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

Cat = Sales

#74

Gifts

by Chris Dee
CAT-TALES
GIFTS
CAT-TALES
GIFTS

By
Chris Dee
Alfred couldn’t bring himself to find fault with any aspect of the process that would establish Bruce and Selina formally and officially as Mr. and Mrs. Wayne—but the odious globular object hovering over his tea canisters was certainly testing his resolve.

He ignored it—or tried to—as he poured the final steep of a red Himalayan that had temporarily replaced Miss Selina’s coffee on the breakfast tray. It was the Object (he avoided its name as if it were Voldemort) that prompted the change.

He had divined Miss Selina’s tastes in the first five nights she slept in the manor and he refined those observations over the next weeks to arrive at the ideal routine of cappuccino and cafe au lait served on alternate days, prepared with the house blend of the King of Sweden using Kenyan, Brazilian, and Antiguan Arabica. Now this upstart had her starting the day with a cup of leaf water, too weak to be called a proper cup of tea, to minimize fluctuations in her shape between fittings.

Miss Selina had a closet full of Paris couture. She was no stranger to fittings, and he had to assume she indulged in the legendary French cuisine in the midst of those fittings. Yet here she was, adapting her daily intake and modifying her routine at the suggestion of... the object.

“Come, vile thing,” he told it, picking up the breakfast tray and then adding quietly, “Since there’s no stopping you.”

The object hadn’t appeared when he came down to make Master Bruce’s breakfast, for the monstrous little beast knew. It interfaced (in some mystical way they were all absurdly expected to believe wasn’t magic) with the Batcomputer and the Watchtower (and who knows what other sources), so it knew there was a Justice League meeting and Master Bruce would be up early to attend. It required only the most modest artificial intelligence to deduce that Miss Selina would not get up at such an hour when she didn’t have to, so the object let Alfred pass by and get on with his tasks as he had always done: alone. When it was time to prepare Miss Selina’s tray, however...

The little parlor off the foyer had been commandeered to display the wedding gifts, for the Ashton-Larrabys of the world like tradition, especially when it comes to weddings. Bruce and Selina may have requested “in lieu of gifts” donations to the Thomas Wayne Trauma Center, but writing a check simply wasn’t satisfying. The old guard sent gifts anyway, the new money that could afford it sent both, and the long table along the wall quickly filled with Pâte de Verre crystal, Herend porcelain, lacquer trays lined with Chinese wallpaper, and so on. The object made its home behind a pair of Carrara marble bookends, and from there it rose each morning like a radio-controlled drone whenever Alfred passed by on his way to make the breakfasts. It followed him through the breakfast making and volunteered whatever information it thought relevant until the handoff.

It floated now like an independent intelligence maneuvering just to the right of his shoulder as he took the servant’s passage to the parlor with the gifts.
“That is where you belong,” he noted as they passed a lynx and cashmere throw which, despite being faux fur, was, in Alfred’s view, in exceptionally bad taste.

“Observation: A gift of fur denotes the passive-aggression of a loser who had hopes of becoming Mrs. Wayne herself,” the object noted in its dry, non-mechanized tones that Alfred found galling. “I do not see the categorical pertinence.”

The voice was male and with a pronounced English accent that, despite appearances, was not patterned on Alfred’s but on its donor. Alfred knew this, but it didn’t make the composed, occasionally sarcastic, unerringly well-informed dictums any easier to take.

“You are a wedding gift,” Alfred told it, then mentally added ‘whose usefulness is very much in doubt.’

They proceeded, butler and AI-drone of presumed magical make-up, up the grand staircase and down the hall to the bedroom.

Miss Selina was up, rubbing the cream of a new skin regimen into her face—a regimen also recommended by the object, though not quite so despised in Alfred’s view since it did not intrude into his kitchen or housekeeping practices.

“Your breakfast, miss, and your... assistant is reporting for duty.”

“Thank you, Alfred. Did Bruce make it off to his meeting okay?”

“Yes, miss,” Alfred said, nearly speaking over her last words in order to preempt the AI answering for him. “He took a glass of orange juice on his way down to the cave, where he rejected further nourishment on the grounds that he could ‘grab coffee and a roll’ at the Watchtower. He expects the meeting to run to ten.”

“God, whoever scheduled that at dawn Gotham time should be shot—and yes, before you say it, I know half of them are bulletproof. It’s a figure of speech.”

This was directed at the AI, which instead informed her that Batman’s estimate of the meeting length had a high accuracy index but he would be delayed returning. There was a 46% probability he would be contacting her between 10:10 and 10:20 to join him at the Watchtower; 41% he would return with a guest and ask her to join them in the cave. A factor she might consider in choosing her outfit for the day, as the cave’s temperature was a constant 52 degrees Fahrenheit; the Watchtower’s 68.

“Thank you, Faust,” Selina said while Alfred assumed the expression of silent disapproval honed in Bruce’s earliest days in the cowl.

It wasn’t an ideal morning to have breakfast on the terrace: it was overcast, a little brisk and the air had a damp, dewy feel that threatened rain later in the day. Still Selina took her tea outside. She was about to do something that wanted distance from her morning routine. She was about to do something... stupid. And the mind-splittingly stupid thing must not be ushered into her life with an unrestrained open-armed welcome as if this is simply the way it was going to be now.

“Okay,” she announced, looking suspiciously at the open expanse of table beside her cup. There was a centerpiece—samian ware, she thought absently as she moved it—and then she repeated “Okay” as she regarded the now totally bare tabletop apart from the cup. “Let’s do this,” she said, and sat. She took a very deliberate sip of tea. The
sun crept out from behind the clouds and bathed the patio in a warming glow, and she shot it a nasty look like its hopeful imagery was not welcome. There was even a bird chirping that she hadn’t noticed before, and she scanned the now idyllic setting with the simmering contempt of a wet cat. “This is why we don’t do mornings around here,” she grumbled.

“All right, let’s get this massive mistake over with,” she said, extracting the folded newspaper seemingly from nowhere as she had every night on the stage of the Hijinx Playhouse to segue into her monologue’s triumphant conclusion at the end of Act I.

“I’m sure you all saw this,” was the line, but instead of holding up the despised tabloid for the audience to see the glaring headline, she laid the Gotham Post on the table and looked down on the glossy image. Instead of a bloody Jim Gordon lying sprawled in the foreground, there was nothing but Venetian lace and rich ivory peau de soie. Instead of receding into a blurred image that was supposedly her running away from a shooting, the folds of elegant fabric receded into a blurred image that was supposedly her in the Deeor boutique pinned in for her first fitting. Instead of a second coming headline screaming OFFICER DOWN, a comparatively restrained SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW teased the first glimpse of Selina Kyle’s wedding gown. Shot by some mysterious means through the 57th Street window, it had the usual Gotham Post embellishments (black lace, for the love of Bast) but compared to the paper’s previous slanders, sketchy taste in a bridal palette could only be called progress.

She was really going to do this.
She was really going to do this.
She was really going to open the Gotham Post sans mind control and read what they were saying about her.

“Do it quick, like ripping off a Band-Aid,” she said and did just that.

... 
... 
... 

She breathed.
Deeor hadn’t sold her out—thank God.

They got the materials right but that really wasn’t surprising. Shipments from Jesurum on Calle Larga XXII Marzo a few blocks west of Piazza San Marco and the Viaduc des Arts showroom of Malhia Kent, Avenue Daumesnil, Paris, both coming to the Gotham atelier within days of Selina’s visit could only be for the Wayne dress. They didn’t know why it was Emilia third-generation Burano lace from Jesurum or peau de soie from Malhia on Avenue Daumesnil, and that meant her secret was still hers to tell Bruce and the world in her own way and at her own time.

Making a tweezers with her outstretched fingers, she carefully picked up the very corner of the page as if to touch as little as possible as she turned. Since she’d gone this far, buying and reading a Gotham Post, she may as well press on.

Alfred was in the dining room. It wasn’t his usual day to dust there, but he knew Miss Selina had settled far from the intercoms in her suite and the morning room, and he thought it best to be within earshot should she require anything.

“Sweet merciful god!” rang out from the terrace.
Alfred took it with his usual calm, though he shot a withering look at the object which hovered near the french doors like a dog who had followed his master as far as he was allowed and waited patiently for his return.

“I don’t suppose you know what that’s about,” he asked, though his tone clearly said ‘I know very well you caused this upset, whatever it is. And if you didn’t, it’s still quite likely a problem that could have been dealt with if you’d informed me beforehand.’

Faust bobbed and grew a little brighter, as if consulting its memory routines. Then it said:

“Information: the mistress has taken a Gotham Post out to the terrace with a 99.97% probability of reading the cover story titled ‘First Look: Inside DEEOR for the first glimpse of Selina Kyle’s Wedding Dress.’ There are five possible items in the issue that could have provoked the exclamation in question, the most likely involves…”

The french doors opened and Selina stood like the soothsayer in a Greek Tragedy as she announced ‘These… people. Imagine. I am… friends… with Pamela Train-Crash Isley and Harleen Unfit-for-Human-Company Quinzel. They are dangling the possibility before the world that I would have that garbage sitcom as attendants at my wedding.

“It’d be nothing but the same oldsame old Gotham Post slander—Selina is a bottom-feeding nobody with no taste or standards—except this is Harley and a wedding we’re talking about, and that psychopath gets sugared up. She’s going to see this, even money she’ll be excited. And the whacko-miss being disappointed when she finds out she is not invited let alone going to be outfitted in orchid and lavender chiffon…”

“Information: There is a 31% probability of criminal mischief, miss, and a 54% probability of—”

“Thank you, Faust; I don’t need the odds on this one… And then there’s Ivy. She’s got no illusions about our being friends, but she is in pretty bad shape since the depowering. I don’t know if I’d use the word ‘depressed’ but she certainly seemed to be missing something the night we saved her from Clayface. I may not like her much as a person, but I don’t like kicking someone when they’re down.”

“I believe I have a solution, miss,” Alfred and Faust began saying together. Selina looked from one to the other while Alfred affixed Faust with a slow-burning glare of death.

“Okay, I can’t do this by committee,” she said tactfully. “Alfred, Bruce is probably bringing somebody back with him from the Watchtower. Why don’t you make up a tray of snacks for the cave and we’ll talk later, and alone.” She emphasized the final words in a way that might have hurt the AI’s feelings if it had them, but since it didn’t, they served only to let Alfred know his council was valued and she was only humoring Faust by hearing its suggestion first.

At 10:10, Selina was on her way to the Batcave with Faust following like Tinkerbell. The intercom had buzzed twelve minutes ahead of schedule, and Bruce asked her to come down to see Arthur. When she asked what it was about, there was one of the spiked silences only Batman can really pull off, followed by an ominous “I don’t know.”

She introduced Faust as “a wedding gift from Jason Blood. We’re assured it’s not technically magic because it’s from the future, at a point where what it does is considered technology and not at all mystical. Alfred still hates it.”
“And Bruce doesn’t?” Arthur asked, turning with a wide grin and expecting Batman’s angriest glare. Instead he saw grim submission.

“It was brought here by magic,” Bruce said. “Jason wants to split hairs and say that’s also a matter of perspective depending on which end of the timeline you’re on, but that’s sophistry. It was brought here by magic and he used magic to ‘fine tune’ it. It doesn’t know all things, it just interfaces with a variety of computer networks and absorbs information that could affect the wedding. As in all intel that could affect the wedding, no matter how improbable or fantastic the cause-and-effect. How a determination like that can be made without magical precognance I find it hard to conceive.”

“For an advanced AI?” Arthur said. “I’m sure any well-programmed computer armed with all the variables and probabilities...You’re shaking your head.”

“He’s done it before,” Bruce said flatly. “There was a dimensional crisis at one point, Jason set up a magical portal with alternate realities tethered to the crisis, so of all the infinite possibilities, the traveler would only be transported to a time and place that was relevant.”

“Ah. And this fine-tuning the AI—” Arthur said.

“Looks like a duck and quacks like a duck.”

Arthur chuckled.

“I see. Well in that case, what I know of Blood, I’d agree. He’s looked me in the eye and told some whoppers about his past dealings with Atlantis. But if you know he’s lying and that thing is magic, why is it here?”

“Because there’s a shapeshifter who wants to kill me,” Selina said calmly. “The bride being murdered would affect the wedding, so Bruce figures Faust is sucking in all intel that could point to a Clayface attack. It’s a tradeoff worth making.”

“I see,” Arthur said, giving the floating ball a piercing look. He then asked quite casually if Bruce could leave so he could talk to Selina alone. Bruce agreed with a shrug and left, and Arthur watched him go with an appraising stare. He hadn’t expected the casual tone to work, but apparently even Batman accepted that weddings involved a lot of bother he’d just as soon not deal with. Arthur returned his attention to the light ball. “Did it tell you why I’m here?”

“Your Majesty may ask me directly,” Faust said, floating forward from its spot behind Selina and bobbing as if in a curtsy. “Information: I made Miss Kyle aware of an 87% probability a member of the Justice League would approach Batman for a private meeting after the formal business at the Watchtower concluded. Ordinarily I would have specified attire appropriate to an audience with the King of Atlantis, but as there was a 96% probability Your Majesty would specify this meeting is not taking place, I thought it best to suppress any details.”

“Thank you,” Arthur said like one so accustomed to cloying, overly officious pedantry it didn’t even register. “That being the case, maybe we could dispense with the honorifics. It’s Arthur, or Aquaman.”

“As you wish,” Faust replied with another bob.

“And it’s right,” he said, returning his attention to Selina. “I must stress that I am not here today and this conversation is not taking place. I only spoke to Batman during
the meeting and afterwards I returned to Atlantis immediately without talking to anyone. He likewise came home alone. Agreed?”
“What’s on your mind, Arthur?”
He grimaced.
“Ra’s al Ghul has my political balls in a vice, that’s what’s on my mind.”

The texts began during the League meeting, and by the time Arthur made his deliberately casual, hyper-consciously discreet exit immediately after Batman, a shadowy cabal had formed. Eel, Kyle and Wally had studied the Dark Knight throughout the meeting, compared notes and formed their conclusion: Batman was too close to the situation and therefore could not see clearly—and therefore could not be trusted to not keep his bachelor party from being epic. He must therefore be saved from himself. #BoomTube #TamaranianStrippers #MakeItHappen

At first the three men had lingered in the meeting room. Batman left, Arthur left, but though meaningful looks were exchanged, no one else had gone. Kyle was the one to realize there were simply too many people, all three of them lingering created a meeting-after-the-meeting vibe that Diana and J’onn would never skip out on. Vixen had monitor duty, and Clark was clearly sticking around to get caught up.

Kyle improvised a ‘that thing I wanted to show you’ in the quasi-apartment/office he kept at the Watchtower as one of the Big Seven. When the door closed behind them, he merely glared at Eel.
“What?!” Eel squawked.
“Hashtag Boom Tube?” Wally said.
“Hashtag Tamaranean Strippers?” Kyle added. “Spelled with an ‘e’ by the way.”
“Hashtag You know the Batcomputer monitors hashtags, don’t you, Eel?”
ø~Ahem~ø sounded in the telepathic link that Martian Manhunter provided during synchronized League operations. ø~You three might want to remember there’s a good bit of enhanced hearing out here, and one set of those super-ears belongs to the best man. He’d like me to inform you that Bruce Wayne’s bachelor party is in Dubai, the first tier of it anyway, with a more exclusive circle on Wayne One for the flight over and back, and circling the hotel during I’d imagine… ø~ø
“Hashtag Busted,” Kyle said softly.

“As a prisoner in Atlantis, Ra’s al Ghul has no contact with the surface,” Arthur was saying. “But we’re not savages, prisoners are given… He has access to our libraries, and I’m afraid he’s found the means to get back at me for those weekly visits I pay him whenever I’m in the city. I’ll admit I’ve indulged in a fair amount of condescension. He’s such a presumptuous, overbearing prick, I couldn’t help myself.”
Selina laughed.

“Nobody in this house will ever take issue with that, Arthur. Believe me, we’re all fans. What’s your problem and how can we help?”

“Well, to explain the problem, I have to explain the history. First he petitioned—formally, through the courts—to be recognized as what we call a Front Edge of the surface world. It’s something like a head of state or a political leader, except, well, it’s based on fish. And fish switch back and forth from schools to schools—that is, from strict hierarchies to lax social groups—seemingly on a whim. The arrival of a predator, even the time of day might cause a change. That makes it very difficult to prove someone isn’t a Front Edge if they claim to be.”

“That’s a very elaborate explanation,” Selina noted. “Feels a bit like you know we’re going to be mad and are preemptively explaining why it couldn’t be helped.”

Arthur scowled.

“He has followers, Selina, that’s the real waterspout. He also said his capture resulted from an act of war, which wasn’t entirely inaccurate: he had seized an Atlantis stronghold and I sent in troops to remove him. If I opposed his petition, I probably would have lost. More importantly, I would have to give him access to the surface. He would have the right to assemble evidence to back up his claim. There was simply no way to deny him that other than avoiding the fight by granting his petition. So I did. I would have told Bruce, but you were all occupied with that Joker/Luthor situation, and it really wasn’t important enough to bother you.”

“I’m not sure he’ll see it that way,” Selina said with a wry smile, “but I’d say it was the right call. So where does that leave us, Ra’s is a Front Edge. What does that mean?”

“Very little. It doesn’t affect his sentence or the terms of his incarceration in Atlantis. There are a few courtesies that have to be observed: he has guards of a higher rank now, they address him by his title, sprig of parsley on his dinner tray, that kind of thing. Nothing that matters beyond the annoyance. He’s such a pretentious ass, it’s galling seeing him puffed up like a mantis shrimp, but it does no real harm.”

“I think you mean it didn’t do any harm, but now we’re having a conversation that isn’t really taking place because you’re officially not here, so something must’ve happened. What changed that led to this ‘political balls in a vice?’”

“He found out about your engagement,” Arthur said grimly. “I’m not sure how, and I’m afraid he is revoltingly well-informed about his rights. He is asserting obligations to acknowledge the event as a head of state, send a letter of congratulations, a gift, and so on. And if I were to deny him—Selina, if I prevent someone the Crown has recognized as a Front Edge from fulfilling his diplomatic obligations, it would be a very serious matter. There are councilors who can use it to make trouble.”

“Arthur, you must realize he’s going to use any opening you give him to make contact with Demon. I don’t wish any political trouble on you, but—”

“See, I was rather hoping you would express confidence that the Demon’s Head could not possibly get one past me, let alone get it past me and Bruce and you yourself. I hoped you’d find it an amusing challenge, and say it would be fun to see what he comes up with.”
Selina’s mouth had formed a ‘W’ but instead of saying whatever started with that sound, she looked around, left and right, as if searching for a better phrase. “What’s the Atlantis sea-based term for snow job?” she asked, seemingly impressed with his gall. “An amusing challenge? Is this the kind of thing your Atlantis counselors fall for?”

“Selina, please, the King of Atlantis is asking a favor,” he said, ignoring the theatrics. “Atlantic will owe you one, that’s not a bad way to begin your married life.”

“Maybe not, but giving Bruce a Ra’s al Ghul problem to worry about is,” she said pointedly… And waited, looking at him critically… Some men would have tried the puppy head tilt, some would have pushed back, and some would have bargained to sweeten the deal. Arthur simply sat back, a king.

A king who knew the worth of his offer.
A king who knew the worth of what he had offered and did not…

He did not…
He did not have a cat.

Rather than maintain the fiercely critical appraisal, Selina had tilted her head at a kittenish angle and offered a simple smile.

“Atlantic will owe you, and I will too,” he said. “Personally, I will owe you a huge favor. And all you have to do is let the dog-faced puffer send you a gift of some kind.”

The cute kitten smile broke into a triumphant cackle.

“You’re on! I want your chef,” she declared, and went on as Arthur blinked in shock. “Your personal chef. When I was down there to see Ra’s, he gave me tea. (Because of course he did; you know what he’s like with the gracious host routine.) And there were these wonderful little globules, almost like Japanese raindrop cakes, but without the syrup and much, much more flavor. And I figure, if that’s prison food, it must be a fairly pedestrian part of Atlantis cuisine, am I right?”

He was laughing, head down, shaking his head.

“Alginate spheres, yes, they’re about as common as microwave popcorn.”

“Well they’re beautiful,” she said. “And nobody on the surface has seen anything like them, whereas a wedding cake is kind of… And I’m guessing the royal pastry chef does something a lot more sophisticated than whoever cooks for the puffer-face prisoner, am I right? The... ‘spheres’ Ra’s served had something like ‘sea-raisins’ suspended inside. Think we could do something more wedding-ish and pretty like candied rose petals?”

“I will lend you my chef to reproduce whatever it was in the alginate spheres at our last state dinner,” Arthur said, offering his hand in a bargain.

“You are a darling,” Selina beamed. “I will tell Bruce we’re expecting a gift from Ra’s al Ghul, manage his reaction (somehow), and send a thank you note. I think that last part is going to be the hardest actually.”

“I’m sure,” Arthur said, relieved.

They chatted for a few minutes, Arthur became the latest male acquaintance who offered to give her away if Selina wanted someone to take the role, but before he could receive her pat response, Alfred appeared with a snack tray—as well as news that Selina had a visitor who was, regrettably, upstairs being received by Bruce in her absence.

“Mr. Cobblepot, miss.”
Selina rushed off, shooting Faust a nasty look as she went and muttering that it saw fit to ‘warn her’ Aquaman was coming but didn’t think the Penguin was worth mentioning.

Arthur accepted a cookie and considered Alfred.
“You do all the cooking around here, I take it.”
Alfred confirmed it, and Arthur’s manner became less regal.
“You’re probably the one I should ask then. Surface weddings, wedding gifts, it has its place I know but, someone like Bruce doesn’t need another knick-knack any more than I do. Whereas the traditional Atlantis gift…”
“Sir?” Alfred prompted when he trailed off.
“Salt. Rare and exotic salt. Bali Reef fleur de sel, grey sea salt from Brittany, black lava salt from Cypress, pink mineral salt mined from ancient seabeds in the foothills of the Himalayas, red Hawaiian—it turns red from the clay beds they dry it in, you know. And the Koreans roast their salt in bamboo and it releases this incredible—”
“What you describe would make an uncommonly welcome and appropriate gift, sir. One I can guarantee will be thoroughly appreciated by the recipients.”

The scene Selina walked into made her nostalgic for the day Eddie had come to the manor and the war of subtext that followed. It rivaled 007 and the Bond Villain du jour squaring off at baccarat, but at least Eddie knew it was Batman’s door he’d knocked on and where the subtext was coming from. But Oswald, at first she couldn’t guess what Oswald thought or why Bruce had the Battitude dialed up to palpable.

They were in the sun room. Alfred said he’d left them in the parlor off the foyer, but Bruce evidently felt proximity to the door was not an adequate tradeoff to balance proximity to the gifts. When Selina joined them, there was a spike in the Bat-presence, but oddly Oswald didn’t seem to return the hostility. He just accepted it. Selina watched Bruce’s eyes curiously… maybe it wasn’t Battitude exactly. More the non-fop and not-kidding Bruce Wayne who might not break your legs if you took him on at the wrong time, but who would certainly buy up every lot in a three blocks radius of your club and torture you out of business in whatever way amused him.

With Selina’s arrival he was dismissed. He turned to her with a kiss and “I’ll just leave you two to settle whatever you have to work out” in a tone that made it impossible to imagine this man had ever been described as a fop… Until the last second as he pulled back from the kiss, something flashed in his eyes, something that might almost be called humor if it wasn’t so clearly Batman.
“Yes, of course,” Selina murmured, and he left without ever glancing back at Oswald.
Selina smiled a greeting, trying to ferret out his reaction (or lack of it) but figuring it would all be clear soon.
“My utmost congratulations, my esteemed feline colleague, and dare I say, after all this time, my good friend,” he cooed.
“Whatever you want, the answer is no,” Selina said firmly.

“An understandable response. Allow me to explain the unfortunate but well-intentioned lapses that led to my unfortunate participation in that unfortunate business with the Pelacci-Marcuso nuptials.”

“That’s three unfortunates in a sentence that isn’t saying anything. Fewer words, more sense, make it quick and get out.”

“Yes,” Oswald breathed. “Your hostility and that of the lucky bridegroom is entirely—”

“Fewer words.”

“Ahem, understandable, yes. But my dear Selina, you did hoist me up like a game bird several stories above Sixth Avenue. If I can forgive and forget, surely you—”

“…”

“Yes, well, perhaps not one of those cases where the fault lay on both sides. The point is, it was only the best of motives that brought me into the company of those damaged—intellectually challenged, emotionally damaged and batshit crazy individuals—who sought to prevent you and Wayne from knitting your souls together in holy matrimony.”

“…”

“Because they are precisely that: intellectually challenged, emotionally damaged and batshit crazy. My dear Selina, there was no telling to what lengths such insane morons might go to prevent the marriage we all thought was yours. I only joined them to keep it from going too far. Please don’t hurt me.”

“…”

“I can easily arrange Jervis Tetch and Victor Frieze to be delivered up to your tender mercies. Jonathan Crane will take a little more doing since he’s up in Arkham, but if you say the word, I will make it happen.”

“Oswald.”

“Let me live.”

“I’m not going to kill anyone. Leave the wedding alone. Don’t bother me until three weeks—no, let’s say five weeks after Bruce and I get back from the honeymoon and we’ll call it square, okay?”

“You are truly the most generous creature to ever—”

“Fewer words, more sense, go away,” she repeated.

“Yes, of course. I did have one more—”

“Brief.”

“If you were in need of a… that is… somewhat lacking in the elder male relative department.”

“No.”

“In need of a father figure—”

“Thank you, no.”

“It would be no trouble at all, I already have the morning coat, in fact, I own six, and—”

“Giving myself away, Oswald. Strictly speaking, I did a long time ago. That’s why I live here.”

“Yes, kwak, quite. Well then, I thank you, Mrs. Wayne (if I may jump the gun a little to be the first to call you so) for your munificent understanding, and perhaps you will
be so good as to coax a little forgiveness from your future husband. He seems quite inclined to hold a grudge.”

Bruce was dressing for what was to be his last three days at Wayne Enterprises before the extended leave that would span the wedding, honeymoon and an undetermined period on his return to Gotham, when he noticed a yellow glow on his dress shirts and turned to see Faust hovering behind him.

“Worried I’ll wear the Princeton tie to the arbitrage meeting and it will be misinterpreted in Hong Kong?” he graved.

“Observation: You allude to an anecdote in Jon Prevel’s Tales of the Abyss and LexCorp that could be taken as either humor or sarcasm,” Faust observed. “Since you are aware I am an AI and derive no enjoyment from witticisms, there is a 91% probability your intention is to express aggression and disapproval. Query: Why?”

“I disapprove of you,” Bruce told it. “What do you want?”

“Information: since the break-up of this morning’s meeting, nineteen queries have been initiated through Watchtower systems relating to Burj Al Arab hotel and marina in Dubai on the logins West, Raynor and O’Brien.”

“I see.”

“There is also a video of Tiger Woods teeing off from the Royal Suite’s helipad which has been viewed seven times.”

Bruce’s lip twitched.

“There is a 94% probability the plans for your bachelor party have been leaked,” Faust concluded.

“That was the idea,” Bruce said simply.

Selina’s afternoon only became more chaotic after Oswald left, and she wouldn’t have minded a good sparring session in lieu of dinner to blow off steam. Unfortunately with such a late start getting into the city, Bruce said he’d be going on patrol straight from the tower. Selina went to the cave anyway, bypassed the gym and went straight to Workstation 1. She pulled up the At-Large list (noting that Maxie Zeus and Firefly were the only ones she hadn’t either seen or spoken to since breakfast) and made an educated guess at the patrol route that would result. She studied it, and picked a catworthy target.

Just after midnight, Batman saw the telltale signs of a break-in at Le Joyau. Proximity to the alarm box revealed a bit of a puzzle: the burglar was an obvious pro. It was a rushed job: this model would allow only a ten to twelve second window to strip and cut the wires in sequence, and given the speed, it was incredibly neat work.
He took the service door inside as he considered the problem that deduction presented: real skill at the alarm box, yet the tells that caught his attention were sloppy for thieves of this caliber. That probably meant a team, a more experienced man on the alarm working with a junior who gave away their position inside. It could also mean out-of-towners who weren’t accustomed to crimefighters and their vantage points on rooftops. But who came into Gotham without working Batman into their pla—

“Let me tell you about my day,” said the irate bustle of purple coming at him a split second ahead of the thought. Batman shut his eyes as the impact of a leather backpack hit his chest. He looked inside and saw six long, thin jewel boxes with the Joyau logo stamped into the lids. Her arm was dangling in easy grabbing distance, and he snatched at her wrist and led her back to the vault. She talked non-stop as he returned the loot he’d “recovered.”

Aquaman’s Ra’s problem, which was now their Ra’s problem in so far as they would have to accept a gift that was probably more than it seemed. Oswald’s appeal for forgiveness which was followed by Jervis Tetch coming to the manor with a similar plea, followed by Victor—all begging her understanding and forgiveness for opposing her marriage to Bruce, all offering up the other two to buy their own second chance, and all but Jervis throwing in Jonathan Crane as a sweetener. These visits were interrupted by an honor guard of elite Atlantean Cetea bringing Arthur’s gift: seven miniature chests of salt that Alfred was quite spectacularly excited about and he’ll be telling you why in considerable detail. And if by some chance he’s forgotten why the Hawaiian Haleakala Alaea is red, that’s okay because the Atlantis honor guard who brought the stuff are staying. They’re back at the manor now, guarding the gifts apparently, because when His Majesty, Orin VI of Poseidonis sends salt of the seven realms, it’s a thing. And then there’s Harley...

Harley might be delusional enough to put stock in the Gotham Post, but Pamela Isley knew exactly what Selina thought of her. Catwoman might show up to help save her from Clayface, but that was only because Hagen would have come for her next. They weren’t friends. They moved in the same circles and they tolerated each other because their friends all knew each other. And that was that. There could be no reason for Selina to invite her other than pity and Pamela had too much pride to go along with that.

The irony that would haunt her for days is if she’d said any of that when Selina called, her refusal would have very likely been accepted. Instead, for reasons she would never understand, she burred an excuse about Harley. Harley! Of all the stupid... Selina knew enough to connect the dots, and at that point it all came out: Harley had gone back to Joker (of course), he’d cut her wrists (of course), and Pamela just couldn’t get past it. Not this time. Not another bloody round after all the raised hopes and disappointments. No. More. Pamela realized why Selina must be doing this, to humor Harley. After that nonsense in the Post, the insane ditz must have wedding fever as never before and Pamela... couldn’t bear to see it. She didn’t know if
she ever wanted to be in the same room as that ditzy airhead again, but she certainly couldn’t bring herself to witness... She couldn’t just plaster a smile on her face pretending to give a fuck about Bruce and Selina while Harley bubbled and fizzed at the idea of two people getting married.

At least...
At least she didn’t think she wanted see it.

Selina had said nothing, she’d just let Pamela babble on, and without Selina saying anything to contradict, Pamela began arguing against herself.

Harley bubbling and fizzing was something to see. It made you feel good just standing there looking at it. Just breathing the same air as all that bubbling idiocy, it was...

Pleasant.
And the thing was, Harley was going to be bubbling and fizzing whether Pam was there to see it or not.

But no. No. It would be too hard. It would be too awkward. Seeing her again? After she’d gone back to Joker again. How could she even...

Selina pointed out that there would be another guest. Doris would be there. If Pammy was that anxious about seeing Harley again, it was certainly better to do it in a group than one-on-one.

...By now, Batman had restored the Le Joyau vault and taken his ‘prisoner’ to a nearby gargoyle to finish her story.

“So your bachelorette fling is going to be Isley, Quinn, and Doris,” he said grimly.

“Part 1 is,” Selina said with the naughty grin his disapproval usually evoked. “Middle of the week to contain the damage (theoretically) and get it out of the way so I can relax and enjoy the rest.”

“Part 1,” he graved.

“Cats have nine lives,” she reminded him. “Transitions take time.”

“Selina—Catwoman,” he amended, with an exasperated gesture at her costume, “It doesn’t occur to you that inviting Poison Ivy, even in her current state, Harley Quinn and Game Theory to your bachelorette just might spark ideas about Batman? Mischief centered around Batman?”

Selina looked at him pityingly.

“Well you picked your hemisphere, darling. That left me with the one that includes Gotham. Be strong. The republic will survive.”

He scowled.

“It’ll be fine. It’ll be boring.”

He scowled.

“Some champagne, some heist movies. Do you know, I’ve never seen Ocean’s Eleven?”
Bruce looked at his fiancée. Batman looked at Catwoman. And Psychobat looked at the harbinger of Gotham’s destruction.

He scowled.

“Can I see your cuffs.”

He… scowled but also looked around the back of her shoulder, touched her hair briefly, inspected her claws…

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Checking for signs of a dimension leak. Alternate universe seepage, shape shifters, magic—”

“It’s me, jackass. I was just… I read the Post today.”

“Oh Selina, why would you—”

“Have you seen it?”

“I saw the headline,” he admitted. “I know they identified your designer, and I assumed I am not to look inside if—”

“It’s not that, it’s—they haven’t got the dress; it’s safe if you want to look. It’s just… They think I’m fearless. And I’m left remembering what a ‘fraidy cat I was when we got together: my independence, stealing—a master violinist in a room full of pianos, remember? And the giant mouse in my closet before I moved in?”

His lip twitched.

“There wasn’t actually a mouse, was there,” she said rhetorically. “I invented it. A real mouse never would have spooked me, but a manifestation of… no Scarecrow toxin required.”

“Selina, our lives are complex, more than the Gotham Post could ever depict even if they knew… everything.”

“I know. I know you’re right, it’s just… that chick with the bad hair is fearless.”

“Selina, that’s you. It’s meant to be you; that’s what they see.”

“I invented a mouse that wasn’t there. I was nearly in tears the night I thought Ivy’d greened you, remember? ‘The wildcat’s been tamed.’ And let’s not forget the MoMA opening.”

“You hide it well. They only see the serene, magnificent feline.”

“With bad hair.”

“...”

“Serene, magnificent, fearless, and for some reason, 2003 Calvin Klein model hair.”

“...”

