

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



#75

Cat = Sales

Ever Fixed



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
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EVER FIXED

**A Detailed History of
Clan Wemyss
and their descendants**

The Wayne Family in America

Prepared for Dr. Thomas Wayne at the birth of his son, Bruce

The name of Wemyss is derived from the Gaelic 'uaimh', meaning 'cave', and is believed to be taken from the caves and cliffs of the Firth of Forth in that part of Fife. Indeed below the ruins of the old castle at East Wemyss known as MacDuff Castle can be found caves containing drawings dating from Pictish times. Wemyss in Fife has been the seat of the chiefs since the twelfth century. They are one of the few Lowland families directly descended from the Celtic nobility through the Macduff Earls of Fife.

Within the cave below Wayne Manor, a curious phenomenon occurred in an ordinary alcove between the main cavern and the gymnasium. The bats had gone. Over the course of an hour, something about the air felt off, their echoed squeaks sounded just a little strange, and even their sonar felt peculiarly agitated. One by one, the bats decided the main cavern with the humming warmth of the dark man's computers made a more welcoming perch for a nap and they took up residence under the rock balcony that overlooked his chemistry lab.

The abandoned alcove took on a foreboding air. The squeaks hadn't become any softer now that they echoed only from the distant cavern, and the sonar, were there bats still around to sense it, became muddled. Rather than an unnatural stillness, there was a prescience of expectation.

Something was about to happen.

From the Wayne Family History: The First Wayne in America

What is now Gotham City, was first called Ganono by the Mohawk. Ganono meaning "reeds," no doubt in reference the reedy marshes that encircled the great "hilly island" called Manados by the Delaware. When the Dutch arrived, they ignored these descriptive titles. They saw a natural site for a new colony – a large, defensible territory at the mouth of the most vital river on the North American coast, a way station for traffic from the fur-trading areas to the north – the ingredients for a great city, a capital city. They bought it, lock, stock and riverbed in exchange for "certain quantities of duffels, axes, knives, and wampum," and they called it Nieuw Nederland. It would only become Gotham City when it became a British colony, and the first Wayne in America would be instrumental in that transformation.

Robert Wayne was born in Scotland to a highland branch of Clan Wemyss. The family had distinguished themselves as warriors, defending not just their own but any of their neighbors, regardless of clan affiliations. They were rewarded with land and leadership positions. They were prosperous, until Joseph Wayne, called Joseph 'the Uncompromising'¹, took exception to the new English King. It was said Charles II was a Papist, and it was said further that he held a grudge for the lowland branch of the family's action against his father. Joseph the Uncompromising refused to sign the Oath of Allegiance to him, and the family was stripped of its wealth as a result. Some members remained in the highlands, some went into exile, and Robert went to America to seek his fortune.

Described as "tall, muscular, and rugged of countenance," Robert Wayne was an adventurer. Having seen what refusal to compromise did to his family, Robert made a resolution: he would adapt himself to suit whatever he encountered in the world, and he would cultivate a wealth that couldn't be taken at a monarch's whim: a wealth of abilities, knowledge, and cunning...

¹ Among other things.



Doctor Wayne,

On this, the eve of your son's marriage, I find I am somewhat "at odds and ends" as Grandmother Pennyworth used to say. Merely writing in this journal as I have on so many nights seems inadequate to the occasion, so I am writing to you, my absent friend. This is not an ordinary evening in this great house, after all. It is a last night for the way it has been. Tomorrow brings not a new day but a new life for this family of yours. A family that endures change like no other known to me. So many changes since I came into your employ. Yet so often, the last hours of what was are unknown to us.

Certainly, tragically, I never dreamt the night you and madam took Master Bruce into town that the lunch I had prepared that day would be the last I would serve you as a family. Nor could I have imagined the night Master Bruce attended the circus, expected to be a tedious affair benefiting one of the Foundation's pet causes, that

another pair of senseless deaths would bring young Master Dick into our lives. You would take such pride in your grandson, Doctor Wayne, for the values you instilled in Master Bruce are ever apparent in the way he raised his son.

You would take pride too in the woman he has chosen, for his choice reflects the seeds you planted. Miss Selina (the last time I shall refer to her as such, for one has been rehearsing in one's thoughts, mindful that the first time addressed as 'madam' or 'Mrs. Wayne' may well be remembered and it is important one's delivery be natural) is an admirable woman. The change in Master Bruce's outlook since he brought her into his life cannot be understated. He is as he ever was in essentials, of course, but where once there was only grim resolve, there is now an ever-present spark of possibility. There is hope, Doctor Wayne. An idea of tomorrow that is *better*, and more than that, a tomorrow that is more than a nebulous idea of "Gotham." A hope that is personal, that is life-sized, and that is most important of all, your son Bruce. There was a time I feared I had lost him in that vocation called Batman, but he wasn't gone, it turned out. And wherever he was hidden, however deeply submerged he was beneath that mask, he could not hide from her.

From their first meeting, it seems, the woman destined to be Mrs. Wayne sensed the real man behind that invented persona, addressed him (often infuriating the bat mask in the process) and reached him in ways he refused to admit. He is a stubborn man, Dr. Wayne. He was a stubborn boy and it is a characteristic that was only reinforced as he grew. He is so intelligent, so sensitive and so insightful, I'm afraid the unfortunate result was that he was proven right more often than was good for him. I wish I had done better countering the tendency, but if there was a means to do so, I never found it. He is a stubborn man. And he did not want to acknowledge that he was, underneath the persona and expertise, under all that training and discipline, a *man*.

Refusing to admit even that he was a man attracted to a woman, you can imagine the depth of denial when 'attraction' turned into something more. We are fortunate that madam found her way into that part of his life, that she did so as an adversary, and that she is made of the same splendid if infuriating steel, for I can envision no other way the Batman's stubborn determination to deny Bruce Wayne life could have been overcome.

We are so fortunate, Dr. Wayne. Fortunate that she found him, fortunate that she loved him and fortunate she is his equal.

His equal in need, I should add, as much as in strength of will. That was clear the day I met her. This creature I had known only as a masked persona—and that related by Master Bruce, as unreliable a narrator as ever existed, "The Catwoman" as he described her. You would have laughed, Dr. Wayne. I who was so aware of Master Bruce's vulnerabilities was utterly shocked to see similar qualities hidden by the Catwoman's mask. This temptress, this vixen, this thieving seductress so skilled she could defeat the Batman's iron will was quite... Within hours of meeting her, I knew I had two charges in place of one. I have strived to communicate that to her, that she had a home here and was a part of the family.

At this juncture, I should introduce the companion of my writing. Miss Nutmeg is here, a Bengal cat of discerning taste and remarkable disposition. She is one of two cats madam brought with her when she moved in, and I dare say the dear little thing

found the house very large and daunting. One night she found her way to my pantry in such distress, I cannot convey the pity evoked by her silent cries. She has been a regular visitor ever since, and I must say it is pleasant to have company in my solitude.

I should say it *was*, for the routine of the house has been suspended in these days leading up to the wedding. Both cats are put out by the change, and Miss Nutmeg has been absent for several nights. There is *staff* in the house once again, to begin with. Szczenae Orlan and Ahalkea are here, two guardsmen of Atlantis who come as a kind of honorary accessory when the King of Atlantis sends a gift of salt. Ordinarily the intrusion would not be welcome, but with the gardeners and other day workers on the property, to say nothing of the members of the press attempting to snoop, it is convenient to have an extra set of eyes constantly on duty. One has relocated the gifts to madam's morning room, so a guardsman stationed outside her door has a clear view of the door to Bruce's study.

In addition, madam has a personal assistant in the form of an AI drone which remains in the house for the duration. While the object requires no bedroom and can be ignored when it comes to meals, I believe it is best to regard it as human staff on the level of a social secretary or governess. That is: a servant to be addressed as 'Mister' (were it a person and not an AI, of course) and given an upstairs bedroom (again, were it a person), but which remains a functionary that must never be allowed to forget its place in the household.

Under normal circumstances, this intrusion would be even less welcome than the Atlantians, but normal circumstances are a luxury we do not enjoy. The shapeshifter Clayface has returned from the grave, quite deranged and blaming Catwoman for his ersatz demise. The prospect of a shapeshifter with murderous intent stalking the bride at such a high profile wedding was deemed a sufficient threat for the master to put scruples aside and accept a nearly omniscient AI from the future with the appellation "Faust."

While the cats were fine with the upheaval thus far, Master Bruce's departure appears to have been the last straw. Like most couples cohabitating before their marriage, Master Bruce and his bride are living apart in these last days before the ceremony. A bride's dressing requirements being considerably more complicated than a groom's, it was decided that Master Bruce would be the one to relocate. He has moved into the penthouse and has been using the "satellite cave" under the Wayne Tower as his base for these time travel patrols of his (an extraordinary business where he commutes, essentially, to six months in the future, changing places with his future self. In this way, he protects himself from the risk of "last flight syndrome" while insuring the marriage is not haunted by the knowledge that tragedies may have occurred which Batman's presence would have prevented.)

I naturally volunteered to install myself in the penthouse in order to valet him and see to his needs, but he declined. He understands the enormity of the preparations underway here at the manor, and as I said, the needs of the bride *are* greater. It would be a peculiar business to leave madam in sole possession of the manor, tonight of all nights to be alone with her cats, left to set an alarm clock and make breakfast herself in the morning. On such a day, it would be most peculiar... But it feels equally wrong to have abandoned Master Bruce. One has, after all, looked after him from the beginning.

In any case, one made sure one was at the penthouse to receive the gentlemen on their return from Tokyo...

Clark Kent didn't recognize his reflection in the doors of the penthouse terrace. The dark glasses concealing a bachelor night hangover might be the last, defiant hurrah of Bruce's playboy pose. It could never be his own authentic attempt to signal the world that the best man was still feeling the effects of the big sendoff. The guilty frown too, as he considered the morning pick-me-up the butler just brought him "Recommended for gentlemen after a late evening, sir." It simply wasn't him.

A *hangover* was one of those episodes in a human life that he would never know, that's what he always assumed—but then he never expected to become inebriated from the solar flares of the sun goddess Amaterasu giving an angry tongue-lashing to a pair of rogue Ra's al Ghul followers. He still blushed remembering how the others were solemn and respectful after learning the charming business woman they'd been dealing with all evening was really the all-powerful matriarch of the Shinto pantheon. Solemn and respectful—even Edward Nigma had received her thanks and her gift with stone-faced dignity—while he grinned like a moron. "Hey, look at that, the sun," when she presented him with an ornament from the katana of a favored samurai. He practically giggled in her face he was so giddy.

By the time they went to breakfast, he felt like himself again. He had quite an appetite, but otherwise he felt perfectly normal and had flown them home without incident. But now he felt numb, weighed down and parched. He didn't have a headache exactly, though there was a sensation behind his eyes and shooting down the back of his neck that wasn't pleasant, and he felt he could use *a nap*.

It was Dick who used the word hangover. Bruce called to Alfred while Clark scoffed at the idea. Bruce hypothesized that Amaterasu's solar energy overstimulated Clark's system, flash saturating his cells with a highly concentrated dose of pure stellar radiation, and it was perfectly plausible that the drop-off returning to normal levels produced these symptoms similar to a hangover. He then handed Clark a pair of \$400 playboy-billionaire-dodging-the-paparazzi sunglasses and his lip twitched as if to say "I won't be needing them anymore." And finally he assumed his ultra-low battlefield murmur and added "Besides, it will make Alfred happy."

He broke off as Alfred approached, and Bruce ordered a round of 'those pick-me-ups.' He did it with the oddest smile Clark had ever seen. It wasn't the playboy, it wasn't the foppish multiplier on the playboy when Bruce sensed a threat to his identity and overcompensated. It wasn't even relaxed, at-home Bruce having a joke.

Alfred went, and Bruce resumed talking:

"That's why he's here. The wedding is in a day, he has more than enough to do at the manor. I told him I could manage just fine here on my own; he has enough on his plate. But he insisted on being here when we got back. Do you know why? 'In case we needed anything.' Superficially, the Pennyworth version of a prairie oyster after the excesses of a regulation bachelor party. But really 'anything' meant patched up. Or camouflaging bruises. In case I spent last night doing exactly what I did wind up

doing. But I don't need a patch up and you do have a hangover, so it can mean what he pretended but didn't dare hope for. You have a hangover, Clark. Drink your pick-me-up, followed by an aspirin, a bottle of Voss, and whatever else he brings you."

So not Bruce having a joke; the real Bruce giving a gift.

The pick-me-ups came, and after swallowing his in a gulp, Dick left. Alfred had walked him to the elevator, no doubt to impart some final instructions that Clark didn't like to listen in on. Bruce went inside to check the news, leaving Clark to enjoy the view.

Views weren't something he did on a terrace. Looking through the walls to see that everyone was occupied, he then shot up above the clouds, changing as he went. He zipped downtown to the Flatiron District, further south to the Financial District where Selina once asked him to buzz a certain set of Wall Street windows to provoke Barry Hobbs. Uptown to D'Annunzio where he (maybe not wisely, but it worked out) once had Lois prod Selina about her and Bruce getting married. West into Robinson Park where he and Batman fought invading underworld gods with their gargoyle armies when that friendly lunch went sideways. Downtown again to SoHo and the catlair where he was asked to make "a Superman-shaped hole in the wall" to back up Selina's queen of the underworld pose for Luthor. Up to Bristol, just to check on things around the manor without entering its air space... and hovering several seconds longer than necessary, recalling a cosmic crisis sparked by forces that had no business in Bruce's private life meddling with his love for Selina. Then recalling a breakfast in the Wayne Manor dining room, Bruce and Selina including him on an undercover mission to the stock exchange, posing as Tim Drake's corporate flunky. He returned to Wall Street, remembering that day, remembering Luthor and the way they'd snubbed him. Later that day, Selina took him to the Catitac but he didn't go there now. Instead he flew to Museum Row... That extraordinary art exhibit, *Tae-Vrroshokh*, the time and money and effort they went to, all to show him how the world sees Superman.

They were good friends. And they were good for each other. They made each other happy. And absolutely nothing was going to interfere with this wedding as long as Superman had anything to—

...: *Busy?* ...:

It was his Justice League communicator, but rather than answer it, he bolted back to the terrace. Before Bruce could finish his hail, Clark was standing in front of him, adjusting his glasses.

"No, just checking some things," he grinned. "Anything in the news?"

"Dubai appears to have survived. I was photographed nine times by the press, twenty-six on social media. I don't appear to be doing anything too embarrassing in any of the pictures (although one of the men is clearly ginger and I can't understand why no one has questioned if that particular photo is really me.) There have been thirty-three hashtags in various languages over the last forty-eight hours. I think we can consider Operation: Public Wayne a success.

"Rayner, West and O'Brian were all smiles checking out according to the Burj front desk, never left the solar system according to the Watchtower, and no boom tube activity detected. I call that money well spent.

"My future self patrolled without incident: skirmish at the Iceberg, drug ring in Sunset Park, Armenians had a plan to break out a Falcone underboss tomorrow, that's

been shut down, and there's some Z-activity near the docks possibly setting up a lair for Ventriloquist.

"A single, dry mention on the earthquake. Two sentences, nobody picked it up. It's a non-story outside of Japan."

"So far so good," Clark said, sensing a 'but' was coming. Bruce picked up on the tone and met his eyes. His lip twitched, and a hint of the bat-gravel crept in as he spoke again.

"The women got back to Gotham on schedule," he began.

"I know; Lois texted me when they landed," Clark nodded. "She's back at the hotel. This is bringing us to..."

"What we knew we'd be facing when I asked you to be best man. Selina is with her friend Anna. The fence. They're doing the final fittings or something at Deeor and then... I was supposed to meet this Anna before, twice in fact, and both times something came up. I really cannot let anything pull me away this time. Could you— if the signal lights or anything comes up—"

"I'll cover," Clark said, grinning ear to ear.

From the Wayne Family History:

First Family of Gotham

The Dutch exploited wind-powered saw mills and by the 17th Century were building ships faster and more cheaply than any rival. Tea, coffee and spices were the most important commodities, eclipsing income from the North American colonies, and by the late 1600s the Dutch had developed such a hunger for nutmeg that they traded their colony of Nieuw Nederland to Britain in exchange for a nutmeg-producing Banda Island, one of the so-called "Spice Islands," called Pulau Run.

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Nutmeg, unaware that she was named for a substance once deemed more valuable than the whole of Gotham, left Alfred's pantry having assured herself that the man they called Standing Softpaws had escaped the changes moving through the house with alarming speed. While she was there, she inspected the Land of the Can Opener outside his pantry and the many crates strangers brought early in the day. Food mostly, normally a welcome addition to any room, along with bottles and other less interesting things. Quite a baffling array of smells. All in all, too much of everything. Whatever foodstuffs they might have gained could not be worth the overall disturbance to the quiet routine of the place.

Rather than return to her nap place, she went to Bat-Bruce's study to rendezvous with Whiskers. In the study, there was a cave smell that came from a Big Dark behind the Tick-Tock. In that dark cave place, Whiskers knew there were flying mice. Bat-Bruce went in frequently to battle them, and now that he had disappeared, Whiskers was worried perhaps he'd fallen prey to a mouse that was too much for him.

Nutmeg waited for a few minutes outside the study, considering the feet of the Atlantis guardsman on duty. She didn't approve of these new arrivals. There was a

big claw-footed bathtub in their room and they filled it often, immersing themselves entirely in water and soaking in the stuff so their fur must never completely dry out. It wasn't natural. How could you trust someone who got wet so often they could never properly groom?

Whiskers finally arrived, reporting no signs of Bat-Bruce and no new smells at the base of the tick-tock. There was no sign the tick-tock had been opened or that the room had been occupied in days. Woof.

The cats went together to inspect the final place which had been the scene of the greatest disturbance. The two-foots called it "the ballroom" and before today, the human scent was all but non-existent. The air had a close, dry quality that Whiskers loved, a room that had been empty for Tiger Moons, where he could explore and sniff and roll around in the dust, thrash it with his tail and get cobwebs in his whiskers. Until today. Today brought noises and strange feet and strange smells and cloths were removed, dust was removed, the spider snacks were removed, the thin gilded chairs uncovered and unstacked, the tables arranged along the wall with different cloths draped over them. It was all *very* strange.

Shame. The minion Pikhai, axe-thrower of the Galata 4th and food taster to Ra's al Ghul, felt only shame. He was in Gotham—City of the Detective, Stronghold of the Master's Great Enemy—and while he wasn't exactly AWOL, he wasn't exactly there on an officially sanctioned mission of the Demon. He had juggled assignments, there was no other way to say it. Since no minion of Ra's al Ghul cared where he was sent so long as he served the interests of Ra's al Ghul, it didn't matter to D'kar if he was sent to Glasgow instead of Panama and T'hal to Panama instead of Miami. If he himself, now assigned to Miami, came into the United States as a commercial passenger on a flight into Gotham, well, there was no actual *rule* that a minion must stow away on a cruise ship from Havana.

The layover was not so easy to justify. With dozens of planes, trains and busses leaving Gotham every hour, there was no reason for the 79-hour hiatus between his arrival and departure, but even that was not his shame.

He had come to Gotham—that was the purpose of all his schemes, he had made the decision *to come to Gotham* to see the gift he had labored for was delivered with all the accoutrements it was meant to have—the documentation, the poem, the photograph—as Ra's al Ghul intended. He owed that to his master, who had given such thought to every detail.

Yet these, these *minions* thought of the gift as nothing but the means to gain access to Bruce Wayne's home. He heard them when he snuck in to insert his own humble note into the parcel. They joked about the parchment documenting the oil's provenance. If the ink or the parchment were poisoned, it would be a clever way to get at the recipient. They joked about planting a bug in the frame of the photograph. They joked about poisoning the oil.

That's when Pikhai snapped. Poisoning the oil? *Poisoning* the oil! Who would *joke* about such a thing?

He snuck away, troubled, and practiced throwing his axe until bedtime. Who could joke about poisoning olive oil? How was such perversity possible? A world where such a monstrosity came into being should right itself some way and purge the unclean thing from its shores... Unable to sleep, he returned to the shipping compound but it was too late. The oil was gone, the minions tasked with its delivery had been assigned; the documentation remained in the corner, discarded and unvalued. Pikhai was sick at heart. The thought of that refined lady who knew so much about food, opening her gift with no inkling of the thought Ra's al Ghul had put into it. With no inkling of the olives selected and why, the subtle flavors of green almond and tomato leaf to be revealed, the delayed and elongated peppery finish—it was too much for a tender soul to bear.

He had to make it right. He owed it to his master, and with the appalling arrogance of a minion grown above his station, he owed it to *himself*. He realized now, he longed to see how the gift was received. He had been longing for days, that's why it affected him so, imagining Selina Kyle receiving the oil without knowing any of its qualities.

