



Gotham Is... Chaos

Batman - All Media Types · Batman: The Animated Series · Not Rated · 3523 words

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Fandom: Batman - All Media Types, Batman: The Animated Series Rating: Not Rated Category: Multi

Warnings: Creator chose not to add warnings, No content warnings apply

Relationships: Implied Relationships/Pre-Relationships

Characters: Bruce Wayne, Joker (DCU), Harleen Quinzel, Jonathan Crane, Edward Nygma, Jervis Tetch, Bookworm (Batman 1966), Clayface, Pamela Isley, Killer Croc, Kirk Langstrom, Rogues Gallery (Batman), More

Tags: Crack Treated Seriously, The Rogues Gallery as Family (Batman), Books, Magic, The Dork Squad, Jonathan Crane doomscreens, Manbat being adorable, Joker has a civilian alias, Batman is part of the Rogues whether he likes it or not, Killer Croc isn't a cannibal because I will never write that, Consensual Possession, Demon/Human Relationships, Not Beta Read, Alice in Wonderland References, No betas we die like Joker!, Breaking the Fourth Wall, Good Person Joker (DCU)

Words: 3523 Chapters: 5 chapters Status: Complete Published: 2024-05-22

Batman heads to Arkham to fight a breakout, except no one's actually trying to escape -- all the inmates are just reading?

Inspired by a scene in a comic, this was supposed to be a oneshots about Batman and Joker working together. It, uh, sorta got away from me.

As of 30th July, 2025, this is my 12th fic to reach 100 kudos! I'm doing pretty good, I think 😊

Chapter 1: The Book Burning Club

ALERT! PRISONER ESCAPE IN CELLBLOCK C5! ALL HANDS EVACUATE! ALERT! PRISONER ESCAPE IN...

As the sirens blared and staff fled, a dark figure stalked the darker halls of Arkham, an institute for the criminally insane.

It was chaos, but not the right kind. Doctors and guards were screaming and running, the alarm was drowning everything else out, but not a single prisoner had left their cells.

Batman walked between the wide-open cells, locking eyes with inmates who seemed to just be relaxing.

"Batman, do you think you can do something about that noise?" Edward Nygma held up a book. "It's making it rather difficult to read."

"Sound affecting your sight?" Jervis Tetch snorted, looking up from his own well-loved book. "And they call me Mad!"

"What is going on?" Batman asked. "Who did this? What is the plan, why are you just sitting there?"

"It's too stormy to go out, Batman." Edward rolled his eyes. "I'd much rather stay in and read, wouldn't you?"

He held out a book, blue with gold letters on the front. A heavy fog filled Batman's vision, seeping into his mind until the bound volume was the only thing that existed. His hand moved before he could think, fingers grasping the worn pages-

"No!" The book was knocked to the ground, and his awareness snapped back like a rubber band. Something grabbed his wrist, pulling him along the corridor and into an office before his senses were fully back online. A lock clicked shut. "That was a close one, Batsy."

That voice... He knew it, but couldn't place it until the owner let out a breathy chuckle. He twisted around, staring at a familiar bleach white face. "Joker!" He grabbed the clown, pinning him to a wall.

"You've got a funny way of saying thank you." Joker grumbled, then laughed. There was something wrong with that laugh, it was tired. "But that's just your special somethin', ain't it?"

"What was that?" Batman growled, mentally shaking off the thought. Joker didn't get tired. He had to be imagining it. "What did you do?"

"You're giving him too much credit, Batman." A sultry but *angry* voice whispered behind him. A vine climbed up, lightly tapping Joker's cheek. "Down, boy."

Joker scowled, but stopped trying to escape. He winked at Batman. "Time you met the gang, dear. We're the Book Burning Club!"

Batman turned. Out of the shadows stepped Poison Ivy, Harley Quinn, Clayface, Mr Freeze, Killer Croc, and Manbat. Manbat sneered. "I has telled, not us name."

"Oh, loosen up Manny!" Joker rolled his eyes, still not struggling against the hand holding the front of his asylum uniform. "We burn books, get over it."

