



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

#3

Cat = Sales

Heard the Latest?



The Iceberg Lounge
O. Cobblepot, Proprietor

by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
HEARD THE LATEST?

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By
Chris Dee

Edited by
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HEARD THE LATEST?

12:22 AM

Harvey Dent was once an ambitious politician. He fought for law & order. He did it less from moral indignation than because a crusading district attorney in a city the size of Gotham was the fast track to the Senate, the Governor's Mansion, perhaps even the White House. Nevertheless, he *did* crusade for law and order; he was a friend and ally of the police, the Batman, and leading citizens like Bruce Wayne (whose billions would come in handy when Harvey made a bid for the Senate).

Two-Face was a bitter, bloodthirsty, psychotic obsessed with chance, revenge, duality, and being Harvey's polar opposite in all things.

They agreed on nothing; it was the nature of things. Black and white, Good and Evil, yin and yang. They *could not* agree on anything. Hence the need for the coin to settle their eternally opposed instincts.

They agreed on nothing—except a hatred for organized crime. In his mind(s), it was the mob war between the Maroni and Falcone crime families that scarred his face and split him into this freakish force of fate.

Tonight Two-Face flipped his coin because it was what he had to do, but the outcome was predetermined: Good side up: he would strike at evil by blowing up the warehouses along Pier 22 owned by the Maroni Family, depriving them of soldiers and whatever guns, narcotics, or other resources were stored there. Bad side up: he would machine gun every living thing at Pier 22, then enrich his own operations with whatever guns, narcotics, or other resources the Maronis had stored there.

12:45 AM

Poison Ivy had given up her attempts to reclaim Robinson Park where she had ruled so serenely during No Man's Land, but she still had hopes for making a home in the smaller but less-popular Riverside Park. There were practically no people to force out, which was a nice bonus. But there was a reason there were no people to force out: the smell. Much as Ivy liked to believe she was a humanoid plant, she had olfactory senses that mere shrubbery did not. And something happening upriver was reacting with the exhaust in the air as it neared the city, creating a truly revolting odor.

In her mind, it was concern for her beloved plants that took her upriver to investigate the source of the odor. The contaminant was most certainly coming down the river. And if it was in the river, it could poison the more delicate grasses and foliage in her park. She told herself she didn't want to live in a park of only crabgrass and dandelion. The truth was, she didn't want to live in a park that smelled like a chicken farm build on a garbage dump next to a sewage treatment plant.

She tracked the source of the odor to a warehouse where some mob boys—ah, that explained it—had set up an illegal chemlab. It was probably intended to manufacture drugs most of the time, but right now they were making explosives, hence the smell.

Before she could decide on a course of action, a blade materialized at her throat. Then a hand pulled her hair taut and a venomous voice hissed in her ear: “Make one peep and your hair won’t be the only thing that’s red.”

Rather than resisting, she allowed her head to sink back against the chest of her attacker, then she turned her eyes upwards.

“Why hello, Harvey, it’s been a long time.”

2:10 AM

Barbara yawned and stretched her arms, considered brewing a fresh pot of coffee, then stopped. It was a quiet night—maybe for once she’d opt for sleep instead of caffeine. One final pass of the police-band turned up a domestic, a gang-related drive-by, and—what was this? Just a scuffle... but at the Iceberg Redux, Penguin’s nightclub.

She glanced at the OraCom panel and allowed her finger to pause for a quarterbeat over Nightwing’s comlink before moving down and hitting the button below it:

“Robin. Oracle. You want to check out a D.P. at the Iceberg? Probably nothing, but considering it’s Penguin’s place...”

...: Sure thing, O. There was a possible Joker sighting there earlier, any chance they’re connected? ...

“Disturbing the peace? Joker doesn’t get into barroom brawls; he kills people twenty and thirty at a time.”

Or sometimes he just shoots them, severing their spinal column and condemning them to life in a wheelchair as a mere waste product in some plot to torment Batman... but that was no reason to snap at Tim, one of the genuinely nicest people to ever put on a cape.

“I’m sorry, kid. I’m having a mood. Hey, have you heard the latest? Azrael caught up with Mad Hatter last night—found him with some callgirl dressed up as the White Rabbit.”