“Bruce, I love you more than I know how to express… but I was scared. I’m okay now because we’re here, and we’re… wonderful together, but then? You were there; you saw what a mess I was. Every step we took, I didn’t know what it meant. For you, for me, the future, my self-respect as woman, as a thief, the… niche I’d carved out for myself—I invented myself, I created this—mrmphln.”

Her babble was cut off by a warm kiss before it could build to a rant, and the kiss was cut off by the clack of batcuffs before it could build to something more.

“Hey,” she spat.

“You wanted to see them, see how fast you can get out. Go-oh,” he said casually, and then secured the cuffs as she slipped them back into his belt.

“What was that for?” she asked.
“I wanted to break your rhythm; that’s the most effective way. Selina, you were not ‘a mess.’ You were alive. I’m alive. Life is change, and change is... messy. Look, do you remember at Xanadu, right before I... introduced myself, do you remember what you said?”

“No,” she admitted with a shy smile. “To be perfectly honest, I remember the bungalow and you’d found the ticklish spot behind my knee, ‘It’s almost two hours to dinner’ and ‘what should we do.’ The beach, ‘we could walk to the lighthouse,’ and we started down a path... And intellectually I know you asked how I became Catwoman and I said something catty like it seemed like a good idea at the time. And we went back and forth a bit. But if we’re being honest, all I really remember is we started down a path and I had this out-of-body experience where I loved you, and there you were. A hand that didn’t have a glove on, fingers intertwined with mine. I don’t remember what I said, I don’t remember what I thought between starting down that path and ‘My name is Bruce.’”

“There was a fork in the path,” he reminded her. “You rejected the idea of an easy answer, that your choice or mine to put on a mask could be summed up in a sentence ‘like a listing in the TV Guide.’ And when I told you in a sentence why Batman...”

“I went back to the fork and took the other path,” she said, smiling. “Some forced analogy about the stream and the rock bed. You said I was wise.”

“You were right. You rejected the simplicity that you’re comparing yourself to now, and you were right. I was more than what those two gunshots made me, and you’re more than the desire to steal an expensive bauble to feel the love you had from your parents. And that’s why we work. Because we’re not locked into those two sentences. Because we’re alive, and life is change. Selina, we don’t love each other less than some simplified reflections in the Post. They exist because we exist, and we exist because we’re more than that.”

Selina wiped a tear.

“Okay, first, you’re the one who’s wise,” she said quickly, as if trying to outrun her tears, “And you should probably write the vows, because I can’t begin to... wow. Just... wow. And second...” She pointed to the sky behind him and the gleaming Bat-Signal on the clouds. “Whoever is behind that, cause them pain.”

Batman looked at it, and back at her.

“Are we good?” he asked hurriedly.

“We’re good, we’re good,” she said, shooing him. “Punch them very hard. I’m probably going to do Cartiers for old times sake!” she added as he fired a line.

“Better that than the bachelorette with Harley and Ivy,” he murmured as he swung away.
The echoes of a gong strike lingered as a black-garbed minion came at Batman, his saber high for an aggressive overhead strike. His footwork was perfect—which made it slow. The blow was easy to sidestep, raising his right knee into the wrist and jostling the blade, then delivering a simple strike to the jaw as the attacker struggled to regain his balance. The next minion was faster, starting the swing in a full sweeping motion that gained power from his weight moving forward—but trapping him in his momentum and leaving him no way to adjust when Batman’s leg rose to intercept him. The kick shattered his wrists and spun him after the blade he’d lost control of. The move exposed his side for a final kick to the ribs, and by the time he hit the deck, Batman had spun to confront a third opponent... Faster still, with the same perfect footwork as the first. This time, Batman’s kick to the wrist was expected. The minion absorbed the hit and the saber sprung upward and back into position for another overhead strike—but this time Batman was in close, positioned for a brutal blow to the arm-pit that required no follow-up.

After the gong, a rhythmic drumbeat had begun, plodding and impasive, a dull tempo that still seemed like a dramatic build as the fight progressed and Batman’s heart pounded harder and faster.

Coming up under the sword arm for a flat palmed strike at the chin... A kick under the wrists to the groin... A hopping kick to the ribs... Stepping into the strike for a punch at the neck... Kick from behind, taking out the knee... Leaping back out of range... A kick to the side—leap back and lunge—poe to the throat—

There was nothing but void in the masked man’s eyes. No conscious thought—No coming home from patrol to find an Atlantis honor guard living in his house, no half hour on YouTube learning to pronounce their names before he headed down the stairs this morning, no seeing that guardsman standing at the doorway off the foyer and flashing back to his father before he said “Good morning, Szczenae Orlan,” for it was his father who taught him those courtesies were an absolute obligation. There wasn’t even a sting remembering how Bruce had been so certain it was a courtesy he’d never need to worry about because it was a situation in which he’d never find himself... There was no At Large list, no Joker released from Arkham, no Hagen back-from-the-dead and menacing Selina, and no Faustian bargain with Blood accepting magic into the house to protect her. There was nothing but instinct guiding his movements and the familiar tang of adrenaline.

A minion tipped, the body yielding the only way it could to keep its arm from breaking and tossing itself in a dull roll towards the edge of the practice mat... A flat palm strike and kick to the crotch, a straight disarm... An elbow to the throat on the
disarm... The final gong, almost done now... A jumping kick... a duck and roll, toying with this one to run out the clock... taking a hit to drop to his knee, then jabbing at the minion’s thigh.

The last gong strike diminished, time to finish him. Batman dropped below the strike, seeming for a moment to invite decapitation, then punched up with both hands into the minion’s gut, sending him flying backwards into the articulated post from whence he came.

The lighting changed, the hologram sabers became wooden bokken and the turbaned minions reset to the default Zogger practice dummies.

Alfred stood beside the control console looking extremely unimpressed. The bottle of water Bruce had left there had been replaced by a pitcher of fruit juice.

“‘I thought you might wish more substantial refreshment,’ was all he said, and Bruce downed a glass, breathed and cooled before saying more than ‘Thanks.’ Then he looked at Alfred shrewdly.

“If you’re going to say it, now is the time,” he said.

“Say what, sir?”

“I told you so.”

“In what sense, sir?”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed into the menacing slits that terrified the darkest figures of the underworld, and then relaxed into casual acceptance as he gestured to Zogger, changing the subject.

“I was in the mood to practice mutō dori, fighting unarmed against an attacker with a sword,” he said mildly, then he looked back at Alfred. “You’re really not going to say it? The day I came down to the kitchen right after we went public with the engagement, remember I said ‘Selina and I are living together, she’s already running the house, nothing is going to change.’ Remember that? And you had that skeptical... Like I was sixteen again.

“We started on rooftops—fighting on rooftops, thief and crimefighter—and now we have this partnership. Now she’s...” He could barely speak around the smile that he couldn’t contain. “Beyond the craziest dreams I had then, and here we are. After all this, what change was left?! What could possibly happen that would even register—but you had that smirk, like I was sixteen and it was the Ferrari all over again.

“I passed an Atlantis honor guard when I got back last night. Selina is reading the Gotham Post. There’s a mystical-AI drone-light ball floating around tattling on members of the Justice League.”

“I see, sir.”

“You see sir. Alfred, if this isn’t your moment to ‘I told you so’ because you think there’s an even bigger shoe to drop, I don’t know if we’ll make it to the I dos. This house has seen rips in the fabric of space-time, you know.”

“One is confident, sir, that whatever challenges may occur, Batman and Catwoman will be equal to the task.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Bruce said sourly. “We were half an hour on YouTube learning how to pronounce that guardsman’s name and rank.”

“Szczenae Orlan,” Alfred said without effort.

Bruce stared blankly.
“The guardsman currently on duty is Szczenae Orlan, sir. Szczenae being the Atlantis equivalent of a Private First Class. His colleague is Szczenae Ahalkea.”

“Would you mind telling me how long you had to practice that before—”

“One was privileged in one’s youth to appear in a production of Bernard Shaw’s *Misalliance*, sir. There is an amusing scene where an aviator lands with a Polish passenger who offers a remarkably succinct tutorial: ‘Say fish. Say church. Say fish-church. Say Szczepeanowska.’ The skill, once mastered, is like riding a bicycle.”

“I see,” Bruce said, shaking his head wondering why he didn’t ask Alfred in the first place. Then he remembered his manners. “They’re settled in okay? Water and diet and everything?”

“One has put them in the blue room, sir. You may recall, there is a very large Victorian bathtub of the claw-footed variety, which is sufficient to their needs for, ehm, soaking. One has ascertained that they are able to ingest virtually all surface foods and arrived with a soldier’s resolve to endure whatever gastronomic horrors were foisted on them. I am happy to report they have found land-based cuisine more agreeable than expected, and fried foods have been especially well-received.”

Bruce’s lip twitched, then he shook his head.

“See, that’s exactly the kind of thing I was talking about. Aside from Clark, the Justice League is work—Batman’s work—and has no entry into Bruce Wayne’s life. It’s especially not a part of my life where I bother with pretense. If it was a mission making demands, then of course I’d make whatever accommodations were needed, however inconvenient. When lives are on the line—liberty, property, matters of global or galactic import—then I’ll do whatever’s necessary, but I don’t pretend it’s not a pain in the ass.

“And when it’s not a serious matter, if it’s West and O’Brien being silly or Diana being an ego, then I shut it down as quickly as possible and as rudely as possible. A little rudeness goes a long way getting the message through.”

“I’m not sure I understand, sir.”

Bruce shook his head again. He knew he wasn’t being clear. Arthur had joined Clark in the non-League side of his life. There were obligations: the situation resulted from a gift, someone else’s subordinates were guests in his house because they were doing their job. It was important to respect that, to treat them with courtesy and dignity and this had been drilled into him by his father, it was part of a core that predated Batman and existed apart from Batman—yet here it was. And it left him off-balance, like when parents come to school. It wasn’t a hardship, but it certainly constituted change. A change that had nothing to do with Selina, yet was intertwined with the wedding.

“I’m not sure I do either,” he admitted. “Beyond the fact that you’re entitled to an ‘I told you so.’ Selina is already my wife, I told her that when I proposed. I’m already her husband, we’re already ‘us.’ But things are changing, all around us.”

Kyle Rayner was camping under the Northern Lights, his tent shining like a lantern in a snowy landscape pocked with pine trees, a canopy of stars overhead, more than you ever saw beneath an atmosphere. And through it, a gauzy highway of green
myst—the most exquisite gradient from grass green to mint, achingly beautiful, a progression from cumulus thick to near-transparent wisps, and twisting so gracefully—he wanted to paint it, and he wanted to fly through it. It was just bright enough to turn the black around it into a velvety blue-green that sucked you in and made you want to fly up there and roll around in it.

But then the trees began to quiver. It didn’t feel like the ground was moving, except for a weird vibration in his teeth. The quivering became violent, like the trees were bending to a monsoon he couldn’t feel. And then they bowed, the shimmering green light contorted to resemble a shape—to resemblance a face.

A face of Judgment:
“You’re not worthy of the ring, Rayner. Even Gardner would have managed to get Tamaranean strippers into the hotel. Perhaps you should be wielding the yellow power of Fear!”
Kyle lurched up in bed, his eyes wide, his heart pounding. Reputations throughout time and space were riding on this. He could not let them down.

The Demon compound was alight with activity, as if deliriously upbeat music was playing in one of those decadent Western movies about fluff. Whimsical strings, a piano, perhaps a flute as the camera moved with rambling excitement through a country house being opened for the season. An exhilarating tempo as dust covers were whisked off the furnishings, an enthusiastic trill as kitchens were opened, fires lighted, and baskets of provisions marched through the doors and heaped onto a laden table or marched before the cook standing like a general, inspecting the offerings with a stern eye and barking orders that belied his joy to be back at work.

That was the spirit at least, even if the activity resembled Caesar’s Legions prepping for Pharsalus more than a country house preparing for guests. Swords were sharpened, guns cleaned, buckles polished. In the communication center, shelves with ancient codebooks were dusted while a few feet away, modern keyboards were vacuumed with USB-driven mini-vacs and screens polished with pre-moistened wipes. The pit stirrers were given new cloth. A square was cut from each of their old garments for the special cleaning rags that would polish the altars and relics around the Lazarus Pit. The rest were burned in a ritual fire, after which they would roast special mallow cakes and sing and dance into the night.

It was a tremendous occasion, for Ra’s al Ghul had made contact with Demon! True, they didn’t know exactly what he’d said. But the Gang of Six running things since his incarceration would figure it out. To the average minion, there was only joy.

In the throne room however, at a round table in the outer chamber where the Six met so they could look through the doorway and take inspiration from the sight of Ra’s al Ghul’s throne, the joy was blunted with anxiety.

“Survey the olive groves of the world.” What could it mean? “Present me a list of six or eight locations known for unparalleled quality.” The mention of six was a clear directive. “Within each center of superior olive oil production, acquaint me with the four best producers along with a timetable of their respective harvests and pressing.” Third Fang thought four olive groves must be an instruction to Fourth Fang just as the six referenced them all as
the Gang of Six. Fourth Fang did not agree. He was fairly certain they were being asked to assemble an actual list of six or eight somethings—Demon bases, operations or... or somethings throughout the world—Six or eight somethings with four smaller somethings related to each. The smaller somethings presumably having significant dates attached, or else some designation that could be disguised as a date.

“We have wasted an hour on this,” said Sixth. “I really think we must pack up our speculation and move on.”

The grumbling was brief, and First Fang read the next paragraph aloud:

“If my food taster Pikhai lives, place him on standby for he has an excellent palate. If not, determine among yourselves who is best equipped to go in his place. On my order, he will fly to the country I select to sample their olives as near to the time of pressing as can be arranged, given our constraints. He shall use that excellent palate to choose, and make a custom blend of that region’s oil at the peak of freshness.”

Ubu was summoned, for he was best acquainted with the Great One’s food tasters, and the Six recessed until he arrived.

Second Fang shuffled casually into the inner throne room and was soon joined by Fifth. They talked together before the empty throne like players in an especially stilted Shakespeare play.

“The Great One may be sitting here soon,” it began.

“He may. If we divine his meaning.”

Through the careful words, a different conversation was taking place. The two men least pleased with the development had found each other and confirmed it. The others might rejoice that Ra’s was coming back and their burden would soon be lifted. But for Second and Fifth, the ‘burden’ was quite... validating. The authority, the self-determination, making the very decisions that governed your fate (to say nothing of the perks at the top of the pyramid), it was very agreeable. Neither was so disloyal that they would wish harm on Ra’s al Ghul (Perish the thought, may He walk always in the shadow of the Dragon with the Breath of Marduk burning warm in His blood), but they might take steps to ensure that when He did return, they would remain where they stood now: apart from other minions, a few short feet from the throne with all the authority and perks that proximity implied. They needed only to find an opportunity.

Selina entered the Zogger cavern, hair pulled into a ponytail, a hand-stitched gi over her catsuit and a frustrated snarl Bruce remembered from vaults when he’d thwarted her one time too many.

“Are you through?” she asked, pointing to the combat floor.

When Bruce nodded, she went silently to the control console and dialed up a Daito-ryu Jujutsu profile.

“Do I want to know?” Bruce asked when she added Shotokan Karate and Enhanced Physics to the settings.

“Oh, nothing dramatic,” she said wearily. “Faust wants me to add salt cellars to the registry and give an interview here at the house to call attention to Arthur’s gift—it’s not like I can walk them past an Atlantis Dress Marine and not say what it’s about. It’s not a big deal, just eating a little crow. When I registered at Scully, I told the girl I’m
not the typical bride setting up housekeeping with no idea what she’ll need and is going to be making a lot of changes as she goes. Now it turns out, I can actually use more salt cellars, so I tweaked the registry... It’s nothing; it’s silly. It gives me an anecdote for the interview that doesn’t have to be edited or flat out invented to cover how we really met or what we were actually doing when you asked me to move in…”

“An interview here at the house,” Bruce said like an expert holding each word up to the light to examine its facets.

Selina smiled at the master strategist’s mind at work: trying to figure out what the aim of the interview might be.

“Faust says if I give a single interview, there’s a 41% chance it will prevent GCN or the Daily News trying to sneak onto the grounds, bribe gardeners, stalk the most likely caterers, etc. If I give two interviews it jumps to 63% and three interviews takes it all the way up to 86. There’s also a 21% chance it will counteract the Post’s hatchet job on my family. I swear if I read one more reference to my learning to survive on ‘the streets’, I swear I’m going to invite that directrice from Chateau L’Aigrette and seat her where she has a wide view. Let her sit there and judge them the entire time.”

“There is room on your side of the guest list,” Bruce noted.

“I’d never do it to Alfred,” she laughed. “This is the matron of a Swiss boarding school. She’d call him major’d’hommes, speak nothing but French, pretend not to understand a word of English, and I’m not sure either of us would pass muster. Our names are in the news too often and we’ve got reporters in the wedding party.”

“Oh,” Bruce said. “That reminds me, Clark is a little on edge that he’s going to be occupied with me while Lois is at your bachelorette.”

“Oh he is?” Selina said, glancing at the Zogger controls. “Clark’s bachelor party was an interstellar and interdimensional incident. Accords were signed; the Phantom Zone had to change the locks. Psycho-Pirate got shorter. All I’ve ever done to Lois was introduce her to the best shoes on Via Tornabuoni; where does he get off?”

“In the course of the official Catwoman-as-villain kidnappings, yes, that’s true. But the two of you finishing dessert by yourselves at d’Annunzio’s turned into a séance with Poison Ivy to chat up the goddess of death. You can understand Clark’s concern with Ivy being at this thing.”

“Oh is that all,” Selina laughed. “Tell him to relax. Lois and Ivy are not at the same party.”

“They’re not?” Bruce’s eyebrow shot up.

“I told you, ‘nine lives.’ Faust ob—”

“Faust again,” Bruce rolled his eyes.

“Relax,” she said, placing a nail like a clawtip just below his chin. “Faust and Alfred both made the same observation and took it to the same place: Multiple champagne companies have been courting me to become the official bubbly served at the wedding. Alfred had a stack of their offers in his pantry. I went through them, narrowed them down to the most promising. I let Veuve Clicquot put me up at the Mark for party 1: Harley, Ivy, Doris. The bad girls, so I can be myself. Tattinger does party 2: Lois, Barbara and Cassie, who know the truth about the man I’m marrying. So I can be myself. Party 3 is Perrier Jouët. Whoever makes the cut gets to come with me and Anna to a private island off Antigua for the real fun.”

“Anna your fence.”
“Anna my best friend at school, my first real friend period after… you know. And in Paris. And you’re finally going to meet her, so have Psychobat suck it up.”

“Selina, I want to meet your friend, really. I know how it looked, but I had every intention of meeting the both of you at Piping Roc—”

“Stayed to finish your workout as if you needed to do six more sets of bent over rows—” she said over him.

“You’re right that was a lie, but not because I didn’t want to meet her. I wanted to give you time alone to get all the reminiscing out of the way before I joined you.”

“Which you never did.”

“There really was a Deadshot situation in Brooklyn.”

The tone was light, playful. And Selina tilted her head.

“A very convenient Deadshot situation,” she noted.

“Do you have any idea how often it happened when I dated other women?”

“The dates you didn’t want to be on the in first place and were happy Batman gave you an excuse to ditch? Yes, I know.”

She grinned.

“Impossible woman,” he said, and kissed her. Then he indicated Zogger. “Do you still need this?”

She looked down at the jujitsu-karate profile and then at him.

“I’d rather have a piece of you,” she said with the old rooftop growl.

He glanced at the Zogger combat floor and then at her… There was an Atlantis honor guard living at the manor. Selina was reading the Post. They were getting a wedding gift from Ra’s al Ghul and already had a magic one from Jason Blood.

He’d said nothing was going to change.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Ubu stood in the outer throne room, prepared to give the Gang of Six all the information he could. Unfortunately, it wasn’t much: the food taster Pikhai who succeeded Omal was very much alive. When Ra’s al Ghul did not return from Atlantis, Pikhai was reassigned to assist the keeper of the wine cellars. He also returned to his former posting with the Galata 4th, where he specialized in throwing the axe for distance and accuracy.

The Six all looked at each other—quizzically, hopefully, and then resignedly.

“So we’re stumped,” First Fang declared. “Ubu, we may as well confide in you. Maybe you’ll figure out what none of us can. You know the Master sent a message. This is the message.” He handed the printed email to Ubu and waited while the bodyguard read. “As you see, the Great One is using the network of the enemy. Their eyes are upon him and he is forced to write in code. This… wedding gift,” he spoke the words like they carried plague. “Send his taster to choose olives, creating a special blend of oil… We have not been able—”

“Not yet,” Third Fang interjected as if First was dictating a letter on behalf of the group where each word might have political or diplomatic implications.

“We have not yet been able to divine its meaning,” First amended. “My own opinion is this bit about Pikhai is directing us to speak with him. We thought it best to talk to
you first, the master would expect that. One of you must know something or have some insight. Maybe Pikhai was present when some key event occurred, perhaps he had a conversation with the Great One, a chance remark that will shed light on this olive oil business.”

Ubu tried to look thoughtful. Handing back the letter, he had only looked confused and that’s presumably why First Fang was treating him like a moron.

“Do you understand?” Sixth asked with unbelievable condescension.

“Of course he does, he’s not a dribbling imbecile,” Fifth said, and Ubu dared the slightest of nods at the unexpected ally. Before anyone could respond, he started talking.

“I hope it is understood I mean no disrespect to the Great One,” he began, stalling. He wasn’t sure what he was going to say, but he wanted ‘not a dribbling imbecile’ to be the last word on the previous subject.

“That goes without saying, may He walk always in the shadow of the Dragon,” Second said quickly. “You must tell us anything that may help us understand the master’s message; no judgements will be made. For if anything seems odd or foolish in Ra’s al Ghul’s behavior, the fault must lie in us. His ways are beyond our understanding.”

Ubu nodded gratefully and began again.

“In that case, I will say that the food taster is something of a vanity. No one has attempted to poison the Demon’s Head in six hundred years. No minion privileged to serve the Demon’s table is capable of treachery, and if the impossible happened and the kitchens were infiltrated and the master succumbed to poison, there is always the pit. A food taster is therefore… vanity. The Caesars and the Pharaohs had them by necessity. Ra’s al Ghul has one as a statement of his rank.”

There was a lot of nodding and more looking at each other among the Six, and Ubu had his revenge, having belabored the obvious twice as long as First Fang.

“As to Pikhai personally, he knows quite a lot about food. Many days the Great One was preoccupied with his affairs and had no time for trivialities, but very often, with the evening meal especially, he enjoyed Pikhai’s showing off. How he would pucker and swish the wine. ‘I know this one. It’s from Kolios. They had a very bad summer, the grapes didn’t get much sugar.'”

“Do you recall any conversations about olives or olive oil?” First prompted.

Ubu shook his head.

“You’ll have to ask him; I never paid much attention to their talk. I can tell you that Pikhai and the Great One had very similar tastes, apart from the use of garlic and the stuffing of vine leaves.”

“This cannot possibly be the information we’re meant to be pursuing,” Third said through his teeth.

“We can’t know that,” Fifth insisted. “The Master was speaking in code, he pointed us to a food taster. What can we expect but stuffed grape leaves?”

“How did their tastes differ?” Fifth asked, smiling.

“The Great One favored both, Pikhai was less enthused,” Ubu said.
“ARRGH! ow-woof-damnit,” Selina cursed as she hit the mat with a thud. It was their fifth workout since deciding to take out their pre-wedding frustrations on each other.

The second occurred only a few hours after the first, when she returned from Scully & Scully. At Faust’s suggestion, she’d gone into the city to change the registry in person rather than calling. She’d run into Richard Flay, who was indecently pleased when he heard why she was there. He’d made himself part of the excursion in much the same way Clayface appointed himself her bodyguard at Vault, and Selina played along in case this “chance meeting” was exactly what Faust intended. Un-wowed by the offerings at Scully, Richard suggested they try A La Vielle Russie (again Selina went along with what was presumably Faust’s plan) where they ran into Doris, who had a passion for all things Russian and valuable.

Selina had returned to the manor with the wet cat expression Bruce knew from countless thwarted burglaries. “Let’s go again,” she said, twiddling her manicure like claws, and as they fought, he got the details:

At A La Vielle Russie there was a cobalt and white master cellar from the Imperial Porcelain Factory, a modern piece after Dmitry Vinogradov’s design for Empress Elizabeth’s dinner service in 1750. *Hauntingly* similar to a piece from a Paris townhouse where she’d cut her teeth as a burglar. There was also an amber one that was undoubtedly some 18th Century aristocrat mimicking the Amber Room at the Winter Palace—if not an actual piece from the Amber Room lost when the Nazis looted it, aka another link to Catherine the Great’s court necklace, aka another piece straight out of her loot sack, a feature that Doris and Richard both seemed to sense and delight in. She registered for both pieces at their insistence—they practically high fived each other behind her back as she did it—and Selina was sure they each planned to give her one, Doris probably planning to steal hers (and possibly Richard’s too) at this very moment.

“This is what they mean when they say the wedding is really for the guests more than us,” she concluded as their fight wound down to a pin she didn’t bother countering.

“I hope not,” Bruce grunted, releasing her, and they bowed.

Ubu raced to the Galata barracks to reach Pikhai before the Gang of Six messenger. He explained what was going on so Pikhai wouldn’t panic when the summons came. His interview with the six went considerably longer than Ubu’s. First there was the *classical bouquet garni* which Pikhai had discussed with Ra’s al Ghul more than once as an alternative to garlic, and which First Fang and Second went off to investigate. Then there was Macau. Ra’s al Ghul himself had declared Macau to have the best Chinese cuisine—they had discussed it more than once—because it had been a Portuguese colony for so long and in addition to the soy sauce used on the mainland they *often cooked with olive oil*. Third Fang and Fourth went off excitedly to research Macau, leaving Fifth and Sixth alone with Pikhai.

Since they were one fang short of a quorum, Sixth thought it would do no harm to acquaint Pikhai with the rest of the master’s orders:
He shall then obtain a photograph of the most picturesque of the chosen olive groves, this of a size fit for framing and presentation. Also a letter on the grove's letterhead and signed by its lord and proprietor, attesting to the oil's provenance and any details of interest. This document may present as flamboyant a signature as pleases the signer and be affixed with as many stamps and seals as are customary, for such always impress the fair sex. Pikhai, or his successor, should affix his signature also with the title Oleologist.

This is the command of Ra's al Ghul, delivered this 10th day of the Minotaur Moon by the hand of atlantisnet.justiceleague.zirch

“Argh.” This time it was Bruce hitting the mat. The third round of sparring came after Selina’s first interview. She’d chosen Martin Stanwick who wrote Hermione’s Society Chit Chat for the Times. He’d been an ally since Dick and Barbara’s wedding, though his manner had cooled in recent months. He was downright frosty when he’d first arrived. Selina explained why there was an Atlantis guardsman in the foyer, explained the gift he was attached to, and Martin was downright acidic about the Wayne Foundation’s ties to Atlantis through Sub Diego: how it became a flashpoint for Gregorian Falstaff after they made ‘such a display of it’ at the Water Ball.

For someone like Martin, it was rude. To remind her of Falstaff? Selina couldn’t figure out where it was coming from, and she was envisioning worse coverage than the Post now that she’d invited an unexpectedly hostile columnist inside to tell her story. She thought through her options for damage control as they sat down in the morning room: There was Lois, sympathetic of course, but an out of town paper and she was hard news. Even if Selina asked and even if Lois agreed, the job was so obviously beneath her—a puff piece on a Gotham society bride—it wouldn’t have any credibility. It was a favor for a friend and would be dismissed as such… There was Ford Dormont of course. He’d have to be handled; she couldn’t simply tell him what she wanted like she could with Lois. And Bruce wouldn’t like it, though he admitted Ford was going to write something, with their blessing or without it, so it made sense to be proactive. In his favor, Ford had the right attitude about money and social position. He knew Selina never ‘got her dinner from a garbage can’ as the song went, and he knew that was a good thing. He also had his foot in the door; he’d been to the engagement party. In his way, he was the best qualified, more than almost anyone at the Post and certainly more than those who claimed…

Then suddenly the point was moot. They had settled in the morning room. Alfred brought tea and a plate of cookies (presumably at Faust’s suggestion) on a dish Selina knew he didn’t care for. It was a bold red and white design, and Martin commented on it (which wasn’t surprising it was so out of place with the rest of the tea things). He said he recognized it from the MoMA Design Store, and Selina said it was a gift from Kyray. She got no farther when Martin had his breakdown:

Despite an active presence in the top tier of Gotham’s social whirl that placed him at a dozen event crashed by rogues, Martin had never experienced fear gas before the Man’s Reach exhibit. The horrors—the horrors—that had played out before his eyes, he’d relived it fifty-eight times—the last was a week ago Thursday—it was awful—awful. He could never—his father—and Elena—and the banshees—the rotting flesh—poor little Buster—and the razors—the razors—
Selina sat there for an hour patting his shoulder, holding his hand and listening to his story. Giving him a napkin to dry his tears... Giving him a second napkin... And then listening to a complete chronicle of his encounters with Gotham crime prior to the Man’s Reach horror. As she listened, she glared malevolently at the dish Kyle Rayner had given as a thank you for bringing him in as the artist Kyray and sponsoring his entry into the art world...

It ended. After he got himself together and accepted a whiskey instead of tea, Martin went through the motions of the interview. His hostility was exorcised, he had nothing but apologies and thanks for her patience and understanding—but there was no telling what he actually heard or what might make it to the page. Selina saw him off and went to find Bruce for the most vehement sparring up to that point.

Second Fang knocked excitedly on Fifth’s door. The research on bouquets garnis had proven quite revealing. They started in the kitchen naturally, and the chef al ghul, the Great One’s personal chef M’tolk, confirmed Ubu: Pikhai always complained about the garlic. He then said bouquet garni is nothing but a bundle of herbs tied with string. It’s added to soups, stocks, casserole, marinades and courts-bouillons for cooking and removed before the dish is served.

“First Fang thought that would make an excellent way to introduce poison to a dish, and he’s probably right but there was no point in saying it right in front of the chefs. M’tolk was insulted, all his assistants were insulted, the whole kitchen became hysterical and I was ten minutes calming them down.”

Fifth laughed. First Fang’s idiocy was a recurring chorus of his days now. He asked what happened then.

“It looked like a dead end,” Second continued. “But I stuck around after First left, mostly because I didn’t want to deal with him right away. M’tolk wanted to go on complaining, so I let him. He said Pikhai is a fool, that bouquet garni is no substitute for garlic, it is its own thing—except when the Great One is at the compound and the chefs do not have a proper kitchen. For those occasions, he uses special bouquets garnis in these little paper sachets like tea bags. Well, I couldn’t care less about the tea bags, but this is something that’s used only when the Great One is at the compound, the compound nearly always means the name that must not be spoken, his great Gotham foe, I figured this must be it! An important clue.”

Fifth Fang agreed and nodded excitedly, and Second chuckled watching Fifth repeat his mistake.

“So I made him show me the dishes he would prepare this way. The dishes Ra’s al Ghul is only served in his tent at the compound.”

“Yes,” Fifth said eagerly.

“This, I was sure, is our message.”

“Yes, yes.”

“I watched them being prepared.”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“I saw the recipes, I saw the chef reading from the book.”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes.”
“Classical bouquet garni is thyme, bay leaves, parsley, onions, majoram and pepper; the assortment selected and recommended by Le Cordon Bleu since 1895.”

Fifth blinked.

“And it’s right there on the plate as it’s presented to Ra’s al Ghul: the little teabag of spice is not removed. It lays there in the bowl, its little paper tag reading LCB 1895. Do you see? Our clue isn’t a conversation Pikhai had with the master. It’s this 1895 visible on his plate whenever he ate in his tent.”

“I suppose it could be,” Fifth Fang said. “Have you told First Fang?”

“Not yet. I wanted to look up this date in the private archive. It was an exceptionally active year for the Demon. See here are my notes: The Dreyfus Affair in France, London rocked by the Oscar Wilde scandal, U.S. gold reserve was saved when J. P. Morgan and the Rothschilds lent $65 million in gold to the Treasury, the Treaty of Shimonoseki signed between China and Japan, Rudolf Diesel patents the Diesel engine; also the first U.S. patent for an automobile. Workers killed by soldiers of the Russian Empire during the Yaroslavl Great Manufacture strike. Wilhelm Röntgen discovers a type of radiation later known as the X-ray, and the Duck Reach Power Station opened in Tasmania, that first publicly owned hydroelectric plant in the Southern Hemisphere.”

“The Treaty of Shimonoseki,” Fifth said warming to the subject. “The Treaty of Shimonoseki. Let’s just scratch this one,” he said, taking a pencil from his pocket and running a thin line through the words. “Take it out before you show the others. I doubt First will notice the omission. If he does, tell him the year was wrong.”

“The archive wrong?” Second exclaimed.

“Pieces of paper get misfiled all the time,” Fifth said smoothly. “Besides which, First Fang will not notice, and by the time we all meet to discuss this, Wikipedia will certainly confirm this treaty was not signed until 1896.”

“As you wish,” Second Fang said with an obsequious nod, and then shrewd eyes snapped up as if to say ‘But it doesn’t come free.’ “Why?” he asked. “What is so important about this treaty?”

“It involves China. Beyond that, I don’t know.” He smiled hungrily. “Yet.”

Selina’s back slammed into the floor, punctuated by a soft cry that ended in a grunt that stood in for a curse.

“Fall for that every time,” she muttered as Bruce’s proffered hand helped her up.

“Can’t help it. If you’re not fully committed to the attack, I’ve got double the torso strength to block. If you’re committed, momentum’s going to land you right back on the ground.”

“Yes, I get that,” biting off the words as she left the mat and went to the short stalagmite where a shelf was rigged to hold their water bottles. “What I don’t get is how you get out of it a third of the time.”

“That took a lot of practice,” he said, watching the muscles of her throat as she gulped. “And even so, I can only pull it off about thirty-percent of the time.”
“It’s more than practice, you have to know what to do. Between old rooftops and now, I have to assume I’ve felt the technique more than anybody in Gotham, and I have no idea what’s going on.”

She had started to screw the lid back on the water bottle, but now noticing his smug little pre-lip-twitch, she stopped… slowly removed the lid… and poured the water down her chest.

“Ahh, that’s better,” she cooed, letting her head tilt back as she savored the cool shock of the water on her overheated body.