"Technically we're burnin' da dust, Puddin'." Harley corrected. She waved. "Heya, Bats! How's it been?"

"What. Is. Going on?" Batman growled, a headache that may or may not have been related to the earlier fog creeping in. "Why-?"

"We'll explain in a bit, right now we've got to get out of here." Ivy walked up to the door, peeking out the glass window. She glared at Joker. "Someone got the Worms angry."

"The what?"

"The Worms -- do try and keep up, dear." Joker laughed.

"That is how we are referring to those affected by the Reading Dust." Mr Freeze busted open a large vent. "They are rather docile, but have proven dangerous when provoked. Damaging books seems to be an easy way to provoke them."

As if to prove his point, a bang sounded on the other side of the door, the Riddler could be seen leading a mob in an attempt to bust it down -- each one of them holding at least one book.

One by one, the 'Book Burning Club' made their way into the vent. Batman reluctantly followed, shoving Joker in front of him.

Chapter 2: The Secret Rec Room

Uh, so I sorta forgot that the staff had been immune, and why they are is never explained. Sorry?

After some time in the vents, they dropped into an area Batman knew well. 'The Secret Rec Room' was an abandoned basement some of the inner Rogues had converted into a hang out spot. There were TVs, beanbag chairs, snacks, some personal belongings.

He should've reported it to the staff the moment he'd first found it, but... Knowing about it meant he could make regular weapons checks, and it seemed to keep his most dangerous foes somewhat content to have their own space. It had seemed a worthy risk.

Currently, it had been converted into-

"Our zombie apocalypse headquarters!" Harley spread her arms to encompass the room, giggling. "Don' touch dat pile of book over dere, we haven' cleansed 'em yet. Dis pile's fine, though."

"Cleansed them." Batman repeated. He sat on one of the beanbags, looking up at the TVs that had apparently been wired into the security feed, showing nothing but inmates reading. "What happened here?"

"It all started a couple months ago." Clayface sighed, pooling in a liquid heap on the floor. "That's when the first Worm appeared."

"Book talk to Worm, night day both." Manbat shook his head. "No sleep, book book book more!"

"Since when do you talk, Dr Langstrom?" Batman took a moment to ask. You didn't get named the World's Greatest Detective without a healthy dose of curiosity.

"No Langstrom." Manbat did something that might have been a grin. "Europe."

"Hehehe, Batman doesn't want to hear about all that, buddy!" Joker pushed the other villain away. "Why dontcha go practice your letters with Croc?"

"Are you serious?" Ivy asked, staring at Joker's definitely-not-inconspicuous attempts to block Manbat from sight. She turned to Batman. "The clown liked Manbat

better than Langstrom, so he split them. The doctor went to Europe to be with his family, Joker's been teaching Manny to do things like talk ever since."

"You- is that why the cure stopped working?" Batman growled at Joker, who nodded. "Do you know how much time and resources I've devoted to making a new cure? Sleepless nights trying to save a man who isn't even in the country?!"

"I liked Manny better." Joker answered, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. He plopped into the beanbag next to Batman, laying his head on the other's lap. "Besides, I was bored, there were chemicals, he was a willing test subject! I think... Ya know, I sorta blacked out, I'd skipped my meds a few times. I'm not even sure that what I did is entirely possible... Aw, you're mad at me, aren't ya?"

"I'm always mad at you." Batman answered, absently pulling at the villain's green curls. He looked back to the TV. "So this started months ago? Who was the first to... Turn?"

"It was Edward." Fries answered in a monotone, he too was staring at the screens. "He will often challenge me to chess, I don't understand why, and I've taken to accepting. One day, he just stopped, and wouldn't do anything but read. After that, a thin yellow dust started to appear wherever he went. Whoever touched the dust became just like him."

"They took over in a matter of weeks, keeping the staff locked up as hostages." Ivy sat on a table, sighing. "For some reason, most of the staff were immune to the change. As were the seven of us."

