is."

"Might be Phoenician, Proto-Sinaitic, an Egyptian hieroglyph or a sloppy upsilon. Delta, epsilon, sigma, omicron, upsilon, gamma, kappa. (You were trying to rescue him.) Desoúgk. Desoúnk? (You did rescue him, why would he possibly—) This isn't a word."

"To say nothing of what happened to Matt. And Harvey. (Might be a proper name.)"

"Selina, *ὠα ψαριών* is 'spawn'."

Built in 1892, the Butterfield was the youngest of Gotham's oldest private clubs and it had always been a bit of a rebel: turning its shoulder to Fifth Avenue where its rivals stood like proud cathedrals of privilege, and facing East 60th instead. Its architect Stanford White boasted "the scale of the building and the nature of its materials will give it an appearance unlike any in Gotham." It was a little too much rebel for the generations that followed, and the Butterfield adopted the conservative policies, dress code and club rules of its stodgiest rivals. There was, for example, a strict prohibition on the use or display of cell phones, PDAs and gadgets in any of the public areas. Guests wanting to use such devices were "permitted to do so only within the telephone booths located throughout the building."

"Gladys Ashton-Larraby." Bruce said the name like a curse as he got out of the car and looked up at that imposing gate, for of course it was she who'd picked this location for the party. He repeated it graciously when she greeted them at the door, placing both her hands on his elbows like some ancient masonic greeting, and then squeezing them as she shot air kisses around his ear with murmurs of "Your dear mother" and "so very proud." He thought it a third time with the original cursing inflection as she subjected Selina to the same treatment.

Selina who could hold a grudge as dearly as any rogue, Selina who was rarely inclined to forgive and never forgot. After the disastrous Gotham Post party, the idiocy at the polo match, after Gladys had followed her into the powder room on her first visit to the Bristol Country Club wanting to know why the Ashton diamonds were never deemed cat-worthy, Selina had given her blessing to all of this. She had nothing but gracious smiles when Gladys broached the idea. And why? Because it was Gladys Ashton-Larraby who started the Mrs. Wayne talk at Dick and Barbara's wedding.

"Let's be fair, Bruce. She called it when you and I were both very firmly stuck in denial. Why not let her strut a bit?" That's how she saw it. Bruce had argued that if they wanted to "be fair," Dick was the first to "call it" (and Batman had given him a fair amount of grief for it). Selina had agreed but pointed out (correctly, damn her) that Dick would have no interest in throwing them the type of engagement party they needed, nor would a Grayson shindig have the social clout her plan required.

After the air kisses and masonic greeting they were sent to check their coats and walk the rooms, coo over the floral arrangements and perhaps sneak a quick sip of champagne before joining Gladys in the receiving line for the arrivals.

"You endured that well," Selina whispered as soon as they were clear.

"Ridiculous woman," Bruce grimaced.

"I got drunk at the sound of the words 'Mrs. Wayne,' you had a six patrol meltdown and picked a fight with Alfred, then we both took it out on Jonathan Crane. Who's ridiculous?"

"That's not how I remember it."

Selina grinned.

"Remember it how you want; we both panicked. And remember why we're doing this. The code these people live by, tonight's guest list and the wedding should pretty much overlap. There will be a few Gladys doesn't know, of course, but it would embarrass her if we have dozens of people she didn't invite, which gives me cover to exclude them. How's that for some old-fashioned Katz Collection maneuvering?"

"It's not your worst scheme," Bruce admitted. "If only she didn't have to host it here. I've got a riddle in Greek in my pocket and have to spend the night sneaking off to the internet in three minute bursts."

"Oh send it to the cave for five minutes and look at this," Selina said, eyes lit with delight as they stepped into the Gilded Age ballroom done up for the occasion.

"You've been here before, haven't you?" Bruce asked.

Selina shook her head:

"Skylight over the penthouse dining room, third floor President's Foyer—"

"**For the Whitney portrait.**" Bruce graveled.

"Through the J.P. Morgan room and down to the library—"

"**For the Visscher letters.**"

"And I came to a luncheon once in the Governor's Room so I could run into someone coming out of a lecture in the Morton Room. I needed his key to a..." she trailed off, looking up at the ceiling mural and giggled. "But I've never been in here."

"It's a little Versailles for my taste," Bruce said, noting the wall of gilded mirrors reflecting the floor-to-ceiling windows opposite.

"Except that view outside is Robinson Park not Versailles. Get with the program, stud, your city, grunt. And I really meant the flowers and the candles. It's beautiful. All for us, all this trouble they've gone to. C'mon, this is nice. People are happy for us."

He walked her to one of the windows, traced a finger down a strand of hair to her shoulder, and looked into her eyes.

"You're counting down how long you have to do this before we talk riddle," she whispered.

"How well you know me," he whispered back, managing to infuse the voice with a hint of bat-gravel.

"Does it really say 'spawn'?"

"I think it says 'spawn of the *sun*,' and in ancient Egypt—"

"The sun was Ra. Ra spawn. Bruce, when Eddie has a warning about Talia, he doesn't send a riddle, he calls and says 'I've got dish. Want to meet at Starbucks or the Iceberg?'"

"Selina, riddles are not warnings; they're taunts. Or threats."

"There you are!" a new voice called, and Randolph Larraby approached like a man on a mission. "Bruce, I'm to introduce you to Patrick, the sommelier, and superficially discuss the wines we've picked out for tonight while making sure you find your way back to Gladys before the guests start arriving. Selina, Old George the maître d' is waiting to introduce himself. I believe if you pass through the bar on the way to powder your nose, you'll give him a chance to make it look unplanned."

Bruce and Selina's eyes met.

Allowing themselves to be *managed*.

By Ashton-Larrabys.

Being the Mr. and Mrs. Wayne the social register wanted.

Just for tonight.

"You know in Amy Vanderbilt's day, more than half the engagement parties were a surprise. You were invited to a dinner and had no idea what it was about, before the announcement hit the newspaper. Seems a shame now... Twitter. Hashtag: Two Hearts Beat As One."

Bruce made the obligatory laugh and passed the Gardners on to Selina, who managed a similar laugh.

"That's the fifth person that's referenced one of Nigma's hashtags," Bruce hissed after they'd gone.

"I know, but it's an obvious thing to say coming in the door. It's about the engagement, it's something light and funny that everyone knows and everyone saw."

"It's something he did to defuse the rogues," Bruce said through his teeth.

"Not the first time the PLUs have been eerily rogue-like," Selina noted, and then broke into a new smile of welcome to Ned and Charlotte Mandell. Bruce turned and everyone shook hands, exchanged pleasantries, and as soon as they'd passed on, Selina turned back to Bruce. "It's a coincidence."

"Is it? It could be a message, the hashtags after the riddle. Wouldn't be hard to contrive. Neural linguistic programming or one of Tetch's devices—"

He broke off to greet Barry Hobbs, who could never disguise his contempt for all things Wayne, but now...

"My congratulations, Bruce. And my compliments, Selina."

