



by Chris Dee

I was in the mood to celebrate.

Lexcorp was pulling out of Gotham City! As soon as I saw the headline, I headed over to a popular coffee shop in the financial district to eavesdrop on the brokers. The rumor mill was saying Lex Luthor got wind of the enormous sums Talia was spending on the war with Wayne Enterprises and ordered her to knock it off. Meow – Purr – and Hot Damn, Yippie KaiYay!

‘Course Luthor had no idea why she was in Gotham in the first place, probably assumed she was just following his lead during No Man’s Land. If he knew she was focused on Wayne Enterprises because of a personal obsession with Bruce, or that she was spending so much because she was chasing bogus research and products we deliberately planted for her to uncover, he’d have fired her worthless ass. But we can’t have everything. The important thing was: she was gone – at least until she makes it up with Daddy (and she will, let’s not kid ourselves about that).

So anyway, I was in the mood to celebrate. Picked up a bottle of champagne and headed out to the manor. Now Alfred answers by the third ring, always. So after five rings and six knocks, I was quite sure he’d taken the day off. If Bruce was home, he was probably in the cave and didn’t want to take the time to change into civvies to answer the bell. I went round to the side of the house, deliberately tripped the alarm on the French doors to get his attention and waved at the security camera, then let myself in and headed for the cave. Before I got to the clock, I heard a soft “in here” from the library. Bruce was there all right, slumped in an easy chair. He did not look in the mood to party.

“If you say I look like something the cat dragged in, I will have to throw this at you.” he growled flatly.

It wasn’t clear what “this” was, but it was clear he was in no shape to play.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Chloroformed. Twice. Hangover.”

“Oh, poor baby” I soothed.

He winced. “For heaven’s sake, don’t shout.”

I smiled. I’ve been there. Those drug hangovers rank up there with seasickness and kidney stones on the list of things you don’t want to experience more than once in a lifetime.

“Where’s Alfred?”

“Alfred’s got himself involved in amateur dramatics – rehearsals this afternoon and tonight. He offered to stay, but I told him go. Nothing he could do but bring aspirin. I’ve already taken nine.”

“He could’ve cooked,” I said, pointing at the end table next to him. I realized the “this” Bruce threatened to throw was... ulgh... what appeared to be a bowl of egg drop soup that had grown cold and – ulgh – gelatinous. I was not hungover and the sight of it made me gag.

“Tell me you didn’t try to eat that,” I said, forcing down the gag.

The thing with the condition Bruce found himself in is that no matter how long you postpone it, you eventually have to face the prospect of eating. Those of us who have to cope with the problem on a regular basis, discover through trial and hideous error

the sometimes-weird chemistry of our own best cure. I've heard everything from malted milk shakes (the idea being to "line the stomach") to steak tartar.

Bruce looked at the muck in the bowl and nodded sadly.

"I couldn't face marinara sauce or kung pao. The only places that deliver out here are pizza and chinese."

Poor guy... I decided to baby him a little, just this once.

"Okay then," I announced. "We'll postpone my news and champagne for another time. Come to the kitchen and keep me company while I make you something nice."

One eye opened a sliver.

"You can cook?"

I laughed. I figured he must be in bad shape if he didn't realize I wasn't the one that was hungover. I threw together a cold yogurt soup that always soothes me in that condition, added a drop of vanilla, a little honey and some minced mint leaves. The idea, psychologically if not physiologically is to please the mind as well as the stomach and seduce you back to the land of the living. While Bruce ate, I prepared a piece of plain chicken and a poached pear. During this process, Bruce observed twice more that I can cook.

"I'm putting these in the refrigerator for later, they should chill for a few hours, then you've got dinner, okay?"

"You can cook."

"For the fourth time, yes. Is there any point in my suggesting you don't patrol tonight?"

"How do you know how to cook?"

"Look, I think what's happened is when they knocked you out, you hit your head on something hard. If you just take the night off and get a good night's sleep, in the morning you'll see there's nothing miraculous about cooking a piece of chicken."

"I can't do it."

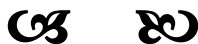
"Right now I don't think you can recite the alphabet, but come morning—"

"No, love, I can't cook. Under any circumstances."

"You mean – at all?"