"Music Meister was immune too." Harley pointed out. "But he had a meetin' in da fifth dimension. And Bookworm's immune! But he willingly joined da rest of da Worms. And Calendar Man escaped with dat creepy swamp guy. And-"

"The point is that we're the only ones left in the building who are fighting." Ivy groaned. "We've been fighting for months. They've cooled down a little, at least they eat and sleep more regularly now, so we're holding out hope that this will eventually go away. But they seem to be getting stronger, and fighting them is getting harder, and I haven't seen the sun in Gaia knows how long!"

"What the weed means..." Joker started calmly. Then he yelled, "is that we need your help, Batsy! We're more the Walking Dead than they are. I don't have the best rest cycle normally, but this is ridiculous!"

"And this stuff we're living off of ain't exactly healthy or filling." Croc added, lifting a candy wrapper with his claws. "What I wouldn't give for a proper salad bar..."

"Why didn't any of you escape?" Batman asked, accidentally pulling too hard on Joker's hair, making the other wince. "(Sorry) Or contact me?"

"We did call you, in a way." Fries pointed out, not looking at any of them. "We had Mr Doe release the hostages and sound the break out alarms."

Chapter 3: The Plan Is Simple

This doesn't come up, but 'Jacob Doe' is the name this version of Joker uses online or when he just wants to buy a snack. He's in deep denial about the fact that he likes having a civilian identity, so the others tease him for it.

"Mr Doe?" Batman checked his mental files, but couldn't find a match. "Who is he?"

"It's a stupid nickname, it doesn't matter." Joker grumbled, sitting up with an uncharacteristically normal pout. "Don't call me that, Frosty."

"As you wish..." A shadow of almost a smirk briefly flashed on Fries' face as he turned, "...Jacob."

"That's it!" Joker launched himself at the cold-hearted doctor, but was held back by vines. Wilted vines, Batman could see now, that looked like they shouldn't have been a problem for the clown's strength. Was he avoiding breaking them? "Let me at him!"

"Down, boys." Ivy hissed at them both. Fries nodded, stepping back with an apology. Joker once again stopped struggling, and the plants released him. "As you can see, Batman, tensions have been a little high."

Batman hummed in agreement, standing up. He was definitely asking about 'Jacob Doe' later, but for now... "We need to get out of Arkham and back to Gotham, contact the GCPD, and-"

"No!" Harley shook her head, scowling. "We aren' abandonin' anyone ta dis nightmare! Not Eddie or Arnold or Professah Crane, *nobody*. If we was willin' ta do dat, we'd already be outta here."

The villains all nodded in agreement, then again when Manbat added "Family."

"We didn't call you to get us out, Batsy." Joker explained. "We need you to help us save the others. The cops might shoot 'em, ya know that. Besides, we should be the ones handling our own."

"You're willing to get help from me." Batman pointed out.

"Oh shuddup, ya know ya became one of us a long time ago." Harley rolled her eyes. "Bein' a good guy doesn't mean ya aren' a Rogue. An honorary one, anyways."

"Enough sappy stuff, we're freezing the plot." Joker bounced over to the screens, tapping away at some keyboards. "And we're only sorta working on comic book time."

"Puddin', da others can't see the fourth wall, remember?" Harley reminded him, winking at thin air. To that same air, she said "What a silly guy, huh?"

"Oh, right." Joker shrugged. "Anyways, there's a spot in Arkham where the cameras all cut out. No one's fixed it because no one goes there, especially not the inmates. Except, we've figured out that Eddie snuck down there right before he changed."

"Has anyone investigated yet?" Batman asked. The villains all tensed up, going quiet. "Well?"

"Bolton used that area as..." Croc trailed off. "It's got a lotta bad memories."

"We were sorta waiting for you to be with us." Joker added sheepishly. "We didn't want to go alone."

"You-" Batman cut himself off, growling. "Fine, let's go and get this over with." Under his breath, he muttered. "I hope someone kills Bolton."

"Trust me, we're working on it." Joker's eyes went wide. "Uh, pretend you didn't hear that."

"Hear what?" Batman asked, leading the way into the vents this time.

"... Is he serious?" Joker asked, incredulously.