And so he'd juggled the schedule and made his plans and made his way to Gotham... yet even this wasn't his shame.

He had... he had... As he had on every mission but one, sought out the humblest and most anonymous lodgings he could find. Though Gotham was a gourmet paradise, he meant to subsist as befits a lowly minion on whatever street food was available nearby. He had eaten a hot dog. And it was... sublime.

A bit of bread toasted on a flat-topped grill, a tube-steak of fine, garlicky meat in a crisp casing, a piquant gooeyness of cheese and mustard and onion. It was unspeakably wonderful. And he felt... such shame.

In Thomas and Martha Wayne's day, *Mise en Abyme* was a French restaurant on East 76<sup>th</sup> Street known for deplorable art on its walls and elites of the art world at its tables. The Gotham rock stars held court daily, while European dealers would appear within hours of their planes landing. In the season, the foot traffic to Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle or the diner down the block favored by Andy Warhol was a parade of influential artists, collectors and taste-makers. The restaurant didn't survive when the epicenter moved downtown, but today a chic bar carried on the name a few doors from the original location.

Bruce glanced at the sky before heading inside. He'd seen Clark hovering, keeping an eye on something to the southwest. Of course with Clark that could mean Baltimore, but there was a Mad Hatter hideout only a few blocks in that direction. Once he stepped into Bar Abyme he was committed, but as long as he was still on the sidewalk... It wouldn't hurt to ask. He took out his phone.

...: *This is Superman. I can't take your call right now because I'm preventing my friend from coughing up the ball on the one yard line. Get in there and meet the friend, Bruce. They're waiting for you...:*

"Very funny. I just wanted to—"

...: You just wanted to say a last good-bye to the playboy thing by being inexcusably late to a woman you've stood up twice? You just wanted to pull a lame excuse out of your ear one last time? ...

"Will you at least tell me if whatever caught your attention is in Gotham?"

...: I will not tell you, because I am super-arrogant enough to believe I can handle it. Go meet your wife's friend and let me cover for you like you asked:...

Bruce grunted and entered the bar.

Selina was seated with Anna Karalis, who was considerably more beautiful in person than in her Interpol file. He took a closer look before he approached the table and wracked his brain, now that he saw her in the flesh, making sure he'd never had any dealings with her as the playboy. Like Selina, she was in her early thirties; like Selina, a brunette. Long hair swept to the side, dipping over her eye, designer dress, "statement" jewelry, expensive but tasteful. There were so many bimbos... But no, he would have remembered features like that. She looked Greek, the name Karalis was Greek, father was a shipping fortune. He would have remembered.

He strode forward confidently, and Selina turned and smiled up at him. She mentioned Dubai, he mentioned Jumby Island, he kissed her cheek, and then as he looked over at Anna, she flashed an almost Joker-wide Joker-intense smile as she offered her hand:

"Anna Karalis, homicidal meth whore," she said with the grace of a debutante.

"We were just discussing the Gotham Post," Selina murmured as Bruce let his chin drop to his chest in mock shame at his city's most embarrassing newspaper. "Back to form and making up for lost time."

"I knew of course that your delightful tabloids have made Selina out to be a penniless nobody with no breeding or connections, oozed up from the gutters of God knows where. So I suppose it's only logical that old friends must be pulled down with her. But I must say, what I know of the poor—and I admit it's not much—I don't know how *mass murder* got on the table."

"On behalf of Gotham, I apologize," Bruce said, swiftly exchanging playboy charm for CEO diplomacy. "We do have better newspapers. The Gotham Times, for instance."

"Not much consolation, I would imagine," a new voice oozed from behind Bruce as Ford Dormont touched his arm lightly as he maneuvered around, homing in on Anna like a guided missile. "When one is the target of the libel, stripped of breeding, education and dignity because, as a woman, your dignity is expendable. Ford Dormont, my dear," he concluded, lifting her hand to his lips with European panache.

"The novelist," Anna said politely, "Very nice to meet you."

"My colleague, Ash Torrick," he said, gesturing to the man who maneuvered around Bruce's other side and offered his hand like a normal person. Anna pretended she *didn't* recognize his name from his far more sensational books and TV show, though Ash rejected the gesture and frankly acknowledged the elephant in the room.

"On behalf of sensationalist pablum, I would *also* like to apologize for the Post. I can chase Nazi gold and Nostradamus quatrains with the best of them, but turning two ladies like yourselves into bottom-feeders without resources, education or a scrap of common sense, well, that sort of thing gives sordid pandering a bad name."

The pair explained they were on their way to dinner “next door” (meaning D’Annunzio) when they noticed Bruce heading this way and saw the enchanting ladies through the glass door. They simply had to stop in and say hello to Selina, and condole. Returning from an idyllic Caribbean weekend to see a Gotham Post feature on the wedding party that rivaled the earliest Cat-Tales era slanders of Catwoman. What a travesty!

Bruce was annoyed. The conversation had momentum. His attempt to laugh and move on was lost in the newcomers’ arrival, Anna responded as one might expect to Ford and Ash echoing her sentiments, and they were invited to join “for a drink” that could well extend into dinner. His eyes searched for Selina’s, but she was occupied with Ash commandeering a chair from the next table to squeeze in next to her. He saw no hint of her usual annoyance with Dormont; she seemed pleased her friend was having a good time... So he was trapped, and with Clark covering there was zero chance of a KGBeast rescue with a well-timed assault on the power grid.

He slipped into the autopilot of a thousand evenings like this one, though he talked less than he usually did on those occasions. Dormont appeared to have found his soulmate in Anna Karalis. She spoke of an upcoming auction in Geneva: Jewels of the Bourbon Parma family that included pieces made for Marie Antoinette, and of a recent sale in London, pieces that weren’t quite royal but were almost on that level, signed by Cartier, Tiffany, and Webb... Batman tried to nudge Bruce into taking an interest on the grounds that Karalis was a fence and one dealing in Catwoman’s level of merchandise, but it wouldn’t take. She wasn’t here as a fence; she was here as Selina’s best friend to stand beside her while they married... a reality that was underlined when the conversation moved on to their dresses.

The women had come from their final fittings at Deeor, and Dormont became a sponge ready to absorb every detail he could draw from them. Perhaps stinging from the talk of the Post (and the comparison of their recent stories with the ones that sparked Cat-Tales) Selina volunteered details she hadn’t before: details that *were* meant for the public eventually, but that so far she had only told him. Bruce had to wonder at her selection of Ford Dormont as her mouthpiece.

Selina’s dress was ivory *peau de soie* from one of the oldest and most prestigious mills in France, with Venetian lace from the island of Burano which predated the Alençon lace favored by the best modern dresses. Alençon began making lace in the 16th century to compete with Venice, whose monopoly and mastery of the craft produced ever-escalating prices for the French nobility. Selina had chosen those materials because her dress was a modernized take on that of a Wayne ancestor in the manor’s portrait gallery. To the world, it was her unique way to acknowledge the name she was taking and the legacy she was marrying into, the kind of gesture that made Ford Dormont’s toes curl and sent the Ashton-Larrabys of the world into ecstasies of self-congratulation... And privately, well, according to the family history, Marie Wayne St. John had used the lure of her French chef and prestige of her ‘Dinner and Supper List’ to stop a duel with rigged pistols, effectively preventing a murder and becoming the first documented Wayne to make use of the family fortune to fight crime.

It ended, in time. Three rounds of kir royales and vermouths cassis left Dormont sated with enough jewel auctions, ancestral portraits and bespoke gowns that he didn't maneuver to join them for dinner. He and Torrick went on to their D'Annunzio reservation while Bruce found his way back to a non-foppish, non-playboy facsimile of himself if Batman wasn't in the picture.

It wasn't easy. Anna was a stunning beauty, similar to Selina's coloring and height, and he was escorting both of them to one of Gotham's trendiest eateries. Muscle memory was strong, and he found himself drifting into the playboy more than once, waxing on the automotive perfection of the Devel Sixteen prototype he'd driven in Dubai. The roar of its V16 Quad Turbo engine, the rumored 5000 horsepower of its top of the line sister, the *curves* of its rear wing...

"You'll have to get one when they come on the market," Selina said coolly. "We can finally race properly. None of your *other cars* can catch me, after all. Not for lack of trying."

It was exactly the smack he needed, grazing just close enough to Bat-topics once-removed to set off his inner alarm. It made him realize he'd fallen into the playboy persona, bordering on the idiot fop, with Selina's oldest friend with whom he was meant to be himself. She didn't want Anna thinking she was marrying a glib idiot (and truth be told neither did he), and Anna was currently smiling at him the way non-bimbos did one date before deciding he had nothing to offer but his black card.

"Listen to me," he sighed. "Fast cars have a way of taking me back to when I was sixteen and obsessed with Ferraris, and I'm afraid Ford also brings out a side from my past that I'm not proud of. Please. Anna. Disregard the last ten minutes and tell me about your flight in, this sale in Geneva, if you've been before, if you go often. What you *drive* even. Anything. Let me prove I'm not the shallow dolt I've been since we sat down."

"No need, I wasn't buying it," she said pleasantly. "You run a forty billion dollar empire, and you're marrying Selina. There's no way you're a fool. I am glad to know the reason for the curious tone of the conversation so far. It would have kept me up for days dreaming up exotic explanations. Now I don't have to. It's perfectly simple: fast cars and Bradford Dormont are a combination to be avoided. Contraindicated, as the doctors say."

Bruce laughed—a genuine one—it was a long time since he'd been called out by a stranger sharp enough to see through his performance and reputation, and frank enough to say so. It stood to reason, Selina's friend was... not to be underestimated.

Anna glossed over London and Geneva, sensing he'd only asked to be polite, but went into some detail on her car—a vintage MG—guessing it was the one subject where he had a genuine interest. She climbed a notch in Bruce's estimation (for a criminal) declaring that she would have driven it out rather than flown, if only (her stock then plummeted) Gotham wasn't so miserably unfriendly to cars. The parking alone, to say nothing of the traffic... Nothing put Bruce off like visitors failing to appreciate Gotham's qualities, but then (her stock rose again) she acknowledged the city's superiority to all rivals as a center for art, diamonds and gems. She regretted that she didn't get out here more often, if only... (her stock soared) ...the *Batman factor* made this whole part of the country too risky for the kind of transactions that made up the bulk of her business...

On the roof of a warehouse near the docks, Robin and Batgirl kept watch for the Scorpio shipment: an HK91 battle rifle, a block of uncut RDX military grade explosive, and a remote circuit cutter for disabling alarm systems—all of which Homeland intel said was being smuggled into *Philadelphia* with Gotham as the fallback, where an unknown operative would be picking it up for transport to Metropolis. It was extremely unlikely the smuggler knew he had a leak so it was extremely unlikely the terrorist starter kit was going to show up in Gotham waters, but *if it did*, it was *extremely important* that it never make it to Metropolis and even more important to Jim Gordon the GPD or Team: Batman identify and apprehend whoever came to pick it up. It was vital the job not be left to federal agencies who wouldn't share the information. It was solemn work they were doing...

"Lace is from little island off Venice. Called Burano, very famous for making lace for hundreds of years. Before machines, hand-made, hand-embroider."

Solemn work. That's what Tim repeated to himself (since there was no point repeating it to Cassie).

"Much lace now brought in now for tourists, cruise ships full of them, very bad. Traditional makers could not keep up, so bring in Chinese-made lace, from machines. Nice enough for tourist. But Selina dress has real thing, finest Emilia lace, third generation maker. Deeor get from—No like look of that Coast Guard boat. Too close to shore, second time tonight. Check number, bet no legit. Echo Golf One Niner Three Zero—get lace from special shop in Venice proper near Piazza San Marco, also have peignoir set for wedding night..."

"Did you know there's a city in Turkey called Batman?" Barbara asked as Dick was inspecting his tungsten line before suiting up for patrol. "Named for the Batman river which is named for Bati Raman Mountain."

"What?" he asked, a look of utter confusion as he turned to face her.

"You didn't want to hear any more about the lace and how the French Alençon in my dress is actually considered the better kind, so I dug around until I found the least wedding-related tidbit on the internet."

"Thank you," Dick said happily.

"Wedding scrooge," Barbara retorted and stuck out her tongue.

"I am not. I've been rooting for those two longer than anyone—including *them* if you factor in the denial years. She's good for him. She makes him happy. And in case you haven't noticed, everything works better, inside the cave and out, when he has a little happiness to go home to balancing out the rest of it. And because it's Selina, 'a little happiness' will never become so much of a normal life that he gets complacent."

"So why the wedding scrooge?" Barbara demanded, and Dick sighed.

"I just... Now that the day is here, I want to take a breath, a step back, not get fingerprints on anything Alfred just finished polishing... And watch from a safe distance, keeping a clear path to the fire extinguisher at all times."

"All this because I enthused a little about the dress?" Barbara said, shaking her head.

“All this because Bruce is Bruce. There is no way those two are going to pull this off without at least one dragon to slay. And when it pops up its scaly fire-breathing head, I’m going to be there for them.”

“Riddle me this, Puzzle Muffin. How did the bidding war for highly sensitive intel about South American oil production turn into ivory *peau de soie* and venetian lace?”

Doris shook her head and kissed Edward Nigma’s cheek.

“And something about shoes,” he added.

“I told you, silly. Rotsby was holding both briefcases—identical, silver metal, one with half a million dollars, one with quarter of a million pounds—when we went back into the party to find the bomb and he slid them under the table rather than trying to pass himself off as a random party guest toting around a spy movie briefcase full of cash. When it was over, I saw him *leave* with a case in each hand, and I thought ‘okay, nothing blew up so he went back.’ He slid two in there; he took two out and never thought a thing of it because he never knew about the third case. Consulate guy sure didn’t go back for it, the Texan and his goon didn’t go back, so I went back and there it was—score!”

“Mhm,” Eddie said. “Followed all that, and then ‘seed pearl beading’, hand-stitched or hem-stitched or something, I don’t really know, I don’t really care, but there was *no turn signal*. Briefcase full of cash, exquisite beading on the *peau de soie*, and I don’t know why.”

“Selina’s dress, silly! Lois wouldn’t stop talking about the couture experience, all these fittings at Deor, having the garment fitted to her body, and it sounds *SO* beautiful, nothing like the fabrics you’re going to find in even the best department store or dress shop. This one shop in Paris still deals with a mill that made silk for—”

“Puzzle Muffin?” Eddie said piteously.

He tried to work up some interest... Silk was still a mysterious rarity from China. (He couldn’t.) A Wayne ancestor was married to the U.S. ambassador to France, struck up a friendship with the queen, shared her dressmakers (He couldn’t.) She shipped exotic silk and feathered garments home to her relatives in Gotham who were still making do with homespun cloth after the war-time shortages. (He couldn’t. There might be 10,000 riddles to be spun from this history of haute couture as it dovetailed into the wedding that only he knew was Batman’s, but he could not bring himself to give a damn.)

“Just remember we’re not going as regular guests. We’ve been given a job to keep Bradford Dormont and his buddy occupied.”

Doris grinned.

“What is a nine-letter three-syllable descriptor for the self-assured derived from the Latin ‘with trust’ by way of bold and/or secretive Middle French?”

“You’re confident,” Eddie said.

“I am confident. And all the blue bloods call him Ford.”

After a pleasant meal, Bruce walked the women out of the restaurant—and experienced the most unsettling wave of *déjà vu* since a cosmic crisis erupted in Wayne

Manor and an alternate reality battle with the Justice League played out in his study every 43 minutes. He looked at Selina to see if she felt it—she obviously didn't, but Anna noticed and said "I can take the hint. I'm going to walk myself back to the hotel so you two can say your goodnights, okay?"

She and Selina exchanged air kisses and giggles—and Bruce realized too late that the thought tumbling from his lips would be taken the wrong way.

"We should have eloped," he blurted, and saw the flash of hurt and disappointment in Selina's eyes. Regret punched him in the jaw like a henchman he'd underestimated.

"Because my friend pays her bills the same way I used to?"

"No. God no. I *like* your friend. I'm sorry, that slipped out. It's nothing to do with Anna—or with you or anybody's bills. It's just... I really can't be rid of the playboy fast enough. I want you to have a proper wedding—I want it for both of us. For Alfred, and my parents, my father's name. I want to do this right, I just hadn't figured on these flashbacks. The way things used to be... I never realized how awful some of it was, how much I hated it."

"I guess Tokyo didn't go the way you hoped?" Selina said gently.

"Tokyo was great until a few... unexpected... that I don't want to get into right now. It's not that anyway, it's *this*. Coming out of the restaurant, ready to say goodnight and go our separate ways. When we started dating, remember? We'd do this, right here coming out of D'Annunzio, and it was so... strange. Looking in your eyes, no masks in the way. It wasn't like saying goodnight to other women, because you were going to be out there later, just like me. Or would you? It was so new then and I was struggling with it. You and me, and *you*, and *me*, where we stopped and they started."

"I love you," Selina whispered and then smiled. "You can be such a mess sometimes." Her smile said it was the most wonderful mess anyone had ever been, then the smile became mischievous. "Nothing stopping me from hitting the rooftops tonight. My last chance for a while."

"But not mine," Bruce said sadly. "It won't be me out there, remember? My last night swapping patrols, and you cannot play with the Bat who's covering for me here."

"I know," Selina said with mock menace. "Your master plan kinda sucks. There is literally no point going out to case a target in this town without the possibility of a Bat-encounter."

"You're the only thief who thinks so," Bruce smirked. "Thank God."

Smiles faded, and again Selina became tender.

"Call when you get back? Just to say goodnight?"

"You got it."

The moment held, a long loving gaze into each other's eyes, a lingering kiss—which ended abruptly as their twin awareness flared. Their gaze abandoned loving intimacy for strategic assessment: someone was watching. Bruce's glance considered the sidewalk cones a few doors away near the street entrance to Cipriani. Creating just enough of a blockage, those heading into the restaurant would have to enter through the hotel, walking right past the sweet spot where someone in the shadow of that newsstand would have a clear, well-lit view of them.

Selina's eyes were more suspicious of the elaborate canopy outside the Pierre—convenient for shielding a lady's dress from the elements in the mad dash from the car

to the door, but convenient for shielding almost anything else you wanted to point at a couple coming out of D'Annunzio.

The telepathy shared by partners said they would window shop, moving north to get an angle on anyone hiding at the Pierre while forcing anyone at the newsstand to reveal themselves.

They took a few steps when awareness spiked. Bruce grabbed Selina impulsively, pulled her into a warm embrace, his hand stroking the side of her face, the pair of them oblivious to the world beyond their amorous desire—until a lightning quick, synchronized and ferocious pivot snapped both heads west...

To see the least imposing axe-thrower in the history of assassins running up to them with guileless zeal.

"Grit lady," he enthused, looking on Selina like a pilgrim at Canterbury. "And wiry gentleman." He beamed, and then noticed the confused stares. "This is right, yes? My English is new and perhaps wobbly. I am greeting you as persons of importance and esteempunk."

Selina's hand covered her mouth. Bruce had no smile to conceal so she let him take the reins.

"Who are you and what's this about?" he asked like a pompous civilian, and Selina shot him a look like it wouldn't have been her choice of approach.

"I am Pikhai, servant of Ra's al Ghul, Light of the East and Terror of the West. And you are the Missus Selina Kyle-Wayne, and you are the Mr. Bruce Wayne she is will be marrying, and you forgive that I mangle for I am very excited."

"We definitely should not have eloped," Selina said, barely holding back a laugh.

"I knew tonight of all nights you would eat at D'Annunzio, so I came hopping to fine you. You are to be receiving *Ata al Ghul*, a gift of the Demon. (This is right word, yes? A 'gift?')"

Selina nodded encouragingly.

"That's right. Last time he gave me swords."

"Behave," Bruce said under his breath.

"I always behave," she replied shamelessly, and Pikhai continued:

"I come in grit urgency to fine you before gift arrives. To tell you before you open. There is grit mangling in the house of Ra's al Ghul."

"You don't say," Selina murmured.

"What kind of mangling?" Bruce demanded.

"Maybe they sent more swords," Selina suggested.

"Shh," said Bruce.

"Important documents left owl. I bring. Photograph of olive grove. Certificate and provenance of grower with explanation of olives used and oil quality. Special recipe from region. All this I bring. Add to gift when you open, is as if it was there all along, yes?"

"Yes, alright," Bruce said like a crimefighter who'd learned to humor-and-handle his insane foes (and their minions) as well as anyone. "Just give us the stuff and we'll put it with the oil when it arrives and pretend it was there all along."

Pikhai hesitated.