"I made a sandwich once...."

I admit it. I started to giggle. By the time he finished I was wiping tears from my eyes. I don't care who you are, if somebody tells you their butler banned them from the kitchen, it's pretty funny. If halfway through the story you realize it's Batman, professional badass, most dangerous man alive, telling you how he put the lunchmeat and the lettuce back in the wrong place ("it seems they have special drawers") and scarred the counter because he failed to use a cutting board, take my word for it, you too would be doubled over laughing.



Nobody likes admitting they screwed up. Nobody likes admitting they need help. And nobody liked it less than Dick Grayson. But some screwups were too conspicuous to ignore.

His couch was puce.

He had bought a puce-colored couch. He remembered a little square of maroon fabric with bits of yellow, but this was more of a brownish purple with streaks of yellowish green. It looked like a bruise. A bruise with throw pillows.

Tim had politely neglected to mention it. Either that or he'd been struck with hysterical blindness on seeing it. Dick offered him a soda and they talked briefly about Tim's returning to school and recent happenings in the Gotham underworld. Finally Dick got around to what he wanted to ask:

Tim's seemingly malicious prank the night of Jack Drake's birthday party brought Bruce and Selina together at a time when that was all they needed to reconcile after their first fight. Did he have that in mind the whole time? Or was it just dumb luck?

Tim admitted that he hadn't really intended to play matchmaker; he only wanted to unnerve Bruce a little.

"Oh."

"Not looking for a matchmaker, are ya Bro?"

"Nah, not really. Well. You know Babs and I have been dicey since the Helena thing."

Tim roared. "You are! You're looking for a matchmaker to patch up you and Barbara."

Dick and Barbara's on-again/off-again wasn't the stuff of legend like Bruce and Selina, but they were a cute couple and those that knew them knew, since the days when he was Robin and she was Batgirl, they complimented and completed each other.

"Dr. Tim Drake, practicing yenta: Advice to the lovelorn, broken hearts mended, hamburgers and quick lube. The doctor is in."

"Give me a break, will ya. I'm in trouble. Can we, y'know, 'be men?'"

"Dick, wasn't it you that told Bruce, 'you fight and you make it up?'"

"Yes, and doesn't it occur to anybody that I said that 'cause that's, y'know, what I need to believe is going to happen for me?"

"Well I'm just spitballing here, but all Bruce and Selina needed was an excuse to come together. Can't you, I dunno, concoct some reason to spend some time with Barbara?"

"Like a case?"

"No, not a case. Jeez, you're worse than Bruce. Nothing remotely connected to bats or belfries or crime and punishment. A real life reason to get together.

Dick stared into space.

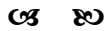
"You could ask her to help you pick a new couch," Tim suggested.

"You don't like my couch?"

"It's the most butt-ugly piece of furniture I've ever seen in my life – and that includes the lime green futon in the Riddler's lair that's covered in question marks."

"You think if I tell her I screwed up she'd help me... repair the damage."

"I think if you word it just that way, you've got a good shot."



**OraCom: Channel 1 – Nightwing**

...: 'Wing, there are five subway platforms on that route, our boy could've stashed the goods at any one of them. Anyway, if you buy furniture in Gotham, you're going to pay twice as much in delivery charges as you pay for the sofa itself. ...

::But this way, I get your help. You have good taste. Give me the platforms in order of least-populated areas.::

**OraCom: Channel 3 – Robin**

::Give the poor guy a break, O. You should see the couch he got. It's hideous.::

...: *What happened with the shots fired at the docks? Was it Scarecrow? How hideous? ...*

:: Was a driveby. Cops had it locked down by the time I got there. It's hideous, an ugly brown.::

**OraCom: Channel 1 – Nightwing**

...: Start with the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Lot, it's nearest the river. Why brown? ...

:: 11<sup>th</sup> Street, check. Salesgirl said it wouldn't stain. ::

...: But it's brown ...

:: It's more like puce. I said least populated first. There are apartments here got a clear view of the trains. He wouldn't risk being seen stashing the stuff. ::

...: In that neighborhood, if they see anything, they keep quiet. PUCE? ...