...the frost of his forcing himself through social formalities was compounded by fear. He'd glimpsed Catwoman the predator at that last LexCorp party and he regretted provoking her. He'd been fearing the worst when the news came that

Luthor's hedge fund collapsed, that his algorithm somehow made billions in the aftermath, and if he didn't want Lex finding out, he had to make her happy. He now found himself almost bowing over her hand rather than shaking it. And then attempting to save face, he coughed on it. He apologized, Bruce offered a lozenge, and Barry slunk away miserably.

"We may have overplayed that hand," Bruce whispered when he'd gone.

"I know. He'll be back and he'll be pissed," Selina agreed. "But he's not tonight's problem. And it can't be what you're thinking with Ra's and Talia. Eddie despises her, *and she's off and happily settled with Brady, right?* Ra's is in an Atlantis jail, and even if he wasn't, Eddie wouldn't touch him with a barge pole."

"Alright, suppose it's not Nigma," Bruce began, then trailed off. The crimefighter whose life depended on awareness of his surroundings was suddenly on edge. Selina was next... "Bruce" ...his name uttered so softly it was almost as if she'd thought it rather than saying it aloud. Then Gladys, a sharp intake of breath that would have gone unnoticed by anyone other than Batman on alert.

"Bruce, I am so sorry," she whispered. "He's supposed to be in California. He never comes East anymore."

Bradford Dormont, Ford everywhere except his book covers, was oozing across the foyer escorting a woman. Vivian was it? Vivian Chase, a climber Bruce had dated once or twice, right around the time he figured out it was more memorably obnoxious not to bother with their names. Then as now, she wasn't important. Ford Dormont on the other hand...

"Randolph," Vivian gushed, and Bruce studied her with a detective's eye. There were no signs of guilt. She was thrilled to *be here*, but it wasn't the thrill being at the center of a drama... "Gladys." ...It made sense. She'd married a financier now doing seven years for insider trading, and she'd somehow held on to enough money and goodwill to remain in society. She was thrilled to have climbed so high, to be making it inside the imposing gates of the Butterfield, but she had no inkling that allowing Ford Dormont to accompany her was any kind of faux pas.

"Vivian, dear," Gladys was saying—and Selina was right. There was something positively rogue-like in the way she could pack so much energetic revulsion into such a superficial greeting.

Ford lingered talking to Randolph, and Bruce waited. It wasn't typical behavior for a 'walker' but Ford Dormont was no longer typical of the usually gay, usually closeted single men of an earlier generation, with good suits, impeccable manners and just enough connections to hang around the fringes of society escorting widows and divorcees. He'd become a celebrity in his own right, parlaying the inside knowledge of the walkers into a series of gossipy novels that made him—in his view, at least—a peer of Truman Capote and Dominick Dunne. The books had slowed to a trickle since he turned sixty, but he remained ferociously relevant—in his view, at least—through a column in *Mayfair* magazine. He'd boasted through his literary doppelganger that his subjects *loved* reading about themselves in *Mayfair*, which is why they continued to invite him. The truth was apparent in Gladys's cold greeting. He wasn't invited; he came.

"Bruce, congratulations," Vivian cooed. "What changes the years bring, eh?" He didn't remember enough of their break up (if two dates even qualified for the term) to

know if it was a barb. He murmured something complimentary and introduced her to Selina, then turned to face the gossip-mongering namedropping novelist obsessed with crime among the upper class.

As for the supposed joy of seeing yourself on the page, Bruce had appeared twice in Ford's novels and it was a pleasure he could do without. The character he called Manderson Hume showed up in Ford's first novel. The villain of the piece identified himself as such by declaring "The only respectable way to come in to money is to inherit it," and Manderson overheard, took offense, and punched him. He was herded off by sympathetic onlookers ("Drunk as usual, poor man") and didn't appear again for nine books (although there were sixteen excruciating callbacks to Winkie Allen's dining room where Manderson Hume had punched Reid Nogales the night Sissy Banks bought the Monet).

Ford stood before him now looking ten years older than when Bruce had seen him last. The salt and pepper hair had gone completely white, he seemed an inch shorter, and there were more wrinkles around his mouth and neck.

"Bruce Wayne, Gotham's poor little rich boy, tormented by injustice, made dissolute and debauched by the anguish of crime unpunished and unatoned, finds peace at last..." he eulogized in his high-pitched gravelly sing-song. Bruce forced a smile and started the turn to include Selina in the conversation, hoping to get the joint greeting and introduction over with as soon as possible, until the next words froze the social auto-pilot in a blast of instinctive, angry, defensive *Batman*. "...by finding love with a criminal."

The old eyes shown with lusty enthusiasm, and Bruce realized: Irony. Exquisite, literary irony. For an author whose entire career was romans à clef among Gotham's elite—*crime* among Gotham's elite—for an author obsessed with crime among Gotham's elite whose creative output had dwindled to nothing, the prospect of Bruce Wayne marrying Selina Kyle must be the Holy Grail. A literary and dramatic irony nestled in the very thing he had always written about, a literary and dramatic irony that would elevate his final work above the "Judith Krantz in pants" moniker that had always dogged him. For a decade, he'd been coasting on a reputation that was unlikely to outlive him. With Bruce and Selina, he could go out with a bestseller and more, a bestseller recognized for its literary merit.

Bruce introduced Selina, who of course overheard his epithet and wasn't going to ignore it.

"A criminal who's had quite a run being misrepresented by 'biographers,' tabloids and a major motion picture," she smiled like she was beyond noticing any new fictions Ford could dream up.

He seemed to take it as a compliment, taking her extended hand with both of his as he said "There *is* a peculiar insistence denying you the privileged origin that makes you fit in here so beautifully. We must fix that." There was a sinister undertone on the last words, like a serial killer in a movie dropping his facade and revealing himself to his victim. "We'll talk later," he promised, caressing her hand like a crystal ball. "I'll tell you the tidbits about Bruce that didn't make it into my book."

It was a creepy performance, and anyone who hadn't dealt with Joker up close and personal might have been unnerved. Bruce and Selina simply watched him go, and then looked at each other and shrugged.

"I don't get it," she murmured. "His books trace six bits of gossip through a string of parties and lunches while somebody with money gets away with murder. All the people he likes look fabulous, the ones he doesn't are plastic surgery disasters, there's a price tag on every orchid and sable cuffs on every suit. The same six bits of news, repeated like the rhymes in a villanelle."

"Well brace yourself, we're going to be the A story he follows those six bits of gossip through."

"Have you killed someone?" Selina asked flatly, and Bruce gave an unamused head tilt. "'Cause I haven't," she added.

"Don't dismiss him. He's probably harmless, but he has noticed things that no one else did."

"You punched Jim Endicott in someone's dining room?"

"No," Bruce chuckled. "I'll tell you later."

Trip Corcoran arrived with Samantha Ambrose and Liv Bantree. Gladys warned them Ford was back in Gotham and they clustered around her reminiscing about who was who in his last book. It gave Bruce and Selina an opening to talk freely.

"Suppose it's not Nigma," Bruce said quietly. "We've been assuming the riddle is from him because it came to the manor, but Ra's knows and so does Talia. Either of them could be pulling something and trying to hide it as a Riddler missive."

"Point me to one of those phone booths, I'll call and ask him point blank if he sent it," Selina said.