...: No! You’re shittin’ me. ...

She heard his voice grow soft, then there was a girlish giggle. He just told Spoiler. The girlish voice said something, which Robin repeated into the link:

...: Az isn’t exactly cool when it comes to women. How’s he handling it? ...

“He does his job, kid. Which is what you should do. Check in after the Iceberg, okay.”

...: Alright, I’ll stop picking on your new pet. Robin out. ...

Barbara punched the button on her console, cutting the link even though Robin had already done so. Children. She was dealing with children, she told herself, and that required patience. Jean Paul *was* painfully awkward with women. He’d had little contact with them during his training, and in some respects he was naïve in ways no crimefighter could afford to be naïve. If he had grown comfortable enough with her to flirt a little, there was no harm in that. And if she chose to ignore the signs that he’d made her the object of his first crush, well, that was her business. It was certainly healthier to let it run its course than to coldly shoot down his first real relationship with

a woman, possibly scarring him for life. Flirting and crushes were not the monumental affairs kids like Robin and Spoiler seemed to think.

It wasn't like they'd had a tawdry one night stand like *some people* who shall remain nameless, Mr. Grayson, you two-timing prick.

11:30 AM

A Wednesday.

79 degrees.

Winds were from the NW at 10 mph.

Sunrise was at 6:35 AM, Venus was rising into Capricorn, The Dow opened at 10,290...

...and Bruce Wayne was in a fantastic mood.

Batman's takedown of a drug cartel had unexpectedly exposed a gun-smuggling operation as well. *Guns off the street* was a wonderful way to start a new day.

And Dick had called for no apparent reason other than to be sociable.

Dick was taking rather more interest in "the Selina Situation" than seemed necessary, but still, it was a good phone call—meaning both men had remained civil and both had actually said goodbye before hanging up.

The look on Selina's face when he'd given her the second cat pin was nothing less than magical. And tonight, she was to be his date. Not for some dry society affair either, but for a genuine party. Lucius's daughter and her husband moved into a new condo and were having a housewarming for a few close friends.

And best of all, the budget meeting Bruce had been dreading was over in record time. Last month it had dragged on for four hours; today it wrapped up in under two. That left him a few hours with nothing to do. There was no point in going home to the manor when he'd be coming right back into town for the housewarming. He decided to drop in on Selina.

He was remembering the delightful outcome of his last surprise visit when he'd discovered her wrapped in a bath towel, snuck up behind her and...

...his good mood evaporated as he rounded the corner. He spotted a vaguely familiar car parked near her apartment: a green and white Dodge. License plate: **Game 'n' ID**, an anagram of Ed Nigma. The Riddler.

Rather than announcing himself to the doorman as usual, Bruce went round to the service entrance and slipped up the back stairs. He approached Selina's door, still unsure what he was planning to do or how he felt about it, when he heard voices inside that made the decision for him. He slipped a small metallic disc from his pocket, fastened it onto the door, and clipped a small speaker to his ear. The first voice he heard was Selina's—or Catwoman's? No, it was Selina's but with a strange hushed intensity.

"I said no, Eddie, and I meant it. This is absolutely none of your business."

"Lina, listen to me, you're the only one that's close enough to tell him without—"

"Getting myself killed? I think you overestimate the strength of our friendship. He's going to totally freak out."

"Yeah, well, who can blame him?"

"Then explain to me again why I should tell him."

"Because he should know. Because something like this should be handled 'in the family.'"

Selina sighed audibly. "Yeah, I guess it should. I hate that expression by the way. You lunatics are not family."

"Riddle me this, Pet: who are the people you didn't choose, can't live with, can't stand, can't sell for the spare parts, but can't escape this strange, indefinable bond of common somethingness?"

"Eddie, seriously, those new herbs you've been taking? I think you should stop."

A lifetime of Tibetan breathing exercises enabled Bruce to stifle the snort that would have exposed his eavesdropping. The conversation inside continued, but without the hushed intensity. They were moving on to lighter topics:

"Paradoxes and conundrums work for me," Riddler insisted.

"Not as well as you think. What happened to your eye anyway?"