:: I thought it'd look good with the carpet. Hey there's something here, tied underneath – PAYDIRT! Good idea starting near the river. ::

...: Told ya. What color is your carpet that you thought PUCE would be - oh nevermind, pick me up Friday noon. I'll expect a nice lunch before, a good dinner after, and a declaration of your eternal gratitude... ...

**OraCom: Channel 2 – Batman**

:: *Make it Saturday. Alfred's opening night. You WILL ALL be attending.::*



Nightwing was pretty sure this wasn't the worst idea he'd ever had. It might be a mistake but, if so, it wasn't a letting Harley-Quinn-nail-you-with-a-squirtgun screwup. More of a what-was-I-thinking-I-bought-a-puce-sofa mistake.

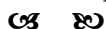
He sat on Selina Kyle's terrace, waiting patiently for Catwoman to return from her evening prowling. The way he saw it, she owed him. He'd listened patiently when Bruce had ticked her off. It was her turn to lend a sympathetic ear.

Of course he would be going to Alfred's opening night. It wasn't necessary for Bruce to declare: "If you're not there, you better be dead." He loved Alfred. Nothing would make him miss the old man's return to the stage, even if it was for some dinky community theatre. And yes, if he was coming in to Gotham to see the show, and he was coming into Gotham to do furniture shopping with Babs, it made sense to combine

it into one trip – *except* he had wanted to use the time together shopping to ask her to the show as his date and now he *couldn't* because it looked like they were both roped into going as a group thing.

After fifteen minutes it occurred to him: Selina might already be home and perhaps he should knock. He approached the sliding doors then froze when he heard voices inside. First a silky purr, “That’s it, nice and easy, it needs a very light touch...” Then a male voice chuckled, “I’d heard of people doing this in the kitchen, I just never thought I’d be one of them...”

Oh dear, clearly it was not a good time to drop by unannounced.



It had been nearly forty years since Alfred Pennyworth stood on the apron of a stage and took a bow before a cheering audience. He never regretted the pledge to his dying father to continue the family tradition of service. And he certainly never regretted his years spent serving Dr. & Mrs Wayne, and then their son Bruce. But bowing again to acknowledge applause, he did heartily regret that it took him so long to realize: quitting professional theatre did not mean he couldn’t still act now and then. Those skills – modulating the voice, timing lines and movements for effect – unused for so many years, had come back to him within days. And the rush of hearing an audience react to a well-delivered line – it was a magic he had forgotten existed.

After the show, a small party assembled at Wayne Manor to congratulate him: Bruce and Selina, Dick and Barbara, Tim, Stephanie and Cassie. This was the core, the Bat family, those who had been told if they weren’t there they better be dead.

As others began to arrive, the cast of *HOW’S YOUR FATHER?* and their friends and hangers on, Alfred instinctively headed for the kitchen. There were guests in the manor and that meant he had to go to work – but Bruce insisted he was the guest of honor and wasn’t to lift a finger. Alfred sat uneasily in the drawing room, as Dick handed him a glass of champagne and Tim directed the others where to leave their coats...

What happened next would be debated, deconstructed and whispered about for the remainder of the party.

Certainly someone who appeared to be Bruce Wayne came out of the dining room with a tray of mushrooms stuffed with crabmeat. A short while later, a second tray with cheese puffs was being passed around.

Tim drifted casually over to Dick who was eyeing a mushroom suspiciously.

“What does it mean?” Tim whispered.

“I don’t know.”

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know.”

Barbara joined them:

“He couldn’t have made this; there’s a caterer, right?”

“Are you kidding! While we were all at the show - he’d never let strangers in the house alone. Never.”

“So who made the food?”

"Maybe a portal opened from another dimension and this is a Bruce Wayne from an alternate universe where he can cook?"

"Then this is food from an alternate reality that's totally opposite from ours, it might be poisonous to us!"

Dick sniffed the suspicious alternate-reality mushroom.

Stephanie sidled up with a plate of scrambled eggs.

"Hey guys, what's up?"

The trio looked aghast.

"You're not eating that?" Tim asked in horror.

"There's a covered dish through there."

"But you're EATING it. You don't know where it came from?"

"Bruce made 'em. He said so."