"Later. I'm going first," Bruce said. "I want another look at the text and then another run at Google."

"Be quick," Selina said. "Everyone will be here soon, and once the line breaks up, I'd rather not mingle alone with Mr. We'll-Talk-Later out there waiting with the Manderson Hume version of your exploits."

Bruce grunted.

The second time Bruce appeared in a Bradford Dormont novel, Manderson Hume (who punched Reid Nogales in Winkie Allen's dining room the night Sissy Banks bought the Monet) goes to the Union Club. The doorman greets him by name as he holds the door, the maitre d' greets him as he enters the library and brings him his favorite scotch. Later he brings another, and then a third. This would not be remarkable at the Butterfield, the Empire Club or the Knickerbocker, but it was worth noting at the Union Club because Manderson Hume was not a member.

The passage always bothered Bruce because he *hadn't* ever bothered joining the Union Club and he did show up 'drunk' one night in Batman's early days when he needed an alibi after a Scarecrow takedown went bad. He expected them to throw him out. He would make a scene, there would be a tactful paragraph in the police blotter the next day that he could call attention to by trying to cover it up. But nothing happened. After they let him in, after he stumbled around, knocked a bronze off its

stand, poured a snifter of Armagnac into an Etruscan urn and seemed in danger of vomiting on the Savonnerie rug, absolutely nothing happened. The next day, the implacable but transparent denials that he was even there provided a more convincing alibi than any police blotter could have. And Ford Dormont knew. Nothing about Batman, not that the alibi was staged or the drunkenness faked, but he knew the protective shield that had formed spontaneously around Thomas Wayne's son, and Bruce wasn't thrilled with the mind capable of that insight looking closer at him or Selina.

"Not thrilled" deepened to real concern as he made his way to the phone booths behind the Great Hall. He heard snatches of conversations that sounded Dormontian. Morsels of gossip that suddenly had the feel of those trashy novels: *He slept with the nanny. They paid to sit next to the duke. He can lose a million dollars in that high stakes poker game and take it on the chin, but a few months working with that awful woman and he was drinking again...*

That was on his way to the phone booth. On the way back: *How much did they pay to sit next to the duke? Did you hear he slept with the nanny?* And apparently his first date with Selina was in Rome.

He had to negotiate a number of waiters on his way back to Selina, trays of champagne seemingly popped into his path along with fresh twists on the gossip as he moved around them: *They paid a fortune to sit next to the duke each year at the Clarence House benefit. It wasn't his gambling losses, it was being thrown together with that dreadful woman again that started the drinking...* The receiving line had broken up. *Hiding in rehab now...* And he found her in the Great Hall, with Richard Flay pointing out all those features of the room that evoked the Italian Renaissance.

"Bad news," Bruce whispered, paradoxically handing her a glass of Piper-Heidsieck as if to toast the disaster, and then steering her away from Richard, he elaborated. "First line of the riddle, it's a 'pointed' something, that could mean a sword or a dagger, 'spawned from greatness,' not the sun. That comes later: a pointed weapon from *the land of the sun, the land of Ra.*"

"I have bad news too," Selina said, taking another champagne flute from a passing waiter and handing it to him the same way. "Once you introduce the idea that it's not Eddie, I started thinking. Barry Hobbs and the LexCorp boys, the blackmail fund, I called it *Ba en Aset*, the soul of Isis aka Bast. I *told them* that's what it meant, I told them it was a Bast thing. And that would explain its coming to the house. It might not have anything to do with Batman, it could come to the house if it's aimed at me."

"No," Bruce shook his head. "No I agree the LexCorp boys will bounce back eventually, but there's no way they got it together that fast."

"I cost them *a lot* of money, Bruce. Who's to say how fast they'll regroup when—dinner rolls flown in from the Passi bakery in Rome, do you know why?"

Bruce saw they were strolling near enough for Dwight and Sophia Beaufort to overhear, necessitating a change of subject, but he still had to smile at the subject Selina chose.

"Does it have something to do with our first date?" he asked.

"Okay, there are times the detective thing is sexy and times it's just creepy," she said, dropping her voice. "How in the hell—"

"I just heard myself, our first date is something about Rome."

"Apparently you flew us there for a sandwich from this little stall in the mercato. Beef brisket, four euros, gets its bread from that bakery."

"Well I didn't want to be like all the other guys," Bruce said impishly, and Selina gave him a look. "It's not like we can tell anybody what really happened," he whispered. "And it's not a bad story. It sounds like me, like the me I pretended..."

He trailed off as he saw Ford Dormont was watching them talk, watching as if he knew what they were discussing. He raised his glass very subtly, as if in a secret toast.

"Of course it's a good story," he muttered. And of course it fit. If it was crafted by a writer who was in the business of making up stories to fit a character.

There was no chance to talk further. They were separated as Dwight Beaufort led Bruce off to meet his son's girlfriend and Sophia appropriated Selina to settle an argument about that darling shop with the earrings that was either in Venice or Milan. They heard separately how Don Eping was drinking again, how Gilda Newling—typical arriviste—had the plane redecorated while Isaac was in rehab and how she used Kiki Manning who does the London houses for all those Russian oligarchs. How there was a feud with Lily White because Lily wanted Kiki to do her dining room and Gilda had been monopolizing him for months. How Vivian Chase tried to get Piper Turnbull as a media consultant to advise on her husband's release from prison, but he turned her down flat...

They met up again in the general migration to the dining room:

"It would also explain the riddle," Selina insisted, picking up where she left off. She spit it out quickly, figuring they would have little chance to talk during the meal: "Greek on Egyptian papyrus, that's not Eddie's style. It's an outsider who doesn't know how it works, trying to mimic and getting it wrong."

"You're right about that part," he whispered as they reached their table... "At least I certainly hope you're right that Nigma has nothing to do with it," as he held her chair... "Because there's something more. I can't analyze it until we get home, but having taken a closer look in better light, it's just possible that dark ink is blood."

"Ew," Selina said, glancing at the dish of cocktail sauce and then looking at Bruce like he'd ruined the prospect of eating oysters.

"I want to check something," he whispered just as Gladys took her place next to him, ending the conversation.

The tables settled, an amuse bouche was set before her, and Selina eyed the elegant little round of puff pastry and salmon mousse, topped with roe and dill. She picked it up and leaned over to whisper in Bruce's ear as if imparting a sexy secret.

"Don't you dare," she warned, her lips to his ear while the mousse blocked anyone's view of his mouth.

"Blood and a 'pointy something' is definitely a threat," he mouthed, his hand over hers, guiding her fingers to pop the delectable morsel into his mouth.

The table reacted with tolerant amusement, as expected—young love and all that—and Bruce returned the gesture. First whispering in her ear "If it is blood and it's directed at you, a threat that was meant to be found on our way here, I want to know now, not later..."

She smiled gamely, as if it was an equally romantic endearment he was offering. She accepted the bite of salmon just as he had done, and just as he had done, she mouthed

the last words this gambit would allow them to exchange. “Don’t you dare,” she repeated.

It actually seemed to work, for a while. The amuse were cleared and the next course served. She felt the shift midway through the soup—the Dark Knight was on the job—and when the course was finished and the waiters began hovering to take the bowls, she felt a spike.