"Nothing. Run-in with the Junior Bat. Speaking of which, have you heard the latest? Remember the rumors a couple months back about Huntress and Nightwing?"

"I never put much stock in that one. She really doesn't seem like his type."

"Oh, it happened. I got it from Hatter. And Hatter is never wrong about these things, the little shit. Anyway, it turns out, Nightwing was on the rebound 'cause his regular girl's taken up with that Azrael Angel-guy."

"No way."

12:30 PM

Selina cancelled a lunchdate and went instead to a flat above the Jekyll and Hyde Club on 22nd Street. Her host was pleased to see her, but curious about why she'd come. They made small talk:

"Heard the latest?" he began.

"About Nightwing and Bony Ass? Yeah. Don't believe it."

"Oh, it happened. Hatter's never wrong about these things. No, that's old news. Fresh dirt: Seems Black Canary's doing the dirty with—wait for it—Ra's al Ghul!"

"You're kidding. BC and *THE CADAVER*? She could do so much better. Why on earth?"

"We heard she wants to distance herself from the Bat-clan. Time was she was thought of as a lot more than a bat-groupie."

"I guess taking up with Ra's would drive a wedge. Still... not an appealing picture."

He noticed the exquisite set of pins she was wearing.

"Did you wear those just for us, Selina?"

"Of course."

"What a lovely bit of loot. Wherever did you pick them up?"

"Not loot, they're a gift."

Harvey Dent let out a low whistle.

"Quite a gift. Who from?"

"Old friend of yours: Bruce Wayne."

He winced.

"Selina, really. We know he's loaded, but what do you care? You can steal for yourself anything he could buy you. Bruce goes through women like Kleenex. Why would you sign on for that?"

“Harvey, there are very few people in this world I get to say this to: Your love life is far too strange for you to be giving me advice, ‘kay.”

“Two-shay.”

It was common knowledge on both sides of the criminal divide that when Harvey Dent was District Attorney he was briefly involved with a beautiful research chemist, Pamela Isley—now known to be Poison Ivy—and that she’d seduced him with the intention of killing him. It was not widely known that after he became Two-Face, they’d somehow restarted the affair. Only a very few in the criminal community knew, and absolutely no one in the legitimate world was aware. Today. Nobody in the legitimate world was aware today, but that could all change by tomorrow. They’d been indiscreet. They’d met, whether by design or chance, near a mob warehouse with very special security cameras. There was a videotape.

“Harvey, look, that’s actually what I came to talk about.”

“My love life? As you so delicately put it.”

“Yeah. Um, here’s the thing. What you and Ivy do on your own time is really nobody else’s business. And games, even rough ones, well y’know, consenting adults and all that.”

The Two-Face side of his personality proposed a dozen lewd comments about the pussycat pussyfooting around. The Harvey side rejected each one.

Selina was a friend. He didn’t want to be “Big Bad Harv” with her. But he did wish she’d get to the point.

She did.

“There’s a tape, Harvey. I have it on good authority that a cousin of your very favorite mobster, Boss Maroni, owns the warehouse where you were... ‘gardening’ last night. And word is: he plans to make copies and sell them.”

DA Dent held Two-Face’s rage back just long enough to ask: “Who’s the source?”

“Penguin. Maroni’s people approached him to distribute. Pengy told the Riddler and Eddie told me.”

The degree of Two-Face’s rage may be gauged by the fact that he did not pause to flip his coin before calling down the sting of two thousand scorpions on Maroni, on the Penguin, and on anyone else involved in this monstrous outrage. This was not a matter for the coin to decide because he was not “of two minds.” On the contrary, while Two-Face conjured images of machine-gunning every Maroni in existence, Harvey searched the annals of his Harvard education for appropriate epithets:

Come not within the measure of my wrath.

—The Two Gentleman of Verona

*Ne’er had been read in story old,
Of maiden true betray’d for gold,
That loved, or was avenged, like me.*

—Marmion. Canto ii

Which, if not victory, is yet revenge.

—Paradise Lost. Book ii

And just for good measure:

I don't want to kill everyone. Just my enemies.

—The Godfather Part II

1:00 PM

A distinguished older gentleman, neatly but too-formally dressed for a suburban park, scrutinized his reflection in the pond. He thought he was long past the age where you make discoveries about yourself. Yet recent events—or rather, the lack of recent events—were forcing him to face one of those revelations.