"Are any of us ever?" Ivy smirked, following the Dark Knight. "Wonder how long it will take for him to remember he doesn't know where we're going?"

Chapter 4: The Scarecrow's Mistake

I've seen two or three fics where Scarecrow was a human-demon pair, and I love it soooo much.

Bruce Wayne was going to launch a full investigation into every inch of Arkham the moment this was all over, and he didn't care who he pissed off.

Batman tried very hard not to think about the purposes of the twisted devices he was walking around, almost succeeding in ignoring the flinches of the six criminals that were pressed close to him. (Clayface had chosen to guard the Rec Room).

They came to a small area where all the devices had been pushed to the sides, creating a clearing. Papers and formulas and beakers were strewn randomly around, at its center a figure was slumped on the ground, watching news reports on his phone.

"How in the world does anyone think *you* are our *leader*?" A southern drawl rasped over the video of a museum heist from last year -- where the reporter was indeed naming a certain Clown Prince in charge the Rogues -- but the figure didn't look up from the screen.

"I put on a good show." Joker answered quietly, stepping out of the main group. He looked into a dark corner. "Hey Spooks, what are you doing out and about?"

The demon pushed air through its beak in a huff, but didn't answer. The figure on the ground finally looked up, speaking. "We're havin' a little spat, and he's being petty."

"He do that, Jonny?" Joker asked, pointing to three long scratches along Jonathan Crane's cheek. "'Cause if you need help outta a bad situation, I know a great exorcist!"

"Of course you do." Jonathan muttered. "One, an exorcism only works if the afflicted wants the demon gone, and I don't. Two, yes he did this, but it was an accident. Three, for the last time, being a Host is not the same thing as dating!"

"Sure it isn't." Joker smirked. He looked at the papers around them, somber and serious as he crouched down to look in the other's eye. "Jonny, I'm only going to ask this once; what did you do?"

Jonathan hid his head in his hands with a groan. "I didn't mean to, I especially didn't mean ta hurt Ed, I just..."

The rest of the group slowly moved forward, sitting amongst the papers. Harley picked one up, reading. "Professah, please tell me dis isn't what I tink it is."

"I, it..." Jonathan shook his head.

"Crane, what happened?" Batman demanded, glaring. "Start at the beginning, why are you here? In this room?"

"One can hardly be the Master Of Fear if one cannot conquer their own fears." He whispered, taking a moment to do a breathing exercise. "I snuck here whenever I got the chance, at first just seeing how long I could last. Then I started doing experiments, not my normal kind, just ones for 'fun'. Ms Quinn has suggested a hobby might be good for me."

"And you chose to create magic reading dust?" Ivy asked. "I don't think that counts as a hobby, per se, Professor Crane."

"It's better than your preferred activities, Doctor Isley." Jonathan rolled his eyes, Southern accent fading as his focus came back. He rubbed his eyes, stifling a yawn. "I was creating something to help youth enjoy their studies. I thought it would be funny, the Scarecrow releasing a gas at some college, everybody panicking as they await the inevitable hallucinations! Only for all the students to suddenly be obsessed with their textbooks."

"Funny?" Manbat asked. "Crow-Crane misknow funny? Worms funny no."

"This ain't 'ow it was supposed tah work!" Jonathan yelled. "Ed followed me down here, the prototype dust was spilled, this weird stone in a box glowed an' disappeared... Ah've been trying tah fix it ever since. Ah didn' even know anyone had escaped its-"

Jonathan's head snapped up, wide eyes staring at each of them. "None of you are affected! I need blood samples, where's my microscope? Harleen, grab those papers..."

Twenty minutes and seven needles (sterilized by a bat tool) later, Jonathan was screeching like his demon. "That's it, that's it!"

"What's it? What did you find?" Batman asked, unable to understand a single thing the man had scribbled down. For all his intelligence, he couldn't match Crane without his tech.

"**Magic.**" Jonathan answered simply, switching on a bunson burner. "Harleen, I need the cleanest beakers you can find. Joker, get as many chemicals from this list as

possible, I don't care if you have to separate them yourself -- just don't explode anything! Manny, hold this still..."