“If you’ll excuse me for just one minute,” he said.

Selina spent that one minute recalling the Anderson balcony, where she could have pushed him into the street and nobody would have been the wiser... The next minute she worked out how he must have studied the waiters clearing the amuse course to determine the best psychological moment later when they came back for the soup... The next minute she again considered the balcony, and the one after that, how bad whatever Bruce suspected must be. That he would leave in the middle of this dinner knowing what was at stake...

“So sorry,” he said, returning. She looked at him, that catch of the fop in his voice said it all. It was bad. He was overcompensating and it was bad.

She looked closer once he was seated, but could see nothing in his eyes but Bruce Wayne the one time playboy prince of Gotham, finally settling down. He was wholly in character, utterly committed, not a hint of Batman. Whatever he found was bad.

Selina made it through the fish course, the game and the sorbet on auto-pilot: the recent trip to Metropolis, the America’s Cup and the Kents... Yes, it was the Clark Kent who wrote *Strange Bedfellows* who was to be Bruce’s best man. They met through his publisher here in Gotham... No, she didn’t think there was a collection of Wayne bridal gowns preserved like a private museum in some forgotten room in the manor, but she would certainly find out...

All the while her subconscious sorted through the possibilities like polished tiles of a game she wasn’t entirely sure how to play: If the riddle wasn’t from Eddie but sent to Bruce, it had to be someone who knew his identity—Hugo, Ra’s, Talia or Bane—and making it seem like a Riddler clue could be a stalling tactic, an ordinary red herring, or an oblique shot at her because she and Eddie were friends. And if it was a shot, it was an ambivalent passive-aggressive act which eliminated Bane.

If she was the target, that changed everything. Batman’s identity wasn’t a factor. It could be anyone with a grievance. Catman had never liked her and it was said he “hadn’t been right” since the Bane beating during the war. It’s not like any of the rogues were normal to begin with, there was no telling what a brush with death would do to a guy like Blake. The Riddler angle could also be an allusion to the war, he was leader of the rogue forces against Falcone. *And* the war did start—ironically—because the rogues thought she and Bruce were engaged. If it was a grudge from the war driving all this, their real engagement party would make an inviting target.

The sorbet arrived. Selina took advantage of the pause in conversation and turned to Bruce, mentioning William Blake like it was something they’d been talking about for

their vows. He shook his head and said the problem with those romantic poets was the allusions were too murky.

And he was right. If Blake was sending a message, he wouldn't be half-assed about the cat angle. It wouldn't be a generic Egyptian scene on Papyrus with a riddle in Greek on the back, it would be a clear allusion to Sekhmet depicted with her cat's head on a human body making her unmistakably a cat-woman.

Of course Catwoman was credited with *ending* the rogue war, with taking out Carmine Falcone and putting down Bane. And raiding Falcone's fortune afterwards. Carmine had as much cause and more time to mount his revenge than Barry Hobbs... But unless he'd completely cracked, Carmine would never announce his intentions with a riddle.

Of course she'd also gone "snacking" on Ra's al Ghul's fortune (as Lex put it), though he had a variety of other motives to strike at her. Ra's was more likely than Falcone to misdirect with a riddle as part of some needlessly convoluted scheme. But he was safely stuck in Atlantis. As far as anyone knew, he had no way to contact the surface...

The game arrived. It was even possible *Ivy* had some misplaced associations between Selina—or Bruce and Selina as a couple—and that awful mutation that nearly killed her. Being rid of it wound up stripping her of her pheromones and her telepathic connection to plants. Selina looked down uncomfortably at the fronds of fennel and thyme served as a garnish with her pheasant. Poor Pammy, losing her powers had been the *good* outcome. If it hadn't been for Clayface sacrificing himself, she and Selina would have been fried in Etrigan's hellfire.

Bruce was saying something about the Wemyss Clan from which the Waynes descended, a family legacy and the right to spend their honeymoon in a Scottish castle so private, it didn't appear on maps. Well that was a solution to the honeymoon question; she wondered when he'd thought of it. No sending a mountain of luggage to the Gritti Palace or imposing on J'onn to make shapeshifting appearances and eat a lot of room service breakfasts. They could remain in town, decently disguised as Thomas Pearl and Cora Colette, Bruce would continue to function as Batman to satisfy the curiosity of anyone who—obnoxiously, in her view—had to see his reaction to Catwoman getting ma...

God, that was a *third* possibility—the riddle could have been left at the manor not because the sender knew Bruce was Batman, not as a message for her, but by someone intending to use her connection to Batman to make her deliver the riddle for them. Either to force Selina Kyle and Batman together on the night of the party, or if the sender were *really* clever, the riddle being handed over by Catwoman being an integral part of the clue.

Ulgh, there were too many possibilities.

Selina excused herself, planning to call Eddie in the powder room only after she'd taken an aspirin. Her phone, unsurprisingly, had voicemail from Bruce.

...:Trouble. It's on the Egyptian side, not the Greek. I'm sending a snapshot, but you probably remember there's a block of hieroglyphics above the figures. It's divided into five segments. The murders this week, the Bludgeon Killer, the locations where the bodies were found correspond exactly to the first three blocks of hieroglyphs. The first victim was found in a credit card consolidation office, the next at a food bank, the last under scaffolding on a church;

that's a point for point match with hieroglyphs about forgiveness of debt, gifts of corn, and restoration of a temple. This was sent by the killer, and he's got two more locations picked out. Two more murders on deck....

She made her way back to the table feeling there was a rock in her stomach. She took her seat as Bruce had done, on auto pilot, finished the meal on auto pilot...

Yes, the Gotham Post had run the engagement story. It was quite remarkable, the reduction in fabricated and insulting embellishments. Apart from omitting her parents and completely misrepresenting her education and family background, they more or less ran the announcement submitted... Yes, they had selected a charity. She would certainly register at Scully & Scully, but they would both prefer donations be made in lieu of gifts, to the Thomas Wayne Trauma Center or the Victims' Alliance... Through the meat, then the salad... No, she hadn't given any serious thought to marking her era as mistress of the manor with a new china pattern commissioned from Lenox as if she were an incoming first lady, but there was a superb 18th century Spode service and some fin de siècle Limoges that she might bring out for special dinner parties if they were especially good... And finally the dessert...

Bruce suggested they take a pass and walk the room, visiting all the other tables and chatting with those they hadn't had a chance to spend time with. It gave them an opening for guarded conversation as they moved from table to table...

Of the suspects discussed: Ra's and Talia, Hugo, Eddie and Catman, Ra's was definitely the most likely to run up a body count just to get his attention.

Liv Bantry and the Colemans, the Endicotts and the Forbes...

But Ra's did not have access to news from the surface, he shouldn't know about the engagement (unless Arthur told him, and why would he?) let alone specifics of the party, and he had no means to contact the surface. All that was confirmed when Bruce went to see him in Atlantis to feel out if Ra's could be behind the rogues' collective assumption that the Pelacci mob wedding was really Bruce and Selina—

"Dear God," Bruce breathed.