He, Alfred Pennyworth, was every bit as much of a workaholic as his employer. It was just possible that the example he'd set of tireless dedication had somehow contributed to Bruce's tendency to put the job above any personal interests.

Now that Bruce was finally making a bit of a life for himself, Alfred found himself with time on his hands. Today, for instance, he'd finished his minimal housework by 11:00, pretended to dust the cave until 11:30, and examined the contents of the refrigerator until 11:45, making a grocery list although there was no evening meal to prepare. Finally, at 12:05, he admitted defeat and took the afternoon off. He returned to double-check he'd locked the back door no fewer than four times before taking a walk around the Wayne property. Then, realizing it was a sad commentary to actually remain on the grounds on his "time off," he headed for this public park.

He had a chance to relax, to enjoy himself, to play. And here he was, sitting on a bench, with no idea in his head about how to spend his free time.

1:15 PM

Silencing a momentary qualm, Selina flagged a cab and headed for the Iceberg Redux, the Penguin's refurbished nightclub. She hadn't seen him since No Man's Land, when his conduct had been less than laudable, even by the liberal standard of Gotham City Rogues. Still, one couldn't hold on to grudges like that forever or no one in the city would be talking to each other.

She paid off the cab and announced herself to the doorman. As she waited in an outer alcove, she told herself she was not being a big softie. It was not being "soft" to simply warn the poor ass that he'd just made Two-Face's list of *Top Twenty People to Obliterate with a Double-Barrel Shotgun*.

When she had talked to Harvey, Selina thought she'd made it quite clear: Maroni's people only *approached* Oswald to distribute the tape. There was no evidence that he had agreed. But Harvey didn't want to hear it. There was no reasoning with his Two-Face side once Harvey had 'left the building,' as it were.

A too-amiable voice interrupted her musings: “

Catwoman, my felicitous feline, come in, come in. You haven't seen my renovations have you? Come in, you must see them.”

Evidently Pengy was willing to pretend the whole No Man's Land episode never happened. He waddled eagerly towards the club dining room—perhaps with just a tad more waddle than usual. Selina took in the room appreciatively. The little bird had clearly spent a bundle—the effect of a room interior carved out of a glacier was stunning—as was a conspicuous hole in the ice-effect behind the bar.

“What happened there?” Selina asked.

“Oh, haven't you heard? There was a bit of a ruckus last night. You know Joker got himself thrown back into Arkham last month... -Hic- ...Well, it seems the Riddler took advantage of his absence to put the moves on the lovely Miss Quinn. The Mad Hatter was nabbed over the weekend, and when he got back to Arkham he told Joker about Riddler and Harley. Joker broke out and came after Riddler last night. Found him sitting right there,” Oswald added pointing to a table “and threw him over there -Hic.”

Selina smiled. That explained the black eye Eddie had unconvincingly attributed to a run-in with Robin.

“Psychos in love,” she said out loud, “it's rather sweet in a disturbing, Kafkaesque way.”

Although he had no idea what Kafkaesque meant, Penguin apparently found this hysterical. He laughed—too loud and too long. Selina stared, then saw the significance of a half-dozen odd details: “Oswald,” she asked pointedly, “are you drunk?”

3:10 PM

Tim was home from school. He powered up his desktop, and glanced at his e-mail—one in particular caught his eye, and he double-clicked on the subjectline: Heard the latest?

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

To: Tim Drake <Drakester@oraclesecure.gothamheightshigh.org>

Re: Heard the Latest?

Care to confirm a story going around the squad room that they had to put The Mad Hatter into solitary at Arkham because the other inmates were hounding him for information from the outside? Don't think I'll ever look at Scarecrow the same way now that I have this image of him under a hairdryer clicking his tongue about Ross and Rachel. :)

*btw, I talked to the B-man this morning and wouldn't you know it, he did have the second pin. Gave it to her last night. Whew. Didn't want to be on the clean-up crew if that one blew up. Y'know, I was just trying to be a guy and help him out in case he didn't have a second pin, and what do I get in return? A 10-minute lecture on how I should **worry about my own affairs**.*

Now what is that supposed to mean? You don't think he's heard about me and Helena do you? It was nothing, and it was months ago.