"It would be butter if I bring, myself, inspect box when you receive and make sure all is in hoard."

"In order?" Selina guessed.

"Why?" said Bruce.

"It would be better," repeated Pikhai.

Selina was ready to agree. Bruce was adamant that he would not be leaving her to return to the manor alone for her and Alfred to be receiving Demons and their mangled gifts in his absence. She said she could handle it, raked her nails lightly across his dress shirt over the scars of an early cat scratch and mouthed a 'meow' dripping with sinful promises.

The moment held, a long loving gaze into each other... Pikhai was not as perceptive as Anna and continued to stand there, grinning at them.

"I will see you tomorrow," Bruce said, holding onto Selina's hand, though his eyes said 'If this guy is still on the street by the time future-me is here in costume, I am punching him into next year.'

"Tomorrow," Selina said, though her eyes said 'Please don't. He's harmless, and kind of cute.'

"Yes, tomorrow. I too will present myself at your house tomorrow and all will be made as it should be."

Letter to Dr. Wayne, p.2

On my return to the manor, there was a development that confirms the wisdom of my decision to remain here with madam and let Master Bruce fend for himself at the penthouse. Szczenae Orlan reports an incident that is highly suspect. In my absence, a delivery was attempted when none was expected. Before you accuse me of succumbing to your son's excessive caution (I will not call it paranoia), I should explain that we are in expectation of a most unwelcome gift from one Ra's al Ghul, a foreign gentleman who came into the master's life as a pestilence that has taken far too long to eradicate.

The vehicle came to the front gate shortly after I left. Told no one was available to receive a delivery, the driver said he would return later. Given that this was the first hour in many weeks the house was empty (apart from the Atlanteans), it seems likely they were waiting for my departure. I have consulted the security cameras and found the vehicle to be a common panel truck. Enhancing the image of the driver and passenger, they could certainly be followers of Ra's al Ghul, in which case they had ample opportunity to survey the grounds. They will not have found it easy, for the ground security is first rate, designed by Master Bruce before madam moved in and made further improvements.

These are, nevertheless, trained assassins whose skills cannot be underestimated. I have not told Master Bruce, as it is only supposition on my part that these men have any connection to al Ghul. I shall inform madam when she gets home and accede to her judgment.

### **From the Wayne Family History: First Family of Gotham**

*When Nieuw Nederland became a British Colony called Gotham, the English king continued the Dutch practice, granting titled land to colonists who had proven useful. Robert Wayne had certainly done so... but the words patroon and patroonships had to go. Rather an English term was substituted: manorships, along with the title Lord of the Manor thrown in if the recipient had been especially good. Thus in 1686 James II declared Robert, son of Joseph the Uncompromising, to be the first lord of the great estate formerly called Schuylcrwyck, henceforth to be known as Wayne Manor.*

*By 1800 the term Wayne Manor no longer applied to the land grant itself, which had swollen to a million acres before being largely sold off throughout the 18th century, but to a house. Wayne Manor the house was built in 1771 on the choicest 200-acre parcel of the original manorship. It was the first in the region built with large windows, seven feet tall and three feet wide, to command a view of the river and the growing city beyond, and to the east, of magnificent sunrises.*

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5:23... Twelve minutes to sunrise. A figure at one with the darkness that would conceal it for precisely 720 seconds had moved with uncanny certainty across the Wayne Manor grounds. Mindful of the cameras—overlapping 180s—thermal signatures and sightlines, air space monitors, speedforce detection near the Batcave, sensors for energy displacement related to magical disruption and even for kryptonite radiation as one approached the house.

Past the patio with the french doors... Magnetic sensors. Made to appear the weakest link in manor security to a semi-informed thief: door opens, breaks the electrical circuit triggering the alarm. Just a matter of keeping a magnet in contact with the sensor and you could proceed straight into the dining room... or so you'd think, until the trap sprang shut.

Past the kitchen that a true insider might see as the weak link... Alfred Pennyworth was no mere servant, and his kitchen was the heart of that family. A heavy but ordinary door, heavy but ordinary hinges, and secured by an extremely well-made but relatively ordinary lock. Keys held by Alfred *and* Dick Grayson *and* Bruce himself, and Selina Kyle. The door they all used most often, and where anomalies would be dismissed without a thought... A truly informed thief familiar with the family would think any of the keyholders except Selina (aka Catwoman) would be an easy mark out in the world, and once that kitchen key was copied...

Past the bushes under the balconette, the master bedroom whose window represented the only true flaw in the manor security, an exploit only a world-class thief would recognize and only Catwoman's claws could exploit—a moot point now that the claws were under the bed in that room while Selina slept in that bed alone.

Concealed by the bushes, the figure crept to the end of the building and watched as the regular delivery man—Tony Alvarez, a Brazilian immigrant who delivered newspapers to augment the income from his construction business and send his kids to a better school—dropped the morning Times on the Wayne doorstep as if it was any other morning when a wedding wasn't scheduled to occur in a few scant hours.

Alvarez returned to his mini-van and drove off, and the dark figure rounded the corner...

The formal entrance to Wayne Manor. Constructed in 1866 when the architect B. Andrew Wayne included a massive renovation of the manor in a number of building projects to stimulate the post-war economy, the doors, doorframe and most of the foyer arch build from the hardest, strongest and heaviest woods at his disposal, now embedded with next generation nano-tech security mesh from his descendant's tech company—And irrelevant to the mission. The doors didn't have to open.

As the first blush of indigo lightened the eastern sky, the dark figure squatted and replaced the newspaper on the stoop, then vanished with the silent haste of a vampire fleeing the sunlight.

The first rays fell across the newspaper, illuminating the masthead of The Gotham Times, identical to the paper it replaced thus far... Early Edition... Identical for a few centimeters more and then... SUNDAY... Not today's paper but tomorrow's... And as the light stretched and reddened from cool blues to a golden glow, in a box on the left that normally highlighted the weather or rosy hopes for a Knights playoff: WEDDINGS: Wayne-Kyle Nuptials Did Not Occur... ST12.

GET ME TO THE CHURCH ON TIME

Several Months Ago...

Selina,

I wanted to thank you for dinner last night and for the part you played arranging that extraordinary demonstration after. I really don't have words. Iceland, Greenland, Europe, all those people turning on their lights to signal they'd been helped by Superman. I don't have words. I wish you could have seen it, the clusters of light like miniature galaxies over the cities, the paths twinkling along the Nile and the Congo. I don't have adequate words. You and Bruce have been so quick to say how it was Lois's idea and Kyle and Alfred contributed, and even that Flay fellow had a hand in it. As if you were nothing but an intern getting coffee. I know better. Thank you. Both of you. Or as it's said in Kryptonian: ⇨↯↵

Your friend,

⇨↯↵~↵↵

Selina squelched a tear she would never admit to, (It would not do to become a weepy bride at this early stage.) folded the note and paused before putting it in the desk. It *was* Superman who'd come to dinner after Wayne Tech played a crucial role dismantling Luthor's AI-supercomputer-intersect, and she had been the face of that effort for the photo op. There was nothing compromising in a thank you note written unguardedly as Superman, and no need for it to be brought to the cave for secure storage as if it were ionized plutonium. It went in the drawer.

As long as she'd been using Martha's morning room, nothing had ever felt like folding that envelope and slipping it into the drawer. A facet of "kissing a man in a mask" she couldn't have guessed at in a million years. His best friend was Superman. *Superman* had an opinion on the way she made his friend happy. And Superman who turned out to be one of the most open, accepting, ready-to-meet new people (Well, maybe that part was to be expected in a dog person, but still) now considered *her* a good friend.

It was sweet—a thank you note—and more than that, it was validating. Selina felt she was going to need that in the coming months. Like every news outlet on the planet, the Gotham Post was turned inside out by Joker's hijacking of Luthor's intersect, and like every outlet on the planet, it had to reboot its operation when the beast was finally put down. And for a moment—for an incredible, marvelous, terrible moment—it almost seemed they had a change of heart. It almost seemed that having gorged on a diet of fake news more gruesomely distorted by the Joker than anything their sickest minds could dream up, it almost seemed that they'd... learned.

That wasn't possible and everyone knew it. The Gotham Post *is*. Their lies are. Their cynicism, their toxicity, their pathological need to remake anything noble or honest or inspiring as corrupt, ugly and sick. It just wasn't *possible* that they'd overdosed on the stuff and *decided to change*. Yet it did seem for an incredible fraction

of a second that it was happening, and in that second they acknowledged that she lived at Wayne Manor and that she and Bruce were engaged to be married.

Selina had traveled to alternate dimensions. She'd met a coke-snorting Owl Man and a lucid Poison Ivy, persuaded the Batman of an alternate dimension to use magic to help her put down the rabid dog that was Zatanna's. In her own world she'd stared down a Hell Hound and flirted with a chaos demon; she survived Jonathan Crane's Halloween parties and Joker as her Secret Santa. She once committed a break-in by rune stone and stole from a Lady of the Lake. She had *navigated a pass from a bewitched Lex Luthor*. She could accept *a lot* that didn't fit into a sane, educated person's idea of a neat and orderly universe where the speed of light would always be 186,282 miles per second in a vacuum *because science said so*. But she could not accept the men and women at the Gotham Post just waking up one day and seeing the error of their ways, renouncing F. Miller and going forth to sin no more. It was. Not. Possible.

And it wasn't. The incredible-marvelous-terrible moment was just that. The fraction of a second when the Post acknowledged her and Bruce was like a note struck on a piano that hadn't resolved when the tabloid reaffirmed its doctrine that she was a pauper of the lowest origins consorting with similar street trash, as out of place in Bruce's world as a smear of squashed cockroach on a Da Vinci Madonna. It was almost a relief. It validated her suspicions: the speed of light was still 186,282 miles per second and, however it looked, The Gotham Post hadn't changed. *Something* was coming. She had no idea what, and since she was no protocol-writing demon, she couldn't possibly guess every possible shoe that might drop and devise a response to each one. She didn't like playing defense anyway. What she could do was what she'd always done: plan the heist.

Or in this case, the wedding. A heist was getting away with something, after all, in this case Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Wayne. It began with known tasks: how to defeat the cameras, how to avoid the guard, how to deal with the motion sensors. Along the way, solving each of those problems, the openings would present themselves to lay a trap for Batman: in the courtyard or by the alarm box or at the vault or heading out the window, wherever the confrontation might occur. It rarely worked out as planned. Sometimes he'd confront her at a point she didn't anticipate, sometimes he showed up with Robin, once she got saddled with a lone Batgirl and once a PMSing Huntress. But she could always adapt and improvise, because the foundations were solid for the parts of the job that really mattered. She had her way in, around each security hurdle, and out again. Along the way, she had zones of opportunity to trip up the crimefighter that tried to challenge her.

How different was a wedding, really? There was a prize: "I now pronounce you man and wife." There were tasks: guest list, invitations, music, dress... And there were obstacles. Not quite as easy to identify as a 4x4 array of SVB-19 thermals, but the principle was the same: knowing the basics. Having the fundamentals down so completely that reacting was instinctive. And that meant knowing what makes everything tick, whether it was a SVB explosion-protected thermal imaging camera or Gotham's Dark Knight.

What did Batman want? He wanted justice and he wanted her, the one got in the way of the other, and that usually created an exploit.

What do security features want? Guards, cameras, and motion sensors all want to see you approaching the target. In the case of an SVB-19, by picking up temperature contrasts created by body heat. A thief who makes a thief-shaped area warmer than her background is easily identified. Once she knows that, there are ways to avoid standing out on the sensor display; ways of trapping, reflecting or redirecting body heat and messing with the ambient temperatures to make herself indistinguishable from the background as the imager sees it, or to make the heat shape look like anything but a person.

So... What did the Gotham Post want? It wanted her low. It wanted her kept down there, of the slums and a friend to the creatures that dwelled there. It was *very* important to them, and whatever they were going to pull would *hinge on that*. It was a dumb battlefield, but if that's the one they wanted, so be it. She was marrying *Bruce Wayne*, for Bast's sake; the best offense was simply to take Mrs. Wayne out for a test drive.

She began with the path of least resistance: Hervé Rott, conductor emeritus of the Gotham Symphony who (to put it mildly) owed her. His bizarre idea of hiring a thief to identify holes in security around the Mahler baton drew her into a spiral of corporate espionage and international intrigue: a stolen carbon polymer smuggled into the country as a cello string, a dead body, a *different* cello string that was really conductive thread containing Star Labs security codes and a *different* dead body that *she herself was accused of murdering!* He owed her.

Rather than remind him like a heavy-handed villain, she gave him the chance to be the hero: she made an appointment to see him at his townhouse, admired his piano and said it reminded her of her mother's music room, and finally she laid her bridal ambitions at his feet: There were elements out there who thought she was some sort of uncultured monkey-woman rolling around on the floor of a dress shop. She wanted to use the wedding as she'd once used *Cat-Tales*: putting her true self on a public stage and letting the contrast speak for itself.

Rott loved the idea, sat right down at the piano and began tinkling away as he expounded on each of his suggestions. Debussy's *Claire de Lune* would be most appropriate to begin. Nearly everyone knew the title meant "moonlight" and that Selina was "daughter of the moon," but beyond that, the poem that it's taken from speaks of masks, a nice touch when the bride is also *Catwoman*, but more than that, there was a beautiful phrase in the very stanza the title is taken from: *L'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune* "Of victorious love and good life."

And then the music itself, how it starts: it is not what it seems in the beginning—Do you hear that? It doesn't start on the one but the beat after, what we call a syncopation. One *and*. Now listen, here comes the tension. Listen to that, the full phrase... The next, a little more elaborate... But listen, wait for it—See, at the beginning it was in mid-air, and now it is grounded. Fitting for a flirtation with a playboy that ends in marriage, is it not?

After that, a couple of Chopin Nocturnes were discussed, Purcell's Sonata for Trumpet and Strings while the guests were seated, and Bach's Concerto No. 2—the third part, *allegro assai—perfetto*, and finally for the march down the aisle, the modern piece often mistaken for Chopin: *Mariage D'amoure* by Paul de Senneville.

Selina was delighted with the a number of the suggestions—and the ferocity of Rott’s cultural enthusiasm. “Of victorious love and good life,” the melody that emerges isn’t what it seems at the beginning, the title meaning “Marriage of Love...” Martin Stanwick would eat it up. He would have a reason to get the music editor involved *and* hobnob with the symphony people. But the best was yet to come:

“There is a girl I’m sponsoring, a viola prodigy, Femi Molokhya. The Foundation selected her for a Strad we’ve recently acquired, the Castello Sfortza...” In a heartbeat, the romance had evaporated from the air and Rott had the look of a Catit tiger smelling meat. Selina knew to be cautious when she saw that look, which is what made her so qualified to be Mrs. Wayne as well as Mrs. Batman.

“Naturally I’d like to have her perform,” she said easily. “I was thinking if you could prepare new arrangements for each of these songs: viola and piano, string quartet, and chamber orchestra. The symphony will retain ownership, of course, (a gift of Mr. and Mrs. W, not the Foundation for this I think) and I’ll arrange a recording of the quartet. Should amount to quite a tidy income, a Wayne Manor wedding after all, there is market appeal. That’s in addition to your fee, of course.”

Not a bad deal for the idiot who had her tripping over dead bodies in Ibiza.

Martin would eat it up. The Times would give it a full story in the Music section and a blurb if not more in Philanthropy in addition to the full piece on the wedding, while the Post ran a Bruce and Selina Spotify playlist or something equally downmarket.

Her next stop was d’Annunzio’s after the lunch rush, where she subjected Giovanni to a merciless blast of Catwoman’s beguiling charms to secure the use of his sommelier, Paolo—and only then realized a regular Tuesday night smile would have got the job done with good will to spare. Giovanni the Italian, Giovanni the romantic, and Giovanni the snob were so eager to be asked anything in conjunction with the wedding—the culmination of that *romanza epica* that became known to the world when Bruce and Selina—*che bella Selina, che sposa farà*—chose to dine in his humble establishment. He sat her down and insisted she have a little glass of vin santo (“Just to wet the lips, *si?*”) before they began. And then a toast—Bruce and Selina, *una storia d’amore*—required a toast—*un amore così grande*—and who would toast *un amore grande* with vin santo? There was a Sicilian white that would be worthy of the occasion, a little strong for so early in the day, but why not. This was an occasion! In fact, perhaps some bubbly instead. Or in addition, before the Sicilian, a sparkling Metodo Classico with a shot of that hazelnut liquor...

Selina felt she was lucky to walk out on her own power, but she did secure Paolo’s services. Paolo was brought to the manor where Alfred set up a conference call with François de Poulignac and the tri-national committee of wine experts decided a 2007 Burgundy Corton Charlemagne Grand Cru, *Bonneau du Martray* would be the best respite from the champagne that would saturate the rest of the celebrations.

“A vin as deeply satisfying to the palate as to the snob,” François declared with the passion and intensity of Jason Blood raising a storm of kobolds. “The de la Moriniere family managed to keep their pristine nine hectares of Grand Cru Corton Charlemagne in the family for almost two centuries. The vineyard is a single block on the famous hill of Corton that dates back to the Emperor Charlemagne. The winemaking at Bonneau du Martray is underpinned by the desire to allow finesse to shine through in

the wines. White peach, lime and grapefruit, floral notes and a saline character shine through on the nose, leading to a creamy and layered palate full of variety and focus.”

Martin would eat it up.

Her last stop was the Gotham Historical Society to brush up on Marie Wayne St. John before meeting with Deeor, and that’s when she ran into Jason with the usual “Selina, a pleasure to see you” that fooled no one who knew him.

“A pleasure maybe, but not a surprise,” she’d said. “You know, Jason, there are people who consider it rude to aim your precognizance at them to meet accidentally-on-purpose.”

“Are there? How ingenuous,” he said with mock disdain. “The truth is, Selina, I didn’t ‘aim’ it at you, it simply came to me. I am living in an apartment that was once yours. You probably emitted a kind of psychic pre-echo of your intention to come here: researching the past, full of intent. A past I lived through, as you’re well aware. And we do share a link from the Seeings and dimension hopping (fueled by my magick, if you recall, and linked to you and Bruce as a couple). Given your upcoming marriage and the fact that your research must relate to that, I would say it is not surprising. I’m sorry, Selina, given the evidence, it is *you* who have summoned *me*.”

“What utter bullshit. Jason, you are the worst. How you can just make up reams of that stuff, you really should have been a theme rogue.”

“I’m not entirely joking,” he said with that peculiar smile that was hard to read.

The silence held, the stubbornness of a cat vs the stubbornness of an immortal wizard, until the librarian entered with her reference books.

“So what are we researching,” Jason said, happily examining the spines and murmuring as he read “Dinner and Supper Lists of Mrs. Charles St. John... The Bristol House Ball of 1897... *The Brides of Fife?! Selina, what on earth— If, if you have gotten yourself possessed by Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, do not look to me for aide. I have exorcised her once already and I am full done with feathers.*”

“Wow. Jason. Take a Midol. I’m... just looking for some detail on a portrait in the manor, but thanks for making a nervous bride feel like a punchline.”

“I apologize,” Jason said sincerely, and then gave his courtly nod like an abbreviated bow. “Command me, lady of the manor. Allow me to make up for my inexcusable rudeness.”

She had absolutely *nothing* for him to do, even after he twirled his finger and told her she could speak freely because he had already “sealed their conversation” and it would sound like “Oh, probably the Sami language of rural Norway if anyone is listening.” Experience had taught her that Jason Blood with the urge to “be of assistance” should not be left to his own devices, but she had absolutely no idea what he could do for her. Unfortunately, that prompted her to speak without any idea what she might say.

“Bruce made the sweetest gesture a while back. He packaged it wrong, he offered me pearls.”

Jason raised an eyebrow.

“A gesture, I take it, meant to...”

“To demonstrate *he* was marrying me, not the small part of him that’s Batman. I had to set him straight: that I loved all of him, Battitude and all. I didn’t want him ‘sending Batman out of the room’ on our wedding day. But the thing is, I don’t want to

overcompensate. It's easy to get caught up in the Bat and keeping secrets through all this that we forget who he really is. What *that family* is to Gotham... I want him to know that I know... that I appreciate what I'm marrying into. Thomas and Martha deserve that. We met—the reason Bruce and I are in each other's lives—is because of what happened to them and what that did to him. So I better damn well nail this: becoming Mrs. Wayne. Jason, I *can't* blow this. I can't be just the billionaire's bride with a six-figure dress from Givenchy."

He nodded with that far away look like when he's hearing something besides the words, and a short time later, Faust arrived at her door declaring itself her all-knowing, all-seeing personal assistant for the duration of the wedding plans.