Chet and Dodo Lassiter, Winkie and Clayton Pierce... They all knew more about this preposterous *date in Rome* than Bruce did, who supposedly contrived it. Another time he would be annoyed, but tonight...

"What's wrong?" Selina asked as soon as they were free.

"Dessouk," he whispered. "When I went to see Ra's in Atlantis, I tested him about getting news from the surface. I told him a ridiculous story about a Justice League battle destroying the town he was born in, and he corrected me about the town but clearly had no idea the whole story about the battle was a lie. The town I used for the lie was Dessouk."

"And?"

Penny Vraag and Charles Tremont, Bunny Wigglesworth and Clive, Chester and Matilda Markel...

"The word I couldn't identify, Desoúgk or Desoúnk," Bruce resumed. "It could be Dessouk, an ancient name or a variant spelling. The town is in Egypt, just east of Alexandria, plenty of Greek on the monuments."

"So this whole thing could be a message, putting you on notice that he's in contact with the surface now?"

“Possibly. The murders aren’t out of character but why dress it up as a riddle?”

Ted Layne and Gerald Grimes, Clive and Adrienne Littleton...

They returned to their table just as the orchestra set up and the tables started to break up for general mingling and dancing. As the guests of honor, Bruce and Selina’s situation didn’t improve. They were in demand for conversation, and though they did finally get the details on this first date they’d had in Rome, they still had to steal moments here and there to exchange a few words that weren’t in code.

Bruce went off to research Dessouk on the Internet, and when he returned, Selina’s brow was knit.

“I know the detective brain is tied up with stuff that actually matters, but if you get a chance while we’re mingling, see if you can find out my position on The Gotham Post.”

“Repeat,” Bruce said in the tone Batman used to challenge her banter mid-break-in.

“I was cornered with Bunny Wigglesworth and Ormolu. ‘Dashiell Tate slept with the nanny’ and so on, when Ford Dormont comes up to us and launches into this story about you and Harvey in his Dentmeister days. It’s weird, I’ve heard Harvey’s side of it more than once and Ford’s version is spot on. In between that, Dashiell sleeping with the nanny and Don Eping losing a million dollars at this high stakes poker game in London, Bunny asked if I’ve forgiven the Post now that they’re giving me good press on the engagement. And I honestly don’t know what I told her.”

“Selina—”

“Bruce, I’ve got a head full of dead bodies in my voicemail and a riddle that’s not from Eddie in Greek, pointed weapons spawned from Ra’s. Give me a break, words came out of my mouth, I don’t know what they were.”

“If I get any indication what your position is on the Post, I will let you know,” Bruce said like a man who knows his way around feline logic.

She looked up at him like she felt bad—a rare occurrence. She knew none of this was important with a killer on the loose and a riddle they couldn’t investigate until they were free of the social quagmire, but still, it was the exact angle she’d always looked up with such infuriatingly carefree defiance as Catwoman, when she was actually committing a crime.

“Let’s dance,” he said and led her to the south end of the ballroom.

Warm bodies merged as they always had, hyper-reactive to the slightest shift in balance, adapting to the other’s rhythm. Selina’s lips moved to Bruce’s ear, a hair’s breadth of contact, achingly light, achingly fleeting, and then the hot breath of a whisper:

“Tell me about the bludgeon killer.”

Bruce’s lead spun her abruptly and awkwardly. He stopped for a beat, looking at the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows and the radically different view of Robinson Park now that it was dark.

“Bruce,” Selina prompted, and he resumed dancing, turning them so that she faced the windows while he saw the same view reflected in the mirrors opposite.

“A pointed instrument,” he said. “The *bludgeon* killer does not use a pointed weapon; he bludgeons. The riddle isn’t referencing a weapon, but a tool. A pointed tool, a pointed *instrument*. Do you know what ‘pointed instrument’ is in Greek?”

“Obelisk,” Selina said, looking out at the dark silhouette of the Robinson Park obelisk blacked out against the city lights behind it. The obelisk called:

"Cleopatra's Needle," they said together. Then Bruce went on, "Cleopatra wasn't Egyptian; she was Greek, right?"

"More than Greek, she was descended from Alexander the Great," Selina said. "Spawned from greatness, you might say."

They hurriedly left the dance floor, waving heedlessly at Bunny Wigglesworth and Kay Kay Finn as they passed, a pair of foppish smiles for Clive Littleton (Bruce mentioning how it was too bad about Dashiell Tate getting caught with the nanny) and Winkie Pierce (Don drinking again, so sad, it wasn't the poker losses you know, it was that woman!)

They squished together in a phone booth off the Great Hall, and read over each other as they skimmed the history of Cleopatra's Needle on the Robinson Park website.

"The obelisk came from—was shipped to—Gotham from Heliopolis," Selina read.

"Literally the city of the sun," Bruce said, while she said "or city of Ra—"

"In later Egyptian dynastic times, Ra was merged with the god Horus, as Ra-Horakhty—oh who cares!" Bruce exclaimed.

"Ra, who is Horus of the *Two Horizons*' might care very much if Harvey doesn't surface. Nobody has seen him since the whole Ivy-Etrigan-Clayface thing went sideways—in Robinson Park—and it's not like it'd be the first time a rogue decided to wreak bloody vengeance on somebody who wasn't strictly to blame for whatever they're mad about."

"Breathe," Bruce suggested when the torrent of words subsided. "We've got a pointed thing descended from greatness and from the land of the sun. Ra-Horus and the two horizons don't figure into it. 'Limestone pedestals and bronze crabs were added to each corner,' couldn't matter less. Ah, here we are—transported to Gotham via a wooden cargo ship called the *Dessouk*. This is it. This is the solution to the riddle, it's Cleopatra's Needle."

They looked at each other.

"Okay, now what?" Selina asked. "'Knock, knock.' 'Who's there?' 'Cleopatra's Needle.' We still don't know what it means, or why it's in riddle form or even which of us it came to."

"No, we don't," Bruce admitted. "We better get back. Maybe you could..." He pointed to his neck, and Selina obliged with a discreet lipstick smudge on his collar.

They rejoined the party. Bruce got a duty-dance with Gladys out of the way while Randolph sat Selina down for "a nice chat," which was spent probing for every conceivable detail about the night Luthor's hedge fund imploded. She stole periodic looks out the window while Bruce did the same from the dance floor.

When he finished with Gladys, Bruce asked her to dance again. Selina thought maybe something had occurred to him, but he said nothing. Through half a medley of Cole Porter love songs, he said nothing.

"Get anything?" she asked finally.

"No."

"So talk to me. Three bodies in, you've got to have something on this guy."

"He obliterates their identities. Faces smashed beyond recognition, teeth are pulverized, some kind of chemical process on the finger. And he's lucky: DNA came

back inconclusive on the first two vics. The last chance is forensic facial reconstruction on the skulls and that's another two to four weeks minimum."

"And what does that mean? Why does he take away their identities?"

"It was necessary to hide who they were," Bruce said grimly. "Either because there's a link, because knowing who the victims are will point us to the killer, or because he's crazy, his particular pathology is focused on removing these people's identities. It's even possible that's his aim and the murders are just a necessary first step to accomplish his goal."