“I know what you’re doing,” came the dry gravel. “That move also only works thirty percent of the time,”

“Sixty,” she said, licking her lips very subtly.

“Thirty-two or thirty-three percent, maybe,” he said, eyes lingering on the glistening water.

“It’s one of your insane voodoo moves from Foshan, isn’t it?” she said, taking a step closer. “The kwoon you hardly ever talk about, that would never consider taking a Caucasian student…”

He grunted, locked onto a droplet of water that held its form on the slick of sweat on her skin.

“…Until you did something at the kwoon in Hong Kong that convinced them. Yes?”

His lip twitched.

“Tell me, Dark Knight, how’d you learn it?”

“I felt the technique.”

She was close enough to press against him, the sopping shirt and rock-hard nipples pushing insistently into his bare chest.

“Feel this technique.”

…

Thirty minutes later, as they sifted through a pile of discarded gis, street clothes and costumes putting themselves back together, Selina helped herself to Bruce’s shirt.

“I’m taking this as punishment,” she announced. “You’re holding out on me.”

Bruce didn’t exactly gesture to his crotch as he stared in affronted disbelief, but the message was clear.

“Not that way,” she said with a satisfied purr, then she explained. “When I’m the one blowing off steam, I tell you what it’s about. This round was for you, and I still don’t know a thing.”

“I was going to tell you,” said Bruce. “After. It’s not a mid-fight conversation. But you do have to know so you won’t worry.”

“That sounds ominous,” she said, making a face.

“It would be if I did nothing,” Bruce said. “Faust reminded me of a disturbing phenomenon going back to the First World War: a pilot flying his last combat mission before being rotated out was significantly more likely to crash. The statistics before going on leave to get married weren’t great either. I was aware of this, but there was nothing to be done about it, so I’d just resigned myself to being careful.”

“Was nothing to be done,’ past tense,” Selina noted. “Faust came up with something you can do.”
“What the Air Corps did was simply not tell a man when he was flying his last mission. He’d land and they’d say ‘That was it.’ I can’t do that. Selina, if I said ‘Last night was my last patrol until after the wedding,’ and something awful happened that Batman could have prevented, it would haunt us both. It would hang over our marriage that the arbitrary choice of date cost lives. It’s no better if I leave it to the Batcomputer to randomly choose a date of the last patrol and tell me only when I get home from it. There’s the same guilt if something avoidable happens when I’m not out there, compounded with the exponential risk if the randomly chosen date is a late one. As it gets close to the wedding day and I’ll know the probability is increasing every night and the danger of subconsciously dropping my guard is magnified.”

“So what does Faust want you to do?” Selina asked.

“It’s basically time travel, patrolling out of sequence. I change places with myself from a few months down the timeline. These nights leading up to the wedding are covered. Nothing terrible happens that haunts us because I was playing it safe. Because Batman will be there, but it’s a me who’s already made it to the wedding so that psychological time bomb doesn’t apply.”

“But you’re going to be covering future you’s patrol,” Selina said. “Isn’t that rolling the same dice?”

“Say that again slowly and think about it,” he said in the patronizing tone used to tell a villain the flaw in their epic scheme.

“Jackass,” Selina said, and he laughed. She didn’t join in. “Look, from your point of view, you’re still getting married ‘tomorrow’. Why aren’t we worried you actually can die in the future and set up one of those paradoxes that leads to cosmic sparks burning—not to mention the you-dying part that makes me not care so much if the fabric of space time wants to unravel us all into unexistence.”

He held her arms and kissed her cheek.

“If there was any risk of a time paradox, Faust wouldn’t have suggested it,” he said like a mathematician working through a proof.

“Okay then,” Selina said. “Why aren’t we worried that we’re suddenly making a lot of compromises because of something called Faust. Magic, now time travel. It’s not like you, Bruce.”

“I’m not doing it for Faust, I’m doing it for you. For us. You said the prospect of my dying made you not care so much about the cosmic spark, what makes you think I feel any differently? If it’s a compromise, this is the time to make it. Jason said the thing’s not magic. Clayface said he’s coming for you next. I’m choosing to believe Jason, there’s nothing to think about.”

“Bruce, I love you,” Selina said, closing her eyes. “But doesn’t it creep you out just a little? Its name is Faust, and it offers what we want most—we get married without a hitch—we just have to bend this one little principle.”

“Its name is Faust because that’s Jason’s idea of a joke and a fifteen hundred-year-old wizard’s sense of humor doesn’t age well. A fifteen hundred-year-old wizard’s idea of a gift, on the other hand, is pretty spectacular. Selina, I spend my life trying to anticipate the possibilities. I do it because my life and the lives of everyone I care about could depend on it. I try to anticipate and then make a plan. And this… what we’re about to do… this wedding is something I never considered possible. For so many years, I never began to think through the contingencies and develop protocols… And since I
proposed and you said yes, I have to admit it’s not comfortable being that far behind. Once I started to think about it, the number of things that could go wrong is staggering. The scale of the disasters. The permutations just on Clark as best man. On you as the bride. Bruce Wayne as the groom and Batman as the groom are two distinct sets of variables with virtually no overlap... Knowing if I work on nothing but this every second between now and the ceremony, I can’t possibly anticipate everything that might happen... And then suddenly it’s gone. With that one gift, the weight of that is gone. 51,600 trillion calculations per second that thing is capable of. Every news blurb that might get past me that would be a heads up on how Hagen will come at us, it won’t get past him. I don’t care if its name is Lucifer Satan von Joker III.”

Selina could not contain the snorting laugh.

“Lucifer, Satan, von...”

“I don’t say I would call it that,” Bruce backpedaled. “I’d call it LSJ or something.”

“LSJ the Third,” she nodded, now containing her laughter but just barely.

“Three. LSJ3,” Bruce said.

“Okay, fine,” Selina breathed. “You’re giddy,” she then noted approvingly. “How long are you going to be like this?”

“I don’t know,” Bruce said, looking into her eyes. “I’m marrying the woman I love. I didn’t think I would ever feel this.” He kissed her, and then turned serious. “There is one thing though. About the time travel, this is just to cover patrols. We cannot risk messing with the timeline, so I do not want you seeking out ‘future me’ and trying to find out what’s going to happen. None of your teasing, no games, no indulging your kink for messing with me when you know I can’t touch you.”

“You love it when I tempt you,” she said.

“Selina, this is important. This is using the ability to move through time for our own convenience. We have to be responsible, good citizens.”

“You’re telling me to be a good girl,” she laughed. “You really are committed to this ‘life is change’ thing if you’re standing there telling me to be a good girl and expecting it to take.”

“Selina—”

“I’m teasing. I won’t throw a soda can out the window while we’re driving in the time lane. I won’t track down future you and find out if you wanted La Perla, Lise Charmel or Wanda’s House of Leather on the honeymoon. Your loss.”

He grunted.

From the musings of Ra’s al Ghul, year of the Green Wood Ram, Fifth Moon

How I have waited.

The fixed element of Fire rules the Year of the Wood Ram. The house ruled by the Ram is that of the high sun, the hours between one and three, and his principle season is summer. And summer approaches at last.

There have been eddies in the two great empires, but as the high season comes, I fear I must abandon the West, for now. Oscar Wilde’s arrest and trial consumed London, yet its aristocracy remains gallingly impervious to the currents that took down the nobility in other countries. We did what we could. That Victoria is a durable one. A maddening woman. It
savages my bowels to say it, but her reign cannot be destabilized. May the Prince of Wales bring us better prospects.

For now I look East to that damnable Qing Dynasty in China. Early this year, Japanese troops captured Liaoyang and Taiwan and now the defeated Qing Empire has signed this Treaty of Shimonoseki. It renounces their claims on Korea, Taiwan, Fengtien province, and the Pescadores Islands. They paid a huge indemnity besides, and the Japanese have used it to establish iron and steel works. Foolishly in my opinion, mimicking the West and their mad obsession with industry. Nothing will come of it, this modern mania for progress.

The future is in the treaty itself, not the payout. Our petition, the Gongche Shangshu as it is known in China, 10,000 words strong expressing opposition to the treaty, though we have allowed the native operators to insert a few bits about reforms that they want. That too will come to nothing, but it is a political movement in modern China and we shall direct it. That Zaitian chap would have made an excellent husband for Talia, but there was no point pursuing it while he let his aunt do the ruling for him. If this auspicious summer proceeds as I hope, the Dowager Empress Cixi will be put down, and then we shall see...

Fifth Fang read it through again, committing the names to memory though he suspected the key name was not listed. The Dowager Empress Cixi was long gone; so was her nephew Zaitan aka Guangxu, the Eleventh Emperor of the Qing Dynasty. The Hundred Days of Reform certainly hadn’t played out the way the Demon’s Head intended, and the entire Qing Empire was no more. Even the Japanese Empire on the other side of the treaty hadn’t made it through the 20th Century. The only entity connected to the Demon Head’s musings of 1895 related to China that endured was the one Ra’s al Ghul dismissed (may the lapse of the Demon Head’s wisdom be unseen by his unworthy minion save at those times the noticing will serve His Great Purpose):

Yawata Iron and Steel Works, founded with the indemnity exacted from the Qing Empire at the Treaty of Shimonoseki, became Nippon Steel and then the Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation, second largest steel producer in the world, headquartered in the Chiyoda ward of Tokyo.

‘WAYNE TECH A Wayne Enterprises Corporation’ and ‘DO IT RIGHT’, the bundled boxes read, and then the words vanished into a blur of ice blue as Eddie was pushed back by the recoil of Victor’s freeze ray and the blast of cold from a rapidly growing glacier that resulted from the test. Hm.

Nearly as much of the blast ricocheted off the boxes as went into them. He repeated the experiment on the brick wall and a pair of caution signs illustrating how to lift correctly and warning intruders the warehouse was guarded by zombies. In each case, the stick figures vanished into the glacier as a sound out of Star Trek emanated from the gun, and again Eddie was forced back by recoil and cold. Hm.

He adjusted the distance and tried on a storage container, which was satisfactory. Then climbing on top of the storage container he shot down at some wooden crates. The higher angle did not help, and again he was nearly caught in the rapidly growing ice ball.

So, distance. Distance was the only way to go without the shielding of a cold suit and the built-in protection of Victor’s metabolism. The warehouse would be tricky, a lot of narrow aisles and short range obstacles. Very tricky shooting, though those same
features made it the best location he’d seen to trap his prey. He took out his list and stared at the words…

There was nothing special about the warehouse where Bane had brought Kittlemeier, other than it was a corner of the war unknown to non-participants. The address would mean nothing to Batman, which gave his riddle a fighting chance.

The riddle that he had yet to write. His greatest riddle. It had to be. It had to be so subtle it wouldn’t be recognized as a Riddler-clue at all.

If only he could not send it. It would be so easy if just this one time he could not send a riddle announcing his crime beforehand. Just this ONE TIME. He closed his eyes as if squeezing his brain trying to force the plan into being—

His eyes popped open, his right eyebrow mysteriously arched on its own as if the ‘birthing’ process locked his facial muscles into this new contortion. He stared in unfocused shock until the pain of his eyeballs drying snapped him out of it. He… actually had… there actually was… a way to do this. A part of his plan that had nothing to do with Batman directly, that Batman would see but think nothing of, would never recognize as a clue because it wasn’t one. And yet it was. It could be—it certainly could be. All he had to do was pretend it was, pretend he’d done it on purpose. YES!

He checked his list. There was only one location still to check: the catacombs under the cathedral. Now that it didn’t matter for the clue, it wasn’t so important. Still, he may as well be thorough.

Second Fang was furious. He couldn’t wait for the meeting to end. When it did, when Fifth Fang did his usual ambling towards the inner throne room, Second marched up to him with all the indignation of a minion who had wasted his time in the private archives for nothing.

He stood before Fifth Fang aggressively—to the extent that one can ‘stand’ aggressively—and then looked guiltily towards the throne.

“Come,” he said. “What I have to say to you is not worthy of these hallowed surroundings.”

Fifth looked put out by the drama more than anything, and he followed reluctantly to the outer chamber, to the receiving room beyond that, and then to the hallway.

Where Second slapped him.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Macau?!” he demanded in a peevish whisper. “After we left to research the herbs, Pikhai told you about a conversation he had with Ra’s al Ghul where the Great One referenced a city directly because it used olive oil. Clearly we are to strike Macau! Clearly we’re meant to do something in Macau! Why didn’t you just tell me I’d wasted my time! Why didn’t you tell me instead of letting me go through my whole pointless story about outraged chefs and sachets of spice, useless research on 1895. Why didn’t you tell me before I walked into a meeting about our mandate to strike Macau?!”
“Are you finished?” Fifth asked. “I didn’t tell you because the rest of them will chase Macau. Only you and I know there is any alternative target.”

“There isn’t an alternative target. The answer is Mac—”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Fifth said, taking a small notebook from his pocket. “Look at this. Only 1.4 kilometers from the headquarters of Nippon Steel. 1.4 kilometers—you can get there in three minutes if the traffic is with you. Three minutes!” he hissed. “In the vastness of the globe, from far away Atlantis, the master’s clues point to a target only 1.4 kilometers from THAT! I say that cannot be coincidence.”

Second stared at the words in the notebook, wanting to be skeptical but unable to do so.

“Even if it isn’t what the master intended, we will distinguish ourselves,” he said finally.

“We will,” said Fifth. “We surely will.”

“ARRGH! ow-woof-damnit,” Selina cursed, then rolled over onto her back.

“C’mon, Kitten, you can do better than that,” Bruce said, dropping his hand to help her up.

“I seriously doubt that,” she said, shaking it off and twiddling her claws like a tennis player bouncing between sets. “Have you noticed I’m doing worse with each round.”

“I have,” he said, bowing and then taking a ferocious swing. “You’re letting the emotions drive. You know it’s less effective.”

“It’s not a choice at this point,” she hissed.

Things might be changing at the Gotham Post, but Selina was not about to sit down with one of their reporters for that second interview. After Martin Stanwick, the most qualified writer was Ford Dormont. His books were so-so beach reading when she was laying low after a heist, and he was as apt to make up shit as his rivals. But judging by the first date he invented for them at the engagement party, he knew the type of shit to make up. Whatever he fabricated in Mayfair would contrast whatever the new girl spun at the Post, and any interview would accomplish the primary objective: taking the heat off Alfred, Mr. Harriman, the gardeners, caterers, florists, and whoever else the paparazzi decided to stalk. So she floated the name past Faust, and receiving no warnings that there was a 45% probability Ford would turn into Clayface and smother her, she told it to set up the interview.

Then she forgot about it. That night was to be the last Date Night with Batman for quite some time. He would be replaced by his 6-months-from-now doppleganger until the wedding, and after, Catwoman couldn’t be seen in Gotham until Selina returned from her honeymoon.

Nothing special was planned. Like any date night, it was to be an ordinary patrol she tagged along on, but there was word of three factions competing for the drug business in a particular nightclub—and they had delicious synchronicity in nightclubs. Typically Catwoman went in first, deliberately voluptuous, deliberately visible, picked her target, asked questions, occasionally started some trouble. Once people started moving, Batman watched. Depending on who ran, who texted, who tried for a discreet exit or pulled a weapon, he picked his targets and intercepted, detained, pummeled or followed. Tonight looked like a pummel-pummel-intercept/detain/question and
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Catwoman did her bit taking out wildcards, removing outliers from the perimeter and watching his back... It was 49 seconds of prime date night action, another 28 until she could join him outside in the alley—where he was finishing off the goon that she assumed he’d pulled outside to question.

The guy fell unconscious as she approached, but before she could ask why Batman had knocked him out, he turned with a look that was—quite pissed.

“It’s for you,” he growled, and Selina saw the muted brownish-orange glow appear from behind his cape.

“Faust, what the hell?” she said.

“You are having breakfast with Mr. Dormont tomorrow morning at Café Boulud,” it said.


“It is advisable that you retire now and have an ample night’s sleep to appear fully rested as I have made a lunch reservation for yourself and Patrick McKael, the society photographer at Sant Ambroeus. This will allow you to cut off the meeting with Mr. Dormont. There is a 71% chance he will follow you, a 64% chance he will visit Mr. McKael’s website where you appear in almost 2,000 photographs. It is advised that when you leave Mr. Dormont, you arrange to meet him for drinks to complete your interview. He is likely to suggest Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle. It is recommended you propose Belvue Wine Bar as an alternative.”

“You think you’re feeding me enough, Faust? I thought we’d just do it at the house like with Martin.”

“Do I have to be here for this?” Batman growled, rubbing the knuckles of his glove.

“I have analyzed the works of Mr. Dormont and selected the Gotham eateries most likely to appeal as a setting in future novels and cross-referenced with those unknown to him because they did not exist or were not prominent when he was actively living and writing in Gotham. This is the recommended course of action. Mr. Dormont will not be intrigued by the presence of the Atlantis honor guard... Batman’s continued presence is immaterial to the success of the interview.”

“It was a rhetorical question, Faust; he was being sarcastic,” Catwoman said as Batman fired a line behind her and ascended rapidly to the rooftops. “Or maybe he wasn’t,” she said softly.

Officially, any minion is thrilled at any order, for it is a chance to serve the Demon. Officially, no minion feels joy, frustration or disappointment beyond that, for an order is a chance to serve the Demon. That said, Pikhai was excited, overjoyed and downright giddy at the orders read to him. Traveling to Spain, Italy or Chile to sample the freshly picked olives and dictate a pressing... an Oleologist. It was a dream!

Having no belongings beyond the clothes on his back, “packing” was not something he could do in any meaningful way. He tried. He’d gone to the drawer that constituted the communal arsenal of the Fourth Galata Division: Tokatlıyan War Dogs. There were shuriken of varying shapes, caltrops, tekken, a throwing knife, a sai, various picks, a grappling hook, a spiked ring, a poison ring, climbing claws, tekko-kagi claws, kusari-fundo, nunchucks, a blow pipe, a rope dart, kyoketsu shoge,
kusarigama... none of it would do. None of it suited the task before him. But the mission before him was so exciting, he had to prepare in some way.

Technically, he should care nothing about the recipients beyond Ra’s al Ghul’s desire to honor their union with a gift. But he felt an energy that simply had to find an outlet, and there was that phrase in the Demon’s order calling for stamps and seals on the presented letter: ‘for such always impress the fair sex.’ The bride’s sensibilities were therefore of special interest to the Demon’s Head. It was his particular wish that she look on his gift with favor. A study of her tastes would not be amiss to prepare for his trip. How could he weigh the viscosity, bitterness or fruitiness of the olives to create a crisp, vibrant and structured oil without knowing the kind of palate he was dealing with?

So he crept from his bed, unearthed the two packs of cigarettes he kept for barter (no food taster would dull his palate by smoking them) and bought his way into the south communication center where the night crew was more lenient. Four cigarettes bought him a little over three hours internet access, enough to watch a typical Bollywood film which was the usual reason for these transactions. The first night, his research into Selina Kyle was sidetracked almost before it began.

There was a monsoon of data on the name alone, and cross-referencing with Bruce Wayne didn’t help. Combining both names into a search and cross-referencing with food did the trick: there was mention of the restaurant D’Annunzio’s where the couple was first seen dining together. Reasoning there could be no better introduction to the cuisine of Gotham City and the tastes of his subjects, he looked for more on the restaurant and found himself down a rabbit hole of culinary wonders that left him shaking.

He knew Gotham was a great city with many rivers, which always meant diversity in the population and cuisine, but he had no idea, no glimmer of an idea. How was it even possible for one place to hold so many eateries? How was there even room? Did they build them on top of one another? How could so many be staffed? How could enough fish be caught? Enough pigs slaughtered? Enough rice—to say nothing of the variety. D’Annunzio’s wasn’t merely Italian or Northern Italian but Tuscan-Venetian Fusion. There were simple ‘French’ restaurants but also bistros specializing in the regional specialties of Provence, Gascony, Burgundy, Roussillion... even French Guiana, French Creole, and French Moroccan! There was a bakery offering nothing but the breads of Northern India! There was a place for West Indian curries. There was a ‘pop up’ restaurant specializing in dishes brought to India by Persian invaders! When his time ran out, Pikhai realized he hadn’t read a word about Selina Kyle. Rather than buy another three hours, he went to bed to dream about Gotham, no longer the city of Him Whose Name Must Not Be Spoken but a place where you could eat your way from Osaka to Tabriz to Jamaica in only a few steps.

The next night he returned to research Selina Kyle and this time he actually got to her as a subject. Once again he searched Selina Kyle Bruce Wayne xref food, ignored the siren song of D’Annunzio’s the palace of Tuscan-Venetian Fusion, and delved into the only other hit: Le Grand Festival d’Oenologie et Gastronomie Françaises.

He blinked. He read the words again. He clicked through and read... He translated the blurb into his native Farsi just to double-check his English... These people, this Selina Kyle knew a great deal about wine. This Bruce Wayne—this Wayne Manor—had
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hosted a great festival of food and wine. No wonder the Great One had commissioned such a gift. Pikhai’s hand had risen to his chest, his chest puffed out with pride. The honor that was to be his! He would devise such an olive oil for this happy couple that would bring honor to the name Ra’s al Ghul!

Bruce blocked the sparring claws that would have thresher the scars of his first cat scratch.
“Maybe it’s not letting the emotions drive,” he taunted. “Maybe Faust bouncing you through every bar and restaurant on Museum Row’s slowed you down.”
Selina hissed, but she didn’t take the bait. Rather than swing, she tumbled sideways and when his weight shifted to turn, she vaulted past him and snatched a smoke pellet from his belt, landed, and held it up triumphantly.
“Score! Now I toss this at your feet and get away.”
“Woof,” Bruce said, conceding the point. “So, we’re back to deuce?”
“We’re back to deuce. Call it a draw?”
“I have time for one more round before patrol. And I want to hear more about this Torrick.”

The first half of the Ford Dormont interview went as expected. Selina broke it off citing errands she had to run before a lunch engagement. She offered drinks later to finish up, and that’s when Ford threw her a curve—he brought another writer with him. Ash Torrick was a younger man in his late forties, not bad looking if you went for the Lex Luthor thing. He’d been a rather serious novelist for a few books and then abruptly cashed out. He lent his name to a lurid magazine of the ‘Finding Big Foot’ variety, followed almost immediately by a TV show Ash Torrick’s Ancient Mysteries, rebranded after a season to cover a broader spectrum of pseudo-science and conspiracy theories.

In short, he seemed an unlikely friend for Ford Dormont and an even less likely colleague. But there they were, and Selina made it through the second half of the Dormont interview with an extra audience member. When she got home, she asked Faust if he planned it and got only silent glowing in reply.

“And now you’re popping off into the future,” she told Bruce, blocking his kick more efficiently than his Zogger playmates and leading him by his own momentum down to the mat…”Swapping patrols with future-you on the principle that Faust knows what he’s doing.”

The move cost her, for the same momentum she used against him made it impossible to get away quick enough. He pulled her down on top of him, spun them into a roll and pinned her hard.
“It will be fine,” he said, his lip grazing her cheek in a pseudo-kiss before adjusting to prevent her counter. “The AI may be keeping things from us, that’s not a bad sign. Sixty percent of my protocols rely on not giving participants all the information. I can’t expect people to react naturally and plausibly if they know too much.”

His struggle to control the pin ground his hip against hers, while her squirming to get out from under his superior torso strength brought her arm under his to grab his
shoulder from behind, using the strength of his pin to pull herself up and pressing her chest fiercely into his.

“Ahem, excuse me, sir, miss,” Alfred said as if he’d walked in on them reading the newspaper. “There is a visitor upstairs. One was told to announce ‘The Artist Formerly Known as Kray’ is here for Miss Selina.”
Selina stood in the MoMA before the De Groupil that only she recognized as a series of joyous cat-scratches.

“You’re the only one who’s going to be any fun tonight,” she confided to the streaks of amber, and then she turned to leave. There was a glass insert in the middle of the floor, and she’d already spotted Ford Dormont downstairs waiting to intercept her. She could only hope the presumptuous society writer didn’t think she was modifying her plans for him. She bypassed the stairs as she always meant to and took the elevator up. It was less than a half-hour to closing time and the rooftop café was already shut down for the day. She stowed her overcoat in a crevice behind one of the rooftop sculptures that was so convenient she had, catlike, assumed it was put there just for her and claimed it as her property. She went to the edge of the roof, spread out her arms and leapt, and then pulled a mini-chute and glided to a lower roof.

Après was the hot rooftop lounge of eight months ago, themed like a chalet on a Swiss mountainside: Adirondack chairs around a central fire and an astonishing menu of hot rum drinks. It no longer had the monopoly it enjoyed when the evenings were cold, but it was still trendy. Or rather, in a few hours it would be trendy. Right now the crowd was thin apart from the trio she was meeting.

“Evening all!” she said, and then looked at their drinks with mock disapproval. “Hope you’re not spoiling your palates. Did I not mention tonight’s misadventure is being sponsored by Veuve Clicquot, one of the champagnes courting me to be the official bubbly of the Wayne wedding?”

The news was met with excited squeals from Doris and Harley and relief from Pam who set down her drink a little too quickly and with a sour glance at Harley. It was easy to imagine the coaxing to try a specialty drink; less easy to imagine Pam politely hiding her disgust when she found it revoltingly sweet.

After a quick toast to their host, Selina signaled for the check and announced their next stop was— when she broke off, seeing Ford Dormont toddle in. He looked around and gave Selina’s party an oily nod before settling on the far side of the fire.

“Hell,” she murmured. She briefly explained who he was: a novelist obsessed with crime among the super-rich, who had returned to Gotham with Bruce Wayne’s wedding in his sights. Doris who had once worked in a bookstore knew the name and had read his books, but she had never seen the man. She said he was shorter and older than she expected. Harley hadn’t read his novels but she’d seen excerpts in Mayfair magazine along with the gossipier essays. She said he was creepier than she expected and Red should green him. He could be their butler for the night and that would teach him a lesson.

Pam finished her champagne in a gulp. Doris was nodding and looking at her expectantly. It seemed like the ideal solution, she could see that. She looked at her empty glass, which of course offered no solutions. She looked uncomfortably at Selina,
who offered a sympathetic nod and, unexpectedly, reached out and gave her arm an encouraging pat. She considered refilling her empty glass, but pride intervened. There was no other way forward, there was no way back, and there was no plant metaphor offering an alternative. She imagined downing a second glass of champagne in an instantaneous gulp, opened her mouth and let the words come in a rush: She said she’d used Dormont’s badly written but terribly useful novels to find weaknesses and avenues of approach for many of the rich men she targeted over the years... (There. That wasn’t so bad.) And then, after the warm-up, she revealed the horrible price she’d had to pay to reverse the transformation she underwent after the polo match. She hadn’t only lost her green complexion, she’d lost her connection to plants and her herbaceous-sympathetic metabolism—her pheromones and her immunity to toxins—so she couldn’t green anybody.

Harley’s reaction was immediate and quite touching: “Oh, Red,” a sad smile, arms open for a hug. It broke the last filaments holding Pamela Isley together and she burst into quiet tears on Harley’s shoulder.

Selina looked warily at the staff: the tilt of the waiter’s tray, the bartender’s angle and the way he held a bottle of Caroni, at least one of them was concealing a phone. There was no way the image wasn’t going to make it into the Gotham Post in one form or another, and experience said any attempt to buy them off would only make it worse.

Doris may have reached the same conclusion about the Post, but she apparently had a different form of damage control on her mind. She was heading over to Ford Dormont. Without reading lips, it was clear she’d introduced herself and sat next to him, maybe just to pull his attention from Harley and Ivy. It was all warm smiles for a minute, almost like she was flirting, until she reached into his jacket and pulled out a small notebook. She tossed it into the fire with the definitely-not-flirting look of a woman who’d won the heart of the Riddler and reinvented herself as Game Theory to be with a man who’d led the theme criminals of Gotham in a war against the mobs.

Whatever riddling threat she delivered, it concluded with a pinching twist of his chin followed by a theatrical fluttering of fingers as if ridding herself of icky civilian residue that might have rubbed off.

By the time the magnificent sideshow concluded, Selina had paid the check and Harley and Ivy were strolling to the door with their arms around each others’ waists.

Kyle Rayner laughed.

“The times they are a-changing,” he said, shaking his head and considering a corner of the sketch he was working on. “I saw that bit in the Post. Usual nonsense, I figured: Harley Quinn consoling a tearful Poison Ivy. Now you’re telling me it’s real? The normal skin wasn’t even photoshopped?”

“I know; it’s weird,” Selina said, frozen in her pose but given leave to move her mouth while Kyle worked on the details of her dress. “It’s the one thing you and I always agreed on: the Gotham Post are a pack of lying bastards.”

“Not only are they amazingly consistent,” Kyle said, seamlessly picking up her thought, “they will find the most insulting, inane, degrading crap to superimpose on whatever really happened. Now they’re getting a few right?”

“A little,” Selina said. “Maybe twenty-five, twenty-six percent.”
“Pull that off in baseball, it gets you into the hall of fame.”

“On Second Avenue, it gets you flattened by a bus,” Selina countered, and Kyle laughed.

He said nothing for a minute, focused on the curve of her waist where the corset met the skirt. Then he said “That is some beautiful lace, by the way... So tell me more about this hotel.”

“You really want to hear about this?”

“I do,” he said, speaking in spurts as he sketched. “Because right now, I’m working on the dress. But there will come a time... I am going to work on your face... and your eyes... which Bruce first saw behind a mask. And he focused on... because that... is what we do... with a beautiful woman with eyes behind a mask... And this is your bridal portrait, and I want a certain look on your face... a certain look in those big green eyes of yours... and to get that, I am going to ask you to talk... about him... And if that’s going to work, I need you comfortable talking to me... Not that Kyray character we invented, but the actual me... So for right now, I just want you to talk... about anything that isn’t Bruce... May as well start with your bachelorette at this cat burglar hotel.”

“Alright, well, the Mark is a luxury hotel located smack in the middle of seven major museums and galleries, so it was always a good place for out-of-towners come to Gotham with art on their mind. The Mark has its own line of toiletries exclusive to the hotel, and in 2003 a smudge of their hair gel was found inside the duct of a museum the morning after Haustenberg’s Girl in Pink Ribbons went missing, leading to a very short list of suspects and a chap called Falco getting hauled into a GPD interrogation room...”

“...Yadda, yadda, yadda, the Mark became hotel of choice for the discerning art thief visiting Gotham.”

“I don’t get it,” Harley squawked.

“I don’t either,” Pam whispered. “But go along. She invited us. Be a polite guest.”

“Cat burglars as a class having an odd sense of humor and a wicked sense of irony,” Selina concluded, giving up on the story that nobody but art thieves seemed to appreciate. “Make yourselves at home.”

She had booked the largest Garden Suite and had it equipped with a bigger TV for a screening of heist films, an activity that seemed rather tame but was certainly sweetened by the magnums of Veuve Clicquot, chef Jean-Georges’s gourmet pizzas, popcorn, and homemade marshmallows with flavors like champagne-and-strawberries, Bailey’s Irish cream, and Kentucky Bourbon.

It was pleasant enough for about half an hour. Brad Pitt’s features were compared to Francois de Poulignac... Matt Damon’s were compared to Francois de Poulignac... Matt Damon’s were compared to Edward Nigma’s... Pam looked curiously at Harley, who was clearly as well-informed about Francois as Selina, Doris looked curiously at Pam, who seemed as well-informed about Eddie... And Selina looked curiously at the screen.

“This movie is stupid,” she declared.
They all nodded, of course it was, who didn’t know that? Selina reached innocently for Ocean’s Twelve, to a chorus of panicked NOs and the universal derision that apparently she knew less about heist films than anybody on the planet.

“Fine, screw the movies,” she announced. “Let’s finish off the popcorn and go downstairs to the safe. We’ll see who shows who how it’s done.”

“Um, Catty?” Pam said.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Harley said.

“It is the cat burglar hotel,” Doris reminded her.

“Because we’re surrounded by world-class museums and galleries. Nobody ever bothers with their safe,” Selina pointed out.

“Selina, honey, it’s your bachelorette,” Pammy said like she was trying to talk a drunk off a ledge.

“Exactly! Last fling, have some fun. C’mon, what’s wrong with you people? Who’s been taking Batman pills?”

Pam checked out the label of Selina’s bottle, which was certainly identical to everyone else’s.

“Selina. You cannot have your bachelorette at the cat burglar hotel and then burgle the place.”

“Pamela. Your least favorite tabloid and mine implied I would blow up the floor of a dress shop and steal the one-of-a-kind garment I’ll be photographed getting married in—which by the way, would somehow be fit to be worn after being dragged through a sewer. Let’s not pretend we live in a world where actions have consequences.”

“Oh for pity’s sake, that same column said I’m God!” Pam exploded. “You don’t see me trying to jump off a building because Superman eats vegetables!”

Doris, who did not read the Post, looked confused and Harley said “Don’t ask.” Pamela started to sniff.

“I… I was God,” she whimpered. “And I could… I knew everything and I could control everybody… (And my hair looked really good.) But in real life I can’t even, I can’t even… I can’t get Ivan to talk to me!”

And just like that she was crying again. She turned to Harley, who was right there with the hug and back-patting but this time brought her champagne, which she continued to sip with her free hand.

“Well I’m a Wayne now, right down to the knack for throwing parties,” Selina murmured. Then she looked around the room, at Pamela weeping and Doris inspecting a marshmallow, and she snapped. “No. No, I refuse to become that punchline. Come on, bad girls! We’re going out and we’re having fun no matter who has to die. None of you like the vault here, we’ll just find something else.”

“Hey, what about the Sherry-Netherland,” Doris said brightly. “If you want a hotel, it’s not far. They have a wonderful old-fashioned vault for the residents, modern safes in the rooms and a whole shop full of priceless antiques on the corner.”

The party spirit revived when Selina vetoed the idea because the Sherry-Netherland was one of those special locations with a history. She’d hit the Sherry-Netherland with someone called Tommy who none of them had ever heard a whisper of before, and who sounded quite yummy. After twenty minutes of interrogation and speculation, each woman took her own magnum of Veuve and a bag of marshmallows and set out.
Special Agents Stanton and Hughes sat in the notoriously drab and aromatic confines of an FBI surveillance van debating the foursome under the awning of the Mark Hotel. They had identified Selina Kyle when she came in that afternoon to check-in, though it sparked only a brief exchange about Bruce Wayne being a lucky man, a bachelor party in Dubai, and whether it would be preferable to get a Ferrari or an Aston Martin if you had money like that. They noted only the time when Selina left, but when she returned with a party, they IDed Harleen Quinzel on sight and ran facial rec on the other two. The redhead did turn out to be Pamela Isley even though she was no longer green (winning Agent Hughes twenty dollars), though the other blonde turned out not to be Taylor Swift or Kylie Minogue (losing him ten).