Tell me what you know.

Tim thought for a second about how Oracle was so quick to defend Azrael. He hit reply and typed:

Bro, ah, maybe B wasn't talking about your end of it at all. It might be the other side you should be worried about.

Hell, what was the point in worrying him about a hunch... Tim hit delete and typed:

Don't know about Hatter and Arkham, but I was at the Iceberg last night and Penguin was drunk as a skunk—crying in his beer that he'd borrowed big from the Maroni Family to rebuild the club, and now they want some kind of 'favor' that's gonna get him killed twice.

3:30 PM

Every rehearsal, every performance, and every casual meeting at the Bristol Heights Community Playhouse began with a certain amount of gossip among the regulars, which had to crescendo in that actressy-squealing sound before the business of the day could proceed.

"Heard the latest from Sally?"

"No, what?"

"New guy came in to ask about auditions?"

"That's news?"

"Now wait a minute. Sally says he's *really* classy and he has an *actual English accent*. A real one, not the bad actor kind. And he'd been a real actor, a *professional*, in London!"

"Whoa, hot stuff! What's this guy look like anyway?"

"Sorry, I asked. He's really old."

"Bummer."

"Sally figured he'd want to, like, do Shakespeare or something. But no, he had the flyer from the park."

"The ones Janet said nobody would read?"

"Will you get over that?"

"So he's auditioning for *How's your father?* "

"He's auditioning for *How's your father!* "

Then both actresses were so overwhelmed with excitement at the thought of sharing the stage with a real English actor, even if he was old, they each made the girlish squealing sound that signaled rehearsals were ready to begin.

4:30 PM Officer Dick Grayson reported, as requested, to Detective Porpora of The Multi-Jurisdictional Task Force against Organized Crime, an office he was beginning to respect. Their failure to adopt any catchy acronyms (MuJu-TaF-OrC ?) hinted that they might actually hope to accomplish something.

Dick had been called in, he was told, in "an unofficial capacity," because he was a former resident of Gotham City. Could he, they asked, provide some information on one of that city's peculiar criminal characters, one Poison Ivy. Yes, they realized, he was not a cop but a private citizen when he lived in Gotham, but still, anything might be helpful. Did he know anything, anything at all, that might not appear in the official files?

Dick maintained a poker face that would've made his mentor proud as he thought over the many and varied details he knew about Poison Ivy that were not in her official

files: she dyed her hair, she was a perfect size 6, she liked reggae music, when she got angry her pheromones smelled like Lemon Pledge. None of this trivia could be relevant to Detective Porpora's investigation, even if Dick could concoct some reason why he would know such things.

"No, sir, I'm sorry," Officer Grayson said formally, "I know nothing about those characters except what you'd find in the newspapers. May I ask why you want to know?"

"A few hours ago, the FBI began losing the signal on a number of mob wiretaps. When they investigated, they found some kind of moldy moss is infesting every Maroni property in the tri-state area. Bad news for us, but worse for them—it's wreaking havoc on everything electronic."

"Whoa. Too weird."

"Well, thank you for coming in, Grayson. Oh, as you're from Gotham, did you hear the latest speculation about that Joker escape they had? Seems his girlfriend, Harley Quinn, heh, is known to 'team up' with this Poison Ivy character from time to time, and not necessarily for a crime spree, if you know what I mean. Heh heh."

Dick smiled politely. This man was his superior, and he spent his days buried in reports of heinous mob wars. If it brightened his day to gossip about women in tights, what was the harm?

Dick was quite certain, however, that the Joker was not jealous about some imagined liaison between Poison Ivy & his sidekick. Joker—and every other man on both sides of the criminal divide—had spent some considerable time speculating about (if not actively visualizing) the relationship between Harley & Ivy.

6:15 PM

Dr. Harlene Quinzelle presented a convincing ID badge identifying her as Maude Sinclair, PhD to the nightclerk at Arkham Asylum. She signed in and walked with confidence into the high-security wing. No one gave her a second glance. Nightclerks at Arkham have a short lifespan. There was probably no one left who could have recognized her from her brief incarceration here, or her even briefer term on staff.