"Sad state of affairs when Ra's offing people to get your attention was the *good* alternative," Selina muttered. "What about tonight's body, the one that—"

"The one that disappeared from the morgue," Bruce said, pivoting, a new energy in his lead as he mind raced to incorporate the new data: the riddle, Cleopatra's Needle, and the ramifications of that third body being taken from the morgue. "Damn it to hell," he grumbled, turning Selina and walking her deliberately to the farthest corner of the room. "Dormont is stalking us," he announced, though by now Selina could see him crossing the dance floor with a determined gait.

"We are all enchanted by spectacle of young love," Ford Dormont announced in that annoying sing-song. "But you must share each other a little."

He stood there clearly expecting to cut in, and Bruce looked at Selina with more regret than when he'd threatened her with Blackgate.

"Yes, by all means, share me," she said (with less teasing affection than when he'd threatened her with Blackgate).

Ford moved in and clutched her back like a figure from those 1950s dance movies, and Bruce remembered there was some Hollywood in his distant past before he became a writer. He was a producer or something, on paper at least. Not important in his own right, but he flew pretty high in the people he partied with.

With the acid thought that that's probably where he picked up the namedropping, Bruce dismissed Dormont from his mind and went back to the phone booths as the orchestra began an upbeat Rodgers and Hammerstein medley with a peppy rendition of *When You're Driving Through The Moonlight*. He returned looking grim, saw Ford subjecting Selina to his energetic rumba box step, and scanned the room with Batman's strategic acumen. He selected Liv Bantree as the doyenne Ford would be unable to resist, dusted off his playboy charm and gave Liv a full blast to get her onto the dance floor as quickly as possible. He rumba'd her into position next to Ford and Selina, and retrieved his bride with the swift, unassailable stage management he would have used to separate her from civilians if she'd infiltrated the party to escape Batman after a robbery. He led her first to a courtyard where, unfortunately, Randolph Larraby was smoking, then hustled her back inside and up the stairs to a private room where—after he picked the lock—they could look down into the courtyard to see when Randolph had left.

"I called Gordon," he reported grimly when they were alone. "He confirmed two things. They never got a chance to take samples from the third body before it went missing. No samples and no measurements, so not only is the skull gone, there's no possibility for a reconstruction."

“‘Confirmed’ meaning that’s what you expected,” Selina said, and Bruce nodded. “So the first two bodies the killer covered his tracks, but he messed up on the third and had to take the body before you could get an ID?”

This time Bruce shook his head no.

“Gordon also confirmed the attempt to match DNA on the first two bodies came back inconclusive/no match. But the thing is when I said that earlier, when he said it, when the officer told him, we were all repeating what someone told us. ‘The results were inconclusive.’ I had him call the morgue and have the night crew pull the actual piece of paper with the lab results and read it. It says inconclusive, yes, it’s exactly the same boilerplate report of an inconclusive/no match result, *exactly* the same on both like they were printed off the same template, same computer and printer one right after the other, consecutive case numbers though they were submitted four days apart.”

“So the killer’s got a man in the coroner’s office?” Selina murmured, chasing the idea. “Covering for samples they never took, and disappearing the final body?”

“No, not quite,” Bruce said, glancing out the window and down into the courtyard where Randolph had finished his cigarette. “The body wasn’t taken from the morgue, it just got up and was reabsorbed into the clay mass it came from. Can you make it over that gate from this window?”

“Did you just say—uh, I can but the dress might get torn up, are we coming back?—Did you just say Matt is alive? Bruce, did you just say Matt Hagen is still alive, because he didn’t deserve to go out that way. I mean, he saved me, he saved Pammy. He took that full blast of Etrigan’s fireball and then you crashed into him, it was broken pottery everywhere and that dust—in my eyelashes, and coughing on it—”

“And Cleopatra’s Needle isn’t that far from where it happened. It’s about half way between the clearing where Ivy made her last stand and the art museum on the edge of the park. The art museum with all those Basts and Sekhmets. Selina, this isn’t good news. When I was at the morgue, there were signs that could point to a fire alarm going off earlier today. If the body got wet, Clayface lost his connection, maybe it was too damaged to ‘repair’ so he just absorbed it back into his lab employee and walked out the door.”

“Bruce, we thought we had three dead bodies and a dead Clayface, now we have none. This is totally good news.”

“There were three dead bodies and five locations left by a supposed killer, and a clue positioned midway between representations of you and Ivy. And Hagan has a history of blaming women he considers responsible for his plight. I need to get to Ivy now, and you have to come with me because I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Selina looked out the window, at the wrought iron gate surrounding the courtyard and the sidewalk beyond. She reluctantly took off her shoes as she muttered “I am going along with this because I don’t, off the top of my head, have a better plan. But I’m going on record saying this is not Metropolis. It’s Gotham, you’re Bruce Wayne, and this is actually a party for us. People are going to notice we’ve gone and it’s on you to figure out how we explain.”

“Agreed, I may have an idea that—”

“That better not include our having to come back tonight, because I can’t guarantee the dress will survive this,” Selina said, positioned on the window ledge. She leapt,

grabbing a gilded urn on top of a gatepost but snagging fabric on a jagged bit of filigree as she vaulted over. She rolled and ran expertly to disperse the shock of the landing, completing the tear up the side of her gown all the way past her thigh to the hip.

Bruce had followed her trajectory and ran past her, indicating the way to the Batmobile he'd summoned. Nothing more was said until they were suited up, the car speeding to a convent on 64th Street that acted as halfway housing for the University Medical Annex.

It was Catwoman who finally spoke, not from a burning desire to defend Clayface but merely to break the silence.

"For the record, it's one woman, singular, that he blames for ruining his life and making him Clayface because she *is* personally responsible for ruining his life and making him Clayface. It's not like he's irrationally pointing fingers at half the planet because we have girl parts. He blames one person who actually did it and happens to be a woman."

"Your point?"

"I don't know. Maybe just that... if Matt is pissed, I don't think I get to hide behind my tits. I dragged him into that situation, it was my brilliant plan, I whispered 'hero' in his ear, and then he goes and hurls himself into fire. Literally into a sustained stream of hellfire."

"Selina, we've all made choices that didn't turn out like we intended—"

"I had clumps of him in my eyelashes, Bruce. That clay-dust-stuff was *everywhere*. I was coughing it. I still have nightmares... He was a *nice guy*. And I could taste him. I had clumps of him in my eyelashes."

Batman reached over and took her gloved hand in his.

"You've been holding on to that too long," he said. "And we'll talk it through later. Right now, you've got to clear your head and do what's needed. Save her, and keep yourself in one piece."

"Yes, dear."

A convent wouldn't have been Pamela's first choice for living quarters, but it was less than a block from the University Medical Annex where she still had to present herself twice a week for check-ins and booster shots. It might not be ideal for getting on with her life in this awful state without pheromones, but she did *have* a life to get on with. Until she could be sure the treatments that reversed the catastrophic rift in her herbaceous-sympathetic metabolism were stable, she didn't dare run off and discontinue treatment. Much as she wanted her powers back, *determined* as she was to *get* her powers back and to do it sooner rather than later, there was no point even trying if she wouldn't be able to breathe.