The foursome had disappeared into the hotel and that was the last the agents thought of them, until now. The presumed bachelorette party had nothing to do with their surveillance… But now the four of them had come out of the hotel again and they were standing there under the front awning, facing the van. Could have been nothing, they could have been waiting for a taxi—except they really seemed to be looking right at the van. And then moments after not-Taylor Swift started fiddling with her phone, their supposed-to-be-phantom wi-fi started pinging login attempts—and then went silent. Before Hughes could even check if they’d been hacked, Harley went back inside and an argument ensued. Stanton thought he should check it out while Hughes maintained the women were not their concern, even if three of them were known theme criminals.

Stanton said he could go along with that if not-Taylor-Swift didn’t hack their wi-fi, but that really seemed like the precursor to something that might—and now there were four of them again, look! Harley Quinn had come back and now they were on the move again. They were all on the move and—they were coming over. All four of them were coming right towards the van.

There was a knock.

“Open up, we bring goodies!” a merry voice called.

Hughes and Stanton looked at each other.

“You decided to mess with an FBI van,” Kyle said, and it was the first time Selina heard him actually sound like a judgmental cape.

“It was a party. We were looking for something to do, and there they were,” she answered.

“Federal law enforcement.”

“Have we met? I like playing with law enforcement, they’re my favorite cat toy. Feds are mice with bad haircuts…”

“No wonder they hate coming to Gotham,” Kyle said under his breath.

“Hey, it’s not like we sent Harley as a diversion: make them chase the psycho down the street, buildings catch fire, people start shooting at each other, all so we can break into the van and read what’s on the screen. That would be a reason to hate Gotham. We were nice! We knocked, we brought food—an untouched Jean-Georges black
truffle pizza and two slices of prosciutto and rosemary. No champagne since they were on duty, but there was cherry yuzu and ginger ale.”

Kyle flashed back to the weeks posing as the jetsetting installation artist Kyray.

“To make virgin bellinis,” he said flatly, and then added, “You people are seriously strange.”

“Rogues or UES party girls?”

“Yes,” Kyle said emphatically.

“Well anyway, it turned out they were surveilling Myasnik Kiyeva, ‘The Butcher of Kiev.’ He was staying at the hotel, he had to be in town to kill somebody, and... well, the truth is they were afraid they’d missed critical intel because of my little party. First they spent time trying to ID Pammy and Doris, and then there had been this reporter from the Daily News snooping around. They didn’t know he was a reporter at first, he was just a suspicious character trying to get in the service door, then going through the lobby, not subtle with the camera work. Exactly the kind of thing that sets off bells and whistles when you’re tracking the Butcher of Kiev.”

“And by the time they figured out he was a tabloid hack following the bachelor girls, something slipped by on the Butcher,” Kyle guessed. He’d been there many times, following what he thought was a valid lead and finding he’d wasted valuable time. The ring could do nothing about false starts and dead ends.

“So we decided to help,” Selina said. “With Clayface after us, Ivy and I could both use the Karma, and it would probably produce a better story than that weepy picture at Après.”

“The knife fight in the hotel kitchen?” Kyle said helpfully.

“Apparently room service is a very popular way to approach a hotel room when you don’t know if the target is home. Doris and I would have been happy to use the window like normal people—”

Kyle knitted his brow but said nothing.

“—but Harley, Ivy, Fat Mickey and Gaspipe O’Roarke all went the room service route. So yeah, the hotel kitchen was the crossroads of the world, and there were knives.”

“It was a better picture than weepy Poison Ivy,” he noted, and Selina shrugged.

“Well anyway, the Butcher wasn’t in his room and all we accomplished was taking out his competition from Bludhaven. We still had no idea who his target was, so we searched his room and got a lead on this bare knuckles fight club...”

“Gaia, mother of all,” Pamela said, wide-eyed.

“What is she doing to him?” Doris said, appalled.

Harley tilted, not just her head but her whole body bent to the side to survey the scene from a full 90-degrees. She gestured, grabbing her right forearm in her left and jamming her thumb into the side. “I think she broke his wrist and is just pulling him around by it,” she said.

“It looks painful,” Pam noted.

“Well that would be your fault,” Doris said, and then broke into an unflattering impersonation: “Catty, I think you should let one of us do the honors. You do have a
history crushing on your opponents, and I don’t mean the respectable way crushing a
windpipe. We don’t want you getting flirty tonight of all nights.”
Harley snorted. “One look at that guy, NOT gonna be a problem.”
“It was a joke, sort of,” Pam said feebly.
“Not a funny one, and you gave her something to prove,” Doris concluded.
“She just likes showing off,” Pam grumbled. “I mean look at that. You’d think she’d
been working out with Batman a couple of times a week.”
On cue, Selina flung Braden ‘Mercy Stroke’ Carver out of the sankyo she’d used to
lead him around the ring, and then she flipped forward as he stumbled back and
finished him with a high kick to the chin.
“And that gets us into the V-Room!” she announced, rejoining the party.
The Victors’ Room at a Gotham bare-knuckles fight club looks less like the backroom
at a grungy gym and more like the VIP of an upscale nightclub themed like a grungy
gym. There was an improbable number of Zegna blazers and Cole Haan shoes, and an
unlikely amount of chit-chat about the joint syndicate team’s recommendation of
LIBOR-plus-twenty BP price guidance (with the hope of getting to eighteen, natch).
But in among the Wall Street bruisers, there was Mejia from a Bogata drug cartel,
Feng who could arrange an introduction to King Snake, and Moroz who only a few
hours ago met with the Butcher of Kiev and delivered the name of the man he’d been
hired to kill.
The bachelorette party kicked into gear. As bride-to-be, Selina could assign the roles
or claim one for herself.
“No reason to make this more complicated than it has to be,” she announced.
“Pammy, time to get back on that horse. Get over there and charm it out of him.”
“I- I can’t. I can’t do it,” she stammered. “You know I can’t.”
“Without your pheromones? Get past it. It’s not like you have to seduce him, just be
pleasant—”
“I can’t be pleasant,” she interrupted.
“Flirt a little,” Doris said.
“C’mon, Red, you can do it,” Harley encouraged.
“Have a drink together,” Selina concluded. “And before the glass is empty he’ll
show you where the button is. You push it and he’ll spit out the name.”

“The line-up was Pammy would charm, Doris would bribe, Harley would threaten,”
Selina said. “If all three failed, I’d intercept him as he tried to leave. You know that
thing where you just stand there, no words, no introduction. Just block their path and
look at them like a bug you’ve been sent to swat.”
“And out comes the name,” Kyle said, chuckling. “I’ve seen Batman do it a few
times.”
“Oh, I do it better,” Selina said and Kyle gulped. She continued. “But yes, we got
the name: Pete Ignazio—who none of us had ever heard of. Not that that would have
stopped us for long but... Well the fact is, I caught a lucky break.”
She looked at him critically, the way she once considered a piece of jewelry that
might or might not be worth the effort planning a heist.
“Kyle, we’re confiding in each other, right?”
He turned his sketch pad around.
“I’ve seen the dress,” he said brightly.
“Right. Okay. Look, I haven’t told Bruce about this because it’s ‘respect the timeline’ stuff and I don’t think I’m supposed to. But you set up the time bubble when he proposed, right? I mean, there was a dress from 1930 encased in ‘temporal stabilizers’ made from lantern energy, so I’m assuming…”
“Yes, that was me,” Kyle nodded.
“Then you’re probably the best person for me to talk to about this…”

Selina couldn’t understand what was happening when her phone buzzed and Bruce’s smiling, handsome face appeared on the ID screen. The Bruce of today was six months in the future patrolling as Batman. The Future Bat here in the present would be avoiding her. He didn’t want her teasing, he didn’t want her playing around trying to get information from him about what was going to happen, and he absolutely should not be making contact. If he was—if there was an emergency or some pressing reason—he would be patching a call through the Batmobile. It would be the OraCom initiating the call, not Bruce’s cell. But only Bruce’s cell should produce that glib playboy photo on the caller ID.
She answered cautiously… And he said “Oh good, you’re up” and referenced the time difference and breakfast and then Tokyo.
...::Kitten, I know it’s early and I hate to bother you with something like this before breakfast, but remember when we built Tommy Pearl’s resume. There was a Rubens taken from the board room of Odawara Electric in Otemachi, remember?::..
She did and she said so (without mentioning that wherever and whenever he was, he was more than twelve hours off thinking it was early morning for her).
...:: Good. Suppose I really had come into town to do a job like that, who might it honk off?::..
“Honk off? As in…”
...:: Might the local yakuza be pissed and come after me?::.. he said.
“That’s oddly specific,” she stalled as she made it out of the club and into an alley.
She opted for a quick climb to the roof before she continued. “Look, I know you hate answers like this, but it depends. A solo job for your own profit, like the Rubens, you’d be out of range before they knew anything happened. And these are rough edge gangsters; they don’t have the resources or the inclination to hunt you across the globe to get a piece.”
...:: Under what circumstances would they act? You said ‘it depends.’ Give me a scenario:::.
“Um, okay,” she stammered, thinking out loud. “There’s no way somebody on your level is sticking around for shopping and sightseeing, so they’d have to find out about you before you pulled the job.”
...:: Maybe even before I hit town? Be waiting at the hotel when I check in? ::..
“Maybe. Doesn’t happen the way I work: when it’s a solo gig for your own profit, we keep our own counsel, bring in our equipment, we don’t waste time or risk exposure with local suppliers, you know all this.”
...:: You’re saying the thief was hired by a third party:::.
“You asked for a scenario, that’s the most likely. Comes down to who’s doing the hiring. If it’s someone in the yakuza’s backyard on a more or less permanent basis, someone they consider in their sphere of influence, they might be pissed. A neighbor bringing in serious out of town talent for a job and they weren’t advised.”

...:: The equipment,::.. Bruce said. ...:: Suppose the ‘neighbor’ didn’t tell our thief the target in advance. Suppose he only found out when he got here? ::..

“It’s a possibility,” Selina agreed. “If he comes to town with a basic kit, then finds out what he’s up against and needs specialty equipment, it could put him on their radar. Bruce, what’s this about?”

...:: I don’t know yet. Thanks.::::

“Wait, before you go. Tit for tat. Pete Ignazio, name ring a bell?”

...:: Absolutely. Falcone capo busted at the end of the Rogue War. Unique in that he held onto his money; the Feds couldn’t find it at the time. As of the Pearl case, we know why. It was in the Caymans in his wife’s name. He’s been out for a month, managed to appeal his conviction...::...::

“And being the first released from the sweeps that decimated the Falcone crime family, he’s been trying to rebuild. He was in one of Falcone’s old brownstones in Brooklyn. B had clocked four armed guards, security system is a Lykkva, Israeli-made. Not hackable but it’s easy enough to get past using old-fashioned hands and feet.”

Kyle paused the feathery strokes he was making to capture the edge of Selina’s hair, and he looked over the top of his sketch pad.

“I’m going to get in trouble for saying this, but you sitting there in your wedding dress reeling that off is incredibly hot.”

“Thank you,” Selina said, taking it in stride. “You will not get in trouble because I will not tell—as long as you can advise me about the phone call out of time.”

“Sounds like something’s gone kerflooey,” Kyle said.

“Gee, Green Lantern of Sector 2814, thank you for distilling the delicate mechanisms of space/time across the cosmos into an explanation a simple being like myself can understand. That was very helpful.”

“Selina, I have no idea. There’s stuff in the Justice League communicators to allow for magic teleportation, alien energy fields, gravity distortion, heat distortion, speed force distortion. I don’t know how any of it works but I know I can go surfing on a black hole and the thing adapts. Bruce has one of those comm units in his phone. If he’s going through a time portal twice a day to change places with himself for every patrol, something went kerflooey.”

“So your expert opinion as a Lantern is as much of a wild guess as mine,” Selina said.

“Correct. My completely non-expert half-assed shot in the dark is don’t worry about it.”

Selina bit her lip.
Neither Selina nor Doris had the gear with them to get around a Lykkva Urban Security Suite. Riddler’s hideout was more convenient than any of the cat lairs, so they went there for Doris to collect her gear. They found several large puddles outside which Harley found fascinating and it was nothing but stories of “Puddin’s dry ice experiments” until Doris disarmed the perimeter defenses.

Seeing Pamela’s nerves fraying with each mention of Mistah J, Selina suggested they split up. It didn’t take four people to pack a burglar’s kit. She and Harley would hit the nearest Hacienda for explosives, a butcher shop for blood, and they could all meet on the Brooklyn side of the bridge.

As soon as they were alone, Doris and Pam went inside. Pam took in the crossword puzzle carpeting, the Rubik’s cube side tables, and the jigsaw art on the wall. She shrugged, it was what you’d expect... until you looked a little closer. Her eyes were suddenly drawn to the coffee table. Between each pair of side tables, two Riddler-green loveseats faced each other, and in between was a coffee table with a chess board, a decanter with two glasses, and two framed photographs: One was Doris from many years ago, with a different hair style and a suntan at a seaside resort. In the other she was Game Theory, smiling arm in arm with Riddler at the Iceberg. Indentations on the carpet showed how both loveseats were now closer to the table than they had been. The chess set that had originally been placed there for show was now played.

It was homey.

*Theme objects* that were nothing but a stage set to flaunt “I AM RIDDLER” in Batman’s face when he burst in here to fight were now... they were now...

Pamela turned away from the disgustingly domestic scene and caught up with Doris. She’d gone to a green door that looked like a closet or a bathroom until you opened it and saw a life size copy of René Magritte’s Son of Man with a question mark rather than an apple blocking the anonymous businessman’s face. Doris reached forward and straightened the knot of his tie, touched the top button of his jacket and then the dot of the question mark. The panel slid away, revealing the contents of the closet.

“Puddin’s experiments with dry ice, can you believe it?” Pam said sourly. “Only Harley would ‘There-there, Red’ me, feed me a bourbon marshmallow and tell me everything is going to be fine, and then turn right around and start a story about Puddin’.”

Doris glanced at Pamela, then went on taking black cases from the closet and setting them out across the floor.

“She’s not doing it to hurt you, you know. It’s obvious she adores you. She just doesn’t see either thing having anything to do with the other.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Pam grumbled.

“Okay,” Doris said as if accepting a dare. “You’re someone to be reckoned with. Or you would be if y—”

“If I still had my powers, I know,” Pam lamented.

“I was going to say if you’d pull your head out of your ass,” Doris said, handing her a backpack to hold. “You took one in the teeth, I get it. Get up off the dirt. It’s what winners do.”

“I know what... winners? I was Poison Ivy, the global—”

“Was?”

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*Cat-Tales*
—threat, world-class criminal, irresistible seductress, crusading protector of the plant kingdom—"

"Was?"

"Now I’m a mad scientist at best! No powers, no bond linking me to the plant world, no mind control over half the population. You call that ‘taking one in the teeth?!’"

"Yeah, that’s what I call it,” Doris said, looking over cases she’d opened, each presenting an assortment of silver tools wedged into custom-cut foam. As they talked, she’d repeatedly pick up a tool and examine it like produce at a fruit stand, and if she judged it worthy, it went into the backpack.

"When Ed and I got together, I was still at the bookstore. Started devouring prison memoirs. One of those Watergate guys talked about the strip search and immediately after, the paperwork. There’s a line for education—a single line—and as he’s reeling off prep school, bachelors, officer’s candidate training, law school, FBI Academy at Quantico... he sees fear in the guards’ faces. Because he’s bringing in a weapon they can’t take away.

"Pamela, you have two Ph.Ds, don’t you? And unlike ‘Doctor’ Quinzel, you didn’t bed any professors to get them. So you lost some powers. You’re still Poison Ivy, aren’t you?"

"Am I? How? How am I supposed to change anything if I can’t even—"

"Mind control half the planet?” Doris cut her off. “Do it the way everybody else does that wants something to change. With two Ph.Ds, you can’t be afraid of work. You obviously care about plants enough to fight for them. I really don’t see the problem."

“That is very clear.”

Nothing about Pete Ignazio fit the picture of a Falcone crime boss. At 42, he was young for the heights he had reached. His light brown hair had the bare minimum of styling gel to create a natural but conservative look. He favored light blue button down shirts with jeans or khakis, light tan sports coats when he bothered, and he rarely wore a tie. His house was light and airy, a plethora of creams and throw pillows, comfortable boxy armchairs and modern geometric tables uncluttered by antiques and knick-knacks. There were more plants than you’d expect. No religious pictures or table-top shrines to obscure Italian saints. And neat angular blinds in place of heavy draperies and curtains.

The office might have the carved heavy-burl desk you’d expect of a mob boss, but instead of the leather blotter pad, there was a pair of computer monitors. The one was filled with a spreadsheet, the other displayed a humble notepad with a simple list:

- Construction
- Unions
- Gambling
- Garbage
- Extortion
- Loan-sharking
Robbery
Nightclubs
Auto dealerships
political fixing

Not a lot of options. Pete considered the list on the sad little txt document and the massive—and massively complicated—spreadsheet he’d spent the evening staring at. He got up from his desk and poured a bourbon, then returned to the spreadsheet.

Seven tabs. He spent most of his time on two, and most of that time on one. Tonight he’d done little more than delete a few rows and rearrange the order of others although it did nothing to change the realities: no guns, no drugs, no whores, no tax schemes involving gas or cigarettes. In short, no serious money. With the personnel he had available, the contacts, the resources—and the stranglehold the Russians had on money laundering and women—this was all he had to build with.

Men had done more with less, but it was a long time ago. His father masterminded a string of bank robberies, selecting the banks and supplying street and floor plans—and sharing the proceeds. Not a single job scored more than thirty grand. A share of thirty grand and that was a scale of criminality worthy of a fifty-year sentence—federal time—the summer Pete turned eighteen.

The boss took Pete under his wing then; Ignazio Senior was his underboss and it was the least he could do for the kid. He introduced Pete around, and everybody told him the same thing: “If you don’t help your father out, he’ll die in prison.”

What was he to do? He flushed college (kept the accounting and management textbooks), went to see his father in Blackgate, and told him what he planned to do. Two weeks later, Pete got a visit from the boss, introducing him to the Life.

At the Ignazio brownstone, Selina and Harley again broke away to eliminate the guards while Doris and Pam waited until the sightlines were clear. Then they would advance and disarm the security system, allowing Selina or Harley to advance to the next guard. Pam had been quiet, but the sight of that cozy living room was still with her.

“Doris, what you were saying earlier, about my situation,” she said at last, “It’s not just the plants. I mean, I started out believing I didn’t need people, that my babies were enough. Then Harvey came along and that was… complicated. You’ve heard how we started out when he was D.A. and I sort of… poisoned him. And then Harley came along and…” She sighed. “That was complicated too. Her idiotic fixation on that toxic clown.”

She sighed again.

“It’s people. People are so complicated, but they’re—those two at least—they’re sort of… better than plants. In their way. When it works. But better or not they weren’t available, and then suddenly during the war they both were. And now—Now I’ve lost all three. Harley is back with Joker. Harvey is off the grid and that’s my fault more than anybody’s. And my babies treat me like… like anyone else. If I still had any one of the three, it would mitigate the loss of the other two (maybe) but—BUT IF THIS IS
JUST TAKING ONE IN THE TEETH TO YOU PEOPLE, I’D HATE TO SEE WHAT RANKS AS THE GAME-ENDER YOU WON’T RECOVER FROM!”

She gasped and panted, as if expecting another round of tears with no Harley around to comfort her. But no tears came. Instead an inner voice she had never heard before… *When your head’s no longer attached to your shoulders, the game’s over. Anything short of that*… It sounded a little like ‘Poison Ivy’ but calmer somehow, less angry, more tolerant and faintly amused.

“Look, you’re new here,” Pam said, collecting herself. “You don’t see the problem. I’m alone, I’m anonymous, I’m ordinary. I can’t possibly do the things that need doing. I can’t be Poison Ivy—”

*You’re saying this to an ordinary woman who invented herself as Game Theory.*

“And I’m sure you’re going to say you had no special powers and it didn’t stop you from becoming Game Theory, and that Harley doesn’t have powers and Selina doesn’t have powers, but it’s not the same. Poison Ivy isn’t ‘me’ or the best part of me or the passionate part. It’s— she’s— it’s what she can do. What I could do then and I can’t now. So I’m not Poison Ivy, you see?”

“I don’t,” Doris said. “But you do and I respect that.”

“You do?” Pam exclaimed, expecting a fight.

“Like you said I’m new here; you’re the expert. And Pamela, you’re the only one whose opinion matters about Poison Ivy.”

Pete never expected to be the Don. He never wanted to be, it was a crap job. He was happy being Carmine’s top earner and letting that move him up to where he got to keep most of it. Mortgage fraud had been good to him. Lax due diligence during the housing bubble, and then the Internet, the wonderful Internet, enabling gamblers to bleed money into his pocket through offshore websites. There was plenty of money to pay Carmine his cut, a salary for doing the crap job wearing the target on his back. The Feds, Batman, other families, who needed that headache? To say nothing of the responsibility *running* the Family, constant disputes to settle, constant sit downs, who needed it?

He did. Yesterday when Carmine was available, it was worth paying him a percentage to do a job Pete didn’t want. Now that Carmine was gone—half the organization gone and the brand lying fallow, it wasn’t so much a job as an opportunity. It was like getting in on the ground floor of a major crime family, an opportunity no one had since his great grandfather’s day, and not something to ignore—

The door burst open.

“Good evening.”

—and Catwoman, Harley Quinn, an... extremely hot blonde in an unknown costume and... and an extremely hot redhead too cool to play dress up stormed into the room before he could react. Catwoman’s whip cracked just shy of his desk and all thoughts of opportunity were abruptly silenced.

“Don’t go for the gun in the desk,” she warned, “because if I have to use this, it’s going to take out at least one of those very expensive monitors and that would be a pity.”
“Yeah, okay, no gun,” he said, holding his hands up warily. “Can I ask—”

“You have a lot of plants,” Pam said, eying the potted tree behind him. “Is that a Norfolk Island Pine? Unusual to see one thriving as a house plant. You must be misting it through the summer so your a/c doesn’t overdry the air…”

“Holy shit, you’re Poison Ivy!” Pete blurted.

“Close enough to the window, no draft, soil slightly moist…”

“I thought you were green—Don’t get me wrong, you look great like this.”

“She does, doesn’t she?” Harley said. “I been trying to tell her all night but she won’t listen ta me. See, Red, I told ya.”

“We are on the clock,” Catwoman noted, and nodded at Game Theory.

“Question, Pete. How did four dangerous broads like us get this far into your townhouse where we can reach out and whip, green, smilex, or kidnap you without any of your well-armed guards in sight?”

“Yeah it really wasn’t hard,” Harley complained. “Ya notice how you didn’t hear any thunks when they were going down? It was that quick. Didn’t make a peep!”

“They’re new,” Pete winced. “I mean, they’re not my regular guys. There’s a job in Bludhaven tonight that needed some extra muscle so—”

“They were pulled off for a hit, Pete.” Catwoman had walked to the bourbon and brought the bottle to Pete’s desk. She paused over his glass and when he nodded, added an ample inch of liquid.

“Who?” he asked after a belt.


“But my men being in Bludhaven means it’s an inside job,” Pete said flatly. “Somebody in the family ordered the hit, somebody who knew the bait to dangle to pull them away from the house tonight. Left me a crew that, Christ, the Pastry Chef of Kiev could beat down.”

“Hey!” Harley squawked. “Catty, he’s insulting us.”

“We can take it,” Selina said while Pete finished his drink.

“So what happens now?” he asked.

The women looked at each other, until Pam finally said it out loud.

“We kill you ourselves.”

The neighbors heard gunshots and saw muzzle flashes, but in a neighborhood so recently run by Falcone, nobody called the cops. Then the car blew up and that stretched anyone’s notion of what they could plausibly fail to notice.

By the time the police arrived to find Pete Ignazio missing (and a worrying amount of blood in his study) the foursome landed triumphantly at the Iceberg bar, party girls in full tilt. Harley ordered a “Bloody Pete,” which she informed Sly was a Bloody Mary made with Pete’s Wicked Ale instead of vodka. She urged everyone to join her but couldn’t get any takers. Selina had hopped on the bar, crossed her legs and proceeded to flirt with Sly while Doris played with his hair and Pam stood with her hip cocked in an awkward muscle-memory approximation of the seductive pose she’d use to greet a freshly-greened slave.
Oswald was cooed over. (He always appeared promptly when alpha rogues arrived in his bar and Sly was abandoned for his boss.) Harley ba-beeped his nose, Pam asked if he’d lost weight while Doris admired his vest—and Selina whispered an apology that she hadn’t thanked him at the house when he offered to give her away. It really was a sweet gesture… He turned pink. Glances were exchanged, and while no money changed hands in front of him, the astute may have guessed that there was a wager, either who could get him to blush or how long it would take the four of them to get the reaction.

There was a few minutes small talk about the crowd: no Riddler tonight and no Joker. The dining room was thick with unfamiliar Demons (no cooing), a party from one of the Triads was giving the Ghost Dragons a wide berth. And there were several henchmen whose athletic, combat and decorative potential was discussed (though Oswald sat quietly and studied the scratches on the tabletop after the conversation took that particular turn). Social niceties observed, Selina got down to business.

“We want an alibi package, all four of us. The premium golden egg one with the timestamp security footage, all of us here in the bar, corroborated by witnesses. We want Sly.”

“I see. And you’re aware how much the Sly package goes for?” Oswald asked. “You understand you’ll be buying four packages. We do not split the bill four ways.”

“Oh we understand,” Selina purred. “And we actually want something more, Oswald. We want you.”

“I… do not testify,” Oswald said haughtily.

“You mean you never have,” Pam said coolly.

“Because nobody’s ever pointed out that your fee would be five times Sly’s,” Doris added.

“If we were talking about ordinary police I might consider it,” he said firmly. “But the four of you—Selina most particularly—it’s Batman who’ll come asking. He is every bit as skeptical as the police, but unlike them he’s apt to hoist me up on a bat-line and I am not as young as I used to be. Did—did you say you’d be prepared to pay five times Sly’s fee.”

Doris nodded and smiled.

Harley nodded and smiled.

Selina nodded and smiled.

“All four of you?”

“All four of us.”

He gulped.

“M-might one ask w-what you d-did?”

“Now Oswald, why should that matter?” Selina asked, using a Grey Goose martini to clean a clawtip that Oswald couldn’t help but notice left a tarry red substance on the napkin. “If we were here, what possible difference could it make what was going on at Pete Ignazio’s townhouse 106 to 90 minutes ago.”

“Uhuh,” Oswald said warily. “You will pay in cash of course.”

“In about fifteen minutes if all goes well,” Selina said, checking her watch, after which Pam added “You might want to wait in your office.”

“Quite,” he said, happy for the dismissal.
A few minutes later, a woman walked into the lounge with a metal briefcase. Raven sat her at the table Selina had specified. Harley and Ivy posed and Doris pretended to take their picture, shooting past them and zooming to capture a nice headshot of the new arrival ordering a dirty martini. She compared the photo to a small collection culled from a social network and then murmured “Well I’ll be damned.” She flashed the screen at Selina. “Meet Mrs. Peter Ignazio.”

Selina smiled.

“That should make the end game easier,” she said. “So who wants to be the hitter?”

Harley’s hand shot up like an eager sixth grader’s, but as Selina started shaking her head, Harley said “I volunteer Red. Red should do it,” and pointed her raised hand downward to indicate the top of her friend’s head.

“Not a bad idea. You do stone cold really well,” said Selina.

“Better than crushing on crimefighters,” Pam said under her breath, then looked over at Mrs. Ignazio. “But yeah, I’ll do it. The man bred a Norfolk Island Pine, that deserves some respect.”

She approached the table with the coldly appraising eye of a professional killer, sat in the chair across from Mrs. Ignazio and introduced herself as the person come to collect the money.

“Don’t tell me you’re the butcher,” the woman said sourly.

“A competitor. I’ve taken over a number of his contracts,” Pam said.

“How does he feel about that?” the woman scoffed.

“He’s not feeling anything anymore. But what do you care, your job’s done.” She slid a phone across the table, displaying a photo of the blood-spattered chair in Ignazio’s study, a burning Mercedes in front of the townhouse, and finally she picked up the phone and replaced it with a plain gold wedding band. “I’ll take my money now,” she said.

Pam returned to the table with the suitcase, where Selina picked it up and delivered it to Oswald, extracting three bundles of cash before she left. One she handed to Sly on her way out, one she left on the table for Dove and one she handed to Raven.

Tips and alibis covered, she joined the other ladies in the Maserati Quattroporte they’d borrowed in Brooklyn. Half an hour later, they stopped beside the FBI van and, once again, knocked.

“Open up, we bring goodies!” Selina called just as she had the first time.

This time the van opened promptly, an uncomfortable-looking Pete Ignazio sat with Special Agents Stanton and Hughes and all three filed out to see what was making that noise from the Maserati’s trunk.

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce Myasnik Kiyeva, the Butcher of Kiev,” Selina said proudly, engaging the trunk release to reveal the bruised and duct taped hitman.

“We intercepted him, um, blowing up your Mercedes. Sorry, Pete. Also your townhouse isn’t exactly habitable at the moment, but Myasnik does have a room here that he’s not going to be using.” She produced his keycard with a flourish. “You can just stay there as long as you need. He won’t mind, will you, Nick?”

“Thank you,” Agent Stanton mouthed.

Selina’s eyes met Doris’s, the most imperceptible of nods were exchanged, and Selina escorted Pete inside.
“C’mon, these halls are confusing. I’ll help you find the room,” she said as Doris stayed with the others, yet remained a little apart. While they gave their statements, Doris crept closer to the van while toying absently with the phone she’d used earlier to hack their wi-fi. She ducked inside just in time to capture the audio as Selina and Ignazio opened the door to the Butcher’s room. She heard Selina tell him it was his wife who ordered the hit, show him the photo from the Iceberg, and offer sympathy. Then Selina left, and after a noise that might have been a sob and another that was definitely a curse, she heard “Yeah, yeah, I need all new codes for Cayman Bank and Trust account number 9147931762. The verification code is Clemens 354 ERA 3.12 4672 Strike All-Star 11…”

“Oh you’re kidding me,” Kyle laughed. “He had to change all the passwords ‘cause the bank accounts are in his wife’s name. And you heard the whole thing.”

“We got the whole thing,” Selina beamed. “The agents knew right away they weren’t going to get Harley Quinn and Pamela Isley to come to the office in the morning and make formal statements, the future Mrs. Wayne wasn’t coming back and realistically there wasn’t much they could do about it. They had to get what they could there and then, and hope it would be enough make the case. They were completely focused on that, and Doris was reasonable, personable, acted like a civilian. They didn’t worry about her. She could do as she pleased.”

“And this is Riddler’s girlfriend?”

“Yep.”

“Lucky guy. She sounds like something special.”

“He’s aware. On both counts.”

“Well, on that note,” Kyle said, closing his sketch pad. “I say we call it a day. Next time we paint.”

“Meow.”

Faust quietly processed logs from the Batcomputer, room service at the Mark Hotel, a year’s worth of field reports and memos generated by the FBI in Gotham, the traffic cameras in the vicinity of the Iceberg Lounge, Pete Ignazio’s brownstone, known Haciendas and suspected Riddler lairs… It analyzed ninety-four paragraphs from Bradford Dormont novels relating to women of Doris Ingerson’s physical type, factored in editorial and submission deadlines for Mayfair Magazine, and overlaid six hundred thirteen mentions of Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy from Batman’s logs… Factored in the likelihood of a crude rally if OPEC didn’t adjust its output to cover falling Venezuelan oil production, and made its way hurriedly to catch up to the figure crossing the Great Hall.

“Green Lantern of Sector 2814, if I might have a moment of your time.”
Selina stood in Gallery 111 of the Gotham Museum of Art before an alabaster cosmetics jar that was the first three-dimensional representation of a cat.

“Look at you,” she cooed. “You don’t belong in here. Early Twelfth Dynasty, Middle Kingdom, pfft. With those big, quartz rock crystal eyes, wide open because you’ve sighted prey, all that tension in your chest and paws, you’re a hunter. You’re an Old Kingdom kitty. You belong next door.” She looked around and then whispered conspiratorially. “I’ll come back one of these nights and move you.”

Then she sighed. “I wish I could stay and do it now, sweetie. It’d be a lot more fun,” she confided, and turned to leave—only to start as she saw Lois Lane standing behind her. “Gotham is not a great place to do that to people,” she announced. “Unless you’re Batman, of course.”

“You were talking to the cat,” Lois noted.

“I was. His name is Nedjem,” Selina said with dignity.

“Nedjem,” Lois said, glancing at the label which said only that it was a cosmetic vessel in the shape of a cat, c 1990-1900 B.C. made of Egyptian alabaster, copper and quartz. “It doesn’t say that.”

“And what it does say is wrong. Look, this is the first sculptural cat in Egyptian art. By the Middle Kingdom, the temple cats, the household gods, there’s an elegant aloofness. The Basts and Sekhmets you honor so they’ll watch over your home and protect the kingdom and right the wrongs.”

“The superheroes,” Lois said.

Selina beamed. “Coming from you I’ll accept that without scratching, but anyone else says it... But yes, you’ve got the idea. Now look at this guy; is that a serene feline deity waiting to accept your homage?”

“No. That is a cat who’s spotted dinner,” Lois pronounced.

“You got it.”

“Well I did hear you when I came up,” she admitted.

“Ah.”

“Doesn’t explain how its name is Nedjem,” Lois said with the insistence of a reporter whose question you dodged.

“The first cats appeared in paintings and relief at the end of the Old Kingdom. The earliest recorded name of a cat is Nedjem; it means ‘sweetie.’ This little guy belongs down that way in Gallery 107 or 103. Since they’ve got him in the wrong place, I figure the least we can do is give him a name that reflects his true status in history.”

“That makes no sense,” Lois grinned.

“It does to me. Bruce calls it feline logic.”