Chapter 5: The Rogues Of Gotham (Arkham)

Just to be clear, I love reading and books. This is not meant to say that reading is bad. It's just for fun.

They snuck up to the roof of Gotham, dragging a knocked-out Worm behind them; Jervis Tetch, the Mad Hatter.

"If I'm right, this should work." Scarecrow, fully rejoined, prepared a needle filled with a glowing green liquid. "If I'm wrong... Well, Batman's the only one here not immune, so we'll all be immediately doomed."

They waited in tense silence as the 'patient' was injected. He squirmed, moaning, then opened his eyes with a gasp. "Where... Haigha?"

"Hey, Hatta." Scarecrow smiled softly, too tired to care about people seeing, and kneeled by his friend. "How are you feeling?"

"... Like I could go a month without *touching* Through The Looking Glass." Jervis groaned, sitting up. "What happened?"

"Talia hid a pendant here last year." Scarecrow explained. "I forgot about it, but it's magic. It absorbed one of my experiments and made things get out of control."

"Wait, why were we immune?" Joker asked. "I thought it was a chemical thing..."

"It is, slightly." Scarecrow agreed, his voice switching to a lecturing tone. "An immunity to the magical side is more important. I'm immune thanks to being possessed, you and Ms Quinn are only affected by curses you know about (however the heck that works), Dr Isley is technically undead-

"I was reborn, I'm not a vampire." Ivy grumbled. She hummed in thought. "Makes some sense, I guess. Croc's half monster, and whatever Joker did to Manny definitely wasn't science."

"What about Victor?" Harley asked. "He's not magic!"

"My working theory involves the, blech, power of lo-"

"I'm in a survival suit, you morons." Fries actually scowled for a second. "The dust can't reach my person. Now that we've established what actually happened and have a cure, shall we dispense it?"

"Someone's in a hurry." Batman commented.

"He's missing the Dormouse." Jervis explained, leaning on Scarecrow as he stood. "They talk about the White Queen, and how to bring her out of the Red King's domain."

"The dream world." Fries translated. "I'll admit, I have become a little fond of Edward. But my urgency is a simple desire for sleep, and to get back to helping my dear Nora."

"How much of the cure do you have?" Batman asked.

"Not enough." Scarecrow shook his head. A grin slowly spread across his burlap face, splitting it in two. "But if I had one of the dispensers you use for the Fear Toxin antidote..."

"If you reverse engineer this, I'm telling Gordon where you keep your crows." Batman threatened, taking out a small silver device.

Scarecrow pouted. The demon side of him muttered "You're no fun."

Three days later, Bruce Wayne walked through Arkham Asylum, peeking into the closed cells. The inmates were eating, yelling, fighting, even making out -- only a handful were currently reading.

"Heya, Brucie!" Joker called, playing Go Fish with Clayface.

"Hey, Mr Doe." Bruce nodded, smirking as Joker's face fell in shock. "I hope the staff are treating you well."

"... I am going to hurt you." Joker hissed, groaning as the nurse wrote the new surname down. "They better not put my first name as 'John', or I swear I'll..."

The inspection went rather well, many new pockets of hidden rooms were found. Bruce didn't believe they had found all of them -- he knew for a fact that a few areas had been 'overlooked', though he had *nothing* to do with that.

He was glad to see that, despite the bumps, Arkham was vastly improved from how it had been years ago, before Wayne Enterprises had started taking a *personal* interest in the asylum.

In the (regular) Rec Room, Victor Fries and Edward Nygma were back to playing chess. Crane was taking a nap, his demon laying on his chest, rune collars keeping both contained.

Through an open door, he could hear as a group therapy session turned into a debate between Scarface and Harvey Dent. In the yard, Isley sat in the sun, Harley laughing as she braided her hair.

Arkham was technically a medical facility and a prison in one, but it had never really been either. It had been an illegal testing site, a torture chamber, a villain base, and more.

Somehow, for the Rogues of Gotham, it had become a *home*.

— end of "Gotham Is... Chaos" —