She gave a soft sigh as she passed the entrance to her Puddin's special cell—they still hadn't cleaned all the blood off the walls from his escape.

Finally, she came to the door she was looking for, punched a code into the intercom panel, and spoke:

"Jervis, it's Harley. You've gotten me into quite a spot with Puddin'."

An unabashed voice replied: "I blew the trumpet, I did indeed. The Knave of Hearts should know, don't you think, if the March Hare is stealing his tarts, don't you think?"

Harley rolled her eyes. The Joker's mad ravings were so adorable. But Mad Hatter's nonsensical doubletalk wasn't nearly so appealing. She purposely came before they distributed the evening meds to avoid this bullshit.

"Nobody stole his tarts, Jervis. Riddler made a pass and I was handling it. I'd never cheat on my Puddin' with some other funnyman, you know that. Everybody knows that! We should be together now that he's out, and instead he went and put Riddler through a wall—and who knows what he'll do to me."

"It began with the tee. The tee? No, the tea! Yes, that's right. And the bread and butter was getting ever so thin. When, calloo callay, they all came to say—"

"HEY!" Harley pounded on the intercom. Though she would giggle, prance, and cower with her Puddin', Harley Quinn had a fiery temper when provoked. "I'm not playing games, Jervis. I have a grenade in my purse and I want to know WHAT YOU TOLD HIM and WHY YOU DID IT. If I like the answers, I'll leave it on this side of the door and break you out, and if not, it goes on your side of the door. Understand... Calloo Callay?"

It got through. A far more reasonable voice came through the intercom:

"They were so interested to know what was going on outside, in the world of outside, don't you know. So I told them about the Iceberg, where all the world comes and goes, in a room carved from ice..."

"Jervis."

"...and I told who all was there, and that you were there, and that Ed Nigma had his hand on your leg," he finished in a rhyme-free rush.

Harley let out an exasperated puff. That was that.

"Why, Jervis! Why oh why oh why did you have to tell him?"

This last was a rhetorical question. She wasn't expecting an answer and was surprised at its vehemence when it came.

"BECAUSE IT'S NOT FAIR! HE'S FREAKISH AS THE REST OF US! MORE! HE'S MORE OF A FREAK THAN ANY OF US! AND HE FINDS THE ONE WOMAN IN ALL THE WORLD WILLING TO PUT UP WITH HIM AND HIS TEMPER AND HIS CACKLING—WHO ACTUALLY LOVES HIM FOR IT! ...AND HE TREATS YOU LIKE THAT! IT'S NOT FAIR! IT'SNOTFAIR IT'SNOTFAIR!"

Harley backed away from the door, leaving the Mad Hatter ranting about the unfairness of it all. They'd be bringing the evening meds in a few minutes, and that might calm him.

7:00 PM

Alfred returned to the Playhouse for his audition, having prepared two monologues as requested: one classic, Sir Andrew Aguecheek's from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and one contemporary, Elyot Chase from Noel Coward's *Private Lives*.

"That's refreshing," said a mature but feminine voice from the back of the house, "two comic monologues. Most actors choose a tragedy for the Shakespeare."

And so might Alfred have done at one time. But he was doing this for a change, and he'd seen more than enough vows of honor and vengeance in real life to enjoy reenacting it onstage. Naturally, he wouldn't explain this to the director. Instead, he said, "I was given to understand this was a comedy for which I was auditioning."

The figure at the back of the house came closer to the stage, where Alfred could make out a petite woman with a length of neat salt-and-pepper hair pulled into a becoming chignon. As she came closer, he observed a face that may have once been pretty in the generic ingénue sense, but had matured to assume a character and dignity far rarer in women her age than mere prettiness is in girls of twenty.

"It is a comedy, in a manner of speaking," the woman replied, "The title page reads: '*How's Your Father*, A Comedy.' Whenever I read that I can't help but thinking 'I'll be

the judge of that, buddy.' You understand it's a small role, just a character part really—some good lines, though, comparatively speaking."

"I do understand. I was expecting to start small, get to know the company a little better."