Dick, Tim and Barbara looked at each other in terror. The worst-case scenario was confirmed. Okay, he'd told Selina his real identity, fine. And okay, he sometimes talked now, smiled occasionally, and even behaved like a person at Jack Drake's birthday party. They could accept all that... But *COOKING!?!?* That was too much to swallow as one of life's little fastballs. Something was *WRONG*. Their Batman had been replaced by a look-alike. And if this one could cook, there was no telling what else... he could kill, he could be a robot, or a shape shifter, he could be...

"Raspberry Meringue anyone?"

The imposter stood before them with a tray of desserts and a twisted grin.



After Bruce showed the last non-family guest to the door, he returned to the drawing room to find a reception committee that was not at all friendly. They wanted answers and they wanted them now: Stuffed Mushrooms. Cheese Puffs. Raspberry Meringues. Explain.

"You start with a four cups of mushrooms and a pound of fresh crab... Looks like it'll have to wait."

In the window behind Dick and Tim, the Batsignal shone over the night sky.

Great, now they had to suit up and go into battle with Bizarroworld Batman at their side.



The next day, Dick Grayson bought Selina Kyle lunch.

"I thought Barbara was helping you pick out furniture," she asked casually.

"She is – was. Actually that didn't go too well. No, this is about... last night."

Selina smiled inwardly. She knew what the lunch was about. Bruce had briefed her on Dick, Tim and Barbara's total overreaction to his debut as chef, and had given strict instructions that, if anybody asked her, no explanation was to be given. He hadn't planned this as a stunt, but since they had made such a drama out of it, and since Tim *HAD* set him up at the party, since Dick *HAD* played the prank with the workout dummy, and since Barbara had undoubtedly cheered them on, they all deserved a little payback.

"What does Alfred say?" Selina asked innocently to avoid volunteering any information herself.

"Not much," Dick admitted. "He's preoccupied. That director, (did you meet her?) she's got some project taking Shakespeare to the schools."

Ah, that explained it. Bruce had predicted the big reaction from Alfred, not Dick and Tim. He was curious why the butler hadn't so much as raised an eyebrow.

"Look, the point is," Dick began.

Selina deftly changed the subject.

"Tell me about the furniture shopping. What went wrong?"

Dick was out of his league. It took a Batman to corner Catwoman. After a few more tries, he admitted defeat and threw out the hidden agenda. They would talk about what she wanted to talk about:

Shopping with Barbara had been a disaster. Dick liked bright hues ("Easter Egg colors," declared Babs) and bold patterns ("Groovy, it's 1974 all over again"). Barbara was pointing him to pieces best described as institutional. When he voiced this opinion, she declared that anybody that would mix green with red and yellow (a pointed reference at his old Robin outfit) required a keeper.

"Now tell me, please, what is the point in having the largest thing in your living room, this thing you'll be looking at every day, decked out in fourteen supremely subtle shades of taupe?"

"If you don't like her taste, why did you ask her to help you?" Selina asked, suppressing a giggle. The batboys uniform cluelessness in domestic matters was becoming a source of endless amusement.

"The master plan was that shopping gave me an opening to ask her out. Bruce went and torpedoed that idea though. He has to stick his oar in, doesn't he? Has to tell everybody what to do. I tell ya, Selina, it makes me want to scream sometimes."

"Can I ask you a delicate question, kiddo?"

"If you don't call me kiddo ever again, yeah, sure, why not?"

"How old were you when you lost your parents? Under 13?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because this is the ninth or tenth round of you and Bruce bitching about each other that I've sat through, and I've gotta say - He's not well adjusted enough to hear this, but you are - *this is what fathers and sons do*. They drive each other crazy. You both lost your parents before adolescence, you never got to the point where you realize they're not perfect. You insist Bruce won't let you be your own man, doesn't know when to let go, yadda yadda yadda - and you've blown it up into this monstrous character flaw. Richard, no father in history has *EVER* let go in the way you seem to be expecting. It doesn't happen."

Dick's response was delayed by his need to chew, and by the time he swallowed Selina went on.

"He says you never listen, by the way, meaning you plan to make the decisions affecting your life yourself and not do it his way. That's normal, too. He might know that if his Dad had lived, 'cause they would've gone through this same thing about the time he turned twenty. My guess, it would've be about Bruce going to med school or not. Y'know what though, if he had been through it, he'd still turn around and do the

same thing to you. Only difference is maybe he wouldn't feel like it's a big failing on his part."