By then she'd had her first consultations with Deeor and had seen some sketches based on Marie Wayne St. John's portrait... "Breathtaking decadence" "the underskirt is a take on a classic Toile de Jouy which has been embroidered on crinoline" "And a smart traveling suit, I think, leaving for the honeymoon. I was thinking black shell with a white demi-jacket, or else a white collar. Will photograph beautifully throwing the bouquet."

Martin was going to eat it up...

The Present

...That's what I'd been telling myself all these months: Whatever the Post did to me, I would have the Times to smack them down because *Martin Stanwick* was going to *eat it up*.

Whatever *the Post* did.

I had planned this wedding like a performance art *tour de force* of 1% Brahmin Fuck You so whatever the Post did to demean and diminish me, I would have the Times. Whatever the Post did to destroy my reputation and wreck my wedding, I had preloaded the Times to set the record straight. Because I knew what made Martin Stanwick tick. So how was it possible I was looking at a Gotham *Times* headline declaring "*Sorry, Bruce, It Wasn't Meant to Be*"?

Naturally my first thought was a prank. When Alfred came into the bedroom with "There has been a development, miss" instead of orange juice, I thought it had to be a prank. Somebody who didn't like me had put a lot of time and money into this stunt—Compensating for a lack of imagination, it seemed, because "*Sorry, Bruce, It Wasn't Meant to Be*," is not what I'd call a way with words.

I said as much to Alfred, but he said he would "never bring such a thing to your attention on a day like this without verification. Mr. Kent confirmed residue of 'temporal variance'."

"You've shown Clark?" I asked, still trying to process all this.

"He is the best man, miss. It seemed prudent before sullyng your morning with what was, most likely, a petty, mean-spirited act. You may be unaware, miss, but Mr. Kent has made it known to the master that, having encountered persons and objects from alternate dimensions and timelines, he can recognize foreign harmonics on certain spectra. He saw no such anomalies here. I fear this newspaper appears to be genuine and is of our universe and timeline."

I've done it a thousand times, paging through a newspaper braced for whatever new outrage they've dreamed up about me. There's usually a kind of baseline disgust as I turn the page, but today I felt nothing. Maybe because it was the Times instead of the Post, maybe because Alfred was there. I don't know. I wasn't numb or in shock, I just felt nothing.

There was a large photo beneath the headline and I studied it: we were in the ballroom together, posed to look candid, sitting on the stairs. I was in the dress, Bruce was in the suit. It did seem like the ballroom was empty but more like the party was over, not like anything dire had happened to shut the thing down. Both of our postures said tired relief more than anything...

I realized Alfred was still talking.

"It would be ideal, of course, to make use of the portal Master Bruce has been using to simply pop into the future and see if this is indeed the headline printed tomorrow, but Mr. Rayner—"

"You called Kyle too?!" I blurted.

"—reports that Master Bruce used the last charge when he returned from patrol this morning, and it will take four days to recharge the portal safely."

"Two if Clark goes," Kyle said—and yep, there he was, the hitherto least annoying Green Lantern was in the doorway of my bedroom, blithering. "I can have it charged in two days, but a human would get tachyon poisoning." Only then did he realize it's not polite to burst into someone's room if it's not a regulation cape/villain confrontation, and he rapped belatedly on the doorframe. "Morning, Selina. Nice, um, silk thing."

I just stared. Like any bride with the means, I'd had a little spree for the honeymoon: A traditional white peignoir for the wedding night and more colorful lounging sets like this for the playful hours lying around the hotel room—or in our case, Tommy Pearl's apartment so we could remain in Gotham hidden away in new identities. It was still a honeymoon, which meant *sexy* and *comfortable* was the idea. Two features that don't always go hand in hand, so I was taking advantage of these nights apart to see how they fared after a few hours being slept in. In this case, not well. The camisole did *not* run big like the salesgirl said, and while a little snugness across the breasts might have short-circuited the bat-brain last night, it had ridden up as I slept and was now pushing down my boobs in a way that was decidedly not flattering—but which did not stop the no longer not-annoying Green Lantern from staring.

I adjusted the camisole to lessen the squashed boob effect and wished my robe wasn't all the way across the room, while the power ring went on talking:

"Still, two days is a day too late. And Wally says using Speedforce gets us nowhere. Going forward—"

"Flash?! Alfred, exactly how many members of the Justice League are—"

And just like that, there he was.

"—in the house?" I concluded. Unlike Kyle, he didn't stop in the doorway but was standing next to Alfred before I could finish.

"Clark said it sounded like you were dressed so it'd be okay to come up," he chirped like a hero who'd forgotten I had been to the Secret Society's open house, admired the

gun cabinets in their arsenal and the missile launcher under their solar panels, and had come away with the private numbers of *fourteen people who try to kill him on a regular basis*. “Lanterns always get confused about this stuff. Y’see Speedforce is perfectly stable going back—”

“Excuse me!” Kyle blurted.

“—going back in time and it’s reasonably good crossing dimensions, but going forward, there’s a causality thing that’s extremely delicate. It’s like you’re tickling God, and if he laughs, there’s just no telling what that movement might do. I can hit ‘tomorrow’ okay but there’s no guarantee it’s tomorrow in the right universe, and if it is, that the timeline will be intact when I get back. Y’see?”

I wondered if the wedding didn’t take place because I’d gone berserk and killed half the Justice League.

“Everybody who isn’t Alfred, please get out,” I started to say—when *Dick* cleared his throat, and then waved apologetically from behind Kyle.

“It was my thought to call Wally,” he said like a Robin I should have locked in the basement with a leopard when I had the chance. “Babs hacked the Times mainframe, but she says it’s too early to see much. There’s a massive block of column inches reserved for the Vows section and Hermione’s Society Chit Chat. No surprise there, they’ve been pushing it as the wedding of the century. And the text and pictures here do correspond to what they have reserved.”

“Good morning, Richard,” I managed.

“And Clark called Lois,” Wally added, “Had her check the hotel and it’s today’s regular Gotham Times left at their room. And I checked a bunch of newsstands on the way over, everything’s kosher. Whatever going’s on, it’s confined to here. Just this one copy is tomorr...”

He trailed off because Faust had just floated past him, swiveled between him and Alfred, and bobbed up to me. Alfred coughed.

“One should also mention, miss, that the Atlantis guardsmen have observed the comings and goings. One could not say precisely what they have heard or deduced, but it is likely they glean the activity is not the norm for the morning of a surface wedding.”

“Clark! I know you’re listening. Fill them in, please,” I called out, and then I considered the AI.

Maybe it was muscle memory from a phalanx of crimefighters invading my lair when they weren’t expected, but Faust was looking an awful lot like a henchman who had screwed the pooch so thoroughly, it made you reconsider the merits of punishment by disintegrator ray.

“Faust, is there something you’d like to tell me?” I asked, keeping as much villainess out of my tone as was reasonably possible, under the circumstances.

“Information: This platform downloaded the day’s headlines and projected commentary of morning radio personalities and news shows for the purpose of identifying environmental variables affecting subject Hagen, Matthew aka Clayface. This platform previously analyzed all screenplays read by Hagen, Matthew and evaluated against 493 psychological profiles to determine the most likely model for an assault on today’s event. This platform determined a 61.3% probability that Hagen, Matthew’s avenue of attack will be derived from the unproduced work *Retribution Res*

Publica in which an assassin gains admittance to a society fundraiser as a musician concealing her weapon as a flute.”

“You’re supposed to know everything,” I hissed. “You computed every possibility that could affect the wedding, how did whatever’s behind this get by you?” I batted the newspaper at him, and Wally piped up:

“Hey, glass half full, it *doesn’t* say Clayface killed you, so there’s that, right?”

“Information: I could have accessed Times mainframe in 1/36000th of the time taken by Mrs. Gordon-Grayson, if asked.”

“Not the point,” I said—which really applied to both of them, but I was focused on Faust. “And I’m asking now, what can you tell us about this newspaper? Is it really tomorrow’s Times.”

“As yet, there is insufficient data to compose a meaningful response.”

“That’s familiar,” said Wally. “Why do I know that? It’s really familiar.”

“It’s Asimov,” said Kyle. “Isaac Asimov, ‘The Last Question.’ From *Robot Dreams*, I think.”

“But you’re right, the article doesn’t say the wedding was axed because Selina gets killed by Clayface. That is something.”

“I was thinking it’s from a planetarium show.”

“It doesn’t say much of anything, really. Really light on the detail.”

“That is the appropriate form for an announcement of its kind,” Alfred put in. “Discretion is the order of the day on such things, those intimately involved know the circumstances, and it would only embarrass the family to make public—”

“It’s light on the *specifics*; it’s drowning in *detail*,” Dick said, taking the newspaper from me—a paper he’d clearly had a chance to read closer than I had because he started pointing to different paragraphs as he read. “‘Wayne Manor previously hosted the wedding of the groom’s son Richard Grayson to Miss Barbara Gordon... The groom gave the bride a gift of pearl... The bridal portrait by the artist Kyray whose entry into the Gotham art world Miss Kyle sponsored earlier this year... dress is based on the portrait of a Wayne ancestor from the portrait gallery... special arrangements of Debussy and Chopin commissioned for the occasion remain the property of the Gotham Symphony as a gift of the Waynes, providing an ongoing source of income to be known as the Wayne Endowment.’ This is a data dump. It’s nothing but *detail*, but absolutely nothing that’s relevant. Not a hint of what happened.”

“Like Barbara said, they were locked into so many column inches, so they stuck in anything they could think of—”

“Except for anything that could actually help us stop whatever went wrong,” Dick said emphatically.

“Well the Clayface thing is stupid. He doesn’t need to smuggle in a weapon, he is a weapon.”

“Talia al Ghul maybe? Some kind of blackmail. Somebody who knows the identities forced them to cancel or else.”

“Either way, the AI *spouting Asimov* isn’t good, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Psycho Pirate! Plants an idea in one of their heads—”

“Clarification: This platform does not suggest subject Hagen will employ a smuggled weapon, only that there is a 61.3% probability he will infiltrate the event in the guise of a female musician.”

“GUYS!” I called and let out a sharp whistle. “I’m the *bride* and I’m saying maybe we should be less concerned with the implied threat to the wedding and more focused on this being *tomorrow’s newspaper* and how it got here! This house has seen hiccups in the space-time—what now?”

Wally and Kyle both tensed. In a blink Wally was gone, Kyle said “Sir, yes—” and was gone before we could hear the final sir, though there was a visible streak of green glow on the doorframe.

“Dick, go see what it’s about,” I said, and as soon as he’d gone, Faust piped up:

“Information: There is a 79.4% probability Superman alerted them through Justice League communication channels that operatives of Ra’s al Ghul terrorist organization Demon are on the property. There is an 89% probability the arrival of his gift is imminent.”

“Alfred, go get the—” I said while Alfred said “Perhaps I should just—” and the doorbell rang.

Alfred went, Faust went, I gave the newspaper the nastiest look I could manage before coffee, and I looked at Bruce’s side of the bed. I was marrying *Batman*. I knew this day would bring “developments” as Alfred put it. But now that the moment was here and they were starting to play out, I was pissed. *Very, very* pissed.

I sat back down at my dressing table and defiantly finished moisturizing. I applied a little lip gloss. Then I went for my robe, paused, and instead got my whip out from under the bed.

A rogue newspaper, Superman, Flash, Green Lantern, Nightwing, the machinations of a homicidal shape shifter, an immortal wizard’s cryptic plucked-from-the-future AI and now the minions of Ra’s al Ghul, before coffee, on my wedding day. Fine. If that’s the way it was going to be, that’s the way it was going to be.

I adjusted my boobs under the camisole and headed downstairs.

Coming down the grand staircase, I could see into both the foyer and the Great Hall, and what I saw looked like a rugby game about to begin between bitter long-time rivals.

Clark, Wally and Kyle were at the edge of the Great Hall like a pack of attack dogs called off by an owner whose lenience they were taking on faith—barely. Alfred was their tolerant owner, receiving four Demon minions in what I can only assume is the ninja dress uniform. One of the Atlantis guards had taken up a position behind the minions while his partner inspected the crate they’d brought.

“Good morning,” I said, as if this was a perfectly natural scene to be walking in on—and two of the four minions looked straight at my boobs.

“A late delivery, miss, understandable in that the sender rejects conventional shipping in favor of his own, ahem, methods. I was just remarking how... *fortunate* it was that the delays these gentlemen endured in customs and elsewhere brought them to our door the very morning of the wedding.”

(You can’t beat Alfred for sarcasm.)

“I wonder if that’s all they brought,” Wally said.

(You also can't beat Justice League heroes for overplaying we-know-you're-up-to-something declarations, but some of them do it with a certain truculent charm.)

I was about to thank them and send them packing, when the head minion, eh, didn't raise his voice exactly but it was a pronounced public-speaking volume that, in the Great Hall, filled the space like I imagine a herald delivering his message in an ancient castle:

"To the most admirable lady of respectability and virtue I think it right and proper to address as Selina Kyle of Wayne Manor, Gotham, North America..."

"This could take a while," I murmured.

"By the hand of the minion D'chaym, son of Pruhr, entrusted these three generations with the most private correspondence of The Demon's Head..."

"Excuse me! Ryan from First Cup!" a new voice called out, and a kid in khakis bobbed out from behind Szczenae Orlan. "We're booked to set up refreshment carts for the workmen. Coffee, fruit juice, cinnamon rolls. We pulled up to the service entrance but nobody answered. Vans from Pertida's Florals and Ortolan Catering are waiting too. And I think there's somebody trying to break into your kitchen."

"A gift of Ra's al Ghul, Light of the East, Terror of the West, meant not for dust but who triumphs over death and grave..."

Yeah, this was a job for Mrs. Batman. I adjusted my stance and spoke in my best approximation of a Shakespearean actor crossed with a stuffed cape crossed with a spokesmodel at the auto show.

"Minions of Ra's al Ghul, I thank you for your pains and I accept this gift of olive oil in the name of House Wayne (and Karma which has certainly found a way of sticking it to me for all those golden Basts I got away with). I will be sending a thank you note by the hand of my own minion when time allows. I offer you fruit juice, coffee and a sweet roll to refresh yourselves *before you go*." I gestured to Ryan and the refreshment cart (with the whip hand) and smiled my best villainess about to chuck you into the Pit of Despair smile to convey: *Go soon, because none of us can keep this up for long*.

They went. I heard Kyle say "That was a-mazing," and Wally ask if it was always like this, and then they hit the breakfast cart meant for the florists.

Dick had gone to nail down whatever was going on in the kitchen, and the Atlanteans followed with the oil. Alfred was supervising the parade of florists, directing most to the ballroom but reserving three to work on the hall. Everyone passed Clark who I had no doubt was scanning every flower arrangement as they passed...

"Study," I whispered, and he was waiting when I got there.

"Get Bruce," I said wearily. "Fly him over and—" Clark held up a hand to shush me, and then pointed to the door. Dick and Szczenae Orlan quickly appeared, and I turned back to Clark. "Just say I need to see him in person, don't go into the whys of this idiocy."

He gave me the raised eyebrow that usually means a skeptical cape who can't believe the vicious criminal is doing the right/generous/decent thing. It wasn't hard to know what it meant in this context, but he left without saying it. I turned to Dick and saw the same eyebrow.

"I think we can put those superstitions aside," I laughed. "Newspaper from the future says we're already toast, first look protocols can suck it."

He stepped into the room, held both my shoulders and kissed my cheek.

"You two are meant to be," he said. "There is no way whatever's behind that headline is going to get its way."

"Tell me something I don't know," I told him, and he grinned wider.

"Well, the way you're handling it is still kind of magnificent. Pack it up, we need it in the kitchen."

On the way to the kitchen, Dick said only that the intruder somehow got in and the caterers followed. Szczenae Ahalkea stayed to keep an eye on the situation—which is what we walked in on:

Pikhai, the Demon from outside D'Annunzio's, having escaped the wrath of Future-Batman, was holding a rod of honing steel and a monster chef's knife, drawing the one against the other while four caterers and Szczenae Ahalkea watched.

"You see, it is only meant to maintain the shape of the blade. If your blade is not sharp to start with, this will not make for doing you any goods."

"His English is wobbly," I whispered to Dick, who mouthed 'You know this guy?' and I nodded. "I'll explain later."

"Not a lot of force is need," the lesson continued. "Go lightly acrossing. Away from you. I was taught other way," he repositioned, drawing the blade towards his body in shorter, quicker strokes. "But it seems a little danger-mouse. I prefer blade go away from me in case I slip."

Ahalkea nodded.

"Also can do like this—give me towel please." He positioned the honing rod straight down, and got into position to demonstrate a new angle, when he saw me.

"These are very fine knives," he announced looking up with the biggest smile. *Eddie* has never looked that pleased to see me. Then he turned back to Ahalkea. "Down like that, you see? Three ways now I've shown you. First is most danger-mouse, then safer, and this way is most safe of wall. All do the same thing. Realigns the blade, the um, mole-cules (that is what you call the little bits? mole-cules?) in the blade. Realigns the mole-cules so the edge of the knife is maintained."

"I touched those knives once, I was banned from the kitchen for three weeks," Dick whispered.

"Pikhai! Good morning," I said cheerily. "What do you say we let these good people get to work and you can bring all those olive documents and certificates to my morning room. This man will show you the way," I shoved Dick forward. "Dick Grayson, Pikhai, servant of Ra's al Ghul. Pikhai, Dick Grayson, your guide." Then I gave Dick the glare of death that Bruce uses giving orders in the field, adjusted my camisole and told him to stay with the Demon *while I got dressed*.

Clark was waiting at the bedroom door, sans Bruce.

"It was my fault," he said, straightening his glasses and peeking over the top as if to remind me it was *Superman* taking the heat so it really, *really* wasn't anything even super-powers could have avoided. "The way I brought him in, he saw the AI, what's it

called, Faust? I should have noticed and detoured but somehow it just appeared there before I—”

“It was probably waiting for you, Clark. That thing anticipates all of us, there was nothing you could do. Let me guess, it told Bruce about Clayface.”

“Nothing about the newspaper,” Clark said, as if that were something.

“No, it doesn’t seem to care about that at all—which I think I’m starting to understand. Faust’s programming is to ID things that could harm the wedding, that’s its prime directive. Tomorrow’s newspaper isn’t a factor no matter what it says, because whatever is happening already happened. (And the thing I hate most about time travel is sentences like that.)”

Anyway, Faust told Bruce about the screenplay and the likelihood that Matt would come in as a female musician, so Bruce was tweaking protocols to screen the musicians, and that included calling Eddie. I had to explain to Clark about the viola player who just happened to be the daughter of a cabbie who helped Eddie. She played a Stradivarius once stolen by me and lent to her through the... (Oh hell) ... my explanation ground to a halt as the realization hit.

“Selina?”

Hell.

“Selina, you were talking, and then you stopped, and you look pale, and your body temp is down more than a point. Do you mind telling me...”

Clark and his concern. How could I even begin to explain?

“Okay, you know how the Gotham Post is always insisting I’m this classless nobody. Uneducated, unsophisticated, it really pisses me off sometimes. Insults my parents, insults me, glamorizes poverty, it’s disgusting. So I inserted a few things into the wedding plans to really put them in their place. They’ll do what they always do: ignore anything that doesn’t fit the gutter narrative and make up shit that does, while the *Times* will have the *real* story just dripping with details that show how clueless the Post scum really are... Clark, those details are *in* the Times article. Tomorrow’s Times, Dick called it a data dump. It’s loaded with details that don’t matter if the wedding doesn’t happen.”

“Because they were committed to filling those column inches,” Clark said like a practical newspaper man. “But if the filler is what you intended the Times to write—”

“But I didn’t tell them *in advance*. Clark, you’re a reporter. If some society broad handed you a press kit before an event like this primed with everything she wanted you to write, what would be your reaction? I have people lined up to leak all that to Martin Stanwick as the afternoon unfolds.”

“Then whatever is going to stop the wedding must happen *after* your surrogates complete their mission,” Clark said. “That’s good. That’s a good lead. When do you imagine they’ll do it?”

I thought. I thought hard. “The music is right before I come down the aisle,” I murmured. “The dress isn’t something you talk about before you’ve seen it, and how much do people chat *during the ceremony*? So what the hell happened? Did everybody hang around for hours after this thing burned down, drinking the champagne and talking about the flowers? It makes no sense.”

"You're right, it doesn't, but it is a marker," Clark said, less newspaper man and more hero-on-the-job. "I'll keep an eye on this Stanwick when he arrives and listen to the chit-chat around him."

"Alright," I said, "I need to get changed, meet with this last Demon, and by then Anna should be here to get me dressed for real. So Bruce is... in your hands. Tell him I love him. Remind him one of those female musicians will be carrying a Golden Age Stradivarius so if he can possibly spot Clayface without drenching one of the finest stringed instrument ever made in salt water, that'd be—"

"I will remind him," Clark smiled.