"That will take precisely ten minutes. Once you've met one twenty-something actress/model/whatever, you've met them all."

Alfred was intrigued. The words were harsh, but, unless he was mistaken, there was a begrudging affection in them. He seemed to be signing on for a role with a director whose cynical style of expression rivaled his own.

"You've trod the boards professionally, I understand," she remarked.

"That was many years ago," Alfred confirmed.

"Still, once an actor, always an actor. I know, I was married to one forever."

Alfred remembered the claustrophobic world of the theatre well enough to know he would not need to ask if the past tense arose from death or divorce. He would know the complete biographies of this director and everyone else in the company by the end of the second rehearsal.

The woman paused. Alfred had the uncanny feeling he had just been sized-up. She must've reached a favorable decision because she continued...

"So you know the classics: Shakespeare and Shaw and such. Reason I ask, once this silliness—*How's Your Father*, A Comedy—is done with, I'm putting together a little program to take round the schools, scenes from the classics. Show 'em early that it's not hard to understand. There's more of sex and violence and soap opera in a Shakespeare play than any Hollywood blockbuster. If you're able to free up some time, maybe we could talk about it some time after rehearsal."

8:30 PM

Dick woke from the hour of deep meditation that substituted for a full night's sleep more often than he cared to admit. Every time he did it, he felt he was turning into Bruce. Meditating instead of sleep. Wasn't this his version of Batman's famous: *I'm not hungry, Alfred, just leave the tray on the table*. Bruce wasted far more time bickering with Alfred than it would take to just eat the damn sandwich. In the same way, Dick knew this meditation dodge was simply borrowing against his body's reserves, and he'd wind up sleeping twice as long when he finally crashed. So why did he do it?

What kind of numbskulls pretend they don't need to eat and sleep? his inner voice asked.

The kind of numbskulls that don't want to admit they're human, came the answer. *The kind of numbskulls that don't want to admit they're mortal. The kind of numbskulls that don't want to die.*

Oh man, sometimes he hated the part of his brain that did that. It was the voice of reason, the voice of conscience, and it sounded disconcertingly like Babs.

He should call her.

Tim's non-answer to his e-mail meant there probably was something up with Barbara—something to do with Helena, no doubt. He could call and tell her about his meeting with Detective Porpora. She'd see through it, of course; she was Oracle. She'd already know about Poison Ivy's attacks on the Marconi family, and she'd know he'd know she'd know. They were a knowing little circle, the Bat-Family.

Better still, better than making up a dumb transparent excuse, he should go into Gotham and see her in person. Bludhaven could do without him for one night. He would go see Barbara and later he would patrol with Robin and ferret out what he wasn't saying in that e-mail.

9:05 PM

Daniel Kuph stood an uneasy post at the front door at the Iceberg Lounge.

He'd reported for work to learn he'd been promoted from dishwasher to head doorman—there was no doubt as to why. The Joker's visit last night had put his predecessor into the hospital, along with the bartender. Daniel was a half head taller than Bobby the busboy, so Daniel was promoted to doorman and Bobby was promoted to bartender.

What's more, the boss was drunk. Mr Cobblepot had given explicit instructions not to let "him" in, but when Daniel asked who, Mr Cobblepot merely slurred: "Who? Yshou need a descript-pt-shun? It's not like you can misst-take him for anybody else."

That statement applied to almost everyone the Penguin might have a beef with, from Batman to Bane. And since Daniel had no hope of stopping any of the costumed lunatics of Gotham from going anywhere they pleased (and no intention of trying), he figured he'd be much happier tending bar. The biggest risk there was being hit by an airborne lunatic caught playing around with some other lunatic's girlfriend.

10:05 PM

Nightwing tried to make his voice sound casual and devoid of subtext as he linked in to Oracle to ask Robin's location.

:: Oracle, 'Wing ::

read: Barbara, how friggin' long are you going to punish me for Helena, huh? What does a guy have to do for pity's sake?

:: I'm in Gotham unexpectedly. ::

read: I saw him. I saw him leaving your apartment just now. How could you do this? Why him—why that cursed Azrael of all the people in the world? Don't you know what it did to me when Bruce gave him the mantle instead of me? Don't you know what it means that you pick him of all people to have some flirtation with? How can you fucking do this to me?