"You think he blames himself?"

Selina looked at him like he'd asked if the sky was blue.

"Richard, you have MET Bruce, haven't you?"

"Yeah, okay, it was a stupid question, but I mean—"

"He has a hyper-idealized view of everything to do with his parents. His father was a perfect father. Since he's not perfect, his relationship with you isn't perfect, he undoubtedly feels he doesn't measure up."

"But that's ludicrous—"

"No shit. What I'm saying is this: what he feels, what you feel... this *great estrangement*, as you all seem to think of it, this isn't some profound conflict out of Greek tragedy. This is what drives sales of Maalox in every town in America every Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's what families do. Ask around."



### **OraCom: Channel 1 – Nightwing to Robin**

**<ENCRYPT THROUGH BABS.NET - LOCK-OUT CHANNEL 2>**

::Robin, it's 'Wing. ::

::*Did you talk to her? What did she say? Shape-shifter or Robot? ::*

::We didn't get into that. ::

::*That was the whole point of the lunch. ::*

::Forget that, let me ask you something. Does your dad drive you crazy? ::

::*You mean about grades, girls, tattoos, politics, the internet, using the car, the music I listen to, the movies I see, the length of my hair, the cost of good sneakers, and the Celtics' chances of making the playoffs – yeah, my dad drives makes me crazy. ::*

### **OraCom: Channel 1 – Nightwing to Oracle**

**<ENCRYPT THROUGH BABS.NET - LOCK-OUT CHANNEL 2>**

::Barbara, it's Dick. ::

:::*What did she say? Mind-control nanites or evil doppelganger? :::*

::We didn't get into that - let me ask you something: Does your dad drive you crazy?::

:::*Are you kidding? Since he retired that's what he does with his time! Just this morning he sent me this article from Cosmo – COSMO mind you – 'Safety tips for the city gal living alone.' Forget I was raised a policeman's daughter, forget I have better security than the NSYNC Compound – he's sending me clippings from COSMOPOLITAN MAGAZINE! :::*

Sheesh, Dick thought, possibly Selina had a point. Barbara continued without a pause.

:::*AND he agrees with you about the sofa, can you believe that? What does he know about – you've seen those curtains he has in his study, right – and he's telling me it's your apartment and after all we should adjust to each others' tastes because – GET THIS! – it's just a matter of time... :::*

Alright Papa Gordon! Dick beamed as the implications sunk in: She had told her father about their argument, just as he had told Selina. He was, at least, still important enough to rank in the day's headlines. And Gordon had not only taken his side, he implied it was only a matter of time 'til the two of them set up housekeeping together.

What did it matter if Bruce had been replaced by an evil doppelganger shape-shifting killer robot from an alternate universe? He and Babs were back on track, and all was well with the world.



The night of the party, Alfred was thoroughly preoccupied with the visiting director, the rest of the cast, and the excitement of performing again. He didn't pay much attention to "The Case of the Mysterious Mushroom Caps," but he did consider the question the next morning as he cleaned up the breakfast things.

It was quite a puzzle. The food served was certainly not prepared by a caterer. They were all dishes from his own recipe book, the one his father passed down when he agreed to go into service. Alfred examined the stove and utensils and found no sign that anything in the kitchen had been disturbed – until he looked for the recipe book itself and found it wasn't in its accustomed place.

At that moment, it ceased to be a mere puzzle and became a full-blown quest: Someone or something had tampered with his kitchen and his recipe book –and may the lord above have mercy on their souls.

A systematic search commenced of the manor's endless cupboards, closets, and shelves. It turned up Master Dick's 6<sup>th</sup> grade report card, the remnants of a balloon reading "Happy New Year 1966," a ticket stub from the opening night of *Oklahoma*, and the discharge papers of one Colonel E. B. Wayne after World War I – but no recipe book.