I went into the bedroom, sat at my dressing table and considered the newspaper from hell. **Sorry, Bruce...** and that picture of us in the ballroom. I saw Clark's smile more than either of ours in the photograph. "I will remind him."

I realized the bit about the Strad was a mistake. A normal person... I was getting married in a few hours, my mind should be on that. There was a newspaper from the future saying it didn't happen, my mind should be on that. There was a shapeshifter plotting to kill me, my mind should be... But no, I'm a freak who thinks how there's a rare and precious thing made by a genius whose technique we can never understand and it's survived 250 years to make it into our hands and mustn't be destroyed on our watch. I wasn't normal.

Neither is Bruce. Practically the first thing we nailed down about "us" was that normal people will never understand and we won't either if think like them, measure against their standards, judge ourselves by their values. I guess that's why it's a kick pretending. Our private joke, getting away with it: Bat and Cat living in the world like a normal man and woman...

I looked at the picture under the headline. Did we finally take it too far?

The Chilean poet-diplomat Pablo Neruda wrote about his country's olive trees, and this odd—and oddly charming—follower of Ra's al Ghul had copied down several lines to be included with the oil. He also had a recipe for salmon, swordfish, mackerel or flounder, all plentiful in Chilean waters, prepared with the local oil and cherry tomatoes common in the region. The recipe called for sea salt, and he nearly had a fit when he saw Aquaman's gift—seven chests of the stuff—right there in the morning room. He looked... he looked the way I felt the first time I got into Cartier's vault in Paris.

There was also a photograph of the groves and a letter spelling out the olives selected and why ("Extracted in a modern Alfa Laval mill at 23.7 degrees celsius to preserve its volatile aromas") but it was very clear these were all Ra's touches while the poem and the recipe were Pikhai's own contributions.

It was sweet. He was sweet—not something I ever expected to say about a Demon, but in that room, surrounded by a twelve-hundred dollar Meissen dish we didn't need from a corporate climber trying to ingratiate himself with Bruce (who would have done better donating to the hospital like we asked), the *thought* Pikhai had put into his gift.

Maybe I felt bad that Bruce would never touch a drop of the stuff, considering the source. Maybe I was just curious. Or maybe I wasn't in a hurry to leave that room and

go back into a manor with that headline hanging over it, to go upstairs and put on a dress for a ceremony that apparently wasn't going to happen. So I stayed and hung out with Pikhai, got his life story (which didn't take as long as you'd think) when time ran out.

Faust came in and said that Eddie and Doris were in the house, along with Bishop Geoff (which must have made an interesting threesome at the doorbell), adding that there was a 21.5% chance he was not really The Right Reverend Gideon Geoff, D.D. but Clayface and I should "take precautions" such as sending Dick in to quiz him before I would meet with him alone, and even then I should bring a loaded waterpic for protection.

I don't know what became of Pikhai as I went to sort out the mess. Bishop Geoff had been Reverend Geoff when he married Dick and Barbara, so giving Dick the job wasn't completely ridiculous. I went to find Alfred, assuming Dick would be with Bruce wherever he'd set up his command tent, but Eddie found me first.

"What's going on? Bruce called and said I should get here ASAP, but Dormont isn't here yet and I didn't know what to tell Doris. Do you know what's involved telling a woman to *get ready for a wedding* hours before she... Okay, wrong person to ask, I see that."

I downgraded the death glare into a sigh, explained about Hagen and that we got a tip about female musicians. I assumed Bruce wanted him there to vet Mahmoud's daughter Femi and, if her father was with her, confirm the other members of the string quartet. It wasn't something that had to be kept from Doris, but since she'd been inconvenienced, I gave her a field promotion to bridesmaid/dresser.

"You still don't look happy," I noted.

"Lina, Riddle me fiddle me. Hagen wanting to kill you? This is what marrying white hat brings, that's all I'll say."

"Nice try, Edward, but he wants to kill Ivy too, you can't blame this on hats," I told him. "And I heard you were trying one on yourself in Tokyo and *that's all I'll say.*"

He blushed.

"Only time I'll offer, my weak lion: Do you want me to give you away? Awkward as it would be, I'll do it for you."

I smiled.

"You're the only one where it would mean something, Eddie. You're the only 'on my side of the church' who knows what's really going on. But that's my father's place, and since he's gone, I really don't want anyone."

The moment was approaching a level of sentimentality I couldn't tolerate, so I gave him a job.

"Find Alfred, tell him I need Dick to vet Bishop Geoff and I want to see Jason Blood as soon as he gets here, and tell him Doris will be upstairs helping me dress. He'll understand."

Alfred knew that once Anna arrived I'd be surrounded by people who didn't know the secrets so communication would be reduced to coded allusions at best. Doris meant the same thing, and Eddie obviously understood. He looked at me like I was the condemned queen awaiting execution and trusting him with my last message from the tower.

"Well then, this is good-bye until it's over," Eddie said, and he hugged me.

Bruce scowled at the mirror, at his wrist, at the mirror, the reflection of his chin, his tie, his lower lip, and his wrist again.

"Taking inventory?" Clark asked dryly.

"I'm supposed to be obsessing about cufflinks or something, aren't I? Bringing the wrong cufflinks or wearing the wrong... not shaving close enough, imperfections in the tie."

"And instead you're chewing your cud that you couldn't get five more minutes scanning, remodulating and rescanning the feeds from the security cameras? Bruce, we talked about this—"

"When you took my phone."

"It's not a phone, Bruce. What I confiscated is a miniaturized Pentagon Command Center that can also send texts. It is a security threat, and I don't just mean to your identity. You could take out NORAD with what you've got in there—"

"Defcon, Clark. In case you haven't noticed, there's an *event* in the house, as in guests. The cave is locked down and I need *access* to my *tools*."

"You *need* to take a breath. And then you need to let your best man handle it. The U.N. does, the Guardians—"

"Clark, he's out there somewhere. Let me have my damn phone!"

"Your phone is at the Fortress and that's where stays. Team Watchtower is on it, Bruce. Let us do what we do."

Silence settled—the two men staring at one other, neither moving—until a quick rap on the door broke the silence but achieved no other effect. Dick opened the door to see the pair of them facing each other like an illustration in a Dr. Seuss parable, and he closed the door without intruding. "Okay," he mouthed silently at the hallway, and then after a few steps he murmured "Stay strong, Clark. It's for his own good."

At that moment Bruce relented, almost as if he was the one who heard the distant words. He looked back at the mirror and sighed.

"I should be worried about the shave, Clark. She deserves that much. She deserves something normal. But damnit I... I would rather be out there to keep an eye on the guests myself."

Clark glanced through the walls.

"Everyone is still settling in, just like they were six minutes ago. There's nothing to see—"

"I'm the best judge of that," Bruce snapped. "Those are my friends, colleagues and neighbors. If anyone is behaving strangely—"

"And if you went out there, there would still be nothing to see other than all their heads together wondering *why* you were hanging around where you're not supposed to be."

"This is torture."

"Bruce, relax."

"I should be fussing about cufflinks."

"Bruce, Selina knows who you are—"

"Not shapeshifting killers—"

“—She knows how you think, she *knows* what you’re obsessing on right now and that’s it’s not cufflinks, and *that’s why she loves you*. Relax.”

“My chin was basically the first thing she saw,” Bruce said, rubbing his finger against it, the detective’s hyper-acute senses on alert for the faintest indication of stubble.

Clark glanced through the ceiling towards the bedroom where Selina was dressing, hoping it had all worked out for the best. Faust intercepting them prevented Selina telling him about the newspaper, and Clark didn’t think it was right to do it in her place, not when she’d said specifically to tell Bruce only that she wanted to see him.

“My chin was the first thing she saw,” Bruce repeated, holding his hand over his eyes and nose, and parting his fingers just a crack to analyze the reflection.

Besides which, Bruce had enough on his mind.

Mr. Pennyworth,

This platform had fewer variables to calculate due to the extreme efficiency with which the household is run and the consistency of the high standards maintained. Though it was not among my directives, this platform has determined you can best replace your knives with sub-zero tempered molybdenum steel from MAC cutlery Japanese series. —Faust

Leaving the note on Alfred’s nightstand, Faust proceeded to the Wayne bedroom where it performed a final float-through in what it judged would be the final ten minutes before Selina entered. It checked that the dress, stockings, underwear, veil, bouquet, makeup, makeup brushes, hairbrushes, hair pins, perfume, earrings, and shoes were laid out as they should be. It checked that the gifts for her bridesmaids were in place on her dressing table. Its inner light began to fade as it checked the travel suit she would change into before leaving the reception and the luggage packed for her honeymoon... and it floated lower, bobbing drunkenly as it returned to her dressing table. It hovered a moment over an antique powder dish and swans down puff that seemed too small and delicate to support it. It descended, but rather than crushing them, it simply stopped the moment it made contact. Its light faded completely then, but as its weight hit the puff, it shrank to a small carved amber cameo of a cat.

I dressed. I told Doris that Lois was delayed: that Superman was doing something super over Metropolis and Perry White called in hysterics because his entire A-team was here in Gotham. She was talking him down, so if Doris could take her place on the door...

I was up to the special underwear, this French corsetry detailing in the back was the only part I actually needed help with, when Jason knocked at the door. I heard Doris turning him away and called out for her to stop, while I made my way out there in a

shuffling two-step with Anna holding onto my back-lacing. Jason looked at the three of us and said “*déjà vu*.”

I got him alone, ignored his allusions to the boudoir of Lady Wasaborg and whatever corset-lacing story he wanted to tell, and tried to get a straight answer on Faust. He admitted there was straight hocus pocus non-technology magic in its making, but he also swore up and down that magic is about *intent* and his only intent was to help. It simply wasn't possible that something magically directed to serve the wedding could do anything to sabotage it. It also wasn't feasible that it could withhold information we should have—not from me or Bruce, though it might deceive others if necessary, even Clark or Alfred. And it wouldn't let others prevent it from bringing us information it thought we should have. (As we had seen. Sorry, Clark.) Jason also saw no way Faust could be hacked and no way the AI could manipulate time to obtain a newspaper from the future.

In other words, he had nothing at all to contribute—other than the now-expected last minute offer to walk me down the aisle.

As a trained assassin, Pikhai had an instinct for secret passages. He operated in parts of the world where buildings older than Wayne Manor were plentiful. They often became embassies, ministries and hospitals that were teaming with the sort of people the Demon's Head might want to kill, so the training dwelt on such things. In the age when a fifth of the world lived under English rule and nearly as many bent their knee to the Qing Emperor, servants were everywhere that mattered and they were not meant to be seen. Their comings and goings were hidden whenever possible by passages behind the walls that linked kitchen and dining room, library, drawing room, bedrooms, and servants' hall.

Now that wedding guests were arriving, Pikhai retreated from the areas buzzing with activity. He didn't want to get stuck in conversation with his wobbly English, and with no way to explain what he was doing there in any language. So he ducked into the first semi-hidden door that he found, figuring it would probably lead to the kitchen. The food at weddings was always something to see, even the country weddings in his village, and he was curious to see what fine victuals might be served at an affair like this... He got lost at first, the passage led him back to Selina's morning room where he took another peak at the salt. “Salt of the Seven Realms” she'd said, a gift from the king of Atlantis.

A minion of Ra's al Ghul should have relished the unexpected connection: Atlantis! where the Demon's Head was currently imprisoned. However remote the connection, he should feel a thrill at the chance occurrence—and if he were truly loyal, he might consider if it was by design. If Ra's al Ghul sent a gift of olive oil to bring his minions to this house where Atlantis guards were stationed, he should perhaps be plotting to follow, impersonate, or gain power over them through the taking of a hostage, and force them to do the Demon's bidding and free the Great One when they returned.

Pikhai thought none of this, however. He merely inspected the salts again: the famous Fleur de Sel from Brittany, the large flakes of pristine white from Cypress and

their black, equally large counterparts from the lava beds, the exquisite Korean Jugeom, packed into bamboo stems and baked nine times over a pinewood fi—

He heard a noise outside the door and retreated quickly into the passage...

“AEIOU.”

...to see a pair of cats sitting at attention and glaring at him like a pair of guardian temple cats.

“No, no, I touch nothing,” he told them in his native language. “I have no designs on the gifts, nor on any person here.”

The cats seemed to take him at his word. They both turned and trotted away, and he followed—to the kitchen, of course. Servant passages *must* lead to the kitchen eventually, and of course the cats knew the way.

The one called Alfred was there, in command like a ship’s captain. Pikhai’s duties as a food taster took him frequently into the kitchens, and he knew that level of activity was not to be interrupted. Even if these catering minions were not trained in the fighting arts like those in the Demon compound, it would be foolish indeed to challenge a commander-chef when an important feast was being prepared. He withdrew and returned to the main house—where he *again* saw Alfred at the end of the hidden passage looking out at the guests.

A sharp intake of breath was as far as Pikhai’s startled cry got before his training kicked in. He sank as far back against the wall as his physical form would allow, summoning the shadows to consume him while Alfred looked his way. A trick of the light, for a moment the old man’s eyes seemed to glow red, and then... *Not* a trick of light, there was growling. Growling too menacing—too bone-chillingly ominous—to come from those cute little cats. Growling that froze Pikhai where he stood... though there did seem to be vibrations in his knees and his ankles and his teeth that might be called trembling—and might—and probably did—make noise that could be heard by that red-eyed old man who was presumably the source of the growling.

Despite paralysis and the physical reality that his solid back could not press any further through the solid wall behind him, Pikhai attempted it. The effort produced nothing more than a swallow. The thing ahead, which Pikhai didn’t like to call a demon out of respect to the Great One but which was certainly not that guy Alfred, twitched its nose as if it was reacting to the smell of fear rather than the sounds it came out in.

“I am the Fire of Belial,” a voice from an Exorcist movie hissed, so soft and low Pikhai couldn’t be sure it was actually coming through his ears or if it was some demonic telepathy just present enough to be heard over his thumping... over his thumping... his thumping heart and the rising silence that threatened to swallow the remaining words. “Let the stink of virtue be consumed in the cleansing flame—”

In place of the shriek any normal person would emit, Pikhai was awakened by the steely will of a trained assassin—although that will manifested as running from the apparition as quickly and silently as he could.

THREE PILLARS

The malevolence that resembled Alfred Pennyworth watched Nigma chatting with Ford Dormont and briefly tried on both of their forms, until Nigma pointed to the little girl Matt Hagen had already identified as his best way to approach Selina. He'd learned the hard way that, up close, a target will spot the impersonation of people who are allowed to get close. If he tried to approach Selina as Bruce, as Alfred or as Nigma, he'd be busted in a heartbeat. Bruce was her lover, Alfred a housemate she saw daily, and she played poker with Nigma. Even Batman she knew well enough to spot imperfections in the way Hagen saw him. He would never get close enough to snap her neck—and that was too quick anyway. What he had in mind for her required time as well as proximity. Lots of time.

So he returned to Alfred's form for one more leg of the journey, and then spotting the Atlanteans up ahead, he changed to Lucius Fox for safety and ducked into what he thought was a guest toilet but turned out to be a little cubby hole off the ballroom. There was a large flower arrangement that made the hate burn like cyclone of fire around his heart. He reached out his hand until it enveloped the disgusting blossoms, pouring his hate into the clay, heating and pressurizing it even as he drew it into his center—hating—hating—heating and pressurizing and hating its disgusting virginal white obscenity stinking of Gaia Life—then he expelled it to sit as it had on its table, a brittle, blackened dead thing that would crumble to ash if he blew on it. But he wouldn't. It was a scarier sight as it was.

Inside him, the excruciating cyclone subsided to the level that was its basic resting pulse since the park, the Hate was always with him now—the fire always with him—searing yet life giving, pushing him on, the Hate. The sacred fire. Life-giving Hate: Whore of Babylon, Jezebel, Ivy, Cat.

The inferno turned down to a simmer as he shrunk to the shape of that girl with the viola. Nothing better. No one is afraid of a girl like that, least of all a bride. A beautiful bride is always ready to smile at a wide-eyed girl—she would let him get close, and then he would have her.

I knew something was wrong as soon as we'd left the bedroom. You can't spend the nights I have on Gotham rooftops without developing a sense for it: being watched, being stalked... and being hunted.

Lois had joined us by the time I finished with Jason, and being Lois she'd navigated my Superman fib like a champ. Doris hugged me and went off to join Eddie and we took the backstairs to avoid the grand staircase and the Great Hall. Two steps in it hit me—hot, nauseous dread—the backstairs were predictable. And they were narrow—not vent narrow but in these dresses we had to go single file, creating a kill zone, which made them seem pharaoh's tomb claustrophobically narrow.

“Oh God,” I breathed, which Anna naturally assumed was jitters.

“Easy girl, just think of Bruce. He loves you, honey. He’s got it worse than any man I’ve ever seen.”

All I heard was ‘think of Bruce’—Bruce who thinks of everything. Bruce who would have had four dozen routes mapped out to get from the bedroom to the altar, none of which was a fucking kill zone. Bruce who didn’t harass me with thirty reminders to plan a route downstairs because he trusts me—Fuck. Fuck. He trusted me because he had this silly idea that I was Catwoman and knew enough to move thirty feet through my own home without getting myself killed.

I was going to blow this.

I was really going to blow this.

Some part of my brain remembered our first year together, that first Hell Month when he said I was the love of his life and I—and I thought your once in a lifetime chance to screw it up for good—and I thought of that night after Cat-Tales when he kissed me and I felt the real man in there behind Batman, and how vulnerable he was and how dumb he was to be kissing Catwoman and how I had to protect him from a trainwreck like me—and—and—And I thought of Lois. “You’ve got good old-fashioned wedding jitters.”

“Lois?” I said, though I could barely hear myself so I’m not sure she could hear me. “When you said—”

At that moment, we’d reached the bottom of the stairs in this niche outside the dining room when Femi Molokhya came running up to me.

“Well hello, sweetie,” Anna started to say, all smiles and crouching a little, when Femi’s arm sprouted into a grotesque claw and swatted her nearly up to the ceiling.

In a blink, Femi had lunged into a six-foot Clayface leaning in and poised to strike, and I heard that distinct ‘mph-MMPH!’ from Lois that meant he’d slapped one of those mud gags on her.

His face arched forward until it was inches from mine—and I felt this weird déjà vu. Dread and revulsion but something else—or someone else.

“I am going to rip your heart out and shove it down your throat,” Matt croaked in this horrible gravel. “And while you choke on it, I’ll—”

There was a swffffTUNK and I was suddenly looking at Alfred’s chef knife lodged in the side of Clayface’s nose.

-swffffTUNK-

-swffffTUNK-

-swffffTUNK-

And there were three more sticking out of his shoulder, chest and thigh.

-swffffTUNK-

-swffffTUNK-

And one in the forehead.

“You go now,” Pikhai said, somehow finding a phrase his wobbly English didn’t mangle, while Anna had recovered enough to crouch behind him.

Whatever Matt has left in the way of bones or organs under the mud, it didn’t like being stabbed. He was mostly focused on Pikhai now, though he glanced my way enough that I could see the wheels turning: he was trying to figure out how much damage he could do in one good lunge and how much Pikhai could do in response.

Luckily I had a weapon of my own to tip the balance. An adapted waterpik tucked neatly into the bouquet. It was meant to deliver a quick slash of pressurized liquid to get me out of whatever clay trap I'd fallen into so I could run, but Matt didn't have to know that. I pointed it like I was Dirty Harry and snarled Shimbala's past-feeding-time-and-I'm-not-playing snarl.

"Didn't anyone tell you what happens if you mess with a bride on her wedding day?" I gave him the tilted head with the hungry eyes, when the leopards are deciding whether to go for the throat.

He took a step back (So far, so good. No heart being torn out of my chest) but there were three other people in the middle of this, and running wasn't likely to save me let alone help any of them. So it was reason or bust:

"Matthew, I know you were only in the park that night because of me," I began.

"You," he croaked. You never heard so much hate packed into a single syllable. You could feel it like the blast of heat when you open an oven. The sound prickled in my ears—I could feel it in the curves and canals, and could almost feel it boring into my brain.

"You."

It was in my nostrils like intensely bad breath, except not a smell but this sense of powerful, personal hatred. It was in my mouth, coating my tongue—"You"—It made my eyes sting. Twin intertwined passions: wanting me in pain and wanting to be the cause of that pain.

For all that, I didn't budge in my Dirty Harry stance.

It didn't stop him.

"You don't even like her," he said. "And why should you? Narcissist and fanatic with the mind of a bratty child, temper of a brain damaged pitbull. Nobody'd care if she died that night. But you—you had to drag me in. 'It's what you do.' Why?"