“Oh you know about that?” Lois laughed.

“I’m aware,” she said, and they performed an abbreviated fist-bump of super-wife solidarity.

“Hi Lois,” Selina said, belatedly.
“Hi. Gonna ask how I found you?”

“You’re Lois Lane,” Selina said simply, and Lois blushed.

“Damn right,” she said, trying to look modest and failing utterly. “So, this is really a thing you do before your big bachelorette night? You go to a museum and talk to Nedjem, the Middle Kingdom Cosmetics Jar?”

“It’s my ritual,” Selina said. “Cats in museums aren’t the same thing to me as they are to all of you. And weddings entail a lot of... ‘normal’ stuff I’m not good at. Going along with what all of you do, doing it your way, all of society’s little rituals. That doesn’t come easy to people who wear masks. Behind a mask, you don’t worry about it. You do your own thing, say ‘meow,’ fuck ‘em. Give yourself over to that distilled part of you the mask releases."

“Does Bruce know you feel this way?” Lois asked, concerned.

“Oh Bruce is much worse,” Selina whispered. “When there’s a billion dollars in the bank, it’s the same in the morning when the masks come off. But we want this, so we suck it up. Sublimate who we are and play the part. But we sneak these moments in, touchstones... A cat in a museum that I share a secret with, Zogger—"

“Zogger?”

“Self-defense trainer in the cave,” she said, mouthing the last words.

“Ah.” There was a pause, not strained but not exactly relaxed. The alabaster cat’s rock crystal stare bored into Lois, urging her to speak. “So how are you holding up?” she asked.

“Not bad, keeping my balance. There are about fifty variants of our ‘official’ wedding photo circulating on the internet, and three or four bridal portraits. It’s surreal.”

“All in the Harry Potter dress with the black lace,” Lois said disapprovingly.

“It’s not like it’s a bad dress,” Selina said quickly. “Or that it wouldn’t suit me.”

“It’s not that,” Lois said. “But I know it’s not your dress and it’s just... Since that business with Joker putting out all that fake news, I have a hard time reconciling... I know the press making stuff up isn’t new: about you, about Bruce. Heck, Bruce cultivated it. And I’m a reporter, I want people to trust what they see in print. I never had a problem with the tabloid crap— Heck, I even helped him, playing along with all that flirting whenever he came to Metropolis—because I always assumed that sane, rational adults knew the difference between a headline in the Planet by Lois Lane and some garbage a tabloid invented years ago about Catwoman or Batman or Superman. But since that Joker business, I don’t know anymore. I hear people referencing that junk like it has some relevance and I get knots in my stomach. I feel dread. Like something foul got in while a door was open and now it’s here, lurking, and we can’t get rid of it.”

“I know it sucks,” Selina said. “I make jokes about the hair, but it sucks. My father read to me from Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats, and those people just... erased him. My mother was a dancer with Ballet Piacenza, the oldest in Italy with a direct line back to the court dances of the Renaissance, before joining the Gotham ballet. I’m the product of Miss Corinne’s, a Swiss finishing school, summa cum laude at the Sorbonne, and they would have you think... And every blessed piece on the wedding manages to... it sucks.”

“So I’ll ask again, how are you holding up?”
“I’m marrying the man I love,” Selina smiled. “Everything else is detail.”

“Great. Now how are you holding up?” she repeated.

An evil grin formed, a flash of the villain who first grabbed Lois to escape from Superman in her flight at LexCorp.

“They’ve pissed off Catwoman and Mrs. Wayne. I’m holding up great.”

The other woman smiled, and the alabaster cat who was a hunter poised for the kill as well as the precursor to the avenging goddess seemed to join in its silent, immobile way. Then both smiles faded.

“Lois, we’re running out of small talk. Are you going to tell me why you came to find me here rather than meeting at the bar with the others.”

“Yeah, I was about to tell you… I’m being followed.”

The Egyptian Wing of the Gotham Museum of Art was Catwoman’s Briar Patch. She led Lois through a maze of sarcophagi, grave goods, wall fragments covered in hieroglyphs, and an improbable number of sculptures of the female pharaoh Hatshepsut. In the middle of the fourth century B.C. she stopped and began a lecture on the Metternich Stela, “the finest extant example of a type of magically potent monument…” She wasn’t looking at the tall, stone monument but at something beyond it high on the wall that Lois guessed was a camera she couldn’t see (or a camouflaged part of the security system, but given the height of the monument and the likelihood that they were hiding behind it, Lois figured it was a camera). Whatever it was, Selina watched it, lecturing in a strange rhythm presumably because she was counting.

“Water poured over such… objects was believed to have… healing power—okay go.” And they were off into a chapel of Ramesses dedicated to a fetish of Osiris.

“Nobody ever comes in here,” Selina declared. “They’re pharoahed out by the time they get this far, and all the sexy stuff: Ptolemies, Cleopatra and Egypt under the Romans is all down that way, so… We’re alone.”

Lois explained that she’d been in Gotham all day. “Had Clark fly me in this morning so I could do some shopping and they were on me in the first hour. It’s like they were waiting at Scully & Scull, which I guess isn’t completely crazy since you’re registered there. It is a logical place for someone attached to the wedding to go. I tried losing them, but I couldn’t at first. I mean—I didn’t always see them, but I’ve got good radar for this kind of thing. I know they were there.”

“They,” Selina said. “Figure of speech or there’s definitely more than one?”

“Two. I saw them—I know them. They’re writers, if we’re being generous. Ash Torrick from that sleazy ancient mysteries show, and Bradford Dormont, from The Other Lady Pemberley. I know it’s probably not a kidnapping or anything, but I didn’t think I should lead them to your party if I could help it.”

“That’s very considerate of you,” Selina said. “Ford has been lurking since the engagement party. We think we’re his next book, but it could be something shorter for Mayfair. Series of essays kind of thing, or a collection of short stories. Anyway, I gave him an interview and it only whetted his appetite. That Ash Torrick is a late arrival. Not sure what his interest could be. I mean, I can’t introduce him to Deadman. I don’t
know what happened to the White Martians or if the Orb of Ra is real, and I can't hook him up with a Medusa Mask."

"Well anyway, I lost them temporarily," said Lois. "But then I went to Deeor for my fitting—she doesn't like me, by the way. When I made the appointment—"

"It's not you," Selina assured her. "It's just that you're a pretty famous reporter and discretion is everything in that world. Deeor's clients don't want people to know who they are, what they look like, where their money comes from. It's like a doctor with medical secrets, or the secrets we keep, you understand? So reporters make her nervous. She gave me a little attitude the day I brought up her doing dresses for you and Cassie, you're not members of the club."

"I don't want to sound ungrateful," Lois said quickly. "I mean it's the experience of a lifetime, a dress like that. Do you know they're working off a mannequin specially made to be me, my proportions exactly."

"Of course, that's how it works," Selina said. "I'll warn you, it's very addictive."

"My god, I can see why," Lois said with the slight eye-roll/head tilt from her first bite of dessert at d'Annunzio's. "What they fitted today, it was so light, like a second skin. Is that what the costumes feel like?"

Selina nodded, once, a warm glow as if they were discussing sex.

"The dress becomes a part of you. You put it on and you don't think about it again because it's been molded to your body."

"Can we do this next time you kidnap me, instead of shoes?" Lois asked.

"You got it," Selina winked. "Paris instead of Italy, so bone up on your 'salade croquante aux champignons des bois.' And as for Deeor, the best way to prove yourself is to take an interest in how the pieces are made. The construction and the craftsmanship. Understand and acknowledge these are works of art."

Lois nodded, then the buzz faded.

"Selina, they found me when I went to Deeor. I never saw Dormont, but that Torrick character was waiting when I came out. And like I said, I didn't want to lead them to you. I don't suppose it's a state secret: a chocolate tasting and a lingerie show, not exactly scandalous, but, I don't know about you, I don't like being stalked."

Selina looked off to the side, her lips parted, her breathing deepened, and her eyes grew darkly excited.

"Well," she said, the warm, resonant voice with which Catwoman first greeted Lois Lane, grabbing her from behind and claws to her throat, "the whole point of tonight is a last fling, right? Let's escape from a museum."

At a glance, the Eirene and Daniel Ashton European Sculpture Court seems like the ideal spot for a café within the museum. With its enormous picture windows and high glass ceiling, it has the feel of a bright, airy pavilion with a view of Robinson Park where you can literally dine or take tea surrounded by museum-quality art. Many never look beyond that, but for those who do the perverse juxtaposition of subjects you pass on your way to your table would often spark conversation. There is Canova's Perseus (holding up the severed head of the Medusa), Rodin's (starving) Burghers of Calais, and Carpeaux's Ugolino and His Sons (starved into madness and cannibalism).
The sculpture court was no longer busy, for the throng of tourists had gone at 5:30, leaving the museum to a comfortable ‘Members with Evening Access’ crowd and the sculpture court itself all but deserted. Lois and Selina approached the café, and the hostess began to apologize that they had finished the afternoon tea service and were in the transition to the evening menu. Selina waved her off saying they just wanted a bottle of mineral water, and took a table by the window behind a Hellenic torso that Lois eyed disapprovingly.

“Tea in the shadow of a headless, armless woman,” she noted. “Charming.”

Selina shook her head.

“She survived. Look at her, that’s the victor right there. The city is gone. The men who built it, the ones who died defending it, the soldiers who conquered it—who thought they’d won, who vandalized that very statue—gone without a trace. And there she stands. She’s what lasted to speak for all of them.”

“Well, she’s not standing since she has no legs, and there’s no mouth to speak because she’s got no head,” Lois said, and Selina laughed.

“Yet there she is. And a standard of beauty to boot.”

“God, you are a total romantic,” Lois said. “No wonder Clark likes you.”

“Yeah, well…” Selina shrugged, but she got no farther when the hostess brought their water, and when she’d gone Selina pointed out the obelisk outside the window.

“That was the clue right there, the night of the engagement party: Cleopatra’s Needle,” she said. “And just past is where it happened.”

“Etrigan,” Lois said, naming the participant that would have been Superman’s concern.

“Clayface,” Selina said, focused on the one that haunted her. “Poison Ivy, who Etrigan wanted to kill. Etrigan who hurled the fireball. And Clayface who threw himself into its path and morphed into a shape that protected us both. Because I went and whispered ‘hero’ in his ear. Because I’m ‘a romantic.’ He’d be better off if I was a bitter old cynic.”

“Would he? Selina, I’m the most pragmatic person I know, aside from Perry at Christmastime. Half my day is rejecting quotes from people pushing a narrative that doesn’t match the headline. ‘The protest sent a powerful message’ when they don’t have the votes and the bill’s going to pass. ‘The new product line is a hit,’ when its sales are in the toilet. I don’t care how poetic an argument is if it’s not borne out by the facts. I look at the facts here: Bruce, since you. Gotham, since you and Bruce. The League, the relationship with Clark, and with Dick, it’s all better than it was, that’s the outcome. Because you changed him. Nobody would be better off if you were a bitter old cynic.”

Selina thought about it, looking out at the needle as those four words echoed in her mind’s ear.

“Because I changed him,” she said at last. “That’s exactly what’s spooking me. Because I hadn’t. I understand how it looks from a certain distance—a distance that I never had with him, but I get it: What all of you see, the part of him that you saw then and now, it looked like change. But it wasn’t, not until a few weeks ago, until the engagement party. Until Clayface came back. Now he’s... ready to compromise. About magic and time travel. It’s scaring me.”
“Because he’s worried about you? Selina, this isn’t new. When we were at the Fortress, after the Dibny murder—”

“That was perfectly in character. Taking charge, ordering everyone around. Heck, I was the one making the compromise—”

“Exactly. You, with your notorious independence, you were willing to let him hide you up there so he could feel you were safe and protected. Because they were special circumstances and you love him and we make sacrifices for the people we love under special circumstances, right?”

“Lois, he doesn’t compromise. This thing has got inside his head.”

‘This thing’ being the wedding. Weddings are special circumstances, and he loves you.”

Selina looked skeptical.

“I don’t think it’s that simple. Even the part where he’s worried about me, because he’s… not. Lois, he’s not worried because he’s trusting Faust. Bruce is. Trusting. He’s trusting Faust more than I am.”

“Have you talked to him about this?” Lois asked, and then seeing her face, “You haven’t.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You should.”

“Insert doubts into his field of vision when he’s… well, happy? And relatively worry-free, I don’t want to ruin that. Dumping my doubts on him when I don’t know anything, when they’re not based on anything, why would I do that?”

“Look, you know him better than anyone. What does your gut tell you? If there are unanswered questions, would it ruin this happy carefree thing he’s got going, or would he be invigorated by it?”

“Pre-engagement party? He’d love the challenge. He wouldn’t say it exactly, but he’d be more than invigorated; he’d be… turned on in a very cerebral way. ‘A mystery, thank God.’ He gets bored when he doesn’t have a problem to sink his teeth into.”

Lois began to smile.

“Ah, I see. So pre-engagement party, you’d know what to do, but with this changed Bruce, you’re not so sure?” When Selina shook her head no, Lois only smiled wider. “Lady, you know what you’ve got on your hands? An old-fashioned case of the jitters—Don’t give me that look. I was just like you. I thought bridal jitters were strictly a Mary Sue Smallville ‘been planning the wedding since she was eight’ condition that women like us don’t have to contend with. I was wrong, and this is textbook: He’s changed. You’re the person who knows him best and suddenly you don’t recognize him. Suddenly you don’t know what to do because you don’t know who he is anymore? He’s different from the man you said yes to? Selina, you’ve got good old-fashioned wedding jitters.”

“You really think so?”

She nodded, then said “On your end, not a doubt in my mind. On his, it’s what we call a developing story. Keep an eye on it. I’m betting two weeks after the honeymoon, he’ll be back to normal. If not, you’ll deal with it then. But until the wedding’s behind you, you’re not going to figure out anything. It creates too much interference.”
“Okay,” Selina said, and then closed her eyes. “And there he is. Look, outside, 3 o’clock behind the tree.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” Lois said, noting the tuft of white hair that was certainly Ford Dormont lurking where he could see inside the restaurant but imagined they couldn’t see him. She glanced at her phone and tapped the stopwatch, then said “A little over fifteen minutes, I hope I’m that good at his age. How did he find us so fast?”

“The sculpture court is a very popular venue for parties, the kind of parties he went to every night in his heyday. Seats two hundred, six hundred if they stand and nibble… It’s one of the corners of this place he probably knows as well as I do…”

“Well if you knew that, why did you bring us here?” Lois asked.

At first Selina didn’t answer. She touched her finger lightly to the rim of her glass, then spoke as if she was thinking about something else.

“Because now we know where he is… If it wasn’t for Ash Torrick, we could scoot over to Medieval Art, make a mad dash through the Met Store and be… on 82nd Street before he’s out of Decorative Arts. Did you see that?”

“Nope, I’m just sitting here waiting for you to tell me what ‘it’ is,” Lois said.

“That recessed case in the wall, it’s dimmer than when we came in. The exit signs are a little brighter, too, and there’s a red indicator on the emergency light over the door. I don’t know if it was lit before, but it’s on now.”

“What means?” Lois asked.

“A power surge,” Selina whispered, still but her eyes flitting around with delight as if there were invisible fairies in the air. “Or a brand new Houkotanuki system rebooting.”

“And that would be what?”

“That’s a very good question,” Selina murmured, taking out her wallet and dropping a bill on the table. “Somebody is hacking the encryption system on the museum’s database. We need to get to a terminal…”

She looked around casually but Lois watched her eyes. *Taking in the camera angles and sightlines,* she thought, and said “Don’t forget to work Dormont into the equation.”

Selina glanced up angrily, either as ‘I never forget’ or ‘I was carrying the one.’ What she said aloud was:

“This place has seventeen curators. Maisie Cowle won’t be working late; it’s her daughter’s birthday. So we can use her office. You up for scooting through some vents or should I get us a staff ID?”

Lois’ eyes gleamed with a blend of mischief, curiosity and pride that was the terror of corrupt politicians, predatory lenders and redlining banks.

“Why don’t you let me get us the ID,” she said, a flush of excitement brightening her cheeks. “Show you what reporters can do. You above all people, Gotham of all places, should stop writing me off because I haven’t got powers.”

“Uh,” Selina stalled, but Lois pressed her case.

“A burglary at a Gotham museum and I’m sitting here with Catwoman,” she hissed excitedly. “I get to see this through your eyes, it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Way better than a chocolate tasting.”
“Okay first, you need to calm down. It’s not a burglary. The Houkotanuki protects the database, not the alarms or the cameras, the heat sensors, that’s all on a separate mainframe with the back-up generators.”

“Okay, so what is happening?” Lois asked as they left the restaurant.

“I don’t know. That’s why I want a terminal,” Selina whispered.

“Great, so, ID badge,” Lois said, all efficiency. “I need a clear shot at the reception desk as if I’m just coming into the building. How do I do that?”

Selina affixed Lois with a sideways appraisal as they walked briskly through the sculpture court. It was a look Lois remembered, from that first semi-kidnapping at LexCorp when Catwoman used her to escape from Superman.

“I’ll give you this, Lane, you don’t rattle,” she’d said then. Today she said “Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Greco-Roman and into the coat check.” Lois nodded and Selina added “I’ll give you this, Lois, you are never dull.”

“You told me something like that once before,” Lois reminded her. “I think it’s just that I adapt and I try to avoid being predictable. Can only depend on Superman so far, I mean, I have to pull my weight. Stay alive until he shows up to do the punch-a-hole-in-the-space-station part that I can’t.”

Selina laughed.

“It’s more of a partnership than people realize, isn’t it?”

“Yep. They see ‘Lois Lane that always needs rescued’ and put me in a safe little box where they never see it coming.”

“I sure didn’t,” Selina said. “When I grabbed you that time, it was just expedience, in the moment: Get out of the super-strike zone, get to the 10th floor landing—”

“Which you’ve since made up to me with shoe shopping in Rome and Florence—”

“It’s not that part, Lois, it’s… I never saw you coming. What you said. About him, him and me, what you saw.”

“Reporter’s curse,” Lois said. “Observant as all hell and no filter. When I see something and it prompts a question, it comes tumbling out my mouth without any thought that it’s not the kind of thing anyone wants to discuss with a stranger.”

“Well you were right. About ‘the man you want and the one you can have.’ It haunted me.”

“Selina—”

“No, really, for years after I’d get a knot in my stomach when I’d see your name on a story, or sometimes just a blurb about Superman in the Planet. Because it was right after that, right after we talked that you accepted Clark Kent’s proposal and after what you’d said that day, I knew how you felt about—”

“When the truth is, I never had to decide,” Lois said softly, “He told me the next day. I felt guilty about you whenever I thought back to our talk, because I got to have it all and you were stuck behind that mask… and look at you now. Ready to become Mrs. Wayne.”

It was Selina’s turn to blush with excitement.

“I love him so much,” she confided. “Bruce, I mean. The whole man is so much more important than that one facet. I’d tell him but he gets jealous.”

“Wait,” Lois said, “Did you say—”

“I know, it’s nuts. He has a weird way of looking at it. It’s not normal.”
“No, it’s not,” Lois laughed. “Clark is just as weird about some of it. We go up to the fortress in November because there’s this little pinhead that becomes visible in Orion’s belt—barely visible. It’s like one little pinhead of blue and a gassier pinhead-size blur next to it that he says is the light from before Krypton blew reflecting off a gas cloud or something. And every year we go up to look at it… Totally nuts, how can you not love him to death?”

At last they made it to the coat check, and from there Lois proceeded alone, approaching the reception desk with her crisp “I am Lois Lane in pursuit of a story” walk which the savvy in Metropolis interpret as “Do not come between the Nazgul and its prey.” She said she knew that by now everyone was gone for the day. She cursed the airline, cursed Uber, cursed the hotel and Gotham traffic, and then threw herself on the clerk’s mercy as a woman who was truly on her last legs.

“So I know I’ll have to come back tomorrow. When I do, maybe you could please tell me who to ask for so I can recoup some time and maybe not look like a complete idiot. I’m working on a story about Lex Luthor’s art collection. He’d lost everything when LexCorp collapsed and my sources say he’s completely rebuilt it. In less than two years, I don’t see how that’s possible unless he went to Argentina and bought up, like, three villas worth of stuff looted by the Nazis. I was wondering if there’s someone I could sit down with, go over the pieces I know about and see if we can piece together what happened…”

The receptionist went over the staff list, suggested Dr. Albany or Miss Greenaway, perhaps Mr. Granger, it really depended on what type of pieces they were. Lois whipped out her phone and began showing the receptionist pictures, and while she was occupied (and while Selina watched in shock), Lois deftly lifted the ID badge clipped to the receptionist’s belt.

“On behalf of myself and the three best burglars I know, that was incredible,” Selina said when Lois returned.

It was a quick maze-run to the American Wing by way of the Mezzanine, up the stairs to the STAFF ONLY door Selina preferred, where a second maze brought them to the proper hall, a swipe of the card and Maisie Cowle’s office. Selina made quick work of the door, sat down at the desk and began typing. As she worked, Lois asked how the museum had acclimated to a woman half the city believed to be Catwoman becoming a member of its board.

“All but the former head of security took it in stride,” she said as she worked. “They all know what side their bread is buttered on, nobody wants to make an enemy of Bruce—not nobody but Barry Hobbs and you saw what happened to him.”

“I did indeed,” Lois grinned, feeling that really no payback was too severe for an unabashed Luthor fan. “The former head of security, you said. Resigned in protest?”

“Offered a better job in Keystone,” Selina said.

“Your doing or Bruce’s?”

“Little bit of both. I didn’t do it on purpose. He’d made such a nuisance of himself since I joined the board: had his whole staff watching my movements whenever I was in the building and he practically stood on their shoulders while they did it. It was a security risk: if anyone else wanted to rob the place, all they’d have to do is wait for a board meeting. Nobody was watching the cameras anywhere but in the board room.
So Bruce figured the best thing to do was get the idiot promoted before he got himself fired.”

“Hence, an offer he can’t refuse from Keystone,” Lois mused.

“The thing is, it paid an unexpected dividend. Now that he’s gone, the rest of the security staff all but ignore me.”

“I guess that’s understandable.”

“Well this isn’t,” Selina said, eyes riveted on the screen. “Look, this is a modification log. I did a search for changes to the database since the power surge. Look at this: nine records. Four pieces in the storage vault have been moved, or at least their location was changed according to the database, to Galleries 253 and 358, while a piece from 358 was sent to restoration. Gallery 357 next door, two pieces removed and sent to restoration. And something from 207… all sent for restoration, huh.”

“That’s eight, you said nine altogether?”

“A piece from Gold of the Ancient Kingdom,” Selina read, “That was a special exhibit, it closed months ago. Anything they had on loan should have been sent back before now, but this edit ‘Returned to lending institution’ was just made a few minutes ago.”

“Can you see what the old location was? I mean if the exhibit’s been closed, it has to have been somewhere all this time.”

“I should be able to, but…” Selina shook her head, “Nope, it’s not here.”

“Okay, so where is it going,” Lois said, a reporter with a scent not going to be discouraged.

“There’s just a code,” Selina said, typing, “9132, here we are. Ernshaw Museum, California.”

“Never heard of it,” Lois said.

“Neither have I, must be pretty small. It’s a San Francisco address; I can ask Anna… Boy this is weird. It’s got another generic name: Artifact 85G. I’ve got a Fragment 1406, Personal Ornament 421.”

“That’s unusual, eh?”

“No,” Selina hedged, drawing the word out for three syllables while biting her lip. “There are more than two million pieces in this place if you count every loose bead and glass shard. But pieces that make it out of the vault to be displayed in the galleries, you’d expect to be interesting enough and complete enough to warrant a ‘cosmetics jar in the form of a cat’ type of thing.”

“Okay, so where do we start: Gallery 358, 207, Restoration or Shipping?”

Selina looked up with a grin.

“See, this is why we get along. Anybody else, I’d have to tell them we’re going to have a look at these things. They literally wouldn’t know until I brought it up and then I’d have to convince them to go along with it.”

“Oh that much passivity just shouldn’t be allowed,” Lois said in feigned concern. “It will kill you. The total lack of curiosity and initiative will just… you’ll die. Three, four days tops, you’ll just up and die.”

“You might be thinking of water,” Selina noted.

“Tsk, I do confuse them sometimes.”

Since the galleries were only open for another hour, they began in the Art of the Americas: Pre-Columbian, Gallery 358… They worked well together at first: analyzing
the labels to see if anything looked newly printed or if an object didn’t quite match what its label described, and coming up with a short list for most likely pieces to be the new ones brought from the vault.

Lois took notes while Selina pointed out where and how the cases opened and reconstructed how the change-outs would work. It was a laborious process if done correctly to minimize disturbance of the other artifacts in a display. And then they considered the security camera: It would take a while to swap out the pieces and the staffer doing the job was almost certain to appear on the closed circuit camera—but the opening of that one particular case seemed to offer the best cover. Could it be that the pieces taken were not as important as the case they were taken from?

They went excitedly into the next gallery to see if the pattern repeated, but as Lois went to work as before, shooting video with her phone and looking for labels that didn’t quite match the displays, she noticed Selina’s contributions growing fewer and less detailed.

“Feels like someone’s walking over my grave,” was all she would say when asked.

By the third gallery—207, Ancient China—she was herself again and they discussed ways to get a look at the security footage to either get a look at the culprit moving these works around or else confirm their theory about the cases. Gallery 253—Art of Tibet and Nepal—was on the third floor. They got as far as the elevator, but as Lois reached to push the button, Selina stopped her.

“Let’s take the stairs. I don’t want to be cornered.”

At the top of the stairs, she led Lois to a balcony that looked out onto 79th Street. She pointed out the Fletcher-Sinclair House, one of the grandest Fifth Avenue mansions designed by Gilded Age architect C.P.H. Gilbert in his signature French Gothic style. Lois couldn’t help but notice that Selina never looked at the house during this edifying lecture; she kept her eye on the way they’d come.

“You think Dormont and Torrick are still out there?” Lois asked.

“Just making sure,” she murmured and then resumed in the Sorbonne docent voice. “The house is named for Isaac Fletcher who built it and Harry F. Sinclair, the most notorious of the three private owners before it became the Ukrainian Institute, which it is now...”

When she was satisfied that they had no novelists tailing them, Selina motioned to Lois and they cut through Chinese Decorative Arts to finally arrive in Gallery 253, the art of Nepal and Tibet. Once again the piece most likely to be a recent addition was in the display case where the camera would see no more than the sleeve of whoever opened it. It resurrected the idea of getting a look at the security footage themselves, Lois agreeing it was better to come back after the bachelorette outing when the museum was fully closed, but insisting she be allowed to come along.

Merry bickering continued as they made their way to the restoration room, their movement through the halls now a silent ballet of timing and teamwork that avoided detection by museum staff, security cameras, and even detoured to a soda machine when Lois felt a dry cough coming on. Finally they came to a door secured by a special keypad under a discreet sign reading Conservation and Restoration.
Selina noted that the system was active, meaning everyone was gone for the night and they had the place to themselves. She took out what looked like a very chic art deco compact, and Lois cooed.

"Clé de Peau eye shadow," Selina said as she dusted the keypad with a delicate blue powder, and then she shook her head sadly as she saw the fingerprints. "It's always one of the same four combinations," she confided, pressing 1-1-4-9. "Not much point in changing every few weeks if you're just cycling through the same—no." The door had clicked, opened, they'd stepped inside and Selina stopped cold. "No," she repeated and then shook her head in disgust. "Not you. Not. You."

Lois waited for an explanation, but when seconds passed without Selina volunteering one, she asked. Selina pointed to a gold diadem inlaid with jade and turquoise.

"Zotz, the Bat Death God," she said wearily. "He has a bunch of different names, actually. Aztec, Maya, Moche, every tribe in South America had a bat god. Lord of the underworld, guardian of the underworld, soul wrangler, overseer, binder of souls... always a death thing. To be expected. Night creatures usually get that end of the dichotomy. (Primitive cultures love dichotomies: light and dark, male and female, life and death.) But with bats it's more so because they hang out in caves which were considered the entrance to the underworld, often called Xibalba 'the place of fear...'

"Selina, you're babbling," Lois said, noting a tone that tempo different from all the previous art history lectures.

"Yes, well, he's a death god and he's a bat. This one is the original, I call him Zotz after the Mayan version, but he doesn't have a name that we know. Only that he's the oldest, the First One. All the other mythologies evolved from him. And nobody really knows he's here, in the museum I mean—Joker, Scarecrow, Hugo—Thank god. I mean, it's not surprising, in a collection this size, most pieces go unnoticed, and it's not like anybody but me is particularly into art and museums..."

"Still babbling," Lois said quietly, and Selina shot her a look.

"Nobody knows he's here," she said firmly and with a deliberate control that was the polar opposite of babbling. "And it should stay that way because this incarnation is one of the nastiest deities in any pantheon."

At that moment, the lights went out.

"I've seen this movie, when the lights come on the thing is gone," Lois whispered.

"Not what I'm worried about," Selina replied.

"When the lights come on, it's gone, and then when I get home, I glimpse him in the mirror and people around me start dying."

At that moment, the lights came back on. The diadem was still on the work table, but neither woman relaxed.

"It was another power surge," Selina said. "Longer than before, both systems rebooting. Try the door."

"Locked," Lois reported, and Selina cursed under her breath. Lois studied her with concern. "Okay, World's Greatest Thief, how do we get out?"

"We don't."

"Selina, 'meow,' since when do you so much as blink at a locked door."

"That's not a locked door, Lois, it's a system reset."

"Semantics."
“No, a lock is a puzzle. It’s meant to outsmart people who want to open it and aren’t supposed to. Understand how it’s made, figure a way around its obstacles, solve the puzzle: click, you’re in. But a Houkotanuki resetting behind a Kesselrig keypad that’s out there while we’re in here, that’s not a puzzle that’s…”

She trailed off.

“Go ahead, say it,” Lois chided, “You’ve looked at him four times since the lights came on. Let’s get it out there. It’s not a puzzle, it’s…”

“Possibly it’s Leatherwing the God of Death here deciding to score a final goal for Team Bat before the wedding—or maybe to derail things entirely.”

“That’s where I thought you were going. Selina, you used a phrase earlier and I’m afraid it’s true. You let this inside your head. Bride—that-was to bride-to-be, you’ve got to get it out. It’s just a wedding.” She laughed on the final phrase, and Selina gestured with claws that weren’t there.

“We’re stuck in the museum with the bat god of death, Lois.”

“You love him, he loves you, you’ve looked in each other’s eyes and said it a thousand times. You do it once more in front of people, and that’s it. Then there’s a lot of hugging and dancing and food you’ll only pretend to eat because the dress makes it hard to breathe, and then you’ll take it off and get on with your lives. Together.”

Selina smiled.

“You said that building across the way was the Ukrainian Institute, right? Well I just happen to be on very good terms with the Ukrainian ambassador. I was interviewing him several years ago and it turned into a kidnapping, y’know like it does, and I was instrumental in his not getting thrown into this vat of electrified—Serhiy! Yes, it’s Lois… Yes… Yes… Well thank you, that’s very kind… No really, I was just in the right place at the right time… Oh Clark is fine, yes… I will tell him. Serhiy, the reason I’m calling is I need a favor, a very urgent one. You have a consulate in Gotham, right?”

The Executive Director of the Ukrainian Institute called the Executive Director of the Gotham Museum at home and asked her to deputize the most senior employee still in the museum to kindly receive their neighbors from the Institute who were at this moment crossing the street, and accede to their request on a very urgent matter.

The assistant curator for Drawings and Prints was called upon, and she received the distinguished visitors from the Institute (which happened to be the event coordinator, who was the only one still in her office and answered the phone, along with a caterer, bartender and facilities manager on duty for an evening rental). Giving the impression
that they were accustomed to diplomatic intrigue, the foursome explained that a valuable sculpture had been damaged at the consulate. That it was a gift from an individual who would be attending a party at the end of the month and it was vital the sculpture be repaired by then. The Gotham Museum being one of the top restoration shops in the world, and being much closer and more convenient than sending it home, the consulate would be approaching the GMA in the morning with a formal request. But before then, the ambassador was particularly concerned with their security and wanted them to have a look. Allusions were made to the time difference, the necessity of assuring high ranking parties back home who would be asleep by the time tomorrow’s A-team had the paperwork in order...

The curator had her orders, so she escorted the visitors inside and gave them a security tour: the keycard access to the staff area, the security office monitoring the many camera feeds from the public areas, the loading dock where their piece would be brought in, the receiving area where the crate would be weighed, opened, and its contents documented. It would be affixed with a scannable code that logged it in the museum’s database and tracked its physical location and movement thanks to a Houkotanuki system that coordinated both the database and the alarms. One more card swipe and here they were at last at the restoration department. A pin code required, as you see, and here we are...

Selina and Lois, the professional thief and professional snoop, had no difficulty staying hidden while the party entered, nor sneaking out once the event coordinator was on the line with the ambassador describing the arrangements and sending photos. They had no trouble getting the rest of the way out of the museum or getting a cab, or indeed making it to Le Ganachery where Barbara and Cassie greeted them with such wild enthusiasm they could only blink... and notice the bottle of Tattinger on the table that was already half empty. An amuse bouche was thrust into each of their hands, consisting of a champagne truffle, chocolate-covered strawberry and a shot of chocolate martini.

Selina and Lois were too experienced with real danger to remain off-balance after such a trifling episode as being detained by an ancient death bat who, if he had done it on purpose, wasn’t strong enough to hold them. Their evening was being hosted by Tattinger and there was 80 vs 90% cacao to savor, and after that, a limo to Setablu, a boutique of Italian lingerie too sinfully indulgent to be famous. After that, Selina offered her guests a choice: their hosts had arranged VIP accommodations at a dance club, a jazz club, or if their palates were up for it, a caviar tasting at Petrossian.

“Yes, we could do that,” Barbara said. “Or you could all come back to my place for something as mundane as coffee and you two could tell us what the heck happened.”

“Have peach tea and green tea at mine,” Cassie volunteered. “But not place for everyone to sit.”

Selina and Lois looked at each other and shrugged.

“Well since you’re onto us, and we’ll have to kick Dick out at your place, Barbara, or sit on the floor at your apartment, Cassie, why don’t we use the penthouse,” Selina offered...
Instinct flared as Bruce stepped from his dressing room and registered dark, rapid movement where no movement should be. A fist half-formed reflexively before his brain caught up, then the fingers relaxed and the puff of an almost-laugh escaped him.