It had been a dreary evening, another one. There was nothing to prevent her going out. The first week after her release from the hospital she'd done nothing else. The novelty, having a normal skin tone again, walking the streets like anyone else, going to the bank and the drug store and the deli, safely anonymous. She had even gone into a florist! (Though the experience made her cry and she hadn't gone back.) And she could wear anything, no planning ahead if she wanted to accentuate the green, play it

down or cover it entirely. It was a novelty, it was liberating... at first. Then she thought about the Iceberg.

Her de-powered state wasn't common knowledge, but it wasn't Batman's identity secret either. She was at the convent because a court-appointed Special Master ruled "placing her among those she had victimized visibly stripped of her meta abilities denotes a foreseeable and preventable danger" and Arkham refused to accept the responsibility. Pamela wasn't sure if Jonathan Crane, Edward Nigma and others she'd greened would be out for revenge, but she wanted to at least get Harley's opinion before she took the plunge. She might also hedge her bets going *with Harley*, which would absolutely defuse any such threats from anyone but Joker.

If she could bring herself to speak to Harley, that is, which was very much in doubt. It was six days since Pamela learned Harley was being released from Arkham. It had been six days since she'd gone out for more than the walk to the hospital for her booster. Six days since she'd had any appetite. Six nights since she'd done more than skim the news and play Plants vs Zombies on the convent's surprisingly robust wi-fi. She had nine days until Harley would be released. Nine days to figure out what she was going to do, how she felt about this. Harley that stupid, wonderful, deplorable, enraging, despicable, detestable, impossible, *unforgivable*, beautiful, horrible, magnificent, doomed idiot. She'd gone back to Joker. Why? Was there any point even asking anymore? She went back to Joker. Because she's Harley, that's why. She would always go back. She was made by him, for him, and she would always fucking go back! He'd cut her wrists. Why? Was there any point even asking anymore? He was Joker, that's why. He wanted to buy time and saving her gave Superman something to do!

Harvey was gone. No surprise there. She couldn't even say 'men are undependable,' she didn't have that satisfaction after Harley had let her down so disgracefully. Harley had no excuse but Harvey was gone because Ivy herself had broken him. He was gone because she'd seen his soft spot with the intimate knowledge of a lover and she'd banged away at it until he broke.

So she'd faced it alone. This whole ordeal wrenching the ability to breathe again from her failing body—at the cost of everything that defined her as Poison Ivy—and she'd faced the nightmarish ordeal alone. Her one visitor, it was unbelievable, her one visitor the entire time was Bruce Wayne. She got up from the little desk and went to her nightstand, patted the slim volume that lay there. "It's about a tree," he'd said.

Simple oaf. A man she'd greened, extorted, greened again, a man whose *clothes* she'd caused to attack him, had come to see her in the hospital and brought her a book about a tree. It was quite ridiculously sweet. She opened the back cover and consulted the notes she kept in the back, notes that had nothing to do with the Bodhi Tree on the bank of the River Naerunchara, when there was a knock at the door.

Sister Lucille, probably. Because she'd stayed in again, an invitation to the common room to watch television. Or Sister Karen, with a complaint about draining the wi-fi.

"Come in," Pamela called, and the door opened. It was shriveled Sister Dorothy—for a moment—and then as the frail woman who had to be over ninety stepped through the doorway, she grew and her body swelled, yellowing and darkening until a

hulking, dripping mass of black and brownish slime towered over her, bending its... call it a head, to keep from bumping into the low ceiling.

"Ivy, hiding out in a convent. What's next, Adam Sandler playing Hamlet at the RSC? You lectured the brides of Jesus on all your pagan goddesses yet?"

Most of the body shrunk suddenly, so the arm that remained—shaped like a giant mallet that might be used to slaughter a woolly mammoth—could swing freely in the tiny room. It came at her head, turning Ivy's "Matt" into a shrieking scream as she sprang away—and checked herself into the wall with a thud.

"GAIA!" Clayface bellowed. "Pantheon: Olympian. Sphere of influence: fertility and protection!"

He swung again, thinking her trapped against the wall, a vicious downward blow made to beat her into the floor. This time the articulated syllable was "Clay" before it turned into a scream, and she threw herself at the bed, took a step up the wall by the headboard and twisted to the far side of the room. She was farther from the window but slightly closer to the door. She looked frantically from the door to Clayface and back to the door, trying to force an angle to make it work.

"M-Matt-Claymatt, you, you saved me-us-me-and-Catty-us, th-thank—AIEYOLNO!" she managed, rushing hopelessly for the door only to see Sisters Karen and Mary Katherine coming towards it before it slammed shut, splintering in the force of a mud mountain.

"Your fault," Clayface hissed. "Nerthus. Pantheon: Norse. Earth Goddess said to have traveled through Denmark in a wagon. Earth Mother that rules over Midgard; associated with witchcraft, wealth, and purification."

Again the mallet hand swung, and again Pamela screamed.

"Mankind has always been indebted to those godly women touched by the blessed life force of Mother Earth," Clayface snarled. "Without whose munificence no blossom, sheaf, or blade of grass could grow."

Swing. Scream. Snarl.

"Now you must see how unnatural it is to resist this simple request. Tell me, Batman, would dehydrating the Walking Dung Heap be possible?"

Swing. Scream.

"I can explain!" she yelped. "It was such a long time ago, we've come so far. You helped me, helped SelYEEAAIE—"

"STOP SQUIRMING!" Clayface roared. "I'm not gonna kill you."

His left arm came out of nowhere, punching with an only slightly oversized fist, delivering an upper cut that bounced her head into the wall.

"Oh that hurt," she said through clenched teeth while the mud mountain closed in around her.

"That'd be too quick. I just want to slow you down—" The mallet hand hit the wall above her head, cracking the plaster and then oozing down onto her head "—so we can do this right."

The menace in the final words revealed the masterful actor Matt Hagen had been, to convey so much *intent*, not just the hatred but the determined intention to act on it that it chilled the blood. For a full second, Pamela couldn't move, then the spell of that soul-searing voice shattered in the weight of mud slime dripping down her face, the

ooze pressing into her body pinning her neck and shoulders to the wall, and the icy realization that she was about to die.

Her fingers drove themselves into the... call it a forehead, digging—as best they could in slimy mud—digging into a gelatinous mass that became wetter and less solid the deeper she dug. Straining to pull his face apart even as it lost the solidity to make the effort worthwhile. Her face was completely covered in sludge now, smothering her last attempt to scream in a disgusting mass of Hagen-mud.

Her head started to spin, the arms digging into Hagen-face were heavy, and something oppressively silent was enveloping her when... suddenly, very far away through that force field of silence, she heard a cry. A cry that was... not her. Hagenot...her.

Hagen. Not her. Hagen. Screaming. Air. Air was good.

Very cold air. Nothing over her face and... what was going on?

She was looking at Hagen's back, Batman was in the room—Hagen was facing Batman who'd apparently come through the window and... and *Catty* who'd come in the door. Batman was punching Clayface—he had new gloves with weird spurts of water coming out of them on each hit and—wow!—that knocked a chunk of clay sludge out of Hagen with every hit. Ha!