"She was hurting people."

"WHAT DO YOU CARE?!" he roared. "PEOPLE GET HURT EVERY DAY! GODDESS CUNT STINKING OF GAIA FINALLY HURT THE WRONG ONE AND WAS GONNA BE FRIED BY MIDNIGHT—YOU SHOULD HAVE SAID GOOD RIDDANCE! YOU SHOULD HAVE OPENED YOURSELF UP, CAT, AND ENJOYED THE MOMENT—FEEL IT! DRINK IT IN! FEEL THE WORTHLESS BITCH BURN!"

"..."

"..."

"... And scene," I said finally. He panted and snorted like a bull that had just charged and was almost—but not quite—ready to do it again. I only had a few moments to make this work when I only had the slightest slippery grasp on what 'this' was. "No, guess not," I stalled. "I haven't seen a lot of your movies, Matthew, but I have seen you get your drama stud on a few times. That wasn't it."

"The fuck are you talking about, whore?"

"That was Etrigan. I've had him in my head, Matt; I had him in my head that night in fact. I know those phrases. Open up, taste her fear, drink it in—"

"Whore of Babylon, you are the sin-master and soul-murdered!"

"Matthew, you don't care about Pammy any more than I do, if anything you cared less, but you came to the park that night because you knew that if you didn't, I was

going in alone. We were never enemies, Matt, not that I was aware of, and I thought we were becoming friends. And now we're standing here poised to strike at one another because you came here to kill me. Think about that—there's no reason for this—it's all Etrigan."

"OF COURSE IT IS! I TOOK A FIREBALL, WORTHLESS CAT! BECAUSE 'THAT'S WHAT YOU DO!' I DIDN'T TAKE JUST A LITTLE FOR YOU, I STRETCHED OUT TO SHIELD HER TOO—BECAUSE YOU'RE ON THE WRONG SIDE! LADY OF SLAUGHTER, SHE WHO MAULS, FIERCEST OF HUNTERS WHOSE EYES BLAZE WITH THE HEAT OF THE SUN, BREATHING THE DESERT UPON THE CITY THAT OFFENDS TO SWALLOW IT WHOLE! THAT'S WHAT CAT-WOMAN IS MEANT TO BE! NOT CARING IF SOME FILTHY DRUID SAP-PUKING WOOD NYMPH STRIKES DOWN A FEW MORE THAN SHE'S DUE!"

"Fine. Screw reason; back to snarling," I said. "Take the gag off Lois and thank whatever god you pray to that you didn't smudge the dress."

He slurped away almost faster than you could see it—which might have seemed too easy, but I was betting he'd raised his voice enough that ungagging Lois was no longer necessary. He certainly wasn't loud enough to be heard in the chapel, but—yep—I turned and Clark and Wally were "stepping into the doorway" before all those clay embedded knives even hit the floor. They were both in civvies and doing that ridiculous 'looking casual' stance all the heroes seem to do when they're on the job and trying to hide it.

("Where was that light touch this morning?" you may ask. Where was the metagene multiplier on subtlety and tact when I was in my bedroom with my boobs flattened? The situational cluelessness of capes is a mystery beyond mortal understanding.)

What they'd actually done back there I couldn't guess, but whatever Matt had seen, the stand-off had ended without Pikhai or Anna realizing Superman and Flash were at the party. Now they were quietly backing out again, so for the moment we had containment. No "wasn't meant to be" headline and I was still breathing.

"Clark, I need Jason Blood now," I whispered. "Bruce doesn't need to know the specifics of what you saw, but tell him I'm onto something."

I couldn't say more. Pikhai had come to collect the knives, and Anna was staying close enough that you couldn't see light between them.

I thanked him (Ra's minion or not, he was the hero of the hour) and since he seemed pretty interested in the waterpik I let him have a look. He gave a patronizing chuckle: half contempt for the weapon, half admiring my bluff, and then he said it was a pity about the knives.

"Such fine cooking blades are rarely seen, but I cannot guess how they could be cleaned for touching food again after the goop of that foul thing."

... He was a strange one.

Bruce would have been suspicious, I mean, a minion of Ra's al Ghul just showing up like that, throwing knives to save the Detective's feline concubine? But to me it felt like... like the other side of what I experienced with Clark about the Stradivarius. He wasn't "normal" and that's what it takes to fit into the crazy rhythm of the place. Gotham in general, and Wayne Manor on one of its craziest days...

I put Lois in charge of comforting Anna by way of distracting her: repairing the hair, checking the dress for smears of clay, etc. Lois is the world's leading expert on putting

yourself back together after the unimaginable, and Anna was just stunned enough that she went along without worrying about me. That left me alone with Pikhai, and by the time Jason arrived I'd got his story. Even through the wobbly English, everything he said confirmed what I'd worked out...

"Jason, what you told me earlier about magic and intent, it works the other way too, doesn't it? Matt was 'killed' by Etrigan's fireball that night in the park. Literal hellfire, meant for me. ETTY's intent that night was to kill—at the very least to kill Ivy, to draw it out and make it hurt, and if I happened to burn before making it to the lake, c'est la vie."

"So it seems," Jason said with that dismissive I-don't-feel-guilty-and-I'm-sick-of-talking-about-this tone that I can respect as a cat, most of the time, but not now when he must know I wasn't angling for an apology.

"Jason, Matt got infused with Etrigan's evil that night, I'm certain of it. 'Open up, drink in their fear,' I know those phrases. You must know those phrases; it's pure ETTY. Could the intent to kill powering that fireball have fused with Hagen's clay and that's what's coming after me? Still Etrigan's wind-up and pitch, just using Matt Hagen's body now in place of the fire?"

There was a pause, and Jason's expression was that of a man checking if the milk had gone sour.

"Judging by the silence and a feeling of unsavory amusement, I would say yes. It's not something Etrigan intended, but he has known about it for some time and he seems to look on it as accidentally drawing an inside straight."

"I see." There was nothing else to say, really. Tangle with cats, you're going to get scratched. Play around with demons and sooner or later, somebody is getting licked with hellfire. I was just unlucky that it was a clay man who absorbed the stuff rather than frying in it.

At least now I knew what I was up against. I sent for Bishop Geoff, and recited the three pillars of my day:

Getting married—this above all—Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Wayne.

Stay alive—shapeshifter out to get me—but now at least I knew why.

Beat the headline—whatever is behind it, whatever menace is lurking, somehow, someway—Sorry, Times, we are meant to be.

The string quartet began their pre-ceremony program, prompting more guests to take their seats though a few continued to mingle. Conversation shifted from the free range, open air pleasantries with whoever happened to be standing there to the serious business of where to settle for hushed exchanges on specifics once the ceremony began.

Ford Dormont was a skilled social tactician, though taking on Riddler and Game Theory may have been punching above his weight. Still, a novel based on Bruce and Selina required better access than he was getting from red carpets and society gossip. The pair of them were maddeningly elusive. They were seen at events, appeared in the right circles: opera, horses, art, sports... but they always remained apart, never became regulars, never stuck.

Doris was his in. She'd been a part of Selina's pre-bachelorette night at Après and gone to the real shindig on Jumby Island. Anna Karalis might be useful filling in Selina's past, and his Mayfair readers would be satisfied with that. But Doris was the intimate friend of the present, and that's where the crime was, here in Gotham, and that's what he'd need for the novel he envisioned.

At least that was his plan when he and Ash arrived. Ash was happy to act as bait, seeking out Edward Nigma and drawing him out on famous puzzles from ancient Egypt to the Sanborn sculpture at Langley. But then, rather than leading him to the row Ford had chosen too rapt in conversation to notice, Ash spotted a thread on Ford's collar and drew his friend aside.

"Ed's your guy, not the girl," he reported as he fussed with Ford's collar. "He was next to her at the opera a while back—next to Selina, in the Wayne box—set off a feeding frenzy of climbers using him to get close to her. Also, Martin from the Times is late. If you want to take over his seat, I'll plop them next to you up there."

"Oh dear," Ford tittered. "Late for a wedding on this scale? The only time I had something like that happen, the fellow was stabbed." Ford salivated as he looked at the seat unofficially reserved for Martin Stanwick of Hermione's Society Chit Chat, and at Liv Bantree who'd claimed the seat beside it and Trip Cochran in the row behind. All those tidbits meant for Martin's pages could now find their way to his.

"Thank you, Ash. Thank you very much."

"You look very beautiful, Miss Selina."

There is no level of insanity Alfred can't make just a little more manageable. "Whatever's come barreling out of the future," it seems to say, "whatever has risen from the dead or shimmered in from another dimension to wreak havoc, British butlers have seen worse. We do not let it upend our calm, tarnish our dignity, or interfere with tea being served promptly at five."

He'd come in, "Begging your pardon, miss..." and seeing the dress for the first time, had to acknowledge it before getting down to business. "There is news from the front hall, I'm afraid."

I was afraid of something else entirely.

"Alfred, don't make me use a tone," I said, using a tone. "I know Bruce couldn't stop you from working today, and I do understand why, but you promised, once three guests had arrived you would go sit with Dick and Barbara like any other member of the family, which you are. It's important to Bruce—Hell, it's important to me, but even if it wasn't, I'm juggling so much crazy right now, Bruce losing it because you wouldn't let the first mate pilot the ship for a few hours is—"

"Superman is here, miss."

I knew that. Alfred knew I knew that, so he couldn't mean...

"Mr. Kent is with Master Bruce in his study," he added dryly. "Yet Superman has just arrived."

"Well that's a typical film star, going to upstage me at my own wedding," I muttered. Superman is the A-lister among capes, right? It was known he escorted me to that polo game a while back, got lots of press. It's not completely unreasonable that

he could be a guest. Of course I would know I didn't invite him, but from Matt's POV, Superman showing up uninvited wouldn't throw me. I would just assume...

"Have you told Bruce and Clark?" I asked.

"Master Dick is informing Mr. Kent as we speak," Alfred said, and then paused that very particular pause when he's got a caustic word for Bruce but is holding his tongue unless provoked.

"Out with it," I ordered.

"Mr. Kent and I determined this morning that, at the thirty minute mark, Master Bruce should be shielded from any information which might disorient his focus."

Of course. The pair of them have had us married for years. They consider us impossibly difficult problem children for not giving them this wedding years ago and—

"Alfred, just out of curiosity, when is my cut-off time?"

"Two hours ago, miss. The only reason I've apprised you of the matter is that your life is in danger."

"..."

In other words, there was no telling how much was going on that I didn't know about because it didn't involve a possessed T-1000 aiming to rip my heart out.

"Miss?"

"Alfred, please ask 'Superman' to meet me upstairs in my suite, and try to feel him out if he's got a message from Batman."

"Miss?"

"Possessed or not, Hagen is a drama queen. He sees soap opera in any situation. And he's baiting me, so let him think it's working. You've told me Superman is here, check, and I assumed he has a message from Batman. You're astute enough to have noticed, so when you show him up to the suite, let on. I know Matt. He won't know if I'm dreading the message or hoping for it, but either way, he's on his way to play a great scene. His mind will be on that, how he's going to play it and not whether I'm onto him and who is really baiting who."

"Very good, miss."

I waited until he was gone before stripping. Jason helpfully zapped the exquisite 150-hours of hand-stitched couture corsetry, laces and buttons to function like 21st Century velcro for the next fifteen minutes and I dashed out in my specially-made bridal silk underwear to the astonished stares of Szczenae Orlan and Ahalkea.

"Here!" I said, passing the dress to Orlan like a football. "Guard this. Guard it like the life of your king Orin of Atlantica, Pacifica and dominions beyond the reefs, and no matter what happens, no matter who you see, no matter what they say, DO NOT LET IT GET WET!"

I ran.

I have run through the back halls of houses like Wayne Manor before, where being spotted by the likes of Richard Flay or Gladys-Ashton Larraby could have dire consequences that I wouldn't easily escape. I was in a respectable leather catsuit, not handstitched French underwear, but I had done it. I dodged Endicotts and Corcorans, Bantrees and Yorks, Park Avenue Gardners and River Place Gardners, Nigmas and Dormonts...

And finally...

I reached...

My suite...

It was a risk, but I took an extra second to move the Wanli vase from the urn stand outside the door and with it safely stashed in the bedroom, went into the suite to meet my doom.

"Superman, I see you found it okay. Thank you for agreeing to meet like this. Away from prying eyes, I mean. Prying ears. I think you have something for me—"

The trick baiting overpowered opponents is to keep them off-balance where they're buried in a chain of reactions and not thinking through any one move. Matt barely had time to process that I was in my underwear when I hit him with that line just begging the movie villain to throw off his disguise and make his move.

"Something for you—YES!" he said, savaging the last word as his arm turned into a long spike thrusting at my middle. He hadn't waited for me to step all the way into the room, so I simply ran out and down the hallway towards the kill zone. Only had to dodge one clay-spear and had one nasty skid in the muddy spillage but I made it to the turn into the blue room where the waterfall shower was hooked up to a special reservoir of 3.5% saline approximating seawater for Szczenae Orlan and Ahalkea—which the bishop had just blessed and which Wally should have speed-connected to the sprinklers.

I raced in, looked for the button, had to dodge another clay-spear and had a mud-snake coiling up my leg like an anaconda before I found it, but I did find it and I pushed it before the clay-snake could get in a position to squeeze. I continued running—sort of—while Matt went from trying to maneuver his attack-snake for leverage to simply reshaping it into position.

There was no banter now, just the demonic snarling I remembered from the hell hounds. And he was squeezing all kinds of places that made it hard to run and hard to breathe, so I wasn't going to chit-chat. But I was still doing both—running and breathing—although Time was now the enemy. Mine obviously, as his bulk caught up with the snake-appendage and I had his full mass trying to squeeze the life out of me—but also his, because every second I was dragging him across the kill floor getting more and more doused with holy water. I waltzed him around the bedroom until he lost the cohesion to really squeeze me hard, and then I lunged into the bathroom as if this had all been nothing but a desperate bid to escape and in my desperation I'd chosen the wrong door. Instead, I slammed us both at the shower and sliced off a piece of him in the waterfall stream—smashing the controls with one hand and freakishly protecting my hair with the other! A final lunge pushed what was left of him into the famously over-sized Victorian bathtub, filled with water also blessed by the bishop and dousing the living hell out of him, literally.

"Hey C.W.," I heard him say—I heard it very distinctly coming from the slice that came off in the shower, though it was now little more than a misshapen baseball bat lying in a mud puddle. "Sorry... about ruining..." came from the tub "your special..." from a blob on the sink "...day." I'm not sure where the last word came from.

There was nothing after that.

I stood there, panting.

Waited for my vision to clear.

Had a hand on the sink to steady myself.

Panted a little more.

And stumbled out to the bedroom to see Alfred, Pikhai and the guardsmen all standing in the doorway.

"Well, he's no longer evil," I said, looking down at the globules of mud and slime on the floor and dripping down the wall. "But he's got no structural integrity." More panting before I could explain the holy water may have washed away whatever malevolence Etrigan infused into him, but it's still water and he couldn't hold himself together.

"What about the salt?" Pikhai asked. "Salt draws out moisture, does it not? Baking potatoes, do you not lay on a bed of rock salt to draw out moisture and make them greatly with flakiness."

"Y-yes, that is the case—excuse me but who are you?" Alfred asked like Pikhai was a dog that had suddenly begun talking.

I understood his confusion. Pikhai isn't what any of us expect in a Demon minion, and of course Alfred missed the earlier episode in the kitchen. But it wasn't the time for introductions. He was right about the salt, and I sent the Orlan and Ahalkea to get Arthur's gift: seven chests of the purest sea salt available to the king of Atlantis. It was enough to fill the drained bathtub, and as soon as we got six globules of clay-mud in close proximity they quivered like that bit in the Terminator when the T-1000 is blown to bits—and just like in that scene, they pulled themselves together into one big blob!

I was so excited I bounced and clapped like a high school cheerleader—I might have kissed Alfred's cheek if I hadn't realized Orlan, Ahalkea and Pikhai were all looking at my chest.

"Yes, fine, I'm in my underwear," I said. "Eyes on the prize, gentlemen. This man is not dead, which means I did not kill him—again. Let's get as much of him onto the salt as we can. We don't know what kind of shapeshifter-brain death clock is ticking."

We were ferrying Clayface globules over in handfuls when Wally appeared in the door—in that judgmental The-Hero-has-Arrived pose I'd never actually seen from a Flash.

"Hi," he said in the uptight cape tone that went with the pose—and I suddenly realized how it must look. Bride in her underwear on her hands and knees, picking bits of goo off the floor, butler, ninja and two guards in various postures doing the same thing, arms cupped in front of them, running their contents into the bathroom. "Selina, could I have a word in private?"

In all the times I've suffered that tone from a cape, I've never felt I deserved it like I did right then.

"Clark's heard bits and pieces," he said as soon as we were safely out of earshot, "and he's done a pretty spectacular job keeping Bruce occupied, figuring that was the best course given what he's heard. But now he's heard enough that— just— at what point was it going to occur to you that you had Flash and Superman, like, in the house? Is it a Gotham thing, or is it just— Crazy woman, go put your clothes on and let the supers handle this!"

I... did not have a reasonable answer, so I went and dressed.

It was a lot easier the second time. Not because of Jason's velcro voodoo on the lacing but because it's the kind of thing I'd done before. A heist gone sideways, a Bat encounter and a Bat pursuit, traditional avenues of escape east, west, up and down all iffy at best... But I had a Plan B whenever there was a black tie event in the vicinity (which in the neighborhoods I prowl is always)... Shedding Catwoman's fur and disappearing into that parallel dimension of Gotham nightlife: the privileged class enjoying their privileges. A spritz of hairspray (also used for beating thermal sensors—a multi-tasker!) and pinning my hair up (hairpins double as lockpicks, as everybody knows), touch up the eyeshadow (also used for dusting keypads to pick off the digits in a PIN) and lipstick (used to direct Batman's attention to my lips, duh). Add a pair of strappy Swarovski-beaded heels and an evening gown stashed in a vent, I could disappear into the gala fundraiser and be home without a hitch.

It felt so much more natural: not a bride being carefully prepared for the once-in-a-lifetime by a hand-picked, specially-clad team of attendants, but me on my own, hurriedly prepping for the final leg of a heist, pulse racing from a tussle and trying to make myself look presentably normal.

I repinned my hair, replaced the flowers meant to suggest cat-ears without being ludicrously on-the-nose about it (and also to anchor the veil), touched up the make-up and heard the strings starting the *Claire de Lune*. I just had time to check on Matt.

"C.W., C.W., I am so sorry," I heard before I even saw he'd completely pulled himself together.

Wally gave him a last once over, like he'd passed a final inspection, and he ushered Pikhai and the guardsmen out.

"Alfred's already down there. You look great. See ya," he said, and winked.

"Thanks," I whispered, but he'd already gone. I made a mental note to upgrade my assessment of Flash as more than 'nice guy' and 'Dick's friend,' and turned my attention to Matthew.

We both stood for a minute.

That first step after a mind control/fear toxin/ghostly possession episode where a friend tried to kill you/you've tried to kill a friend is always the same. No matter how many times you've done it, it never gets easier. Like after a death, you say "I'm sorry for your loss" and feel like an inept poser. The words are empty, hollow, a stupid formula because you're not as evolved as the real people who know the right thing to say.

"I'm glad you're not—" we both started to say, and he did this cute thing like he was starting to step towards me for a hug but then thought the better of it, considering. So I initiated the hug.

"I'm so sorry, today of all days. You look beautiful," he babbled in what was probably his answer to a studio's 'Get me someone like Hugh Grant but American and more buff for the action scenes,' but it was still all kinds of sweet.

"I'm sorry I got you quick-fired into pottery, shattered and possessed," I answered, and he smiled. "You also look quite nice," I added, just for balance, but he wanted another round.

"No seriously, C.W. I tried to kill you on your wedding day, even hellfire in the clay, there's no excuse for that."

“Matthew, I dragged you onto a battlefield and filled your head with unspeakably dumb, wrong and obscene hero priorities which rogues like us are not meant for. It was wrong, and I apologize. As a bride minutes before the wedding, premiere moment of selfish entitlement by right and custom, I say we go out there and get ours. Screw the rest of them, they’re on their own, at least until we cut the cake.”

He laughed; there would be no more apologies. But he did turn serious when we’d had our laugh.

“In that case, I have a proposal,” he said. “I was lurking as a henchman at the Iceberg for a while, trying to get the details on who was invited and all that, and then I was a caterer for a while and a socialite to get the layout of this place, and, you probably know how it is, while you’re snooping you hear things. And I know you don’t have anyone to give you away.”