“And who are you?” he asked the tiny bat that had scurried down the bedroom wall and taken refuge behind a colonial era fainting couch that Selina had moved into their bedroom from one of the little-used guest rooms. “You shouldn’t be up here, buddy. There are cats in this house,” he said, stepping into the bathroom and returning with a glass. The bat had dropped to the floor and run to the window—which made it easier to catch but Bruce hoped it didn’t have an injured wing. It took all of two seconds to trap it under the glass, and just in case it did have an injured wing, Bruce chose to release it in the cave rather than throwing it off the balcony. It did fly off then with what he decided was a grateful squeak, and he returned to the study feeling he’d done a good deed. The first thing he heard was Selina’s laugh and Alfred’s coming from across the hall, and he went to see what was so funny.

“So we have a plan,” Selina was saying, “Roses and stasis in the silver basket in the foyer; Imari bowl stays in the dining room, empty. Wine stoppers in the small crystal bowl freeing the bigger one for the potpourri, which frees up the antique Lenox for—” and then froze when she saw him. “Hi,” she said brightly, the particular guilt-free brightness when he surprised her at an open safe. “Promise you’re going to go on loving me after I tell you.”

He then saw she was holding a small, blooming orchid plant in each hand, their roots overflowing their tea-cup sized plastic pots.

“I think I can guess,” he graveled, eyes darting from the pink one speckled with Catwoman purple to the one that was solidly Catwoman purple. “Ivy sent a gift.”

“The new, muted, unnervingly polite, semi-thoughtful, not noticeably psychotic Ivy sent a gift, yes. Alfred and I were just figuring out what to do with it. And um, Oswald… there’s a set of, sort of, place card stands. Birds on leaves. Hand-painted. Herend. Quite nice actually.”

“I see,” he graveled, and Alfred tactfully withdrew. “And the ‘silver basket in the foyer’? Ivy doesn’t send cut flowers.”

“Pete Ignazio sent a bouquet, pink roses and purple stasis. Quite pretty.”

“The Falcone underboss,” Bruce said flatly. “That’s him. And um… Could I get a grunt on that promise to go on loving me?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I want to invite Eddie and Doris—hear me out.”

“Selina.”

“Just hear me out.”

“Selina.”

“He—you know what, the gold jaguar from Belize, I’ll return it.”

“Selina.”

“That one has always stuck in your craw.”

“I… Yes it has. Make your case.”

“Ford is becoming a real pest. Lois got a taste of it yesterday and she said when she’s chasing a story, the one thing that’s consistently effective slowing her down is when they assign a couple of flunkies to keep her occupied. Eddie knows the situation
with us, and Doris already stepped in with Ford, on her own, just because she saw it needed to be done. They’re both smarter than he is, and I think if I ask—”

“That’s a very good idea.”

“And I know he’s not your favorite person in the world, and I’d do anything to make this a rogue-free day for you, but realistically I don’t think it—wait. What?”

“It’s a good idea. It would never have been my choice for Nigma to know my identity, but he does know. That’s a fact, it’s part of the landscape, and it’s wasting a resource to ignore it if it can be helpful.”

Selina blanched slightly.

“Given your friendship, you’re right. He’ll be… helpful,” Bruce concluded.

“Great,” she said, seemingly relieved that he was receptive to the idea. “Okay then, I’ll go over later today, deliver the invitation in person and, depending who’s home, explain what we really want.”

He grunted, came closer to kiss her cheek and then gave the orchids a particularly venomous blast of disapproval as if to demonstrate he was still Batman.

“Where are they going to go?” he asked in the tone he’d speak of felony burglary.

“I was thinking that table in the breakfast room, where we never eat.”

“Alright,” he said, and then completed the cheek kiss.

She asked about patrol and he gave the vague grumble that was the norm since he began swapping patrols with his future self. He said he was going to work out in the cave, and she said he was on his own for lunch since she was taking the dress back to Deeror until Kyle needed her to sit again. He left… And Selina stared after him, at the doorway where he’d disappeared.

“Given your friendship he’ll be helpful?” she quoted, and then shook her head. “Old-fashioned wedding jitters… Lois, you better be right.”
Bon Vivant Bridegroom: Billionaire Bruce Wayne Plans the Ultimate High Rise Bachelor Night

Very soon after Mayfair launched, Bradford Dormont began his career at the magazine with Carte des Etoiles, a chronicle of café society and its scandals by the one writer with access to all the dramatis personae in the tangled circles of Hollywood and High Society. From criminal trials in Boston to tummy tucks in Bangkok, negligence-or-was-it-murder in Monaco to insider trading in Gotham, all sides seem to take Dormont as their confidant. The children talk, the servants talk, the mistresses talk, and the countesses talk. But will Bruce Wayne and his bride talk?

Mayfair begins its coverage of the wedding of the century...

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by BRADFORD DORMONT

“The thing to remember about Bruce,” said one of Bruce Wayne’s oldest friends at a Park Avenue dinner party, “is that he’s trompe l’oeil, his life is crafted to deceive the eye. He created a character that he plays, and the press laps it up.”

It’s an idea that goes in and out of fashion among Foundation donors and Wayne Enterprises investors, for it’s hard to reconcile the debauchery on Page 6 with the high-minded philanthropy and solid corporate citizenship reported in more respectable news. Yet for the true cognoscenti, the link is as common as FILTH, as in the old Wall Street acronym “Failed in London? Try Hong Kong.”

Bruce seems eager to deflect attention from his time abroad, wearing his washout from Princeton as a bad boy badge of honor as if we wouldn’t notice he was enrolled in the London School of Economics the next term. Studying at LSE may put him in the company of Kennedys and Nobel laureates, but it put him more literally in the company of those sons of privilege who are a fixture in London and Hong Kong, beginning careers in the capital markets, famous for their hunting of “Sloane Rangers,”
living at clubs like Annabel’s and Home House, blacking out on the tube and showing up to work the next day in their tuxedos. One need only compare the London chapters of Jon Prevel’s *Tales of the Abyss* and *LexCorp* with Bruce’s playboy antics when he returned to Gotham, and one might come away thinking he used the anecdotes of those first year Salomon Brothers analysts as a script.

Bruce is expected to say goodbye to single life in the most spectacular fashion possible, and sources close to his preferred concierge say he does not plan to disappoint. The multi-night extravaganza will begin at one of Gotham’s most exclusive clubs, of course, but only as a gathering point. Once assembled, the party will move via a caravan of party busses to Wayne’s private jet and then to the famous Burj Al Arab on the southern sandy coastline of Dubai, where it’s rumored that Wayne has booked the US$24,000-per-night Royal Suite as well as the Al Falak ballroom and Al Mahara restaurant for a three-tiered final party—potentially four if the jet continues to circle overhead, as is rumored.

The guest list has been the subject of speculation for months, with rumoured guests ranging from rock stars to athletes, European royalty to the Who’s Who of Hollywood and Wall Street. Knowing Bruce, only the crème-de-la-crème need apply. And knowing Bruce, we can expect a last look at the bad boy who’s become such a rarity since he began escorting Selina Kyle to D’Annunzio, the Upper East Side restaurant that caters to Gotham’s people-you-love-to-read-about...

Blue diamonds get their color from boron, an element more abundant in the Earth’s crust than its mantle. Fine. But saying the famously cursed Hope Diamond was “spawned in the most hellish depths of the Earth” seemed a needlessly sensational flourish, and Jaxon Valdorcia (known in various circles as Jax, Coop, Mason, Logan, ‘that Aussie bloke,’ and *Le Maître Rusé*) dropped the in-flight magazine into the trash wondering why he’d even taken the thing off the plane.

Jaxon lived in an exclusive suburb outside Melbourne whenever he wasn’t living out of a $4,000 Prada go-bag in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok or Jakarta for a job like the one that now brought him to Japan. Against his better judgment, he’d read an article on the plane, about blue diamonds. He’d read it because the Hope was a blue diamond, that much seemed like fate. The one thing he knew about the upcoming job was that he’d be acquiring an item from a shrine near the Imperial Palace. The Hope had famously begun as the eye of an idol in a temple in India. So… Fate. He turned to the page with the article expecting something interesting from a nature journal, something on the complex geologic sequence by which boron ended up at a depth where diamonds form, not another rehash of French royals, wealthy owners and thieves that came to bad ends after coming in contact with the gem.

Jaxon wasn’t superstitious of course. No one on his level could afford to be. Temples, grave goods, religious icons, it was all part of the business. And everyone understood that Hollywood myth notwithstanding, a good story was the only security the ancient world had. There were men with swords, no doubt, but they’d be as prone to sleep, boredom, bribery and bludgeoning as their modern counterparts. In a world without retinal scans, cameras or heat sensors, the best thing to do was scare a would-be thief into staying home.
Home. Swimming laps in his pool, puttering with his outdoor deck—the one part of the property free of heritage conservation rules, where he could modernize and tinker to his heart’s content. He hated leaving, but what was he to do? DEMON offered more than any outsider could refuse. They used their own talent whenever they could, so if they called it was because they needed you and they didn’t waste time haggling. When he first got the call—when he heard Ōtemachi—he assumed the target was a corporate headquarters. He packed assuming he was going after a prize like that Rubens from the Odawara board room a few years back. A temple never occurred to him, though they often contained the richest treasures. Whatever was in this one, its security must be on par with its treasures, requiring an expertise only a half dozen people in the world had to offer. And that translated into an awful lot of zeroes—worth dodging a curse or two, certainly.

Especially since, when you thought about it, curses couldn’t be avoided. Everything of value was once something else: a Portuguese ring might link gold melted from an Aztec temple with a gemstone from ancient China. A thief actively trying to avoid curses probably crossed as many gods as one who didn’t. So there was no point worrying what was in this temple of Masakadonoatama and what dire fates were pronounced a thousand years ago to whoever was bold enough to take it.

I want to live like common people,
I want to do whatever common people do,
I want to sleep with common people,
I want to sleep with common people
Like you.

You haven’t experienced the exquisite irony of the one-percent until you drive across the access bridge to Burj Al Arab with Pulp’s Common People blasting on the radio. The Bruce Wayne of foppish legend would have loved the joke, while the real one was at least pleased to give the experience to three men who, though a pain at meetings, had saved humanity more than once and deserved a good party.

Rent a flat above a shop
Cut your hair and get a job
Smoke some fags and play some pool
Pretend you never went to school

The Bruce Wayne who traveled the world in reality was very different from one who traveled in the public imagination. There was never a week at the Hotel Byblos in St. Tropez in the duplex overlooking the pool. No getting bottle service at Nikki Beach while fashion models circled modeling clothes from the nearby shops. No enticing them one by one to abandon their posts and join him at his table, then making a triumphant entrance to Le Cave du Roy after only ten hours in the country, accompanied by the next Vogue cover and on a first-name basis with the entire Dior runway. There was no sailing and snorkeling in Antigua, rotating between the beach
bar, pool bar and spa, no drunken trips to the casino charging chips to the hotel, and no bimbo raiding the gift shop while he checked out, adding thousands to the bill in real time. There were no four hand body massages in Hong Kong, no seafood buffets with views of Victoria Harbor or pub crawls in Lan Kwai Fong. There was only a punishing kwoon where Sifu Lin would decide if the rich gwáilóu was fit to study with the master in Foshan, and the senior students who had no intention of allowing him to be found so.

There was only one point where Bruce’s years of travel overlapped with his legend: in London, where the London School of Economics provided cover while he picked up more important skills from Scotland Yard and MI-6. Jon Prevel was finishing his first year as an analyst and living the cliché as a Wall Street hedonist abroad, blowing through five and six-finger bonuses in a matter of days. His debaucheries became Bruce’s, though Bruce changed enough of the details that when Prevel wrote his own account *Tales of the Abyss and LexCorp*, the similarities went unnoticed.

That Bruce Wayne of legend required a sendoff. He needed to die as he had lived, so to speak. And if that Bruce Wayne was unlikely to meet Wally West, Kyle Rayner and Eel O’Brien in the normal course of his private beach in St. Barth’s existence—forming such bonds of friendship that they were the first names on the VIP guest list given to the hotel—the real Bruce was ready to overlook it.

*I want to live like common people,*
*I want to do whatever common people do,*
*I want to sleep with common people*

Tim texted them first: Get to Dubai your way. None of them knew what it meant, but before their speculation got out of hand, they each got a call from the ‘coordinating host’ at the hotel asking if they would be arriving in Dubai independently or flying in on Wayne One. Despite a rumor that the real party would be on Wayne One, they put their faith in a Robin’s greater knowledge and said they would be flying in on their own.

They then made a mental note not to ever underestimate Tim Drake, for the host asked which of the exotic cars in the hotel’s pool they would like waiting at the airport, for Mr. Wayne had covered the rentals for a select few of his very special guests.

*You’ll never fail like common people,*
*You’ll never watch your life slide out of view*
*And dance and drink and screw*
*Because there’s nothing else to do.*

And so it was, the afternoon of the party while Wayne One was still hours from landing, Eel, Wally and Kyle drove across the access bridge in a yellow Ferrari, red McLaren and green Aston Martin with Pulp’s *Common People* blasting on their radios.

All three meant to share the joke when they reached the hotel, then forgot in the wonderland jolt of the arrival as doormen of identical height and builds sprinted to open each of their doors simultaneously. There was a quintet of staff lined up to greet them as they entered the lobby, offering hot towels, a plate of dates and a cup of Arabic
coffee. All three meant to remark on that too—on the similarity to the welcoming ceremony on Kilfnagon-9 after they’d prevented the Dark Matter Incursion—but again they forgot as the kaleidoscope splendor of the atrium lobby introduced a new level of wonders.

“We are not in Kansas any more,” Wally and Eel said together.

“I’m not sure we’re on Earth any more,” Kyle said under his breath.

They made it past the hypnotic technicolor splendor of the fountain, the shops featuring (among other things) a vest made of gold... Past the art works... Past a restaurant, and beneath the Swarovski crystal ceiling to the elevators... They made it, finally, to their room—to their suite, that is, for the hotel had nothing as mundane as a room...

Two floors. Downstairs: two sitting rooms, a bar, and a bigger TV than any of them had at home. Upstairs: two bedrooms with panoramic views.

“Well,” said Kyle.

“Well yes,” said Wally, clearing his throat.

“Uh, right,” said Eel.

Then they said nothing for several minutes. They looked at each other, they looked out the window, they looked at the bar, and then, as one, they burst out laughing.

“So this is, uh, because Batman is marrying Catwoman,” said Wally.

“There’s a gold hair dryer in the bathroom,” said Eel.

“Always thought it was a good idea. Just the way their costumes go together, the ears, and y’know, the names. Bat-man, Cat-woman,” said Kyle.

“Gold iPad too, that seems to be how we contact the concierge or order room service,” said Eel.

“I-ehhh... had my bachelor night at a Wing House,” said Wally.

“My buddy Martin went to a comedy club,” said Kyle.

“The point is they’re happy. She makes him happy, everybody’s life is better,” said Wally.

“Hot tub in through there. With a mural. Of sailboats,” Eel reported.

Again they grew quiet, and again, after a minute of silence, they began to laugh. Nobody remembered their quips from the atrium, or the lobby, or bridge. And nobody thought of the song until hours later in the elevator riding up to the royal suite as a faint, musical thumping became audible in the distance. It grew more distinct as they neared the party floor, the vague melody becoming more discernable until the doors opened and they were hit with the full volume of a live performance coming from the famous helipad, transformed into a stage and dance floor.

“Wow,” was the universal response as they took in the colorful opulence awash in reds and golds, and the effusive crowd awash in sequined cleavage

“Okay men, remember your training,” Wally said in his approximation of a Bat-gravel as a cloud of sweet floral perfume hit. “We keep our heads. We don’t get distracted. Survey. Methodically. Do not...”

A second cloud of perfume telegraphed a bouncy, giggly parade of softness and warm jiggling. All around them. Pressing here, squeezing through there, bustling, squirming and moving on.

Wally swallowed.
“...Do not wander,” he resumed, a slight tremor in his voice, “and do not separate from the group until the entire field is documented. We move counter-clockwise, left hands to the left wall at all times. Are we clear?”

Eel’s gaze had followed the women, but his feet did not. Ascent was murmured, and the exploration began with all the disciplined focus of a League mission.

They went through a set of double doors into a large red sitting room with two seating areas, one like their suite’s faced a window with a spectacular view of the harbor. Nearly every seated man had a girl on his lap, except for the chap who had two. Bottles of vodka, tequila, wine and champagne, empty glasses and even a few beer bottles covered every horizontal surface, and a silver Asprey wine filter held marijuana seeds and stems...

The next room was smaller: only one seating area which faced a high def television even larger than the one in their suite. They realized they were in the suite’s ‘private cinema’ though at the moment it was being used for karaoke. Two girls in cocktail dresses were singing You’re So Vain while four others sat around a table, drinking and playing a dice version of liar’s poker. Eel wanted to stay but the exploration mandate prevailed.

They returned to the foyer, bypassed the stairs and went through the opposite set of doors into a dining room where two feasts were laid out. A spread of rock shrimp salad, hamachi sashimi with ponzo, and black cod with miso flown in from Nobu was arranged on the circular dining table, while the sideboard presented a buffet of lamb, beef and quail—as well as a drunken attempt at art arranging greasy kabob sticks on a canvas of hummus depicting, one supposed, the Battle of San Romano by Paolo Uccello.

A kind of office or library lay beyond that with another good-size TV. This one displayed a live feed from the dance floor on the helipad with a digital clock counting down to either a light show in the harbor or fireworks, no one was quite sure which. There was also a guestbook of the suite’s celebrity occupants, more ashtrays strewn with joints, cigar butts (and inexplicably a wad of blood-stained Kleenex), and an overturned plate with traces of white powder on it (which at least explained the Kleenex).

Upstairs, before the bedrooms, they came to another large sitting room, this one arranged with the largest stuffed animals the ceiling would accommodate and a dancer performing on the giant plush bunny as if it were a stripper pole. Another reveler sat with two girls on his lap who appeared to be twins. In front of them, a table with several elaborate and exotic fruit plates—and next to the fruit, a pile of cocaine. Johnny Walker and iced green tea seemed to be the preferred drink in that quarter...

Bruce wasn’t there. He never was.

It was a ten-seat hole in the wall in Asakusa, Tokyo. Three men sat at the lone table apart from the bar, a haze of smoke from the owner’s stubby cigarette permeating the tiny room, along with emotional waves of synth strings from a dilapidated radio behind the bar. The radio was almost as old as the song, an ancient enka hit Dick Grayson described as “something my alcoholic great aunt would kill herself to.”
Clark Kent slid his glasses up his nose in the steamy confines of the bar and smiled at the proprietor, ordering another Yebisu in shy, fumbling Japanese that was, seemingly unbeknownst to him, saturated in his Kansas accent.

Bruce had been quiet since they walked into the narrow, cluttered alley lined with microbars, though he’d been animated enough when the night began. He brought them first to another basement establishment almost as small, in Roppongi. A twelve-seat sushi bar where Bruce spoke of the sushi chef reverently as Yasuda-san.

“Look at his hands, look at his knuckles,” he’d whispered, his enthusiasm apparent despite the volume and discretion of a mission directive. “That’s years of Kyokushin karate right there. You can tell by his posture: low center, deep stance, the sweeping motion when he turns, look at that.

“Now watch his timing. Adapting to each customer’s pace of eating, coordinating, the order he serves them. His focus—middle to left, middle to right, watching them all, adjusting constantly. The speed, whether it’s managing the temperature of the rice or dispatching your opponent as quickly as possible, every second is measured. Controlling the space, managing his distance from the diners—watch how he turns, that deep fighter’s stance—moving in and out, never out of position…”

Bruce the martial arts nerd. The laser-lock on weirdly specific details and sharing them with an intensity only his son and best friend could love... Yasuda saw them then, and there was a lot of bowing and nodding through the introductions. They drank sake from Yasuda’s home town, chatted about the dojo in Asakusa, the boxing club in Toshima, the fish market, and baseball. Bruce was more relaxed than Clark had ever seen him outside the manor.

But since they reached Shinjuku, the old Bruce had emerged, the pre-Selina Bruce. The silent intensity the younger leaguers called brooding but Clark knew was more complicated. They’d come through a network of dark, rundown alleyways that Bruce navigated with such familiarity they might have been in Gotham... But the silence made Clark uncomfortable. It didn’t seem like a good omen as Bruce led them through the maze of ramshackle buildings and narrow alleys packed tight with narrower doors, lighted signs, printed signs and chalk sidewalk boards.

Clark made a few observations about the architecture, trying to make conversation. “Like walking into another time,” he’d said, and without slowing the pace, Bruce drew attention to several features of the surroundings that felt like an old Japanese shantytown, dropping easy phrases about the “direct contrast between the pre and post ‘economic miracle’ architecture.” Then the broody silence returned.

And then, suddenly, a density shift. The palpable density shift that meant Batman without the mask as they approached a blue door on a painted red building, a blue shuddered window next to it where he turned abruptly into a new alley. It was darker than the others, still crammed with doors and signs but fewer lit signs and almost no neon. Another turn and another alley—narrow, neon-lit, semi-populated—through a quartet of locals holding beer cans... Past the window of a microbar crowded with five laughing neighborhood regulars... Past some chained bicycles, another bar with a kid playing guitar, another with a pair of salary men singing karaoke... to this low, red painted door that looked like any other to Clark, but which transformed Bruce yet again. He wasn’t ‘Batman’ anymore, though the forceful intensity was still present. It
was just... unfocused. For the first time since Clark had known him, the purposeful, pressurized, super-concentrated, super-disciplined potency that defined ‘Batman’ was... inert.

Two beers later, the transformation was still unexplained, but it had done nothing to dampen the party atmosphere (such as it was for two married men and their friend who posed as a wild playboy for his job but never enjoyed it and was glad to be rid of the tiresome chore). They’d talked about first crushes, first kisses and first times... Bruce guessing that Alfred knew he’d lied about that ski weekend, Dick horrified to learn Bruce and Alfred both knew he used the West Side safe house as a bachelor pad the whole time he was at Hudson, and Clark confessing to the ethically sketchy use of x-ray vision and speed-running to contrive a series of accidental meetings with his freshman crush. (Followed by Bruce and Dick’s judgment that it might have been ethically sketchy if he’d managed to secure anything more than a cup of coffee and a warning that Professor Donnor’s Astronomy 100 had the nastiest mid-term on campus and if he didn’t find the science library and read the practice tests, he’d wind up in a parade of students leaving the mid-term and walking directly to drop-add.)

Brunettes were discussed, which Bruce and Clark both favored, and redheads... They teased Dick that at least a few of his beloved redheads were brunettes to begin with. A learned debate commenced comparing golden age beauties like Vivien Leigh, Liz Taylor, Bianca Jagger and Audrey Hepburn to more contemporary stars like Blake Lively and Kate Hudson. That resolved into contemplative silence... and an increased awareness of the synth strings and quavering croon of that ancient enka hit buzzing from the radio behind the bar.

“I wonder what’s happening in Dubai?” Dick asked philosophically. “And what that tragic wailing is about.”

“And if diplomatic relations with the U.S. will make it through the night?” Clark added.

“You should talk,” Dick chuckled, then cleared his throat from the smoke. “The most anyone who wasn’t there knows about your bachelor night is the Seattle-Phantom Zone Accord of 3016 YZ ‘that means Year of the Zone,’ and ‘Jagermeister mixes with Stoli; Green Chartreuse with Lantern energy and not the other way around.’”

Kryptonian muscle control suppressed the grin but not the blush.

“Well...” was the typically Smallville response.

“Think we should have left a reminder for Kyle?” Dick asked, raising his finger for another Kirin.

Finally Bruce spoke:

“Rayner isn’t Hal,” he said with a flick of his eyes to one side and a grim smile. “He’s not about to give the Jager ‘a little shot’ to make it glow under a black light. And as for the radio, the woman in the song sacrificed her familial ties to marry the man she loves against her father’s wishes. She then learned that he plans to leave her and marry a younger woman, so she throws herself from a bridge into the river beneath the moonlight.”

“Ah,” said Dick, though his eyes met Clark’s with an indignant “See?! Music my alcoholic great aunt would kill herself to, did I lie?”

“Poison Ivy invaded your bachelor party,” Clark reminded him lightly. “Ironically, it’s only the great playboy here whose send-off isn’t going to land us all in trouble.”
“It’s a little early to say that,” Dick warned, as the radio’s passionate wail reached a new plateau of anguish, and then subsided. “No, we’re going to be fine,” he amended.

“We’re not here for the enka,” Bruce said with a nod to Morinaga, to which the barman returned a broad smile, an enthusiastic nod and the hiss and smoke of the fryer behind him. “We’re here because Morinaga-san makes the finest okonomiyaki in Japan,” Bruce concluded.

Morinaga Shunsuke bowed, with a proud grin. “No, no, Osaka is better,” he said in English, “Osaka is origin city of good okonomiyaki.”

“Of course,” Bruce replied, with a knowing glint in his eye, “Mr. Morinaga moved here from Osaka when he was twenty-three and brought his family recipe with him. What you’re about to taste, gentlemen, is hands down the finest okonomiyaki In Japan.”

“Wayne-san, you speak too kindly,” said Morinaga, but Bruce only bowed his head to him slightly and lifted his glass.

“How’d you find this place?” said Clark.

“Wayne-san has been coming here for many years,” said Morinaga, his back turned, his gravelly voice competing with the next enka classic on the radio and with the hiss of cooking okonomiyaki, steam rising in puffs from the plate, “Since he was very young man.”

Bruce almost smiled. There was a thoughtful distance in his gaze before he turned it back to his company. Clark, his best friend. Dick, his son in all the ways that mattered. He hadn’t said the words, assuming they’d guessed, but it was time to remedy that.

“I studied at a dojo not far from here,” he said mildly. “It… was still fresh, then. The anger and grief. Especially the anger, my first days on the mat brought it all back to the surface. And the years since the alley, the emptiness of the manor, the absence of them, being alone in a strange city brought that back too. It was everywhere, inescapable. It made everything feel...bigger.”

“You were very quiet man, first time you came,” said Morinaga, wiping sweat from his brow on his bare forearm. “Not like most Americans. Especially tourist.”

Bruce chuckled. “I was lost. Like a lot of young men, I was convinced that all I needed was a wise old sensei to teach me the arts and I’d find the path of my life.”

“And did you?” Clark prompted.

“Not the way I imagined,” Bruce drummed his fingers on his glass and leaned back, staring at the ceiling. “It was still fresh, then. The city felt too big, despite all the close alleys. Empty, despite all the crowds. I’d left to get away from that feeling of hugeness, the silence at the manor, and ended up somehow just… finding the world to be a bigger manor. I didn’t find any wise master on a mountaintop. Instead I stumbled into this place, completely by chance.”

“And he ate so much okonomiyaki,” said Morinaga. “I thought ‘this is not good for young man’s health’. This is the okonomiyaki eating of despair.”

Dick held in a laugh, putting the pieces together. “And this is your sensei?”

“In many ways, Morinaga-san is my first sensei, yes,” Bruce said, “Others taught me the things I’d come seeking. But this man taught me the first important lessons I
learned after leaving Gotham. A significant part of my journey and part of my life started right here, with a sympathetic stranger and a plate of okonomiyaki.”

“See,” Morinaga laughed, pointing his spatula over the bar at his well-dressed guest, “I tell you, he is too kind. Now, sumimasen—” he deftly slid the flat, round pancakes of egg, flour, bacon and cabbage onto plates and slid them in front of the three men. “The food is ready. Douzo.”

“Itadakimasu,” said Bruce.

A half hour of steaming egg batter and seaweed and thin-sliced pork belly deliciousness later, the three travelers sat in a kind of religious silence, staring into their golden beers and, at most, nodding slowly. Bruce was indeed correct; Mr. Morinaga was an absolute master of his craft.

Suddenly, Clark’s eyes flicked up and to the west wall. Into the silence came a sound; an intrusion of clipping narrow shoes on the cobble. And a face manifesting at the doorway..

“Hey, Bruce, this place is hard to find,” said Edward Nigma, poking his head into the bar, “And finding the three of you here like zen monks in a temple is a puzzle indeed.”

The Bat-scowl froze Bruce’s features. “Nigma. You can’t be here,” he said, though the impossible arrival had already come through the door and was barreling down on them with unnerving perkiness.

“Your best man needs no introduction,” he said to Clark. “Mr. Kent, Edward Nigma. Rewarding number of question marks on your book cover,” offering his hand, then turned to Dick. “And Mr. Grayson, had the pleasure of looking in on your wedding. Beat the Wayne Manor curse, well done. Edward Nigma.”

“Consider your next words very carefully, Ed,” Dick said, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Nigma thrust up a finger, off the baffled faces of the three, “Gentlemen, I am not here for hostility, and I regret having to intrude on what’s obviously a private party. I need a few minutes with the groom, that’s all. Then I’ll crawl off to my one-step-above-a-capsule hotel, sleep off my jetlag and perhaps go spy some Harajuku fashion or pick up some new tech in Akihabara tomorrow. I’ll be completely out of your perfectly coiffed hero hair, pinkie swear.”

“How did you find us?” Clark managed, blinking.

“Don’t ask him, it will only prolong the conversation,” Bruce said while Nigma chirped “Riddle me this, when is a bachelor party in Dubai not a bachelor party in Dubai?”

After a round of eye contact out of The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, Bruce quietly stood and bowed to Morinaga-san before turning his gaze on Nigma. “You have five minutes,” he said.

“Five minutes and two requests beforehand—”

“No.”

“Simple ones, Bruce, simple ones. One…” he winced, “Look you really needed to hear this from me, but I want your absolute promise, pre-emptively, that you will not, and I cannot reiterate this strongly enough, break my legs again. Or any other limb or appendage. No ruptured organs either, please, I need those. Like I said I’m not here to fight, and I came here with the very best of intentions…”
Bruce grabbed Nigma by the collar and started to drag him from the bar. “What did you do?”

“Second… second, second! Before we go!” Nigma wriggled as close to Morinaga as he still could, “Biru hittotsu, kudasai… I’m going to need it.”

Warily, Mr. Morinaga passed him a bottle of Asahi from the fridge.

“Put it on my tab, Morinaga-san. And I apologize for this,” Bruce said stonily, and then the two were gone, Bruce crowding Eddie down the narrow alleyway outside the bar like a pair of drunken gaijin stumbling back to a hotel after a night out on the big town.

“Well?” Bruce asked when they reached a secluded spot.

“Do you want to hear how I found you?” Eddie asked impishly.

“Edward, understand that I am taking this time to share a quiet drink with my son and my best friend in a place that is significant to me. All I want from you is to state your business and go away so I can get back to it.”

“You’re already mad,” Eddie sighed, “Listen, I have your wedding present. I wanted to give it to you when Selina’s not around, you know how women are.”

“I thought the hashtags were your gift,” Bruce said.

“My gift is taking care of the other rogues so you don’t have to worry about it. The hashtags covered all but your biggest problem, Brucie. You can’t pretend you don’t know who I mean, and you can’t have forgotten what he did at the Pelacci-Marcuso wedding and that bit about giving the bride away.”

“I’m equipped to handle him.”

“Since when? Nobody handles him, nobody’s equipped to handle him. So I took care of it.”

“Edward…” Bruce’s fists creaked.

“We had an agreement on the leg-breaking, right? Witnesses, multinational—”

“…what did you do to J—?”

Before he could speak the name, a bloodied man came skidding around the corner and clpped the pair of them, leaving a smear of red on Nigma’s arm as he recovered, stumble-running a few more steps until he gained full speed, and finally collapsing outside Morinaga’s door. He would have fallen flat on his face if it was anyone other than Batman and Riddler that he’d passed, but both men were accustomed to pursuit and neither paused at the sight of blood. They reached him as he was going down and caught him under the arm on each side.

“His shirt’s bleeding,” Nigma said in English as they helped him inside.

“His shirt’s not bleeding; he’s bleeding,” Bruce corrected.

“I told you we shouldn’t have left them alone,” Dick said to Clark, as Clark said “What’s th—” and Morinaga cried “Yuuto!”

“This is Yuuto, my brother Riku’s boy,” he told Bruce in Japanese.

“It’s his nephew,” Bruce told the others, while Eddie had taken a small kit from his jacket and was using a thin probe to pull blood-soaked cloth from the wound.

“That doesn’t look so bad,” he said like an expert, and then in Japanese asked Morinaga for vodka and napkins. He turned back to his patient and said “Well actually it looks terrible, but it’s not as bad as it looks. Nice bit of wordplay in English,
doesn’t translate, and you wouldn’t care anyway because nobody wants a pun when they’ve got O-negative on the outside.”

“What are you talking about?” Dick asked, disgusted.

“We should take him to a hospital,” Clark said.

“Nobody goes running to their uncle’s bar if they’re clear to go to a hospital,” Eddie answered. “You can’t see this guy is scared?”

Yuuto had just enough English to follow what was being said from the tone and he agreed vehemently—vehemently enough to start the blood flowing, and it took Bruce agreeing with Eddie in Japanese to calm him down. By now, Morinaga had brought the vodka and as Eddie expertly cleaned the wound, Yuuto told his story, principally to his uncle, though Bruce occasionally cut in with a question and translated in snippets:

“He works in a hotel in Ōtemachi, the business district. It’s like Tokyo’s Wall Street; a lot of offices, corporate HQs, thick with skyscrapers. Not a lot of hotels compared to other parts of town. The few there are, they’re very high end. He says men came in today. Into the staff area. The kitchen and break room. Closed them off… Nobody else could come in, nobody could leave… He says they were Yakuza… This would happen sometimes when he worked in Shinjuku. You’d go into work one day, boss would be at the door and say ‘Go home, you can’t come in.’ It would happen in Shinjuku, doesn’t happen in Chiyoda. It doesn’t happen in Ōtemachi…”

There was an ominous clap of thunder outside, punctuating the word like a radio play.