Admitting defeat, Alfred resumed his regular chores – until he got to the Batcave. There, on Master Bruce's worktable, between a Bunsen burner and a radar tube, was the Pennyworth recipe book, opened to Meringues – with several sheets of handwritten notes. There was a diagram of a cracked egg, with the notation: *Whites: 90% H<sub>2</sub>O /10% protein. Create a colloid with granulated sucrose, solidify by exposing to heat.*

Alfred blinked.

He turned to the page on cheese puffs and saw this notation for preparing pastry: *small amounts of H<sub>2</sub>O with unbleached flour to create a strong elastic gluten. Maillard reaction, in which sugars react with proteins.*

Under scrambled eggs it said: *Heating an egg causes compact proteins to unfold into long, spaghetti-like strands. These release amino acids, which form bonds with other protein strands, causing coagulation. Overcooking creates too many bonds between proteins, leading to a rapid loss of liquid.*

At that moment, there was a series of tones that indicated one of the many automated systems was receiving instructions from the Batmobile relay. Alfred

jumped as one of the beakers poured a yellow liquid into a oblong pan suspended over the burner, which simultaneously sprouted a four inch flame.

As the liquid began giving off the smell of clarified butter, the Batmobile pulled into the cave and Batman got out, walking immediately to the burner.

"Hi Alfred," was the only comment as he uncorked a test-tube and added a pinch of green spice to the butter, then took a pre-made sandwich from the cave cooler and dropped it into the pan.

As it grilled, he looked up to see that Alfred wore the very model for his own nonsense *We can do this the easy way or the hard way but you will give me answers and you'll do it now* bat-glare. A facetious answer ("start with a four cups of mushrooms") like he'd given Dick and Tim was out of the question.

"I, uh, it was pointed out to me that if I can radiate ionized mercury trisulfate, I should be able to toast bread."

"And was it Miss Selina who made this observation, sir?"

"Well..." Batman looked at his feet.

The preposterous notion that he'd been taking cooking lessons from CATWOMAN would never have occurred to the alternate-universe/killer-robot theorists, and if it had it certainly wouldn't have calmed their fears. But Alfred's speculations weren't quite so outlandish, and he accepted Bruce's sheepish non-denial with paternal affection.

It came out then, the whole story: Bruce hadn't consciously assumed that all non-butlers were incompetents in the kitchen, but, at some point, he did dissociate such regular life-skills with "spandex-wearers." It came as a nasty shock when he discovered Catwoman, who he considered more of an equal and certainly more of a contemporary than Dick or Barbara, was quite an accomplished cook. It pricked pride that she could do something he couldn't.

The first attempt to remedy the situation was not productive. He'd presented himself at the public library as the most exaggerated caricature on an aristo-idiot, and asked for a book – or preferably a video – on "exactly what you have to do to dead animals and plants to make them fit for human beings to eat." The librarian gave him a copy of COOKING FOR DUMMIES. The book's patronizing tone reinforced his mental block that cooking was something he simply couldn't do. It couldn't find words small enough or analogies simple enough to communicate with someone so stupid as to be reading its pages.

It was Selina who put an end to this nonsense with the remark about mercury trisulfate. He wasn't really a dummy, and dumbing it down was not the solution. They tried the opposite approach: he watched her prepare a simple dish and translated each step into the terminology of the laboratory. He analyzed each ingredient, put each under a microscope in its cooked and uncooked states, mapping out in his mind the precise reactions they underwent...

Alfred's eyes glazed slightly as Bruce enthusiastically listed a number of these: the denaturation of proteins, sodium bicarbonate reacting with acid to make carbon dioxide, yeast cells digesting sugars and starches and releasing Co2 and water...

"As you say, sir," Alfred attempted to derail the train so he could go to bed. But there's no slowing an active mind when it's latched onto a new idea, or, in this case, a new world of ideas to explore. Once he was past the initial hurdle, Bruce's natural love

of learning had kicked in. He would pour all his intellectual energies into the new discipline until he had mastered it as completely as any other.

As he flipped over his sandwich, Bruce continued his lecture about the chemical properties of various foodstuffs.

“Chocolate has some interesting properties. Heated to 85 degrees F, it liquefies...”

“Or ‘melts,’” thought Alfred, despairingly.

“But if the temperature goes above 90, the cocoa butter molecules separate from the cocoa solids. If they break up completely the chocolate will never completely harden again.”

“As you say, sir.”