“What is it with you guys?” I asked. “What do they tell you when you’re boys that you all want to—”

“Selina, do you not see a rogue has to give you away? Wayne seems like a nice guy, but he’s certainly not one of us, and you’re Catwoman. Remember Joker at the Pelacci-Marcuso wedding, even he talked about giving you away. When even Joker can see it.”

“Exactly. Matt, Joker has never said a true thing in his entire life. If he says it’s raining, I’d question the drops on my head. So let’s have no more about—”

“I’m just saying I’m here. I am. I’m a rogue and I owe you one, and if you happen to have a picture of your father, I could...”

“Matthew, that is so incredibly sweet, but I—”

“Please, C.W. I really don’t want today’s standout memory of me to be ‘rip your heart out’ and all that.”

I lied earlier. I have seen a fair number of his movies and it’s not easy to ignore a genuine film star standing in front you life-size, reproducing the earnest eyes and soft spoken “Please” from the final scene in *Advocate for Love*.

“I have a photo,” I told him. “We’re going in through the alcove behind the ballroom. Meet me downstairs.”

It was a sweet gesture, and if it wasn’t what I intended for my walk down the aisle, well, I guess for all my big talk about making my stand as a selfish bride, I didn’t like to be stubborn about it. Matt wanted to make a gesture, and if it made him feel better... I got the photo from my dressing table and ran down to the ballroom realizing I didn’t hear music. The *Claire de Lune* must have ended while I was in the bedroom and—

I ran smack into Bruce as the first notes of the *Nocturne* began.

“Clark told me to wait here,” he said.

JUST US

“Hi” was all I could think to say. It may have come out “Meow,” I’m not sure. All I knew was he had materialized out of nowhere, a beautiful Bat-entrance when my head had filled up with so many irrelevant nothings since sunrise I nearly forgot... “Do you want the short version or the long one?” I heard myself asking.

“Later.”

He looked me up and down, and then took a breath like he’d forgotten how for a second.

Or maybe that was me. Somehow there was air in my chest again.

“Look,” he said. His arms were around mine and his eyes were—Oh hell, I don’t know, so *blue* and so *Batman* all of a sudden, while his voice was that soft lilt I didn’t hear until years later. “We’re going to go out there and recite vows, and I have something picked out, but right now while it’s just us, I want to say this.

“From the very first night you saw through the mask. You saw *me*, a me that even I haven’t always understood. And I look into those eyes now—masks, no masks, they’re the same—and they always will be. The parts of us that are connected... Are. WE are. It’s *Just. Us.*

“We both invented ourselves. Most people want to but not many can. Most aren’t brave enough. Early on, we discovered something about ourselves, something deep. And we didn’t run from it; we leaned into it. We let it lead us, shape us... And that’s what brought us to each other, because that’s how it works.

“This one temple dojo, there was a monk. We didn’t exchange more than ten words in all the time I was there, until this one day shortly before I left. He said he was like me, the training came easy, the discipline, self-denial... But the one thing it took him the longest to understand: it’s in the path of our happiness that we find the learning for which we’ve chosen this lifetime. And if we don’t *pursue happiness*, the Universe has to adapt and put the happiness in the path of our learning.

“I didn’t understand then, but I see it so clearly in us. The parts of us that they all see and the parts they never will, we’re meant to complete each other.”

All I know of the next seconds is he lifted my hand to his lips, he said he would see me out there, and he... basically... did a Bat-vanish.

It never occurred to me to tell him about the newspaper.

The room Martha Wayne nicknamed ‘the chapel’ (for the god light that poured from the high windows in late morning and not for the sculpture of Michael the Archangel some 19th Century, globetrotting Wayne brought back from his grand tour) was covered in flowers. Lily of the valley signifying a return of happiness and hyacinth symbolizing constancy in love were interspersed with roses because they were roses, and honeysuckle because they smelled nice.

Clark deposited Bruce on his mark and then scanned the crowd, the walls, the caves beneath and the grounds for a half-mile in every direction. With no sign of the menace lurking behind that headline, he gave Superman a moment off and watched Lois begin the short parade down the aisle.

She was so beautiful, and he thought of when he stood where Bruce was now, that strange, blank, otherworldly numbness... He looked at his friend in concern, and yep, Batman had left the building. The ordinary human who could stand toe to toe with gods was simply... reduced. He breathed, he blinked, and he faced the end of a long white aisle knowing something he set in motion was about to happen, and that was about it.

"You got this," Clark whispered, and offered a manly clap on the shoulder before he withdrew.

Anna was next. She seemed like a nice woman, doing her best after the ordeal she'd suffered. She'd reacted like a normal person compared to these Gothamites, and that was something Clark appreciated. He smiled at her as she reached the altar. She smiled back (quite a radiant smile for one who wasn't the bride), nodded at Bruce, and then stepped aside...

Jim Gordon looked briefly at Edward Nigma and the woman beside him. Happy as he was for Bruce, it was unfortunate what Selina brought in her wake. Still, the little pest was at Barbara's wedding and did no harm. At least the new girlfriend was no Harley Quinn.

In the alcove just outside the chapel, Selina looked to the ceiling—and thought for a moment of that portrait of Thomas and Martha hanging in the study. "Thank you" she mouthed to the heavens before clasping Matt Hagen's arm. The music trickled to a halt, and all eyes turned...

Jason Blood smiled, checking her aura and seeing no sign of shadow-sapience. He was never worried about Clayface or Etrigan, but there was *something* that day in the library. Something that was certainly not Etrigan; he knew every nuance of that demon's appetites. But this, this was... not familiar. And whatever it was... Jason looked around suddenly at the guests... Yes, whatever it was, at that moment it had been quite absorbed by Selina, but it almost seemed... in another sense, it was more intrigued by them as a couple...

Selina walked down the aisle to a special arrangement of Mariage D'amoure for piano and viola, the latter played by Femi Molokhya on the Castello Sforza. At first, no one knew the rather distinguished man escorting her, but of course no socialite would admit such ignorance.

After a moment, Nigma's eyes gleamed with recognition and the faintest hint of a smile crossed his lips. "Nice going, Hagen," he murmured.

Dick turned from Selina's entrance to watch his father. "Well done, Bruce. Well done," he whispered. Barbara heard, reached for his hand and gave a squeeze.

Beside them, Alfred stood a little taller and breathed a little deeper. He had done it. The world might need a Batman but that had nothing to do with Master Bruce finding a measure of happiness in his life, other than intensifying the need for it. He nodded, his chest swelling with pride as he dared to imagine Doctor and Mrs. Wayne watching from another plane. "Well done, miss," was his thought, eyes riveted on Selina.

Tim's eyes were also glued to Selina because he was determined not to look at Cassie. It was ridiculous, weddings, girls and weddings. They put too much pressure on everybody. It was like Valentine's Day on steroids. Just because you happened to be in a relationship, there was like this gravitational force that—He heard the sigh beside him. And he turned to look at Cassie.

Hagen bowed out three quarters of the way down the aisle as Bruce stepped up, not even registering the man he'd never seen before or the implications of his presence. He saw only Selina, the hint of a tear in her eyes, the radiance of her smile visible through the veil.

The veil which his overloaded brain saw as an allusion to the mask. Could this really be happening? Catwoman.

"I always knew you'd be beautiful," he whispered as if he was seeing her unmasked face for the first time, and Bishop Geoff cleared his throat.

"Friends," he said, "We are gathered together in the sight of God to bless this joining of Selina Kyle and Bruce Wayne. What makes this such a joyous occasion is Selina and Bruce are reaffirming a love they have lived for many years now, since I stood not far from here to wed his son Richard and his lovely wife Barbara. Marriage is not a ring worn or a paper signed, but a mutual promise to live two lives as one.

"I ask you now, in the presence of God and these people here gathered, to declare your intention to enter into union with one another."

Selina felt she was smiling too much. She should tone it down just a little, but neither her mouth nor her eyes would cooperate as the bishop's soft voice carried with surprising force to fill the large room.

"Selina, will you have Bruce to be your husband, to live together in holy marriage? Do you promise to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," she pronounced solemnly before the smile returned.

Bruce was focused with an intensity never seen in Batman, the side of his lip raised almost imperceptibly as if frozen in the famous lip-twitch.

"Bruce, do you take Selina to be your wife, to live together in holy marriage? Do you promise to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," came almost as a sigh of relief, and he cleared his throat and repeated a bit louder. "I do."

"Let us pray. Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all life, Giver of all Grace, bless and sanctify with your Holy Spirit Bruce and Selina who come now to join in marriage. Grant that they may give their vows to each other in the strength of your steadfast love..."

Both were smiling wide now, Selina barely able to hold back a laugh, as their eyes locked in shared, shocked disbelief: They made it, they were doing it—this ridiculously normal thing—they were getting away with it and none of these people watching had an inkling...

"Enable them to grow in peace and love with you and with one another all their days. Amen."

"Amen," Selina said sincerely.

"Amen," Bruce echoed.

... As if they were normal people.

"You may join hands and exchange your vows," the bishop said with a subtle gesture, as this is where people often took out an index card.

Bruce took out a thin volume in weathered leather, the gilt title "Shakespeare Sonnets" almost completely worn.

"Selina, I haven't always been the best telling you how I feel. In the beginning especially, I often wound up saying the exact opposite of what... So I found someone to say it for me." He indicated the book and said bashfully, "This was my mother's," and then read formally:

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an *ever-fixed mark*
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even... to the edge of doom."

He paused and took a breath, head swimming, those green eyes the only point of reference.

"I, Bruce... take you, Selina to be... *my wife*," those two words again infused with relief, and then something more. Every word after was *claiming* something that had been denied for too long... "To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse," he stumbled over the words, and Selina laughed as Bishop Geoff prompted him. ...Something *sacred* and *fundamental* to all humanity, that was denied him... "For richer, for poorer, and in sickness and in health, um..." Just... finding another person "To love and to cherish, 'til death parts us, and therefore I pledge thee my troth."

The smile was gone.

"I, Selina," she said solemnly, "take thee, Bruce *to be my husband*," The sincerity was almost painful, and Bruce had to remind himself to breathe. "To have and to hold," every word pronounced so clearly, with such intent "from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer," There it was, a hint of a smile—which made him smile—she was the Selina he knew again. "In sickness, and in health, to love, and to *cherish*," her voice broke on the word, and that tear was back in her eye. "'til death parts us, and therefore I pledge thee my troth."

It was nothing but teary smiles now, and would-be laughs barely held in check on both sides now that they'd got through it.

Then the spell was broken as Bishop Geoff said "You may exchange rings now" and they both became aware of the world, looking around trying to figure out where *rings* were supposed to come from. There was considerable tittering among the guests as Clark stepped forward and supplied them.

"With this ring, I thee..." Bruce managed, holding it immobile near the tip of her finger, and then thrusting it forward. "Wed," he finished, making Selina laugh at the breakdown of hand-mouth coordination, which made him laugh too.

"With this ring, I thee wed," she said soberly, and slid the ring on, lifted his hand curling the fingers into a fist and kissed the knuckle, a flash of the cat in her eye, making sure he knew that was for Batman.

The smug, satisfied smile of the Catwoman—just for a moment—the Catwoman victorious...

"I now pronounce you man and wife."

...getting away with her prize.

"Those that God has joined together, let no one put asunder."

They kissed unprompted, the music began and the guests stood and applauded... and the kiss continued while the music encouraged them to stop, link arms and depart.

Tommy Pearl, the world-class cat burglar identity who was Bruce's wedding gift to Selina as well as her gift to him, had equipped his West Village apartment with a hidden media wall equal to any of the satellite Batcaves. Beneath the long, horizontal viewscreen, Bruce and Selina's phones were docked. Batman's most powerful data-sorting algorithms prioritized the photos and video sent to them by Alfred, Clark, Anna, Eddie, Barbara and Tim over the deluge of material being uploaded to social media since the reception concluded. The center of the screen displayed the best images for each segment of the festivities, while the sides ran a slideshow, montage or video of alternative angles.

On the sofa, Bruce and Selina were curled around each other, watching in a kind of euphoric awe that Selina expressed in giggling and Bruce in pulling away the sleeve of her peignoir, flicking the thin strap of her negligee, and nibbling.

"That tickles," she announced for the third time, "Husband."

"I know. That's why I'm doing it. Wife."

On the screen, guests gathered in the south drawing room while waiters circulated with canapes.

"This would have been when? While we were taking pictures?" Bruce asked suddenly. And then before Selina could answer, he said "VOX, audio on panel C and expand."

"Oh lord," Selina laughed and held a hand to her eyes to mock-cover the sight of Pikhai talking to a rapt Ford Dormont.

"Foie gras on gingerbread with Atlantis smoked salt," he was saying. "The other, is vegetarian option, is 'wild mushroom cappuccino' a shot of rich soup of porcini, morel and button mushrooms, topped with truffle foam and porcini dust."

"What the hell, Demon!" Selina half-blurted, half-cackled. "You don't know 'worthy' and 'better' but you've got 'vegetarian option' and 'truffle foam'?"

"He is a *strange* one," Bruce graveled, as the image faded into the society photographer's formal shots of the receiving line. Either because the Bat-algorithm weighted facial recognition of Riddler and Game Theory or because it was one of the

most aesthetically pleasing compositions, the first photo displayed was of Nigma meeting Anna, clasping her hand in both of his in the slightly blurred foreground while Selina greeted Doris in sharp focus and Ash Torrick shook hands with Bruce, with Lucius Fox approaching Clark in soft focus.

"If that's the signature photograph, it's going to wind up the social climbers all over again," Bruce noted. "Think Nigma's told her what to expect?"

"They both knew what I was asking with Dormont. They'll be fine," Selina said, pulling Bruce's hand from her breast and kissing each knuckle individually.

There were few photos or video from the meal, other than a few Instagram-style shots of the food, which Bruce narrated with an impersonation of Pikhai "The Wagyu filet has a glaze of soy sauce from Sawai-shoyu Honten near Kyoto's imperial palace which has been making it for a hundred years, and this I will not to be mangling with my wobbly English because the Grit One al Ghul has a glossary of anything happening next to the seat of power in any lingua—"

His performance was cut off by Selina's tongue, and a substantial portion of the slideshow was missed in favor of spirited love-making. They only subsided—ironically—with the tinkling of glasses from the viewscreen. They managed to separate just as their video selves kissed to appease the crowd, and Clark rose to give his toast... "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please..." Bruce again called for an adjustment to the volume, and Selina stroked the scars of that ancient cat scratch on his chest as they listened.

"My very good friend," Clark said from the screen. "My best friend and long time old buddy, a man I will always respect and whose respect I will always cherish, got married today to a lovely, beautiful, exquisite woman who gave him what he needed more than anything in this world. She challenged him, challenged his preconceptions about the world. And about himself. She made you a better man, buddy.

"And that's saying something. You are, despite what some people assume from the ludicrously distorted picture they're given in the press, you are the smartest, most generous, most dedicated, and just generally extraordinary human being I have ever been privileged to know. I should add the bravest, given the losses you've overcome without losing the will to fight on. Selina, when I say you deserve this man, it is the highest praise I can offer. And as your loving him made him a better man, I think I may call you a friend enough to say that his made you a better woman.

"Let me tell you something, folks, this day has been a long time in coming. But it's well worth the wait. To Selina and Bruce."

They danced to *I Have Dreamed*, and by the time the melody was up to the line "How you look in the glow of evening, I have dreamed and enjoyed the view..." they were, once again, not watching.

Video Bruce and Selina cut the cake... Video Anna danced with Pikhai... Video Eddie and Doris laughed merrily with Ford and Ash... Video Lucius raised his glass with Dick, Barbara and the Ashton-Larrabys... Video Anna danced with Hagen... Tim with Cassie... Eddie with Doris... Gordon felt a tear threatening as he sat with Barbara, so he abandoned the champagne in favor of a stiff bourbon... Lois danced with Ash Torrick but was so patronizing about his conspiracy theories that Clark cut in to save him, even though Lois would know it meant he was eavesdropping... Video Bruce and Selina appeared again in traveling clothes...

While their warm-blooded counterparts had gone, leaving only a trail of lace and silk bits on the floor, across the coffee table, by the wall, and in the doorway to the bedroom.

"Ohhhhhh!" two voices moaned in sync. "Ooooooh" "Errrrrrlllll" "Ooooooh" and then a broke up into staccato "mmmmMM! MM-MM-MM-Yes—" and giggling on the one side and a kind of snarling grunt on the other which also resolved in laughter...

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"Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Wayne," Selina purred finally, stroking a scar, "Is it me, or is it better now that we're man and wife?"

"I think it's probably the days apart," Bruce said, curling an arm possessively around her hip. "God, I missed you. That empty spot in the bed... And there was a vengeance ghost in Tokyo. Do you know how long it's been since I tangled with something like that and didn't have you to come home to? Hear 'Oh woof, I released one of those in Giza one time, what a mess.'"

She laughed. "I never said that."

"Or 'I remember when Jason sent me to steal the Scroll of Aken-kotep to evict a murder ghost one time and—'"

"I never said that either," she insisted, laughing harder, and then "Oh."

Bruce adjusted to read the kaleidoscope of emotion flashing across her face.

"Hey, Mrs. Wayne, what's wrong?" he asked, concerned.

"I guess it doesn't matter now; we made it to the 'I dos,'" she said with a smile. "I just realized I never got to tell you... any of it. My God, we have a lot to catch up on."

"Well, I know you did more than survive Hagen, you brought him back from whatever happened," Bruce said like a Detective whose brain hasn't quite restored full operations after Olympic sex but is still capable of marshalling obvious facts.

"Not Hagen," Selina said, first biting her lip as she realized the new challenge facing her. Whatever the threat to the nuptials had been, it failed and that idiotic headline would never appear, but she now had to tell Bruce that a whole episode came and went affecting the most important event of their lives and he was completely unaware of it. "Bruce," she said as if taking a deep breath before diving into a maelstrom, "when I sent Clark to get you this morning, it wasn't about Hagen..."

"Wait," he said. "Selina, I hate to do this, but this is obviously going to be a bit of a story... in addition to Hagen, *and* whatever happened on Jumbo Island, *and* I haven't told you about Tokyo. And Batman has patrol tonight. Tonight of all nights, I cannot risk not being seen. So rather than start this big thing we clearly won't be able to finish, let's put it off until I get back, okay?"

"Deal," she said, reasoning that the more time that passed, the better. After patrol, logs, sleep, sex, more sleep, more sex and breakfast, he'd be more apt to keep the news in perspective. Yes, something big happened that Batman didn't know...

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"...But everything worked out in the end," she concluded the belated sitrep. "'I now pronounce you man and wife' and 'who God joined together, let no one even think of messing with.'"

"The *Times*?" Bruce graveled like it was the worst riddle Nigma had ever handed him. "The Post I could understand, it would be perfectly in character but—"

"I think that's the point exactly: it would be in character. I've had time to think about it, and I think whoever sent this must have realized if it was the Post, we'd dismiss it without a thought. With all the shit they make up about us, I mean completely out of thin air, just think about it: Who would take it seriously? And if the wedding *really* didn't happen, they wouldn't have reported anything that simple and straightforward. It'd be—my God, the mind boggles—It'd be flying monkeys. A cult of zombie Green Lanterns. Skies red with a hailstorm of frozen blood from giant vampire bats..."

"Whoever sent it," Bruce repeated. "Yes, that's the question. If it was meant as a warning so we could avert disaster—"

"If? What else could it be?"

"Anything. A scare tactic, a cry for help, a threat, just a mean-spirited act of aggression to ruin your day— If it was the Post, none of that is possible because they have no credibility. You'd laugh it off: a story in the Gotham Post just like a thousand others."

"But the *Times* means it happened," Selina winced, feeling a victory had been taken from her. If it was a warning so she could save the wedding, then yes she'd beaten the threat. But if it was anything else Bruce was suggesting, then they'd won. The thought crept in like a spider while she cleared the breakfast and began quietly weaving its web while Bruce put on a robe on to collect the newspaper from the door: That headline had set the tone for her day, it had kept her from experiencing the joyful excitement the morning of her wedding should bring, it kept her focus from Bruce and their future and buried it in worry and dread.

"So we're back to who sent it and why?" she murmured. "Not to mention what actually happened to stop the wedding and create that headline in the first place, I don't suppose we'll ever know that now."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Bruce said, holding up the Gotham Times Vows section to the page reading '**Sorry, Bruce, It Wasn't Meant to Be.**'

APPENDIX

Since the wedding chapter was not ready in time for Christmas, Chris Dee released this series of alternate openings that might have introduced Chapter 2, but didn't.