“He says they didn’t care about us, the kitchen staff. Just told them to stand by the wall… They brought in the doorman. A girl from the front desk. Then an older man from the front desk, one at a time they brought them in… Itsuki, who he knows; he works at the concierge desk. And Sora who works in the lobby bar… One at a time, they take them through the kitchen into the break room. They take them past the knives. Sometimes they pick one up and take it in with them… Few minutes later, they come out again. White. Scared. No blood but white and scared and shaking… Finally they go. These Yakuza, they left and he ran out to see his friend, this Itsuki… But the Yakuza hadn’t gone. They were still in the lobby. They saw Yuuto and Itsuki talking… Grabbed Yuuto, beat him up. ‘You don’t see anything, you don’t know anything, we were never here.’”

“I think we can all fill in from there,” Eddie told him. “Those conversations never have much variety.”

The heroes gave Eddie a nasty look but Yuuto nodded gratefully and managed a smile. Bruce drew Morinaga into the corner where they talked quietly. After a minute he waved Clark over and Dick followed. A minute later Eddie joined them.

“If the question you guys are debating is whether you should suspend the wild bucks’ night and look into this, the answer is yes. ‘Cause the Yakuza boys took his wallet,” he reported. “That means if anything goes wrong with whoever/whatever they were asking about, it’s going to come back to him and his buddy and they both end up in the tuna nets with the dolphins.”

“Since when do you care?” Dick snapped.

Eddie pointed to the smear of Yuuto’s blood on his jacket.
“That’s his. There is an obligation, which I am discharging like any lucid person who’s been bled on. I am pointing out what you should already know unless you’re all drunker than you appear: Yakuza were asking questions about somebody booked into that hotel because something is going down connected to that person, and if that thing does not play out exactly the way they want, the dumbest oyabun going will figure Yuuto’s buddy told him something and he went and talked to… to people like you, which he kind of has. Since what they’ll all assume he’s told you could very likely get him killed, it’s probably a good idea if you actually find out what it is.”

“This might be the Yebisu talking, but he has a point,” Dick admitted.

Near the Imperial Palace Gardens, another patch of lush, beautiful greenery flanks the entrance to a 40-story glass tower. It would appear small in any other part of the world, but in the ultra-expensive business district where every square foot of real estate must pay its way, leaving even that tiny area undeveloped is a wild extravagance.

The building is principally an office tower, the hotel occupying only the top six floors. Its tiny receiving lobby on the ground floor appears like a tranquil oasis, apart from the city. Earthy hues with the creamy-golden glow of indirect lighting, bonsai tree against a shoji screen, a world apart from the noise and bustle of the street. The main lobby on the 33rd floor is reached by special elevators that complete the feel of escape from noise, grime, and worry into an alternate reality of calm, balance, and peace. Under a 90-foot ceiling of washi rice paper (designed to suggest a shoji lantern but to some suggesting The Matrix,) a water pond, rock gardens and ikebana flower arrangements are placed to convey a sense of timelessness and harmony.

In the midst of this, an older woman sat alone on the most comfortable of the sofas near the window. From a distance she appeared about sixty, though if you got closer her eyes made it hard to tell. She was dressed in a very expensive business suit, perfectly fitted, yet there was a maternal plumpness that kept her from looking chic. The whole idea of fashion seemed too artificial somehow. Though the deep sofa was made for lounging, she sat upright, her legs crossed at the ankles like the grand duchess of another age receiving visitors. She was poised but not stiff, dignified but not proud. And when she looked out at the city, she exuded warmth and contentment.

She’d ordered tea, which was just arriving and drew her attention from the two men she’d been studying. Two men at odds with the zen-like atmosphere of the lobby.

Something about them radiated… agitation. It buzzed around them so that even now that they’d settled in the lobby bar, even at this great distance, it disturbed her. Like a hive. It sat over there, tense and restless. An errant bee flying out now and then and chittering, then returning to its den but apt to return at any time. It was not… as it should be. The air was not as it should be while those men continued to exist in her field of vision...

In the bar, Fifth Fang and Second had no idea they did not blend invisibly into their surroundings. Both skilled assassins, trained to be shadows, they were disciplined and detached, their unwavering focus clamping down on any visible sign of stress.
And stress there was. Jaxon Valdorcia was late. It was thirty-eight minutes past the meeting time. They should be in his room right now, inspecting the Masakado head.

“How long do we wait?” asked Second.

“As long as it takes. Anything could have delayed him. He’s a professional. Most likely, he is being cautious.” A long rumble of thunder went unnoticed by most in the tranquil lobby, but Fifth was one of the few who glanced at the window. “Besides, I wouldn’t be in any hurry to go out into that.”

The force of the downpour was not as present as it would have been in daylight, but even against the night sky he could see near-opaque sheets of rain blurring the distant lights. He could imagine the harsh whistle of winds and the clacking of windows being buffeted in their frames, and the chill of that punishing wind cutting through whoever was so unfortunate as to be out there.

“Yeah, it’s a Wayne party; should have seen this coming,” Eddie said as the four men crowded under a few feet of cover while the wind blew every bicycle in sight against its chain, tore advertising flyers off their posts and turned any errant bit of litter into flying shrapnel. “Do it in Japan, you’re gonna get a tsunami.”

“Get ready to move,” Bruce barked. “Cloudbursts like this don’t last long. If we keep up the pace, we can get there ahead of the rain.”

Their goal was a McDonalds near the train station that closed at nine and became a known pick-up spot for prostitutes. The men came to a stop across the street, happily ahead of the rain, for they had no idea where the girls might go to wait out the storm.

With a wrist-flick of a street magician, Bruce’s hand contained a 5 000 yen note held in front of Eddie’s nose.

“Get what we need,” he ordered. When Nigma hesitated, Bruce went on “They’re both married, I’m getting married, and you’re here. Get what we need.”

“Fine,” Eddie said, taking the bill in disgust and adding ‘wusses’ under his breath as he stepped away.

He approached the women, talked for a minute, there was pointing down the street, and he returned with a satisfied grin. “Pimp is an older woman, should be in that bar with the pink sign, sometimes watching through the window. The protection is in that steep stairwell next to the shop with the green awning.”

There was a loud clap of thunder and, knowing their time was short, they quickly debated starting with ‘the protection’ or the pimp. In the course of the cross talk, Bruce’s eyes met Clark’s more than once...

Wally and Kyle had returned to their suite. The party was fun for a while, until the third time one of their League signals was mistaken for a coke signal and they were passed “the bag.” Eel was occupied, so they’d let him be. He’d met a model of the type that existed exclusively on Instagram and in magazines—or so they thought. Apparently these wild and exotic creatures not only existed in nature, they wandered free range through Bruce Wayne parties.

Their brains collectively shorted out.
There was no way to reconcile this—any of this—with the grim, inflexible and all-knowing hard ass they knew in the Justice League. They didn’t know Bruce Wayne—though the muscle memory of Kyle’s time as the jetsetting artist Kyray threatened a Dutch accent when he found himself talking about his work—with oh God—with the topless girl from the blue jeans ad.

He, Kyle Rayner, was talking to the Guess Jeans girl. Eel had slunk off to a corner to suck face with the girl from the Gucci perfume ads—none of them could say how they came to be at this party, it wasn’t possible they were Bruce Wayne’s special guests at the party of the decade at the Burj al—And Wally was probably left fidgeting with his wedding ring, so a pal really should go find him and—and—

Kyle had looked around, and saw Wally was not fidgeting but looking with contempt at the liquor bottles displayed on one particular bar at the far end of the party. Wally being the least snobbish person he knew, Kyle went to investigate.

This smaller bar was apparently where the very select, outrageously expensive liquors were being offered, and Wally’s disgust was for a tequila which owed its ridiculous price tag to the bottle more than its contents. He said he pitted the rich, so desperate to drop a bundle on a drink but not knowing how to do it. Then his eyes twinkled, he ‘flashed out’ for a split-second that wasn’t exactly visible to the eye, but Kyle was used to it so he knew what was happening. When he ‘returned,’ he gestured with a speed-blur finger-tip, and Kyle followed back to the elevator.

A half hour later, they were back in their suite having the night of their lives watching IP Man on their oversized TV screen…when Eel came in. They pointed to the selection of films they had racked up: Commando, Predator, John Wick…Tried and true boys’ night fare, but not quite enough to justify passing up the opportunity to press the Fashion Week flesh and being so darned happy about it.

...“Remember how Monaghan spent half of last year trying to get us to call him Baba Yaga?”...

Yes, Eel remembered, but it still didn’t compete with these women who spend, like, 80% of their waking hours in nightclubs. Did Kyle and Wally not know what happens when you get those women on the dance floor? They have moves!

...“and the concierge is trying to find Old Boy in the original Korean.”

That… was impressive, Eel admitted, but still. The Gucci perfume girl had her hands under his shirt. She pinched a nipple—she actually put her fingers under his shirt and pinched—

Kyle held his hand high over his head as like a rock star signaling the crowd, and a lantern energy liquor cabinet materialized between their chairs. Wally took over the explanation in words:

“A pre-prohibition bottle of Old No. 7 whiskey—that’s bourbon if you need to be told such things—plucked from the time stream in 1896 when it was made, eh, probably 30 years prior, give or take, by one Jasper Newton Daniel, more commonly known as Jack.”

“You… used Speed Force, to zip through time and pick up a bottle of Jack Daniels made by Jack Daniels, aged 30 years,” Eel said in awe.
“That one is Don Lunas Grand Reserve 10-year aged tequila,” Wally continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “Not old by whiskey standards, but trust me, it is something special. Now that one—”

He looked at Kyle quizzically, which one is that?

“I couldn’t let him off thinking he’s the only one that can make a liquor run in the time stream,” Kyle explained and pointed to the first bottle. “World War I, bottle of Rhum Clement from the old creole sugarcane plantation in Le Francois, Martinique, it’s not a bad attempt, but it is something Bruce could pick up at auction, which defeats the whole idea. This one…” a golden-green halo began to glow around the remaining bottle, and Kyle’s voice took on the deep quiver in which proud fathers speak of their children “…is a Barbados Private Estate dark rum from The Year of Our Lord 1780. Behold. And then be-holding a glass and pour some.”

The level of Yakuza thug assigned as protective muscle on an insignificant street far from the red light district isn’t exactly the A-team. The guy wrote off four dripping wet gaijin the moment he saw them. When one approached the girls and then returned to the huddle, it wasn’t cause for concern. He watched them, but not with concern. The only question was if they could pay, and the girls knew what to do if there was any doubt.

The thunder was the biggest worry. It was getting louder, and suddenly there was a loud crack and an explosion of white. The streetlight in front of his stairwell erupted into a hail of sparks and he ran out with a yelp through a shower of red glowing dots, hitting his hair, his jacket, his hand—and burning flesh in the second it took to flick off. Before he knew what was happening, something—an arm—was around his shoulders, half guiding-half pulling him along. In a burble of English, the Japanese words for ‘lightning’ and ‘fire’ popped out, and then suddenly, the burbling stopped and he was surrounded by the rain-soaked gaijin—who seemed concerned more than drunk or hostile. And it turned out they spoke passable Japanese.

Neither his hair nor his jacket had caught fire, but their concern was understandable. Being that close to a lightning strike was a dramatic thing, and it was actually pretty nice of them to rush in and help him get clear that way. There was also more thunder, long rumbles unlike the loud clap that came with the lightning strike but threatening a deluge to come… and maybe it was the thunder, but the rescue party suddenly didn’t seem that nice. Three surrounded him, the fourth stood in front fingering a tempting roll of cash. He croaked a question in a voice out of a nightmare, and an answer came tumbling out of his mouth as a reflex—another question and “the Nigerians in Kabukicho”—another and “Love/Pain in Roppongi”—another—crackle of thunder. Another crackle of thunder and he was alone again, holding a 5000 yen note.
Haute couture, or ‘high sewing,’ dates back to the court of Louis XVI (and more importantly, of Marie Antoinette) though it wasn’t formalized in France until, ironically, the English born Charles Worth opened a Paris atelier in 1858 and soon founded the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne to regulate and codify the craft where the most gifted designers from Coco Chanel to Cristobal Balenciaga would display their art.

Couture became synonymous with garments made entirely by hand and of the very best materials, and created by the most accomplished craftspeople who complete a twelve year apprenticeship before being considered full-fledged seamstresses and tailors. Garments are fitted to a client’s shape and then sent to workshops for the incredibly intricate embroidery, beading or feathering which takes three to four months or more. No more than ten examples of any particular design are made, and it has been estimated that there are no more than 4,000 haute couture clients in the world.

One of these is Selina Kyle, long time companion and soon to be wife of Gotham’s Bruce Wayne. It was therefore shocking, though perhaps not surprising, that the tabloid eager to strip her of every semblance of her true background has alleged everything from the black lace pilfered by the Harry Potter franchise from the 2008 runway of Alexander McQueen to Ms. Kyle herself doing the pilfering from a Gotham dress shop. As if any woman known to Couture Week in Paris was unaware such garments are built to the body of the wearer requiring numerous alterations and fittings. Miss Kyle’s patience with these slurs is the truest testament to her breeding, but the rest of us need not be silent.

For the edification of those inventing these stories, accustomed no doubt to the outlet malls of Bludhaven and imagining the (alleged) theft of Rembrandts and rubies would equate to the stealing of a dress, let us provide more informed speculation:

The future Mrs. Wayne would have begun with a visit to her designer, most probably before the engagement was made public. Fashion houses keep their clients’ secrets as scrupulously as a doctor, and there is not a moment to be wasted as the work will take months to complete...

“...and while couture houses never speak of the price,’” Lois read aloud, “‘any more than they bandy the names of their customers, these are the wedding gowns of royals and billionaires. To reach a likely amount, take the price tag offered by the tabloid scribblers, double it, and then add a zero.’ My God, the prose is painful!”

“Reowrl,” Doris said, making a cat scratch motion. “It may not be the AP Style Guide, Lois, but he’s sure got the claws out on Selina’s behalf. I say more power to him.”

Lois set down the magazine and picked up her daiquiri. The women were seated around their villa’s infinity pool, surrounded by towering palm trees, hibiscus and wild orchids.
“Easy for you to say, you didn’t have to read it out loud,” Lois laughed, her judgment tempered by the cool, soothing drink.

“Not to mention dancing with him,” Selina added, remembering the rumba at the engagement party. “And dodging him through the museum, that’s only fun with hunky crimefighters.”

“I would’ve thought you’d be happy. Somebody’s finally punching back against the Post,” Doris said with a wicked smile.

“I punch back fine,” Selina said. “Remember Cat-Tales?”

“Yeah but now you’re not alone; isn’t that a good thing?”

Selina didn’t answer, she just glanced at Lois who said “Well I’m grateful anyone is laying into the so-called reporters making up this nonsense, but I still don’t see how anyone can get through his books.”

“You get used to it. Like ceviche,” Doris said, then she turned to Selina. “Speaking of, where’s Anna? I haven’t seen her since lunch.”

“She’ll be back, she’s trying to find out who that guy was, when we got on the ferry.”

“The smoking hot one checking you out?” Lois teased.

“Neither of us think it’s because he’s into leggy brunettes. He didn’t look twice at you, Lois. Just me and Anna, the fence and the thief.”

The commercial areas of Roppongi were dark and still, but the night was just getting started in the bar-nightclub-strip club-hostess club-cabaret areas. Every third usher, barker, and salesman identified Clark Kent as the quintessential tourist, and he was shown Polaroids of the beautiful girls dancing at a club right down the street.

The storm had been and gone in this part of town, a smell of charred wood and a dead neon sign indicating where the lightning had hit. The foursome found their way to Love/Pain without much trouble. There were a few Western faces in the crowd, but not many. The club obviously didn’t seek out Western tourists like some places, but it seemed to welcome those who found it because they were brought by a local.

Near the door, Bruce, Clark, Dick and Eddie stood together looking up at a stripper dancing on a low table while some other newcomers squeezed past.

“Apparently you can thigh-fuck her,” one of them announced… “Like dry humping?” “Yeah” “Right up there on the table?” “I suppose.” “More like knee-fuck her.” …and they were gone.

While Bruce, Dick and Clark argued who was going to pony up and cause a disruption, Eddie noticed a small square on one of the posters by the door. His phone was out and he scanned it as the argument raged on:

“From what happened on the street, it’s clear Clark gives off a vibe. He should do it.” “I may have a look. That’s different from a vibe, and it’s why I shouldn’t do it. They won’t be expecting anything from me. It will seem more natural from one of you—” “Exactly. Never give them what they expect.” “The element of surprise isn’t a plus here.”

“I got this,” Eddie said, brushing past them and walking quietly up to the girl. He didn’t unzip, merely beckoned with a fingertip for her to bend down and then whispered something.

She nodded, glanced at Bruce and the others, and stepped off the table.
“C’mon, we’re in,” he announced happily, as she waved for them to follow and led the way to a backroom.

“What did you—” Bruce started to ask, when Eddie cut him off.

“Password,” he said, flashing his phone which displayed the club’s website. “QR-code on the banner over there led me to it. The whole site is Lorem ipsum text, y’know, the placeholder stuff. ‘Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit.’ Except for right there. Kin Gorudo. I figured that’s the password.”

Bruce grunted, and they were led into the back room where a manager, presumably a low level boss, sat with two young toughs behind him and a third who came forward to search the newcomers—but shrank back by a four-headed wave of death glares that caused his stomach to drop, his muscles to seize, and the blood to drain from his face. The boss merely smirked at his failure.

“My English is not probably up to task of what you will speak asking about,” he said pleasantly.

“That’s not a problem at all. We’ll speak in Japanese,” Bruce said swiftly in that language, and with perfect pronunciation and inflection.

A blur of questions and answers followed, during which Eddie leaned over to Clark and whispered:

“It’s from Cicero, you know.”

Clark looked down on him warily, but he continued without encouragement:

“The Lorem ipsum thing. Neque porro quisquam est qui dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit.”

“Mhm,” Clark managed, deciding it was one of those bizarre moments that happened with Gothamites where politeness was the best course.

“It’s from Cicero. It means ‘There is no one who loves pain itself, who seeks after it and wants to have it, simply because it is pain.’ Just imagine, 2000 years ago there were people so messed up, something like that needed to be said out loud. 2000 years later—” he nodded like the stupidity of the masses was an in-joke with his new friend “—still just as messed up.”

“Why are you talking?” said Dick.

“Oh I’m sorry, am I interrupting your enjoyment of the Kurisawa movie without subtitles,” Eddie said, gesturing to the other conversation.

Before Dick could respond, there was an abrupt jolt—under the floor and rattling objects on the desk.

“What was—” Dick started to say as a more persistent vibration began and continued for several seconds. The boss had stood and his men were filing out the door as calmly as if it were a fire drill when, almost four seconds into the tremors, it stopped.

“Was that what I think it was?” said Dick, alarmed.

“What do you call a gin mixer in Silicon Valley?” said Eddie reflexively, amazed at the natives’ complete lack of concern.

“Let’s go, we’ve got what we need,” said Bruce, leading them out.

As they left the club, Clark rejoined them, stepping in from the side.

“Techtonic,” Eddie said dully, answering his earlier riddle but staring at Clark, confused. “Weren’t you just...”
Clark cut him off with a homespun smile. “An earthquake is what we call breaking news, Mr. Nigma,” he said, holding up his phone.

Bruce changed the subject with what he learned: the man the Yakuza were looking for was Jax, aka Jaxon Valdorcia, the Australian cat burglar.

After a remark from Eddie that “your night keeps getting better and better” which led to Dick swatting him on the back of the head, there was a brief debate on Bruce making a two-minute call to Selina that could save them hours chasing their tails around Tokyo versus the monumentally stupid idea of calling the bride in the middle of your bachelor night. The ground shook again, as if the Earth itself was casting a vote in favor of the call. The prospect of chasing their tails around a tectonically unstable Tokyo was even less appealing than doing it in a thunder storm.

That led to a new discussion of the time zones: Selina would be in the middle of her real bachelorette party, a spa weekend of ultimate indulgence on a private island in Jumby Bay—as was Doris and Lois—and none of the three ladies’ partners could agree if the island was an hour ahead of Gotham or behind, which would be two hours ahead of Metropolis (or not) and how that related to their time in Japan, and how waking her, catching her at breakfast or interrupting a sunrise massage ranked on the list of things that would get you off to a bad start...

Bruce found a quiet place to make the call—while the thugs who’d followed them from the strip club watched. It was the perfect time to strike. Jo, the youngest and greenest of the three, who also happened to be the biggest, took the lone man who spoke Japanese and was silly enough to separate from his friends. Riku, Ogura, and Sando would take the other three.

Since Bruce was isolated, Jo’s fate was sealed in under a second. The block and takedown were nearly simultaneous and Bruce had checked that his phone hadn’t been damaged and was performing his post-battle neck-stretch before Jo’s colleagues even reached their targets.

That scene was slightly more complicated, since Eddie gallantly tried to escort civilian Kent away from the violence—leaving the junior bat to handle the three hulking brutes, which was of course his job more than Edward Nigma’s—while Clark tried to help Dick by keeping Nigma’s back to the fight. The chaos and crossed purposes drew that fight out for nine seconds.

A minute later, Bruce returned. He glanced at the heap of unconscious Yakuza muscle and then looked at Dick.

“Three,” said Dick.
“One,” said Bruce.
“Nine,” said Dick.
“One,” said Bruce.

Dick’s eyes flicked to Nigma and Clark as if to say “Well I had an audience,” and Bruce grunted. Then he laid out his leads:

This thief hunt was almost certainly taking place before the heist. The thief was probably hired by a third party unconnected to the Yakuza. Ötemachi is filled with corporate headquarters. Jax started in the Australian S.I.S., the kind of talent you’d bring in for a very high security target. The Yakuza somehow got wind of it (possibly because he had to acquire special equipment once he got here) and figured whatever
he was brought in for, it was too valuable a prize to let anyone make off with without paying a cut.

“Boy, she’s something, isn’t she?” Eddie said, bursting with pride.

Bruce shot him a look that was... not quite the judgmental disgust of the crimefighter. His lip twitched. Then he said:

“Now that we know who we’re looking for and why, we can investigate the hotel.”

The beautiful people had gone. The shamisen player had packed up for the night. The lobby itself was timeless, still projecting that zen-like atmosphere that existed apart from the world with its lunchtime rushes and checkout times, early risers and night owls. But time still existed with its ebb and flow. The crowd was now sparse, it defied easy categories, and it presented a difficult problem for four westerners in search of answers.

“Okay, we’re here. Where do we start?” Dick asked, unmoved by the tranquil beauty that awed most visitors.

Clark suggested the staff. Bruce analyzed the traffic patterns, the sightlines, the exits, and the spot in the lounge that offered an ideal location to sit quietly and observe. If anyone had installed themselves there for an hour, nursing a scotch...

“What about her?” Eddie suggested. Nodding slightly and with a polite smile to a plump, older woman in an elegant business suit, seated alone. “She’s been watching us since we came in.”

He was ignored. Bruce agreed with Clark, but rather than questioning “the staff” generally, he wanted to begin with the bartender in that lounge and any wait staff still on duty there. Unfortunately, the servers were gone and the bartender was only a half-hour into his shift. But he did mention “Mrs. Ami” as he fumbled with a package and extracted small green balls dusted with sugar, which he arranged on a plate with similar white ones.

Mrs. Ami, he said, is a regular. On the evenings she’s in the lobby, she would be there for hours. If anyone could tell them about the comings and goings, it would be her.

“Told ya,” Eddie said under his breath, while Dick grinned about “the Japanese Miss Marple.”

The bartender set the plate of sweets onto a tray with a pot of tea and said it was for her, if one of the gentlemen wanted to take it to her... Eddie had already picked up the tray without waiting for a consensus and the others started to follow, almost as if to keep an eye on him in case he was a bewitched child on his way into the witch’s gingerbread house—when Clark grabbed Bruce’s elbow.

“Problem with a train in Kashiwa,” he whispered. “Probably caused by the quake. I may be a while.”

Bruce nodded and Clark was gone. When he caught up with Dick, Eddie was serving the woman expertly, addressing her as Ami-san and asking if the green daifuku were flavored with green tea.

“They are. They serve western sweets here, as a rule, but I am a very good customer and they indulge me,” Ami was saying as she then looked up at the new arrivals before
including one in her remarks. “You speak Japanese very well for an American,” she said to Eddie, though she was looking at Bruce. “As does Wayne-san,” she added with a nod. “I remember your, what was it called, ‘town hall’ for stockholders late last year, and you spoke at the Economics Summit some years before that.” She switched to English as she said “Welcome back to Tokyo. I’m sure you find it more agreeable than Dubai.”

Her smile was warm with good-humor and maternal indulgence, and Bruce cleared his throat, seemingly embarrassed. He said he hoped she would be discreet with the information, and she told him not to worry. “In this lobby I’m afraid there is the possibility of a CEO of a multi-national being recognized, but those who do know Bruce Wayne by sight wouldn’t dream of snapping a picture or tweeting about it.”

She asked them to sit, offered tea and explained about the sweets which Americans know as mochi. The white rice cakes stuffed with red bean paste were the originals while the green, “as your clever friend guessed,” are flavored. A relatively modern innovation. The rice cake is flavored with green tea and the filling has white cream in addition to the red bean paste…

Gracious hostessing dispensed with, her manner returned to that of a charming businesswoman:

“No, now I gather you have questions,” she said amiably. “But before I answer yours, I have a question of my own about the dreadful weather out there. What did you make of it?”

She took in every detail about the rain and lightning, and projected worse to come if there was flooding or if the lightning took out electricity for any substantial part of the city. The earthquake, even if they didn’t feel much here in Tokyo, could have been more severe elsewhere. Halting factory lines in key industrial areas, bursting water mains…

“Look, I realize a lot of ‘business’ amounts to thinking through contingencies,” Dick broke in uncomfortably, looking from Ami to Bruce and back again. “But I don’t see what the benefit is to listing—”

“To say nothing,” Ami said with calm insistence, “of what the markets will do when they open if this situation is not resolved.”

“How can a thunderstorm be resolved?” asked Eddie.

“Or an earthquake,” asked Dick. “And as for the markets—”

“Japan is what you westerners consider ‘superstitious,’” Ami explained in that same calmly insistent tone. “Take this neighborhood, for instance, very much like your Fifth Avenue or Wall Street or… what is that English one called… Kensington. And yet, did you pass a courtyard as you came here. You must have, it’s right down the street. With the stone frogs, four steps up to a shrine, a tall stone marker with flowers left before it. Does it not seem strange to you that such an extraordinary piece of real estate would remain undeveloped? Well there’s a reason. It’s because that is ‘The Hill of Masakado’s Head.’”

“Come again?” asked Dick.

“Taira no Masakado?” asked Bruce.
Eddie ate one of the green mochi.

“Taira no Masakado, the samurai?” Bruce repeated.
“Arguably the first samurai,” Ami said, nodding to Bruce. “Though hardly the life of honor and service the term now implies. A warrior landowner who quarreled with influential relatives, killed several in battle, led a rebellion, declared himself emperor…” she sighed. “And just generally never walked past a fire without pouring gasoline on it. The theory, I suppose, is that a raging inferno might create opportunities. Chaos creates, though at a dreadful cost. Masakado was one of those who didn’t mind the cost, since he wouldn’t be the one paying. The powers that be caught up with him eventually, he died in battle and was beheaded… That was not the end of his story.”

“That’s not usually how it works,” said Dick.

“You’d be surprised,” said Eddie, and Bruce shot him a nasty look, though Ami seemed to regard the interruptions with maternal indulgence. She continued:

“The government had put a bounty on his head, and that wasn’t a figure of speech in those days. The head was sent to Kyoto as a trophy while the body was buried. The head didn’t care for the arrangement and went flying back to the small fishing village where Masakado was from, which became Edo and is now Tokyo.”

“You can’t be serious,” said Eddie.

“A flying samurai head?” said Dick.

“A demon head,” Eddie whispered through his teeth. “A literal demon’s head.”

“Ghost head,” Dick countered. “If we’re being literal.”

“I remember Luthor was trying to get his hands on a prime lot in Ōtemachi at one time,” Bruce said thoughtfully. “That would have been this shrine?”

“There have been several attempts to develop the land,” Ami nodded. “In each case, disturbing the head was followed by tsunami, flooding, mudslides, typhoons, plague, cyclone, volcanic eruption or war. In 1923 when they got as far as taking down the shrine to build a Ministry of Finance, it was the Great Kanto Earthquake. Leveled the building and killed the minister. They restored the shrine.”

“Ready to call him a demon?” Eddie whispered to Dick.

“Are you saying something’s happened to the shrine, and that caused the storms tonight and the tremors?” Dick asked, ignoring Nigma. Ami smiled with tolerant affection.

“I am saying that Japan is superstitious. Today alone in this hotel, a man had a heart attack, another in the restaurant choked on his steak, there was a kitchen fire and out front on the street, a woman was hit by a car. Now, you all are from Gotham, which the world considers a great metropolis. Is it? Or is it like Tokyo, a thousand cozy villages laid by side by side and stacked on top of one another, making up hundreds of distinct neighborhoods? Ōtemachi is a village like any back street on Aoshima, and come morning, it will all be known: the heart attack and the fire and the woman hit by the car. Together with the quake, and the lightning… Japan is superstitious. There will be panic in this small, close-knit village—that just happens to be where the business of the nation is conducted.

“I tell you, gentlemen, if this night continues as it is going, if the situation is not resolved by morning, I fear the markets will crash. The stock market, the currency markets, the economy could collapse. Compounded with the damage of a quake, or worse to come, the economy will collapse. In a day, three or four at the most.
“Masakado is what we call ‘onryo,’ not a demon exactly,” she directed the last words at Nigma with another tolerant smile, “but a vengeful murder ghost targeting all his rage on the Imperial Family of Japan, and therefore on Japan. Bringing economic ruin would be an effective way to begin a new assault. What is happening must be uncovered and dealt with by sunrise. It simply must. Do you understand?”

“We don’t, but we don’t have to,” Bruce said. “Thank you for the extensive information. May I ask my questions now?”

“We do understand each other,” she said with an inscrutable smile. “I didn’t expect that. My office is in this building. Taiyōsama Limited, two floors down. You can find me there when you’ve done all you need to do.”

Bruce pointed out the spot in the lounge that was of interest, and Ami described the men she’d seen who had lingered there for quite some time. All three thought they sounded like Demon, though for different reasons.

As they got up to leave, Clark quietly rejoined the group as if he’d been standing behind Nigma’s seat all along. They split up then, Bruce, Clark and Dick questioning a doorman, bellman and maid respectively while Eddie left a riddle. It was Dick who found out the man the Yakuza were asking about was in room 319, a one-bedroom suite, and Clark who learned he was checked in under the name Mason Vash. Bruce and Clark went to search the room while Dick returned to the lobby to keep an eye out for Eddie.

“Don’t say it,” Bruce growled, sensing Clark’s smile as he pulled a card from his wallet, coding it with a mysterious swipe across his watch strap as if he and not Jaxon were the notorious cat burglar.

“No, uh-hm, not a word,” Clark murmured as Bruce opened the door.

Bruce then waited as Clark scanned the go-bag, the drawers... bathroom... and finally declared “He doesn’t stay long. Doesn’t unpack. Toiletries in the bathroom are the hotel’s...”

“This isn’t,” Bruce said, pulling a black case resembling an airline’s amenities kit from the go-bag and unzipping it.

“Not much to search,” Clark said, making his way to the living room side of the suite.

“Quite large for Tokyo,” Bruce said.

“I meant not much that’s his. Tourist flyers for Sensoji Temple, Meiji, Nezu... He does seem very interested in shrines and temples.”

“Might be why he’s here,” Bruce said, bringing the black case from the bedroom.

“Selina said a likely scenario for winding up on the Yakuza’s radar is having to get specialty gear after he’d hit town. Staying in Ōtemachi, he probably assumed he was going to be hitting a corporate HQ. The gear he brought,” he waved the case, “would be ideal—infrared paint, black light, silicone polymer, fast-expanding polystyrene, a wave cancellation box—but he didn’t take it with him.”

“He comes assuming that’s the job,” Clark nodded. “And after he gets here, he finds out he’s hitting a temple. Some of them do have museum quality security, I suppose, museum quality artefacts.”
“Many do, but not Masakado’s head.”

“Did you say—”

“I’ll explain later,” Bruce said quickly. “Right now, we need to take advantage of Nigma’s absence. Fly down the street to the courtyard with stone frogs and a concrete marker. Give it a good scan. See if there’s still a human skull buried underneath or if anything’s been disturbed.”

“A skull. You know, Bruce, it isn’t necessary to try and ‘top’ my bachelor party. The thing with the Phantom Zone was just—”

“Get out of here,” Bruce chuckled, and Clark was gone.

Bruce continued to search, pocketing a receipt from the wastebasket when he heard a noise outside the door—

Eddie knew he had no one to blame but himself. That was his thought as he charged through the hotel towards room 319, pleased that he’d unearthed the room number but piqued that he found himself swept up in a Wayne party spiraling towards chaos as they inevitably do.

He was giving Batman a wedding gift, what did he expect? He had compromised the principles of any right-thinking rogue, and clearly Nemesis had it in for him as a result. Demon minions—Bruce was Batman and Batman had to know the two men described by Ami-san were Demon minions—and that was a nasty coincidence at the very least. He might even realize they sounded like two “Fangs” from The Gang of Six, and that was a very nasty coincidence too, if you believed in them, which Eddie didn’t.

Nemesis on the other hand, Nemesis sticking it to him because he’d compromised the principles of any right-thinking rogue and gone to such lengths to get Bruce and Selina a nice gift, that was all too easy to believe. That’s why he wasn’t sitting happily in his capsule-bed by now, watching Japanese Netflix and resting up for a full-bore electronics binge in the morning. That’s why he was running instead through the kind of hotel ONLY a Bruce Wayne escapade would uncover, and chasing a story about a flying samura—

He froze. He’d reached room 319, but before he could begin appraising the lock, the door opened at the slightest touch—unlatched.

And before he could register—bfwitmp—what that sound was, he saw Bruce hurling a Demon fang to the ground, holding him down with his foot on the man’s neck while he twisted another attacker into a vicious human knot, wrenching a knife from his hand before—oh OUCH, those look even worse than they feel—before finishing him with one of those punches that make you question if the bone in your jaw really is harder than the ones in Batman’s fist.

Eddie cleared his throat. “Yeah, okay. Come the revolution when they introduce CEO cock fighting, my money’s on you,” he said flatly.

Bruce looked at him with Hell Month hatred, which Eddie optimistically chalked up to the adrenaline of the fight. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to offer an olive branch, so he pointed to the Demons and named them.