:: Can you tell me where Robin is at? :: read: You can't be serious about this. Is this payback? Grown men and women have sex sometimes. It doesn't mean it's the start of the great American romance. Sometimes it's just an unpremeditated and meaningless roll in the hay, and we enjoyed it very much.

..00.. The Redbird's parked at Mason and Fifth. There's a taco drive-thru near there he likes to take Spoiler.

..00.. read: Being jealous over Az is just a cheap excuse to get out of feeling guilty for sleeping with Helena.

10:30 PM

Amanda Fox-Appleton pulled her father's sleeve and motioned him into the kitchen.

"Dad, tell me the truth. Did I screw up? Is the party a flop? Mr. Wayne left kind of early."

Lucius gave her hand a reassuring pat.

"Sweetie, you did fine. That was actually a record for Bruce. He usually disappears before the second tray of canapés comes round. You should see what his butler and I go through to keep him at company shindigs long enough to satisfy the stockholders."

11:45 PM

Robin slammed the door of one ambulance bound for the Arkham Infirmary as Nightwing slammed the other. Between the two of them, they'd just captured Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn without any help from Batman. Granted they'd had a bit of help ... from the Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn.

Nightwing had just reached the RedBird when the call came in: disturbing the peace at the Penguin's club.

"Déjà vu," Robin remarked.

"What do you mean?" Nightwing asked.

"Had one of these last night."

"You mean this is the *SECOND* D.P. at the Iceberg *REDUX* in *TWO DAYS*?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean... well, he is on the loose, isn't he."

By the time they reached the club, Daniel the accommodating (and terrified) doorman practically ushered them in. There was Two-Face, scarred side of his mouth gushing blood, arms wrapped around Joker's shoulder, ramming the dazed clown into the wall head first. Joker clutched a broken bottle and tried to stab his assailant in the thigh while Harley Quinn jumped on his back yelling "Put my Puddin' down!"

While Nightwing watched the scene in wonder, trying to decide how (and when) to intervene, Robin nudged him and pointed. At a side table, Scarecrow sat before an impressive stack of cash with Hugo Strange, Killer Croc, and some nameless nogoodniks huddled round.

Nightwing walked over to their table, neatly sidestepping the scuffle as Ivy pulled Harley off Two-Face and Harley spun around and slapped her.

'Wing held out a \$50 bill and asked, "What're the odds on Harley?"

Scarecrow looked up at him suspiciously, "You want to place a bet?"

"What, my money's no good here?" Nightwing snarled.

Scarecrow looked at Hugo Strange, who shrugged. Scarecrow took the bill and muttered "3 to 1 on Blondie." There was a slight murmur of approval from the assembled rogues at this unexpectedly matey behavior from the vigilantes.

"How'd this start, anyway?" 'Wing asked casually.

"Joker was after Harley for...something or other..." Strange answered.

"Cheating with Riddler," Croc put in.

"...and she went running to Pammy for protection," Scarecrow continued.

"Par for the course."

"Pammy's here with Two-Face with some axe to grind against Penguin."

"Hey, where is Penguin?"

"Passed out in back."

"Joker caught up with them here."

"Probably followed Harley."

"He wasn't surprised to see her with Ivy..."

"...but Two-Face threw him..."

“He said Two-Face shouldn’t be allowed to have a three-way.”

“Then he said maybe he didn’t consider it a three-way—two of him + two girls.”

“That’s when Harvey decked him.”

“Okay, that’s all I need to hear,” snapped Nightwing as he dove into the fray.

The four combatants were already battered, but they had just enough fight left that Wing managed to work out some of his Oracle-frustrations.

11:59 PM

Catwoman heard a light swish on the rooftop behind her. She turned to see a glimpse of dark disappearing behind a chimney: black against black, knight against night. She’d been a little put out when he took her back to her apartment after the party and kissed her goodnight. They both knew he’d be patrolling in less than ten minutes. Why didn’t he invite her along?

She smiled now, beginning to understand: he had just invited her in the only way he could.

She joined him on his rooftop where he was just tuning in the police band. He looked up with the lip-twitch that was his version of a smile:

“Heard the latest?”