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EXT. COUNTRY ESTATE - DUSK

We swoop in on a grand country house lit for a big party. Rolls Royces, Daimlers and limousines, their headlights on despite the lingering light, are queued in a billionaires' traffic jam along the narrow, winding drive. They disgorge their passengers at the entrance. Over the gate is draped a banner indicating a fundraiser for the symphony.

EXT. COUNTRY ESTATE - DUSK

Closer now, the first of several long takes follows the cars, picking up one conversation before drifting to another, establishing the camera as a wandering party guest. It's all Newport and Beacon Hill, Bunny's new nose and Daphne's riding lessons, until we reach a humble Ford. CONNER, MEL and SADIE squeezed in the backseat with their instrument cases, MORRIS is driving with his cello riding shotgun.

CONNER:

Will we meet the famous  
Hal tonight?

(beat)

Right, we're here as the  
help and he'll  
be pretending not to know  
you. Charming.

VALET:

Excuse me, sir, you the  
performers? You've  
got to swing around and

park in the service area.

CONNER:

Never let the peasants  
forget their place.

Proving his point, the camera meanders ahead of the Ford, first to the main entrance, the elegant guests getting out of cars, ELLA and BRYCE sweep in with the rest of the crowd while security guards check names against a guest list. After their names are checked, the guests enter, but before they're inside a BEAUTIFUL WOMAN recognizes Bryce.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN:

Lawrence.

BRYCE:

Dana.

There is history here. A lot. But the camera moves on to the service entrance where a uniformed guard is stationed with a folding table, opening each instrument case and inspecting the instrument before the musician is clear to enter. The BLONDE from Vienna is here with a flute case. The case is well-worn but when it is opened the lining is vividly new. Each piece of the flute is lifted lightly from the case and inspected. The guard nods: it checks out but everything about the encounter feels sinister.

INT. KITCHEN

A maid leads the musicians through the kitchen.

MAID:

You'll be performing in  
the garden area. Just put  
the cello there for now.  
In between sets, you are  
absolutely not to speak to  
the guests, or interact  
with them in any way.

CONNER:

That's classist. And  
against union rules.

MAID:

This is a right-to-work  
mansion. Leave your  
union shenanigans at the  
door. When not  
performing, you may sit at  
this table, and  
there are refreshments at  
hand.

Conner, Mel, Sadie and other musicians follow, but no sign of the Blonde from Vienna. The only flautist is a tall, black man.

INT. GUEST BATHROOM

Distant music from the party is heard. Blonde has taken the body joint of her flute and extracted a metal dowel she loads into the 'mouthpiece' turning it into the a high tech blowgun we glimpsed at the embassy. Cut to

EXT. GARDEN - MAGIC HOUR

More bits of conversation, again all champagne and polo ponies until the "that Kiev business" and "the reactor." Bryce is chatting with the Colonel while Ella approaches Quince. A new angle on the 'my husband is ignoring me' bit, this time playing out in the back as a silent pantomime. Bryce appears not to see, but as Ella is getting Quince to the dance floor, we see the tell-tale dot of red on his cuff.

EXT. GARDEN MAZE - MAGIC HOUR

For the first time, we see the blowgun in action and the Blonde using it. It's to her mouth. The data from her watch is mirrored on the HUD in her glasses. The second sight appears on Quince's shoulder.

EXT. GARDEN - MAGIC HOUR

Bryce sees the sights. It's Vienna all over again. He

looks around trying to spot the assassin. He disengages with the Colonel and moves towards Ella and Quince. The faint sound of a helicopter in the distance.

EXT. GARDEN MAZE - MAGIC HOUR

Close-up on the Blonde, aiming. Then the view from her HUD. Under all the medical readings that word DOYLE in all caps.

Close-up of the same data on her watch: DOYLE. The sound of the helicopter more present.

EXT. GARDEN

Bryce trying to make his way to Ella. Obstacles everywhere. The third dot appears, bright red, on Quinn's neck.

BRYCE:

NO!

05:35:00:0513418197431328. Sunrise. Inside the housing that looked more 'magic orb' than 'futuristic drone,' Faust's digital code infused with magic recognized the day and initiated the final routines for which it was programmed.

Its Gamma protocols interfaced with the butler's database at the St. Regis hotel, indicating Anna Karalis had a 7:15 wake-up call, followed by an asterisk, breakfast ordered for 7:30 with two asterisks, a make-up artist and hair dresser arriving at 8:15 and a car ordered for 9:30. There were four asterisks after the last indicating a reminder that the garment bag with her bridesmaid's dress must be with her at that time. The concierge at the Roff Robinson Park had nothing booked for Lois, but there was a charge on the Kents' room from the hotel salon for hair set and manicure the day before. A subroutine over-rode the flags downgrading Kent transportation needs while it updated current weather and recalibrated expected traffic for the day, projecting taxi and Uber availability for the hours prior to the wedding and then initiating a pattern of reservations and cancelations that would ensure Clark have easy transport to the Wayne penthouse to meet Bruce and a limo would be waiting outside the hotel at the optimal time for Mrs. Kent's departure. It determined the most desirable arrival times for Dick and Barbara Grayson, Tim Drake, and Cassandra Cain, factored in traffic and weather conditions and scheduled wake-up calls to each household to inform them of their optimal departure times to reach Wayne Manor at the target time before the ceremony. It ran similar routines to insure the unhindered arrival of florists, caterers, musicians, waiters, Patrick McKael the society photographer and Martin Stanwick the society and gossip columnist for the Gotham Times.

Its Beta routines downloaded the day's headlines and projected the conversation of morning radio personalities that might result, expanded projections to include a.m. news show chatter for the purpose of identifying environmental variables affecting

subject Hagen, Matthew. Having previously analyzed all screenplays read by Hagen, Matthew and evaluated against 493 psychological profiles, it determined no environmental factors from radio or morning news had significant probability of affecting the previous determinations.

Meanwhile its Alpha... hiccupped.

The gentle strumming of Tommy Emmanuel playing *Questions* drifted through Riddler's hideout. The song might be thematically satisfying, but it was too soft and lyrical to wake the bed's occupants. Subconsciously Eddie heard it, the knowledge deep in his brain registering that the track was three minutes and thirty-eight seconds. Three minutes and thirty eight seconds before the much more spirited track began and he would have to get up... The much louder and more aggressive track that was *now playing* because his sleepy brain didn't realize *Questions* was already two minutes in when he started his internal timer.

Doris groaned... "Ed" ...nudged his shoulder... "Ed" nudged his hip... "Eddie get that" and finally crawled over him to get his phone from the nightstand. It required a fingerprint to unlock, and she went for his hand—which his seemingly sleeping body moved. She went for it again and he sprang to life, flipping her onto her back. Wrestling-tickling-nibbling commenced for one minute and thirty nine seconds until the wild percussive intro to Emmanuel's 2013 performance of *Classical Gas*, which they both cursed at. Eddie relented and turned off his alarm, and Doris announced "Wedding Day!"

"What is it with women and weddings?" Eddie questioned the Universe represented by the ceiling.

"Don't be a killjoy, Edward, they don't get cake."

"I don't like cake."

"They don't get to bang a bridesmaid."

"Weddings are awesome. We should have more of them."

The synchronized brushing-shaving-showering-hair drying of two people used to sharing a bathroom was spent reviewing their first target Bradford Dormont: his biography, novels that sold and were made into mini-series, novels that were savaged by the critics, and his more notable essays in *Mayfair* magazine.

Making and eating breakfast was spent on the secondary target Ash Torrick, his early novels hailed as masterpieces, his inexplicable break from serious writing and rebranding as a low-brow peddler of dodgy symbolism, secret codes, and conspiracies for the crackpots who think the Illuminati hide messages in their Home Depot receipts.

They agreed that Eddie would do the heavy lifting with Torrick, Doris would focus on Dormont, and then as they cleaned up, they quizzed each other on details of the champagne and flowers sure to be repeated in the pages of *Mayfair* if dropped into Ford's ear at the proper time.

"Lily of the valley signifies a return of happiness, hyacinth means constancy in love, myrtle is love and marriage, and if Pammy ever finds out I memorized this shit I'll have to nuke Robinson Park, so let's keep it on the QT," Eddie declared.

“Perrier-Jouët Belle Époque Blanc de Blancs 2004,” Doris countered. “Chef de Caves Hervé Deschamps, bottle decorated by Emile Gallé. The phrase ‘Art du Millesime’ indicates the most representative expression of a particular year, the exaltation of a specific harvest through the interpretive keys of, in this case 2004.”

“Ivy of the non-poison variety also stands for marriage, fidelity and affection but it was vetoed for obvious reasons.”

“Normally the Belle Epoque cuvée is a blend from the villages of Cramant, Avize and elsewhere, but ‘04 was one of the rare years with an exceptional harvest, winter frosts didn’t something or other, zig instead of zag, so it’s the super-rare Blanc de Blancs produced entirely from Grand Cru Chardonnay grapes from the 65 hectares the Maison owns, making it the rarest in the Perrier-Jouet line of production...”

One of the hawks for which Red Tail Mountain was named soared gracefully over the dojo Bruce called home for the last six months, then dove to a favorite perch over the door. Bruce counted subconsciously honing his sense of time, the idyllic beauty of the scene lost on him. This mountain temple with its bamboo and wild flowers, its tori gate heavily patinaed and strewn with prayer flags. It was unlike the dojo or the boxing club in Tokyo, or anywhere he would train in the years to come. The cinematic perfection of every detail, down to the water lilies in the meditation pond.

Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six. The hawk remained on that perch only twenty-to-thirty seconds if its mate was in sight, probably keeping an eye on a nest Bruce couldn’t see... As the hawk rose to circle again, Bruce’s eyes flicked towards the temple rather than following it. Hamada Taijo again. How the old man watched him on the mat. Never corrected his technique like Maki Sensei, never a word of direction or correction like senior *sempai*. Indeed Hamada hadn’t spoken more than ten words to Bruce in all the time he’d been there. But how he watched.

Then yesterday, for the first time, there was the slightest acknowledgement when Bruce saw him looking. Just a barely perceptible nod. Then Hamada left like the senior-most student he was while Bruce remained behind to clean the mats and refill the incense. This was the first Bruce had seen him since then, and more than nodding, the old man was coming over. He knelt next to Bruce as if he intended to meditate, then he considered the hawk for a moment, and then he looked at Bruce.

“You will leave us soon,” he said without preamble.

“Hai. I’ve learned all I can here.”

Bruce knew the words would sound like appalling arrogance, but now that he was finished here, he didn’t mind being dismissed as a young know-it-all who would be quickly forgotten. But instead of a rebuke, Hamada looked up at the hawk.

“Yes, the technique comes easily to you,” he said, his eyes shining. “The discipline, the drills, control and focus. *Self. Denial,*” he said the last words in English, and with a peculiar smile, his old tongue shooting out of his mouth and smacking his lips as if savoring a favorite old treat not tasted for many years. “You remind me of myself when I came here. All the things they struggle with, I don’t know why they have so much trouble when it is all so simple.”

He then looked shrewdly back at Bruce.

“Do you know the one thing that took me the longest to understand? It is in the path of our *happiness* we find the learning for which we have chosen this lifetime. It’s in our *nature to seek happiness*, and if we do, we will find what we’re meant to find, meet who we’re meant to meet, and learn what we’re meant to learn.

“But some of us pursue learning instead of happiness. The Universe can work with that. For those who take that road, it will place the happiness in the path of our learning, and it all works out the same,” he smiled, and then became grim. “It’s only if we pursue *neither*, if we seek neither learning or happiness, that it is a wasted life.”

The hawk’s shadow passed between them, and Hamada followed the path and pointed out the nest Bruce had been unable to see.

“Twenty years,” he concluded with a contented nod, “You don’t see it now, I know that. Young buck hears an old man’s words like a woman in a shop deciding what to take home for whatever she’s planning to do. But one day, if you’re as smart as you think you are, you’ll understand. Twenty, twenty-one... maybe twenty-five, twenty-six years before I did.”

Bruce’s eyes snapped open. He looked at the ceiling of the penthouse bedroom. Snatched his phone from the nightstand and switched off the alarm.

Clark knew agreeing to be Bruce’s best man would be more complicated than holding onto the rings. The morning of the wedding he awoke before dawn, kissed Lois, left the hotel and placed an order at Pola’s Bagels before zipping off to Metropolis just to ensure there would be no interruptions from that quarter. There was new construction at a warehouse Conduit used a couple of times, and just to be safe he dismantled enough to set the work back a day. He bypassed the LexCorp tower and flew instead to the company’s data center by the river, though it was equipped with the same anti-Superman measures. Unable to penetrate the building, he superheated the air around the intake vents, pushing the environmental controls to the breaking point. Then he flew to a LexCorp office in Portland and gave it the same treatment. Then Montreal... Vancouver... Star City... and Cleveland. Within an hour, alarms would be going off that air conditioning and dehumidifiers were failing and servers in danger of overheating at six far reaching locations, and that should keep Luthor’s paranoia fully engaged for the day. He returned to Gotham and picked up his bagels.

He returned to the hotel, leaving one order of bagels for Lois and picking up his suit. He brought the rest to Bruce’s penthouse—where a note was waiting. Clark shook his head at whatever bat-protocol was in progress, and read:

Clark,

Dr. Hugo Strange was booked on a seven-day cruise to Alaska, see attached itinerary. I told him if he wasn’t on it, he’d wake up in the cargo car of an unreliable train in the Karwendel Alps, chained to a goat. He was checked in when the ship left yesterday, but please confirm he is actually onboard and in his cabin. If not, I leave tracking codes for that train, an alternate traveling between Madras and Pune, a dhow approximately six days out of Bombay, and a Yugoslavian freighter somewhere between Madras and Singapore. Select whichever is most convenient, and do not forget the goat.

Also be advised several rogues in favor of a Bruce-Selina union presume a jilted and jealous Batman is a threat. One or more may be planning criminal activity to coincide with the ceremony and keep me busy elsewhere. Take whatever steps are necessary. – B

Well... it was straightforward enough as bat-marching orders went.

Hugo Strange was right where he should be, but before Clark could begin to contemplate the rogue problem, his phone rang. This time it wasn't Bruce but Alfred Pennyworth asking him to come to the manor "most urgently."

Rap-a-rapraprap-raparap

Mahmoud performed his usual percussive wake-up on the doorframe of his daughter's room which hinted that at least some of her musical talent might come from him.

"Good morning, sleepy face," he teased, and then with mock sternness: "Performance Day, so *no phone*. Breakfast in ten minutes."

They were on their own this morning. It was Saturday and his wife and son were sleeping in. It fell to Mahmoud to get Femi ready for the biggest day of her young career. The woman who made it possible for her to play a Stradivarius. The man whose foundation provided security and transportation and storage. He thought it was *hyperbole* when Edward Nigma said he would get his daughter a Strad. A quality instrument, sure. Something better than his cabbie's income could manage so when she was ready for Julliard she could audition on equal footing... He never *dreamed*, never in a thousand years did he imagine...

Mahmoud went to the kitchen and turned on the radio while he made himself a smoothie and a pop tart.

:::This is WCDE, Motley in the Morning, I'm Ken Motley. So the big day is here. The Kyle-Wayne wedding out in Bristol. Might create some traffic on the 10th Avenue Bridge, but it won't because the people invited are probably going by helicopter, am I right? Hovering next to each other, asking for Grey Poupon.

:::For those of you just waking up from a coma, Bruce Wayne is marrying Selina Kyle, said to be Catwoman since, you remember, that Cat-Tales show a few years back. Is she? I don't know, but bad guys, word to the wise, Batman could be in a really foul mood tonight!

:::Speaking of the Dark Knight, I don't know if you all saw the Bat-signal last night. No idea what it's about, but there is this thing in the police blotter about an alarm going off at the archaeology museum on the Hudson University campus. I don't know what they keep in a place like that, if it's like, skulls and dirt or what, but if there are two words I never like to read the day after the Bat-signal's lit, it's—:::

Femi came into the kitchen then, freshly scrubbed but yawning, and Mahmoud endeavored to wake her up with an enthusiastic barrage of questions and reminders while he made her breakfast.

"Tell me again what you're playing."

"Debussy, Chopin, de Senneville. Debussy is *Clair de Lune*. That means light of the moon, for Miss Selina's name."

"Good, and what else? Chopin is a *Nocturne* but which one?"

"E-flat major, and *Mariage D'amouree*, that means love match, by Paul de Senneville."

"Very good. And remember, when Miss Selina talks to you after the ceremony, what do you call her?"

"Mrs. Wayne. And if the mayor compliments us he is called Mr. Mayor, and the bishop is Bishop, not father or reverend."

"That's right. And if there happens to be anyone who says they're from the press and they ask about your instrument, what do you say?"

"It's on loan from the Wayne Foundation. Through their... pay-tronage," Mahmoud mouthed this word with her and nodded, pleased at how well she'd picked up the lingo. "Through their patronage, Maestro Prohm was able to form a string quartet that brings together the best instruments ever made: a Stradivarius, del Gesu, Hilaire and Nagyvary, for listeners to compare."

"Good, good. And today's program?"

"Specially commissioned arrangements by Maestro Rott, conductor emeritus of the Gotham Symphony, which retains ownership as a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wayne, creating an...I forget the word."

"Endowment," Mahmoud prompted. "That means the symphony will have an ongoing source of income from those arrangements, because a Wayne Manor wedding is something many brides will want to copy. When they do, they pay a royalty."

"And there is going to be a recording next week, and they will make money from that too," Femi grinned.

"Your first recording. The first of many," Mahmoud beamed. All because he picked up an escaped Arkham lunatic in his cab. "If you see Uncle Edward there today, you be sure to tell him. Now go get dressed, I'll take you to the Crispin Center and we'll pick up your instrument. Security escort will meet us there and take us to the wedding."

"Will it be Mr. Craft again?" Femi asked.

"I don't know, sweetie. Whoever the insurance company sends. No matter who it is, they'll be there to protect you."

"They're there to protect the viola," Femi said sagely.

"As long as you stay with the viola, it amounts to the same thing," Mahmoud said impishly, and Femi giggled.

She ran along to get dressed, and Mahmoud smiled.

"The winter frost didn't compromise the yield," Eddie murmured, looking over the tasting notes while Doris ran around the bedroom tossing socks, stockings and a headband onto the growing pile on the bed. "Protected the slow ripening that began during a cool June—who cares— Continued through a warm and fair summer—who cares—The bouquet—Here we go—has notes of white melon and kumquat, frangipane and hawthorn flowers, almond paste and white chocolate with a hint of oyster and saffron—Yes! I am using that. M-K-F-H-A-W-oysters and saffron?"

"Question mark cufflinks or plain?" Doris called from the bedroom.

"Doesn't matter!" he answered. "Mouthfeel is lithe and lively, blah blah blah, concentrated salinity, no way that makes it into print..."

The phone rang.

“Notes of crunchy apple and linden honey, hm, apple and honey, apple and honey, Isaac Newton, Bees, Newton Engineering and Beeton Brothers Aerospace, that’d be a nice payday...”

“Eddie, it’s for you. It’s Bruce—”

“You mean Selina; I’ll get it in a second... The wrapping finish has a joyous and juicy persistence of pineapple and gingerbread, with an aftertaste of iodine many minutes later—Oh come on, they made that up.”

Doris’s head appeared in the doorway.

“Puzzle Muffin, Bruce’s voice and Selina’s are not easily confused.”

“So you mean it’s Wayne Manor, that butler, Pennyworth. Let me wrap this up, I’m almost done.”

“It’s Bruce. Pick up, will you, I have a curling iron to get back to.”

Eddie looked down at the tasting notes and the riddles they could spawn.

“It’s like he knows,” he muttered.

The arch-demon Belial was one of the highest ranking angels cast out with Lucifer. Though he subsequently fell, he was part of the first ruling triumvirate of Hell and it was during this reign that he spawned Etrigan, as true-born a Prince of Hell as was ever baptized in the Infernal Flame. In the year mortal dust counted as Five Hundred and Sixty, Etrigan, son of Belial of the Seven Evils, was bound by his half-brother Merlin in the mortal flesh now known as Jason Blood. It is therefore unsurprising that Jason, his soul trapped and intertwined with the demon’s for centuries, *lied* when he said the AI Faust was free of magick. It *was* from a future so distant that wizards incorporated technology into their magick just as Jason might do a Google search to find a magic shop selling wormwood. Its housing and programming were the work of non-enhanced science, but inside, its core was infused with Jason's spell and tuned to the harmonics of his particular magick.

Thus at 05:35:00:0513418197431328 as the AI came to life at the moment sunrise was predicted at Wayne Manor, Jason’s eyes snapped open, a line of Shakespeare lingering inexplicably in his thoughts:

*Now, soldiers, march away:*

*And how thou pleasest, God, dispose the day!*