“Second Fang, and Fifth, two of the big shots running things since Ra’s is up the river. Or down the ocean, I guess we should say... Or whatever.”
“And you know that how?” Bruce asked.
“It’s part of the wedding thing we’ll talk about later.”
“The wedding thing involving Joker? Joker and Demon are involved in this gift of yours?”
Eddie glanced down at the freshly bat-pummeled men on the floor and, remembering his broken legs, reiterated that they should talk later.
“We’ve got this whole flying head thing to work on, remember? One demon head a time, I always say.” He pointed. “You didn’t hit that one so hard. He’ll be conscious in a minute and we can get some answers. Or I should say, get confirmation because I’m pretty sure I’ve figured it out.”
Bruce raised a skeptical eyebrow, which was all the encouragement Eddie needed.
“These Demon guys are idiots, we can agree on that, right? Nobody that knows which end is up needs to be told Ra’s al Ghul is a joke, but these dweebles drink the Kool-aid, smack their lips and ask for more. To them ‘The Demon’s Head’ is a big deal, so they assume this Masakado’s Head is also a big deal. It’s just how their pinheads operate. So they hire this hot shit cat burglar in the mistaken belief that there’s all kinds of elaborate security to get past. Not, y’know, a box under a hidden panel in the middle of urban Tokyo.”
Bruce’s lip twitched.
“My theory is along those same lines,” he admitted. “The French police call Valdorcia Le Maître Rusé, ‘The Wily Master.’ He brought IR paint, an ocular counterfeiter and silicone polymer. The Yakuza got wind of his coming to town—”
“—they make assumptions about what he’s here for. Decide they want a piece, wet their beak—”
“Yes, of course. I was focusing on how they got wind of it, possibly because once he got here and saw the nature of the job, he needed a different kind of equipment. There’s a receipt in the waste bin for a hole-saw bit. Attach that to a silenced drill to bore his way in without attracting attention—but muzzling a drill isn’t exactly a modification you pick up at a corner hardware store.”
Eddie stared as Bruce continued thinking out loud in an intense, contemptuous murmur:
“Assuming the skull’s in a box. (They wouldn’t just drop a head they’re afraid of into the dirt; it must be in a box.) Wood would’ve decomposed long ago, and it is the golden age of Japanese sword-making we’re talking about. They certainly had the technology... Best to go in prepared for the steel crates museums use to ship priceless paintings. Can’t use a torch; it’ll damage the paintings. Has to get his hands on a small, hydraulic cutter.”
“What the hell kind of dates did you and Selina go on?” Eddie asked, making a face.
“I haven’t confirmed it yet,” Bruce said, ignoring him, “but judging by the weather, Valdorcia got the head but neve—”
“Never made it to the hand-off,” Eddie chimed in, happy to be back on solid ground outside the inner workings of a cat burglar’s mind. “That’s why these two numbskulls were downstairs so long waiting for him. When they figured he wasn’t coming, they found his room somehow and came up themselves to search,” he concluded, and Bruce grunted.
“Since these two didn’t grab him,” Eddie continued, “gotta assume it’s the Yakuza that grabbed him and they’ve got the head. So we’re stuck? Dead end?”

“Not just yet,” Bruce said slowly. “Keep an eye on these two.”

He’d taken out his phone as he walked into the bedroom, and Nigma made a slight ‘whip-crack’ motion and smiled.

It was nothing but yawns for a half-minute after Selina answered the phone, followed by a sleepy...:Oh, right, your Tokyo thing:...

Bruce wondered about that. It was over an hour since the first call and she was wide awake then, but he had more important things to focus on now:

...: If the Yakuza got their hands on a priceless jewel like you’d find in a temple? Well... They wouldn’t bother cashing out in my opinion. Just use it as currency on the black market, for a gun buy probably. Much simpler than having to launder funds:...:

“That’s what I was thinking,” Bruce said quickly. “Now suppose they got a surprise. Expecting a valuable jewel, they found themselves with an artifact instead. Something they couldn’t identify. Probably valuable, given how they came by it, but they’re not sure. With no fence standing by, who would they go to?”

...: Bruce, the last four times I was in Tokyo was with you. It’s—... she yawned again. ...—been a while. Let me think... I guess it really depends on who we’re talking about:...:

“Yakuza.”

...: I know that, but I mean what level. The little guys (What are they called? Kyodai?) they’re just going to bump it up if they know what’s good for them. A regional boss, second lieutenant, maybe the same. Shateigashira or higher... maybe there’s a guy in Ginza:...:

“Forget the Yakuza. It’s you. Middle of the night in Tokyo, authorities closing in—”

...:This is me?:...:

“Batman’s closing in.”

...: Kon’nichiwa, Dāku Kishi. Hoteru ikou:...:

“Something that you actually consider a threat is closing in and you need to act quickly. In the middle of the night, in Tokyo. Where can you find out what this thing is, get what you can for it and be rid of it? Where do you go?”

...: Okay, um... Yoyogi-Uehara in Shibuya. There’s, like, a trendy slow-drip coffee place above a tiny fashion boutique behind a workshop for tatami mats next to an old family run noodle shop:...:

“Are you kidding me?”

...: Bruce I haven’t had coffee yet. And—I don’t believe I’m saying this but—whatever it is you got Tommy Pearl into over there, may I remind you that it’s illegal and you don’t approve of that kind of thing?:...:

“I don’t approve of Yakuza snatching cat burglars hired by Demon either.”

...: ...:...:

...: ...:...:

...: Bruce, you’re supposed to, like, go to a titty bar. Drink a lot of vodka. Maybe have a stripper or something—:...:

“Selina.”
I know, I know, we’ll never be like normal people and we can’t make sense of our relationship using their standards... but there aren’t supposed to be demons and yakuza and hot thieves auctioning stolen intel on Venezuela’s oil reserves..."

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, well, we sort of took a break from spa treatments and went to the casino last night. There was a private party upstairs that turned out to be more of a Zanzibar marketplace to sell this... y’know what, never mind. The Yakuza thing, there is a place in Ginza..."

"A hot thief you said."

"Get off the grand boulevards and promenades. From Mitsukoshi, head up towards Armani, Dior, that place we stopped for candied chestnuts, and duck down this opening beside some vending machines, I’m sure Clark can find it. There’s a big blue and white curtain covering a locked door with a buzzer..."

"How hot is this thief?"

"Ganbatte, darling. I really need coffee before my massage. Ciaomew..."

Clark and Dick reached room 319 just in time to see the door open. They stared as two Demon minions were marched out as prisoners, the one’s arms twisted behind his back, wrists held high with the nerve torqued in a brutal sankyo by Bruce. The other equally compliant from a simple thumb lock courtesy of Edward Nigma.

"Oh God," said Dick.

"What are you doing?" asked Clark.

"Not here," ordered Bruce. The Demons were awkwardly turned and marched back inside—Eddie’s prisoner followed by Eddie, Bruce’s prisoner followed by Bruce—leaving Clark and Dick to look at each other for a moment, shrug, and then follow.

The full war council was delayed by a second earthquake several seconds longer and a Richter point higher than the first—which cemented a truce among everyone present except Clark, who had run for the bathroom, presumably to vomit, and who looked frantically uncomfortable with the situation when he returned. With exquisite condescension Eddie signaled Dick to keep an eye on Fifth Fang (who, truce or not, he considered his responsibility) and he led Clark aside and argued with surprising insight for the leads a talented Daily Planet reporter would have as a result: Tokyo underworld, Tokyo real estate, Japanese superstition and the financial markets, Demon... Because let’s face it, that wife of his has a tendency to lap him. As a reporter and a writer, Clark Kent, the author of Strange Bedfellows and the guy who arguably took down the Luthor administration singlehanded, generally came out looking less brilliant than he might at another paper out of her shadow. And she was now, at this very moment, with Selina and Selina’s friends on Jumby Island doing who knows what—Bruce’s ears perked up at that, and Eddie moved them farther away and whispered intently that Clark really should snap up whatever opportunities Tokyo-with-Bruce-Wayne handed him.

Clark allowed himself to be persuaded, and when the pair finally returned to the group, information was pooled and equipment inventoried: the Demons each had grappling hooks and an assortment of hidden blades, shuriken and a syringe, while Eddie had lock picks and an app with real-time listings and a GPS locator for whatever
Gifts

stores were open in a given square mile of Tokyo, indexed by the type of merchandise offered. And everyone had bone-conduction mic-earpieces they pretended were run-of-the-mill accessories for their smart phones. Bruce considered it all, as well as the sophisticated burglary tools Jaxon had left behind, and then he looked over his companions: Clark, Dick… Nigma… and the Demons.

“Okay,” he said finally. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Six men in cheap, plastic Tengu masks synchronized identical diving watches in a dark corner of a Ginza parking garage. The group then split up, two going back towards the convenience store that sold the masks, two south towards a Pokka Sapporo vending machine, and two taking the stairs straight up.

The last pair took a position on the roof of a camera store.

“So even Americans know that guards watch windows and doors,” said Second Fang. “And if the roof is nothing but plywood and asphalt tiles, it’s a quick, easy way in for anyone with a saw blade and drill to make a hole. Insert a small mirror to look around. Add a few ounces of C4 on the brackets holding the door and this would be a two minute job.”

“Luckily, you don’t have any of that,” Clark said, keeping his disapproval low-key. “Saves us having to talk you out of using it. It would be too much of a risk damaging the Masakado head.” Though he mentally added ‘Not to mention the people inside.’

The first pair were crouched behind a parked car on a side street, mixing a strange concoction.

“Olive oil and cheap motor oil,” Eddie said happily. “The poor man’s Ethan Hunt diversion. Low smoke point, smelly automotive odor. What do you call a spanking good way to get everyone’s attention without sending them running for their lives?”

Fifth Fang studied him.

“Yes, but what are you doing here?” he asked suspiciously. “Shouldn’t you be at home securing Gotham? Your great enemy is…” he trailed off then said “Is this not the time?”

“That’s my business,” Eddie said in a casual sing-song, never lifting his eyes from his work. “You know how to hotwire a car, don’t you? I mean, you’re not so high up in the super-demon-ninja ultra-elite-assassin hierarchy that you’ve forgotten the basics, right?”

“I can hotwire the automobile,” Fifth said, coating each syllable with contempt.

“Great,” Eddie said, producing a toothbrush. “Then as soon as I get the exhaust pipe coated with this, we’ll be ready to go.”

The final pair found the blue and white curtain Selina described.

“Tengu masks, really?” Bruce complained, and Dick shrugged.

“They are masks. I figured we’d have to improvise something with bandanas and sunglasses, wind up looking like a gang of biker-pirates.”

Behind the red, knob-nosed Tengu face, Bruce glowered…

The Roof Team fired the Demons’ grappling hooks to a lower roof and rappelled down one-handed, one like a Special Forces operative trained to keep a hand free to
hold a machine gun; the other like a man who could fly and was only using the rope to fit in.

The Car Team finished coating the exhaust pipe.
The Curtain Team swabbed the syringe with alcohol.
The Roof Team bored through the ceiling and inserted a small mirror.
The Car Team started the engine and walked quickly but unobtrusively away from the car and towards a particular alley.
The Roof Team reported three guards on the top floor, two windows, and no sign of a safe or vault.

Bruce acknowledged the report and rang the buzzer. In seconds, the intercom crackled.

“Car! Your car is on fire,” he said anxiously in Japanese. “You need to get down here! It’s on fire! Pouring out smoke!”

There were anxious voices on the intercom. From their vantage point in the alley, the Car Team reported a man looking out the window. In seconds he came running out the door, where Bruce seized him and shoved, Dick twisted him into a choke hold and let him feel the bite of the syringe at his neck. His imagination would do the rest, and Dick released him with a lighter shove against the wall. Again Bruce spoke in Japanese:

“You’ve just been injected with three ccs of benzanine methylchlorate. You’ll be dead in five hours without the antidote, which I have right here.” He gestured with a breath mint. “The first tablet can be yours in ten minutes if you cooperate. Not enough on its own, but it will slow the poison down, buy you another twelve hours. Plenty of time to make it to ten o’clock tomorrow when—as long as we don’t run into trouble after we leave here—I’ll come back and give you the second pill. You understand?”

The fence nodded vigorously, and Bruce and Dick marched him back inside.

On the roof, Clark scanned for the alarm box, wires and radio waves. Identifying the alarm proper and the point where it interfaced with the phone line, he stumbled, drawing Second Fang’s attention as he clumsily righted himself. Second congratulated himself for finding it so quickly and went to work with Jaxon’s polystyrene, the fast-expanding fire foam filling the box and silencing it. While he was busy, Clark picked up a chunk of asphalt tile and palmed it—and he listened. Two floors down, he heard the fence returning to his home with Bruce and Dick in tow. He called off the guards in what was certainly a coded message, and Clark kept his eyes peeled for any sign of a silent alarm attempting to call out. When the moment came, he tossed the asphalt, drawing Second Fang’s attention away from the wire box and watched—sensing the invisible surge, he shot a quick beam into the wires, frying the attempt to call out and then directing a puff of cold before the smell of sizzling wires could be noticed.

Downstairs Bruce was getting answers, none of them good:
War was coming to the Yakuza. A large faction of over 2,000 had splintered from the main syndicate and formed a rival outfit in the Kansai region west of Tokyo. They complained about profits being squeezed, high membership fees, and the boss favoring his own faction. The old cash cows like loan-sharking, drugs and protection weren’t paying like they used to, and the Yakuza were moving into financial crimes: corporate
takeovers, financial fraud, insider trading... It made the prospect of this burglary in Ōtemachi very appealing.

Yes, they were expecting a corporate prize not a samurai head, but the boss who heard about it—a powerful wakagashira called Nakamura—wasn’t disappointed.

“Because this war is coming, and the battleground is going to be Tokyo. This head is a powerful symbol to possess. Many Yakuza trace their roots back to the 17th Century samurai warriors...”

The fact that a bloody mob war raging across the city was exactly the kind of destruction the head was known to bring didn’t seem to bother him. And then it got worse—

“This Australian can’t be allowed to go home,” the fence was saying. “It wasn’t my decision, you understand. Came from high up. ‘Send a message.’ Usually a body goes into the foundation of a building; never found. This Jaxon, they want to be found. They are going to arrange for him to ‘fall’ free climbing in his gear.”

What Second Fang saw was no longer important, and Clark scanned the horizon in all directions—suddenly and inexplicably transformed into a hyper-alert lookout—while in reality looking much farther and processing more detail than a squad of lookouts with thermal- telescopie- and alternate-spectrum scopes.

“What’s that?” Bruce’s voice asked sharply—and Clark didn’t have to look through the roof and ceiling to know it was a cue: Bruce would be looking up, drawing everyone’s attention to the ceiling and giving him the opening he needed.

“They’ve heard us, we have to go!” Clark cried, dragging Second by the back of his shirt and ‘running’ to the edge of the roof just fast enough that the Demon’s feet lost touch with the surface. At the roof’s edge he shoved/dropped Second Fang to the fire escape and shot straight up into the air too fast for human eyes to process. From a high vantage point, he continued to scan—two—three—five seconds before he spotted them. Back in Ōtemachi—

Four men on a roof, three hustling a fourth to the edge. He was begging. Superman could hear him as he flew towards the scene—two held him while the third hit him hard—he went semi-limp and the begging stopped for several beats—then he was screaming—and then—

Then he was clawing wildly at Superman’s arm—trying to gain purchase before he processed what was— happening. He— He wasn’t falling anymore.

He wasn’t falling anymore.
He was—
Superman.
Up.
Superman caught him. He wasn’t falling anymore, Superman caught him and they were going back up!

“I know none of us approve of thieves, but I don’t think you gentlemen are legitimate law enforcement,” Superman said when they landed back on the roof.

No one used the word ‘coward’ when Clark caught up with the group. Eddie had seen enough movies where the bad guy gets squirrely and shoots up a ceiling, and the
Demon Fangs knew how often assassins really did come in that way. Shooting up a ceiling was the thing to do if you suspected something, and so Clark’s fear of being shot, given where he was and what he heard, was perfectly valid as far as they were concerned.

The prospect of continuing this misadventure burdened with excitable civilians, however, that was a lot to ask. They didn’t want to perish in an earthquake, but if local gangsters wanted to go at each other with grenades and machine guns after they’d left, or for that matter, if they wanted to commission motorcycle gangs to attack third parties with baseball bats, well, that was none of Demon’s business. Unless it happened to create an instability that the Demon’s Head could take advantage of, which was probably why Ra’s al Ghul wanted to acquire the head in the first place. So the Demons were ready to go—

In the interests of prolonging the truce for a few more hours, Eddie proposed that the two Fangs go back to partnering each other. That way they would have a partner with all the same training and the same fashion sense, and the same obvious devotion to a moldy old head that hadn’t been used for thinking for several hundred years... at which point he’d maneuvered Fifth Fang to step back into the same puddle Second was standing in. His fist was suddenly swinging at Fifth as if to stab him in the throat, when the taser he held in place of the knife took down both men in 1.4 seconds of jaw-droppingly brutal efficiency.

“Forgot I had this,” Eddie said with a happy smile, waving the taser like a toy wand. And then, noticing the stares from the heroes he added “Oh like you guys didn’t hold anything back during Inventory Share Time.” When he still got no reaction, he continued “I say put ‘em in the back of that van and we get going on this Nakamura thing, and pray it’s the endgame. Every hour this goes on is cutting into my electronics shopping in the morning.”

More stares.

“Morning,” he said enthusiastically. “Reward for living through the night, nature’s way of saying ‘Sunrise Achievement Unlocked.’ I don’t know about you, I am flying out tomorrow, assuming we put the tsunami cork back in the bottle, and before that happens I’m going shopping for—”

“Nigma, what are you talking about?” sputtered Dick. “Why are you strutting like it’s all downhill from here.”

“You got the guy’s name, kid. Nakamura. In Tokyo that’s all you need. Yakuza are more open than Rogues about who they are and where they live. They carry business cards. They’re in the telephone directory. Offices with a little brass nameplate on the door reading ‘Sumiyoshi-ka.”’ Sure, there’s a big sumo-size guy on the door, but it’s not like that’s going to be a problem with this crowd, right?”

The ‘endgame’ at Nakamura’s wasn’t quite as effortless as Nigma predicted, but it was close. He was only a few streets away in another Ginza back street, and as predicted, the name of the boss’s Yakuza clan was displayed boldly on the door. A synchronized effort coming in through the roof, the trash disposal and the sewers rendered the sumo-sized doorman moot. A second trip to the convenience store had supplied a broom, a block of styrofoam, electrical tape and hairspray, which thwarted
almost a million dollars worth of thermal cameras, motion detectors, and a light sensor so sensitive it could detect the glow of an uncovered watch.

“That motion sensor won’t see anything move for weeks,” Eddie giggled, offering Bruce a high five which he scowled at and then hesitated. “C’mon,” Eddie gestured at the at the block of styrofoam on a broomstick, then at the tape on his watch. “We just beat almost a million dollars worth of security with an $18 trip to the 7-Eleven. The girls would be proud.”

Bruce completed the high-five with a reluctant smile, then said “Let’s not tell them. There’s a WayneTech R&D lab in Oregon with a security set up very much like this. It would kill Selina if she knew.”

“Then we shall not speak of it,” Eddie said. “Lips sealed or Ad Ellipses, you might say.” A more elaborate five-and-fist bump followed that might have been the secret handshake of men bedding world-class cat burglars. Dick and Clark merely looked at each other, confusion and shock competing with shock and confusion, as Eddie and Bruce considered the fingerprint pad on the door to Nakamura’s private office.

“Got the Silly Putty?” Eddie asked casually.

“The silicone polymer,” Bruce graved, pulling a wad of the stuff he’d taken from Jaxon’s kit at the hotel.

“People never wipe off the scanner after they’ve used it,” Eddie explained as Bruce applied the putty to the lens like a pro. “So there’s usually a beautiful print sitting there right on the glass.”

On cue, there was a click and the door unlatched. Again, the men married to non-cat burglars looked at each other, then Clark signaled for Dick to keep Nigma distracted while he surreptitiously approached the safe.

There was no time for Bruce or Nigma to cold-crack it—if they even could without special equipment, where all Clark had to do was look through the door and watch the cylinders as he turned the dial. Quickly determining that the combination was 19-14-33-81, he scribbled it on a slip of paper and left it in the desk drawer which would be the first place the others would look…

An hour later, they waited in Ami’s office in the same sleek high-rise as the hotel where they’d met her.

Bruce and Dick, Nigma and Clark, Second Fang, Fifth, and Jaxon Valdorcia had all filed into the Taiyōsama offices approximately an hour before dawn with the head of Taira no Masakado in an ancient iron and lacquer box. A savvy business woman, Ami quite understood Bruce Wayne’s desire to keep up the illusion that he was in Dubai, and she readily agreed to deal with the police on their behalf. A prominent figure in Ōtemachi, she could turn over the head, with or without the thief and the ninja cult that hired him, and tell whatever story she liked. The police would make do because they knew it was all they were going to get.

She had sent all but Jaxon to an inner office while she received the officers. Bruce, Clark and Dick had settled on the right side of the room, Eddie and the Fangs on the left. But then Fifth Fang took out a shuriken, apparently using it to clean under his fingernail while studying Eddie. His eyes drifting from pocket to pocket until they settled on the crinkle of fabric that revealed where he hid the taser. Eddie edged silently to the heroes’ side of the room and smiled at Clark amiably.
“So… Metropolis…” he said, doing his best imitation of henchmen standing around talking sports. “How about those Meteors.”

The door opened, Mrs. Ami said the coast was clear, and everyone returned to the outer office to see that both Jaxon and the head were gone.

Ami dismissed Bruce’s thanks with vague amusement, repeating that she was sympathetic to his situation but it wasn’t her only reason for dealing with the police herself.

“A gang of Americans could only raise the profile of the situation, not really what we want to calm the markets and forestall economic chaos.”

Her eyes then fell on Fifth Fang who didn’t hide his sneer when she mentioned Americans.

“I will see the two of you next,” she said, the slightest edge in her tone as she pointed the way to the inner office where they’d all waited before.

The Demons filed in as instructed, and an awkward silence descended among those left behind. Eddie looked around the beautifully appointed corner office.

“This is nice,” he observed. The washi screens, the pinewood floor and tatami rug, the kind of less-is-more the Japanese do like no one else. The footprint was larger than Jaxon’s room in the hotel, but it had a similar layout and view—though as a corner it had two walls of windows, so the panoramic view of Tokyo was extended into the east where the sky was quickly easing from pre-dawn purple into a light lavender-orange-gold.

Clark giggled suddenly and clutched the edge of a table subtly as if to steady himself.

“Whoa,” he said, the hoarse rasp in his voice associated with marijuana.

Bruce turned, expecting to make eye-contact for the silent communication often engaged in between partners. Instead he saw only a deep flush and a goofy smile on his friend’s face. Before he could comment, his attention—and everyone’s—was drawn to the door to that inner office. A new voice could now be heard from behind it—familiar in that it was female and must be Mrs. Ami, but intensely commanding unlike anything they’d heard before now, and completely at odds with her gracious, charm. It was also…

“What is she saying?” Bruce murmured.

…speaking some sort of ancient dialect barely recognizable as the Japanese he knew.

Bruce took a step towards the door, presumably to hear better, when—

“There he goes,” Clark laughed. “C’mon, Bruce, give it a rest. I know you like to stick your nose in everyone’s business, but your quiet, no-drama bachelor party turned into a hunt for the Samurai Headless Horseman. Accept that the plan has gone a-ways.”

“Are you drunk?” Dick asked.

“I think I might be, just a little,” Clark said, a slight roll as his head turned to Dick.

“It’s been a long night for someone like him,” Eddie said kindly.

“Will you all be quiet?” Bruce hissed, trying to make sense of the bits and pieces he was getting through the door—when the whole room flashed with a blinding flare of solar energy and the Demons behind the door began screaming their heads off. The commanding voice continued over them for another few sentences, and then...

Silence.

The door opened.
Fifth Fang and Second filed out numbly. They didn’t look at anyone, or speak, as they passed through the outer office and made their way out the door.

“Um,” Dick managed.

Clark did his best drunk-trying-to-look-sober while Eddie eyed Bruce expectantly.

“Well?” he prompted.

“What little I got can be summed up as ‘Go tell your little fake god that he’s been beneath the attention of the real ones until now. If he so much as contemplates sushi for lunch in the next five hundred years, we’ll know. Sayonara now.’”

“In Rao’s name,” Clark said.

“You’re closer than you think,” Bruce replied, turning to the door to the inner office, which remained open. He took a tentative step towards it, and the others followed.

Mrs. Ami looked precisely as she had before except that her previously pink and red suit was now a solid, dazzling white.

“Gentlemen,” Bruce said solemnly, “I introduce you to Amaterasu-ōmikami, the Shinto goddess of the sun.”

“I have many names, Wayne-san. I am Hae-nim in Korea, Xihe in most of China. Here in Japan, yes, Amaterasu, and the Imperial Family are my children. You might say Japan is as well. What mother wouldn’t keep watch when a child is in peril. You gentlemen have been very helpful.” Then to Bruce she added in that ancient Japanese dialect, “But then you take these false demons as your special burden, do you not?”

“If I understand you,” Bruce said, clearly struggling with the strange dialect, “I didn’t track them here. It was only chance that we got involved in this.”

“Modern minds and western minds,” Amaterasu laughed. “You know just enough—you’ve learned to see just enough—that you think what you can’t see isn’t there.” She glanced up at Clark, and continued in English. “There are always connections. That’s why it troubled me, all this... finance growing up around Masakado when the Bay receded.”

“You don’t approve of big business?” Clark asked, a reporter asking the obvious follow-up.

“It’s fine for buying a fish,” she said, smiling. “You walk away with your dinner, the fisherman walks away his money. A fine alternative to violence for distributing this world’s resources, I approve entirely.”

“But?” Bruce prompted.

“But. The transactional mentality, debits and credits... You believe that you borrow, you pay back and it’s done. You wrong someone, you apologize and it’s done; do harm, you make it right and the matter is finished.”

She shook her head sadly.

“But there are always connections you don’t see,” she looked down at Clark’s hand, and looked as though she was about to say something about it, then changed her mind. Instead she said “Drink water from a well and it becomes a part of you, always. These bodies of yours are composed of little else, the particles of you before you drank intermingle with the particles of the water itself. They become one and the same. Honor the spirit of the well you draw from, that honor becomes part of you. Offend the spirit of the well, the offense will always be with you.
“The grievances of the onryo cannot be paid off like a bond at six percent interest. They are always with us. The debt is.”

She considered each man, and seeing only confusion in their eyes, she moved on.

“But tonight the four of you shouldered the burden. Allow me to offer a token of thanks.”

She presented Clark, Eddie and Dick with a piece of metal she called “menuki,” the decorative ornaments woven under the handle-wrapping of a katana. She intimated that they were from the sword of a samurai who had done her a particular service, and each was etched with a sun and sun-dragon. She held a fourth, but rather than handing it to Bruce, she gestured with a playful twinkle that almost resembled Catwoman teasing him back in the day.

“Walk with me,” she said, stepping towards the door.

He followed and when they were out of earshot for all but Clark she said “So, Wayne-san. Your ‘last night of freedom’ (that is the phrase, is it not?) before beginning a new phase of your life, and you managed to spend it apprehending a cat burglar. Jaxon Valdorcia. Skilled in the art of thievery, but not what I would call a person of quality. Not like your charming feline.”

“You know Selina?” he asked, nearly skipping a step.

“Many years ago she was employed by a Jason Blood to recover some items I had given the Imperial Family that were taken for… reasons best not delved into after tonight’s upheaval. But I liked her. We understood each other right away. And she made me laugh.

“I teased her. Her heart was so clearly spoken for, and she was so utterly unaware. I said I would introduce her to Tsukuyomi, my brother. Because of her name; he is god of the moon. It was quite sweet, how she demurred. Trying so hard to hide her complete lack of interest. So you are her samurai of the shadows.”

“Um,” was the best Bruce could manage, and Amaterasu laughed. Then she became quite solemn as she looked him up and down:

“Fear, Justice… the avatar of a Bat. Honor the spirit of the well you draw from, Wayne-san.” She handed over the menuki, not like a Shinto goddess bestowing a token of thanks, but like a Japanese business woman presenting her business card. “I wish you joy, progeny worthy of your name, honor that lives on in their memories and inspires generations to come.”

Bruce had pointed Clark and Dick to a café-bakery in Akasaka that boasted “a taste of Gotham in Tokyo.” He told them to try the American breakfast and said he’d catch up with them in an hour for the trip home. He allowed ten minutes for Clark to become fully occupied with his pancakes, then made his way to the modest hotel where he knew Nigma would be staying. Ordinarily, there would be no question of Clark eavesdropping on something that was clearly none of his business, but Bruce had seen Best Man mode reengage as soon as they were free of Nigma, and it was best to be sure.

His timing was perfect, reaching the hotel just as Nigma was checking out and intercepting him as soon as he stepped onto the street.

“Well?” was the minimalist greeting.
“Good morning,” Eddie said, as if setting an example for someone unfamiliar with non-rogue/bat interaction.  
“Good morning,” Bruce echoed, then resumed the deep bat-gravel.  “What did you do to Joker?”
Eddie sighed, and then pointed to a convenience store where he was going for breakfast and began walking that way.
“Your instinct will be to hear this a certain way, without context, and react. But if you just wait and hear the whole thing, you’ll see it’s really the best outcome possible. I semi-killed him. Now don’t—”
“You what?”
“—flip out, it was temporary. I took Victor’s—”
“Edward”
“—ice gun, which is not a precision weapon. The recoil is something—”
“Nigma!”
“—fierce and it puts a weird spin on the spray, but the ice balls are big enough that it doesn’t matter so—”
“Stop talking.”
“—much. Still took like six shots to really get him in there.”
“Edward.”
“I know, I know, you’re impatient, I’ll skip to the good part.”
“The good part?!”
“Point is, he was stone cold. Dead for all intents and purposes. And that’s where Demon comes in. See it turns out something’s happened to Ra’s al Ghul, and as we saw last night, the bozos running things while he’s gone aren’t exactly bright. You see that story in the Gotham Post, ‘The War of Jokes and Riddles’? That was me.” He smiled proudly. “I planted the story. Little riff on the drama with Falcone, was all it took to convince them I’m a homicidal maniac with such a hate-on for Joker that I’d off him—”
“Temporarily!” Eddie squeaked, off the completely indiscernible emotion in Bruce’s eyes. The thought of the death of his hated foe—of another actually doing what Bruce himself had surely wrestled with doing but stepped back from time and time again. Would it engender relief? Guilt? Wrath? Or a stormy mixture of all? Nigma had riddled himself silently how many of those paths would lead to broken bones, and now, faced with those unfathomable but definitely impassioned eyes, he riddled again. Still, he pressed on. So far, his legs were unbroken and the only way was forward:
“It’s not like I ever considered leaving him dead. Even though it might be the best wedding present I could possibly give you kids, I don’t want to wake up in the middle of the night with a murder-eyed Harley hovering over me with a sledgehammer ready to reenact that scene from Misery with a pair of starving hyenas thrown in for fun.”
Bruce closed his eyes, tipped his head forward, and rubbed his temples. It looked like progress, and Eddie continued:
“I had intermediaries pretending to be ‘Team Joker.’ They made contact with Demon, worked their way up to the ‘Fangs’ and convinced them the best way they could stick it to you was to plop Joker in the Lazarus Pit and bring him back.”
“And suppose they refused?”

“Brucie, I told you, they’re dumb. That Demon crowd are really, really dumb. You think I can’t maneuver them to do whatever I want as easily as you do?”

“Go on.”

“This War of Jokes and Riddles made it perfectly plausible that I had murdered Joker, and anyone with a rudimentary grasp of the situation could see the best way to stick it to Batman was to make sure it didn’t take. Joker is in the Making-Batman-Miserable business, it’s a natural. Demon droogies bought it and put him in the pit.”

“And?”

“And? What do you think? The stuff makes Ra’s crazier with every dip. What was there a 99.974% chance it would do to Joker, maxed out on crazy since Day One?”

Bruce closed his eyes, envisioning it.

“It made him sane.”

“It made him sane!” Eddie crowed triumphantly. “It’ll wear off, unfortunately, but for now he’s curled up in a ball, just paralyzed with horror at all the terrible things he’s done. It’s great! Now, I know you’re not going to say anything that sounds remotely like approval, but trust me when I say it’s a sight to see and you would’ve enjoyed it.”

Bruce glared.

“Right, so, point is, he will not be showing up at the wedding making a nuisance of himself. You and I are even for that… delay coming after me when Doris came back, and everything can go back to the way it was.”

The angry glare hadn’t faded and for a moment another ominous Bat-declaration seemed to hover on his lips, but something stopped him. Instead, it was the voice and manner of Bruce Wayne at the Empire Club feigning sympathy for a colleague whose stock dropped a quarter point.

“Edward, she’s invited you to the wedding. Doris ‘made the cut’ and is with her right now on Jumby Island. Back to the way it was isn’t in the cards for any of us.”

“I can dream,” Eddie said with a stubborn smile. Then he glanced sideways at Bruce’s eyes which only moments ago glared with the sinister Bat-intensity that was expected given the Joker news. Eddie had planned for it, was prepared to weather the storm—but he never expected the storm to pass as quickly as this.

*Back to the way it was isn’t in the cards for any of us…*

Yeah, okay, but he’d killed Joker—temporarily but still. He had hoped after the initial outburst Bruce would calm down and take the gift in the spirit it was intended, but he didn’t realistically expect him to calm down as quickly as this!

“Speaking of Jumby Island, Edward, apparently between spa treatments and ceviche they’re doing something with, ahem, ‘a hot thief.’ If you find out what, I would appreciate a detailed report.”

“Y-yeah,” said Eddie, thinking this was the weirdest riddle he’d ever come across.

“Will do.”

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*Gracious Lady,*

_This mission has been the gratifying event of my life. I am beholden to you that your dealings with Ra’s al Ghul (may He walk always in the shadow of the Dragon) have been of such estimable quality that your marriage has prompted this gift._
It is my hope this union brings joy to yourself and to Him whose name must not be spoken.

Pikhai,

Oleologist and Axe-thrower, Galata 4th