"Pammy!" Catwoman called, and tossed her—what was this thing? Seltzer. She pointed it at Hagen and fired a spray of liquid into his back. He twisted at the waist a full 180 and roared at her, but before he could do more Catty drew his fire with... *Well I'll be damned*, Pamela thought ...some kind of water attachments on her claws like Batman had on his gauntlets.

Hagen tore into her with more venom than he had responded to Batman.

"The other whore," he snarled, hoisting her up and shoving her into the wall the same way he had Pam, except in Catty's case he'd had to lift her above the desk. "You should have waited your turn, C.W. I was coming for you next." It looked worse than what he'd done to Pam, but it did leave her legs in a position to kick him in the head.

"Ivy!" Batman called, and he tossed her a cylinder the size of a flashlight. As before she aimed at Hagen's back, pressed the only button, and it shot out some kind of water balloon. This time he didn't turn but merely shot out his arm to swat at her. She dodged and fired again, fired again, and then he turned and swatted her hard, knocking her into the wall and the balloon launcher to the floor. This time Batman pulled his attention, and it continued like that for several rounds. Hagen fought Batman until Catwoman tossed Pam a weapon to distract him. When he came for her, Catwoman pulled his focus and he fought her until Batman tossed Pam a weapon. They were also scattering white crystals—probably salt—whenever they weren't fighting, until Hagen was inside a ring of the stuff, with huge chunks of his lower clay sprinkled with it.

"Now!" Batman called.

He held up what looked like a flare. Catty actually ran up a piece of Clayface to get her flare close to the ceiling—and to the smoke detector as a loud pop sounded beyond the door. A chorus of fire alarms went off, and the sprinkler over the door kicked in. The white crystals erupted into little puffs of white smoke.

"Heavily ionized superconductive hydroxyl vapor," Batman announced as Hagen's upper body started to lose structure while the lower portions lightened to a pale yellow. "Go while you can. Because once it dries, it won't move for days."

Pamela watched as *most* of the Hagen glop congealed into a central... shape, more a spherical candle than a body... A semi-spherical candle balanced precariously and off-center on a semi-columnar candle which had both burned unevenly. It heaved and lunged at the window and finally poured itself out, all the while saying something unintelligible in a gargling parody of Hagen's voice as if he were under water, but resolving in five syllables of frightening clarity: "This... isn't... over."

Pamela stared at the window, stared transfixed for a count of three, then she looked at Batman, then at Catwoman, then at the window again.

"That went well," she remarked.

Bat and Cat looked at each other. She might be in shock. Or she could be referring to the three-sided portion of the battle where they had fought well together, considering how they were all more accustomed to fighting each other. But probably she was in shock.

"Thank you," she added.

Definitely in shock.

"Catty, awfully nice of you to come out tonight. You're supposed to be at an engagement party, aren't you? Didn't I see something in the paper?"

Yeah, she was definitely in shock.

Then suddenly she wasn't. She went to the shattered window, looked down at the grass below, picked up a shard of glass with a glop of clay on it and nodded with satisfaction.

"I will not be sleeping in this room," she declared regally.

Then she looked from Batman to Catwoman with a business-like air, and then with a disapproving one. From one to the other, Bat then Cat...

"Excuse me," to Batman, a deliberate, contemptuous turn of the shoulder as she passed. And then sotto voce to Catwoman, "Could I have a word." Tapping Selina's elbow and steering her to the far edge of the room by the door she said "So what are you doing with him? Isn't the engagement party tonight? That's what I saw in the Times."

Put off for only a half-beat, Selina opted for the truth (more or less). "He came and got me. He was working on a murder, some clue led to the conclusion that Clayface was back and going to come after us, you and me, because of what happened that night in the park. I didn't believe it at first, but..." she gestured around the trashed room coated in salt and slime.

"Oh, yes, I see," Pam nodded. "So he's not making trouble for you and Bruce, because if he is, I'll take care of him for you. Why I'll..." she trailed off, realizing she was talking about abilities she no longer had. Rather than rub salt, Selina patted her hand. "I got it, I can handle Batman, really."

"Good. You've got gold there, Bruce I mean. Did you know about the lovely book he gave me?"

She returned to the nightstand, offering Batman a curt "You can go" as she passed. Selina started to say "He's kind of my ride," but Batman was crawling out the window, presumably to meet her outside.

Pam patted the book dry and flicked off bits of clay, then showed Selina the precious volume titled *Bodhi*. She gushed, positively gushed explaining it was about a tree—actually told from the tree’s point of view—on the banks of the river where Buddha came to meditate. Selina promised she would tell Bruce how much she enjoyed it, and Pam hugged her impulsively. Selina left, confused.

“Nice one on the book,” she mentioned when she reached the Batmobile.

The Batmobile made its silent, menacing way up 60th. It passed Hudson-Kane where Lise and Lili had recovered from Poison Ivy’s attack on the Queen of the Night audience, passed a department store, passed the courtyard where Bruce and Selina made their escape from the *Butterfield*, passed the formal entrance and made the turn onto Fifth Avenue where it might or might not be seen by all those revelers still dancing before that row of floor-to-ceiling windows reflected in the wall of mirrors.

It disappeared past the park, and a minute later Bruce and Selina walked from that direction: her dress torn and splashed with mud, one shoe heel broken, favoring her ankle. Bruce was solicitous, helping her but also cradling his knuckles whenever possible. They reached the front gate and hobbled inside, making apologies. They’d only come back to let everyone know what happened, so there wouldn’t be any worry, and say goodni—

Goodnights were vetoed as they were hustled into the main bar, sat in front of the fireplace and brought brandy to calm their nerves. The story came out, of course it was too trying to go into much detail, but apparently Batman was investigating something unsavory and in the midst of it, he unearthed a threat to poor Selina. He came here (*Yes, apparently he had been right here in the Butterfield*) to spirit her off to some, what do they call it, protective custody. Bruce “went along” (and there was no doubt now who he had punched, for everyone remembered the dinner party the night of the Wayne Gala, when Batman burst in to question Selina about the cat burglar and Bruce threw him out. He wouldn’t stand idly by while the Dark Knight took her away from her own engagement party to go with him to some safe house alone...)

Details on exactly what happened at the safe house were not forthcoming. Clearly it hadn’t been that safe. Clearly the *protective* part of that protective custody wasn’t. Imaginations ran rampant, but good breeding forbade asking point blank. After twenty minutes or so, the couple departed in a chorus of well-wishing and promises to call or look in on them, not tomorrow of course, they must rest up after such an ordeal, but the next day or the day after...

In fact most of the guests were glad to see them go, for now all those guessed-at details could be discussed openly. The whos, the hows, the whys... All but one joined in, standing apart from the rest, his face a mask as he watched and listened, unnoticed. Bruce and Selina took the side door from the main bar, turned the corner into the foyer and collected their coats... Ford Dormont stood on the east side of the double staircase at the end of the Great Hall, watching them go. Silhouetted against opalescent stained glass, stolid and impassive as they climbed into the car, as their driver shut the door, as

he walked around to his own door and got in. And then, evanescent and barely perceptible as the car pulled away... a smile.